"Drinking the Hot Blood of Humans": Witchcraft Confessions in a South African Pentecostal Church

JENNIFER BADSTUEBNER
School of Archaeology and Anthropology
Australian National University
Canberra, ACT
Australia

SUMMARY Giant cats flying to America and cities under the sea off Cape Town are part of a cascade of imagery brought forth in the confessions of born-again witches. Now Christian, these exwitches confess stories of murder and bloodshed to packed audiences in townships in the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa. The confessions reveal occult realms in deep engagement with the particular experiences of young, poor, black women in South Africa. These confessions are performances of risky agency in a country in which acts of witchcraft are severely punished. This article explores the possible motivations of these young, disenfranchised women who take up witchcraft and Christianity as one way to negotiate conditions of extreme violence and dislocation in the sprawling urban townships.

True Faith Revival Night

It is Saturday night in the township of Thembulethu. The service led by Reverend V. W. Khula is in full swing, backed by an electric organ, a big PA system, and beautiful singing. The crowd gathered begins to engage in a call-and-answer chorus with the Reverend, building the atmosphere to a well-orchestrated pitch.

Khula: Do you love Jesus?
Crowd: Yes!
K: Praise Jesus!
C: Praise Jesus!
K: Do we know who is against us?
C: Satan! [Satan]
K: Satan! We know that Jesus is more powerful than Satan, Praise Jesus?
C: Praise Jesus!
K: Praise the Lord.

Standing to the left of the Reverend is a line of people, some ready to tell how the Reverend healed them of afflictions and to witness to the grace of the Holy Spirit in finding work or escaping debt. Most in the line, though, are there for another reason. One by one these young women (and in these traveling revivals, they are all young women) move forward, taking a microphone in hand and calmly lay claim to acts of witchcraft: Nowetu,¹ who was forced to many an isituenzela (zombie or walking dead); Sindiswa, who drank her uncle's blood and stole most of her elder relatives, swapping their bodies for goats and imprisoning their real selves (and bodies) underneath the sea; Thandiwe, who bears a burn mark on her cheek, offered as proof that the Holy Spirit had burnt her out from under the sea; and Gcina, who had 5,000 demons placed under each knee and a watch that could transport her to Nigeria for a meeting with the "Queen of the Night."

The True Faith of Apostolic Faith Ministry (hereafter "True Faith") is a small Pentecostal Church with a largely amaXhosa base of followers. Its spiritual leader

is Reverend Khula. Once a gang leader, he was brutally blinded in a gang war. Some years after the injury, reduced to a miserable existence in the townships, he began to experience visions that led him to establish the True Faith ministry. Such tiny churches are scattered throughout Southern Africa, held together by one or more charismatic leaders. Some survive but many do not, often re-forming into other churches or simply disappearing off the theological map. True Faith’s small congregations—some barely more than ten members—can be found in Khayelitsha, Craddock, George, Port Elizabeth, and Stellenbosch (urban and peri-urban areas in the Eastern and Western Cape provinces of South Africa). The church is tiny in comparison to the older and well-established groups of African Independent Churches and lacks the foreign power base of other Pentecostal Churches that have recently taken root in South Africa.

Reverend Khula and his entourage regularly take to the revival trail, traveling throughout the Eastern and Western Cape, renting small halls and staying in the faithful’s homes. It is these revivals that form the main outreach and source of new parishioners for the church. The revivals draw on and follow a Pentecostal mode familiar to Charismatic Pentecostalists worldwide.

A distinguishing mark of Pentecostal Charismatic services are the public confessions of sinful deeds. Based on my attendance at other Pentecostal services in the United Kingdom, Australia, and South Africa, the “best” confessions (most enthusiastically received) are typically those that contain heinous or scandalous acts (according to Christian principles). In some of the more extreme Charismatic Churches, confessions of Satanism, drug abuse, and crime are common. As one Pentecostalist explained, “for some people, the bigger the sin, the more powerful the testimony.” In the True Faith Church, the confessions that follow this extreme mode are made by a group of young women who travel as part of Khula’s revival group. It is these confessions that are, by far, the main draw card of the revivals. Their content makes the True Faith one of the most popular, for its size and unique revivals of its kind in South Africa.

The young women testify that they once lived as witches. They speak of arcane worlds, magical transportation, violence, and bloody murder, and they pack out the halls and rooms the church hires. These testimonials contain ruptures between the worlds of the imaginary and the material. In the process, the hitherto hidden world of witches and the modus operandi of witchcraft are, apparently, laid bare.

I suggest this church and the participation of these young women is part of the complex spiritual and social bricolage engaged by urban South Africans experiencing a fragmented and, at times, hyper-real African modernity. For young African women in the townships, this church is a refuge from their frequently violent, often oppressive gendered and generational encounters in the social space of townships. In exploring these confessions of witchcraft, it becomes clear that, as it mirrors their experiences in the urban space of townships, storytelling about the occult is also a critical strategy of survival for this group of young women.

