Chapter 9

THE DISCOURSE OF ‘RITUAL MURDER’
Popular Reaction to Political Leaders in Botswana

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In re-engaging the classic theme of sorcery and witchcraft in African anthropology, it is asserted that something new is happening in terms of the manifestation and magnitude of the phenomena that are commonly included in these notions.1 Geschiere, for one, claims that ‘nearly everywhere on the continent the state and politics seem to be true breeding grounds for modern transformations of witchcraft and sorcery’ (1999: 6). And Jean and John Comaroff (1999) speak of escalations of what they label ‘occult economies’ in post-apartheid South Africa, escalations they also trace in other parts of the world, including the West and the post-communist East.

Although the intensity and public character of what seems to be going on in various parts of Africa apparently resemble the witch-hunting that took place during the colonial era, it has been argued that ‘witchcraft’ in post-colonial times is situated in a new kind of context that transforms it into something else. The Comaroffs, for example, maintain that ‘[i]n its late twentieth-century guise ... witchcraft is a finely calibrated gauge of the impact of global culture and economic forces in local relations’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxviii–xxix). And Geschiere (1999: 214) enquires ‘why there is such a strong tendency in many parts of post-colonial Africa to interpret modern processes of change in terms of “witchcraft”.’ He argues that ‘the paradoxical combination between, on the one hand, “globalization” with its connotations of open-endedness and unboundedness, and, on the other, “identity” seems to require definition and clarification that can help us to understand why “witchcraft” or related moral concerns play such a prominent part in people’s perception of modernity’ (ibid.: 216).

These statements are thought-provoking when addressing such a case as the present one: the heightening concern amongst people in Botswana about what is conceived as ‘ritual murder’. Generalising notions of ‘globalisation’ and ‘modernity’ raise, however, a number of theoretical difficulties, amongst others because of their lack of analytical distinction. Case studies help to overcome some of these difficulties, as they speak more specifically about these notions.
in ways that also account more carefully for the dynamics internal to the phe-
nomena in question.

In Botswana, celebrated virtues of European modernity – representational 
democracy, bureaucracy and commoditisation – have been introduced with great 
force by the post-colonial state. In replacing the allegedly arbitrary exercise of 
power by the rulers of the ‘traditional’, ‘patrimonial’ Tswana polities, these 
central elements of European modernity have been advocated as major instruments 
to ensure ‘social justice’ and ‘development’. In this essay, I suggest that ‘devel-
opment’ has, in reality, meant anything but ‘social justice’. It has, most appar-
tently, involved an escalation of wealth discrepancy, leaving almost half of the 
population below the official poverty line as spectators to the aggregation of 
power and wealth amongst a small elite (see, for example, Gulbrandsen 1996: 
223ff., Good 1993). ‘Developmen’ in this case thus compares well with the 
European modernity in its sense of commodisation and individuation of the 
economy. This is a kind of development which is, to be sure, closely related to 
the highly exceptional (in an African context) integration of Botswana’s political 
economy in global systems of beef and diamond trade (see Gulbrandsen 1996).

My concern here is how people’s experiences of the major political and eco-
nomic changes are reflected in specific conceptions of ‘occult practices’. I will 
concentrate on their formation as a distinct discursive practice, resembling 
Scott’s notion of ‘hidden transcripts’ (1990: 4). This discursive practice has 
been propelled by the peculiar ways in which Tswana notions of power abuse, 
as those are conceptualised through Tswana cosmologies of the kingship and of 
power, have been actualised in the contemporary contexts of representational 
democracy, bureaucracy and market economy.

If anything, notions of occult practices focus on the problematic of power, 
specifically their intensely constructive/destructive ambiguous dynamic. Be-
cause of this, they involve deep, existential moral concerns (Evans-Pritchard 
1984: 51ff.). These aspects are accentuated in contemporary globalising proc-
eses. They find particular focus in: the phenomenon of ‘ritual murders’, which, 
as I will show, enliven a discourse of empowerment among the poor and oth-
ewise disadvantaged.

General forces of globalisation and modernity are a background to what I 
will argue. But a thorough understanding of current developments in Botswana 
demands that close attention be paid to the way the past is reconfigured in the 
present. Thus, the phenomenon of ‘ritual murder’ achieves its discursive force 
through post-colonial transformations in the structuring of power and its ideo-
logical legitimation. A reduction in analysis to general globalising processes 
would fail to comprehend the crucial mediating factors.

I shall anchor this analysis in an earlier study of Tswana kingships, in which 
I explained that ambiguities of power are located at the heart of the polity – the 
ruler being simultaneously the supreme benefactor (a benevolent despot) and 
the potentially most dangerous sorcerer (Gulbrandsen 1995: 421). I shall argue 
that this pervasive ambiguity of power reinforces people’s alertness and strong 
care about the personal character of any individual in a position of influence,
high or low, ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’. Above all, it constitutes a strong discursive practice that impacts upon popular reactions to power abuse.

The Tragic Death of Segametsi and Its Aftermath

The point of departure is the tragic death of a 14-year-old secondary school girl and the popular responses triggered by this event. On 6 November 1994, the body of Segametsi Mogomotsi was found outside a school fence in Mochudi, the major village of the Bakgatla, one of the Tswana-speaking peoples of southeastern Botswana. This village is located less than an hour’s drive from the capital of Gaborone. While I was not in the field when the murder occurred, repercussions flowing from it and other similar cases were still strongly evident both later in 1994, when I returned to the field, and still in 2002, the time of my latest fieldwork. The continuing concern with Segametsi emphasises the significance of this case in the popular imagination.

