The Occult, the Erotic and Entrepreneurship: An Analysis of Oral Accounts of *ukuthwala*, Wealth-giving Magic, Sold by the Medicine Man Khotso Sethuntsa

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Introduction

This study examines the way in which the economic, the erotic and the supernatural are brought together in the practice of *ukuthwala*, the Xhosa term for a dangerous, powerful procedure for long-term wealth, widely believed to involve the ownership of a wealth-giving being[1]. An individual receives medicine for ukuthwala and acquires a familiar, the *mamlambo*, which bestows wealth upon its owner. However, the mamlambo's owner is required to sustain the ukuthwala pact with sacrifices that come at a great personal and moral cost.

The combination of the occult, the sensual and the economic that characterises the ukuthwala process is embodied in the form of the mamlambo. The word mamlambo derives from the Xhosa for river, *mlambo*. Because *u-Ma-Mlambo*, her full name in Xhosa, resides in deep water, she is known as 'the mother of the river'. The mamlambo is a shape-changer, who is often said to appear in the form of bright, shining objects, which call to mind symbols of wealth, such as sparkling, shining coins (Niehaus 2001:59;

[1] Italics are utilised on the first occasion terms from Xhosa, Sotho or Zulu are used. Thereafter, the words are not italicised. Many of these terms have become part of South African English and there are no concise, appropriate English equivalents for them.

Broster & Bourn 1982:59). However, the mamlambo is most often envisaged as a snake, a mermaid or a seductive woman. The wealth that she grants comes at a terrible price. She wreaks havoc in her partner's life, damaging or even destroying close personal relationships and undermining individual sexuality. This study examines the genesis of the mamlambo, and discusses why the practice of ukuthwala has become widespread in southern Africa (Niehaus 2001:56).

Specific reference is made to oral accounts concerning the leading ukuthwala practitioner in southern Africa, the medicine man Khotso Sethuntsa. Khotso, as he is commonly known, was born in a mountain village in Lesotho in 1898. Initially he was a farm worker, then he set up business as a herbalist in Kokstad in the 1920s. He became highly successful, and his medicines were much sought-after, particularly his medicines for wealth and success. In 1960, Khotso relocated to the Transkei. He established his principal headquarters in Lusikisiki, where he lived and worked until his death in 1972 (Wood & Lewis 2007).

Methodology

This study draws on years of research into Khotso's life[2]. Information concerning him comes primarily in the form of oral accounts, derived from interviews conducted between 1997 and 2008 in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho, some of which are cited in the Appendix[3]. Many individuals who had been close to Khotso were interviewed. The principal informants consisted of close friends, wives, family members and

[2] Some of the principal research findings in this paper are drawn from *The Extraordinary Khotso: millionaire medicine man of Lusikisiki* (2007), produced by Felicity Wood, in collaboration with co-investigator Michael Lewis.

[3] I interviewed many people who had been close to Khotso, sometimes in conjunction with my Research Assistant, Sylvia Tloti, or my co-investigator, Michael Lewis. Both Ms Tloti and Mr Lewis also carried out independent interviews. Details of the specific interviews on which this study is based are provided in the References. Work was also carried out by several student researchers, as indicated in footnotes and in the References.

business associates. Next, people residing in the areas where Khotso had lived and worked, and who had known him personally, or had received information concerning him from those who had known him well were also interviewed[4]. Finally, interviews were conducted with a range of traditional practitioners, including herbalists, spiritual healers and diviners. Khotso's work as an ukuthwala practitioner came to the fore during most of these interviews. It became evident that the practice of ukuthwala was a significant but under-explored feature of the southern African supernatural, thus warranting further academic investigation.

In this study, the socio-economic context within which Khotso operated is taken into consideration, since it exercised a considerable influence on the relationship between magic and economics in his career. Consequently, it has shaped the narratives that have arisen concerning this, bearing out Ken Plummer's observation that oral narratives should be perceived as expressions of the social worlds within which they are embedded (1995:18). Many other narrative theorists, including Ruth Finnegan (1970:14, 331), also draw attention to the way in which oral narratives form part of their social and economic context, and are influenced by their narrators' places in that milieu. Towards the conclusion of his study of oral narratives, Plummer (1995:167) maintains: 'I have tried to show how stories are truly sociological phenomena—rather than mere narratives or texts in the abstract' (167). This study, consequently, pays some attention to sociological aspects of narrative theory, such as those developed by Plummer.

Commenting on the fact that, according to traditional African beliefs in the spiritual and supernatural, humankind 'lives in a more than human context', Isidore Opkewho posits that '[m]agic therefore exists in traditional

[4] Some of the individuals who provided the oral accounts in the Appendix fall into this second category of informants. The man Khotso liked to call his prime minister, James Lunika, is one of the principal informants in this study. Two other principal informants are Pascal Makeka, from Lesotho, who knew Khotso from the early days onwards; and Lalo Yako, who knew Khotso very well in the 1960s, when he regularly purchased medicines from him. Extracts from interviews with these three men are contained in the Appendix.

life and lore as a means of asserting the human will in a world which poses severe dangers to human existence' (1983:179 - 180). This applied to many of Khotso's clients, inhabitants of some of the poorest parts of South Africa and Lesotho, who turned to him for his medicines for money and good luck, including the full-scale wealth-bestowing ukuthwala procedure, in order to exert some measure of control over their lives. Comparably, Khotso himself, an individual from remote, impoverished rural origins and a black inhabitant of a country under oppressive white minority rule, turned to the supernatural as a means of manipulating circumstances, and attaining power and wealth which would otherwise have been beyond his reach. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that Khotso's clientele came not only from economically embattled southern African communities. A substantial number of middle-class entrepreneurs, both white and black, visited Khotso, seeking to shape the economic trends in their own lives, rather than be at the mercy of market-related forces beyond their control.