Although the confessions follow a common pattern and are conditioned by cultural norms (around gender, age, sexuality, etc.) and public discourses (like the TRC and the antiapartheid struggle), what comes through in these stories is the power of the individual’s personal history, sense of agency, and desires in shaping the content of confession. These kinds of confessional testimonials are an individual’s attempt to insert herself into the fabric of public life and through doing so attempts to alter that fabric to create a new space for herself. The content of these narratives begs the question of why these people confess so publicly and
continually to acts that would at the least bring the censure of their family and community and at the worst, and very possibly, mean their death as witches?

Through these uncanny memories, nodal points of connection between modernity, Christianity, and witchcraft coalesce to produce particular cultural voices, voices that tell in occult terms the shape of women's experiences in a culture of uncertainty and fear that permeates so much of township life. The sociocultural milieu of the women, the dynamics in the church, and the charismatic presence of Reverend Kula sustain these texts. The threads of amaXhosa witchcraft beliefs feed through master narratives of Christianities that are themselves shaped by African contexts of colonial and postcolonial violence. The different forms these stories take, however, mark the individual's ability to contest, to be creative, and to move within the constraints of the identity of a born-again witch.

Witchcraft and Modernity in South Africa

The occult world of witchcraft is a secret one. Rumors abound and the symptoms of its presence are felt in the body and social space. Diviners and herbalists have a complex diagnostic knowledge of bewitchment, and most people have stories about encounters with witches. The realm of witchcraft is in no way an open book or obvious social text. However, it seems in this small church, things are changing. Zombies are escaping, talking, telling stories, and witches seem to be coming out into the open. The power of these stories is immense, pulling in crowds who have to be turned away from the door, who press up against the windows to see and hear witches speak openly.

Increasingly across Africa, witchcraft is the medium for the confrontation, absorption, and encapsulation of the changes wrought through modernity. Despite arguments to the contrary, witchcraft continues to flourish in urban South African townships that are making the transition into modern contemporary life. Michael Taussig (1986) argues the encounters between colonizer and indigene on the Latin American colonial frontier opened up spaces of death and terror. In similar spaces in modern South Africa moves the terrible figure of the witch who, taking in knowledge of the terrains of terror and death, returns to visit it on the people caught in these spaces, bringing horror and, in the end, opening up ways to cope with the excessiveness of such a life.

Witches slide across the boundaries of occult and material worlds with slippery ease. They congregate under the sea and in the deep forest; they pollute safe domesticated space by also living in intimate contact in the home and as neighbors. In the contemporary expansion of occult force, witches adapt, expanding beyond older understandings of their capabilities and victims and have come to serve as major agents in the logics of everyday violence.

Confessions of witches generally occur within the context of or in response to an accusation, where the witch has been "caught" usually by a diviner who has "smelt" them out through consultation with ancestral spirits. These "confessions" are often driven out of the accused through violence and intimidation and are usually in the form of a nodding acquiescence to charges laid before them. Rarely are there detailed accounts of acts, and the accused are subsequently punished, usually severely, up to and including death. This justice is meted out sometimes without any form of confession, admission, or anything resembling a trial. Contemporary witch-hunts have been instigated by a range of groups, from ANC Youth Leagues and street committees to vigilante groups and spontaneous mobs picking up where the chief's courts once held authority.

Accusations of witchcraft have so frequently ended in death and serious injury that the government formed a commission in 1996 to investigate witchcraft
violence. An accurate estimate of the death toll from witch-hunts is difficult to establish but it would not be unlikely that the figure is over a thousand nationwide since the fall of apartheid (see Niehaus 1998a, Niehaus 1998b, Niehaus 2002; Ritchken 1989). Although the death rates from these hunts plateaued between 1990 and 1995 as the country stabilized, the murder of those suspected of witchcraft still occurs. Because witchcraft complaints are not acknowledged in formal courts, witchcraft is a common charge brought before informal justice institutions (such as street and barracks committees) or before vigilante-style groups often resulting in the violent punishment and expulsion from the community of the suspected witch.

In this setting, to declare knowledge about witchcraft let alone claim to have once been a witch is an extraordinary act. Even amongst the more powerful amaqgira (healer/diviners) that I worked with, there was caution in speaking too much about witchcraft. "If I knew those things and talked of them in the open (you know, carelessly) then perhaps people would ask, how does she know this? Maybe she is a witch too . . . and they would come to kill me." Yet night after night in revivals staged by the True Faith, this group of young women step forward claiming to have lived as witches.