Among friends and acquaintances, the murder was often discussed, and everyone was prepared to proffer an opinion. ‘We were all terribly shocked’, one woman told me, ‘she had been killed in the most brutal manner ... the murderers had taken away her private parts.’ This fact, often repeated, is the distinctive characteristic of what people generally identify as a ritual murder. Beyond expressions of tremendous anxiety caused by a young girl being murdered in the midst of the village, many of my informants were horrified by their own image of the brutality of such a murder: ‘Do you know what these cruel people do? People say that they cut off the private parts while the person is still alive! They believe that it becomes even more powerful in that way. It is terrible! People are so scared.’

It is a generally agreed opinion that the genitalia of a young girl comprise an extremely potent ‘medicine’, known as *mutl*. I heard numerous similar accounts of babies and young girls, especially, who had vanished. In the words of one man:

The problem is that the police never find the bodies. People are terrified by what is going on; they are so afraid of leaving their children alone. People are disappearing in Botswana these days, I am telling you! Therefore, people have become very, very upset by this case, because this is not the only one. There are many, many! And do you know what? They are always increasing when election is approaching. Why? That is the time when the big politicians feels a need of strengthening themselves. They make themselves invulnerable and lucky in attracting electoral support – and they can make other politicians flat and useless.

Everyone I spoke to about this issue expressed very clearly that ‘all of the disappearances’, which have allegedly increased in number since independence, are connected to ‘all those people who now go for riches, fame and power’. As
one put it: 'We have no other way to explain how some people become very rich overnight.'

It was therefore certainly not to anyone's surprise that shortly after Segametsi's body had been found, the police arrested two prosperous businessmen who were also politicians. On the contrary, rumours that these particular individuals were involved in occult practices had already been circulating. However, the police were unable to establish sufficient evidence to keep them in custody, and they were released shortly afterwards. This was followed by the arrests of four other persons, three of whom were also both prosperous businessmen and involved in politics. The fourth was, in fact, Segametsi's father, who was kept in detention because it was claimed that he had confessed to being involved in the killing of his daughter. But the former three were also released due to lack of evidence. The three businessmen-cum-politicians allegedly celebrated their release - an occasion at which the paramount chief of the Bakgatla, kgosi Linchwe, was also believed to be a participant. We shall later see the significance of this.

The community was enormously provoked by the release of the suspects, as one newspaper report recounted:

Enraged schoolchildren take to the streets, vowing to find the murderers of their schoolmate, Segametsi. The students are met by the police who try to disperse them, a few kilometres from the school. Hell breaks loose and a serious clash ensues. The students win the first round of the battle and proceed to Sekobyre's (one of the suspected murderers [who was released]) and set his home alight. They also burn Kgetsi's home (another suspect [also released]) and as in Sekobyre's house, nothing is retrieved from the house. Boulders, bushes, stumps and rubbish bins are used to block the roads. Soon the Molefi Secondary School students join the fray, and the students fight the police, who have since been joined by the paramilitary riot squad.

During the confrontations with the police, several youths were seriously wounded and one was killed.

Although the youths were the activists here (cf. Durham 1998), it was stressed to me by many of the adults in the village that the schoolchildren were encouraged by their parents. The release of the suspects inflamed more general sentiments relating to the widespread fear of ritual murder, which implicates those 'who become rich overnight' as the perpetrators of such crimes. A press article of an interview with one of the released suspects, touching on the reasons for his arrest, reported: '[I]t was because of rumours doing the rounds in Mochudi that he uses human parts to enhance his business. He said that the problem started after he had bought himself a Land Cruiser...’ Defending himself, he 'challenged the Bakgatla to follow their custom by going to the grave of Segametsi and apply traditional medicine to determine the real culprit'. It is significant that all of the people who were detained by the police and attacked by people were successful businessmen and politicians.
The political tension became such that one of the district councillors sued another on the grounds that the latter had interrupted his speech during a political rally, shouting "Segametsi o kae! Segametsi o kae!" (Where is Segametsi?). He also complained that during another rally, the defendant had stated, with alleged reference to him: "You are hereby warned to be on guard, because there is a lion on the loose in the village. The lion today masquerades as a sheep but when it reveals its true colours, it is capable of destroying you." The force of popular anger directed towards prosperous business people was further expressed in subsequent riots (16–17 February 1995) by university and secondary school students in the streets of Gaborone, in which windows were broken and numerous stores damaged. Stories about occult practices amongst people who 'in ways we cannot otherwise explain' were becoming wealthy seem to have intensified during this period. They found confirmation some months later when a 25-year-old man from Kanye was brought before the High Court and prosecuted for having murdered and dismembered a six-year-old child. The police discovered the forearms of the deceased behind the accused's sofa. In his confession, he reportedly stated that he had 'killed the child so that he could strengthen his liquor-selling business'. About the same time, fears of ritual murder spread in Maun, where a three-year-old girl went missing. In this case, 'the police together with tribal authorities called a kgotla meeting at the Maun kgotla to hear a group of traditional doctors throw bones and speak to the ancestors to determine what could have happened to the girl.... The doctor [said] she is not alive'.

