Journal of African History, **43** (2002), pp. 499–501. © 2002 Cambridge University Press 499
DOI: 10.1017/S0021853702008204 Printed in the United Kingdom

REVIEW ARTICLE

GRUESOME RUMOURS, THE REALITY QUESTION AND WRITING HISTORY

BY PETER GESCHIERE
Amsterdam University and University of Leiden

Madumo : A Man Bewitched. By ADAM ASHFORTH. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Cape Town: David Philip, 2000. Pp. vii + 255. Rand 90 (ISBN 0-226-02971-9).

Speaking with Vampires : Rumor and History in Colonial Africa. By LUISE WHITE. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Pp. xvi + 351. £31.50/$50 (ISBN 0-520-21703-9); £12.50/$19.95, paperback (ISBN 0-520-21704-7).

KEY WORDS: Anthropology, colonial, historiography, post-colonial, witchcraft.

These two seminal books give very different answers to what is becoming one of the major challenges in African studies: how to deal with the striking resilience of representations of occult forces and hidden aggression without traditionalizing or even exoticizing. If one refuses to see the resilience of magic, witchcraft or whatever term one prefers in present-day Africa as a historical relict of a bygone era – and it is increasingly clear that these representations are, rather, about modern changes and how to cope with them – it becomes all the more urgent to come up with an approach to understand these often baroque imaginations without explaining them away as some sort of false consciousness. These books set out to do this in strikingly different ways. Both raise issues and questions that far exceed the domain of African studies as such.

Luise White's is the more ambitious. She deals with vampire stories in various parts of colonial Africa from roughly the 1930s and 1940s. Their central themes are similar: they are about Africans, often firemen, in the service of Whites who have to capture other Africans in order to drain their blood. But the detailed arrangements to which they refer are quite different. Sometimes the *wazimoto*, as they are called in Kenya, are supposed to drain people's blood while they are sleeping. Others are reputed physically to capture people and to lock them up in secret places until they can hand them over to their white masters. In White's subtle and imaginative analysis the stories turn out to convey very different messages. In Nairobi they are about women defending their rights to live by themselves in their own house. In North Rhodesia they seem to be about colonial labour recruitment, particularly about the ways in which White Fathers tried to maintain their access to cheap labour; but they seem to relate also to colonial measures to contain sleeping sickness.

White's vivid treatment shows that these stories are explosive stuff. But there are also deeper reasons why she is so strongly interested in them. To her, such stories are vital for developing a more imaginative kind of history writing. She uses them to distance herself from older generations of African historians whom she compares to 'late colonial modernizers' in their belief in the final authority of the written word and, consequently, in their search for a core of truth in oral accounts. For White this explains their neglect of horror-stories like the vampire ones. The quest for academic respectability for African history made them intent on

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853702008204 Published online by Cambridge University Press

demonstrating that oral history is as reliable as written documents. Fantastic vampire stories, whose truth value is impossible to ascertain and whose contents, moreover, are constantly changing are less fit for this. White tries to show on the contrary that these stories, precisely because of their inaccuracy and their malleability that led to constant re-interpretations, are precious material. She even concludes that they can offer 'a better, clearer, more analytical picture of the colonial experience than other sources do' (p. 307). White is not at all interested in the truth behind these weird stories. Instead she advocates taking them 'at face value'. Thus they allow the historian glimpses of how people saw the colonial world, full of vulnerability and unreasonable impositions.

The main body of White's book comprises five regional chapters in which she develops her own way of history writing by contextualizing similar vampire stories in relation to different settings: gender and property in Nairobi; the political struggle over the *kabaka* in Kampala after 1950; labour recruitment in Congo and Northern Rhodesia. Of special interest is what contextualizing means to her. It is certainly not about contextualizing the story teller and his/her personal experiences. Another of White's criticisms of current approaches in African history is precisely this focus on the informant's experience as a gauge of a story's truth-value. Instead, she proposes a different approach for understanding why stories are convincing – why people believe them and pass them on. She focuses on 'formulaic elements' in the vampire stories and the ways in which these relate to other stories circulating in this particular setting. It is such linkages – much more than the personal history of a particular storyteller – that gave these stories both impact and specificity.