Because of the dangerous ground that allegations or claims of witchcraft occupy in South Africa the declaration of witchcraft made by these women is an ambitious and risky claim to power and knowledge. Through public remembering the testifiers place themselves at risk as known (albeit reformed) witches. If the church collapses (a reasonable possibility) they risk being left out in the open as identified (ex)witches outside the control of the church. The possibilities of estrangement and much more serious ramifications if the church dissolves are foregrounded by the reactions of some of the women’s families. After hearing their relative claiming responsibility for a death of a child, one family shunned the confessor. Other families have followed suit after similar confessions. This has forced many of the women to depend on the slender auspices of the church for food and shelter.

Pentecostalism and the Gospel of Satani

One of the reasons the church has adopted this particular form of dangerous confessional is that the church is in fierce competition with other religious and spiritual institutions and networks that also claim to make sense of life in South Africa. Through the confessions and in Khula’s sermons, ancestral spirits, traditional healers, the the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), the Methodists, the Universal Church, and others all come under thinly veiled attack as the agents of Satan. As Reverend Khula explains, “in my ministry, the Holy Spirit has given me a gift to release those who are involved in Satanism, witchcraft, sangomas, and false prophets.”

Through the act of claiming power over witchcraft, the church makes a bid to claim power over a critical force in people’s everyday lives and their expectations of the future. Witchcraft is a local power popularly blamed for halting and twisting the good changes and opportunities that were supposed to come after the fall of apartheid. The church also makes a connection beyond the local by presenting itself as a modern institution that answers local concerns about a globalizing, urban occult. As such, it offers a protective spiritual bridge into the expanding global world, one safe from the dangers of bewitchment.

The rise of Pentecostalism throughout the world (see Csordas 1994 for the United States; Eves 1998 for Papua New Guinea; and Meyer 1999 for Ghana) has reinvigorated the role of evil in the Christian lexicon through a particular
adherence to and promulgation of Satan and his diabolical presence in the world. In new forms of Charismatic Pentecostalism in South Africa, Satan is portrayed as a universal, global being and is a major feature of emerging Christian doctrines. Birgit Meyer (1999) argues new churches claim to answer people's problems by registering them as part of the universal drama of spiritual combat against Satan and his accomplices. Her work on Ghanaian churches demonstrates how Pentecostalism offers its followers fixed orientation points and a well-defined moral universe within globalization's unsettling flows. In ways that look very similar to True Faith's confessional mode, Meyer documents in her fieldwork a double conversion first to a belief in Satan in order to turn away (from the devil and a life of sin) toward Christ. This belief in Satan is fostered in the revivals through a entanglement of witches and Satani, Christian demons and indigenous occult creatures forging a relationship of different beliefs that lead to a turning to the church for salvation and protection from these occult alliances.

More generally speaking, the attraction of Pentecostalism as a modern institution lies in its claim to make sense of change and to empower its followers in an expanding global world. The end of apartheid has brought the world rushing in on the wings of technology (televisions appeared in houses, barracks, and shacks throughout the townships and gigantic, colorful billboards are a conspicuous feature of urban and rural landscapes). Suddenly capitalism, in all its finery, was selling itself to the African consumer in ways that outstripped any previous attempt at market capture. Along with democracy came the belief that this consumer lifestyle was, at last, possible. That this promise has not been fulfilled for the vast majority of South Africans has lent a great appeal to institutions or movements that appear to hold a key to this just-out-of-reach, yet highly visible, prosperity. For South Africa, and the Third World more generally, Charismatic Pentecostal Churches promise guidance and security, with many specifically promising wealth in this life. It is no surprise then, as Karla Poewe (1993) points out, that of the total Pentecostal Charismatic population, 66 percent are in the Third World. The infamous Universal Church, for example, has a large following in the Third World; it began its life in Brazil and rapidly spread to the African continent, fueled by promises of Mercedes Benz cars and other material wealth.

True Faith employs technology as sign of modernity in the form of microphones, amplifiers, and, especially, through the constant use of camcorders and videos in which the church conspicuously displays its grasp on modernity. These recordings and playbacks sustain the form of the revivals. Reverend Khula suggests that the recordings are proof of the Holy Spirit at work. "We have great and wonderful evidence in that we have video cassettes that show what the Holy Spirit is doing in our services." New converts and people who come seeking healing are placed in kitchens or living rooms converted into waiting rooms that, equipped with a television, show unending videos of previous revivals. These video recordings are prominent in the services as demonstrations of technological power and are a clear link to the global world—a world that will, one day, Reverend Khula asserts, televise his message across the planet. My presence was also assiduously recorded as further proof of their global contacts, and I was frequently introduced as the researcher who has come to be with us tonight all the way from Australia. It is with a wry resignation that I have had to come to terms with my videotaped image (as a foreign researcher) being used as (and in all probability as you read this) a proselytizing tool at the same time as their words and my experience with the church become part of my anthropological discourse.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff's insights into contemporary religious life in the postcolony can be applied to churches like True Faith who offer a way to
comprehend and exploit a "modern world whose vitality (is) both elusive and estranging" (1985:253). The True Faith's claim to control witches offers a solution to insecurities and fears that are often experienced through the lens of bewitchment and witchcraft in its global and local guises. It taps into a commonly held belief that witches are more numerous and more powerful than ever and, further, that witches are adept at negotiating modernity and, thus, constitute a dangerous feature of the modern scene.

