

**CONNECTING BODIES: RE-EXAMINING RITUAL MURDER IN  
VENDA**

BY  
JUHLI Y. LYNCASER

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CARLETON UNIVERSITY  
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JUHLI LYNCASER

## **ABSTRACT**

Ritual murder in the Venda region of South Africa is both real and imagined; it is spoken about, 'real' cases are identified by officials and the lay public, and the act of ritual murder articulates wider tensions that persist within this region post-Apartheid. This thesis will show that people in Venda talk about ritualized murder in a way which speaks to wider socio-economic, gendered, class, ethnic-national and global conceptualizations and practices and how they saw themselves fitting in to these processes. Drawing on Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margret Lock's (1987) "three bodies" framework, in this thesis I will examine discourses and practices about ritual murder as a way to understand the interplay between the individual, social, and political spheres of organization. In so doing, I will further debates that aim to problematise discourses about Africa and the occult, which center on perceptions and expectations surrounding identity, modernity, and the colonial past. Amending this dominant anthropological focus on witchcraft through the conceptual lens of modernity, my analysis examines: how lived experience shapes individual identity and relational communication; the intersubjective dynamics surrounding discourses about ritual murder, focusing on the social and political bodies. This thesis thus proposes subjective and pragmatic realities coexist within this environment, prompting an intersubjective negotiation that is variable and persistent despite the relative rarity of contemporary ritual murder.

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## GLOSSARY OF FOREIGN TERMS

**Aa:** TshiVenda greeting used by females

**diretlo:** a Sesotho term for ‘medicine murders’

**Domba:** also known as the Python dance; Domba is an important initiation rite for girls in Venda who have reached the age of puberty.

**inyanga:** in Venda, the term refers to a traditional healer who has the skills of a diviner-priest and claims a special relationship with the spirits.

**khora:** a regularly occurring gathering or meeting of a local community, usually takes place at the chief’s *kraal*.

**kraal:** refers to the enclosed yard surrounding an individual’s or chief’s house and storage buildings.

**meilie:** a local term for corn or maize.

**muloyi:** TshiVenda term for someone who bewitches through sheer malignance, whether it be conscious or not.

**mushonga:** TshiVenda term for medicine.

**muti/muthi:** an isiZulu term for herbs or plants used in ‘traditional’ medicines created by *sangomas* or *inyangas*.

**muti murder:** the most widely used and accepted term to describe the murder and dismemberment of individuals in order to obtain their body parts for the use of witchcraft and/or certain ‘medicines’. Also known as ‘medicine murder’.

**Ndaa:** TshiVenda greeting used by males.

**ritual murder:** the term most widely used and accepted in Venda to describe the phenomenon of *muti* murder.

**sangoma:** in Venda, the term refers to a herbalist or traditional healer who is able to treat illness with their knowledge of roots and herbs.

**tokoloshe:** TshiVenda term meaning witch’s familiar. This spirit requires human blood to feed on yearly in order to maintain a connection with their witch and their powers.

**tshikona:** a popular dance in Venda named after the reeds used to make the flutes that accompany this dance.

**vhamusanda:** TshiVenda term for a chief.

## PREFACE

I am sure that many young anthropologists go off to do their first stint in the field with as much openness as I did. We want to hear the ‘truth’ from people who live with the experiences we write about, to incorporate their voices into the broader discourses we create. I went to Venda, South Africa with this very much in mind, to talk to the people who lived there about ritual murder and to encounter their understandings of the practice. After my first few weeks in the field I had an idea in my mind as to what that understanding was and how I would write about it; I did not think that I had necessarily figured it all out, that would be too arrogant. I had an idea though. I imagine that this happens to many of us in anthropology, where we reach a point in our research where we have a clear vision, where we feel a familiarity with the topic, and all our interviews up until that point have supported that vision. Then something changes, someone new is encountered in the research process, new data is uncovered, or someone asks a question you had not thought of before and suddenly everything changes.

I realized just how arrogant I had been in my own way, that I had really only gotten one part of the story up until that point despite my attention to making sure I was interviewing a diverse set of people. It was in the final days of my research that I met the pastors and finally understood just how complicated the topic of ritual murder was and what kind of an impact it had on people living in Venda. I had not gotten anything wrong up until that point, but I had not considered the complex webs that connected, revealed, confirmed and refuted various aspects of the experiences and narratives surrounding ritual murder in Venda. I was beautifully surprised by what I had missed in my careful questioning of participants, and impressed by how much more there was still to learn

when I finished my field work. More than anything the experience made me realize just how many different avenues of questioning academics can take with their research. What follows is my attempt to make sense of all of these encounters, to represent some of the different stories I had the privilege of hearing, and most importantly to show where different avenues of inquiry have and could take us in regards to studying ritual murder. At the end of the day this can only be my representation of experiences related to me by the people I followed on my own journey to understanding.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Violence, which has overwhelmed southern Africa during the last century, is thought to be caused by political and civil unrest due to colonialism, Apartheid, and the need to adjust to a capitalist-driven world (Ashforth 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997; Minaar et al. 1992; Murray and Sanders 2000, 2004; Smith 2001; Turrell 2001; Vincent 2008). One form of localized and violent behavior in South Africa is that of *muti* murder, a ritualized practice also known as ritual murder. For example, during the 1940's, crisis broke out in Basutoland, now Lesotho, over a series of murders in which the body parts of victims were used to create 'traditional' medicines. It happened again in Swaziland during the 1970s and 1980s (Evans 1993), in Venda during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kuper 2006; Mihalik and Cassim 1993), and newspapers are still reporting on such murders in sub-Saharan Africa to the present day (Bailey 2010; Mhlanga 2008; News24 2008; Rickard 2010; Thom 2010). Belief in witches and witchcraft, which *muti* murder is believed to be part of, is widespread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, and despite attempts made by colonial governments and missionaries to dispel those beliefs, they remain a strong part of everyday reality for many Africans. Researchers on the subject of *muti* murder suggest that such practices are a new use of 'traditional' technologies invoked to deal with economic, political, and colonial influences and changes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Murray and Sanders 2000, 2004). However, the fact that *muti* and ritual murders continue to occur across many regions of Africa in various contexts suggests there may be other factors to be considered. This research aims to broaden the current academic discourses and understandings of ritual

murder by delving into current beliefs and perceptions concerning these practices in the Venda region of South Africa.

When faced with a topic such as ritual murder it is hard to find a concrete place to start as there are so many interconnected webs of meaning that branch out and intersect it. Such a topic must necessarily encompass the social, economic, and political practices and beliefs found in a community. More importantly it also stretches out and is entangled in historical meanings and encounters, in laws, social movements, and tensions. It is difficult to sort out the far-reaching tangle of networks that impact the perceptions and realities around concrete occurrences of ritual murder. The dichotomy between what is real and unreal hinders our ability to fully grasp that concreteness, which is so obviously present and absent at the same time. What I am attempting to do in this thesis is to facilitate a broader understanding of what makes something like ritual murder such a complicated 'thing', while at the same time showing how much further we researchers and academics can delve into the topic. Naturally many readers will already be somewhat skeptical and quizzical as there is much to be explained and discussed in the following pages, and there will be much left unsaid that I am unequipped to deal with here. However, I feel that it is important to begin my discussion on an uncertain note so as to steer away from the all too comfortable academic tendency to stabilize and explain such experiences and events with identifiable patterns and analytical frameworks that focus too heavily on only one or two aspects of the issue.

What this body of writing hopes to accomplish within the realm of anthropology is to rekindle a discussion about witchcraft and the occult by showing where we can begin new investigations and how we can generate new questions. Terence Ranger

(2007:275) has suggested that since the early 2000s there have been studies done on *muti* murder, lion men, witches, zombies and witchcraft panic “as a response to neo-liberal economics”, as a form of resistance, as a source of political power, and as an expression of sexuality. He claims this has resulted in a great proliferation of works that assume “that ‘a broad general key’ can be applied to unlock the mystery of *muti* murders [and the occult] in South and West Africa”; his belief is “that occult phenomena need, like all other, to be studied in their own particularity” (Ranger 2007:77). Taking my cue from Ranger’s critique, this thesis is then a study of the phenomena of ritual murder as it is and has been experienced in a particular geographic region; the Venda region of Limpopo Province in South Africa, without resorting to a single ‘analytical key.’

This chapter provides an introduction to the topic of ritual murder by discussing how it is defined by academic researchers and people living in the Venda region of South Africa. These definitions provide an important foundation to the broader topic of how ritual murder is examined and talked about in later chapters. Following this is an overview of my methodological approach to the research topic and a brief summary of the chapters to come.

## **DEFINING RITUAL MURDER**

Ritual murder, as it is known in Venda, has also been referred to as *muti*, *muthi*, *diretlo*, and medicine murder, depending on the area and peoples in question (Ashforth 2005; Bhootra and Weiss 2006; Evans 1993; Jones 1951; Murray and Sanders 2000 & 2004; Turrell 2001; Vincent 2008). *Muti* is most commonly considered to be an isiZulu term for herbs or plants used in ‘traditional’ medicines created by a *sangoma* or *inyanga* (i.e., traditional healers) in order to influence the outcome of an event or to increase luck,

business, or power; and this mixture is usually carried, applied to the skin, or to an item of significance (Ashforth 2005; Bhootra and Weiss 2006; Jones 1958; Shaw 1996; Turrell 2001; Vincent 2008). The term *sangoma* is most commonly used to describe the role of diviner-priest, according to the traditions of the Nguni-speaking peoples of southern Africa, while an *inyanga* may best be described as an herbalist. In Venda these terms are reversed and an *inyanga* refers to someone who has the skills of a diviner-priest, or ‘witch-doctor’ as some people I talked with still referred to them. An herbalist, or *sangoma* in Venda, is a person “who can treat a disease based on his knowledge of roots and herbs. He claims no special relation to the spirits, but simply dispenses his drugs without making use of diving bones” (Ralushai et al. 1995:4). In contrast, someone who bewitches through sheer malignancy whether it be conscious or not, would be called *Muloyi* in Venda (Ralushai et al. 1995:4). It is also important to note that the term *muti* also has a counterpart in TshiVenda, *mushonga*, which also means medicine (Ralushai et al. 1995:5).

Medicines play a huge role in the beliefs of many South African cultural groups and, as Murray and Sanders (2005:53) note, “It was vital for the safety and well-being of any [...] community that its chief should have powerful medicines, and a crucial role was played by the doctor who advised him on what medicines he should use and prepared them for him”. Medicines could also be used for personal reasons to increase luck or power, but their most important uses were for the community as protection, for use during initiation ceremonies, or in preparation of war (Murray and Sanders 2005:53). For the Zulu or Swazi, “conceptions of illness and disease are extended to include social harmony between individuals, and the harmonious relations between them and their

natural environment. Disease can therefore include disrupted interpersonal relations” (Evans 1993:28). This has made medicines culturally and socially important for their healing attributes, as well as their protective qualities. Mufamadi (2001) states that “[t]raditional healers are in a unique position to understand and heal the illness of their patients because they have thorough knowledge and understanding of the history of their patients and they share similar customs and beliefs”. As such, understanding what different types of healers contribute to the healing process is important.

*Muti* and *muti* murder are most commonly associated with the work of *sangomas* as they are often differentiated from other healers because of their use of ritual, divination, and ‘traditional’ practices when treating their patients or clients (Ndoki 2009; van Binsbergen 2007; VitaCare.com 2011). In Venda, ritual murder is always linked to the work of an *inyanga* or traditional healer as they are needed to divine whom should be killed and which of their parts will be needed for the client’s *mushonga*.

Ritual murder occurs when human body parts and organs are needed to enhance the outcome of a particular application of *mushonga* or *muti*. These ‘medicines’ are often prepared by burning the flesh, “with herbs and other ingredients over a fire until it becomes a charred mass, and this is pounded and mixed with fat (animal or human) to form a black ointment” (Jones 1958:14). This ointment is then used by rubbing it on pebbles or posts to protect an area, or rubbed into open incisions on the body of the person for whom the medicine was made (Jones 1958:14). To the Southern Sotho, these medicines were used primarily for protection and to manipulate situations such as court trials or ascendancy issues. In Swaziland medicine murder was usually carried out to increase agricultural produce or to enhance political status and power (Evans 1993:27).

According to many of my interview participants, and my own observations, in Venda ritual murder was once undertaken to ensure enough rain for a good harvest and to protect the chief and his people. Motives today usually revolve around economic and social tensions.

There is an important link between the qualities or characteristics of the victim and the desired effect of the medicine. At times parts are needed from specific people, such as a twin or a pregnant woman, and there are parts that are more popular, such as the genitals or parts of the face (Murray and Sanders 2005:223-225). There has been general agreement among researchers regarding the main characteristics of medicine murder during the twentieth century: they were carried out for the benefit of someone in power, usually a chief or political rival. Victims were chosen because of their relationship to the murderers as well as their magical attributes, and killing a stranger was nearly unheard of. The victim was ritually dismembered while still alive so that their screams could give greater power to the medicine. Lastly, the victim's body was usually discarded in a way that made it seem that they had died from an accident, for instance a fall from a trail or attack from wild animals (Evans 1993; Jones 1951; Murray and Sanders 2000; Turrell 2001; Vincent 2008). Many of these characteristics are still upheld today, and in Venda the inclusion of a family member in the actual murder is paramount as they are the only ones who can call on the victim's clan totem and ancestors to ensure safe passage for the soul so that it does not come back to haunt the murderers.

As a final note, I want to make it clear that while *muti* murder seems to be the most widely used and recognized term for the phenomena I am talking about, I have chosen to refer to it as ritual murder. In the region of South Africa where I conducted my

field research, *muti* murder was a recognized term, but one that had entered the area through the discourse of law and media reports. *Muti* murder, as I learned, was far too constricted and defined a term to be able to encompass all the different meanings designated to that particular concept. Ritual murder was both more widely used and understood than *muti* murder, and it also allowed for the inclusion of phenomena that needs to be considered but is not strictly speaking *muti* related, such as the feeding of human blood to a witch's familiar, or *tokoloshe*. I occasionally go back and forth between the two terms in order to include both Venda conceptions of the phenomena as well as those representations of *muti* and ritual murder which are understood through other discourses: academia, law, media, and governmental reports in particular.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to build the body of data that I have, I used a number of methods during my field work in South Africa, which took place between late June and August 2011. Participant observation plays a large part in any anthropological research, and for me it involved living with a family during my stay in the region, just outside of Thohoyandou, the seat of the Vhembe district and capital of Venda. This methodology involves the active participation of the researcher in the lives and activities of the people with whom they are working. Due to the nature of my topic<sup>1</sup> this could only go so far as being included in everyday activities and discussions, which on occasion, because of my

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<sup>1</sup> It was not until the last day of my stay in Venda that I was out rightly told that talk about ritual murder was taboo. I had some inkling of this as people always seemed somewhat taken aback and quiet around me when they knew why I was there, and on occasion my presence had caused heated debate, but I had failed to fully grasp this until the end of my research. Having some clue about the sensitivity of the topic, though, I found that I was often waiting around for people to approach me on the subject as opposed to my seeking out information.

presence, involved the topic of ritual murder. Therefore, much of my data comes from these informal discussions, providing some insight into how ritual murder is perceived by those individuals who have no other involvement with it other than through stories and gossip. These informal discussions also helped to confirm information that was given to me during semi-structured interviews with specific members of the communities I worked in.

Library research at the University of Venda provided quite a bit of background information and led to further avenues of inquiry. The Comaroffs (1999) and other researchers (Ashforth 2005b; Bhootra and Weiss 2006; Niehaus 2005) on the topic of the occult in South Africa have often cited a report produced in 1995, colloquially termed the Ralushai Report (named as such for one of the primary researchers involved). I considered this document essential to understanding certain dominant discourses surrounding ritual murder, but I was unable to find it in Canada. The Ralushai Report, along with several other similar reports that discussed the uprisings and ritual murders which occurred during Apartheid and the era of the Venda Bantustan (Ralushai 1998:13-18), were found at the University of Venda library. Connections at the University of Venda also led to several fruitful discussions with professors, which allowed me to better understand Venda terminology and history.

While it seemed to me that the gathering of data in the field went relatively smoothly, I did encounter, once or twice, a certain amount of suspicion. My first Sunday in Venda was the day of a certain chief's *khora*<sup>2</sup> for which I was invited to attend in order to present to the people there my topic and to request that anyone who feels like sharing

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<sup>2</sup> Khora is a term loosely meaning meeting. Every week or two, everyone in a village will gather at the chief's kraal in order to discuss important business including plans for planting and harvesting, problems with the schools, and so forth.

information should feel free to approach me. Upon looking back at my speech I realize how it could have been worded in order to make my topic seem less threatening, but I had only been there for a few days and had yet to learn how best to approach people. So what happened that day was definitely a matter of poor communication on my part as well as some cultural misunderstanding, and the result was that I was no longer welcome in this village unless it was to make a short visit to the chief. What my speech led to was a heated debate by several members of the community as to what research was, who I was conducting it for, and what the purpose of it was.<sup>3</sup> This was conflated by the outcries of several men who declared that if they were to share information about *muti* murder with me then they themselves must know something about it, meaning that they must have committed such a crime.

The chief's council successfully calmed everyone down and moved on with business, and I, not really knowing what had taken place, kept my head down and moved on to talk to other people. I had realized that I had made a mistake that day in how I presented myself and my research topic, and in so doing learned a valuable lesson in how to approach people about ritual murder. The experience was in no way detrimental in the long run, but an important reminder of who we are in the field and how we need to learn to talk to people. From that point forward I decided to focus more on what people were willing to tell me and less on my pre-formulated questions and perceptions. This experience moved me away from directly questioning people about *muti* murder and

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<sup>3</sup> As the incident took place primarily in Tshivenda and not English, I cannot be exactly sure of the misunderstandings that took place as I was given a brief translated summary after the fact. The effects of the Apartheid regime are still very much present at all times in the Venda region and I have to assume that a large part of the suspicion that followed me was due to my whiteness and the possibility that I might be collecting data for the South African government in some capacity. I am actually quite surprised that it did not hinder my research entirely and must thank the people I stayed with for making good introductions for me. I also managed to discover several individuals eager to help me and to make the issue of ritual murder more widely known and understood so as to bring a stop to such practices.

questions such as “Who do you think practices it?”, to simply allowing people to tell me stories.

Semi-structured interviews make up the largest percentage of data. Interviewees include individuals who have lost people to ritual murder, experts in traditional medicines and healing, police experts on ritual murder, officials at the Thohoyandou High Court, and religious experts. In total, I left Venda with recorded interviews from fourteen participants and notes from another five unrecorded interviews and various conversations I had had with people. In order to protect the identity of the individuals I spoke with, pseudonyms were used in my field notes and in this thesis. Twelve interviews were conducted solely in the English language, while the remaining two were conducted in TshiVenda with an English translator. All of the quotes used in this thesis came from interviews conducted in English and were not translated. These interviews provided me with the historical background and understanding necessary to give a history of ritual murder and Venda peoples, as well as providing valuable materials and insights into ritual murder in Venda today. My interview style often frustrated my participants as I tended to ask the same questions over and over again to make sure I was getting all the details correct. However, this frustration often led participants to add information and led to other interesting avenues for questioning that I would then take up with new interview participants.

When I entered the field I wanted to direct my questioning to cover topics concerning historical occurrences of ritual murder and current perceptions surrounding ritual murder and murderers, leaving enough open-ended questions to allow participants to drift into other topics that might be useful. As my interviews became increasingly

directed towards narratives and experiences I was provided with a lot more data than I had anticipated, and I look forward to the opportunity to broaden the topic further with that data and further research in the future.