Findings and Analysis

Orality, Commerce and Witchcraft

The oral accounts of Khotso's prowess as a seller of ukuthwala formed a key component of his entrepreneurial activities. Khotso's customers, both black and white, believed in him because they had heard the numerous stories describing his ability to bring about financial miracles in peoples' lives. Information about Khotso's ukuthwala procedure comes to us primarily in the form of these oral accounts. Khotso himself devised some of these narratives and was responsible for ensuring that they received widespread publicity. Russell H. Kaschula comments on the way in which aspects of the South African oral tradition can be put to commercial use (2002:7 - 8), and Khotso provides one early example of this phenomenon. The creation and dissemination of stories drawing attention to his skill, wealth and renown became a cornerstone of his entrepreneurial activities.

Khotso's stories carried additional weight because in many of the communities within which they were related, they exercised potency at an imaginative as well as a mercantile level, holding out the reassuring promise that even the harshest of economic circumstances could suddenly be overturned. In this, they provide an illustration of what Kennedy Chinyowa describes as the strategies of survival adopted by African orality to

strengthen, restore and benefit (even if only in an imaginative, psychic sense) one specific group that is dominated by others (2001:131).

In its interweaving of dangerous magic and money, ukuthwala provides an instance of what Peter Geschiere terms 'the modernity of witchcraft':

> To many Westerners, it seems self-evident that the belief in witchcraft or sorcery is something 'traditional' that will automatically disappear with modernisation. But this stereotype does not fit with actual developments in Africa today. Throughout the continent, discourses on sorcery or witchcraft are intertwined, often in quite surprising ways, with modern changes. Nowadays, modern techniques and commodities, often of Western provenance, are central in rumours on the occult (1997:2).

The problematic aspects of the term 'witchcraft' should be acknowledged. As Geschiere himself has noted, translating various local African terms as 'witchcraft' can in fact be reductive and misleading, since the original notions may be complex and ambiguous, possessing a diversity of meanings (1997:14). The interconnectedness of sorcery and modernity to which Geschiere makes reference is manifested in the physical appearance of the mamlambo herself. Because she tends to be associated with western forms of prosperity, like money, the fact that she is sometimes depicted as a curvaceous pale-skinned western mermaid with long flowing hair seems apt. Moreover, some of anthropologist Monica Wilson's informants told her that the mamlambo often appears wearing western clothes (1936:287).

There are a number of mermaid figures in African traditional belief, one of the best-known of these being the West African Mami Wata. Like the mamlambo, she is a dangerous, seductive figure, offering wealth and power, but able to bring about terrifying ruin. Both Mami Wata and the mamlambo are well-known figures in their respective parts of the African continent. Belief in ukuthwala occurs in many parts of southern Africa, and some of the factors that gave rise to this will now be examined[5].

[5] Some of the information relating to the practice of ukuthwala and Khotso's ukuthwala ordeals derives from interviews and discussions with student researchers Fanele Sicwetsha (2002) and Anele Mabongo (2003).

Ukuthwala in Southern Africa

Khotso's ukuthwala clientele came particularly from the regions where he lived and worked: the Eastern Cape, southern KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho. However, he also drew many customers from other parts of southern Africa, including present-day Gauteng. More recently, in a series of interviews I conducted in 2001 and 2002, various informants stated that the mamlambo could be obtained from Indian or White shopkeepers in Durban or Johannesburg. Wilson observes that, because of their relatively prosperous, privileged positions, members of these groups were viewed as having access to relatively strong magic (1936:287).

W.D. Hammond-Tooke indicates that ukuthwala was practised in KwaZulu-Natal from the earlier part of the twentieth century onwards, since Durban was one of the principal places where it could be purchased. In 1962, according to Hammond-Tooke, the two most famous sellers of the mamlambo resided in Kokstad and Durban (1962:285). Khotso was the Kokstad man; and the man from Durban was Dr Israel Alexander, who derived much wealth from his mail order business in herbal medicines (Blades 1982:75).

Hammond-Tooke mentions that while the Zulu traditionally had zooform occult familiars, the mythical supernatural beings with partly human features such as *uthikoloshe* and the mamlambo derived from the Cape Nguni (1975:19)[6]. Moreover, the mamlambo's name derives from the Xhosa word for *river*, rather than the Zulu term, *umfula*. This suggests that the mamlambo originated among the Xhosa-speaking peoples. A student researcher reports that various Zulu people with whom she has discussed this matter say that the mamlambo is not a traditional Zulu spirit (Wood/ Abbey 2008). Nonetheless many Zulu-speakers know about ukuthwala. Many South African peoples allude to the mamlambo using her Xhosa name. For example, Niehaus notes that Tsonga- and Northern Sotho-speakers in the Lowveld area do so (2001:56 - 61)[7].

[6] According to Hammond-Tooke, the Cape Nguni are Xhosa-speaking peoples who inhabit what is now known as the Eastern Cape (1975: 15).

[7] In Lesotho, however, the mamlambo is known as *mamolapo*, a word which has the same meaning as the Xhosa name.

Belief in the mamlambo spread from Nguni-speakers to other southern African peoples, particularly as a result of the migrant labour system (Niehaus 2001:56). Many accounts of the mamlambo describe how this being had been purchased on the mines, and also often from whites or Indians (Wilson 1936:287; Hammond-Tooke 1962:285; Wood & Tloti/ Lunika 2003 and 2004).

