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Confronting uncertainty: Anthropology and zones of the extraordinary

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Anthropological theory has privileged consideration of the regularities of everyday life and has paid far less attention to irregular events that disrupt the social order. In this article, I contribute to ongoing theoretical attempts to redress this imbalance. While I acknowledge the potential historical importance of irregular and extraordinary events, I do not see them as entirely free-floating. Here I concur with Marshall Sahlins, who convincingly shows how people order unusual events through mythopraxis and also how social structures facilitate individual agency. I contemplate a third possible relation between structure and event, namely, "framing." Drawing on my fieldwork in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, I show how people located and framed unfortunate and destructive events in zones that stood apart from everyday life. This process provides insight into witchcraft and homicide, topics that can no longer be understood only in terms of systemic agency. [*events, Sahlins, framing, witchcraft, misfortune, homicide, rage, South Africa*]

Until fairly recently, anthropological theory has been united in its quest to discover regularities in social life. Our illustrious intellectual ancestors of the 19th century—Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Karl Marx, and Lewis Henry Morgan—sought to discern driving forces and recurring patterns in evolutionary processes. In the 20th century, concern shifted toward the synchronic analysis of structures of social relations

and systems of meaning. For some theorists, things hidden were somehow more fundamental that things visible. Following Emile Durkheim (1895), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1922) discerned networks of social relations that were external to individuals yet had the capacity to influence individual behavior. For example, Catholic dogma preceded the birth of individual Catholics yet structured their religious faith and practice. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) sought to unearth universal structures of the mind, such as binary oppositions and mediators; neo-Freudians such as Bruno Bettelheim (1954), deep psychic processes; and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), habitual practices that underlay human action. Their intellectual rivals perceived the most important drivers of social life as more transparent. Bronislaw Malinowski (1944) explained social forms in terms of their functional utility in meeting human needs, and his U.S. contemporaries sought to map out "patterns of culture" (Benedict 1934) and "models of" and "for" behavior (Geertz 1973). As the century came to a close, globalization theorists broadened our fields of investigation, tracing flows of commodities, images, and identities through different parts of the world (Appadurai 1996; Eriksen 2006; Hannerz 1996).

Anthropological attempts to discern regularities in history, in networks of social relations, and in patterns of meaning have been motivated by the pursuit of certainty (James 1995). It is debatable how much progress we have made. Few scholars would claim that we have reached, or will ever reach, a position from which we can establish direct causal mechanisms for social action. But many feel confident that social life has become intellectually more predictable. Modernist commentators might have been anxious about the incommensurability and inconsistency of our paradigms and theories, but such discontent has receded somewhat during a postmodern age that values epistemological pluralism. Authors such as Clifford Geertz (1983) express confidence not only in a particular framework but also in the entire assemblage of tools available in our

analytical kit bag. Geertz seems to suggest that eclecticism is self-defeating, not because there is only one correct framework but because there are many. One has to choose. Geertz might urge those who doubt that much progress has been made to contrast the more rudimentary understandings of any anthropological topic, say, ritual, that prevailed at the beginning of the 20th century with the more multistranded and nuanced understandings that exist today.

The beginning of this century heralds continued attempts to expand and refine our understanding of regularities in human action. In this respect, some cognitively oriented anthropologists are enlisting the aid of neurosciences (Bloch 2012). But insurmountable obstacles to the production of certainties have come into view. Since the 1980s, there has been a loss of confidence in the totalizing capacity and coherence of structures. Most anthropologists no longer envisage encompassing systems but have come to expect ethnographic scenes intersected by a plurality of limited systems or clusters of meaning (Moore 1987:729). In addition, it has become apparent that a focus on structures privileges certain phenomena to the neglect of others, foregrounding durable social forms, regular occurrences, and ordinary, everyday practices. Liisa Malkki writes, "Even if we think of societies as structures of domination, domination, conflict and exploitation are still durable" (1997:91). This focus clouds out fleeting and transitory events that are nonrepeating and anomalous as well as extraordinary and unique phenomena that are nonrepresentative of social forms (Malkki 1997:92). These are crucial omissions. Events do not simply repeat and replicate but also innovate and subvert (Moore 1987). Moreover, transitory events are not necessarily fleeting in their effects. Common experiences of events such as wars deposit traces and may produce resilient "communities of memory" (Malkki 1997:92).