More than a year after Segametsi's murder, The Botswana Guardian informed an official in the district administration of the details of an alleged confession made by Segametsi's father a few days after the murder. Apparently, Segametsi's father, a relatively impoverished person, stated that he had been pestered by a businessman in Mochudi who promised him P 1200 (c. US$ 220) to find a child for muti, the purpose being to 'strengthen' his bottle store, which was about to be opened. They agreed that one of the businessman's employees should lure Segametsi away, and on the following night the father should appear at an agreed upon place to receive the money where '[I] found five people in the vehicle with the child. She was then bound.... When we got to the ponds, three of the men got off the vehicle and took a canvas material and Segametsi with them.... I could hear my child grunting pitifully in an attempt to scream....' This disclosure, however, produced no further action in the disposition of the case; Segametsi's father was in fact judged insane and released from custody. Nonetheless, the news only reinforced the Bakgatla's suspicions not only of the father but also of the businessmen who had been arrested and then released.

The overall anxiety concerning ritual murder in Botswana that the Segametsi case aroused was elaborated in countless other stories describing the mysterious dimensions of the occult quality of such murders. A particular feature of the murders is that in almost all instances the body is never found. The body is so well hidden, people say, 'that even the flies cannot find it', meaning that
the murder normally takes place far out in the bush, the body being buried deep into the Kalahari sand. The exceptional thing about the Segametsi case was that the body was actually found.

The fact that the youths acted as spearheads of a much broader popular movement against people of power and wealth is evident from the events that followed. The people of the village gathered in a major kgotla meeting, the kgotla being the popular assembly or council of the Tswana, headed in this case by the paramount chief since the meeting was held in the royal kgotla. They had come to meet with high government officials, including the attorney general and two cabinet ministers who arrived under heavy police protection. These officials made every effort to reassure the gathering that everything was being done to identify the murderers. No one, however, was convinced. Moreover, the paramount chief, the kgosi, was subjected to intense criticism and accused of having influenced the police in deciding to release those detained. This was substantiated, so the critics said, by the kgosi’s participation in a celebration held by the businessmen following their release: ‘After all, he was known to be their close friend.’ The situation became uncontrollable, and the governmental officials and the kgosi needed police protection in order to escape the crowd. As they drove away, their cars were stoned.

During this meeting, the attorney general declared that the government would call in Scotland Yard detectives to investigate the murder of Segametsi. A few days later, kgosi Linchwe called for a kgotla meeting in order to select a group of tribesmen to be made available for the detectives. But the debate again centred on the role of kgosi Linchwe. One of my informants, who had been present, related that ‘the kgosi was so heavily attacked in the kgotla that he was weeping! We have never seen anything like that. His uncles declared, “We do not trust you anymore.”’ The press reported that co-operation with Scotland Yard was rejected on the grounds that the people ‘did not have any confidence in them as they were being called in by the government, and therefore open to manipulation.... The meeting then reportedly ended in a stalemate’.12 After the meeting, the people went on to destroy the property belonging to those allegedly implicated in the murder. Another riot ensued, culminating in confrontation with the police and heavily armed security forces.

These events triggered the mobilization of university students in the capital of Gaborone. Joined by a number of other people from less wealthy sections of the city, they marched towards the Parliament where they forced their way into the members’ chambers and ended up in a major battle with the police. The president’s bodyguards were seriously injured, upon which soldiers entered the university campus and beat up students. This precipitated another street riot the following day, leading to another confrontation with the police and soldiers. A number of students were seriously injured.

The government was now under heavy attack in the press and otherwise for the harsh way in which state power had been implemented. In Mochudi this had even involved the killing of a youth. This case contributed, in due course, to polarizing the relationship between the state and the public. All this was
exacerbated by the fact that there was no progress with the Segametsi case. In
due course, Segametsi's father was judged insane and released from
custody, and the Scotland Yard report to date has not been released by the government.
The whole situation encouraged widespread rumours, travelling well beyond
Mochudi village, that the actual recipients of the muti derived from Segametsi's
private parts were people located in high official positions.

The dramatic riots in the wake of Segametsi's murder were unique in the
recent political history of Botswana. Nothing of the kind had happened before,
and the people themselves were surprised - indeed, in a state of shock. The
peaceful, harmonious order of political life in Botswana, an idealisation no
doubt, seemed to them to have been completely shattered.

The tragic story of Segametsi continued to engage people as a central theme
in private encounters, often giving rise to a number of other stories about vanish-
ished children whose disappearance was accounted for by reference to the
occultic practices of the rich and powerful. About a year after the murder of
Segametsi, a group of youngsters in the village of Mochudi performed a play
'about the ritual murder centred around a man who wishes to become rich
and arranges the abduction of a young girl so that [she could be killed], only
to find that the young girl they murder [is] his own daughter'.

The event certainly provided a general catalyst for the political action of youths in Botswana
(see Burke 2000, Durham 1998). However, I shall concentrate on the signifi-
cance of the events surrounding Segametsi's death in the critical discourses of
Tswana politics.