Lastly, my research also included the gathering of newspaper articles and online media reports, as well as research into previous anthropological and academic works on the topic of *muti* and ritual murder.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

In this Introduction I have presented my topic and why my particular anthropological approach to it is important. My research objective is to examine the meanings and experiences surrounding ritual murder in the lives of Venda peoples both now and in the past. In so doing, I aim to put ritual murder into cultural context so that it is not passed over as simply a side-effect of an ever-changing world and modernity.

Chapter Two takes a look at current academic analyses surrounding Africa and the occult as well as those discourses pertaining to ritual murder. In particular I delve into issues surrounding theories of modernity and the occult, providing a critique that offers a starting point for my research. From here I offer insight into my own theoretical leanings and will call on researchers and theorists such as Adam Ashforth (1998, 2005), Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) in order to reconceptualise the theoretical frameworks that have previously been applied to the African occult and ritual murder in particular.

Chapter Three focuses on ethnographic background and Venda history. The first half of this chapter primarily uses academic sources to provide some background into Venda social life and history. The second half is dedicated primarily to the history of

ritual murder as told to me during interviews and conversations with individuals in Venda. It provides important links between the meanings of ritual murder both past and present.

Chapters Four and Five discuss ritual murder in Venda in the present day. It looks at how ritual murder is experienced and expressed at different social levels from the individual to a larger political body that includes laws, and social and economic tensions and insecurities. Chapter Four focuses on the differing experiences of individuals, exploring how variations such as age, gender and religious beliefs influence narratives and experiences of ritual murder.

Chapter Five explores the social and political bodies, delving into some of the tensions and insecurities revealed by ritual murder narratives. It also looks at issues of evidence and subjective reality.

Finally, Chapter Six provides a conclusion to my research and a summary of my findings paired with a discussion of possibilities for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORIZING RITUAL MURDER

Theory can be defined “as the analysis of a set of facts in their relation to one another, or the general or abstract principles of any body of facts” (Nader 2011:211). Within the realm of anthropology those facts amount to the ‘evidence’ collected while conducting ethnographic fieldwork, which is then taken home and analysed during the writing process (Engelke 2008). This process reveals multiple dilemmas concerning authority, power, description, analytic frameworks, and so on, all in “an attempt to understand how the people studied see and account for their world” (Nader 2011:211). Each dilemma suggests a choice we, as anthropologists, make, not just to understand, but to also provide an ‘accurate’ account and representation of the peoples we work with and the topic at hand. Debates within the discipline have been based on what constitutes appropriate evidence, methodology, and most importantly for our discussion, theory and how we choose to deploy it. I think it is fair to say that most of us in the discipline have come to an understanding of the concepts we work with, such as ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’, as fluid and ever-changing; our task merely to acknowledge those processes in the present and provide an understanding of ‘the now’ (Briggs 1996; Clifford 2004; Handler and Linnekin 1984; Phillips 2004).

While there are many routes and paths we could take in a discussion of theory relevant to the study of ritual murder, I think it would be beneficial to consider a few basic points and suggestions drawing from the Comaroffs’ article, “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony” (1999), and my own somewhat complementary theoretical stance. The point is not to argue for which theory is best to understand a phenomena such as ritual murder; it is instead to consider

the methodology of theory, that is, what we consider theory to be, as well as how and to what, we apply it. Geertz (1973) has suggested that anthropologists are constructing another people's reality through interpretive theory. He tries to remind us that there are meanings which are yet to be comprehended and ways of analyzing those meanings in an academically acceptable way. What we are ultimately attempting to do is to understand a web of knotted and complicated significances in a way that can be further understood by researchers and readers after we are done writing up our findings. The question is how best to get at and interpret those meanings.

The Comaroffs (1999:295) speak of processes, drawing from Gluckman's study of political and social processes, which they then broaden out to consider global and translocal processes, and "in these processes lies an explanation for the most parochial of things, like the 'new' occult economy in South Africa, also for the most universal". It is this reference to processes which I find so complementary. Tracing processes allows us to hunt down effects, to follow historical roots and meanings to contemporary understandings, to show the various power relations and authorities, and to uncover deeper meanings and allow for thicker descriptions. Eric Wolf (1982:17 emphasis in original) asked "[w]hat ... if we take cognizance of *processes* that transcend separable cases, moving through and beyond them and transforming them as they proceed? Such processes were, for example, the North American fur trade and the trade in native American and African slaves". Wolf's book, *Europe and the People without History* (1982:17-19), goes beyond an exploration and engagement with other cultures and considers how we can move beyond the interpretation of separate units and cultural forms. He states that, "A culture' is thus better seen as a series of processes that

construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants” (1982:388). Wolf believes that anthropology needs to take on the task of not only investigating the multitude of global interconnections that come from a variety of cultures vying for their place in the world, but, “to explain the development and nature of these connections” (1982:385). I bring in Wolf here not just because of his discussion of processes, but also because of the similarities between his stance and the Comaroffs’ approach, in that they both consider the influences and flows of capital and capitalism, as well as socio-historical impacts. They pull from similar theoretical backgrounds and deploy them in somewhat comparable ways.

Historical factors, as well as socio-cultural and economic tensions, play an important role in understanding occult violence and ritual murder, but current studies rarely pull these together with an understanding for the meanings they might hold for specific peoples, and do not deal with their individual experiences and perceptions. This is where I believe Wolf’s and the Comaroffs’ accounts might fall short. They begin the process of analysis by looking at the webs of interconnections on a global scale while still trying to maintain a connection to ‘the local’, but individual people’s experiences and perceptions are lost in the mix. As anthropology is about the study of humans, I argue that a look at processes needs to consider the individual as well as broader social influences and connections. The problem is that processes are typically part of a larger scale that encompasses more corporate entities and organizations; the individual, while both affected by and part of the process, is overlooked in favour of a bigger picture. How, then, can we bring together both the individual and the processes that shape their world and experiences? I would suggest that we begin with a framework that will allow us to

highlight individual effects and experiences, as well as look at a broader network of connections that can go beyond the personal and local.

## **EXAMINING BODIES**

Looking for a theoretical framework that allowed for flexibility in approach and moved to a more encompassing analysis led me in the direction of medical anthropology and the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987). I do not wish to suggest that ritual murder or studies of the occult be looked at as a disease or symptom thereof, only that we should perhaps consider a more holistic approach to such issues, much as medical anthropology has attempted to understand various aspects of the body and health. Scheper-Hughes and Lock's article "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology" (1987:7) aims to distance us from the limits of Cartesian dualism and to suspend our "usual belief and cultural commitment to the mind/body, seen/unseen, natural/supernatural, magical/rational, rational/irrational, and seen/unseen oppositions and assumptions". Moving beyond this they propose a look at the "three bodies" which "represent, then, not only three separate and overlapping units of analysis, but also three different theoretical approaches and epistemologies" (1987:8).

The first level of analysis is the individual body, "understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of the body-self". Second is the social body, "referring to the representational uses of the body as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society, and culture" (1987:7). Lastly is the body politic, which Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:7) conceive of as "referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective)". By framing my research

in such a way, interconnected webs of experience and effect are given meaning and provide us with more visible paths to follow in this thesis and in future research.

The individual body represents lived experience. Through an exploration of individual's narratives of those experiences, influenced by factors such as history and personal background, give meaning to ritual murder in a social and cultural context (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:13-18). The social body allows us to delve into the connections between the individual and society, highlighting areas of tension through metaphor and symbology. It also allows for a look at how ritual murder provides a way for Venda peoples to embody their world and the changes in it (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:18-23). The body politic takes us beyond the relationships of the individual and social body, focusing on issues of power and control (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:23). For Venda peoples this power and control comes from outside sources as well as those within. Being part of a larger political and economic structure, ritual murder, as experienced in Venda, is affected by the laws and practices of South Africa not to mention the rest of the world.

The chapters that follow will build on this theoretical framework, showing how the meanings of ritual murder have changed over time and are being negotiated today through communicative processes. First, there is a need to discuss the academic literature on the topic of Africa and the occult as well as how past research complements and complicates the three body framework.

## **PROBLEMATISING DISCOURSES ABOUT AFRICA AND THE OCCULT**

Christine Obbo (2006:154-169) has talked about perceptions and expectations which surround the African identity; either depicted as dancing or starving by much of

the Western world, or as modern and ‘detrribalized’. Her discussion of perceptions serve as a broader model for the knotted web that anthropology faces in trying to disentangle itself from various critiques, methods, and pasts. Just as African and Western perceptions of tradition and identity are intertwined through various educational and modernization regimes, to suggest but a couple, the discipline of anthropology is struggling to reconceptualise the African continent and peoples along with the anthropologist’s place and knowledge through an acceptance of such intertwined complexities. These same struggles are taking place within the discipline in the context of the African occult. Research has characterized occult phenomena and reactions in a number of different ways, such as an historical and ‘traditional’ remnant, or a reaction to modernization and capitalism.

James Ferguson has pointed out that we are almost always dealing with a generalized view of ‘Africa’ as a totality struggling and failing to join the Western world; we are constantly hearing about “the crisis in Africa, the problems of Africa, the failure of Africa, [and] the moral challenge of Africa to ‘the international community’” (2006:2). He emphasizes that our “understandings of African societies and cultures have long misunderstood Africa’s difference from the West as anachronistic relic; as somehow not really of the present; as a symptom of backwardness and incomplete development—in short, as ‘tradition’” (2006:184). Central to Ferguson’s discussion of “Decomposing Modernity” (2006) is a discussion of the progression of anthropological and Western thought towards Africa, and emerging nations in general, which are tracked from early evolutionary thinking up towards the present day discourses on development while still maintaining a uni-lineal view of moving through various stages towards the final goal of

becoming as 'like' the Western world as possible. In order to counteract this trend, Ferguson observed that there has been an emphasis in anthropology placed on talking about "African society and culture and its status as coeval with the West and part and parcel of the modern" (2006:184). The same trend has happened with discussions of witchcraft, "it has been very useful for Peter Geschiere (1997), for example, to insist on the 'modernity of witchcraft,' much as it was helpful for Paul Gilroy (1993) to identify slavery and its aftermath as unfolding with, rather than outside of, the modern"(2006:184-185).

This focus on modernity does not come without problems however, and in many ways it obscures the reality of the many issues Africans are faced with in their day-to-day lives, particularly in regards to poverty and global status. As many in Africa attempt to be a copy of the rest of the world, the model of modernity creates a hierarchy of needs and wants which in turn creates a hierarchy of people. Africa and Africans cannot help but be less as they struggle to access the same economic position the Western world holds. It becomes an issue of power, corrupting governments and the creation of a class of elites who hold the wealth of the country in their palms. It creates informal economies and ways of life as those who do not hold such a favoured position seek their own way to the material possessions they have been promised by modernity (Ferguson 2006). Jean and John Comaroff (1999:284) have suggested that rising trends in witchcraft are a result of so many changes, "the practice of mystical arts in postcolonial Africa, witchcraft among them, does not imply an iteration of, a retreat into, 'tradition' [...] it is often a mode of producing new forms of consciousness; of expressing discontent with modernity and dealing with its deformities".

Christine Obbo (2006:156) explains that it was during the 1960s that the “majority of African countries achieved political independence and entered the development decade.... With the help of Western aid, expertise and advice, the transformation of Africa would be achieved by modernising traditional political, economic and social practices”. The emerging hierarchies which Ferguson pointed out become more formalized as those “promoting the rapid modernisation of Africa felt that this would be achieved through the creation of a ‘middle class’ imbued with ‘Western’ values”. These ‘new’ Africans became elite representatives, viewed as ‘detribalized’ and modern, rejecting their ‘traditional’ roots (2006:156-158). This is one aspect of the dichotomous relationship representatives of ‘Africa’ and African states have with their people and the rest of the world; a struggle between attaining a Westernized version of modernity and productivity versus a ‘traditional’ system of values and beliefs. Witchcraft and the occult feature prominently in these debates as it has been taken as a throwback to a darker time, a reaction to new values and individual pressures within new economies, or as a something to be mediated and to some extent worked into the modern paradigm. What starts to become visible through a discussion of modernity is that perceptions of ritual, magic, and witches is filtered through this lens

. Obbo (2006:157) noted that, “[b]ecause they studied the activities and thoughts of the majority in a social or cultural group anthropologists were seen as being part of a conspiracy to discredit the modern Africans who were described in colonial policy reports as ‘detribalised’”. Ferguson (2006:176) also observed that anthropologists today “struggle to redescribe Africa as within the modern. Seeking to de-provincialize the notion of the modern and to sever its automatic connection with the West, they prefer to

locate contemporary African social realities within a broader, pluralized idea of the modern as constituting an alternative modernity”. Perhaps the problem needs to be reworked, and instead of discussing witchcraft and occult beliefs as being either a cultural throwback or tension from adjustments to a modern world, we could also consider it as part of distinct cosmologies, different sets of knowledges to draw from, different ways of interacting with the world.

Africa is a populated continent, despite tourist posters which depict pristine savannah, beautiful baobab trees, and herds of noble wild animals which suggest one’s ability to roam the countryside without ever having to run into another person. It is a continent full of people living in a reality that includes “decaying infrastructure[s], non-functioning institutions, and horrific poverty” (Ferguson 2006:185). Yet these types of problems are often obscured by governments, NGOs, and other such authorities working to show the progress that has been made and how much closer they are getting to becoming ‘like’ the West. These contradictions in realities are played out in many public arenas, not just tucked away behind the scenes, and particularly through Western philosophical dichotomies: rational/irrational, real/unreal, natural/supernatural.

Discussion of the occult and witchcraft in Africa is not a simple matter of analyzing the topic solely through the lens of one or two theoretical or problematised issues such as colonial history, development, or resistance to modernity. We need to consider aspects of each in order to gain a broader understanding with deeper meanings. Luise White suggests that instead of looking at the supernatural realm as occurring due to the fear of social and political changes, “we can ask if the supernatural expands to describe new social and political processes” (White n.d.). She goes on to comment on the

nature of the occult as a constantly changing phenomena which we need more information on: “[w]e need to look at how the last twenty years of warfare in many places have altered the composition of the spirit world, and how notions of death and nature have changed as a result. Finally, we need to look at the spirit world from the point of view of those bewitched and possessed” (White n.d.). What is being worked towards is a depth of meaning, and the analytic tools to mine those meanings for new understandings.

There have been several notable bodies of research on the topics of *muti* and ritual murder in Africa, most focusing solely on historical, political or economic catalysts. The majority of *muti* and ritual murders that have been widely discussed academically have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa. Lesotho has been the focus of several historical *muti* studies (Jones 1951; Murray and Sanders 2000 & 2004); Jean and John Comaroff (1999) and Isak Niehaus (2001) have studied the phenomena in South Africa; Harriet Ngubane (1977) and Jeremy Evans (1993) have investigated instances in Swaziland. There have been many cases of murder for human body parts which have occurred in other parts of Africa as well. For instance, Rosalind Shaw (1996) has discussed medicines and diviners in Sierra Leone, Daniel Jordan Smith (2001) has written about inequality and ritual killing in Nigeria, and in recent years the media has begun to release world-wide reports about the killings of albinos in Nigeria and Tanzania (Clark 2009; Radford 2009; Rickard 2010). Some of the most in-depth ethnographic material we have at hand right now is the work done on Zulu beliefs by Ngubane, the historical research done in Lesotho by Murray and Sanders as well as Jones’, and Shaw’s work with Sierra Leone diviners. The analysis and theoretical frameworks used often favour a top down approach, showing the interconnected ties with the global through the local, obscuring and sometimes

overlooking personal experience. My research hopes to fill some of the gaps in meaning that are lost through such an approach.

## **THE BODY POLITIC**

When first encountering the topic of ritual murder, I came across Jean and John Comaroffs' (1999) article, "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony". They wrote about monsters, witches, pyramid schemes, and ritual murder, suggesting that:

The practice of mystical arts in postcolonial Africa, witchcraft among them, does not imply an iteration of, a retreat into, "tradition". On the contrary, it is often a mode of producing new forms of consciousness; of expressing discontent with modernity and dealing with its deformities. In short, of retooling culturally familiar technologies as new means for new ends. It is new magic for new situations. (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:284)

'Occult economies,' thus presented, limit our depth of understanding of the experiences and cultural meanings held by different peoples in such a culturally diverse location as South Africa. To lump something like ritual murder into the same framework as one examines pyramid schemes is, to a certain degree, to strip it of its cultural history and particularities. They may all be part of attempts to overcome or deal with the struggles associated with a new capitalist regime, but I suggest they have meanings beyond this as well. Ritual murder can be, and is, utilized for more than just economic advancement. The discourses surrounding occurrences illustrate social tensions, both locally and globally. They also do more than highlight economic and political hierarchies and malcontents; they become ways of dealing with limitations in other ways such as failure in one's personal or social life, or the constraints of colonial laws such as the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) in South Africa.

The Comaroffs (1993: xviii) explain the link between modernity and witchcraft as a way to “comprehend, in their own right, phenomena like ‘magic and witchcraft’ without having to force them into ill-fitting Western categories”, meaningfully taking them out of the purview of 'tradition' and mystery. Researchers like Jean and John Comaroff (1999) and Peter Geschiere (1997) have suggested that while a phenomenon such as ritual murder has historical and cultural origins, millennial capitalism, neo-liberalism, and political frustrations are actually the root causes for the rise in occult exchanges and violence. Daniel Jordan Smith (2001) has added to this discussion by arguing that a large part of the occult related violence in western Africa is due to a problem of inequality between economic, political and social statuses in the region’s population. Louise Vincent (2008:50) summarizes these arguments well, stating that “[c]laims to the immutability of ‘tradition’ often act simply to justify what are in reality largely commercially-inspired crimes, the body parts packaged and traded for profit like any other commodity in the capitalist marketplace”. While these arguments acknowledge cultural links with occult phenomena, they uphold the conviction that these acts are perpetrated as a way for individuals to get ahead in a modern economic and political landscape (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Vincent 2008). While I do not disagree with their analysis, I consider it to be limiting with regard to the meanings ritual murder might hold for the peoples who continue to believe in its effects, as well as their own experiences. Such an analytic focus on the economic motives of perpetrators and practices leaves many questions to be answered and processes to be examined.

Historical research on ritual or *muti* murder has been primarily based on case studies of ritual murders which took place in Lesotho prior to the demise of Apartheid in

South Africa. G.I. Jones (1951), a British anthropologist, went to Basutoland, now Lesotho, in the 1940s in order to conduct an investigation into the frequent reports of *directlo* murder. His report provided an historical and ethnographic account of the Sotho peoples from the late 1800s up until the late 1930s. While he never made an attempt to explain the motivations behind the murders he investigated, it is clear from the cases he presents and the ethnographic data that they were primarily occurring at times of political upheaval when the colonial and tribal governments clashed and resolution of the situation was ambiguous. Murray and Sanders' (2000, 2004) research on colonial Lesotho and *muti* murder make this argument very clearly, showing how murders and medicines are tied to the political standing of the perpetrators of the crimes. Rob Turrell's (2001) article on ritual murders in Natal highlight the period from 1900-1930, a period in which he claims chiefs lost control over the common people due to colonial upheaval and economic uncertainty, leading to the transfer of powerful medicines from the realm of sanctioned political power to that of common opportunism. Jeremy Evans' (1993) look at ritual murders in Swaziland from 1970-1988 also highlights the significance of political upheaval to the increased rate of killings. Each of these historical based analyses focus primarily on political factors such as power struggles over chieftainships during the colonial period and disputes with colonial governments.