The prominence of the mining industry and migrant labour in numerous accounts of the mamlambo is significant. Various socio-economic and political dynamics, in conjunction with specific religious and cultural processes, gave rise to the mamlambo. In contrast to other beings in traditional southern African beliefs, such as the *abantu bomlambo* (the river people) spiritual presences associated with the ancestors, and the tornado snake, the *inkanyamba*, the mamlambo is a relatively new presence. She has arisen in part from a sense of disconnection to a traditional, communal way of life; inequalities and inbalances in the socio-economic order; and the lure of western materialism. The westernised forms which she often adopts testify to this.

Next, there are the mamlambo's serpentine aspects. These will be examined in the light of the political, socio-economic and cultural forces that have shaped this being.

The Changing Forms of the Snake

The fact that the mamlambo frequently manifests herself as a snake, or a serpentine mermaid, has its origins in the centrality of the symbol of the snake in many traditional southern African belief systems. For instance, according to Hammond-Tooke, the serpent is the being that appears most frequently in the symbolic structure of Cape Nguni cosmology (1975:27).

Indeed, in Africa and world-wide, the symbol of the snake has long had deep-seated mystical significance. A few examples include serpent imagery in ancient Egyptian myth and iconography; the snakes that appear as totem animals and spiritual messengers in Dogon beliefs in Mali; and the Naga, sacred serpentine beings guarding temples in Bangkok and Cambodia. There are also feathered mystical snakes in the Americas, such as the Aztec divinity Quetzalcoatl, and the Rainbow Snake of the Aborigines.

In Africa, the python is especially associated with spiritual power.

There are, for instance, the sacred pythons in voodoo temples in Benin; while in Zulu tradition, the python (and sometimes the puffadder) is a manifestation of the ancestors, and the mamba of the kings[8]. In Zulu and Xhosa traditions, the *amakhosi*, protective ancestral spirits, can manifest themselves as snakes; and serpents also appear as spiritual emissaries. Earliest of all, the snake featured prominently in San rock art as a rain-making animal.

In contrast to these beneficial, life-giving mystical snakes, the mamlambo's serpentine aspects are suggestive of her menacing, treacherous nature. The association between the snake and sinister occult forces such as the mamlambo arises from the impact of outside forces on African beliefs. There is, firstly, the influence of Christianity, in which the snake was intrinsically associated with evil. The mamlambo also is a product of the impact of the Western economic system on African society. The anthropologist Penny Bernard argues that the negative aspects of the snake, in the form of wealth-giving 'muti' snakes, developed through contact with modern economic forces, specifically the pressure to accumulate individual wealth (2000:13). This ties in with the way in which belief in the mamlambo was disseminated through southern Africa as a result of the migrant labour system, which arose as individuals lost the capacity to sustain themselves through their traditional lifestyle and became economically dependent on white-owned capitalist operations, such as mining and commercial farming, as Niehaus observes (2001:46, 56). Similarly, anthropologist Barbara Frank notes that the belief that individual wealth could be gained through a dangerous pact with the spirit world, in the form of Mami Wata, became more widespread in West Africa after western capitalist practices resulted in marked economic inequalities (1995:331).

The oral narratives concerning the mamlambo, in which the ancient spiritual symbol of the snake is transmuted into a dangerous occult presence, reflect and also reinforce these altered perceptions. 'As societies change, so stories change', Ken Plummer remarks (1995:79). Similarly, Chinyowa draws attention to the way in which African society constructs and reconstructs itself by means of orality (2001:128).

[8] Information concerning the snake and Zulu tradition derives from a conversation with the anthropologist Penny Bernard (Wood/ Bernard 2002).

This is evident in one oral account from Amalinda, near East London, in which the sacred python becomes a manifestation of the mamlambo. A woman who employed a domestic worker named Phumza described how she saw a python in the garden while Phumza was working outside. (Pythons do not occur in this region, so the snake in question may have been a large puffadder.) Shortly thereafter, the snake vanished. Phumza then confessed that she was associated with the mamlambo, who would take the form of a man and have sex with her at night (Musakwa / Nghonyama 2008)[9].

Not only do elements of traditional beliefs acquire disturbing new forms in oral accounts concerning the mamlambo, but aspects of western modernity also take on malign occult qualities.

'Magicalities of Modernity'

The mamlambo, Jean and John Comaroff contend, is a symbolic expression of the dark 'magicalities of modernity' (1993:xxx). Western concepts of modernity, the Comaroffs maintain, had their own long-standing irrational, even mythic aspects, including 'various alibis ("civilisation", "social progress", "economic development", "conversion", and the like)'. The Comaroffs go on to argue that the Eurocentric notion of modernity lent itself to being perceived in an occult light particularly as a result of the terminology by means of which it was presented to colonised peoples:

> For modernity ... carries its own historical irony ... the more rationalistic and disenchanted the terms in which it is presented to 'others', the more magical, impenetrable, inscrutable, incontrollable, darkly dangerous seem its signs, commodities and practices (1993:xxx).

Such perceptions would be reinforced by the apparently boundless malign power exercised by forces of colonialism, as they exerted forms of control at socio-political, cultural, economic and religious levels, separating African

[9] This interview was conducted by University of Fort Hare student researcher Wendy Musakwa.

peoples from many aspects of their pre-colonial cultures and ways of being, while reducing them to a subservient state.