The Vulnerable World of (Ex)Witches

If witches are the symbol of the power and danger women can hold through occult labor, the social worlds these women move in during their ordinary lives reveal a stark contrast. Teresa Angless (1992) reports that one in four South African women is regularly beaten by her male partner and that one in three will be raped at some time in her life. The rape statistics themselves, although high, are widely held to be too low. Katherine Wood et al. (1996b, 1998) have shown that young women's experience of sex are often violent and nonconsensual, starting as early as 12, and their subsequent histories are liberally interspersed with beatings and forced intercourse. Police estimate that only one in every 35 rapes are reported, and the continuing work into sexual violence by the Medical Research Council of South Africa (see Wood and Jewkes 1997, 2001; Wood et al. 1996a, 1996b, 1998) consistently shows that rape and other forms of sexual violence are becoming "normal" behavior and, thus, may not even be reported as such. This erasure from reporting and statistics points to an increasingly vulnerable position for young women in South Africa.

This normalization of sexual violence reveals itself throughout the women's stories, not only in the explicit accounts of sexual violence described in more detail below but also in transformations of amaXhosa witchcraft creatures as well. For example, in local tradition, mamlambos, (lit., "Mother of the River"), bloodsucking female snakes, have exclusively male victims to whom they provide material wealth and sexual pleasure (by metamorphosing into beautiful white women), in exchange for the blood of elder relatives of the victim. They appear in the True Faith confessions, however, as male snakes that transform into handsome black men. This masculinized mamlambo adorned with gold chains gives no material wealth as he rapes the women (some as very young girls) as a man and drinks their blood as a snake. This snake man, in his handsome human guise, is also reminiscent of the impundulu, a lightning bird capable of transforming into a handsome male lover. However, the impundulu's human female lovers experience sexual pleasure in his (undoubtedly dangerous) hands. This is in stark contrast with all the sexual encounters with the witchcraft entities in the True Faith confessions, encounters that are consistently portrayed as painful and terrifying. This lack of sexual satisfaction has much to do with the puritanical relationship of Christianity to sex (and women), but it also points to the strong presence of violent sexual relationships in these women's lives.

Sexual violence, however, is not the only dimension of their lives that makes them vulnerable. Being a young, unmarried woman under traditional amaXhosa law means coping with low status and being subject to her elders and to senior men; she is even, in seniority and after marriage, a jural minor because of her gender. In the contemporary context of urban space, this subject position still has a powerful, if fragment hold over women's lives. The difficulty of this position is compounded by the fact that most women are poorly educated in a highly competitive employment field of often substandard wages.
The decrease of lobola (bride-wealth payments) and the “failure” of democratic equality to deliver economic opportunity to young black women have meant a decrease in their ability to bring material benefit to their family. This lack of economic empowerment is compounded by the economic costs of sexual relationships in urban spaces. Young, poor, African women in the urban townships are likely to engage in “sweetheart” sexual relationships. These have replaced many traditional or Christian marriages. The likelihood of children resulting from such alliances and relationships is high, and frequently the mother is left to provide for the child alone. They and their children add a financial drain on already economically-stressed families.

The growing HIV/AIDS statistics paint an equally bleak picture (see Campbell 2000 and Leclerc-Madlala 2001). Devalued by poverty and its accompanying violence, there are few opportunities for these young women to be recognized and valued as persons. Death is constantly around them and, like the Bom Jesus mothers encountered by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), the constant grind of poverty leads to different conceptualizations of life and of humanity and, further than this, of reality and experience.

By contrast, the witches’ confessions move far beyond the desperate local circumstances of these women and tap into global and pan-African scenes with frequent reference to the Queen of the Night (a witch queen) who resides in a palace of gold in Nigeria. There are also stories of magical travel by the witches to America, Europe, and India (familiar sites of colonial and neocolonial power) to wreak havoc on the drivers of cars (drivers/owners of cars being representative in themselves as powerful figures), confirming the place and destructive power of witchcraft in a global context.

