Niehaus, Isak


This is a compelling and mesmerizing book. It builds on Niehaus’s more than 20 years of research in the South African Lowveld. In some respects it is a sequel to his Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld (2001), but it also breaks new ground, notably through its consequent biographical approach. In the introduction the author mentions the disadvantages and advantages of such an approach. A possible disadvantage, lack of representativeness, is overcome in this book by the convincing way this life is situated in a broader context. At least one advantage stands out most cogently: the consequent biographical approach allows the author to give a fine and therefore all the more mesmerizing account of how Jimmy Mohale, the central person in the book, is gradually caught in the vicious circles of witchcraft. Jimmy’s increasing preoccupation with witchcraft is not a given; on the contrary, it is contingent—it is only due to a series of circumstances that he increasingly blames his misfortune on witchcraft attacks by none other than his own father. In the end this is his own undoing because he refuses to recognize that his ever more serious bouts of illness may have another cause. He died in 2005, probably of AIDS, at only 41 years old.

Jimmy (pseudonym) worked for a long period of time as Niehaus’s assistant, but when his marriage fell apart he avoided Niehaus—perhaps out of shame—for a longer period of time. A few years before his death he contacted Niehaus again. They then jointly developed the idea of writing a book about his life. In the end, when Jimmy was already very ill, he was so taken by this idea that when Niehaus asked him whether there was anything he could do, Jimmy’s reaction was ‘Yes. . . . Go to your car! Take your notebook! Write what I tell you! We must finish the story’ (p. 26). The book can also be read as expressing Jimmy’s urgent wish to give testimony to the way witchcraft can take over one’s life.

An obvious parallel, also mentioned by Niehaus, is Adam Ashforth’s Madumo: A Man Bewitched (University of Chicago Press 1999). However, there are interesting differences. While Ashforth’s Madumo was constantly struggling for survival in the lower ranks of society, Jimmy Mohale’s life initially seemed to be a success story. He was a brilliant student, and because of his university degree landed a good job in education. His idyllic marriage was blessed with children. Niehaus describes Jimmy as ‘an aspirant member of South Africa’s new middle class’ (4). However, from the middle of the nineties misfortune seemed to take
Jimmy's career at the school where he taught seemed to be blocked, his political aspirations did not work out, he did not manage to establish his young family in a house of his own, and his marriage collapsed due to his frenetic pursuit of ever-new conquests. Precisely because of this bumpy trajectory Jimmy's life story brings out the contingency of his growing preoccupation with his father's witchcraft. The latter, a reasonably successful man due to his ability to combine migrant labor with maintaining a family at home, had long been at the center of witchcraft rumors. Jimmy initially refused to accept this; he even went to considerable trouble to counter such gossip. The strength of the book is that Niehaus brings out most convincingly how in the turmoil of everyday life unsettling suspicions finally got the upper hand. Jimmy died firmly convinced that his father was killing him. His death further confirmed general suspicions against the father, without directly affecting the latter's position.

This emphasis on contingency allows Niehaus to make challenging remarks of more general purport. He places Jimmy's growing suspicions in a wider context of generational tension in the new South Africa. While many men of Jimmy's father's generation became part of a broader economic development through migrant labor, many of Jimmy's generation seem to be blocked in an increasingly imploding local economy. Niehaus warns that the growing resentment of younger men against their elders, who appear to have done better in life, is a heavy mortgage on postapartheid South Africa's future. Jimmy's undoing also makes Niehaus question 'the relativist orientation of anthropology' and 'the postmodern concern to represent indigenous voices without imposing editorial censorship' (210). The book convincingly shows that for this author really listening to indigenous voices is the beginning of all fieldwork. Yet for him Jimmy's story also highlights 'the dangers of adopting an uncritical, purely interpretative stance towards witchcraft and divination' (212). In the end, Niehaus reproaches himself for not forcing Jimmy to go to the hospital and ask for treatment for AIDS. However, Jimmy himself warned Niehaus that he could not be 'both player and referee'—the anthropologist-biographer as referee, hence as permanent outsider. In any case, Niehaus's conclusion that anthropologists should not be reluctant to raise 'critical questions about the therapeutic role of diviners' seems very sound to me (212).

Niehaus's theoretical comments are marked by a certain abruptness. In the introduction he reproaches both the Comaroffs and Adam Ashforth for their reductive perspective on people's preoccupation with witchcraft in the new South Africa as a response to the postapartheid situation. Yet in his conclusion he sees both the Comaroffs' notion of 'occult economies' and Ashforth's 'spiritual insecurity' as directly relevant to understanding Jimmy's life story. For me it came as a surprise that Niehaus's emphasis on the contingency of witchcraft