Trust and Power

The discourse revolving around Segametsi's murder articulates contradictory
aspects of ruler-subject relations at all levels of Tswana society. In order to
understand this, it is necessary to outline the cultural construction of Tswana
power relations as customarily centred in their kinship or 'chiefdoms', known as
morafo (pl. merafe). At the time of Botswana's independence in 1966, most
of the Botswana population were incorporated in eight such merafe. Until the
mid-1980s, when processes of urbanisation accelerated, almost the entire popu-
lation was living in rural villages, the major ones numbering in the tens of
thousands. Each village is divided into wards responsible to a ward headman,
and every ward is comprised of a number of patrilineal descent groups based on
virilocal residence at marriage. The descent groups are each subject to the
authority of the most senior agnate. The ward headman together with the senior
agnates of the descent groups constitute a council that used to meet on a daily
basis at the centre of the ward. The headmen are placed in a hierarchical socio-
political order, with the king at the apex of the polity (see Schapera 1938; cf.
Gulbransen 1996). These are polities that gained strength during the nine-
tenth century, due in large part to increasing interaction with the larger world
(Gulbransen 1993). In many aspects, they were further reinforced during the
colonial period within the context of the Bechualand Protectorate (Gulbrandsen forthcoming).

The supreme authority of the Tswana kgosi or paramount chief is acknowledged by the saying 'the king is the shepherd of the morafe'. The kgosi is not only rich but ideally generous, the source of wealth for all – he is motswadinile (the one from whom good things come). This benevolent ideal is stressed in such proverbs as ‘kgosi ke mosadi wa morafe’ (the king is the wife of the morafe) and ‘moja morago kgosi’ (the king eats last). The kgosi would dine daily in the open air, taking pieces of the boiled beef... distributing them in his fingers to each one of the dozen rich men who always accompanied him.... The ritual advertised before all villagers the mutual dependency and ideal solidarity of the richest men of the realm' (Wylie 1990: 32; cf. Burchell 1824: 449). This custom signified the king and kingship as being at the centre of a political system founded in commensality and mutual dependency.

In order to perform the role as a benevolent, distributive and potent centre, the kgosi controlled the tribal herd and a common granary. The herd and the granary symbolised the condition of the Tswana polity. In Tswana thought, tension and conflict are closely associated with destructive forces and ancestral punishment, manifesting themselves at the level of the morafe in the form of drought and pestilence, resulting in the death of cattle and children. A ruler should be wise and forceful enough to preserve societal order in accordance with ancestral morality and to defend the people against external enemies. He must ensure kagiso, or peace and social harmony. The Tswana say that 'the dwellings of fierce men become ruins in ashes, the meek live quietly by reason of their meekness' but 'peace gives plenty of corn'.

Thus, people see their welfare, health, fertility and prosperity as being a matter where social tension and conflict are contained and virtually absent – the ideal state that Tswana call kagiso (harmony, peace). This condition is maintained by the unselfish exercise of authority. It depends on appropriate forms of the distribution of wealth in accordance with the hierarchical rules of rank and seniority, and is not subject to individual interest or favour. A failure in this economy of power generates animosity and jealousy, breaking the ideal of kagiso. Such an ideal is pursued through the institutions of the kgotla (public assemblies) and the dingaka (diviner/medium). The kgotla signed the grounding of the kgosi's power as being in the social consensus of his subjects and his openness to the people. The dingaka was the instrument engaged to heal and, importantly, to protect the agents of power and their subject population.

This concern with kagiso is connected with the widespread horror of occult attacks, indigenously known as boloi (sorcery). Even the kgosi cannot easily escape them; on the contrary, he is believed to be a main target of powerful magic,14 which aims to make him soft (nolohala) or, even worse, 'flat' (papeta), that is, politically impotent. In order to fortify the royal office (bogosi) and his own person, the kgosi is ideally entrusted with the most powerful doctors/magicians (dingaka, sing. ngaka) of the entire morafe. Most importantly, the kgosi extends such forms of protection to his subjects.
In explaining to me the value and importance of the hierarchical order, at the apex of which is the kgosi, some of my acquaintances told me how the dingaka of the kgosi supply forceful protective magic to the headmen, who pass it on to bolster the protective magic of ward headmen, heads of descent groups and family heads. Similarly, the most potent productive magic, especially the kind used to attract rain, is vested in the royal office, and its benefits pass to the people as a whole (Schapera 1971).

All of the practices connected with 'magic' are conceived as aspects of power inherent in all relations, including those of the family. These idealised and magical features of authority relations echo, to be sure, those of Weberian patriarchy, which have in many respects been ideologically continued as integral to the legitimacy of the republican state of Botswana. Such magically based authority is substantially different from that described for modern states (see Coronil 1997, Taussig 1997). The magicality of the contemporary Botswana state is grounded in cosmological meanings and practices that are integral to the everyday life in a 'traditional' but no less contemporary setting of Tswana life in rural areas.

In the above context, it must be stressed that the protective magic of the Tswana king and headmen is not primarily related to fear of external enemies. On the contrary, such damaging and destructive forces are predominantly perceived as intrinsic to the order itself. This has much to do with the protective and productive measures provided by the dingaka. Such measures are perceived as extremely vulnerable to destructive magic—occult attacks—and efforts are thus always made to deal with them in secret. This is paradoxical in view of all the emphasis otherwise being placed upon openness, sociality and commensality, all of which are considered essential to Kagiso.