In this article, I contemplate different ways in which anthropologists have addressed, and can address, events that are often dismissed as too irregular to be suitable for social analysis. My discussion is divided into four parts. In the first, I consider some recent theoretical contributions toward understanding events. I express broad agreement with Marshall Sahlins, who posits an ongoing dialectic between events and structures. He has shown how people order events through mythopraxis (Sahlins 1985) and how structures facilitate both systemic and conjunctive agency (Sahlins 2004). In the second and third parts, I suggest an alternative, perhaps more basic, possibility for understanding events, namely, their framing in distinctive conceptual zones. Drawing on my own fieldwork in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, I note a proliferation of discourses about extraordinary but destructive events. I show how villagers framed incidents of misfortune that contradicted ordinary expectations about the workings of the world as products of witchcraft and how narrators and perpetrators alike framed violence resulting in homicide as a product of masculine rage existing outside and against the conventional social order. Hence, they located such events in "zones of the extraordinary" that were highly ambiguous, being antistructural, while at the same time possessing their own regularities. In the final part, I suggest that anthropologists can best study irregular events through combining investigation and witnessing.

From structure to practice, process to event

Events have long been part of ethnographic data. But anthropologists have diminished their importance by treating them as instantiations of social systems and citing them to illustrate general analytical statements.

Researchers at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute reversed this practice. They sought to arrive at the general through the particular, by carefully scrutinizing situations

of interconnected incidents to identify their underlying structural relations (Evens and Handelman 2006:1–13). Dramatic events such as the opening of a bridge in colonial Zululand (Gluckman 1940), a dance on the Northern Rhodesian (now Zambian) copperbelt (Mitchell 1956), and illness episodes among the Ndembu (Turner 1957) became starting points for building social theory. The analysis of these events revealed dynamics that a focus on "routine practices of a repeated, ongoing, kind tend to obscure" (Kapferer 2010:3). Max Gluckman and his associates were well ahead of their time. But they still used events largely in a diagnostic capacity and failed to contemplate "substantial areas of normative indeterminacy" (Moore 1987:719).

Since the 1980s, the theoretical shift from the analysis of structure to practice (Ortner 1984) has enabled anthropologists to consider events in a more thorough and open-ended manner. In line with Victor Turner's approach, Veena Das (1995) organizes her monograph *Critical Events* around a redescription of traumatic incidents in the history of modern India, including the abduction of women before partition, legal cases concerning sati suicides, and the carbide chemical disaster at Bhopal. Das (1995) argues that experiences of these events, both by individuals and by social collectivities, established new modalities for historical action. She shows how individuals' pain, memories, and voices were appropriated at various levels of the social order. Agents such as the state refashioned these into social texts.

Sahlins argues that events are not free-floating. He writes, "An event is not simply a happening in the world; it is a *relation* between a certain happening and a given symbolic system" (Sahlins1985:153). Sahlins shows how people set new events in story lines already established by their mythology, and he uses the concept of "mythopraxis" to denote the reenactment of myth in contemporary circumstances. This process, he suggests, comes easily in societies such as Polynesia, where the dead are genealogically

linked to the living. Here myths foretell what is to come, and people think of the future as behind them. But, because of the unpredictability of events, mythopraxis never fully replicates the prototypical mythical structure. Some events subvert existing frameworks of meaning and alter the social order itself. Sahlins's best-known example is Captain Cook's visits to Hawai'i in 1778 and 1779. Cook arrived at the time of the *makahiki* festival, when the god *(akua)* Lono assumed power and the king's reign was temporarily suspended. In terms of mythopraxis, Hawaiians identified Cook as an incarnation of Lono and welcomed him. Cook departed when Lono's reign came to an end. But then, out of sync with the mythic structure, the mast of one of Cook's ships broke, and he returned to Hawai'i. Hawaiians now greeted Cook with hostility and, in an altercation, stabbed him to death. These events brought about important changes: The rulers of Hawai'i incorporated Cook's power, distancing themselves even further from commoners.[1]

Sahlins (2004) also explores the agency of individuals in history. He recognizes profound epistemological differences between collectivities and individuals as phenomenal orders. Sahlins warns that Michel Foucault's (1977) analysis of the transmission of social order to individual bodies threatens to dissolve individuals into victims of the hegemonic order, subjects without agency. Similarly, he asserts, theories that equate social forms with specific subject positions ignore the unique biographies of individuals. Sahlins quotes Jean-Paul Sartre: "Valéry is a petit bourgeois individual—not every petit bourgeois individual is Valéry" (1968:55–56).

Yet individuals have to be in a position to have historical effect. Sahlins (2004) suggests that structures authorize individuals to exercise either systemic or conjunctural agency. In the former case, the larger organization of society grants particular individuals roles in making the history of collectivities. For example, 19th-century Fijian kings exercised power by virtue of their positions within enduring sets of institutional relations.