Much of the analysis on witchcraft and practices like ritual murder have been handled in such a way as to prove them to be part of a rational order of things, a way for people to explain a phenomena that is otherwise difficult to understand. Often witchcraft discourse is understood by anthropologists as "an idiom expressing other realities", focusing on social tensions and conflict (Ashforth 2005:114). This approach has taught us

a great deal about peoples' social worlds and how they manoeuvre through them, however, it also takes "statements that Africans clearly intend as literal, or factual, as if they were meant to be metaphorical or figurative [...] thereby reverting to prejudices about African irrationality" (Ashforth 2005:114). Looking at the problem as one of understanding modernity leaves us with the problem of interpreting 'modernity' and its approved trajectory along a universal and evolutionary course, suggesting that everyone will eventually reach the same end point along the way. To counteract this:

Many writers have argued that change, even progress, need not entail a single common cultural outcome (i.e., modernity) for all. [...] a multiplicity of modernities is conceivable in this view--the parallel outcomes of multiple local histories. If the possibility of many forms of modernity is conceded, witchcraft today need not necessarily be the same as in the past, nor need the fact that some people still worry about witches necessarily indicate an absence of modernity. The reason people *still* believe in witchcraft, then, can be posited as resulting from the fact that discourses of witchcraft still work in making sense of their worlds, including the changes that modernization and globalization have wrought. (Ashforth 2005:116; emphases in original)

As indicated by Ferguson (2006:176), anthropologists have begun thinking about modernity and reality as pluralities. Adam Ashforth suggests that one of the main critiques to this way of interpreting and presenting issues of witchcraft and rationality is that:

If this multiplication of modernities through space and time has occurred, and if the specific combination of cultural, economic, social, and political features of a particular European history can no longer be taken seriously as the universal destination of humankind, then the term 'modernity' has surely outlived its analytic usefulness when applied to places like turn-of-the-millennium Africa. As Bruno Latour has suggested in his book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), it is better to proceed from the recognition expressed in his title and thus stop looking for modernity in every corner of the globe and wondering why the modernities to be found there are not what they are supposed to be. (2005b:117; italics in original)

Trying to break the issue down into one of multiplicities, whether it is modernities or realities, can lead to generalized representations of experiences that obscure the meaning of witchcraft and occult practices. This creates yet more rational categories for us to analyse and research when we should be focusing on the people who experience witchcraft and occult phenomena and their representations of it.

## **THE SOCIAL BODY**

There is a great deal of research on African spiritualism, beliefs, and medicines as well as many studies of witches, witch-hunts, and other occult entities (Ranger 2007). When looking specifically at *muti* and ritual murder there are fewer particular descriptions, especially if one is looking for information on those buying medicines, commissioning murders, or asking about the meanings and purposes of *muti* in relation to cultural beliefs. Rosalind Shaw's article, "The Politician and the Diviner: Divination and Consumption of Power in Sierra Leone" (1996), provides one of the better examples of the types of individuals who purchase *muti* and might require the added strength of human ingredients. Shaw investigates consumers through the practitioners of *muti*, the diviners, and determines that the majority of them are politicians or business men attempting to consolidate, boost, or ensure their success. Harriet Ngubane's (1977) work on Zulu medicine and beliefs has been useful to a great many, particularly because she views ritual murder as a form of necessary sacrifice to be used when more mundane medicines are unable to achieve the desired result. As Rob Turrell (2001:24) puts it, "she argues it is neither an act of immoral wickedness nor of cruelty". Ngubane's research has focused on Zulu traditions and beliefs in southeastern South Africa and Swaziland, an important set of works when many in South Africa claim the belief in *muti* has Zulu

origins (Ashforth 2005; Bhootra and Weiss 2006; Jones 1951; Turrell 2001). Isak Niehaus' (2001) research in Bushbuckridge, South Africa has offered a specific focus on occult phenomena in the provinces of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. While he does touch upon ritual murder to some degree, his work is primarily on witches and witch-hunts, which are often a rather severe side effect of *muti* and ritual murders (Ranger 2007: 278-279). It is also true that some of the research on modernity and economic inequality has provided more specific ethnographic accounts, such as Smith's article on Nigerian ritual killing (2001); however the literature on specific areas and cultural groups is limited and often outdated.

Blair Rutherford has noted that while current researchers into the African occult have included:

many more factors and wider processes in their explanations, much of the recent work on African witchcraft and modernity follows a similar strategy to that of its anthropological predecessors, trying to know the natives in terms of Western rationality and [...] to ensure that their analyses are not trapped by the mental horizons of the Africans and yet sensitive to their cultural understandings. (1999:92)

Rutherford also critiques the authors of such anthropological works for "neglecting their own positioning with the anthropological project" and for their tendency to

minimize the differing public discourses concerning African witchcraft (coming from government officials, church leaders, journalists, anthropologists, to name but a few) and the various projects of which they are a part which, in turn, articulate with the social identities and power relations within the 'locale' discussed. Knowledge of witches is very much tied to strategies of authority for all commentators. (1999:92)

I very much agree with this critique of more particular studies of the occult in Africa. There is a tendency among anthropological researchers to focus on broader processes, and while some current studies are focusing more on the 'local', they are so often lacking

in giving a voice to the people with whom they are working. The social body encompasses a vast web of discourses coming from and influenced by a myriad of sources including pastors, journalists, community leaders, police and government officials, and academics. Tensions and insecurities affect all levels of the social body, and are felt by individuals and communities most keenly. History and social issues are of paramount importance in understanding ritual murder, but individual narratives of ritual murder are seemingly left unattended. Belief is made real through social interactions, through the making and spreading of rumour and news. Individuals play a surprisingly large role in these social interactions and are part of the process of negotiating meanings.

### **THE INDIVIDUAL BODY**

The smallest body of relevant literature comes from various case studies done by those with a more scientific or forensic background. For example, Bhootra and Weiss (2006) have worked with the case study of a ten year old boy who was killed in Limpopo Province, South Africa whose remains were found in summer of 2004. Their analysis briefly touched on the background of *muti* and the legal case of the businessman and healer who were arrested and subsequently released for lack of evidence. While their research into the matter was informative in a very basic way, their general belief was that “Confused or pathological people can resort to ritual murder in attempt to find a magical ‘cure’ for personal insecurities” (Bhootra and Weiss 2006:257). Dr. T. Adeoye Lambo (1962), a clinical psychologist practicing in South Africa in the 1960s, wrote an article trying to make sense of the ritualistic violence being committed by African men against other Africans. His conclusion was not that their mental conditions were degenerated to the point where they committed murder, but that their social and cultural lives had been

so compromised that murder was a release for them. The media and general public seem to view ritual murder as a way for shallow, desperate, and callous individuals to get ahead; they are unbalanced and unwilling to cope with the world on the same terms as those who play along with society's rules. Dr. Lambo's view supports arguments such as the Comaroffs', but it also points to the need for a broader and more culturally-based understanding of ritual murder.

Case studies and discussions such as Dr. Lambo's show a connection with the social and individual body, but are still lacking the important element of the actor's perspective. Variables such as gender, age, education and history influence how we see ourselves and how we interact with the world. If we consider that ritual murder is at least partially about bodies, then we are lacking an important analytical element if the individual's perspective and understanding are not also included in the analysis. Meaning is constantly being changed and negotiated, and its effects are felt at all levels and should not be disengaged from the multitude of bodies that are necessarily involved in its creation and shifts. My research revealed a lot to be learned about social and political bodies in Venda, but the data was received from individuals whose experiences and perspectives were vital in shaping the broader picture I am trying to develop.

## **CONCLUSION**

A review of the current literature tells us that there is a lack of specific research on ritual murder as well as a lack of understanding of the place it plays in the lives of individuals. History as well as societal and economic tensions all play a very important role in understanding occult violence, but the studies available on the subject now rarely pull each of these things together with an understanding of meanings they might have

held and currently do hold for specific peoples. As can be seen there is a great deal of work on historical Lesotho, providing us a detailed picture of the political tensions which have caused ritual murder in the past. However, the same history is not applicable to other areas such as Swaziland or Limpopo Province. Economic tensions are often a root cause for ritual murder in South Africa, but as a country made up of diverse cultural groups this does not examine broader meanings or experiences held by those peoples. Only through Shaw's work in Sierra Leone and, to some degree, through Ngubane's work on Zulu healers and beliefs do we really get a view of the practitioners' place in ritual murder. The literature answers some very important, yet very general questions as to the hows and whys of ritual murder, but not enough for the subject to be dropped as just another part of occult violence that has been exhaustively studied (Ranger 2007). Certainly, from an analytic standpoint, we need a new approach to issues of witchcraft and the occult, something more holistic and able to incorporate the many areas of influence and effects that such phenomena encompass. It is because of this need for a more inclusive theoretical framework that I chose to implement Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) model of the three bodies. The individual, social, and political bodies affect and inform each other through various discourses, from people's narratives about ritual murder to the police procedures and laws that govern it. These, in turn, are created and affected by historical and social processes, and are adapted and made meaningful according to current understandings and contexts. Exploring all of this at once is nearly impossible, but this thesis aims to broaden the current academic understandings and literature on the topic of ritual murder and suggest avenues to further this endeavour.

The next chapter provides some important ethnographic and historical background that helps to reveal some of the meanings ritual murder has to Venda people today.

### **CHAPTER THREE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC AND HISTORICAL EXPLORATION**

I spent almost two months in the Venda region of South Africa, from the end of June until the middle of August 2011. During that time I lived just outside of Thohoyandou, the former capital of the Venda Bantustan, and now the capital of the Vhembe District. The Vhembe District encompasses all of the former Venda Bantustan along with several other local municipalities including Musina and Makhado, two prominent entry points to the Venda region bordering the north and west respectively. The Vhembe District is one of five districts that govern Limpopo Province, the northernmost province of South Africa. The District is bordered on the north and northwest by Zimbabwe and Botswana, and on the eastern side by Mozambique with Kruger National Park running the length of the Mozambiquan border (Vhembe District Municipality Profile 2011:4).

#### **ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND**

The Venda region encompasses a diverse environment from lush forests and mountains to dry and dusty bush. Thohoyandou is not the biggest urban centre in Vhembe district, but it is the main urban centre for Venda. Most of the villages in Venda are still struggling with basic amenities such as clean water and reliable electricity, despite the presence of Nandoni dam, which was opened around 2005 to help support these utilities. From Thohoyandou going west to Makhado the area is relatively lush, with nearby waterfalls and small lakes. This is the area that was most affected by the influx of white migrants who moved to the region at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, confiscating the land from Venda peoples and turning it into profitable orchards and farms. Levubu, a

small village on the way to Makhado, is still known for its fresh produce as well as having a dark reputation due to Afrikaaner land owners who abused local Venda workers before and during the Apartheid era. Going north and east from Thohoyandou the landscape gets hotter and more desert-like with smaller communities dotting the landscape.

According to the 2011 Vhembe District Municipality Profile, a report written for the Department of Governance and Traditional Affairs, residents of the district face a number of challenges. The majority of the District's population live in scattered rural areas making access to infrastructure difficult. When the report was released, its findings included: 90% of the population did not have access to potable water; a lack of roads made transportation to deteriorating services such as hospitals and clinics difficult as well as hindering formal refuse removal; and access to electricity had increased but was still not accessible by all (2011:4-9). The report also highlighted issues of safety and security as being:

One of the critical concerns for stability and economic development. Despite the fact that all local municipalities in the district have police stations, police services are not always accessible in the rural communities. The high levels of crime are ascribed to alcohol and drug abuse, unemployment among the youth, and to illegal immigrants. (2011:5)

Women and individuals under the age of twenty make up a majority of the rural population and are affected by poverty, unemployment, and low levels of education which the District claims hampers the area's development (2011:2-10). In terms of governance "a lack of communication between councillors and communities has been realized and feedback on issues raised by communities is barely provided" (2011:10). The report cites a "lack of coordination between the traditional leadership of the area and

the municipality” as one of its greatest challenges to development, particularly in regards to the allocation of land (2011:10). While the District is not considered financially viable at this time, there are opportunities for developing agricultural and tourism projects (2011:2-10).

### ***A BRIEF HISTORY***

Scholarship suggests that the first Venda clans migrated south from the Great Lake Region of Central Africa sometime between 1000 and 1200 AD. Venda peoples eventually settled just south of the Limpopo River.<sup>4</sup> Their arrival into the region they now occupy did not occur all at once but rather via a number of migrations. The last groups to cross the Limpopo River in the seventeenth century were the Lemba and Senzi tribes,<sup>5</sup> which contained the royal Singo clan. According to oral tradition, the Venda groups that settled south of the Limpopo River conquered and eventually incorporated other groups with the help of a drum, “which had magic and killing powers” and was used by the Singo chiefs. As the tribes settled, the Singo clan split into different sections and subsections that are still present today (Khavhambe 2011<sup>6</sup>; Minaar et al. 1992:1; Warmelo 1960[1932]:1-6). Anthony Minaar, Dirkie Offringa and Catharine Payze (1992: 2), noted that much of the known history of Venda peoples comes from the oral traditions

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of writings that cover the oral history of Venda peoples settling in the region including legends about the first great chiefs. See N.J. Warmelo, ed. (1960[1932]); Jannie H.N. Loubser (1989); and Hugh A. Stayt (1968).

<sup>5</sup> Using the word ‘tribe’ is often considered a negative and derogatory term, avoided by academic literature. I use it here because it is the term used by individuals in Venda to describe the cultural groups who migrated into the region and settled it. Its use denotes a difference between the more family orientated definition of the term clan, and that of a group of individuals and families identifying themselves as belonging to a historically particular cultural group.

<sup>6</sup> This document is not an academic source, but was mentioned to me by a reliable individual as an excellent and succinct source of Venda history gathered from oral histories.

of this royal clan, “hence the ‘official’ history of Venda has largely become the history of the royal family”.

Singo domination and the expansion of Venda territory was well-established during the reign of Chief Thohoyandou, who disappeared in 1770 leading to a succession conflict that eventually led to a decentralisation of power and divided the region (Khavhambe 2011; Minaar et al. 1992:3; Warmelo 1960[1932]:7-9). Succession wars followed after the death of Chief Munzhedzi Mpofo in 1791 and Chief Ramabulana in 1864, but the area was again consolidated under the rule of Chief Makhado, Ramabulana’s youngest son (Khavhambe 2011). It was also during this time period that the first white settlers entered the region. It was “around 1820 the first white man, Coenraad Buys, entered the region”; in 1836 “the first Voortrekkers under Louis Trichardt arrived [...] In 1848 Hendrik Potgieter’s party arrived from Ohrigstad” and in “1863 a mission station of the Dutch Reformed Church was built” (Minaar et al.1992:3). While Makhado’s father had allowed the Boers to settle in the region in 1858, conflicts between Makhado and the settlers during 1867 and 1895, known as the wars of Makhado, ousted them from the area, albeit temporarily (Khavhambe 2011; Minaar et al. 1992:4; Warmelo 1960[1932]:7-10). After “the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902)... the Venda were completely disarmed and subjugated to the control of the government. The whole area was divided into locations under white administration with a large part set aside for white settlement” (Minaar et al.1992:4). By the 1930s, Venda communities around Tshakuma and the Luvuvhu River were moved to make room for commercial fruit farming and timber plantations (Khavhambe 2011).

After the alleged poisoning of Makhado in 1865 (Khavhambe 2011) and the rise of white settlers in the region, sociocultural dynamics obviously started to change: slowly the power of the chiefs diminished as they succumbed to the pressures of the colonial government; missionaries converted many of the population to Christianity, changing traditional values and practices; and the “arrival of the Western-style economy and the increase in industrialisation as well as European ideas and habits... disturbed and created uncertainty for many Vendas” (Minaar et al. 1992:6). The full effects of colonisation in the Venda region have not been widely described or analysed by academics, but the struggles of South Africans in general during this period can be thought to be common across most regions. The memories of most of my interview participants did not extend much further than the 1950s, and most did not remember much before the Bantustan era and the brief period of Venda independence.

In 1979 Venda achieved independence under the Apartheid Bantustan system (Mathagu 1990:18). Ideologically, the Bantustan system was proposed in order to provide a way for various cultural groups within South Africa to govern themselves. In actuality, the Bantustan system divided South Africa into European and African tribal zones, the Venda Bantustan being one of the few who were recognized as an Independent State by the Apartheid regime. Small areas of land were set aside and peoples ‘belonging’ to a certain ‘tribe’ would be relocated to these zones, or Bantustans, as part of a series of reforms created by the Apartheid South African government to control the labour supply and unrest within the country (Keenan 1987:117-119). In Venda, and other Bantustans, this meant the introduction of civil servants and other new officials who were appointed to their positions, often with little to no previous experience (Mathagu 1990:18). Jeremy

Keenan (1987) discusses some of the problems that arose because of the Bantustan system. He listed four factors that led to much of the unrest of the period:

- Increasing poverty and unemployment;
  - New forms of capital investment in both Bantustan agriculture and industry, which led to increased land dispossession and more intensive exploitation;
  - Intensified control and repression; and
  - Burgeoning corruption in both central and local Bantustan authorities.
- (1987:119)

He noted how there were levels of corruption from embezzlement of funds to the control of the population, often with independent armies and police forces (1987:121-123). Many of the people I talked to felt that corruption was one of the primary issues during the Bantustan era, which ended in 1994 with the first post-Apartheid election which was won by the African National Congress (ANC) after the release of Nelson Mandela from imprisonment in 1990, effectively putting an end to the Apartheid era in South Africa.

During the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Venda suffered ritual murders followed by witch burnings and political unrest. Investigations into ritual murder have focused their attentions on this time period citing Bantustan corruption as the main cause behind such occurrences (Le Roux 1988; Mathagu 1990; Mihalik and Cassim 1993; Minaar et al. 1992; Ralushai et al. 1995). The rise of uneducated and inexperienced individuals to positions of power led to a great deal of suspicion, particularly because they were thought to be pawns of the Apartheid regime by many African nationalists like the ANC. Many of my interview participants noted that if a body turned up during this time period that it often led to accusations of ritual murder, which was undoubtedly carried out by those suddenly found in positions of power. These suspicions helped to fuel youth led witch burnings and protests across Venda, particularly in 1986 and up until

1990 when a military coup overturned the unstable Venda Bantustan government (Le Roux 1988; Mathagu 1990; Mihalik and Cassim 1993; Minaar et al. 1992; Ralushai et al. 1995). When Apartheid ended, these suspicions did not just dissipate like a bad dream. The new ANC government, while trying to be fair and democratic to all, stopped recognizing ‘independent’ Bantustan governments but did not necessarily change the structures of these governing bodies. Clear communication between government agencies and the people they were there to govern was complicated and left many people and officials frustrated. Interview participants told me how during the fight to end Apartheid freedom fighters played a large role, and when it ended they were awarded civil servant positions by the ANC. Tension between chiefs, the government and the people became pronounced as chiefs were often blamed for the corruption that occurred during the Bantustan era and their new roles in government were not clearly demarcated. It was a time of celebration but also great chaos that continues to influence the Venda region today.

#### ***NOTES ON THE CHIEFTAINSHIP: THEN AND NOW***

Much of the known history of Venda has come from the oral histories of the Singo clan (Minaar et al. 1992:2), from which Tshivase, Mphaphuli, and Rambuda sections are still in power today. According to one of my interview participants, Judith, the Rambuda chieftainship was recently chosen by the ANC to take over the kingship of the region. She explained that this would mean that they would essentially form a governmental body over the Tshivase and Mphaphuli sections, also making the Rambuda chieftainship the first point of contact with the national government. Judith explained that due to a revolt by the other chiefs over the perceived favouritism of the ANC and

negation of traditional protocol in choosing someone for this role, this title has yet to be officially conferred. The point here is that the current chieftainships are very much disputed by different powers, amongst clan leaders and the states. The area in which I lived belonged to the Mphaphuli chieftainship.