What this means is that at the core of the political order—focused in persons of authority—are located the basic contradiction of the system: enemies of the social order are not, I repeat, necessarily external agencies of occult forces. On the contrary, in popular imagination, agents of dangerous occult forces might well be situated at the heart of the social order, driven by such highly disapproved motivations as greed, selfishness and jealousy. Even the supreme authority of the kgosi himself is closely monitored by his subjects, who are highly concerned with the potential for abuse of power. This concern is heightened by the fact that the kgosi is the major operator in the secretive dealings with the most powerful agents of magic—the dingaka ya kgosi (the king's doctors). This ambiguity is perfectly reflected in the proverb 'A king is like a knife; he might cut his sharpener', the sharpener (those who give him power) being his subjects.

In other words, this is a system that is perceived as inherently both highly necessary yet dangerous and threatening to human existence (cf. Gulbrandsen 1995: 423–4). The crux of the matter here is the fundamental distinction that the Tswana make between position and person, the ideals of a peaceful order and the always questionable character of its agents. These are realities of life that are not restricted to relations surrounding the royal office. They encompass
all positions of authority of the morafe, including that of the family head. It is in
the light of contradictions between collective responsibility and individual
 Greed, care-taking and selfishness that I realised why people so often ex-
pressed the idea that 'it always depends upon the nature of the person', and
why they so often engaged in extensive discussions about a person's charac-
ter. This is reflected in the centrality of the popular discursive field of the
kgotla in Tswana life-worlds and in their idealising of a life in the public
space. That is a highly inclusive discursive field in which authority figures on
all levels are committed to exercise their power in the open and are thus kept
under surveillance on a daily basis. The perceived critical character of the
open-hidden dimension in relation to the exercise of power is, as we have
seen, epitomised by the occultic discourse which set the moral limits of the
exercise of power.

The contradictions and tensions that this discursive practice catches up in
the Tswana polity as it may have existed in pre-colonial times is, I suggest, in-
tensified in colonial and especially post-colonial conditions. In the contempo-
rary situation, occultic discourse now gathers up contradictions at the heart of
the post-colonial state, whose political and bureaucratic processes are often
more closed and removed from public surveillance than most processes once
engaged by Tswana kingship and subordinate offices. In the post-colonial situ-
ation, this discursive practice transcends the limits of the Tswana morafe and
gains, as I shall now explain, particular significance in terms of popular
responses to political leaders within multiple contexts of the modern state.

Transformations of People’s Everyday Lived-in-World

When I first came to Botswana in the mid-1970s, most people were still
located in their natal villages within contexts similar to those that had existed
for decades, if not centuries. To make a living, most people depended upon la-
bour migration to South Africa, supplemented with subsistence farming. The
modern state established itself on the basis of the existing socio-political hier-
archy of the morafe. A pan-Tswana elite occupied state offices while retaining
a firm footing in the morafe. The different forms of power were equally mod-
ern and interrelated.

During the two first decades of independence, until about the mid-1980s,
Botswana was characterised by a great deal of optimism regarding its develop-
ment. Wealthy people became increasingly wealthier, essentially because the
state heavily subsidised their livestock production. Access to well-paid jobs in
government and private industry was facilitated by government-supported
higher education. The development of a modern state infrastructure and state
social services, as well as programmes of urban development, cushioned the
population against an economic downturn occasioned by South Africa’s reduct-
ion of recruitment of migrant labourers, which had been a major support of
Botswana’s economy (Gulbrandsen 1994).

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Expectations of the benefits of modernity were encouraged by political rhetoric buttressed, furthermore, by the increase in state resources as a result of foreign aid and the lucrative expansion of the diamond industry. However, developing from the early 1980s, I recorded an undercurrent of dissatisfaction, especially among those who remained as spectators to the immense accumulation of wealth among a small number of families. The relatively disadvantaged started to speak of government officials as ‘fat stomachs’, often wondering how relatively young people could afford their attractive cars and appear in such nice suits. Dissatisfaction amongst the vast number of unprivileged people was particularly apparent in urban areas. They expressed their discontent by withdrawing their electoral support of the ruling party.

The criticism of the new rich as persons who had manipulated social connections into the government was brought to the forefront of public consciousness in a series of corruption scandals in the early 1990s (Good 1994). Senior government officials were accused of illegally appropriating large tracts of extremely valuable residential land in the vicinity of the capital. During the succeeding years, a number of similar scandals followed. These cases nourished all kinds of other rumours of government-based corruption relating to the securing of government loans, access to otherwise unobtainable grazing and water rights, and so on. It is impossible to say how well founded these widely circulated rumours were. Nonetheless, throughout the 1990s, ‘corruption’ was on the lips of most. The feeling of general corruption has since gathered pace. It was associated with a current economic recession, reflected in a steep rise in unemployment among educated youth and further compounded by both the drying up of opportunities for migrant labour in South Africa and substantial job cuts in the urban construction industry at home. There is now a hiatus between the expectations encouraged by political rhetoric and the gathering harsh economic realities.

The discrepancy between expectation and harsh actuality is the condition in which an occultic discourse gathers its significance. But such discourse is not a mere expression of political and economic circumstances in the surface/depth sense that still prevails in much anthropological analysis. The occultic discourse is integral within social and political processes, as much a part of the ground as it is of the surface. It is more than a cognitive frame for the interpretation of experience, and plays a political and socially constitutive role, both creative of dimensions of the contexts of which it speaks and vital in structuring an emotional and passionate orientation of people in Botswana towards a situation in which they achieve some agency in changing their circumstances: a process in which the occultic discourse itself comes to have effect.