In consequence, the relatively new denizens of the sinister side of the supernatural such as the mamlambo problematize the notion of an opposition between concepts of tradition and modernity. Ruth Finnegan comments on the relationship between aspects of tradition and modernity in contemporary African societies, noting that 'individuals do not necessarily feel torn between two separate worlds; they exploit the situation as best they can' (1970:53 - 54). This applies particularly to ukuthwala practitioners: one specific group of people who have capitalized upon the changes that outside western influences have wrought upon elements of traditional beliefs in the supernatural in African society.

The mamlambo embodies some of the sinister mysteries and enchantments of the perceptions of western modernity to which Geschiere and the Comaroffs make reference. The allure she exerts is rooted in material actualities, but appears comparable to the workings of witchcraft in its force and its deadly consequences. According to the Comaroffs, witches

> embody all the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself, of its inescapable enticements, its self-consuming passions, its discriminatory tactics, its devastating social costs (1993:xxix).

In the specific case of the mamlambo, these are evidenced in the oral accounts detailing the nature of her relationship with the individual who enters into an alliance with her, and the price she exacts in exchange for the wealth that she offers.

The Cost of Ukuthwala

The mamlambo's partner is, in a figurative sense, required to sacrifice his soul, in that he has to compromise his moral being and his human relationships in order to sustain his bond with her. She demands offerings, which can include bread or banknotes or the blood of animals and even, it is related, the blood of those closest to its owner, such as family members. 'If you want to get rich quick, get rid of your heirs', a man from Maseru once remarked. Khotso drew many of his clients from Lesotho, so he had heard much about Khotso's work and the consequences of ukuthwala (Lewis/

Allah 1997). One Transkeian woman, who lived near Kokstad, also commented on the demands that mamlambos impose on their owners: 'They want blood, and you must slaughter and slaughter and slaughter. At some point, they will want human blood' (Wood/ Madyibi 2001).

Appropriately enough, the Tswana use the same word for blood and money, *madi*, suggestive of the way in which money is the lifeblood of modern existence, yet is also associated with danger and destruction. A craving for wealth can prove damaging to individuals driven by this desire, and also to those around them. The phrase 'blood money', with its connotations of betrayal, is appropriate here, in that it is suggestive of the price that a mamlambo's partner is required to pay, as he forfeits the lives or well-being of his family members. Because the accumulation of wealth can take place at the cost of personal relationships, the belief that the mamlambo feeds on the blood of those closest to its owner is symbolically appropriate. It is said that even if the man who has entered into a pact with the mamlambo does not physically sacrifice those closest to him, he will witness sorrow and misfortune being visited on his family: the damage that his 'marriage' to the mamlambo has wreaked.

The perils that the ownership of a mamlambo entails are suggestive of the hazardous allure of western materialism, which promises far more than it delivers, results in marked economic inequalities, separates wealthy individuals from those around them, and possesses the potential to harm individuals, families and communities.

In this regard, as Niehaus indicates, the mamlambo, with her specific nature and associations, embodies a form of cultural critique (2001:62). The Comaroffs expand on this, arguing that sinister occult presences—often given
disturbingly sensual form, such as the mamlambo—are

> modernity's prototypical malcontents. They provide ... disconcertingly full-bodied images of a world in which humans seem in constant danger of turning into commodities, of losing their life blood to the market and to the destructive desires it evokes (1993:xxix).

As the imagery in the above quotation intimates, the perilous desires associated with the mamlambo can take on both economic and sexual forms. The lust for money and material possessions brought the mamlambo into being; while she often manifests herself as an alluring female, partly because she represents that for which many deeply long. Because the mamlambo is perceived as exerting a seductive force over males, she is sometimes referred to as *inyoka yamadoda*, the snake of men (Morrow & Vokwana 2004:192). This sensual aspect shapes certain accounts of the ukuthwala procedure, while also influencing descriptions of the nature of a relationship with the mamlambo.

Erotic Enticements and Dangerous Liaisons

Firstly, Khotso's ukuthwala process involved undergoing a series of ordeals. Some accounts of these tests are included below in the Appendix, although the ukuthwala accounts discussed in this study are only a few examples of the wealth of southern African oral narratives concerning Khotso's ukuthwala procedure[10]. In general, the ukuthwala experience had a frightening, phantasmagorical quality, often involving a confrontation with snakes. Most of the narrators of the ukuthwala accounts describe events that were related to them by others. Individuals who have undergone ukuthwala prefer to keep the matter secret, because of the stigma attached to this practice. However, some first hand accounts of the ukuthwala process are related by James Lunika, the man Khotso called his prime minister. Lunika was Khotso's right-hand man for a long time, and he had helped Khotso

[10] Most of the oral accounts of ukuthwala in the Appendix depict the terrifying, hallucinatory quality of the ukuthwala ordeals. Many of these narratives describe how individuals failed these tests. However, a few of these accounts relate how those who had the courage to withstand the ordeals became rich. One of Lunika's accounts describes how a white man who successfully underwent an ukuthwala test. Like many of Khotso's other clients, this individual was convinced that Khotso had unleashed one of his supernatural serpents on him during the ordeal. Yet he passed the test and was convinced that the prosperity he acquired thereafter was due to Khotso's agency.

administer the ukuthwala ordeals. As a result, he acquired many insights into the nature of Khotso's work as an ukuthwala practitioner.