Much of my discussion about ritual murder and Venda highlights the power of the chief, and it would be disingenuous of me to continue without making note that the chief is not an absolute monarch but must work alongside other members of the family, respecting their authority and guidance (Stayt 1968:195). The chieftainship was once an office of great respect, not only important for ensuring prosperity, but also for dealing with issues of civil obedience and punishment (Mmbara 2009:2). The chief also had certain benefits such as the ownership over land and delegation thereof, and the revenue from said land as well as receiving payments for initiation ceremonies and the like. This is where the chieftainship has lost a lot of its power today according to several interview participants.

Numerous influences have led to a loss of prestige. The colonial reordering of political structures was a major factor, but so too was the introduction of European goods and the rise of jobs in urban centres, which caused many petty chiefs to leave the region (Mmbara 2009:2-3). Such changes were noted by Europeans as early as the turn of the twentieth century and have progressed since then, now the chieftainship is considered by many to be nothing more than a traditional remnant as civil servants now fill many of the roles chiefs once did (Mmbara 2009:2). Mihalik and Cassim (1993:129) noted that:

Prior to the creation of the Bantustan system, the functions of a chief encompassed judicial powers, executive powers in the allocation of land, welfare duties and a number of ritual and spiritual functions; but the chief had to pay heed to the direction of the council of elders. With the

implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act 1951, chiefs became de facto public servants appointed by the central government and accountable to a government-appointed commissioner. Instead of representing the people in and against the central government, they became representatives of the central government among the people. The authority of the chiefs thus became vested in the government instead of in the people whom they were supposed to become even less reliant on community support, as they were now appointed, not by the community, but by the Chief Minister. This effective dictatorship by the Chief Minister or President [later President for Life] resulted in a great deal of anxiety amongst the chiefs about their tenure.

It was explained to me by one interview participant that, today, chiefs serve primarily as a figurehead, providing aid to the police when necessary and providing guidance to those people who still respect their position within Venda society. While in the past a chief primarily worked alongside his or her brother, sister, and a few close advisors, now they work together with village councils who are elected or appointed into office. One of the biggest problems with the chieftaincy these days is the lack of revenue, as initiation schools are rarely ever held and land is often claimed and sold by municipalities without consulting the chief. These shifts are relevant to ritual murder as well for they allow us to see that as respect for the chieftainship diminished, motivations behind ritual murders altered to include factors such as prosperity in business.

## **RITUAL MURDER – HISTORICAL NARRATIVES**

Dr. Timor, a professor in Venda history and anthropology at the University of Venda, took the time to talk to me one day. After a couple of hours of him chatting about his long and fascinating career and what he could share with me about his research into ritual murder, he turned to me and said he would be happy to help with my work. Being something of an expert in the field of Venda ritual murder he had been called upon many times before to help researchers, and it seemed a point of pride for him that he had always

done so. Then he looked at me and told me that he would take special care to make sure I was told the truth, as every account of Venda before was poorly done and full of lies in his opinion. Having at this point an understanding of the Venda way of obscuring the truth from outsiders, I was both flattered and amused. I have also struggled with his comment, taking it as a challenge to go above and beyond in accurately representing the people I talked with and the stories and information they shared with me. As a result this section examines the history of ritual murder and Venda beliefs surrounding it as told to me in interviews and corroborated by various other conversations during my time in South Africa. I begin with account of the pre-Apartheid period.

### **ACCOUNTS OF PRE-APARTHEID RITUAL MURDER**

#### ***TREES***

An important part of understanding what led to the use of human body parts in medicines is the beliefs that are held in regards to the magical and healing properties of certain natural ingredients, in particular the power of trees. These details were imparted to me by Pastor Madiba who claimed that his family was descended from the first powerful healers of the Lemba tribe who were linked with the great trees of power.

It is said that there are three great trees: one for life, one for death, and the third is tied to the spirit. There is also a fourth tree which is linked to the lands of the rain queen, Modjadji,<sup>7</sup> and is the best place to get the reeds required to make proper flutes for the

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<sup>7</sup> Queen Modjadji is a figure of myth and at the same time a very real individual. My first encounter with her story was on the train I took from Johannesburg to Musina during my first few days in South Africa. A young man, whom I dubbed CB, was returning home from university for the school holidays. He told me about Venda's rain queen and how farmers would pay her to bring the rains during times of extreme drought. She had died quite a few years ago, but CB had heard that her daughter had inherited her powers. From what I could ascertain from other discussions about Queen Modjadji, she ruled over an area between Makhado and an area near where the city of Polokwane is now; a region slightly west and to the south of Thohoyandou. While I did happen upon a book of photographs from the 1950s which contained pictures of

*tshikona*<sup>8</sup> dance. The great trees are still said to grow in Venda, but they are now virtually unknown to local peoples because they have lost the knowledge required to use them properly. The tree associated with death is said to affect anyone who nears it; birds drop from its branches, and anyone who falls asleep beneath it will have their breath sucked out of them and they will never reawaken. The trees associated with life and spirit, where healing powers originated, are said to be protected now, the government ensuring that no one who is not part of the correct tribe goes near them.

The first powerful healers originated from the tribe linked to these trees, and only those from the right bloodline can fully harness their power. They are considered powerful witches who are capable of using their powers during the day, setting them apart from the harmful witch whose powers are only activated at night. These particular healers and witches are feared and respected for their natural powers, which are considered to be focused on healing. Other types of witches harness their powers differently, obtaining them from spells or creatures like the *Tokoloshe*, and using them for nefarious ends in the middle of the night. The pastor explained other people's perceptions of his tribe:

When you meet people they are afraid of you because the tree is very powerful. You can't just be with others because you use the tree. If a witch is born from this tribe she will heal and grow without needing anything. They don't witch in kraals, they witch while they are grazing (out working in the fields, etc.). That is why we don't shake hands, because this type of witch has

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Queen Modjadji and her daughter, no one was able to give me dates as to when she lived. She was known more as a mythical figure who would be called on to bring the rains, and stories suggested she had existed for generations, suggesting that indeed this was an inherited title belonging to the women of a certain bloodline. According to an online forum, the last Rain Queen, Makobo Modjadji, died in 2005 (Assata Shakur Forums 2005) For other mentions of the Rain Queen see N.J. van Warmelo, ed. (1960[1932]); Hugh A. Stayt (1968); and E. Jensen Krige and J.D. Krige (1978).

<sup>8</sup> *Tshikona* reeds are blown during the *tshikona* dance, which is ceremonially performed on certain occasions such as the death of a chief or crowing of a new one. *Tshikona* in particular is only to be performed at the chief's kraal (Mmbara 2009:4), although these days it is also being performed by groups in tourist venues and recordings of *tshikona* music can be bought on the streets of Thohoyandou.

got the powerful medicine in him so it means this person can witch anybody whom he can shake hands with in the mid-day. They don't wait to go and witch during the night because their power can be just in shaking hands. That is why you see in Venda we just say "Aa" or "Ndaa" in greeting. It is from this origin that people cannot just shake hands. When people say we are witches it is because we can mix the powder of that medicine well. So the word 'witch' sometimes does not mean cruelty. (Pastor Madiba, August 11, 2011)

The link the people of this tribe had with the great trees was so powerful that an individual had to approach the tree naked and shaved in order to make sure too much power did not follow them home and corrupt their lives. Not only is the origin of true healers linked to this story, but so too is the connection with ritual murder.

Trees were considered the most powerful natural medicine, and parts could only be taken for use in medicines if they came from a living tree, the sap signifying life and power.<sup>9</sup> The pastor told me:

They have different medicines which they dig, they use the root. Sometimes they use leaves; they use bark and even the fruit. They use everything and they usually use living trees, not dead or dry trees. When they cut a root, the root will have some water. They say that is the power of the medicine. They believe that because the roots were living, it's a symbol of being. That is why they heal, because the root is also living. (Pastor Madiba, August 11, 2011)

When a person is ritually murdered their parts must be taken from them while still alive

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<sup>9</sup> Hugh A. Stayt, in his 1968 ethnography, *The Bavenda*, discusses the uses of trees for various remedies, particularly those associated with birth.

If the wife is found to have some physical defect, she is given a drug to mix with her morning porridge. This drug is made from the roots of three trees: *mudedede* (from *u dedeza*, to lead a child), *mudzidzi* (from *u dzidzi*, to drum the initial beats of the *tshikona* dance--in this case, the throb of the head in a severe headache), and *mphimbi*. [...]

...occasionally the medicine-man may divine that it is the husband who is impotent and prescribe a drug for him. This is made from the roots of the *murombuli* tree (from *u rubula*, to impregnate, to make a hole right through) and the *muta-ta-vhana* (from *u tata*, to be afraid, and *vhana*, children). [...]

To produce a boy pieces of bark must be taken from the east and west sides of the male *mufula* tree (from *u fula*, to pick fruit). The bark is powdered and mixed with water. It must be drunk by both parents morning and evening at the time of conception. To produce a girl the bark must be taken from a female *mufula* (1968:83-84).

For an in-depth look at what kinds of trees and plants Venda traditional healers use, see Hans-Joachim Arnold and Mairam Gulumian (1984).

in order to assure their efficacy, blood being a more powerful representation of the life force symbolized through the presence of a tree's sap.

### ***THE SCARY DRUM***

Linking the symbology of trees and life, the oral history of the Scary Drum gives us a possibility for an origin of human sacrifice that can be related to ritual murders. As Venda peoples moved out of what is now the Congo, they encountered other peoples, many were said to be conquered and integrated into the Venda population as enemies were overcome. How Venda peoples were so successful in conquering the people and lands surrounding their migration path is what this story relates to. I compiled the following from several interviews and casual conversations.

Venda peoples believed that their ancestors were wise, peaceful individuals whom they could call on for help in times of distress. When sickness, conflict or war became imminent a traditional healer was consulted in order to divine the name of the individual that should be sent to plead with the ancestors for their help, and it had to be a member of a royal family. The individual chosen would then be told that they are going on a journey, one that required their spirit only, meaning their body had to be left behind. When this royal person was chosen to make their journey to the ancestors, for they were the only one of high enough status to communicate with them, their body was selected to be used for powerful medicines that would be used to guarantee the safety and continuing success of Venda peoples. Because of the belief in taking parts from trees when they are living and the association with sap and blood, it was also important that body parts be taken while the person is still living so as to guarantee the most powerful ingredients. This is where the focus on sacrifice is strongest; the royal person was killed for the greater good,

not as an act of malevolent power. It is also important to note that such a sacrifice only took place maybe once a decade, for the power harnessed through the ritual killing of that individual would be strong enough to last for many years.

So what would become of the body of this sacrificed individual? While parts like the heart or blood could be used for specific medicines to aid in the success of Venda peoples, the instrument that signifies this success in Venda culture is the drum. When the member of the royal family was sacrificed, their skin, along with the skin of a bull, was used to make a large drum. The severed arms and hands of that person were used to beat the drum. It had to be carried by four men and never allowed to touch the earth, when resting it was laid on the thighs of women. When going into battle the drum would be beaten and the enemies of Venda would fall down in a deep sleep, their hearts tied to the heart of the sacrificed individual. This, I was told, is how Venda peoples conquered their enemies.

There are several important aspects to the story of the Scary Drum that are carried along throughout the history of ritual murder to the present day, albeit somewhat altered with the passage of time. The first is the link between traditional healers and the choosing of appropriate victims; second, the role of the ruling families in ensuring the protection and prosperity of their people; third, the need to harvest the required parts from a living organism; and fourth, the powers associated with those parts.

### ***PLANTING, PRESTIGE AND POWER***

When Venda peoples settled into an agrarian way of life it meant there was a

great reliance upon the elements, particularly water.<sup>10</sup> Hugh A. Stayt (1968:202) noted that “[t]he chief, *vhamusanda*, is the head of his tribe, the father of his people, and the sacred living representative of their far-off ancestors” (1968:202), one of his most important duties being to ensure the rains every year. It is important to note that a chief was never chosen; he was born and carried on protecting the tribe after his father’s death. To ensure the prosperity of his people every chief had a traditional healer living next to him to conduct rituals and offer guidance from the ancestors.<sup>11</sup> As descendents of the conquering Venda peoples, they knew of the stories of the Scary Drum and inferred that those powers could be used to further ends in new ways. The chief was an important figure who maintained much of his control over his subjects through their respect for his authority and power. He resided over sowing and harvesting, choosing the appropriate times, and called the initiation schools (Mmbara 2009:2-4). When he died, because the chief was more important than everyone else, he had to be laid to rest in the ground protected from the earth by a special mat. Ritual murders were said to take place to ensure all of these things.

My first interview after arriving in Venda was with a well-known traditional healer, Dr. Humbe, who told me about the chief and his mat, something he said that had been kept in secrecy for generations. When a chief died and was ready to be buried, he was put on a mat made out of the skin of a human, usually a close friend or advisor. A chief could not be buried in the ground lying down, so this mat provided a seat for him to

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<sup>10</sup> Venda beliefs in the sacredness of water, certain lakes and waterfalls, water spirits and associated topics such as the importance of crocodiles and snakes have been documented by several Internet and academic scholars. See Stayt 1968[1931] and Warmelo 1960[1932].

<sup>11</sup> A traditional healer cannot directly communicate with the ancestors, but is chosen by them in a dream to become a healer. This then creates a link between the healer’s powers and those of the ancestor’s, meaning that they are more capable of deciphering the ancestor’s wishes.

be placed upon. If the chief is not buried sitting on top of someone then his descendant will not have the power to control his followers, and will therefore not have the power to be chief. Prestige could be guaranteed in other ways as well. The burying of human skulls under the threshold of a chief's house is said to have made people react in awe near his presence, as have medicines blended by traditional healers containing human body parts. The power of the human skull is also said to calm the temper, cooling the heads of anyone approaching the chief in a rage. It was suggested by several interview participants that there was a great deal of belief tied into the use of human body parts and the production of dignity, or prestige, for individuals in powerful roles such as the chieftain:

Usually ritual murder was not practiced by every person around in the community; it was the chiefs that had to protect the community. But not ordinary people. And to a chief it was either during the time of drought that there will be a need for human sacrifice, or when a chief leaves their home and builds a new palace. They would need to reinforce that palace so that witches and people when they come there, they will respect that place. Then it is a need of human sacrifice, they will take the head off a person and bury it there so that when people come there they will be afraid, they will respect that place. Sometimes it is for the field of the chief, because the chief is supposed to have the largest field and it will be the responsibility of the entire community to plant that place. Before they began to designate that place as the field of the chief they would need sometimes to bury a human head inside that field with the belief that it will give them success. But that field would need to be renewed sometimes to yield better crops. They did not know about issues of fertilizing or maybe allowing the field to rest for two or three years. They believed that in order to have a good yield on crops they needed sacrifices and put the head of a person inside. (Pastor Paul, August 16, 2011)

Ritual murders would also occur for the sake of protection, not just against disasters such as drought, but also harm from witchcraft.<sup>12</sup> Human parts were often mixed into special medicines to anoint objects that would protect the royal family, as well as being rubbed on roofs and foundations of certain houses (Mathagu 1990:9-10). Protection

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<sup>12</sup> “Anything that was considered evil, inexplicable or destructive was considered to be the result of witchcraft” (Mathagu 1990:9).

against witchcraft was needed most during certain times, particularly when an initiation dance was about to be performed (Mathagu 1990:13-15). It is said that when you knew of an initiation ceremony coming up you would watch your children more closely for fear that one would go missing, killed to protect the dancers and dignitaries.

When they start the python dance itself, the python dance is the *Domba* dance, it's an initiation school for the girls who have matured from childhood to womanhood. You will find after they close down the python dance that one of the ladies has disappeared and has gone for brutal [ritual murder].

The day when you say that you are going down to that secret bush school you need to watch out for your children. You as a parent, you need to take your child and you look after that child. If you don't, one child can be missed. And if they are missing how do you know it isn't because someone has used some traditional magic medicines so that your child cannot be seen, where he is going or where he is at the moment. And when you go to the bush school to see if that is where your child has gone, he's not there and you are told your child has disappeared. And we know that 'no', the person looking after that child was not doing it well because if you look after them properly you will surely find them. Even if you have ten children, you must be there during this time [initiation time], you don't go back home. You must be there in the bush for almost six months. In the oldest time it was six months, now it has come down. It was three months, but they stopped it because of this brutal thing [ritual murder]. (Dr. Humbe, July 3, 2011)

One of the pastors I interviewed also described the need for sacrifice and ritual murder during times of initiation:

Another reason for ritual murder in our region is initiation rites, of both females and males, because of things like a Python dance, *Domba*. A lot of people have been killed for that. People have disappeared during the time of initiation; the people that would disappear during time of initiation were girls of very poor backgrounds with no one who would raise a voice after their disappearance. The girl who comes from a very very poor family. They say "this one, she is staying with her grandmother, let us take her, no one would fight us for that". The old lady would not be allowed to ask any questions, they would just say she has been eaten by *Domba*. It is like that even for males during the time of circumcision. There is another initiation rite that also involves the blood. It is for males and females like *Domba*, and there is another one. I don't know how to describe it but there is human sacrifice for that one as well. (Pastor Paul, August 16, 2011)

Perhaps the best known time of year for ritual murder is that of the sowing season.

The mixing of the seed was explained to me by several people, and Hugh A. Stayt described it as follows:

From time to time when, in spite of rain and good conditions, the crops are poor throughout the country, the chief attempts to remedy the fault by magical means (*u suka mbeu*, to mix the seed). All the people bring a handful of the different seeds, to which he adds a handful of his own and sends them in a basket to the chief's kraal; here all the baskets of seed from the different districts are mixed up together with a magic powder by the *maine vha mbeu*. (1968:313)

This mixture of seeds is redistributed to be sown across the land, but it is the magical powder that is of particular interest to the topic at hand. I was told on numerous occasions that it was human skins and fats that were mixed into the seed, and certain body parts from the same victim would be buried at the four corners of the chief's fields to assure a bountiful harvest that year. Stayt observed that:

There is no evidence of human sacrifice in the generally understood sense in connexion with fertility, although an interesting murder case that came before the law-courts some six years ago disclosed the fact that innocent people are sometimes put to death for the good their bodies may do to the country. (1968:314)

The murder which Stayt discusses involved a petty chief and six other men who, in conjunction with the divining powers of a traditional healer, chose to kill a man who had been lucky in his harvests. Other murders followed until someone accidentally witnessed one and escaped to tell the police (1968:314-315). Stayt (1968:315) declared that "[t]hese murders were not human sacrifices as there was no idea of propitiation; they were committed merely to obtain the essence of these fortunate people so that their power could be passed on to the crops and make them fertile". A pastor confirmed the use of human sacrifice during times of drought and described it as a way to ensure security.

Part of it is for the security of the tribe, the other part is for dignity or power. The other one possible is for protection. That is how I think about it. That is how I see it. I would say that it had to do with the security of the tribe, it is because of their understanding of security. Because sometimes during times of draught, the tribe will maybe experience drought for two or three successive years without any rain. They think that it maybe has to do with the wrong that they have done to their gods or ancestors. And to appease them they will need a human sacrifice. They will sacrifice someone to maybe appease those gods and then after they will say we take the fats of that person and mix it with the seeds, the corn seed that we are dependent on. And then they will call all the people of the community to bring their old seed and mix it with the seed that has been treated with the fat. And then they will say go and plant. By that they believed that then the drought will be broken, it will rain, there will be food. It was for the security and the survival of the community itself. It is a matter of belief. (Pastor Paul, August 16, 2011)

According to the people I talked with about ritual murder, many of these practices were slowly put to an end by European colonists and missionaries. However, there was a persistent emphasis on secrecy from interview participants that I feel it is important to impart. Ritual murders were always talked about as a secret affair, involving only a small trusted circle of individuals such as a chief or petty chief, trusted elder, a family member of the victim, and a traditional healer. The victim would always be divined by the healer and a family member would be enlisted to help calm the victim and ensure that their soul would move on and not torment the killers. People would know that a ritual murder had taken place when someone turned up missing, and they would know who was responsible. Witnesses were hard to come by as people avoided becoming involved in any way, particularly since those responsible were often the ones that you would report a murder to.