The delocalizing strategies also extend to the choice of victims beyond the usual witchcraft targets of family and near neighbors to strangers in the cities of Cape Town and Johannesburg and people in foreign countries. This further imbues local (witch) actors with global power and a modern, unpredictable menace. The confessions are a discourse on the changing nature of power (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1998; Rowlands and Warnier 1988). Within their confessions, women find the space to publicly talk about the effects of sexual violence and intimidation in the coded terms of witchcraft. Through the confessions, they label forced sexual acts, violence, intimidation, and rape as acts of Satanic witchcraft. This is, I suggest, a form of resistance to the worrying and growing acceptance of sexual violence against young women as a “normal” (accepted) form of behavior and to the silence that often accompanies talking about incidents of sexual violence. Besides labeling these experiences of violence, these confessions reveal a surprising agency on the part of these women as they reenter the world as powerful witches. They invert their normal status as relatively powerless individuals into powerful, destructive agents, taking life, moving throughout the world freely and invisibly, masquerading as powerful figures in their ordinary social world: as ancestral spirits, as men, and, finally, as the feared figure of the witch.

Nomalady: White Victims of Witchcraft

Nomalady lives with her children in an informal sector of a Cape Town township in her own house. She works as a domestic cleaner in the upmarket Cape Town suburb of Claremont. She is in her late thirties, a solidly built, cheery woman with a lilting breathless tone to her voice. I met her in the Khayelitsha chapter of the church in which she has been a member for several years, though she was not part of the revivals at the time I attended them. The following section demonstrates her ability to negotiate with powerful witches in positions of authority.
even as she reminds the listener of the dangerous situation she is in. The following is part of her recounting of a long battle of wills with a powerful witch beginning with the witch who attempts to force her to kill people:

**Older Witch:** Listen here, don't think you are clever. You mustn't think you are clever, you must do what I told you. You must kill people.

**Nomalady:** I said to her, “which people must I kill?”

**OW:** Even your family, you can kill your family.

**N:** I say, “What! I can’t kill my family!”

**OW:** OK, then you must find people and kill them.

**N:** You know, there with the Devil, they force you, you can’t say no. They force you. I said to her—thinking my heart was so sore to kill my family or friends—I said, “Ok, what about white people, as they usually kill the black people.” In those days, from 1976, the black people were killed by the whites. So, I am going to kill the whites as they kill the black people.

**OW:** She said, “It’s fine, just try . . .”

Nomalady combats the witches in this and other accounts. She confronts them, argues with them and they in turn engage with her. This two-sided engagement is largely absent from the other accounts. Her status in the larger world as an older woman with children empowers her to answer and get replies from the “head” witches. She is much older than the other exwitches and clearly draws on her personal history in the struggle. Nomalady presents herself throughout her narrative as a heroine, battling witches, trying to minimize harm, or only harming those who are evil—like white people who kill black people. Her account employs history to mark parts of her story, unlike the other accounts that are situated in a vague, recent past. Her successful negotiation to kill only whites draws from her own politicized sense of the world.

Nomalady’s account also significantly differs from the others in that she was not subject to, nor engaged in any violent sexual acts. In contrast, the younger women are relatively unpoliticized and are arguably more vulnerable, because of their age and socioeconomic position, to the sexual aggression and violence endemic in present day South African townships. They told stories soaked in images of sexual violence.

**Pumza: Car Accidents and the Queen of the Night**

Pumza is 20 years old. She has a high school education and no longer lives with her family. She is unemployed and travels with Reverend Khula and his entourage. She is a tall, attractive woman who appears confident. IsiXhosa is her mother tongue. Pumza was taken by her father’s sister to be a witch in 1998. For three years Pumza says she worked and lived underwater in a river in the Eastern Cape until the Reverend Khula rescued her in 2000. The following are sections of an interview with Pumza, in which she talks about how she came to be a witch, what she did down under the river and how she would travel internationally to cause car accidents. The excerpt below begins as Pumza is about to be taken by her aunt:

I said, “Where are we going?” For it was midnight by now. She said, “You will see.” And then, she came to another room. In that room was some brown, homemade bread. She picked it up and put it on the ground. She pointed with her small finger at the bread and the bread changed to being a big thing. We entered into the bread. Inside the bread looked like a bus. We went to the river in that bus. We entered the river. And then there what I saw was a brown place with buildings like Khayelitsha township [in Cape Town].
When we got there they took me to another room. They took me and showed me a girl and said this girl was your sister who died a long time ago. They took me to another room and showed me another sister who had died. Then to another room and showed me a grandmother whose hands were tied and her mouth was sewn shut. This woman was my grandmother. They make her stitched [sewn her mouth shut] because she prayed a lot. They took me to another room where there was an Indian. He said I must take off my clothes and my aunt removed my clothes. I came to the Indian man and sat next to him. He took a nail and put it in on top of my head and then took some nails and put them into my hands.

They took me again to another room and on that room I saw a naked white man. When I got there I saw this man and I got scared and fought and got out. They pushed me and said I must get in and forced me in. The naked white man had me sit down near him and he took a snake and put it in my right leg and one in my other knee. They then took me to another room. They said it was a very special room and that when I went in I must give respect because a special person was in that room. When I went in the room I saw many, many doors. There was a round bed on that room. The Queen of the Night [from Nigeria] was on that bed with her angels. When I entered, the Queen of the Night came to me and told me that the things they put in me had a use. She told me that the nail on top of my head was to protect me so nobody can see what I am doing, the snake for protecting me so I can fly and I can do car accidents.