One example of an ukuthwala ordeal is related by the District Secretary of Qacha's Nek in Lesotho, who takes much interest in local history in Lesotho, and in the adjoining regions in South Africa (Wood and Tloti/ Tseane 2004). He has heard many accounts of the ukuthwala procedure, some of which were related to him by people who had undergone the process. He describes the experience of a relative who went to Khotso for ukuthwala:

> And, as they slept, he was not alone; he was with friends, because they had come for a common purpose. People had many objectives to go there, but he would group them accordingly. Now, ultimately, they realised that the room they were sleeping in was full of water, whereas it was dry before they went to sleep. But then they discovered that they were covered with water and there was a big snake in this water. They had been warned that whether they feel anything or see anything they should not be scared. They should be brave enough. The snake started wrapping itself around them and at the start they enjoyed that. Then it pretended to swallow them, and they got scared and cried out. They tried to open the door and run outside, but somebody opened the door for them and there was nothing. So they were sent away because they had failed.

This description has a weirdly erotic quality to it, as the snake winds its body around those of the men and they find the sensation pleasurable. This sensual dimension of the ukuthwala experience was also emphasised by a man from Teyateyaneng in Lesotho who knew many individuals who had been through ukuthwala in the 1950s and 1960s. 'There is the pool test', he said.

> The snake winds around your body: don't panic. Mermaid, naked lady. Don't act, just stand. Don't be tempted. She will give you love kisses. Pretend nothing is happening (Lewis/ Faro 1997).

Fraught as they are with an alluring serpentine temptress at their centre, the ukuthwala narratives do not always stop short at the suggestion of perilous titillation. A number of them incorporate accounts of sex with the snake woman, who takes on a human female form for this purpose. As the earlier account of the domestic worker's python indicates, the mamlambo can also transform itself into a male sexual partner.

The mamlambo's sexual qualities are not surprising, since a number of witchcraft familiars are believed to have erotic connections with humans. One such creature is the *impundulu*, or lightning bird, which can appear to a woman in the form of a handsome young male lover, often in western clothes, 'dressed as if he comes from the goldfields' one of Wilson's informants said (1936:282). Once again, the connection between dangerous occult beings and the mining industry is apparent.

Uthikoloshe (the tokoloshe) is a mischievious, licentitious spirit. The male's penis so long that he carries it tied around his waist or slung over his shoulder (Hammond-Tooke 1975:20; 1962:280 - 281)[11]. He offers far greater sexual gratification than men can provide, but women who have sex with uthikoloshe can become infertile, have miscarriages or give birth to monsters. A man who has sex with the huge-breasted female uthikoloshe can become sterile and impotent (Laubscher 1975:130 - 131; Niehaus 2001:53). This creature's disruptive, destructive effect on human sexual relationships and reproductive capabilities is comparable to that of the mamlambo. But the mamlambo is the most powerful and perilous of all the occult beings associated with sexuality. She exerts the strongest allure, for her sexually enticing qualities are intensified by the desirability of the wealth with which she is associated; and the greatest dangers of all lie in wait for those who succumb to her.

The mamlambo demands that her consort put her before all others, and some narratives expand on the erotic implications of this. They describe how a man's serpentine lover proves so insatiable in her sexual demands that she eventually drains him of his carnal energies. And so, it is said, he will neglect his wife's physical needs, leading all too often to the end of his marriage. 'Many men who go for ukuthwala divorce their wives, because that snake needs sex regularly. Wives get frustrated, and when the snake is

[11] See also Broster and Bourn (1982: 58 – 59).

satisfied it becomes a snake again', someone who had heard many of these stories concluded[12].

The mamlambo can damage her partner's sex life in other respects. Sylvia Tloti, a University of Fort Hare researcher, provides the following account, based on her interviews with a member of Khotso's household and discussions with an inyanga from Flagstaff, Transkei:

> The mamlambo is strikingly lovely. She is a demanding woman and is reputed to have an overwhelming appetite for sex .... A man who has sex with the mamlambo is unable to have sex with an ordinary woman, because his penis eventually becomes the size that will satisfy the mamlambo, but which is obviously not suited to an ordinary woman.

To an extent, these descriptions of the consequences of insatiable physical lust metaphorically depict the results of an all-consuming passion for individual wealth. Both result in a breakdown of key aspects of human relationships, and the consequence is dissatisfaction, rather than fulfilment. Also, these accounts suggest that the apparent desirability of the western capitalist system, with its promises of individual affluence and personal power, is a dangerous seductiveness, resulting in forms of deprivation and a loss of potency, in an essential sense of the word.

On one level, this again indicates the human cost involved in the pursuit of wealth. It is also worth noting that a man was not allowed to have sex, not even with his spouse, while he was in the process of using Khotso's ukuthwala medicine. 'If you want to get rich quick, don't sleep with your wife', said one man from Lesotho. Among many others, Joan A. Broster and Herbert C. Bourn corroborate this, mentioning the belief that a man who has taken on a mamlambo does not often marry, although he tends to become very prosperous and lucky (1982:59 - 60).

The mamlambo's disruption of sexual relations within marriage calls to mind a key feature of witchcraft accusations in Africa. It is often said that agents of sorcery strike at their victims' reproductive capacities, harming their abilities to procreate and to generate that which will sustain a healthy

[12] Name of informant withheld.

family and community life. For instance, Ralph A. Austen observes that

> a central trope of witchcraft beliefs [in Africa] is the misappropriation of scarce reproductive resources from households or communities (1993:100).

A mamlambo, for instance, presides over her consort's household, depriving him of his spouse, harming his offspring and sapping his sexual energies, thereby impairing his ability to maintain a secure, harmonious domestic environment.

But there was another, very different dimension to the sensual aspect of Khotso's ukuthwala medicine, for an element of sexual testing seemed to be involved in the process of obtaining this concoction. Khotso sometimes utilised seductive, semi-dressed women to tempt his customers, even after they had left his premises. (Some accounts of this are included in the Appendix.)[13] Lunika recounted: 'Khotso would tell his patients to avoid women .... He used to encourage abstinence'.