In the latter case, a conjunction of circumstances momentarily allows individuals to determine history. Persons such as Elián Gonzalez, the boy who sparked international controversy as the sole survivor of an ill-fated attempt by Cuban refugees to reach Miami in 1999, instantly erupt from the ordinary into the larger scheme of things.

Unfortunately, Das and Sahlins focus on events in the public political sphere, events that are somehow removed from the daily happenings we encounter during fieldwork. For this reason, anthropologists such as Bruce Kapferer (2010) turn to the philosophical writings of Gilles Deleuze on difference and repetition in everyday life. Deleuze (2004) suggests that events do not simply reflect the world around them but actualize only certain relations within broader assemblages. Hence, events are "critical sites of emergence," that are both present and future oriented.

Zones of the extraordinary

Such a focus on transitory, unusual events and on conjunctive agency can provide fresh insight into classical anthropological topics. This became apparent during fieldwork that I have been conducting in Impalahoek, a village of the South African lowveld.[2] During apartheid, Impalahoek fell under the jurisdiction of the Lebowa Bantustan, but the village is now administered by the Bushbuckridge municipality of Mpumalanga Province. It has a population of about 24 thousand Northern Sotho and Tsonga (Shangaan) speakers. Population relocations and overcrowding have destroyed agriculture, and households rely on migrant labor to South Africa's industrial centers and also, increasingly, on social welfare payments (Niehaus 2006). Although my fieldwork has been intermittent, I have been able to visit Impalahoek for periods of at least one month each year since 1990. These visits have enabled insight into the long-term significance of events.

Diverse discourses informed daily talk about social life in Impalahoek. These were sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, and at times completely incommensurable. One can nonetheless discern in them local understandings of history that broadly resemble Sahlins's (2004) notion of systemic agency. Village residents desperately sought to unearth deeper reasons for the occurrence of certain observed events. For example, men who had previously worked as migrant laborers blamed privatization of economic enterprises for rising unemployment. Their talk explicitly drew on the discourses of COSATU (Council of South African Trade Unions). Men also invoked conspiracy theories, holding diverse actors—such as the government and the funeral industry—responsible for the high incidence of HIV infections and for failure to develop a cure for AIDS (Niehaus 2005). It is also easy to discern fairly elaborate structures in village discourses, such as those pertaining to concepts of pollution (Niehaus 2002) and to the classification of kin.

When we were renewing acquaintances, research participants told me stories about newsworthy events that interrupted the daily flow of life and in which conjunctive agency appeared to be at work. The more unusual the event, the more worthy it was of retelling. Their narratives took the form of episodic melodramas that were emotional and forthright in their moral lessons and that seemed to exist apart from, and to undermine, broader ideological and social patterns. They resembled reports in the local tabloid newspaper, the *African Sun,* that appeared under captivating headings such as "Dead Man's Skull, Leg Missing"; "Border War Ends"; "Teacher Arrested for Alleged Rape"; "Lions on the Prowl in Villages"; and "Witch Falls from the Sky Near Marite."[3]

These observations show that an exclusive focus on the systemic and on events that reproduce broader structures would produce an incomplete picture of social life. Yet previous analytical strategies for understanding the interplay of structures and events are

not wholly transferrable to the situation in Bushbuckridge. Northern Sotho and Shangaan genealogies are characteristically shallow (Hammond-Tooke 1981:22–34; Webster 1977), enabling only a limited body of myths and legends. This has inhibited the workings of mythopraxis. Moreover, the events that occur in Impalahoek very seldom become part of the broader, national, order of things.

We can better conceptualize the emic understanding of unusual events through Erving Goffman's (1976) concept of "framing." This concept denotes the imposition of a structure to organize events and individual experiences of them (Goffman 1976:10). Through bracketing and the application of specialized semiotic terminology, Goffman (1976) argues, framing creates scripts to answer the basic question, "What is going on here?"

In Impalahoek, fleeting events may be framed simply as news *(dithaba)*. But unexpected incidents of misfortune and violent destructive acts are also commonly framed in strips or zones associated with specific nuclei of activity, such as witchcraft *(loya)* and rage *(sebifedi)*. In the case of witchcraft, the emphasis is not on the agent, who remains an invisible presence but, rather, on the extraordinary nature of misfortune. Such framing is in line with Kapferer's (2003) suggestion that witchcraft is compelling and engages the human imagination precisely because it stands apart from reason. He asserts that witchcraft is located outside everyday realities, in "phantasmagoric" spaces with their own logic. In the case of destructive violence leading to homicide, the emphasis falls on the agent. Narrators, and, by inference, also perpetrators of violence themselves, frame homicidal deeds as the product of masculine rage, an emotion they locate in a zone of wildness, where men's violent instincts predominate. Rage exists as the antithesis of humane sociality and of calculated conduct. In both cases, subjects impose order by locating unfortunate and destructive events in zones of the extraordinary.