Motivating factors that prompted ritual murder up until the mid-nineteenth century were protection, prestige, and the ensuring of power and prosperity. It was also suggested by one participant, Dr. Mahosi (August 6, 2011), that ritual murder was a way

for a chief to conveniently get rid of opposing men in his village, definitely an important consideration to keep in mind. It is also vital to note that chiefs and traditional healers worked side by side, the only ones who organized these murders, according to tradition. Dr. Humbe, Pastor Lily and Pastor Paul explained that those relationships changed though, not just with the separation of chief and healer, but also with the relationship between ritual murder and the chief, as commoners attempted to harness that same power for individual desires.

### **THE BANTUSTAN ERA**

The era of the Venda Bantustan ‘independence’, stretching from the late 1970s until the end of Apartheid in 1994, was one of great fear and confusion. Corruption was rampant and belief in witchcraft was high as commoners believed the people in power were only capable of holding on to their positions through violent acts such as ritual murder. A woman whom I had become close with during my stay in Venda, Judith, tried to convey some of the fear and corruption of that time with me during an interview.

They [Venda officials and chiefs] were given cars, black cars. And they [the Apartheid government] gave them houses. I’ll show you the houses there in Thohoyandou. They were given the tar roads. A school was built for their children, it was called The Royal Blood School. Their learners, their children, were taken by beautiful cars to school. Then these same people were given power. They used to order people on the radios to say “If you do that...”, you know? And even the name of Mandela was not called. If you say Mandela you are in prison already. Because of the Afrikaaners, it was their laws that said there must be no... what? People who are against their government. No “terrorism”. There were even workshops, and even my husband was once made to go there to be taught that if you see a person that you don’t know you must call the police. The students began to revolt against this government. They wanted everybody to learn in Afrikaans because in politics, when you want to colonize a people and their land you start with their language. You must do away with their language, do away with their culture so that they forget about their olden things and so they will do what they need them to do. So it was already finished, we were going to learn

everything in the Afrikaans language, and you know it is a very difficult language. You can't study mathematics in Afrikaans, you can't. That is why the students began to revolt against this government, we revolted. They came here with big dogs, with guns, with tear gases. And then there was no school for some weeks. People used to sleep up in trees in order to run away from the forces over this land. Some people were shot dead. Those who were known to be leaders, they were shot dead. And if a person died they would just take the body, and even the parents didn't know where they were buried. Some who were leaders, the police would know who knew them and would go to their homes. They went there in the night, they just go and "Open! Open!" they said "Open! Open!". When they opened [the door], if there was a boy who was [known] there he would be taken away. Those who were not fortunate, after a week or two you would be told "he hanged himself". They buried them where they liked. And you must keep quiet, if you speak you and the parents would go to jail. It was just bad. (July 11, 2011)

Judith, being a member of one of the chief's families, had never given ritual murder much thought or credence despite her growing up during such a traumatic time period. She happened to be present at an interview I held with a pastor much later on in my field work, and during our discussion, the pastor related to us how his father had disappeared when he was a young boy. He knew he had become a victim of ritual murder but had never been able to find his body or burial site, and so had dedicated his life to putting an end to such practices through education and activism in Venda communities.

While the pastor was telling us this, Judith's face drained and her eyes widened in sudden comprehension. I stopped the interview to ask what was wrong and she told me about her uncle who had disappeared during the height of a certain Bantustan official's rule. Apparently, he and this official were not on good terms and one day he headed to this official's house with a sack of money as payment for a truce, but he never returned. Judith was convinced at that moment that he had been ritually murdered. What converted her to this opinion was the memory of everyone in her family just not talking about it. She was simply told he was gone and not to ask further questions.

During my initial research into the Venda area and ritual murder I came across articles on civil unrest, witch burnings and murders which took place during the 1980s.

Janos Mihalik and Yusuf Cassim (1993:131), discuss how:

The torrent of popular discontent which flooded Venda in the late eighties was prompted by the collapse of the old tribal system and a popular conviction that chiefs, politicians and businessmen form a bureaucratic elite which relies on magic and ritual murder to entrench their power and privilege. The widespread protests were against the perversion of the chieftainship and the abuse of political power by the Venda parliament. [...] The spate of ritual murders epitomized a political system which offended both traditional and modern understanding of legitimate political authority and practice.

Two reports were undertaken by local governing bodies to determine the underlying causes of ongoing ritual murders, one in 1988 and the other in 1995. Both found that an overwhelming reason for the civil unrest and accusations of ritual murder were due to a mistrust of local government officials and a lack of communication between services such as the police and local communities (Le Roux 1988; Ralushai et al. 1995). This is painting a picture in broad strokes however, thus it is relevant to reiterate some of things I have previously discussed. The lasting effects of the Bantustan era on perceptions of ritual murder and murderers are incredibly important to the outcome of this research.

As I have discussed, up until the twentieth century chiefs played a fundamental role in the security and safety of their communities and ritual murder played an important role in their success. As white settlement brought economic and structural changes, the role of the chief diminished allowing others to rise in status. Pastor Lily described to me how with the introduction of missionaries and European goods, Venda peoples became reliant on being able to buy food and other goods. They began to open their own shops offering goods and services, changing previously upheld values of solidarity and

community and focusing somewhat more on the success of individuals. Pastor Lily claimed that it was during this time period that ritual murder began to be associated with conducting business. During the Apartheid era poverty and unemployment were steadily climbing and businesses struggled, leaving people desperate to find ways to keep afloat. When Venda was declared independent part of the plan for the Bantustans was to increase economic development, and to do this many local businessmen were raised into government positions along with petty chiefs and members of their families. As it was explained to me, these new officials did not have the education or experience to make them successful in these positions; they had not earned them. Therefore, in order to cover up and compensate for their shortcomings, new officials resorted to ritual murder in order to increase their prestige and try to ensure their success.<sup>13</sup>

During this period any suspicious death was decreed a ritual murder by most people, and yet they never saw the police or any other official, who was supposed to be protecting them, investigating the crimes to their satisfaction. Several individuals I talked to about this time period related stories to me about how they only just escaped a ritual murder or how someone they knew had disappeared and was suspected of being ritually murdered.

For example, Dr. Timor related a story about himself from the 1980s. He was walking home from the university one night when he came across an old woman who told him to turn around and go another way because there were men waiting to ritually murder him on that stretch of road. Pastor Paul related how he had lost his father during the Bantustan era, and Judith remembered the disappearance of her uncle during this time

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<sup>13</sup> Some individuals I talked with claimed that these were nothing more than rumours spread by the ANC to create unrest. They claimed that freedom fighters would often kill people while they walked alone at night

period. As unrest increased, the unemployed youth began holding protests and decided to take matters into their own hands, and so the witch burnings began (Le Roux 1988; Mathagu 1990; Mihalik and Cassim 1993; Minaar et al. 1992; Ralushai et al. 1995).<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Mahosi and Dr. Timor told me stories about the building of the Thohoyandou Stadium under the rule of Chief Ravele after he became president. Apparently he was notorious for having ritual murders carried out in his name and when the authorities finally arrested him he laughed at them and told them they would never guess how many people he had killed and buried under the new stadium. He was said to have confessed to dozens of murders carried out under his orders.

Dr. Timor also told me about a friend of his who was a chief. In the late 1980s, this chief was accused and investigated for ritual murder. Dr. Timor believed that his friend had been accused because the chief's uncle had been found guilty of ritual murder many years previously, so when a community member went missing it seemed logical to blame it on someone with a family history such as his. Dr. Timor was saddened by the circumstances and continues to believe that his friend was innocent, a verdict the police agreed with as there was no conviction. Interview participants, apart from those who worked for the police or High Court, believed that the police were also committing or covering up ritual murders because of the fear they instilled in people. The kind of respect and fear a policeman got could only be attributed to the use of human body parts.

Rumours about ritual murder and government corruption were abundant during the Bantustan era, fueled on by local newspaper headlines such as *Frontline's* October 1988 article "Sorcery in the circles of power. Little noticed, by far the biggest mass strike

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by clubbing them in the head and then leaving their bodies to be discovered on the side of paths.

in South Africa's history took place in Venda during August. Behind it: witchcraft". On the second page of the article a quotation is highlighted in capital letters "YOU CAN'T REPORT ZOMBIES TO THE POLICE, BECAUSE THEY WANT CONCRETE PROOF" (Ntlemo 1988:9-10). Local newspapers as far back as 1982 referred to Venda as "the capital of fear" (Utting 1982:2), and talked about power being "the name of the game" (Le May 1982:6). Even after the 1990 military coup, newspapers reported on stories about Venda's public servants becoming overnight millionaires, likely through relying on ritual murder (Tsedu 1992:2, 11). The atmosphere of fear and chaos that gripped Venda during the Bantustan era has been said by interview participants and academics alike to be the reason for so many suspicions and accusations of ritual murder and witchcraft even up to the present day (Le Roux 1988; Mathagu 1990; Mihalik and Cassim 1993; Minaar et al. 1992; Ralushai et al. 1995).

## CONCLUSION

Ritual murder, or *muti* murder, has been examined from varying perspectives, as I discussed in the previous chapter. While many academic investigations have focused on particular cultural perceptions, few of them have given us an understanding of where these perceptions are socially rooted and how these influence their current shape. By laying out a history, however brief, of Venda and ritual murder it is easier to see where current perceptions are stemming from.

Official reports and some of the research that has been carried out on the topic in Venda concluded that Christianity will eventually put an end to the problem (Le Roux 1988; Mathagu 1990), and many of my interview participants voiced a similar opinion.

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on the witch burnings and civil unrest during Venda's Bantustan era see Le Roux

While I would not dare to argue either way on the matter, I do see it as an issue of perceptions of development and modernity clashing with a perfectly legitimate understanding of how the world works. There was often an element of competing realities: one that included ritual murder as a perfectly reasonable explanation for unexplained deaths or an individual's sudden rise in status or wealth versus a brutal, backward and dwindling practice spurred on by poverty, rumour and not much else. The next chapter will discuss these competing realities and how they affect and are affected by individuals, society and politics.

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1988; Mathagu 1990; Mihalik and Cassim 1993; Minaar et al. 1992; Ralushai et al. 1995.

## CHAPTER FOUR: EXAMINING THE BODY

In Chapter Two I examined some of the current academic research on occult phenomena in Africa, showing how recent trends have focused on broader processes such as capitalism and modernity (Ashforth 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997; Minaar et al. 1992; Murray and Sanders 2000, 2004; Smith 2001; Turrell 2001; Vincent 2008). I identified a lack of inclusion of the individual's experiences and perspectives in the current academic literature on ritual murder. While these bodies of work have given valuable insights into the effects of global processes, they have not given due attention to the actors themselves, to individuals who live with those effects. I noted that there is very little specific research on ritual murder and the meanings it holds for those people whose cultural traditions have included such 'occult' practices. While I recognize the importance of looking at the role that global processes along with societal and economic tensions play in understanding occult violence today, I maintain that there is a need to pair these with a better understanding of the historical processes and individual experiences of particular peoples.

In the last chapter I touched on the history of Venda peoples and culturally ascribed understanding of ritual murder during historical periods that have been particularly influential to people's experiences. This history provides a base of knowledge for us to understand how ritual murder has been perceived and experienced by individuals in the past and by peoples living in the Venda region when I was conducting my research during the summer of 2011. People's knowledge of ritual murder differed from individual to individual and was experienced in diverse ways. The individual is not alone in their experiences and social and political experiences and influences need to also

be considered. In order to show how individual, social and political experiences and influences act upon one another I draw upon Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock's exploration of three bodies: the individual body, the social body and the body politic (1987). They explain this analytical tool in their 1987 article "The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology".

Essential to our task is a consideration of the relations among what we will refer to here as the "three bodies." At the first and perhaps most self-evident level is the individual body, understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of the body-self. [...]

At the second level of analysis is the social body, referring to the representational uses of the body as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society, and culture [...]

At the third level of analysis is the body politic, referring to the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction and sexuality, in work and in leisure, in sickness and other forms of deviance and human difference. (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:7-8)

Scheper-Hughes and Lock's "three bodies" provide an organizational guide for understanding experiences of ritual murder as it shows how different levels of societal and political structures influence these social and individual bodies. By using Scheper-Hughes and Lock to organize my research I am able to highlight where we are able to build on our current knowledge and understandings of ritual murder.

While I use the framework of the individual, social, and political bodies to organize my research and findings and to show how they build and influence one another, it is also important to recognize that what I am also talking about is subjectivity. I draw on Sherry B. Ortner and her definition of subjectivity as meaning "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But I always mean as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on" (2005:31). Sherry B. Ortner suggests in her

article “Subjectivity and cultural critique” (2005:33) that past theorists have had “a tendency to slight the question of subjectivity, that is, the view of the subject as existentially complex, a being who feels and thinks and reflects, who makes and seeks meaning”. She sees this type of subjectivity as “the basis of ‘agency’, a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon” further defining her use of the term as meaning “a specifically cultural and historical consciousness” (2005:34). She claims that this consciousness is always “part of people’s personal subjectivities and part of the public culture” (2005:34).

Ortner makes these suggestions in order to push the boundaries already laid out for us by theorists such as Clifford Geertz. In his treatise on “Thick Description” (1973:10) he says that culture is a public performance and that human behaviour is symbolic action, “[t]he thing to ask is what their import is”. While I intend to look at this public performance in more detail as part of the social body in the next chapter, it is just as important to consider the individual experiences and histories that colour those performances. While something as homogenously conceived as ‘culture’ and ‘history’ certainly help to form individual consciousness, we will see in this chapter that they also affect how different individuals perceive of and share those experiences. It may be easier to see the symbolic meanings surrounding ritual murder through an analysis of the social or political body, but how those meanings are generated, passed on, changed, and so forth comes from individuals and their interactions with other individuals.

Renato Rosaldo has suggested, “social analysts should explore their subjects from a number of positions, rather than being locked into any particular one” (1993[1989]:169). Rosaldo has pointed out that even something as seemingly innocuous

as narrative style and form can differ between individuals “within the ‘same culture,’” providing material for social analysis (1993[1989]:142-143). By providing some insight into some of the meanings ritual murder holds for individual Vendas who participated in my research in 2011 and by recognizing that those meanings are shaped, lived and enacted at multiple levels and positions, from the individual to the global processes and affects, I aim to contribute to existing academic works that tend to focus on these wider ‘bodies’ of influence. This chapter focuses on the individual body, while Chapter Five will examine aspects of the social and political bodies.

## **THE INDIVIDUAL BODY**

It was frightening! Because they say that she took the baby from the back, then she tried to make the baby smile, but it was too young, two years maybe. So when the baby started to smile the *inyanga* held the baby with the two feet together and hit that child’s head on the stone. And then that child went unconscious. And then they started to take all the parts that they want. Usually you find that they need the private parts, they need this, and they took everything. I was afraid! It is terrible. I was afraid. (Susan, July 22, 2011)

The interview quote above came from a woman who was relating a story of ritual murder to me. While she had no part in the events and had heard them from another source, they still had a powerful effect on her. Susan’s understanding of the history of ritual murder and how people are utilizing it today are part of what led to her fear. Her response was so powerful because she identified with the victims in this case, in particular the parents who sold their child in order to overcome their poverty. “Usually you will find that those people who are looking for body parts will identify people they know are vulnerable. So poverty makes that family very vulnerable” (Susan, July 22, 2011). While she herself was unmarried and childless at the time, her fear conveyed her own feelings of vulnerability. While the story she told me about ritual murder

encompassed broader social issues such as poverty, it is the individual's encounter with such stories and experiences that lend it so much meaning.

The individual body, as conceived by Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:7-8), refers to the lived experiences of persons in a phenomenological sense. It is both a physical entity and a culturally constructed identity that is constantly being shaped and influenced by the social world an individual lives within. Judith Butler (1988:520-521) explained how, "the body is understood to be an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities" according to the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir (as discussed in Butler 1988:520-521). Building on the idea that 'we' are not just bodies, but beings crafted from our histories and experiences, Butler argues that this crafting or styling of the body includes categories like gender. She draws again on de Beauvoir's claim "that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact" and that "to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign" (1988:522, italics in original). I draw on Judith Butler as we enter into a discussion of the individual body because of this idea of *becoming*. Bodies are more than fleshy vehicles for consciousness; they are formed by a sedimenting process that is influenced by our histories and social bodies, as well as our experiences and movements through this world. As Butler suggests in her article "Performance Acts and Gender Constitution",

...the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. From a feminist point of view, one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic. (1988:523)

According to Butler, gender identity is part of a sedimentation process influenced by far more than just biological designation. This idea of sedimentation can be used to describe far more than just gender identity and I perceive of it as a way to expand upon the concept of the individual, that is to say that the individual body is not identifiable as just a physical body, but also encompasses processes that create individual identity. Those processes of sedimentation are evident in the creation of gender identity, and can also be seen through categories such as age and geographic location. This chapter uses categories like age, gender and religious affiliation to show how such identities shape individual experiences of ritual murder, which lead into broader conversations and counter narratives that guide us forward into Chapter Five and a discussion of the social and political bodies.

## **THE BODY AND ITS PARTS**

*Hands and arms, when buried under the door of a shop or business can beckon customers in and make the exchange of goods a happy and beneficial one. In the past, hands were enough to ensure a steady flow of customers but now other parts, such as the tongue or genitals, are needed as well. Breasts or nipples are taken from female bodies because they are associated with “mother luck” and bring good fortune. It is very rare that a male body will be missing nipples. Genitals are needed from male and female bodies and most often are taken as a complementary pair in order to create love, admiration, and lust from customers. When the two sets of genitals lust for each other, customers will lust after a shop’s goods. Skulls are used to give prestige and dignity to a chief when buried under the entrance to his kraal. It also provides protection from angry visitors by cooling their heads and making them fear the chief. Eyes are to give the gift of far-sightedness. Tongues and lips call customers into a shop and make a business person’s speech pleasing to hear. Body fat, usually from the stomach, ensures a good harvest when mixed with seeds. The heart is a powerful symbol and when used by a businessman creates admiration for whatever he is selling or doing. (Field notes, July 19 and August 16, 2011)*

Many of my interviews began with participants telling me about the various body parts that are used in ritual murder and what those parts could purportedly do.<sup>15</sup> An individual's familiarity with ritual murder starts at a visceral and fleshy level, providing a connection between the living and dead body and its constituent parts. Therefore, before delving into individual's lived experiences and the processes that shape them, I am starting with the most basic of considerations: the body as a physical entity and its relationship to ritual murder, which is then ascribed meaning based on cultural understandings of that entity and what it is capable of.

The depth of knowledge pertaining to the use of body parts differed with each participant, but the constant point that came out with each interview was an understanding that the parts taken in a ritual murder, and the power gained from their use, were linked to the characteristics of the live victim's lived experiences as well as their physical body. For instance, a physically strong man with a record of good harvests on his land might be chosen to bring luck to a *meilie*<sup>16</sup> field during a drought. His experience in farming paired with his physical strength make him an ideal candidate for ritual murder and will reinvigorate the *meilie* fields bringing good harvests for everyone in the community. Virgins are often sought for their genitals when needing medicines for a successful business. A virgin's body part, of any gender, has more power due to the individual's perceived purity. What I wish to convey regarding body image is that talking

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that people living in Venda have had numerous uses for the various parts of the body and their respective fluids aside from those linked to ritual murder. One individual shared with me that after a miscarriage the body of the infant is rubbed with medicines before being buried in a sitting position. A small hole will be left in the grave after the burial so the mother can pour urine into it. This is done at around four in the morning each day for the first few weeks or months after the incident to prevent another miscarriage. Several men I talked with told me that the best medicines are made with foreskins removed during circumcision. After removing the foreskin it is thrown into a fire and the ashes are collected, when applied to a wound it stops the flow of blood and aids in closing it over.