The link between celibacy and access to supernatural or even spiritual power is a longstanding, widespread intercultural phenomenon. For example, in African tradition, men and women seeking purification before certain crucial undertakings, whether of a spiritual or military nature, have often been instructed to refrain from sex, while members of Western religious orders have been commanded to embrace chastity in order to attain spiritual purity and strength. In the case of Khotso's ukuthwala tests, however, sexual purity served as a path to economic advancement, rather than spiritual potency.

Moral Fables and Compensatory Tales

Towards the end of Khotso's career, the relationship between sexuality, economics and the occult took on a different form. Khotso's health failed near the end of his life and his customers began abandoning

[13] Two of Lunika's accounts describe this, as does an account from Darlington Nyankuza, formerly from Flagstaff, near Khotso's headquarters in Lusikisiki.

him when they saw him turning to white doctors. He also began publicly complaining that his sexual capacity was ebbing away. It was almost as if the decline of his sexual and economic prowess was intertwined: both the result, some stories claim, of his dealing in dark magic.

Some said that Khotso's 'marriage' to the mamlambo was breaking down, as his fortunes declined and, some argued, his power over supernatural forces diminished. In part, some ascribed this to Khotso's promiscuity. Mamlambos, it is said, become jealous of their owners' sexual partners, and Khotso surrounded himself with wives and concubines, especially in the latter part of his career. '*Nkosazana* [the euphemistic name that Khotso and certain informants bestowed on the mamlambo] didn't like Khotso's constant meddling with woman', someone who knew him well said. 'He was changing them left and right all the time and eventually she got tired and left him'[14].

On the other hand, it could be argued that tales in which the occult and the erotic visited punishment on those who succeeded economically in the midst of poverty and suffering fulfilled a compensatory function,. The advantage of the narratives that contained moralising, compensatory qualities of this nature was that they offered outsiders a way of coming to terms with their own harsh economic situations, by reassuring them that a fortune as great as Khotso's could bring no lasting good[15]. Thus, some of the extraordinary elements of the ukuthwala accounts relate in part to their narrators' needs and desires. In this regard, they bear out Sean Field's observation that oral histories do not only describe what actually took place, but also depict that which their narrators wished could have happened (2001:250).

Moreover, such accounts provided a means of levelling condemnation against Khotso on the grounds of his wealth, which constituted a controlling force in his life and which he flaunted in the midst of poverty-stricken communities. In this respect, these narratives are illustrative of what Niehaus has described as the mixture of antagonism and

[14] Name of informant withheld.

[15] Pascal Makeka's and Joe Jordan's accounts in the Appendix are two of the many oral narratives depicting the disasters that befell those who became wealthy as a result of ukuthwala.

'envy and desire' that pervades attitudes towards the alluring but potentially damaging forces associated with white domination in Africa, such as capitalism (2001:82).

Ukuthwala as Effective Magic

Despite these above aspects, which suggest that some of the features of the ukuthwala narratives stem from the yearnings and the imaginations of their narrators, many of these accounts do have a sense of underlying solidity to them. The fact that many of Khotso's clients had faith in his medicines lent weight to many of the ukuthwala accounts. In an oral narrative context, conviction is fuelled by many factors, apart from the direct influence of specific belief systems. Luise White, for instance, refers to the potency of rumour and hearsay (2001:286); and David William Cohen draws attention to the convincing nature of a claim to truth and the power of unfinished accounts (2001:265, 274, 277). These qualities were intrinsic characteristics of many of the ukuthwala narratives, helping bestow a sense of actuality upon them.

This sense of authenticity that infuses many ukuthwala accounts also arises from a number of other factors, one of which being that many people who successfully passed through Khotso's ukuthwala ordeals did indeed experience considerable economic improvement in their lives. An Eastern Cape businessman who visited Khotso for his medicines recently stated sadly: 'If Khotso were alive today, I wouldn't have the financial problems that I have now'[16].

There are a variety of reasons why many of Khotso's clients became wealthy after undergoing ukuthwala. Some of these are connected to the entrepreneurial aspects of his ukuthwala procedure. Firstly, Lunika, among many others, believed Khotso's ukuthwala clients probably did experience something very frightening (Wood & Tloti/ Lunika 2004). Possibly hallucinogens were administered to many of his customers, in order to induce the weird phantasmic visions that characterised the ukuthwala ordeals. For instance, a herbalist in Matatiele recently described one concoction as 'Khotso's recipe' (Lewis 1997). This contained *isipili*, a

[16] Name of informant withheld.

mixture which summons up otherworldly visions by inducing altered states of consciousness. One informant said: 'I took it once, and it was like things from dreams came alive and walked around me'[17].

In this way, Lunika concluded, Khotso was testing his clients' determination. If they could endure the test, possibly they would possess the firmness of purpose to become successful entrepreneurs. A Lusikisiki man whose father had worked for Khotso contended: 'It's just testing your character, how strong you are, to go through that process'. Various Transkei locals share this view, sensing that the significance of the ukuthwala ordeals might have resided primarily in the psychological trials they entailed, rather than the uncanny dimensions they appeared to embody[18]. Many of Khotso's clients, for their part, believed they had proved themselves worthy of the ukuthwala medicine and the riches that it would bring. This strengthened their resolve to succeed in life.

There was, too, the fact that Khotso preferred to bestow his ukuthwala medicine on those that he thought possessed the skill to advance themselves economically: for example, clever, energetic, purposeful young men. There was another, concrete reason why Khotso's ukuthwala procedure appeared to be effective. Successful clients might receive not only medicine but also business assistance from him. Long before the days of rural development agencies, Khotso helped many would-be entrepreneurs on their way. 'He'd give them good business advice', Lunika recalled. 'He might even give them some money to get started'.