Witchcraft stories: An archive of unfortunate incidents?

Conventional anthropological understandings of witchcraft aim to unearth patterns in witchcraft beliefs and accusations. From a Lévi-Straussian perspective, W. D. Hammond-Tooke (1974) argues, witch familiars among Xhosa speakers of South Africa, such as the apelike *thikoloshe* and snakelike *mamlambo,* form part of a broader symbolic structure. He argues that these animals were highly ambiguous and can be seen as mediatory constructs, pertinent to situations of cognitive dissonance. Men, he suggests, imagined that women responded to social deprivation with resentment and took the thikoloshe, with its exceptionally large penis, as a lover. This image transmuted men's guilt into righteous indignation (Hammond-Tooke 1974:132). The mamlambo, in turn, mediates between the ideals of kinship loyalty and the actuality of tensions within kin groups. It objectified such dissonance through its ability to change into the shape of beings with anomalous boundaries, such as beautiful girls and snakes that attack close kin (Hammond-Tooke 1974:112).

Durkheimian and neo-Marxist scholars see regularities in the distribution of witchcraft accusations. Max Marwick (1970) suggests that these accusations provide a "social strain gauge." For Cewa people, witchcraft accusations expressed tensions that were not amenable to juridical processes and were bids to terminate or reformulate problematic social relations. Peter Geschiere (1997) shows how, in Cameroon, discourses about witchcraft were particularly pertinent in situations of social inequality. Cameroonians saw living beings that inhabit the body, such as *djambe,* as the principle behind achievement and power. In this context, witchcraft provided indispensable support for elites to accumulate greater wealth and power but could also be a weapon of the weak, enabling the poor to level inequalities. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (1999)

assert, even more bluntly, that South Africans imagined witchcraft as an "occult economy" in which sinister individuals deployed mystical means to attain material ends and to block the progress of others. Witchcraft was a brutal form of extraction but had all the allure of profit making without production costs.

In their quest to demonstrate the systemic nature of witchcraft, scholars have downplayed the significance of anomalous incidents of misfortune. Alan MacFarlane explicitly slights the importance of anomalous events in 16th-century English witchcraft: "Although there was sometimes an emphasis on the strangeness of an event, for instance when a woman's body was sometimes covered with lice that were long and lean, and not like other lice, strangenenss, in itself, was not enough to produce a suspicion of witchcraft" (1970:296).

Academic theories often diverge from popular understandings of witchcraft. Muedan elders in Mozambique explicitly told Harry West (2007:8) that he was wrong in contending that witch-lions were metaphors of predation—in their view, the witch-lions were real. Similarly, residents of Bushbuckridge were of the opinion that mysterious incidents that disrupted the ordered flow of life stood at the very heart of witchcraft.

The Nothern Sotho proverb "a witch has no horn" *(moloi ga a na lenaka)* cautioned that a witch's identity was never apparent and warned people against accusing their enemies of witchcraft. In local knowledge, witches were invisible and were known through their deeds.[4] Much like the alienated worker under capitalism, whose self was realized through the products of his or her labor (Marx 1967), the witch was perceived through his or her actions on the world. Whereas the worker's deeds were productive and creative, however, those of the witch were destructive and annihilated value. In local belief, witchcraft encompassed the use of poisons *(tshefu)* and potions *(dihlare)* and the deployment of witch familiars *(dithuri)* to work harm against kin and neighbors. Witches

not only killed their victims but also transformed them into zombies *(ditlotlwane),* whom they deployed as servants to do domestic work at night (Niehaus 2013:9–18).

A wide series of events were taken as evidence that the mystical hand of witchcraft was at work. A branch leader of the African National Congress (ANC) recounted the following incident to justify his belief in the reality of witchcraft. The prop shaft of a mobile truck broke, smashed through the windscreen of the car following it, flew past the driver, and hit the male passenger on the rear seat, completely severing his head. Such horrible events, the branch leader said, were extraordinary and did not occur naturally. During fieldwork in July 1990, the appearance of a snake that seemed to wear beads in a neighbor's yard and the anomalous presence of a naked woman in a graveyard ignited suspicions of witchcraft. So did peculiar verbal statements. In conversation with me about the existence of witchcraft, a teacher referred to one such incident. He recalled that a boy continuously slumbered in class. When questioned, the boy replied, "Sir, I did not sleep last night. My mother made me feed her things at the river." The teacher did not simply dismiss this statement as a fantastic excuse but reasoned that the boy's mother was actually a keeper of zombies. People do not feed domestic animals at night, nor do they refer to animals as things.