<sup>16</sup> I use the term "meilie" instead of the more common term "maize" because that is the word used by my participants in Venda when they talked about corn and corn fields.

about ritual murder starts by placing an individual inside a physical body, that is, in the end merely the sum of various parts. Those parts can be separated and employed in similar works as they were in life; from beyond the grave arms are still expected to beckon and tongues to wag.

The body, as Marcel Mauss (1973:75) has pointed out, “is man’s first and most natural instrument. Or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s first and most natural technical object, and at the same time technical means, is his body”. It is a pragmatic understanding based on the experiences of using our own bodies and seeing others at work. What he gives us through examining “techniques of the body” is an understanding that the way we use and view our bodies is not just individual practice, but primarily a result of learning influenced by societal and cultural needs and fashions. In short, the body is not just a material entity that ‘does’, it is also one imbued with meanings and, moreover, those meanings change over time (Mauss 1973:70-87). In Venda, people’s experiences with ritual murder involve both an understanding of what physically happens to the body as well as the meanings that are culturally attributed to the body’s parts. Mauss uses several examples to explain this social and cultural connection with the body and its movements; techniques in swimming, marching, dancing and walking. While observing how a nurse walked in New York and comparing it to girls walking in France he noted that, “[t]he positions of the arms and hands while walking form a social idiosyncrasy, they are not simply a product of some purely individual, almost completely physical arrangements and mechanisms” (1973:72).

The body and its parts are physical, pragmatic tools and vessels loaded with cultural meaning that is reinforced through social interactions and passed on through

individual's encounters with one another. After a pragmatic understanding of body parts we enter into a realm of meaning shaped by individual experiences and influenced by histories and personal backgrounds. Factors such as age, gender, education and geography all influence such experiences and shape a person's perceptions, particularly towards a phenomenon such as ritual murder. Differences in perceptions and experiences became readily apparent after my first few conversations and interviews and these highlighted many generational and social tensions that affect the "social body", tensions that are harder to understand without recognition of those differing encounters. The rest of this chapter is broken down into categories of gender, age, geography and social background in order to show how lived experiences influence individual's understanding of ritual murder and their discourses surrounding it. While I have used categories for organizational purposes, I will once again invoke Judith Butler's (1988) discussion of sedimenting processes. Whether it be gender, age, or religious affiliation it is important to recognize that each of these experiences are part of a layered whole created through individual, social and cultural interactions.

## **GENDERED EXPERIENCES**

One of the first sayings I was taught in TshiVenda was how to say hello. As a woman I was to greet others by saying "Aa" and holding my arms out in front of me, the palms of my hands held together and my arms slightly tilted down and to the right side of my body. If I were greeting a chief, then I would lie down on my stomach with my arms in the same position and my head down. Men had their own greeting, "Ndaa", followed most often by a genial shaking of each other's hands if the individuals knew each other well. If the men were strangers or acquaintances hand shaking was a more tentative act

and depended on the social statuses of the individuals with those of equal status more likely to shake than those of disparate statuses. I witnessed women taking care of almost all of the day-to-day running of the household; cooking and serving the men, raising children, and often working a job outside of the home or going to school. The divide between male and female realms even came down to their underwear. One of the women in my household, Beth, came to me one day to discuss my laundry issues. I had asked to be taught how to do my own laundry because I was uncomfortable having the family's housekeeper take care of all of my needs as well as everyone else's. Beth was sent to tell me that the housekeeper would be happy to do my laundry for me, but that it was difficult for her because in Venda women can wash men's small clothes, but they never washed each others. I understood and further emphasized my desire to do my own laundry. After several apparently hilarious mishaps, and the growth of several large blisters on my hands, I was able to wash my own clothes, although still far from the standards accepted by the housekeeper. These small interactions highlighted some of the experiential differences between genders in Venda, differences which also affected perceptions and experiences of ritual murder. Gendered experiences of ritual murder encompass not just realms of discourse, but also reveal issues surrounding women's rights, poverty and gendered violence.

On my way to the nearby Kruger National Park one day I asked my driver, Brenda, if she knew anything about ritual murder, to which she simply replied, "I'm a woman, I don't know about those things. But I can tell you a story I heard". All of the women participants I talked with prefaced our discussions by saying they had no knowledge about ritual murder, but they were willing to share whatever stories they had

heard. One female traditional healer was quite adamant about only using roots and divining bones for her work and nothing more, but she mentioned that men use other things, such as human body parts, as well as botanical ingredients. When women talked to me about ritual murder the information they imparted was expressed as a story or rumour from another source. My interview with Susan, an unmarried woman in her late thirties, started by saying, “I just heard this from a source, but I think this source is reliable because it was a policeman who has been investigating the case” (July 22, 2011). I was treated as one of them, a woman, and as such I was privy to their rumours and they shared their some of their fears as well as their perspectives.

Most male interviewees did not show much hesitation in talking about the subject of ritual murder or in sharing their knowledge. Most of my male participants expressed anger when they spoke about people who kill for business purposes, communicating their disdain for people who chose to kill for their own success instead of working hard to succeed. Dr. Humbe expressed his frustration over the perceived change in those who carry out ritual murder now in comparison to the past: “Now people are making business with the human skins, with the human body. People now, it doesn’t matter if you are a traditional healer or African medical practitioner, it doesn’t matter if you are a king or what, [...] it’s only business.” (July 3, 2011). When men spoke to me about ritual murder they were sharing historical facts and recent details, treating me as a student on the topic. They shared some of their frustrations, often laying blame for occurrences of ritual murder on social and political bodies. Dr. Humbe blamed the current laws that put ritual murderers in jail instead of condemning them to death as they did in the past:

So that is why I say, my side, I blame also the traditional healer, and I blame also the government. But this people who are doing this, they should not go to

jail for one part, they [the courts] should have to kill them because they're killing some other people. But the government says "no, it's life in prison". Which mean the people now they see that no, there's life in prison—you get to eat, you get everything: fried eggs, bananas, fish and chips. You eat anything and everything you want in prison. (July 3, 2011)

Women's and men's supposed involvement in ritual murders also differed. I was told that it was only men who actually performed the killing, and only male traditional healers who prescribed the use of human parts. Women were often implicated in the luring or delivering of potential victims, and reports from the uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s mentioned that women were charged for this type of involvement, but not the actual dismembering and death of victims (Le Roux 1988; Ralushai et al. 1995). Other stories about the involvement of women also arose, in particular their involvement in selling unwanted children to ritual murderers. Dr. Humbe related the following to me:

Some of the people are selling their children, like women. There is one woman who was chased away from her village. She's now here because she hid, because she killed her son. She had five children of her own and was taking care of one for another woman. They [ritual murderers] sent those people to go and kill that other woman's son. When those people get there they found the son of the other woman sleeping beside the woman's son, and then they took this son and killed him. When the villagers found out they chased that lady and she stayed at the police station for about, I think it was almost two years. The government [ignored] what she was doing because it was in a town. (July 3, 2011)

Susan's story also related the choices a woman had to make in order to save her own life and the life of her unborn child.

So poverty makes that family very vulnerable. They approached the man, and the man thought he was going to get a bed, and he will also get a lorry maybe with fuel in it. The man told them [the ritual murderers] "yes", and told his wife that he needed her boy. Unfortunately for the boy, when the woman married that man, she already had that boy. So it was the step-father asking for the boy to give them. So the woman didn't give him automatically, she refused. But unfortunately during that time she was pregnant with that man's child, so when she refused him, she said, "no, I'm not going to give you my baby" and all those things. He said "no problem, since you are carrying my

baby I want that one.” And she didn’t have an option. It would mean they would have to cut her, and not carefully. They needed the baby so they will just take the foetus out. So she ended up agreeing that “ok you can take the boy,” because now she wants to save herself. (July 22, 2011)

These stories not only highlight differences between male and female experiences with ritual murder and their telling of it; they also highlight areas of tension between these gender categories. Dr. Humbe’s and Susan’s accounts relate some of the insecurities felt by women in Venda despite women’s growing independence and perceived equality in certain spheres such as the work force.

Gender also played a role in the choice of victims. Pastor Paul related the following:

If it is the chief who is involved in ritual murder it will be very rare for them to kill a woman. They will go for men because men are a symbol of power. Usually they will go for men. But if it is a woman who has been murdered then usually it is believed to be the business people who need to attract and invite people to their business. (August 16, 2011)

The police captain and the pastors I interviewed claimed that many of the victims of ritual murder since the late 1990s have been women or children with a few notable exceptions.<sup>17</sup> Other interviewees believed that men and women are both equally chosen.

Pastor T’s brother shared his feelings about a ritual murder that happened close to his home:

There was one that pains me. She was brutally murdered, down there just on the valley next to the river. I think it was done during the night because we found her dead in the morning. There was a suspect who was supposed to be arrested, but they didn’t keep them that much in jail. They just disappeared. That’s all I can say for now. I think they were looking for her parts, body parts for medicines. The used the medicines to sustain the businesses, to attract customers into businesses. They say the parts of women’s bodies are very strong along this line. The other one that happened, she was burned

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<sup>17</sup> The ritual murders that took place at Makonde in 2005 involved both a man and a woman. This case will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

during the night. Traditionally women are not involved in that thing, but equally men and women are killed. (August 18, 2011)

However brief, this discussion of gendered experiences, and male and female participation in ritual murder, serves as a starting point for understanding how, and which, knowledges and meanings surrounding such occult phenomena are shared and perceived by individuals. It is important to note that while I use the terms 'gender' and 'gendered experience', I am drawing on these to show how biological and culturally created categories of male and female create different experiences for individuals and is part of the sedimenting process I discussed above. We can see with this discussion on gendered experiences how these two categories of male and female affect an individual's understanding, participation in, and discourses about ritual murder.

## **GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCES**

Generational differences included how younger and older community members talked about ritual murder, different types of knowledge, the uses of body parts, as well as who might be considered to practice such *muti*. The most obvious differences were from participants aged 60 and above, and 40 and below, with those aged 41-59 often citing information taken from both sides of the generational gap to some degree. These differences in age most clearly marked the experiences of individuals who had been alive for the entirety of the Apartheid era, which started in the 1950s, those who were roughly in their twenties during the Bantustan era, and those who have struggled having reached adulthood since the end of the Apartheid era in the mid-1990s.

One of the biggest differences I noticed was the willingness of certain people to talk to me, in contrast to others, and their response to my topic.<sup>18</sup> Males were more willing to talk to me about ritual murder than women, but participants were also divided by age in this regard. Judith often took me with her when she went visiting in the hopes that she might find me people to interview. On several occasions we would visit women with whom she was working on various projects and she would speak on my behalf, asking that if anyone had anything to say about ritual murder would they please share it with me. She only tried this a few times with her older female friends because of the uncomfortable silences that would follow. All of the women who agreed to talk to me were under the age of 60. Women above that age who were approached with my topic replied with silent looks and nothing more.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, men over the age of 40 were most eager to talk to me, while those younger either avoided me altogether or had to be prodded by their elders.

The older male generation, those in their 60s or above, talked about ritual murder as a belief-based activity that was linked with the royal families and traditional healers. Participants from this age group provided me with important historical details, which made up a great deal of the data used in Chapter Three. In particular were the stories about trees, the Scary Drum, and the prestige of chiefs as related to me by Dr. Humbe and

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<sup>18</sup> I did, and do, take my own positionality as a thirty-something, Caucasian, female, and researcher into consideration and feel that it most definitely influenced who talked to me and about what. With men my age and gender seemed to primarily influence the details about ritual murder that were shared with me. A good example of this was my interview with Captain Mannzhi. I felt that he was trying to shock or scare me with the details he shared.

<sup>19</sup> When I interacted with other women I felt that I was being held up to expected cultural standards and norms for women in Venda. Judith occasionally informed me how I was supposed to behave and I was at times treated like a child who was asking impertinent questions. I felt that older women did not talk to me because the topic of ritual murder was not suitable for me to be bringing up and that they were judging me for not following the gendered rules I should be while in their company. Many men seemed to respect my status as a white foreign researcher, allowing them to more frequently overlook my age and gender.

Pastor Madiba, both of whom were over 70 years of age. They related the various uses for human body parts before the Apartheid era, as well as discussing the political uprisings in the 1980s and 1990s and the claims that powerful politicians were using ritual murder in order to maintain their control in the Bantustan government. The older generations could describe what each part might be used for and how it is to be removed, while younger participants only related that it happened and that the parts were sold without ascribing specific meaning to them or describing a ritualized aspect. Pastor Madiba talked about how the younger generation, those 40 years and younger, did not understand the long history behind ritual killing, the meanings it once had, or how to use body parts properly.

At the same time he and a couple of other older male participants suggested that traditional healers who might use such parts, or prescribe them, are mostly likely younger and below the age of 40. It was suggested that they use human body parts to make their medicines more powerful because they do not know how to make proper medicines, or they are doing it to improve their credentials. Older healers were considered by most participants to be more trusted, with the exception of a couple of individuals living near Thohoyandou who were reportedly engaged in ritual killing. Traditional healers with whom I had the opportunity to talk were adamant that they did not use human parts and never have. In opposition to this, however, many of the same participants also declared that it was only older traditional healers who advised people to commit ritual murder, and that they trained younger generations to follow in their footsteps:

The traditional healers will say that they don't do ritual murder and that they are not trained in that. They have an organization and if you ask them they will say no. But if you go to someone who is being initiated into that

organization they will tell you that they are trained and told about the power of human body parts. (Pastor Paul, August 17, 2011)

There are many traditional healers in this area but very few are the ones who practice ritual murders. I know them; they are well-known traditional healers who are experts in that field of ritual murders. They are older people. There are younger healers but they are not mostly involved in ritual murders, except for in Makonde where there was one young man. You might find that the killer might be a young person, but the person who commissioned the murder is an old person. Men especially. (Pastor T's Brother, August 18, 2011)

Participants below the age of 40, such as Susan, Thedzi, and Pastor T's brother, highlighted the victim and the reactions of the community as opposed to noting historical and traditional foundations for ritual murder. They saw the perpetrators as average people seeking money and, therefore, selling their friends and families to the local Indian businessmen or traditional healers. Female participants in this age group told stories and rumours about ritual killings that happened within their lifetimes rather than about history or traditional uses for human body parts. How they talked about it seemed to be somewhat sensationalized but with a basis in fact:

There are so many stories. There are so many stories. Like what happened in Tshakona. It was early in the morning. In Tshakona they said, early in the morning there was a person who was going to Polokwane. He was working in Polokwane. So maybe those people who are working far, on Friday they will go home, go back to work on Monday. So he was going back to work on Monday. Then they said that some people hijacked his lift, he knew them because they were close family members, but extended ones. So immediately when they got inside the car he never reached home. He reached to his work. They had noticed the car. When it was getting into afternoon people saw his car parked close to a big dam. Then until sunset they can see that no, no, no, that car belongs to that person and it was there yesterday. Then they started to go and search there, they couldn't find anyone. The police came, even divers from Polokwane came. They didn't find anyone. So now they said that "we're going to do a house to house search". So immediately, after one day they arrive and announce they want to do a house to house search, they found him floating in the water. The question is where was he all along? What do you think? Was he there all along? They searched for two or three days and didn't find anything. Even the police went there and didn't get anything. The divers especially went there, didn't get anything. (Susan, July 22, 2011)

Male interviewees in this age range displayed more of an emotional response to ritual murder, relating frustrations about murders in their communities and the lack of ability to bring murderers to justice. “We can find people who are being killed; it is visible that they were killed. They did not die only natural cause of death. But you can't know who killed” (Thedzi, August 18, 2011).

Generational and gendered experiences of ritual murder reveal discourses about poverty, violence against women, and frustrations surrounding the current social and political systems in Venda. While I am only able to touch upon these issues here, there is much more that can be expanded upon and analysed within these two categories alone. It is apparent that both gender and age play a role in the creation and transmission of knowledges and meanings about ritual murder, as does social authority and geographic location within the Venda region. The movement of information between rural and urban regions of Venda influences individual experiences and knowledges surrounding ritual murder. Access to information and resources such as basic amenities and political authority, like the police, differ from location to location around the region and often lead to a proliferation of rumours and gossip.

## **GEOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCES**

Thohoyandou is the largest urban centre in the region I visited. The town is the seat of the Vhembe District and is home to the High Court and other local government offices, as well as the University of Venda (Univen). Thohoyandou and some of the surrounding communities have more regular access to water and electricity and there are roads and taxis that make them easily accessible. Within a ten minute drive of Thohoyandou these

amenities become harder and harder to come by. Outside of this more urbanized centre communities are smaller and are maintained by village counsels who report to District officials. Living conditions between these areas are drastically different. Villagers living in more remote areas do not have access to electricity or water and still build traditional round one room houses out of materials found locally such as long grasses and mud bricks. The closer a community is to Thohoyandou the more it resembles a city suburb with houses built from cement bricks with dirt roads and with occasional access to water and electricity. Transportation outside of the Thohoyandou area is limited by a family's access to a car or donkey cart and the occasional passing taxi or bus, limiting options for employment among other things.

Most of the participants I had the opportunity to interview lived within an accessible distance to Thohoyandou, but thanks to the ties of some of participants I was able to interview a few people who lived outside of this area. Between these urban and rural participants there was not a question of belief in *muti* and ritual murder; people believed that it happened and for similar reasons: to increase the success or luck of certain individuals. However, those living in and around Thohoyandou seemed to consider it to be something that happened in the villages, but that parts are sometimes brought to the city to be sold to Indian businessmen. Participants living in this more urbanized area suggested that ritual murders rarely happen anywhere close to the city, but mainly in rural areas. They talked about ritual murder as something that happens rarely now, citing the 2005 Makonde attack as the last official instance. However, participants living and working in Thohoyandou also suggested that if ritual murders were happening

near them, it was due to the Indian businessmen in the area who were supposedly commissioning Venda men to collect body parts on their behalf.<sup>20</sup>

Interviewees living in rural areas knew for a certainty that ritual murders were still happening. There are frequent reports of missing persons in the villages which incite concern on behalf of these communities, and many believe that when a person is found dead that it is a ritual murder. Pastor T's brother, who lived in a small village about forty minutes north of Thohoyandou, told me that "in other areas they kill two to four people a year. There are still people who are still missing even now. I think it is ritual murder. They wouldn't just leave and not tell anyone" (August 18, 2011). Thedzi, a school worker from a small village, near where Pastor T's brother lived, made a similar comment.

A case of a certain old man, I cannot say for sure he's been killed but it's been more than five years. Why is he gone? He's missing, we don't know his whereabouts. But the community thinks that he was killed. Maybe murdered by some people at a hidden place. That old man and one old lady who was my relative. She was murdered, we found her in the morning being dead. (August 18, 2011)

Newspapers often propagate the divide between rural communities and urbanized centres by reporting on instances of disappearances and possible ritual murders. The Limpopo Times reported, "Vuwa community still in angry mood after what they described as ritual killing of Ronald Makhari who disappeared two month ago and later found in the nearby bush" (Dombo 2011:1). Because of the difficulty in accessing smaller communities, information often circulated through newspapers not just word of mouth. Religious and political leaders also played a role in how information circulated and was consumed by people living in Venda. Access to information plays a large role in how

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<sup>20</sup> The issue of Indian businessmen buying body parts in Thohoyandou will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Five.

individual's understand their experiences of events such as ritual murder and often sources such as newspapers and authoritative figures serve as filters for these understandings. Information that circulated between urban and rural centres by newspaper often served to heighten the emotional impact of experiences of ritual murder, while pastors and other religious leaders attempted to heighten the individual's moral perspectives on the topic. Discourses from and about the police caused some of the biggest divides between rural and urban individuals. The following section begins this discussion at an experiential level, and Chapter Five will examine these issues from the perspective of the social and political bodies.

