Wealth-Giving Mermaid Women and the Malign Magic of the Market
Contemporary Oral Accounts of the South African *mamlambo*

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**Abstract**
This study analyses oral narratives concerning the *mamlambo*, a supernatural presence said to grant wealth at a terrible price. Often envisaged as a mermaid, a beautiful woman, or a snake, this being has become a potent presence in the Eastern Cape cultural, imaginative, and psychic landscapes and in contemporary South African orality. A relative newcomer in the African occult, the *mamlambo* represents one example of that which the Comaroffs term “the dark magicalities of modernity” (Mark Auslander). Indigenous occult beliefs and practices and Western consumer capitalism, both forms of authority and control exerting a perilously enticing magic, have become interconnected in various perceptions of the supernatural in Africa. The *mamlambo*’s deadly allure stems from this, as does the power that she wields over those who encounter her. This study considers this interplay between magic and market forces, examining why this interplay has become a distinctive feature of many occult beliefs and practices in Africa, and why it has bestowed a particular resonance on contemporary oral accounts of the *mamlambo*.

**Introduction**

*Begin in the world of advertising*, with an advertisement that has been prominently displayed in the small South African town in the Eastern Cape province where I work, and in other towns in this region. On offer are rats, the familiars of a being widely known in South Africa, the wealth-giving *mamlambo*. This advertisement illustrates the way in which magic has become a marketable commodity, which I analyse by focusing on the hazardous, enticing *mamlambo*.

Belief in the *mamlambo* originated among Xhosa-speaking peoples in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa, subsequently becoming more wide-
spread in southern Africa. The *mamlambo*’s name derives from the Xhosa for river, *mlambo*. Since *u-Ma-Mlambo*, its full name in Xhosa, is said to reside in deep water, it is known as the mother of the river. Oral narratives describing the *mamlambo* have become a distinctive part of the local oral literatures in the Eastern Cape, especially in the Transkei region. They often emanate in rural areas, then spread to the cities, frequently taking on new forms. Therefore, many such narratives tend to have a distinctively Eastern Cape flavour, steeped as they are in local details (as is evident in some of the accounts in the Appendix below), and are often related in the vernacular. Thus, many of the oral accounts upon which this interview is based are translated from the Xhosa. Since belief in the *mamlambo* has become widespread in southern Africa, some accounts are also translated from other southern African languages, such as Sotho.

The contemporary figure of the *mamlambo* represents what Peter Pels describes as “the magic of modernity […] those enchantments that are produced by practices culturally specific to modern states, economies and societies.” More specifically, wealth-giving practices involving the *mamlambo* form part of what Jean and John Comaroff term occult economies, “the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends.” The Comaroffs describe occult economies as shady wealth-generating enterprises which dabble in hazardous magic or have certain strange, mysterious aspects “that evoke, often parody and sometimes contort the mechanisms of the ‘free’ market.” Many other contemporary ethnographers, including Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Peter Geschiere, Mark Auslander, Henrietta L. Moore, and Todd Sanders, also discuss the way in which “a dynamic relationship is formed

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