In Bushbuckridge, I spent many Sunday afternoons watching local football (soccer) teams compete for prestige, and sometimes also for money, on sandy pitches. Here incidents that ran contrary to expected play often provoked allegations that teams might be using potions, and even witch familiars, to prevent their opponents from scoring. Balls sometimes hit the goal posts or stones that made them divert from their course. Animals—such as goats and hares—intruded onto the pitch. At halftime, players sometimes complained that they felt exceptionally fatigued, dizzy, or even nauseous, and goalkeepers claimed not to see the ball clearly. Sudden bursts of rain, lightning, and

winds that worked to the detriment of players provoked suspicion and debate. Yet only on rare occasions did players actually locate witchcraft potions on the pitch. The manager of Impalahoek Fast Eleven told me that, during the 1970s, his goalkeeper unearthed a plastic bag in the goal box that contained a severed cat's head.[5] The goalkeeper immediately took off his jersey and started vomiting.

It was not simply the strangeness of events that counted as evidence of witchcraft but also their uncanny persistence. People were more likely to attribute repeated than singular unfortunate events to witchcraft. During the mid-1990s, Sidney Dilebo, a young professional, came to believe that he was bewitched after he experienced persistent problems with his car. One morning, Sidney found dents on the car's bonnet, which seemed to have been caused by something or someone having walked on it at night. That evening, the car's alarm repeatedly went off, and dogs whined outside. The next day Sidney was involved in an accident at the nearby crossroad. Although a panel beater repaired the damage to his car, its grill mysteriously fell off one night. Sidney told me that poorer neighbors, who were envious of his success as a breadwinner, had bewitched him. Yet he had no idea who they might have been.

A complex interplay between social tensions, misfortune, and the extraordinary was apparent when villagers accused Dimross Mashego, a 50-year-old headman and owner of an initiation lodge, of witchcraft at a public meeting during July 2012. Villagers demanded that Dimross be evicted. They claimed that he had been responsible for the death of another initiation lodge owner, Petrus Namane, who was his business rival. But the accusation was more than the simple expression of tensions between subjects and their headman, on the one hand, and between business rivals, on the other. Nobody alleged that Dimross had been a corrupt leader or an unscrupulous initiation master. Instead, they referred to the extraordinary nature of Petrus's death. He had only been ill

for a few days, they said, noting that he had merely complained of constipation. Research participants mentioned that way too many deaths occurred in their neighborhood and that Dimross always spoke boastfully at funerals, saying that he was in charge of village affairs. In addition, they recalled that over the previous five years, Dimross had provided palliative care for his sister and her two sons, whom he claimed were dying from AIDS-related diseases. The manner of Dimross's intervention provoked suspicion. In the words of a young man who was Dimross's next-door neighbor,

> He was not supposed to care for his nephews. Dimross was their mothers' brother *(malome)*—not their father. He should not have done this. He has his own family. People who were close to the family did not believe they [the sister and nephews] suffered from AIDS. The young men died after only a few weeks [AIDS was widely recognized as a "long" sickness]. If it was AIDS, why did he not take them to hospital so that they could get proper treatment? I saw that there were only two cars at the last funeral. There should have been at least 20 or 30. This shows that people were aware of Dimross's witchcraft. They are sick and tired of him.

This example shows the tenacity of framing. When a person suspected of being a notorious witch lives next door, blaming sickness and death on his or her witchcraft is convenient. Dimross became a scapegoat for all sorts of misfortune, including the death of Petrus Namane.

By playing the systemic nature of witchcraft in too loud a key, theorists seemed to have moved in the opposite direction from E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1937), who, in Azandeland, saw witchcraft as an explanation for uncanny events such as collapsing granaries. He argued that witchcraft accounted for the particularities of misfortune. Witchcraft transcended scientific theories of cause and effect, enabling people to account for otherwise inexplicable happenings.

14

The emphasis on repeated misfortunes was not only apparent in the South African lowveld but also in peripheral farming areas of Europe. Jeanne Favret-Saada writes that in the Brocage region of France, "The misfortunes that occur repeatedly and without reason are called spells: animals and people become sterile; fall ill or die; cows abort or lose their milk; plantations rot or dry, burnings burn or collapse, machines break down and safety drops drastically" (1990:45).