## **RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS AND AUTHORITATIVE VOICES**

Participants talked about ritual murder as a belief individuals had that by committing such acts they could in some way improve their circumstances. This belief was often compared to religious beliefs like the Christian belief in the power of prayer or faith healing. Ritual murder was, according to the pastors and traditional healers I interviewed, part of a belief system.

Everything is belief. I can give you that private parts and mix it with the medicines, I can give you any human parts and mix it with the medicines, but if you don't believe in it, it won't work. But if you accept it and said, yes it is going to work, yes it is going to work, it is going to work, yes. It is because this has happened long ago, before we're born. It has happened long ago. Yes, thousands and thousands of years. Uncountable number of years. So we're still believing in it. Even today. That is why yesterday I said no, if you go to the church, maybe you've got a headache, a pastor put hands on it, just touch only, if your heart believe that no I am going to be cured by that hand, you are going to [be cured]. (Dr. Humbe, July 3, 2011)

Pastor Madiba and Pastor Lily talked about possible links between Christianity and the belief in ritual murder. Pastor Madiba made several connections between historical uses

and belief in ritual murder, such as the Scary Drum, to stories in the Christian Bible about the Ark of the Covenant and the Israelites. Pastor Lily talked about the connection between ritual killing and a need for blood in Christianity:

Like I said, ritual murder is a very broad perspective.... It has different courses for different people. But you realize that once something is believed, it is part of a belief system, it is very difficult to remove from people. Because a people's tradition, their culture, their religion, it's always interwoven. So in an indigenous way of belief of the Venda people, there is this belief in the human body there is medicine, there is *muti*. And though it is not acceptable, it is being practiced. I believe it has been practiced from time immemorial. For chieftaincy, for business, for schools, for indigenous schools. [...] It is different compared with indigenous belief and Christian belief. We do believe in the blood also in the Christian faith, but the difference is we still believe that the blood of Jesus that was spilled on the cross some two thousand years back is still washing our sins away today. But in that other faith the belief is that it needs renewal, every year. The blood that you've used this year should be renewed next year, and that means that someone has to die. (Pastor Lily, August 16, 2011)

All of the people I talked with in Venda considered themselves to be Christian, and several differentiated between being Christian and being a true repentant Christian. Those who considered themselves to be repentant Christians claimed that no one who believes in God would commit such murders, but they also suggested that not everyone who goes to church is doing so without committing such sins.

Going to church doesn't mean anything to some other people. Because we can all go to church but those who have fully repented, they are few. Many people are just going to church but they are protecting their evil things by going to church. They are just protecting their evil things. (Mr. Nnyi, July 19, 2011)

There was a certain amount of derision from a couple of older male participants towards Venda ancestors for believing that a human sacrifice could improve their circumstances. When relating how ancestors convinced their victims to be sacrificed there were times when interviewees would start laughing outright at their ignorance. This was very much the case during my interview with Pastor Madiba when he explained the

significance of trees and historical beliefs in ritual murder. We took a pause at one point because he and my translator were giggling over the perceived stupidity of ritual murder victims in believing that they would be able to travel to the land of the ancestors to get their help. Many interviewees also made a point of talking about how belief in ritual murder would eventually end as Christianity took firmer root in Venda communities.

Religious affiliation had a serious effect on an individual's perceptions of ritual murderers and their victims. The morality of the organizers and perpetrators of ritual murders was often uncomplicated and considered lacking by participants. Those who committed such crimes, regardless of age, gender, or occupation, were greedy and lacking an understanding and dedication to Christian morality. Perpetrator's beliefs in the power of the body parts they stole were symbols of their ignorance and reluctance to engage with the modern world. The morality of victims also came up with Christian participants. Earlier in this chapter I related Susan's story about the woman who was forced to sell her baby, and while individuals would agree that this woman was in a very difficult position, her morality was still called into question for agreeing to her husband's demands for her son's life. A woman may have very little choice about selling a child to a ritual murderer, but such stories also had a moral side to them and the woman was always punished for her misdeed.

The differences in how people talked about ritual murder and what they chose to relate was common across several different divides, including those who were educated or held government jobs versus those who did not, or individuals with familial ties to the chiefs versus commoners. These differences are perhaps best discussed as an issue of lay versus authoritative voices. There was no doubt expressed that ritual murders were

happening by any of the people I spoke to, and several men across such categorical distinctions related to me how they had almost been killed for *muti* when they were younger. Individuals directly involved with the chieftainship, usually through familial connections, claimed to have no knowledge of ritual murder and did not share any information with me. However, they were helpful in setting up meetings with people who did, and they would ask me afterwards as to whether I had been given certain information thereby indirectly confirming what I had been told. There appeared to be an official version of historical events as told to me and confirmed through these meetings that suggested ritual murder was a sacrifice for the well-being and peace of the people.

However, to counter the 'official' version, Dr. Mahosi, a traditional healer who had been university trained and was currently working on his PhD in traditional medicine, claimed these historical accounts I had been given were a conspiracy created by chiefs to keep people controlled and submissive. Instead of people being sacrificed for the greater good of the community, he suggested they were killed for reasons that might include enmity between an individual and a chief. This might be because a community member had spoken out against the chieftaincy, or because they refused the chief a service, trade, or marriage.

When I grew up I looked at the situation: people killing other people because of a problem. People were so cruel. They say to me they go and kill other people, they kill each other. One person who is very rich can kill another person. When I found this out I thought it was so cruel. I say that because if a head man hates a commoner or maybe he wants my wife, a chief may want a commoner's wife, the chief will summon the people to kill that person. When I look at that, it [the murder] is not for medicine. Then he, a headman or chief, kills that person. Then I heard that the head of that person will be placed in the place where they used to keep maize. When they put the head of an enemy there they say there is medicine there because there is the skull of the person. But it [the murder of the person] is not because of the skull. You will see. And it's terrible again. I heard it is difficult in business. In business

some people may believe that you may take somebody's heart and put it at the gate, that person's mouth placed at the gate will call people into that shop. When we analyse it, it's not true. (Dr. Mahosi, August 6, 2011)

This type of counter-narrative is also apparent from how people talked about the civil unrest during the 1980s and 1990s. Youth protested against the Bantustan authorities believing that high-ranking officials, and other powerful men, were committing ritual murders on a regular basis, and the police were covering them up. It was suggested by many participants that individuals aligned with the chieftainship or in positions of authority (such as police officers, court officials or university professors) claimed that these riots and the subsequent military coup were part of the ANC's plan to make the country ungovernable. They claimed that the ANC was essentially framing men in power and starting rumours. These same individuals also acknowledged that prior to the 1980s, relatives of the men who were implicated during the military coup were committing ritual murder and using human parts to maintain their status and power in the government. As to more recent killings and uses for parts, there was general agreement among these participants that it was only done now by people who were poor and desperate, and that they were selling their family members to be killed for use by businessmen.

## **CONCLUSION**

Before moving on to Chapter Five and a deeper examination of the social issues highlighted in this chapter, I want to once again reiterate the importance of the "individual body" in my analysis of ritual murder. There are three main theoretical points that have shaped this chapter and that provide a base for our understanding as I move ahead to analyse the social and political bodies in the next chapter.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock suggest that the “individual body” is “understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of the body-self” (1987:7). The body is both a physical and a cognitive entity that moves through the world and is shaped by experiences interpreted through a social and cultural lens. I bring Sherry B. Ortner and her treatise on subjectivity into the discussion because she takes into account the complexity of individuals, insisting that the subject be viewed as “existentially complex, a being who feels and thinks and reflects, who makes and seeks meaning” (2005:33). When considering the topic of ritual murder, it is not enough to just state that people’s lived experiences are relevant, we must also look at how those individuals seek out meanings and “act on the world even as they are acted upon” (Ortner 2005:34). Lastly, I introduced Judith Butler’s (1988) discussion of *becoming* and the sedimenting process that occurs as part of this act. History and culture come together to shape individuals through a social process that creates identities, reflected through lived experience.

The point that I want to bring out through this chapter’s discussion of the “individual body” is that while meanings are part of a larger process, they are transmitted, shaped, and understood by individuals. In Chapter Two I noted that current research on ritual murder focuses on issues of modernity, often considering such occult phenomena as part of an adjustment to capitalism and social changes (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997). I argue that while this line of inquiry is productive, it limits our understanding of occult phenomena, directing us away from the processes involved in making it meaningful. Dialogues about ritual murder reveal issues of poverty, social tensions, violence against women, and problematic political discourses, to name but a few. Yet it is at the level of the individual, how it is talked about, by whom, and in what

circumstances that offers insight into these broader social and political issues. This chapter has provided us with a stepping off point into these issues, which will be discussed in the next chapter. More importantly though, it also shows how different lived experiences, such as gender and age, shape how individuals talk about ritual murder, victims and perpetrators. From here we can move forward with an understanding of the role the individual plays as part of the “social body” and how they are affected by and in turn find ways to affect the “political body”.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BODY**

Chapter Four introduced the Scheper-Hughes and Lock's (1987) theoretical model of the three bodies and how I have used it here to organize my research and findings. The last chapter focused on the first of these bodies, the individual. I discussed how history and culture shape different lived experiences and identities, which in turn influence discourses about ritual murder. In this chapter I broaden our understanding by examining aspects of the social and political bodies. One of the most fundamental contradictions that occur between the individual, social, and political body is that of subjective versus pragmatic reality. The first part of this chapter looks at issues of evidence as an important first step to understanding discourses about insecurities as discussed in the section on the social body. The last section, which discusses the political body, examines how larger political processes affect discourses about ritual murder.

The first step to understanding the social, or intersubjective, body is to understand what it is that I mean by pragmatic and subjective realities in relation to ritual murder. I feel the need to differentiate between the two because this difference in understandings of realities plays an active role between individuals and groups, particularly in relation to the discussion below on the political body. Individual perceptions and performances provide one part of the discourse surrounding ritual murder, while physical proof and experience provides another. I will briefly clarify these differences before I move on to discuss social tensions, insecurities and anxieties.

### **THE ISSUE OF EVIDENCE**

Max Weber and Clifford Geertz have suggested that “[c]ultures are public systems of symbols and meanings, texts and practices, that both represent a world and

shape subjects in ways that fit the world as represented” (cited in Ortner 2005:37). For something like ritual murder, that world is both a pragmatic reality supported by empirical evidence, and a subjective reality reflected in discourse and narrative. Isak Niehaus (2005) critiqued the anthropological works of Geschiere (1997) and the Comaroffs (1999) for emphasizing:

generic discourses about zombies in sub-Saharan Africa. They suggest that popular discourses of the poor associate witchcraft with the emergence of new forms of inequality and portray zombies as providing indispensable support for new elites to accumulate wealth and power. (2005:192)

Niehaus suggested that while such analyses do offer valuable insights, their approach is “a simplification of a more complex set of phenomena and it is important to keep in mind the rich, diverse, and sometimes contradictory, meanings of witches and zombies” (2005:193), and I would add ritual murder. Niehaus’s analysis of zombies and witches showed how discourse and accusations revealed social processes that “constructed zombie-keeping witchcraft as a reality” (2005:203).

The problem of reality comes down to evidence, empirical or otherwise. Ritual murderers, like witches, often act unseen but are known to exist. History and experience support the fact that ritual murders do happen, and people in the past have been criminally charged for it. The last official ritual murder in Venda, according to police, took place in 2005, leaving the first known survivor to tell the tale. Despite a lack of empirical evidence, rumours of ritual murder circulate on a regular basis, particularly when someone goes missing or turns up inexplicably deceased. Reports and rumours about ritual murders are constantly circulating and being interpreted by individuals. Poor villagers are worried they might be the next targets; local police admit that more people go missing in the Vhembe District than anywhere else in South Africa, probably due to

ritual murder; university professors and pastors tell stories about themselves or family members who escaped (or succumbed to) ritual murderers; and, women tell stories about instances that happened close to where they live. As one female participant expressed to me, “It seems like this thing is in the newspapers every month”.<sup>21</sup> The reality of ritual murder was very present at all times, but the nature of that reality changed depending on who participated in which discourses.

The most talked about occurrence of ritual murder in Venda happened in 2005 near a small village outside Thohoyandou. The mutilated bodies of a young woman and a man were found in the bushes outside of their village where they had been attacked and left for dead by ritual murderers. The young woman survived.

Sidimela’s ordeal shook the world in 2005 when she missed death by a whisker. Ritual murderers struck when she and her boyfriend [...] were attacked at Shadani in the Makonde area. Sidimela had her lips cut off by the sharp knives of the muti merchants and she was left for dead.

She managed to survive, but her boyfriend was not so lucky, as he was mutilated and killed at the scene.

Of her ordeal on that fateful day, [Sidimela] said she will never forget that fateful morning. “I had decided to go to Makonde when, some few metres from my home, I met my boyfriend and we decided to go and relax at the nearby bushes,” she said. She said they had not been there long when three men passed them, only to return a few minutes later. “They approached us from the back. I was hit on the head with a blunt instrument and I lost consciousness. I only woke up in the hospital and did not know what had happened to my boyfriend,” she said. She later learnt of her boyfriend’s death. (Tshikhudo 2011a:1-2)

This was the last ritual murder in the Venda region officially recognized by the police and high courts. Every single person I talked with above the age of twenty referenced this case, some had details to tell me, and others just used it as an example that ritual murders

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<sup>21</sup> In May 2011 the *Limpopo Times* ran a front page story about the Vuwa community uniting against ritual killing after finding the body of a man who had gone missing (Dombo 2011). On July 1, 2011 the *Limpopo Mirror* ran a story about the 2005 ritual murder survivor (Tshikhudo 2011a). Days before I left Venda, on August 12, 2011, the *Limpopo Mirror* reported the death of a woman as being ritually killed and cited previous occurrences from the same year (Tshikhudo 2011b).

do take place. Two men were charged with murder and attempted murder, and two traditional healers were arrested for their involvement in the case (Tshikhudo 2011a:2).

The young woman involved in this ritual murder case is, according to all my participants and sources, the first survivor. This firsthand experience keeps talk about ritual murder alive and belief in it at the forefront of everyone's minds. What to do when a survivor is not readily present though? What kind of proof are we dealing with then? Finding a witness to ritual murder is a difficult task. I almost had the opportunity to talk to a man who was making an official report to the police about a ritual murder he had witnessed. Pastor T and Pastor Paul drove me out to meet this individual one afternoon in the hopes that we would reach him before the police asked him to keep the circumstances of the events he witnessed private while they investigated. Unfortunately, we did not make it in time and I was reluctant to push the issue due to concerns about interfering with the police, but the pastors told me what they knew of the circumstances. Apparently, this man had happened upon a group of men from his village, including the chief, committing a ritual murder in the bush. I was told there was a phrase to describe the situation, "coming upon an elephant giving birth in the bush". If one finds an elephant giving birth, they must stay to help; which means that someone who stumbles upon a ritual murder must either join in or be killed. This man joined the men he came across committing murder, and was now making his confession to the police. Such witnesses are quite rare as ritual murders are considered to happen in secret, at night, and in remote locations. While communities might have suspicions about a murder being committed, individuals rarely come forward with information that the police can use in their investigations.

There is a problem in Africa and in our area, people don't want to give evidence. You can hear stories when people saying that person was killed there. But when they are asked to stand up and give evidence there is no real evidence given. It seems as if they have fear in giving evidence. People around this area are not afraid to talk to the police or people in such authority. Sometimes we invite the police themselves but there is no one who can stand up and give real evidence. These people do that in darkness maybe without being seen by anybody. But if someone can manage to see them, it's not safe to give evidence. We have many stories of people who died around in this village, but we don't have real evidence. A case will be reported to police and they will do a post-mortem, most frequently the post-mortem will indicate that this person is complete. And from this perspective we don't have a real way out. But we wonder what happened if someone is found somewhere being killed, being dead, without any known cause. (Thedzi, August 18, 2011)

I was fortunate enough to have a police captain who specialized in investigations of ritual murder agree to an interview. Part of what we talked about was evidence and, in particular, forensics.

Out of the interviews I've conducted with most of the traditional healers and accused, because I'm specializing in these cases, it's believed that the parts must be removed while you are still alive. If you're killed, maybe we cut the throat and then remove the hand, or we remove the lips, the *muti* does not work. During the autopsy, the cutting we can see that this is done post-mortem. Post-mortem means something which has been cut while the heart's no longer pumping the blood. Then where the cut marks is you will find that it's white. If the heart was still bleeding, I mean pumping the blood, obviously when you cut there's bleeding and then you will see at the cutting mark it will be red because the blood will be oozing there. So if there's no longer a flow of blood through the veins it's going to be white. It is what we normally studied further when we are investigating.

So, during the tour of our investigation there are some of the cases which you can see they've been staged, they are not really the ritual murders. I've got one in which that guy was a serial killer. He faked ritual murder. Somewhere on top of the mountain he raped the victim, she was a lady. After raping her he removed, I still remember, the hand from here, the palm. He cut off here (indicating the elbow), and it was post-mortem as I've introduced to you. He removed the nipples of the breasts, and then he removes the upper part of the lip and he removes part of the ear. When I look at it I see this was a post-mortem, it was a fake. (Captain Mannzhi, July 25, 2011)

A high ranking official at a Vhembe District police office mentioned that there were more missing persons in the district than anywhere else in South Africa, and that the majority of those missing were most likely ritual murder victims. This is the belief, but there is no evidence to back it up. Captain Mannzhi related several accounts of suspected ritual murders, but he had determined they were all fakes. He explained that many times a body would be found with parts missing or other suspicious signs that might point to ritual murder, but that in reality the victim was killed for another reason. Aspects of ritual murder, such as missing body parts, seemed to be used to cover up many other crimes including rape and robbery.

While this type of proof or evidence is most often favoured in South African courts, it somehow did not sit quite right with me. After my interview with the Captain I felt that ritual murder must be something that is mostly rumour, and that science could prove the difference between talk and ‘reality’. The police Captain had made promises of pictures, but the opportunity never arose. I had seen pictures in my library research, but they were of victims from the 1980s. Then one of my participants, who wished to remain anonymous, shared some current pictures with me one evening. They were of a young boy, roughly twelve years of age, his body being pulled from a small stream close to his grandmother’s house. His hands and feet were bound by what looked like rope, and seemed to be purposefully tied in front of his body. Parts of his body were missing and I could see where the eyelids, lips and genitals were seemingly cut away. I saw the immediate problem; the flesh was white and not red as described by the Captain. According to police findings the boy had fallen into the water, gotten tangled in a net and

drowned. The missing parts were attributed to the work of fish and other marine creatures.

The individual who shared these pictures had several problems with this explanation. The small stream in question was barely waist high on an adult, a fishing net does not easily tie itself around just the hands and feet, and no one seemed to know of any marine life that would eat specifically the eyelids, lips and genitals, let alone anything else on a human. In their opinion, and mine, it looked like a ritual murder. I could see the smoothness of the flesh where the parts were missing, which seemed odd if it had been a matter of man-eating fish. It was all too neat and made me uneasy. I found myself between worlds struggling to figure out what was ‘real’.