Conclusion

There is, however, more to the ukuthwala ordeals than pragmatic material concerns. While it could be argued that Khotso became highly successful as a seller of ukuthwala because he hedged his bets and did not rely on supernatural forces alone, the exact nature of Khotso's powers still remains in doubt and whether or not some of the inexplicable events described in the ukuthwala accounts actually took place is impossible to ascertain.

[17] Names of informants in this and the next paragraph withheld.

[18] Roseberry Maloi, among many others, expressed this view (Wood/ Maloi 2002).

Similarly, in studies such as this, there is always a danger of explaining away worldviews that allow for unaccountable, mystical dimensions of experience, or reducing them to symbolic expressions of the workings of socio-economic or political forces. There are conceptions of actuality containing areas of mystery and power, both benevolent and hazardous, which elude clear-cut explanation and containment (and thus neutralisation) within the parameters of factual academic analysis.

The Comaroffs offer another perspective on the material actualities and supernatural mysteries contained in ukuthwala. They maintain that this practice provides one distinctive example of what they term the occult economies: 'the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends' (1999:279). They argue that occult forces such as ukuthwala, which offer a means of swiftly attaining prosperity and success, have become a marked feature of the postcolonial South African landscape, because wealth still lies beyond the grasp of many, despite the fact that the new dispensation held much promise for those who had been economically deprived in the past (1999:283 - 284). For reasons such as this, ukuthwala continues to be practised in South Africa, especially in the Transkei, the most poverty-stricken region of South Africa's poorest province. Some of Khotso's followers and family members work as ukuthwala practitioners today.

Yet this is only part of the picture. For some South Africans, ukuthwala is significant primarily on a symbolic level. They perceive the ukuthwala accounts as meaningful in that they convey warnings about the cost of the pursuit of individual affluence in a society rife with economic inequities. There are, too, the compensatory elements of the ukuthwala stories: that wealth acquired speedily (possibly through dark and dangerous supernatural means) can bring about no lasting good. Niehaus argues that certain stories which some might regard as myths can nonetheless acquire such profundity that they become part of lived experience, 'provid[ing] a framework through which experience achieves significance' (2001:50).

Bearing these varying viewpoints in mind, how best can oral narratives such as those concerning ukuthwala and the mamlambo be apprehended and discussed? When discussing the complex, heterogenous, fragmented nature of the African continent, with its multifarious voices and diverse worldviews, the Comaroffs propose that at an academic level it should be engaged with 'in a dialectic of discovery', rather being perceived

in monologic terms (1993:viii). Such an approach, certainly, seems appropriate in a study of this nature, bearing in mind the fluid, ambiguous aspects of concepts of modernity and the occult; and the way in which they take on new and complex forms as they intereact, each exerting influences upon the other. In this study we have seen how they have given birth to the ukuthwala process and the mamlambo herself, weaving together sensuality, the supernatural and entrepreneurship as they do so.

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[19] This list of References excludes informants who do not wish to be mentioned by name. For purposes of confidentiality, those listed here only contain the year of the interview and not the date or place of the interview.

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Appendix: Ukuthwala Accounts

1. Lekhotla Tseane (Qacha's Nek, Lesotho)

I am telling you about this man I knew who went to Khotso for wealth. The other stages of the test, he did not mention them, but he wanted to talk about this one, the final stage ... it was more powerful. That is the stage if one goes through it, one has won. With him, it was in the final stage when he was asked to tell his wife to brew some beer. She had to carry it in a traditional clay pot to a place that was between two mountains in Lesotho, actually a pass.

The man had to sit and wait near the clay pot and not look around. He had to stay there, and he would see a lot of things happening. He was also told not to react; he had to just let them happen and go by. And this story was said by him.

He said he first experienced some poultry, chickens, hens coming and dipping their heads in the pot, drinking a little bit of beer and then passing by. And then there followed some livestock: sheep, goats and then cattle, horses—in groups, all drinking from the pot. What surprised him was that the pot remained full. And finally, he heard a sound coming from the East, and he saw a big light coming through the pass, as if the moon was passing over the pass. It was by then at night.

He sat, he waited, and the sound grew louder and louder as it approached, and the light also grew wider and bigger, until it got to him. Then he realised the light was actually like a big eye. As it approached him, he realised that the body was that of a snake, a huge snake with one big eye. And when the body of the snake started wrapping itself around the pot, himself he got a fright and stood up and ran away. He had failed.

2. James Lunika (Caquba, Transkei)

The following day, we went to one of Khotso's special pools, there on the Mzintlava. Khotso said that the white man would have to bathe there for luck. Actually, Smith would have to take all his clothes off, and step onto this stone, just in the water, near the bank of the river. Khotso gave me a rope. One end would have to be tied round Smith's wrist. I would have to hold onto the other end of the rope. Khotso went away and we did everything he'd told us to do.

Then the stone Smith was standing on moved! It went right towards the middle of the pool. It sunk right below the surface. Smith disappeared underwater and then he'd reappear from time to time, looking terrified. I called out to the man—but I'd forgotten to hold on to the rope.

Afterwards, I thought that the stone this man had been standing on could have been the back of Khotso's snake itself, and that the snake was wrapping itself around Smith, under the water, cleansing him, to attract luck and money.