One might argue that tensions alert people to strange events. But the opposite is equally plausible. Prosecutors at the chief's court were often of the opinion that overt conflicts over other issues might well conceal hidden allegations of witchcraft. It is certainly true that people suspect envious persons and rivals of witchcraft. But tensions and envy formed part of a broader configuration of evidence that attested to the presence of witchcraft and was related to it rather like motive is related to a crime. However, envy, by itself, was insufficient to produce an accusation. In local knowledge, the most ruthless witches, who carried witchcraft in their blood, struck out at random, without any motive. James T. Siegel (2006) suggests that witchcraft enables people to name what has hitherto been unnameable. Residents of Bushbuckridge might find this formulation more appealing than theories that account for witchcraft in terms of its instrumental potential.

Beyond intention: Homicide as rage

As in the case of witchcraft, several anthropologists have sought to explain violent acts in terms of their utility and their location in broader networks of social relations and systems of meaning. David Riches (1986), for example, insists that violence has a "core purpose" that we can discern from investigating the relations among its performers, victims, and witnesses. He argues that the utility of violence resides in the fact that its performance requires little specialized equipment or esoteric knowledge besides strength

15

of the human body. According to Riches (1986), violence can be used both instrumentally and expressively. In the former capacity, it can enhance one's position, change one's environment, or forestall the victim's activities. In the latter, he argues, violence is an "excellent vehicle" for communicating key social ideas: It is highly visible, and all involved are likely to have a common understanding of the acts and images concerned. Metonymically, violence makes statements about the capacity of social actors to defend their own interests, and, metaphorically, violent images represent other concepts. For example, British football hooligans offer a skeptical view of middle-class values (Riches 1986:25).

Anton Blok (2000) argues against the concept of "senseless" violence. He claims that, like theatrical performances, violent acts are primarily symbolic and make statements about power, solidarity, and trust. The language of violence expresses honor, its violation, and its vindication through the idiom of the human body. Meaning, Blok argues, resides in the time, place, and style of execution; in the names used to dehumanize opponents; and in mutilation of the corpse. For example, the Sicilian mafia carried out liquidation by means of sawed-off shotguns, weapons formerly used for hunting wolves. The killers desecrated corpses of their enemies by feeding them to pigs (Blok 2000:28).

There is some continuity between these theories and those of warfare in sub-Saharan Africa that aim to demonstrate how acts of violence embody cultural meanings. Paul Richards (1996), for example, suggests that RUF (Revolutionary United Front) rebels in Sierra Leone used gruesome violence, such as cutting off limbs, to demoralize better-armed government troops and to warn civilians to cease harvesting rice and voting. Christopher Taylor (1999), in turn, contends that killing during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 enacted the cultural meanings of blockage and flow. Hutu perpetrators immobilized

their Tutsi victims by severing their tendons and conducted killings at roadblocks. By casting corpses into rivers, they expelled the deceased from the body politic.

Much like theories of witchcraft, those of homicide diverge from popular understandings. During fieldwork, research participants frequently told me of killings that occurred in and around their neighborhoods. They valued the opportunity to speak out against such violence, which they saw as a symptom of social disorder and moral crisis. Violent deaths were extremely common. A verbal autopsy survey shows that in 1999, before the zenith of the AIDS pandemic, "assault" was the leading cause of death among men between the ages of 15 and 49, accounting for 17 percent of fatalities (Kahn et al. 1999:439).[6]

My interlocutors clearly understood the argument that violence could potentially serve instrumental purposes, and they conceded that some killings preempted the activities of victims and communicated crucial meanings. This was apparent in accounts of the execution of witches and rapists. Elderly residents still accurately recalled how women of one neighborhood executed a notorious rapist, Matata Mosoma, in 1976. The killing was highly ritualized, combining elements of a state execution (the women tied Matata to a chair, asked him to say last words, and allowed a minister to pray for his soul) and of slaughter (they cut his limbs with axes). The women finally stoned Mosoma to death (enacting a technique of execution from the Old Testament; see Niehaus 2009). In Blok's (2000) terms, the execution theatrically dramatized women's political capacity. Mosoma served as scapegoat for men who abused women.

But people with whom I spoke argued that the vast majority of homicides were not premediated. These killings occurred in the heat of the moment and were the product of a conjunction of circumstances rather than of any conscious intention to kill. In the eyes of my interlocutors, homicides served no purpose apart from expressing men's base

instincts. They saw homicide as destructive, not only of the victim but also of the perpetrator. This is evident in accounts of the following two cases.

During 1999, Ben Mashile, who was a taxi driver, impregnated his girlfriend, Patricia Shokane. Ben wished to marry her, but Patricia's father refused to accept bridewealth from him. Patricia did not pursue marriage but chose to devote herself to her studies. She had visited Germany as a member of South Africa's Lutheran youth choir and secured a bursary to study commerce at the University of Cape Town. Ben was initially depressed, but he became livid when he heard that Patricia had fallen in love with a teacher, who was both obese and married to someone else. Ben visited Patricia's home and, in a fit of rage, smashed whatever he could find. He even ripped the phone cable from the wall and slapped Patricia in front of her parents. The next week, Ben abducted Patricia, took her to a deserted spot, and tied her hands to the back of his taxi. He then dragged her through the bush, presumably to punish her. He only stopped after her head knocked against a tree stump, at which point he discovered that she was dead. In response, he decided to take his own life and hanged himself from the branch of a large tree.