I have already explained that concerns about occult forces are intrinsic to the lived-in-world, at least in the rural context of the morafe. There is also a sense that magical potencies have to some extent broken free from their control and integration within hierarchical social orders. They are not subordinated to the social in the same way as they once were. It is commented upon that the dingaka are often now operating independently of the collective control of the morafe, the kgotla and extended kin, and are serving individual interests that
stand in opposition to the social order as a whole. A discourse of urban/rural contrasts is one relation within which Batswana grasp the magical nature of current realities, many dangerous dingaka now being seen as resituated among urban neighbourhoods of strangers. Ambiguous enough as internal forces, they have intensified their danger, as it were, in their reconstitution as malevolent powers of the outside.

Here I note that a discourse of rural/urban contrasts (imaginary constructs of the nature of everyday realities) that centres on the role of dingaka might also be grasped as one that refers to a process whereby power, in its magical aspect, is perceived as having separated itself from the social body (the body of the people) and as now acting in opposition to the social body or the social order. More broadly, this is a development that works in favour of a state that is no longer in a constitutive relation to society, but is conceived as oriented destructively against it.

Thus, the town is regarded as the negative inversion of the idealised harmonious village life, much along the lines of an earlier functionalist anthropology that conceived of urban life as the dysfunctional image of rural existence. Such an imaginary is driven in political and economic actualities (e.g. of economic depression) that are particularly manifest in urban areas. This draws on factors that are sharply apparent on the surface and which are determined through a rural imaginary that is no less part of contemporary experience (constantly moving between town and country, urban Batswana continually make comparisons, describing the one as the alternative of the other). Some of the marked differences of urban life relate, for example, to the heterogeneity and geographical diversity of the population and the density of living conditions. The specific exigencies of urban living - problems with finding employment, navigating the local bureaucracy, gaining access to educational opportunities, acquiring property and establishing local security - result in these aspects of urban life being realised as negative qualities that demand the magical intervention of dingaka. The magical powers of dingaka are to a great extent associated with the negative dimensions of urban life and, paradoxically, are seen to intensify their potency and destructive possibilities in such contexts. They are, moreover, associated with the expanding social inequalities that are manifested acutely in urban space - individualised inequalities that themselves are imagined as the inverse of the idealised caretaking responsibilities vested in the hierarchical order of the merafe, as these are no less imaginatively conceived.

Power, Wealth and Suspicions of Occult Practices

The events surrounding the death of Segametsi gather much of their import as part of a general discourse concerning occult forces which sees them as a dimension of the negativities of recent political and economic developments. Vital within this discourse is a critique of the state, which is already within the construct of Tswana cosmologies of the state as these are articulated in relation
to the kingship. The destructive magical force of power becomes dominant when such power separates from its social integument, from its embeddedness in social relations. This occurs when power withdraws from contexts in which it is subject to moral and social surveillance. If, as Foucault suggests, the power of European states is in their capacity for social surveillance (rather than being the object of surveillance), the Tswana kingship (as idealised and imagined) is a state which has its power controlled and limited in the surveillance of its agents by its subjects. As such, it is a polity that has some resonance with the idea that Pierre Clastres (1989) developed in his celebrated attempt to distinguish the nature of non-Western political orders from the ideas (in political science and in political anthropology) to which they were conventionally subordinated.

The point I pursue here is that the Segametsi case and related occult discourse highlight the magical negativity of the modern state through conceptions relevant to the Tswana state as idealised. Furthermore, this idealisation or imaginary is a consequence of the fact that in contemporary Botswana, forms of social and political relations relevant to the pre-colonial state as idealised continued into modernity, and did so as a conscious ideological intention of the formation of the post-colonial state of the Republic of Botswana (Gulbrandsen forthcoming). Moreover, while social and economic discrepancies and inequities underpin the general anger that surrounded Segametsi’s death, this anger expands its force and effect through a discourse of the occult that engages its feelings of outrage at the offence to Tswana political and moral value that the modern state has paradoxically harnessed to its own legitimization.

To ensure the legitimation of the republic, government officials engaged the village kgotlas in the establishment of the new order (Gulbrandsen forthcoming). The public was encouraged to present their needs in the forums of the kgotlas, at which government policy was also presented. During the formative period of the independent, post-colonial state, government agencies largely succeeded in establishing the state upon the socio-political order of the Tswana merafe. In particular, the first president of Botswana (Seretse Khama), the heir to one of the major Tswana kingdoms, quite successfully appropriated much of the symbolic wealth vested in these kingdoms. The state manifested itself as a motsuaditile (the one from whom good things come), after the ideal of Tswana kingship (Gulbrandsen 1995).

Under the rule of President Khama, that is, until about 1980, the state established its legitimacy as the supreme agency of welfare and prosperity – and thus of kagiso. The nation-state appropriated to itself that moral space for the exercise of power previously restricted to the merafe. But, of course, the modern nation-state and its bureaucratic order constitute an entirely different socio-political construction to that which they ideologically appropriated and encompassed. The manner of the encompassment, however, exposed the agents and agencies of the modern state to a critical discourse that was once appropriate to the problematic of power in the circumstances of Tswana kingdoms. The discourse was now all the more intense because of the socio-economic contradictions of modernity. The organisation of power in modern states – and Botswana is no exception – is
bureaucratically hidden. In terms of the ideology of the kgotla, which the instruments of the state appropriated, such secrecy was indicative of abuse of power (suggested by the refusal of state agents to be surveyed and morally controlled by their subjects) and, further, of the involvement of state agents and their associates in malevolent sorcery. Such a contradiction was generated and exacerbated in the very contemporary scheme of things. Thus, the more officials used the kgotla as a mechanism of public consultancy (as in the events surrounding Segametsi), the more they became subject to the critical discourse of the occult which perceived them as being engaged in dangerous, anti-social and secretive practices.