Next thing, Smith rushed out of the river. I suppose the snake must have finally let go of him. He ran off, straight into a thorn tree, then he rushed into town, towards the main street and disappeared. He didn't even stop to put his clothes back on. I tried to follow him. ... But I didn't know where he'd got to. As I was searching for Smith, I saw Khotso. He said, 'What's the matter with you? I told you to look after the white man, and now you've gone and lost him!'

So we were looking for Smith. And then we saw this police van, with two black policemen in the front and there was Smith in the back. They'd given him an old pair of white overalls to wear.

As soon as he saw us, he started shouting: 'There's the old devil! There's the young devil! They tried to kill me! They put me in the river with this huge snake!'

Khotso kept calm. 'Oh' he said to the policemen, 'my son here was just taking him for a cold bath in the river. But then he started shouting things about snakes and ran away'.

The policemen must have decided that this was all Khotso's business and they shouldn't get involved. So they tried to calm Smith down, but he wouldn't listen. He just stormed out of town.

But—six months later, Smith came back! He had a new car, he was wearing smart clothes and he had his wife with him. He was so pleased to see us. He introduced his wife to us and he hugged Khotso and called him his friend. 'Thanks to you, my business is doing so well that now I can afford to employ three new mechanics at my garage!' he said.

3. Joe Jordan (East London and Transkei)

Khotso gave my relative a small bottle and told him: 'Immediately you

Get your salary, put all of it in a purse with this bottle and put the purse under your pillow when you sleep. And don't tell your wife!'

The following morning, my relative opened his purse and counted the money and it was five times his salary, so he went to buy a car in Kokstad from the Weeks family. When he got home in his new car, he opened the purse and found double the amount he had used to buy the car. So he went out and bought more stuff, furniture and so on and every time he bought, the money came back, doubled. My relative made the mistake of informing his wife. His wife told him: 'You know what, you are going to have a tikoloshe or a snake as your new wife and I will be driven away!'

His wife forced him to throw the bottle into the sea and he lost everything—no money and the car moved by itself and crashed into the house and everything was in chaos. ... Then his wife deserted him! I believed my relative's story and was forced to recognize Khotso's power.

4. James Allah (Maseru, Lesotho)

This guy goes to the snakes. He was very brave. He became a successful diamond dealer in Lesotho. The man went naked through an underground tunnel in the house to a pool. The snake licks him. The snake has bad eyes and a slippery body. Its tongue is rough and it has big teeth. The snake swallows the man and spits him out.

5. Pascal Makeka (The Hermitage, Lesotho)

This is what happened in the winter of 1946. Thabo Tlali, from Maseru, who had an understocked café and a taxi, and Reverend Mokoena, who had a cafè in Tsoelike, went to Khotso's place for ukuthwala[20]. At 6pm, just as darkness had fallen, Khotso told the two men to go into a river pool and stay there. They had to stand right up to their necks in freezing cold water. They kept their shoulders hunched and their arms folded tight over their heads. They were trying to keep just a small part of their bodies out of the river. Mokoena kept looking at his wristwatch. By 6.15pm, time had been passing so slowly he thought his watch was stuck. By 6.30, he couldn't stand it any

[20] Not the real names of the individuals in question.

longer, so he got out of the pool. Khotso offered him a room for the night. But the Reverend refused, saying he had organised a place somewhere else. Tlali stayed in the water. Later on, he joined Mokoena. He never told him what happened after he left the river.

Three months later, Tlali's shop was full stocked. Next year, he bought two buses. But both his sons died from sudden and surprising illnesses. Then by 1950, Tlali himself was dead. He died in great pain. His business crumbled and his woman had to start again, from nothing.

6. Darlington Nyankuza (Mdantsane)

In the days when I had a garage in Flagstaff, a man from Port Elizabeth who stopped for petrol told me about this. After one of Khotso's clients had qualified to go back and do his business, he would be given a lot of instructions and conditions. For instance, if the client was male, one of the instructions would be not to pick females up in his car en route to his home. But this particular guy had done exactly what he was told not to do. It was strange, because this whole incident happened far away from Khotso. When this guy was passing through Qumbu, he saw this beautiful girl hitching a lift, so he stopped to pick her up.

Of course, these were Khotso's tricks: people would forget things he had told them. Things went horribly wrong for this guy and he wrecked his car. So he decided to go back to Khotso to explain the situation. Khotso said the man had disobeyed him: he should have driven straight home.

7. James Lunika (Caquba, Transkei)

A young man visited Mount Nelson (Khotso's Transkei headquarters) to get good-luck medicine for his butcher's shop. After he spent three weeks there, Khotso gave him a small bottle of muti and said: 'All who want meat, they must come to Bennet's butchery, there is no better butchery!'

Before the young man left, Khotso told him: 'Don't sleep with a girl for seven days after using the medicine'. He warned him that the muti would attract women, but that he should resist them, and use its power for his business only.

The man returned to Johannesburg. He travelled by train. He was all by himself in a compartment when an attractive young woman walked in. She flung herself on him and began making love to him. The young man was pleased that this had happened to him! But he had the bottle containing Khotso's special medicine in his shirt pocket. And suddenly the bottle exploded. The man shouted at the woman: 'You have spoiled my luck!' So he got off the train at the next station and went back to Khotso. He made the young man work on his property for some time. After that, he gave him more medicine.

I know about this, because Khotso made this young man tell me all about what had happened to him. And yes, I believed him. Khotso called me in to listen to this story as part of my training. It was a true story and a strong warning to me!

8. James Lunika

Khotso would also tell his patients not to drink or smoke, which was a good thing, you see, good warnings: *ungaseli*, *ungatshayi* and to avoid women. Today, that is the message that Khotso would have given people so as to avoid HIV-AIDS, because he used to encourage abstinence.

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