Ben's attack can be seen as a violent form of revenge against a young woman who had insulted his dignity. The homicide was not devoid of symbolic meaning. Ben used his taxi, in which his occupational identity was invested, as a weapon. Research participants were of the opinion that Ben tried to disfigure Patricia's body and "scrape away her beauty." But the eventual outcome of his assault militates against utilitarian interpretations. Ben did not vindicate his honor. Villagers were outraged at his brutal behavior. The police treated his corpse with utter contempt. Instead of untying the noose, they cut the tree branch and let his corpse fall to the ground. The Lutheran church held a service commemorating Patricia and lay flowers on the spot where she died. Informants

said that Ben committed suicide to escape the community's wrath. "Ben was a Satan. He did not belong with people!" "If he had not killed himself the community would have done so. If the community did not, I would have killed him myself."

My second case occurred close to midnight on January 2, 1992, when Peta Teanet entered a dance at a popular Bushbuckridge motel. This attracted everyone's attention. Teanet was renowned as the "king of Shangaan music." Although he was merely 30 years old, he lived in a mansion in a posh residential suburb in the town of Tzaneen and was married to eight women. Teanet immediately asked the disk jockey to play one of his older cassettes. His choice of words was unfortunate. "You people from Bushbuckridge are too unsophisticated to appreciate my recent music." Andrew Mbolwane, an off-duty policeman, took offense at these ill-considered words and told the disk jockey, in an equally inconsiderate manner, "Don't play his music. His music is bullshit! Go, play it where people drink home-brewed beer *(sekapakapa)*!" Peta and Andrew then started pushing and shoving each other, and their quarrel escalated into a fistfight outside the motel. In a fit of anger, Andrew drew his service pistol, but Peta wrestled the pistol from him, and it fell to the ground. Peta then jumped into his car, believing that he had sufficient time to escape. But Andrew quickly recovered his pistol, fired rounds at the car, and fatally wounded Peta. In response, Peta's bodyguard started shooting in the direction of the policeman. Another drunken, off-duty policeman also drew his pistol and started firing rounds into the air, presumably to disperse the crowd. Andrew and an innocent bystander died in the exchange, although it was not clear who had killed been by whom. *City Press,* a Soweto-based newspaper, reported on its front page that the tragic incident "left bystanders dumbfounded" (Mokoena et al. 1999).

One would be hard pressed to see the killings in the two cases described above as intended or even as the patterned outcome of everyday, mundane social processes and

structures. Events of chance played an important role: Patricia Shokane's head knocked against a tree stump, and Andrew Mbolwane took out a revolver during a fistfight. However, I would not go quite as far as Robert Thornton (2002), who claims that violence is inherently unpredictable and is only explicable in retrospect, for instance, when it is incorporated in narratives. Some acts of violence are more unpredictable than others.

We can more plausibly see these homicides as the product of a conjunction of circumstances, similar to those that propelled unknowns such as Elián Gonzalez onto the international stage. But certain of these circumstances recur in narratives about homicide and seem to have a relation of "elective affinity" (Weber 1949) to it. The preponderance of male perpetrators is significant, and, to some extent, violence can be seen as an attempt by men to reestablish dominance when investment in masculine subject positions is thwarted (Moore 1994:61). The presence of firearms in scenes of conflict also contributed to fatal outcome of quarrels. In 2007, there were 4.2 million licensed firearms in South Africa, of which 17,600 had fallen into criminal hands (Cock 2001:45). South African men, on different sides of the political spectrum, see gun ownership as a means of protection and of enacting their masculinity.

But my informants primarily framed homicide as a product of masculine anger *(befelwa)* and rage *(sibefedi)*. They equated rage with a "pinched heart" *(fela phelo)* and said that men, who experienced more powerful instincts than women, found it virtually impossible to control their rage. This perception was also apparent in witchcraft. Whereas women witches poisoned carefully selected victims, male witches more commonly killed at random, without reason (Niehaus with Mohlala and Shokane 2001:71–72).