The state bureaucracy, idealised in Western discourse as a depersonalised decision-making system in the sense of treating all citizens on an equal basis, appears from the point of view of many Tswana as a field par excellence of the secretive exercise of power, as a field beyond popular inspection and control. It is thus the very antithesis to the idealised public space of decision-making, that is, the kgotla, where the personal character (botho) of authority figures is monitored on a daily basis. In a bureaucratised polity, on the contrary, people see few or no possibilities to gain information about the character of people to whom they are subjected.

The hidden and therefore dangerous potential of the bureaucratic order of the modern state is also conceived as a dimension of what is viewed as the mounting individualisation of everyday life. In urban areas, people of power and wealth live increasingly apart. To be sure, they remain located in kinship networks that often include poor people, and they frequently visit their natal village where they encounter unprivileged people. However, in their everyday life in urban areas, they are mostly located in separate residential areas, moving around in luxury cars and thus contrasting radically with the idealised traditional elite who used to feature centrally in public life and who took pride in being approachable and available to everyone. Hiding behind solid walls in gardens watched by vicious dogs, these people increasingly manifest a symbolism of distance, superiority and, indeed, exclusiveness. The warning sign on their gates – tshaba ntswa (be aware of the dog) – has gained considerable symbolic significance in popular parlance. These features coincide with personal extravagance and the development of a culture of conspicuous consumption – epitomes of selfishness and greed. Such persons are readily conceived as witches and sorcerers in a discourse of the occult. In their individualised success they exceed the moral bounds of that ideology founded in the ideals of the kgotla and kagiso.

The speed with which such people have risen to prominence is of particular significance for comprehending the anger and anxiety that they inspire. For it follows from notions of a hierarchy of forces and their agencies that such a degree of success and prosperity is seen as necessarily depending upon access to particularly powerful muti – that is, muti derived from human beings. This is reflected in all the circulating stories – such as ‘when election approaches, more and more children are disappearing’ – that reinforce this conception. The plots contained by these narratives express, in my interpretation, a fundamental anxiety about being subjected to a state that is increasingly in the hands of people
who are governed by hidden agendas and engaged in secret combats from which they draw tremendous benefit, but which are highly destructive to the society as a whole. Many people share this anxiety and anger because they have, with considerable enthusiasm, approved the establishment of the state and, in many respects, placed their faith and destiny in this all-encompassing polity, on similar ideological terms as they were once subordinated to the menafe.

Overall, there is a sense of public betrayal by agents of the state. These agents have seemingly broken their compact with the people to an extent that makes moral questions related to the exercise of power increasingly acute, especially to all unprivileged people who remain spectators to those who rapidly accumulate wealth and conquer positions of power. This is a trend that contributes forcefully to the notion of a state leadership that 'eats our children', and, by virtue of rivalries for state resources, creates disruption producing destructive 'heat'. Such action negates the cooling potency of kagiso.

This aspect of Tswana modes of political thought, anchored in the cosmology of the menafe, is exemplified by the public attack on the once beloved kgosi Linchwe in the aftermath of Segametsi's murder. The anger directed towards kgosi Linchwe had much to do with the fact that he used to be the highly respected and much praised custodian of the moral order by virtue of chairing the royal kgotla, often appearing as a brave, eloquent challenger of senior governmental officials when they came to address his people. He had been recognised as a true protector of kagiso. For this reason, in particular, people were annoyed by his decision to leave the royal office to accept the president's offer of the chair of the customary court of appeal, a position firmly located in the central government.

In the wake of kgosi Linchwe's appointment, all kinds of suspicions developed about his being co-opted and corrupted by powerful governmental officials. His association with the alleged murderers only confirmed the view that he had lost his integrity. And it was rumoured that he was the one who secretly conveyed to 'people in high places' the muti derived from Segametsi's private parts. This allegation was, of course, grounded in the extremely ferocious way that the government had responded to the students' protests, in the rumour that kgosi Linchwe had influenced the police to release the suspects, and in the police force's apparent ineffectiveness in identifying and apprehending Segametsi's murderers. All this, and the potential malignancy of continuing government secrecy, was compounded in the government's refusal to disclose the findings of the Scotland Yard investigation.¹⁵

These various aspects relating to kgosi Linchwe's involvement in the Segametsi affair constitute what can be referred to as the 'hidden transcript' underlying the events. That is, contradictions relating to the hybridised structure and practice of the state were brought to the fore. Kgosi Linchwe was, for example, a focus of countervailing forces regarding the performance of power. Thus, his association with members of a new class and apparent secretive action of state bureaucracy exposed him to the criticism that he was abusing that power appropriate to the Tswana kingship authorised by ideals of openness and availability.
to public scrutiny. Integrated into the bureaucratic form of the modern state, the ideas of the *menae* are no less integral to the modernity of the contemporary Botswana republic. And it is by this fact that a discourse of the occult achieves its force, by identifying agents of the state as the magical consumers of its symbols of beneficence—its children—and as being engaged in the sorcerous destruction of a social order that they should ideally generate.

