One afternoon in the 1940s, a sub-headman in the Transkei’s Tabankulu district was killed with a spear near the Umzimvubu River, some distance from his home. Neighbours found his body the following morning. The police came and, making no progress, instructed the local headman to summon everyone in the area to assemble the next day at the murder scene, where in the meantime the body was to remain unburied. At this gathering, now two days after the stabbing, the police, returning with two dogs, ordered the people to sit in a large circle around the corpse, from which the handler gave the dogs scent before releasing them. The dogs circled round for some time, sniffing each person in turn, until both eventually jumped up on and barked at a man who quickly confessed and was led away by detectives.

In my informants’ memory, the dogs’ employment in these events stood out as emblematic of Africans’ experiences of the white-supremacist state. Yet their account also points to the types of intra-communal tensions, exacerbated by the broader systemic pressures of colonialism, which led to police dogs being brought in and through which the dogs’ actions were popularly interpreted. The murder victim had reallocated a desirable field belonging to his assailant. In an era of stock limitation, fencing and forced relocation resulting from the state’s ‘betterment’


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1 S. Mthakasi and E. Vava interviewed by J. Mzayifani and K. Shear, 4 August 1994.
proposals for the crowded African ‘reserves’, land was an increasingly covetted resource and the cause of much resentment, particularly against those responsible for its apportionment. Such resentment cost the sub-headman his life.

The police professed little interest in these allegedly parochial concerns. Having elicited a confession, and justifying their unorthodox methods with disparaging references to Africans’ ‘mentality’, they were content to consider the ‘crime’ ‘solved’. Such complacency, while disclosing an easy predisposition to coercion, also implied the existence of social and moral complexities in which the police feared entangling themselves. Police racism masked nervousness about the limitations of official knowledge and control of social dynamics in African communities as much as it registered arrogant certainty. The police may have known that the introduction of dogs would result in a confession, but they understood only poorly the social phenomena that produced this outcome.

By the time of the Tabankulu events, similar incidents involving police dogs had been occurring in the South African countryside for decades. The police represented dogs as a modern scientific investigative technology which could help to negotiate dealings between rulers and ruled on terms of the authorities’ choosing. But the expectation of the dogs’ truth-telling effects upon black suspects was largely a matter of faith. The dogs simplified and integrated the semantics of colonial interaction, permitting officials to circumvent court-imposed evidentiary burdens and the uncertainties of employing black police, informers and interpreters, whose reliability they were suspicious of. Yet officials’ inability fully to comprehend and control all the circumstances of the ‘smelling-out’ rituals they staged also enabled Africans to construe these events in quite unexpected ways and to appropriate them for altogether unintended ends.

The purpose of this chapter is not merely to document one more example of how white South African authorities abused their black subjects, but rather to interrogate claims about the modernity and

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