Villagers located the violent behavior of enraged men in a zone of extraordinary events, beyond conventional modes of conduct. Violence also exhibited a peculiar

temporality and seemed to exist outside "ordinary time" (Thornton 2002:43). Such violence transgressed all notions of humane conduct *(maitswaro)* and departed from the cost-benefit analysis that prevailed in everyday social intercourse. Homicidal violence only momentarily established dominance and did not reconfirm "masculinity otherwise denied" (Moore 1994:64). In the long term, violence produced injurious losses for the perpetrators themselves. Ben Mashile committed suicide as soon as he realized what he had done. Peta Teanet and Andrew Mbolwane fought to avenge insults but lost their lives.

The alterity of violence is captured by the notion that enraged men acted "outside themselves" when they struck out at the source(s) of their distress. Villagers associated violence with states of altered consciousness, sometimes induced by the consumption of alcohol. Like drunkards, enraged men acted "beyond the pale of normal social etiquette and responsibility" (Marshall 1979:23). Moreover, villagers perceived of violence as an attribute of the racist Other and associated it with the reversal of racial hierarchies. Yet violent men sometimes appropriated the very same disciplinary techniques that white racists had used against black people during the period of apartheid. Ben Mashile punished Patricia Shokane in the same manner that white farm owners disciplined trespassers and thieves: by tying them to the back of utility vehicles and pulling their bodies down sandy roads. In sates[frenzies? or orgies?] of violence, men commonly used Afrikaans swearwords (including the racist term *kaffir*) to denigrate victims. This form of dissociative behavior is not peculiar to South Africa. Violence perpetrated by European colonists in Peru (Taussig 1984) and by Serbian soldiers in the Balkans (Van de Port 1998) encoded the wildness of the jungle and of marginal outsiders such as gypsies. It stood as the very antithesis of civilization.

Conclusions

21

In this article, I have contemplated the status of anomalous and unique events that are not representative of everyday social forms. Despite their potential historical importance, I note that such events are not free-floating but exist in dialectical relationship with preexisting structures of social relations and symbolic meanings. Residents of Bushbuckridge framed unexpected incidents of misfortune and unintended killings as belonging to zones of extraordinary events, which they associated with witchcraft and masculine rage. These ambiguous zones exhibit both antistructural and structural features. The sorts of events that villagers associated with witchcraft and homicide defied systemic agency and transcended insights provided by conventional structural analysis. These include theories of witchcraft accusations as a means of redressing social inequality and of violence as a means of establishing dominance. Yet narratives about witchcraft and homicide do contain certain formulaic elements and semiotic regularities, such as persistent misfortune and a radical departure from everyday modes of sociality.

Extraordinary events, even when located in distinctive zones, pose important questions about method, theory, and narrative strategy. The demand for social analysis has not dissipated, but there is a need to focus greater attention on modes of storytelling appropriate to "conjunctive agency" and "evenential history" (Sahlins 2004). Less diagnostic use of the extended case-study method (Evens and Handelman 2006) and redeployment of biographical narratives that seek to capture the interplay of structure and events in individual lives (Niehaus 2013) might be important avenues to pursue. Malkki (1997) suggests that anthropologists can learn from rigorous[?], less sensationalistic, journalistic practices. Journalists have long dealt with newsworthy events, considered to be too irregular for anthropological analysis. She argues that it might be worthwhile to redress[reassess? or bridge?] the distance between culture and news. At a methodological

level, it might be useful to think of fieldwork as involving both investigation and witnessing. When investigating, researchers follow clues and haunches, assemble evidence, and dig for information that might yield hidden codes that unlock cultural mysteries. When witnessing, researchers provide testimony, with no injunction to speak on behalf of others or to know everything. Conscientious journalists acknowledge their own doubts and difficulties and confront contradictions and complexities.

Notes

1. In another example of mythopraxis, Americans used the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as a template for understanding the tragic events of 9/11 (Griffin 2004).

2. I use pseudonyms to refer to the village and for all personal names, except those of public figures. All African phrases are Northern Sotho.

3. See Herman Wasserman's (2010) insightful analysis of the popular appeal of tabloid journalism in contemporary, postapartheid, South Africa.

4. The term *witch* (*moloi,* pl. *baloi*) denotes a broad conceptual category. It refers both to persons who are believed to have inherited mystical, malevolent power from their mothers and to those who have allegedly purchased dangerous technologies of witchcraft (Niehaus 2013:9–18).

5. Football players were of the opinion that potions made from cats conferred agility, a particularly desirable attribute for goalkeepers. Use of the severed cat's head, they suggested, might serve to arrest and destroy agility.

6. These statistics mirror national trends. In 2003–04, a decade after the country's peaceful transition to democracy, official crime statistics showed almost 20,000 "murders" and 11,000 cases of "culpable homicide." These rates were about ten times higher than those of the United States (South African Police Service 2010).

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