My first year there I had a job washing the intestines of humans. On the second year, I was promoted and was causing car accidents, in South Africa, India, America, and Europe. Before we go to do car accidents, they make a celebration for us. Before they do that celebration they took a live human person and killed them for a sacrifice. Then we drink that hot blood and washed with the hot blood of that human. After we finished washing they took us to the Queen of the Night. When we got there she stabbed us with a sword in our stomachs. She did that because we must be strong. After we finished we went out another door. When we came through we just saw the sky. Then we saw a cat. The cat took us to the places we cause car accidents. It was a big cat and could carry 20 of us. Number 18 operated the cars and Number 19 is the one who looked after us and Number 20 was the driver of that car. The driver sits on the cat’s neck and drives the cat. When we reached there they would put us on our places and the cars that were picked for the accidents we would see with a red light or a green light. When the car came we just fly on top of the car and we pour powder on top of the car and the person driving would have a blackout. After that I would hit the car and the car would crash and the people would think the driver to be dead.

These witches’ testimonials of personal violence and murder have to be seen in a larger social context. Ideas of international space overlap with places that “look like Khayelitsha.” Nigeria’s palaces of the Queen of the Night and cars speeding along American highways, places of power and wealth exist intertwined with local shebeens (taverns) in which sexual violence, exploitation, and casual sex are locally concentrated. Pumza’s parade of dead sisters, her grotesquely silenced grandmother, and her murder of another relative speaks to a severe dislocation of kin and family ties. The cutting of relatives’ throats and the drinking of adults’ blood recounted in the testimonials is in line with what Lambek (2002) describes as the sometimes violent rejection of ancestral and parental figures in response to what is understood as their absence, their impotence, or withdrawal of protection.

Fundiswa: Owner of an Epidemic

The next account is by a young woman in her late teens. It is the first I encountered in which witchcraft and AIDS is expressly linked. Although AIDS deaths are sometimes masked by family members who attribute the death to
bewitchment, amongst the traditional healers I worked with in Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, none thought that AIDS was caused by the action of witches. That this linkage happens within a Christian setting is, I believe, significant. It is also an attempt to gain power over AIDS, a relatively new and lethal force in the townships. Fundiswa’s claim to be able to cause AIDS enables her to be the controller of a major epidemic, though she is, as a young woman, the most common victim of the disease. Instead of the sufferer or potential victim, she is the manufacturer (by grinding the bones of murdered people into powder) and owner; she chooses who is to be infected and escapes infection herself, despite being its carrier. In this she surpasses HIV-positive people who transfer the disease to others and enters into a persona of power that can only exist and be claimed in communities in the grip of an epidemic: that of the untouched, resistant body of a carrier.

My name is Fundiswa. I was a witch for ten years. I started in 1990 when I was 12 years old. They [the witches] took me to a place inside Namaqua forest. The walls were made of human bodies and human skin on the floor. She took me to a small house where there were four old people. So they took me and put in demons under my feet. They also put needles underneath also.

They put me in a washing bin [basin] made of human bones and washed me with blood. After they finished washing me I told them I was hungry so they gave me chaff (calf feed) mixed with blood. And then I ate. After that they told me I must start to work. My first work was to break up marriages and kill people and also to take out the wombs, to cause miscarriages on the four to five months [pregnant]. And also to take out the wombs of women.

I went to kill my sister’s child who was two years old. If you are on that kind of work one of your first duties is to kill one of your relatives. I took a string and wrapped it around the child’s neck. I then strangled the child; they gave me a knife that looked like a knife but was made of bone and I put the knife to the child’s neck and then the blood came out. When the blood came I drank that blood.

They put a belt on my waist, but it was not a belt. It was a snake and that snake changes me so that I could be a man or a wife. When I work I work at night. Maybe midnight I come inside the house. I land on top of the house. I used my demon that is on my right leg to get inside the house.

When I get inside if there is a man sleeping with his wife I change and rape the wife as the belt has changed me to a man. When it comes the time to release my sperms, I release a powder out of me, because of that snake so the woman can have AIDS.

I used to put it on women, that powder, especially the single ones. I go to a tavern to attack those single ladies. When I go into the tavern I have a demon in my eyes to operate [control] that woman. They come to me and drink with me and I tell her that I love her. We will agree and go to her house. I am a man and I change to have sex with her. I also do the same as I do with the wives. I release the powder giving her AIDS.

Fundiswa’s gender switching enacts claims to power, especially when the power to have sex/force sex (like a man/as a man) also deals out death (see Leclerc-Madladla 2001). Their identity as both victim and perpetrator speaks to their aim to have the power to act on the world and their admission that the world forces power over them.