A question that arises is how she knows where to begin. How does she know that for Rhodesia she must zoom in on links with sleeping sickness campaigns, while in Nairobi similar stories relate to women living alone? Would it not have been interesting to go back to her informants and check whether they are indeed convinced by the linkages she conjures up so skilfully? However, these chapters leave little doubt that the new 'history writing strategy' she proposes – even if it may have somewhat intuitive starting points – requires very wide reading and a profound knowledge of colonial developments in these various settings. After all, the intertextuality that makes these formulaic elements convincing and powerful can only come to the fore in a broad, comparative analysis. Clearly White has all this at her disposal. Her book is fascinating because she shows that these strange vampire stories can open up a kaleidoscopic vision of how people at the bottom of the colonial power hierarchy struggled with very confusing 'realities'.

Adam Ashforth, a political scientist who lived for lengthy periods in Soweto follows an almost opposite approach. His question is how Soweto people manage to live with an omnipresent witchcraft belief. He tries to answer this by closely following the personal story of Madumo, one of his first friends in Soweto. He presents his book as neither a scientific treatise, nor a novel, but rather as 'a story, particular and personal, drawn from life'. Indeed this is a book full of life and drama. The story begins with a fierce family conflict: after his mother's death Madumo is put out of the house by his brother and sister. Roaming from place to place he becomes ever more convinced that all his problems are due to his being bewitched. The book graphically describes how Madumo becomes ever more entangled in the vicious circles of witchcraft. After long doubts and deliberations with his friends (including Ashforth) he finally chooses a *sangoma* (healer) in whom he has confidence. But the therapy prescribed by this specialist is not only very expensive (Madumo has to ask Ashforth constantly for money) but also physically exhausting, involving a daily purge through severe vomiting that makes him weaker and weaker. After a detour by way of the Zionist church which only adds to his anxieties, Madumo finally accepts the *sangoma*'s advice to stage a ceremony

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853702008204 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to placate the 'ancestors'. However, this is the start of new problems: such a ceremony is quite costly, but it is also quite unclear which ancestor Madumo has to address and where he can find the relatives that can host the ceremony. Towards the end of the book he leaves on an uncertain trip to a far-away village where he is received by 'relatives' he hardly knows. Returning to Joburg he is far from sure that the ceremony has really worked.

Intertwined with Madumo's story is Ashforth's own: on how he manages to live in Soweto – no mean feat: he might be the only outsider social scientist who has managed to do so – and especially on his own struggle to find a convincing explanation for the omnipresence of 'witchcraft' in everyday life. Ashforth's own story ends as inconclusively as Madumo's. From the onset he recognizes that current western views of witchcraft as a traditional relic are hardly relevant to everyday life in Soweto. He suggests instead that to Sowetans it has come to replace apartheid as the primordial evil. But he does not try to hide his bafflement at the hold these representations have over people's minds. At the end of the book he leaves Jo-burg, still full of questions.

The two approaches could hardly differ more. The 'reality question' that haunts Ashforth – why are these people so obsessed with witchcraft despite their scepticism and doubts? – is naive, superfluous and even counter-productive to White. This may reflect not only a different approach but also a different research context. White, as an historian, makes more or less brief visits to informants who tell stories about past events. The reality question may be harder to brush aside if one is in regular contact with people who are beset by terrible anxieties and act upon them. After all, it is not only Africanist historians of earlier generations who are obsessed with the question of truth (as White seems to suggest). The people involved, as Ashforth shows so graphically, are quite desperately trying to find out, often with considerable courage, what is really at the back of these macabre rumours and nightmares. The power of Ashforth's book lies in the honesty with which he shows that there is no way out of this dilemma: denying the reality of witchcraft is as futile as accepting these rumours as just stories. Thus, he shows as well that witchcraft in Africa is not that special since it expresses basic uncertainties of a much wider purport. White takes more distance in order to develop a highly original approach towards a deeper understanding of the historicity of these gruesome rumours. She shows how they can become so convincing through their often unexpected links with specific moments of crisis. But both show that such fantastic stories have to be taken most seriously. Their challenging ways of doing so makes the reading of both books a true adventure.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853702008204 Published online by Cambridge University Press