**Conclusion**

Botswana is regarded by many as a success story of African democracy, in marked contrast to many other nation-states on the African continent. Furthermore, it has been able to weather many of the economic difficulties of other states because of the continuing importance of its cattle and diamonds on the world markets. Globalising forces, of course, still have their effect and undoubtedly influence the distinct processes in Botswana relating to social inequities that other scholars have discussed in the context of sorcery practices elsewhere. However, I have concentrated more on mediating conceptualisations and institutions of social and political power in the context of the modern state and their critical significance in grasping the import of occultic practice.

While some of the general statements that have been expressed by anthropologists concerning witchcraft or sorcery in Africa can be applied to my material, the Botswana data indicate some modification. Thus, Chiekaway and Geschiere state that witchcraft discourses have an ‘amazing capacity ... to link global changes directly with local realities [because of] their basic open-endedness. Witchcraft discourse forces an opening of the village and the closed network: after all, it is the basic interest of the witch to betray his or her victims to outsiders. The image of the witch flying off to meet fellow conspirators and offer them relatives is a central one in African societies’ (1998: 5, italics added; cf. Geschiere 1999: 215). This statement has some application to the material I have presented, but notions such as ‘open-endedness’ gloss too much and fail to consider sufficiently either the ideas that are embedded in sorcery or occult discourse, or their production in social and political transformations. I have concentrated on the way notions of sorcery and other malevolent ritualistic practices are related to specific cosmologies of power. In the Botswana situation, sorcery is part of a critical discursive field relating to a context in which the order of a contemporary bureaucratic state aims, to a considerable extent, to legitimate its practices through appropriating ideas and understandings pertinent to the imaginary of that state/society constituted in the terms of Tswana kingship.

These terms, I hasten to add, are not simply an invention of modernity or of the colonial era. The ‘invention of tradition’ arguments (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) miss the fact that in the Botswana situation ideas and practices relevant to Tswana kingship and the social relations of which it was the centre have continued into contemporary contexts as a modernity alongside—and, to a degree, in complementary relation with—the formation of the rational bureaucratic
state order of the Western kind. This is a point I believe that scholars such as the Comaroffs (1993) would recognise. What I have pursued here is the contradictions that such continuities open up in the contemporary order of the Botswana state, and especially in the circumstances of the political and economic crises attendant on global developments leading to considerable discrepancies in wealth and life chances. These processes work into a social and political world in which certain cosmologies of power are in play. The discourse surrounding ritual murders and the anxieties and fears that such discourse propels in itself, while conditioned in global economic and political processes, are not a mere expression of those processes. Rather, the discourses I have discussed engage particular orientations to social and political realities which see in them a specific kind of personally and socially dangerous significance. This significance is one that in a way deflects attention away from the global forces that are operating and focuses attention on no less real forces of contradiction that lie at the heart of the historical and political formation that is the contemporary Botswana state.

Undoubtedly, occult discourse in Botswana refracts individual uncertainties and vulnerabilities of an everyday nature that are often connected with unemployment and the many exigencies of urban life, as I have explained. But it is much more than this. It involves some serious problems of the legitimacy of political leadership within the context of the modern state, problems that are as much moral as material. One central feature of such a moral crisis is the fact that the rational order of the bureaucratic state involves practices that must contravene continuing Tswana notions (which agents of the state encourage) that power must be open to the public surveillance of the kgotla. The critical discourse surrounding sorcery and ritual murders builds in this kind of contravention that lies impossibly at the heart of the modern state.

Tswana occult discourse is thus not an irrational expression of uncertainty. On the contrary, it is a response to the conflicting rationalities which are integral to the construction (and legitimation) of the Botswana state and the social order it encompasses. Further, the occult discourse is directed explicitly to the problematics of power. Most particularly, it addresses the perceived abuse of power, such perception being driven in social inequities and incompatibilities created by Botswana's integration within larger global processes.
NOTES

1. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 16th Satterthwaite Colloquium on Religion and Ritual in Africa and at the Research Seminar, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Bergen. I thank the participants for all the comments which have been most helpful for the revisions. In addition, I have benefited much from comments and criticism by John Comaroff, Wim van Binsbergen, Harri Englund, Deborah Durham, Suzette Heald, Judith Kapferer, Fred Klaits, Isaac Schapera, Bjarne Vandeskog, Phina Webner and Richard Webner. In particular, I want to express my gratitude to Bruce Kapferer, who has been an important source of inspiration for this work. This work has been financially supported by the Norwegian Research Council.

2. Within the limits of the present essay, I shall pursue the issue of 'ritual murder' predominantly with reference to the particular case of Segametsi, while other cases will be dealt with in works in preparation.

3. Muti is a widely used word for 'medicine'. It is, perhaps, significant in this case that it is spoken of as a Zulu loan word. The sorcerous agency of muti is a potent of the outside.


7. The capital village of the Bangwaketse in the southern district.


9. The capital village of the Batawana in the north-east district.


14. There is vast historical evidence indicating the extent to which accusations of lobola have been a significant aspect of dynastic disputes. See, for example, Burchell (1824: 439, 457, 551–2), Campbell (1922: 166), Livingstone (1857: 118, 137–8) and Mackenzie (1971: 389–90, 404–6, 421–2).

15. As of 2002, the report was still not released, allegedly because identifying the murder(ers) would be detrimental.

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