There is a very human geography in these occult stories, the maps of fear and of risk that women negotiate. Lack of policing; the presence of gangs; poor lighting; poor public transport and a very real, but underexamined, crisis in
masculinities within urban townships means that young women are routinely exposed to a hyperviolent, sexualized world through which they must negotiate safe passage. This negotiation, dogged by the "traditional" attitudes toward young women, is often undertaken without the protective, if at times oppressive, shield of the extended family. Most of the women I interviewed were of an age group and socioeconomic status that placed them in one of the most vulnerable stages in their lives.

**Peladi: Family Murders and Gerontocracy**

There is also a generational challenge laid down as the women violently take the life of those whom would be generally regarded as senior to them in authority, such as grandparents and older siblings. Yet there is a peculiar tension within these powerful acts, situations in which the women are the victims, being sexually molested by snakes, forced into marriage with *isituenzela* (the living dead), and forced into gross domestic service. The generational conflicts are held in tension between the control exerted by the generally older witches over the younger witches and the ability that the young women have to destroy gerontocratic authority in their own lives by their actions as witches. For example, in Peladi's story, by obeying the order given to her by older witches to murder her grandparents she both obeys and defies gerontocratic authority:

I gave a powder to that demon that was at the house. That demon took that powder and put it at my grandmothers' foot. She got sick. They took her to the hospital but they did not know what was happening. So they took her to the *ixhwele* [herbalist] and they said she was being poisoned. Then my grandmother died and I took my grandmothers' human body under the river. Then I left a goat at my grandmothers' place and they took that goat to the mortuary. Then they buried that goat thinking it was my granny. ... And my father's sister said I must kill my uncle. I go into his body and I put powder on the alcohol in his stomach and he complains about stomachaches and then he gets sick and died. I took his body. They did not bury my uncle. They buried a black goat. My father's sister said I must kill another uncle. I go into his body and travel to his brain and put out a powder there. The people thought he was running mad. They took him to the doctor and even to the *igqira* [diviner healer]. But that uncle died too and I took him under that river in the Transkei. They buried a black goat just like the others. The people at my home, they think that it was a human body in the coffin but we know it was a goat.

I stayed there under the river with my four family members. ... My heart was feeling sorry because the family (back home) think that they are dead but they are alive. ... So I was sorry for that. So I asked to take those people out ... [they said] ... if I am going to take those four out then I must slaughter them like cows. Then I slaughtered them. First my grandfather, and my grandfather's blood was hot. I drink my grandfather's blood when it was hot. And my grandmother, I slaughter her and her blood was hot. I slaughter my uncle. I drink his hot blood and my other uncle and drink his hot blood also.

Despite the vulnerability that comes through in these stories, they all carry the strong sense of the power to act. In some testimonies the sexual power of men is taken over, converted to a space where it is the women who hold the reins of power, who deal death through sex, who take, rape, and control both domestic and public spaces and women's bodies "just like a man." Pumza takes up the role of masculine predator, going into shebeens and preying on women. Peladi slaughtered her family members and challenged the authority of (some) elders by attacking those who were supposed to be the most venerated. Others talked about masquerading as prostitutes and stealing the male client's lives, entering
into households and literally inhabiting the body of a husband to have sex and to deal out death.

**Globalization, Truth, and Reconciliation**

As modernity and globalization fosters the growth of individualism and an orientation toward the future (future time), extended kin networks, although surviving, are felt by most to be disintegrating along with an accretion of enduring time that tradition and ancestorality carries. There is a sense that both family and ancestors have withdrawn their protection and simply cannot cope with the impact of the immense changes that have occurred in South Africa. Young women have to make their own way.

If these stories reflect the growing insecurities associated with globalization, however, they also reflect, in form and function, a local example of global political culture, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC, through highly publicized, widespread performances, created a space in which the guilty told stories without reprisal. In the TRC's high-profile Amnesty Hearings, perpetrators of violent acts were seen to give (sometimes) detailed testimonies in a constructed (if not completely realized) space of reconciliation and forgiveness. The commission's Amnesty Hearings arguably broke a formerly tight link between confession and punishment; public confession became much more a stand-alone narration of trauma and became seated as such in South African public consciousness.

Like the TRC which sought to convert some of the worst agents of apartheid into citizens of a democratic South Africa, this church attempts to make the irredeemable, redeemable: turning a witch into a Christian. And like the highly public TRC, the form of the church’s services, with its relentless videotaping and replaying of revivals, creates each past revival into a media moment for the next town, or the next night’s revival. The route by which Reverend Kula guides the witches is close to that promoted by the TRC and is generally held as a way forward for South African democracy: confession to those harmed, public testimonial, and an altered life. Although this mirrors in part the evangelical procedures of born-again Christianity, it also reflects the creation of citizens in the process of the South African transition.

