

Isak Niehaus, Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa

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Isak Niehaus's *Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa* is a haunting yet accessible book which reads like a novel. To begin with, this book tells Jimmy Mohale's (1964-2005) life story – as a husband, father, son, and history teacher. It is very often the unedited (see Niehaus 2013: 210), raw narrative of an intelligent man, perhaps not with a perfect disposition. It is about a man and his loves and losses, his family, his yearning for career advancement and the disappointment of being overlooked. It is the account of a man that, for all intents and purposes, should be a successful middle-class professional. It is Jimmy's telling of a life flecked with bad luck, accidents, death, loss of love, loss of health, loss of dignity, and loss of life. This pessimistic tone (Niehaus 2013: 19), Niehaus explains, is the lens with which Jimmy eventually came to interpret his life. Jimmy was desperately convinced that he was the victim of his father's malicious witchcraft.

Secondly, it is a book that deals with witchcraft. Niehaus's thorough knowledge about witchcraft is evident in the skilful and unpretentious way that he explains and leads his reader to insights. Niehaus reminds, and illustrates how deeply ingrained beliefs in witchcraft are and how inextricably interwoven they are with, and through everyday life. A significant contribution to our understanding of witchcraft is that the social tension explanation – for example, the jealousies, envy and conflicts particularly between family and neighbours – as a reason for witchcraft is insufficient. He (Niehaus 2013: 120) mentions that “it detracts from the polysemy of witchcraft beliefs and underestimates the faculty of mystical beliefs to alter people's life worlds as well as the capacity of those beliefs to alter people's conceptions of their own experience”. Further, that the reality of such beliefs are objectively real for believers, whose ontological assumptions recognise alternative ontological realities (see Chidester 2011: 124) and that, as anthropologists, we cannot afford to treat them as immaterial (Niehaus 2013: 211-2). The intricacies and complexities of witchcraft, in the Bushbuckridge region, in particular, and in South Africa, in general, as lived realities is foregrounded in Niehaus's ethnographically rich book.

Thirdly, it is a veiled critique of the 'new' South Africa. It is Jimmy-everyman's story. I believe Niehaus hints at this in his title when he refers to *a life* and not simply *life*, in the new South Africa. The disjuncture between how things should be in an ideal world and how things are in the real world is very evident in Jimmy's rendition of events. According to Niehaus (2013: 201, 210-1), this may constitute a form of protest or cultural critique of social structures as well as moral failings. I contend that Niehaus himself is lodging a protest and cultural critique of a

South Africa, supposedly 'new' and brimming with promise, but which is failing Jimmy-everyman on a daily basis. Niehaus (2013: 204) argues that an ethos of anxiety results from the economic, social and spiritual insecurity of Jimmy-everyman's lived reality. The *angst* and disquiet of unrequited ambitions and the disillusionment of not attaining a better life (as has been promised since the 1994 elections), despite securing the requisite tertiary education and professional career, for example, result in a form of exclusion all too familiar in cases of structural violence (Niehaus 2013: 205). Niehaus (2013: 48) mentions that witchcraft and social life are continuous: "It is not that the world is peaceful and that witches are violent; rather, people and witches are equally violent". I read this statement as saying: incidence and degree of, and belief in witchcraft are directly proportional to the incidence and degree of violence that exists in social life. When social life is violent, incidence of, and the extent of beliefs in witchcraft are related. If Jimmy-everyman has deeply entrenched beliefs in witchcraft, its roots can be found in societal violence.

Not only in an apartheid South Africa, but also in the 'new' South Africa, the lived experience of so many is of a consistent, "insidious [...] assault on dignity", as represented in social inequality and institutionalised racism" (Niehaus 2013: 205). Niehaus uses Jimmy's campaigning for the ANC to illustrate this. Jimmy does not do this because he felt compelled to do so on account of political allegiance, but instead, to be seen and possibly improve his prospects of nepotistic job appointments (Niehaus 2013: 115-7). Jimmy habitually drowns his indignation and incredulosity at the tavern with green and brown bottles of beer when, yet again, others are appointed instead of him. His almost compulsive resort to healers also aches of his desperation.

Being silenced by a system, and unable to point out its culpability (one does not do that in the 'new' South Africa), or accept one's own, leaves no other option than blame the thwarting of dreams and desires on the malevolent acts of others; on witchcraft. Witchcraft, as a form of veiled speech (Niehaus 2013: 180), functions outside the formal judicial system (Niehaus 2013: 137) and, because of its circular character (Niehaus 2013: 129, 148), it frees the accuser of culpability – accusing another, exempts one from being accused or acknowledging guilt, and so blame is shifted away from self.

This is very insightfully demonstrated in chapter 8 – *AIDS and Oedipus*. This section should be read by everyone working in the fields of HIV and AIDS. It offers significant insights into sexual behaviour, the refusal to consult with biomedically trained health care personnel and the patterns of resort that seek out the assistance of traditional practitioners and faith healers, and not undergoing early detection tests. In Niehaus's (2013: 161) own words, "Jimmy's life story casts light

upon these extremely complex processes”, not only related to HIV and AIDS, but also the deeply entrenched beliefs about witchcraft.

In the end, it is so much more than merely Jimmy’s biography, a book about witchcraft or a critique. *Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa* is a collaboration between two men; it is a collaboration between friends. Jimmy Mohale and Isak Niehaus worked together for 15 years – Jimmy being his interlocutor, research assistant, interpreter and later friend. Methodologically, this book reveals the value of the biographical narrative in apprehending facets of witchcraft which had hitherto remained outside the analytic gaze such as highlighting the connection between the social, historical and personal (Niehaus 2013: 6), and in particular conjunctive agency, as well as the domestic contexts of witchcraft (Niehaus 2013: 7, 203). Completing this collaboration was a cathartic release for Niehaus as he dealt with, and made sense of the loss of his friend. It is also the perfect homage to Jimmy; in death at least, he is immortalised.

In *Witchcraft and a life in the new South Africa*, Isak Niehaus sophisticatedly sews together Jimmy’s story, ethnographic detail, and theoretical argument. He succeeds in presenting a polyphonic text that scholars of witchcraft and African beliefs systems, traditional health and healing, the astute intellectual and ordinary citizen will find provocative and revealing. It is in-your-face and graphic, as real life so often is.

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Bibliography

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