The young, born-again witches, however, bear witness not to the good news or to their lives as Christians but almost exclusively to their experience as perpetrators of atrocities. The confessors are held at the axis of opposing poles of victim and perpetrator every time they step forward to tell their stories. Each night on the revival trail they begin again at the point of their lives of witches, ever becoming captured by the fire of the Holy Spirit, ever becoming Christian.

There is another way that these witchcraft confessions mirror the narratives at the TRC. In most of the stories told there was the presence of witches who held a deeper knowledge of witchcraft. It was these more powerful witches who controlled the drafted acolytes who had escaped. So constant was this refrain that a long-term member of the Khayelitsha chapter of the church defined two kinds of witches at work: those who have come out in the open and been captured by the Holy Spirit and those “really witches,” the ones who are not redeemed. “Those really witches would kill those little girls [the born-again witches] if they could, because they are telling all their secrets.” She was pointing to a shadowy contingent of higher-echelon witches who have control over the occult domains of the earth, sea, and deep forest, who draft these women through kidnapping, forcing them to acts of murder and mayhem, forcing them to carry out evil in the world.
The parallels between the failure of higher government and army officials to admit culpability, remaining in the background whilst lower-ranking officials testified is tantalizing. Like the TRC and the apartheid histories themselves, there is a strong sense of the presence of layers of knowledges that descend out of reach. And the “really witches” expose the inability of the church to domesticate witchcraft into the realm of Christianity, revealing that the power and persistence of witchcraft lies in its indeterminacy of meaning and its ability to slip the Christian (or otherwise) lines drawn around it.

Conclusion

These revivals offer these young women an opportunity to travel, to be the center of intense public attention. Their lives on the revival trial are an adventure compared to the usual lot of young, unemployed women living in the townships (many days of boredom and unending household duties). The church supports some of them, and undoubtedly serves as a safe refuge from the alternative of trying to survive in what is in many ways a hostile, urban environment. They are bound to each other through Christianity and many are clearly close friends. Their long-term future as redeemed witches is at best precarious, but as life spans and futures are so often curtailed generally, thinking about the future is in the realm of dreams and the actions taken reflect a concern with present needs.

The world of witchcraft is a dangerous world. It promises an alternative and appealing agency for these young women, but its antisocial character means that it is too dangerous a world in which to continue dwelling. By abandoning the evil, sexualized identities as witches, they embrace and attempt to follow a Christian path toward a more prosperous future that uses a radical break from the past. The spoken memories of their days and nights as witches serve as the impetus to propel them and the church forward into a more promising future. These women are agents recreating themselves from marginal to socially valuable through a marked conversion and revaluation. They convert their (arguably low) worth and social impact as ordinary women into that of powerful witches who have a great potential to impact on social life. This status is altered and announced through conversion marking them as witches who have ceased an extraordinary and far-reaching exercise in death dealing and body theft. In confessing, they claim power firstly through ceasing their life as witches and secondly by claims to possess specialized knowledge about a realm that lies underneath much of South African social life.

Religious movements that combat, reflect, or engage with political processes in southern African are well documented, from David Lan’s (1985) account of spirit mediums involvement in the independence of Zimbabwe to work on political resistance implicit in the ZCC in South Africa (see Kieman 1990). In the case of these witches, it is not a specific political or anticolonial force that is being resisted. The struggle is with a much more diffuse form of oppression; that of poverty, of exclusion, and of dispossession. It is a struggle against the economic circumstances that are seated within a complex web of historical, colonial, and apartheid pasts and a global positioning within a world that prizes first world power and income. The confessions invert the powerless position of young, disenfranchised black women. By collecting power within their bodies and expressing their power through the “evil” of witchcraft these women indicate in the strongest symbolic forms their frustrated disempowerment. The women are rewriting their selves from ordinary, poor, young women marginalized and at the periphery of the South African economy into occult players on an international and pan-African stage, claiming power within the greater social scheme of
the nation-state and the world and marking their otherwise invisible presence in the immense sweep of urban townships.

Notes

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1. All names have been changed.
2. From conversations with Assembly of God member in 1999.
3. By strategy, I do not mean that these confessions are necessarily false. In the context of this discussion, strategic acts are those that enable the person to continue as a whole and undamaged individual. Such action can extend to unconscious and conscious acts, feelings, and beliefs.
5. The highest recorded death rates from public witch-hunts occurred between 1990 and 1995.
7. It was thrown out of Zambia for suspicion of occult activities and is in trouble over massive tax fraud in Brazil.
8. The South African Department of Health has estimated that in 2001, in the general South African population, 2.65 million women and 2.09 million men between the ages of 15 to 49 were living with HIV. It was also estimated that 83,581 babies had become infected with HIV through mother-to-child transmission (Health Systems Research Directorate 2001).
9. On June 16, 1976, the student uprisings in Soweto and across the country were violently suppressed by the Security Forces and led to a long period of unrest in the country.

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