This was even more complicated by a passing remark I encountered in Colin Murray and Peter Sanders article “Medicine Murder in Basutoland: Colonial Rule and Moral Crisis” (2000). Their discussion about ritual murders is based on many actual cases that were reported and investigated in Basutoland, now Lesotho, during the 1940s and 1950s. One case in March 1948 briefly describes the victim’s body, which was “dumped in a ravine, in a shallow pool of water, where it was found the next day. A medical report gave the cause of death as drowning and suggested that crabs might have caused mutilation of the lips” (Murray and Sanders 2000:61). My own experiences led me to disbelieve the official police reports; however I knew that this was just my opinion and not something that could be proved in a court. I did not have the expertise to deal with issues of evidence, as I am sure many other people do not. My own interpretation of the data seemed to align with others in the area as suggested by comments from a court prosecutor I interviewed:

Sometimes you find that community members come to a conclusion before even the post-mortem is out. Because, for argument, say a person is found inside the river. That person is dead, the body is discovered inside the river. Inside the river we've got so many things, fish, anything! I think perhaps it's easy maybe for the human body to be eaten when inside the river. But once persons in the community discover that someone has been found inside the river, and maybe when they are removing the body, they think that maybe the lips are somehow, it looks like maybe it has been cut or maybe the eye is not there. Automatically they conclude that it's a ritual murder. And whatever you say to the community, they won't believe otherwise. When the post mortem report comes back and the doctor is saying "no, cause of death, this person drowned it was not ritual murder". It's not easy to convince the community that it was not ritual murder. I think it is because we were raised in that way to believe that when a person is maybe not having a lip here, the rest of the community would know that ritual murders are committed. So if a person died without getting ill, and that person is being found in the bushes or the river, automatically what connects to our minds is that it is ritual murder. We scream ritual murder. (Maluwani, August 16, 2011)

This uncertainty then leads us back to the question of how do we know it is ritual murder? Do we trust the police to determine this for us, ignoring our own experiences and histories? This is where subjective reality begins, no less meaningful or 'real' than the pragmatic, but brought to life through acts of communication with each other rather than through scientific investigation. Luise White discusses the differences and meanings of gossip and rumour in her book *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa* (2000). "Put simply, gossip is a matter of context and convention. It is talk about people when they are not present, but it is not just any kind of talk: it reports behaviour; it rests on evaluating reputations" (White 2000:60). She explains how gossip is a way to "reveal contradictions" while rumour "contains contradictions like a fishnet", and most importantly rumours are open for multiple interpretations (2000:60, 85). White utilizes Michel Foucault's work from *The History of Sexuality* (1978), pointing out how "speaking in modern societies is far more than how individuals enter the historical record, it is how people participate in the states and civil societies that manage them" (White

2000:61). Adding to this, she emphasizes Foucault's discussion of silence as an additional communicative strategy, that is, speech and silence together forming discourse (White 2000:74).

When talking about ritual murder in Venda, people most often spoke of rumours or stories. Occasionally my friend's or mine own requests for information would be met by silence, and once or twice I overheard a bit of gossip relating to the young woman who survived near Makonde. What I feel is important to take away from this discussion is that rumour is a complicated device with layers of meanings and interpretations, and it is this complicated nature which makes it re-tellable over and over again. It is one of several communicative tools<sup>22</sup> with which to engage with the world around us, and forms a type of discourse around ritual murder that reveals tensions and anxieties suffered by individuals and societies (White 2000: 60-85). I will talk about those tensions and anxieties at more length in the sections that follow on the social and political bodies.

## **THE SOCIAL BODY**

One of my last days in Venda was spent driving around conducting interviews with the guidance of my two pastors, Pastor Paul and Pastor T. At the end of the afternoon, as we headed back to my lodgings, they turned to me in the backseat of the car and informed me that I was asking the wrong questions. Concerned about what I had been missing, I asked for enlightenment and was told that I should be asking more about

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<sup>22</sup> I would like to take a moment to further discuss 'communicative tools', albeit briefly. Such tools include newspaper, television, social media (such as Twitter and Facebook), as well as personal blogs, etc. Media plays a large role in the creation and transmission of knowledge and rumour, not to mention influencing generational differences and divides according to access. While I have mentioned the role of media to some extent throughout this thesis, and as a point of further research in Chapter Six, I feel that it is important to acknowledge it here as not just a communicative tool, but also as an authoritative voice and as a mode of generating and proliferating discourses about ritual murder.

the victims of ritual murder. Up until that point I had been focused on the act alone and had not considered the important aspects of victimology. At least, I had not considered it beyond the obvious point that victims were chosen from particular families and had particular characteristics that would lend power to a specific medicine. These Pastors opened my eyes to the fact that ritual murder is not just an act or phenomena carried out in the bush and talked about in whispers to scare children. It is part of, a result of, and a reflection of the insecurities and tensions people live with on a daily basis. From their perspective, the victims of ritual murder today are the poor, the elderly, and the people no one thinks will be missed, such as those without immediate family to care for them. Those conspiring to crimes involving ritual murder are the powerful, the wealthy, or they are of Indian descent; and their henchmen are either desperate or immoral Venda people. Discourses surrounding ritual murder reflected the individual, social, and political insecurities perceived and experienced in people's lives.

Adam Ashforth outlines in his book *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (2005) the dimensions of insecurity people living in Soweto, South Africa faced and how this impacted their belief in witches and witchcraft. He suggests that:

spiritual insecurity informs every aspect of life and is related to, but not reducible to, other forms of insecurity. Circumstances that can be summarized under the rubrics of poverty, violence, and disease produce misfortunes demanding interpretation. These interpretations typically invoke the action of mysterious invisible forces, including those manifest in persons. They also produce relationships among people that are stressed by feelings of envy, resentment, and revenge, feelings that are taken as conducive to motivating people to perpetrate occult violence. (2005:25)

My discussion of Venda history in Chapter Three certainly provides a few examples of the kinds of insecurities and anxieties experienced by people in the region; poverty, lack of infrastructure, and unemployment being some of the most obvious. Another rising

concern is that of education. The older generation are lacking education and many cannot read or write. The younger generations suffer the opposite problem, despite having formal education they are unable to find gainful employment in Venda. Dr. Humbe summarized some of the issues and insecurities felt by people living in Venda when he talked to me about how fast the world around him was changing.

So you see all these changes now. They say that people are creating a job for themselves. I don't look at the church as the right people to blame. Also I don't look at the world and the traditional people either. I said to myself the world now has been changed. Everybody now is looking, must support children, must get the beautiful houses, buy the what, growing all this. There are many changes happening around the world. When we look at South Africa it is worse. It's South Africa, it's a small country, but the whole world is here. They say it's beautiful, it's where the Nigerian people they can change, or the other one, or the what what. They've got their own style to make money and live on their own. South Africa was good during our time. Nowadays we can see it's a country of mafia. Like we're in a rush. We used to say there's no hurry in South Africa. But in today, they hurry. Everybody's rushing. Changing life, changing so much, very fast like you do it. So those are some of the things which if you are looking at today, it's no longer that we can say that killing one another for *muti* purposes, it was not like that. We are doing it? No. [In the past] it was part of traditional healers and traditional leaders, kings and chiefs, those are the people who are doing that to have more power, to have more dignity. But it is no longer like that. It's for the business now. (July 3, 2011)

Discourses about ritual murder reflect numerous insecurities and contradictions that people are faced with. I have chosen to highlight three of the most talked about tensions and insecurities that came up through my interviews: spiritual insecurity, the 'other', and hierarchies of power.

### ***SPIRITUAL INSECURITY***

Spiritual insecurity is highly visible with the large number of diverse church offerings. Travelling prophets and preachers drew hundreds and thousands of people to overnight vigils and prayer meetings. Rumours about Zionist and other church leaders

and their use of human body parts frequently circulated. Pastor Paul suggested that some of the anxiety about the use of human body parts by certain churches might be related to their use of drums and an historical understanding of the Scary Drum, as talked about in Chapter Three. He also linked these rumours to the perceived power and prestige of church leaders.

There are two people who make the decision as to what body parts are used, either the pastor or the traditional healer. Those are the people in our area that make decisions and the people who recommend solving problems with human body parts. (Pastor Paul, August 17, 2011)

The belief is like that of a preacher. If he believes, he might have the head of someone behind the pulpit while he is preaching. Someone was arrested for killing another person, he was a bishop also. The heart of that person was buried in the middle of the church building. The hand or the leg, I'm not very sure, was buried at the entrance to the church and the head was behind the pulpit. And this person just believed that this would bring a lot of people and he would preach with a lot of power. (Pastor Paul, August 16, 2011)

In Chapter Four I briefly talked about belief, and how ritual murder was considered to be part of a belief system. Spiritual discourses surrounding ritual murder often took a moral twist, highlighting what Dr. Humbe said above about how quickly the world was changing. Rumours about the young woman who survived at Makonde often brought up the fact that she and her boyfriend, who had died there, were meeting alone in the bush. The police Captain, and other participants, mentioned that they were too busy with each other to notice the impending attack. The victims' moral onus came up rarely, but when it did it was always with a judgement on their impropriety. In Chapter Four I mentioned how occasionally women would be forced into acting as a lure for potential victims. Rumours about how they managed to bait their victims focused on their powers of seduction and how naive the men that followed them were. The perpetrators of ritual murder would be split into different moral categories: those that were taken advantage of,

the greedy, or those that believed in the effects of ritual murder over Christianity. Many participants commented on how ritual murder was part of a belief system and that it was still being carried out today because some individuals believed that using human body parts for magical purposes would accomplish more than a Christian prayer.

All of the people I talked with identified themselves as Christian, although very few attended the same church. In Thohoyandou, because of the large Indian population, there is also a newly built mosque. Some of my participants were extremely wary of anyone identifying themselves as Indian or Muslim, particularly since many kept up to date with the news in the United States and the United Kingdom regarding terrorist attacks. The spread of Christianity seemed to many to be the solution to their problems. Anxieties surrounding terrorism, poverty, and unemployment were often directed towards the Indian community in the Venda region, taking on the form of rumours about their involvement in ritual murders.

### ***THE 'OTHER' FACTOR***

Pastor Paul took me on a tour of Thohoyandou one day with the purpose of tracking down a man who could tell me a story about an Indian shop owner who commissioned several murders for the benefit of his business. While the man refused to speak directly to me, he allowed Pastor Paul to write down what he had to say while I waited at a respectful distance. This Indian shop owner had hired Venda men to acquire certain specific body parts, depending on his needs. In this particular case he required the eyes of a European. There not being many white men available in the area, the hired murderers settled on harvesting the required eyes from a pale looking man who lived in the community. They delivered them to the businessman and received their payment,

leaving the area shortly thereafter to avoid any difficulties should their deception be noticed. The Indian businessman used the eyes for his purposes, but began to wonder when the effects he was expecting failed to come to any kind of fruition. I was never told how he came to discover the deception, but it is said that when he did discover it he ran away from Thohoyandou to avoid the police, and moved to Durban where it is said he has a successful business to this day.

When Apartheid ended in 1994, Venda businesses had almost all failed. Jobs were, and still are, few and far between leaving individuals, educated or not, desperate to care for themselves and their families. In the early 1990s Indian immigrants began settling in and around Thohoyandou in numbers, opening businesses that seemed magically successful overnight.<sup>23</sup> Dr. Humbe reiterated this in an interview:

When the Indians came here, I don't know which year it was, I think 1995. We didn't have those Indian shops here before, but after democracy they came, '95 or '96 there were more Indian shops here around us. And we know the Indians also use the human body for business and all. Even when you get to their chemist you will find that the Indian people will have sorghum and some other medicines you don't know, and how did they mix it? How do they spice their medicines? They've got a sort of... they call it *lakhi* stick. You burn that *lakhi* stick and I'm telling you, if you burn it today here, it will be maybe five weeks that your house smells of that *lakhi* stick. There might be human body parts in that *lakhi* stick. When you go to their shops, when you smell their things, you don't think "I go to Shoprite or one of these big shops", you buy sometime and tomorrow you come back again. Either that or they can lock their shop for almost three hours and you find that people are waiting around outside. They don't go to the other shop. We've got Spar, we've got Pick and Pay, we've got three Shop-Rites, big shops, but they are going to wait for that Indian shop. If you buy something from them, using these human parts seems to make it better. (July 3, 2011)

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<sup>23</sup> According to an article written by Kwabena A. Kyei (2011:365), "[the] Indian/Asian and coloured population in Vhembe [District] is statistically insignificant at 0.4 percent". While the Indian population may be insignificant from this "official" perspective, there is a very visible population in areas of Thohoyandou and towns like Malamulele. Two Muslim Mosques have been built in Thohoyandou in the last decade, and the majority of small stores in the shopping district are owned by individuals of Indian descent and carry goods imported from India.

The problem expressed to me by many people in Venda is that Indian residents appear to be mysteriously successful where other Venda peoples have failed. They do not believe that Indians are committing ritual murder themselves, but rather that they learned about it from Venda culture and commission individuals from Venda to carry out the murders for them. Rumours surrounding ritual murder and Indian residents abound, but none of the participants I asked were able to suggest that there was anything beyond rumour to the stories. Maluwani, an official working at the High Court, further emphasized these rumours in her interview with me:

I remember some years back there were some people around Thohoyandou who were sending people for ritual murders, to kill other people for ritual purposes. And then shops for the Indians were targeted here in Thohoyandou complex and people were getting in, looting, and everything. But I know of no case which came to court where in an Indian person was involved. But it was going around that Indians were doing that. Even in the instance in Malemulele, they were targeting their shops, looting. But I've never seen an Indian coming to court to be prosecuted for ritual murder. There was a lot of talk, but no proof. (August 16, 2011)

While there are many examples of the social body to draw on and the tensions and insecurities they highlight within Venda society, I have chosen just a couple of them to share here. Spiritual, economic, and political uncertainties played a large role in the stories and rumours that were shared with me. Spiritual insecurities circle around issues of prestige and belief, along with the hope for a better life through faith. Religious diversity in the area may be part of the cause for rumours. There is also a degree of suspicion over the amount of persuasive power religious authorities are perceived to hold over their congregations. Unemployment and the failure of businesses owned by Venda peoples seems to have led to a high degree of mistrust in businesses owned by people who have settled into the area. Indian businessmen and their families have lived and

worked in the region for approximately two decades now and as they slowly became part of the social body tensions between them and Venda peoples rose. In contrast, the arrival of Chinese immigrants and business people in the area has created very little response. When I asked participants if the Chinese were also involved in ritual murders, I was told they were not. This distinction might be being made due to the more recent arrival of Chinese immigrants in the area, whereas Indian residents have been around for much longer and are part of the social body. The newly arrived Chinese are still considered to be akin to passing visitors and are less integrated into the Venda social world.

### ***HIERARCHIES***

People talk about corruption a great deal, within both the local and national political systems, and the police force. Discourses about ritual murder in this context often focus on trying to make sense of the contradictions people sense in these relations of power. People perceive the political and social organizations around them as hierarchies of power, run by individuals with specific social and economic backgrounds. How they achieve their power and how they use it often comes out in discourses involving ritual murder, particularly if those individuals are not well-liked or considered incompetent. The term 'hierarchies' also defines a perceived structure of power. While this particular section focuses on local perceptions of hierarchy, the following discussion of the political body will expand upon how discourse is channelled and affected by processes of power.

Ritual murder is something that happens in secret and by a group of people, usually led by someone with a certain amount of social, political, and economic power. Some participants likened them to a mob or syndicate.

Usually you find that these people, usually someone has sent them. It is just like a syndicate, someone must send them. And when prosecution was supposed to take place that policeman says it was difficult for those people to pin up, to point out who the real culprit is, the main source of ideas, where it was coming from. In the end, usually they won't say. And I asked him, "why didn't they say?" Then he went up to give an example. It is difficult because usually as the prisoner, doesn't the prisoner get some visitors? Then that kingpin will come, say "No, no. Don't say it is me. You wait for all these things to happen, then there after I will come and bail you out". Then usually there are people who don't know that after the judge have given a sentence there won't be any review. So usually you will find that the kingpin will never be found. Because he goes there to tell them, "No, don't say it is me. While you are in prison why not just wait for a moment. I have sent your family some food, then I will be sending them food. And we will see what will happen after". See, he wanted to cover himself. So I'm remembered of this. One of the former cabinet members of Venda, a cabinet minister who was hanged in Venda. Because when Venda was a republic there was that high punishment where, if you kill somebody, then you also have to be hanged, you have to be killed. So, one of the ministers then, Ramovha, he was also found guilty of murdering somebody. But he was with other people and he didn't want to say anything, so they said you have done it wisely. They separated those prisoners and then when the day for the trial was getting closer, they say Ramovha wrote a letter to other prisoners. He said, "Don't even mention my name. If I get released I will make arrangements that you will get released also". So, it was evidence enough that they ended up hanging him because he wrote it on his own letter. (Susan, July 22, 2011)

Ritual murder suspicions often centered around the perceived hierarchical nature of social and political structures, often linked it to individuals experiences during the Venda Bantustan era. These tensions were reflected in conversations I had with many individuals, but always in private and in hushed tones. The corruption in local government, evident during the 1980s, was believed by many to still be taking place. Nepotism was believed to be rampant, many positions within government and the civil services being held by family members of certain chiefs and their close friends and supporters. Frustrations with the police suggested to many that they were in league with government officials and covering up murders and other crimes. It was suggested by a few people that chiefs were still the primary perpetrators in ritual murder, and that was

why so many victims, who came from poor and disenfranchised families, were targeted. These tensions and frustrations were primarily voiced to me by individuals living in poorer rural areas and those without ties to a specific chief. To certain individuals it was very evident that descendants of the greatest criminals and murderers from the Bantustan era were still in control and maintaining their hold through ritual murder.

### **THE POLITICAL BODY**

Most people I talked to about witchcraft and ritual murder in Venda relate stories about witches and their familiars, or *tokoloshe*, about how they follow the footpaths outside the villages each night to meet those they conspire with in order to do harm against their neighbours. They related a time they themselves or a friend or family member were attacked for the purposes of ritual murder. When talking about witches and witchcraft, people often frame it as a story that is open for interpretation and judgement by the listener as to whether or not it really happened. There is an element of fear there, which comes from the scenario being related and a sense of trepidation that the person telling the story might be condemned for talking about witchcraft in the first place. The stories themselves revolve around victims who have been targeted for inciting someone's jealousy. Accusations of witchcraft are extremely rare and individuals are rarely ever named in these stories. They were often told with a smile or a secretive whisper, like someone was passing on a juicy piece of gossip. People were often a touch theatrical when describing a witch or act of witchcraft. When people talked about ritual murder, there were various emotions like fear and anger expressed. Frustration and a lack of understanding were central themes and often seemed to be focused on who might be involved and the possibilities that ritual murder was being used to maintain the

conspiracies of local government officials and chiefs; or that it was being used by selfish and greedy individuals. Body language of the individuals relating the tale became closed off and notably less expressive. Stories about ritual murder were presented factually and accompanied with either a firsthand account, or a retelling of the details from an authoritative source such as a police officer or community elder. This shift in how the narratives of experiences are told have broad historical and cultural significances, but can also be attributed, to some degree, to how the dominant discourse of the political and law-making realm have affected those experiences.

In 1957 the Witchcraft Suppression Act was put into place in South Africa in order to place some control over belief in the occult, and the violence that occurred as a result of witchcraft accusations when people took the law into their own hands. The Act not only prohibited acts or threats of witchcraft, but also prohibited people from accusing one another of being a witch (Minaar et al. 1992:13; Ralushai et al. 1995:54). I would suggest, as did several of my interviewees, that this process of law has shaped the discourses surrounding ritual murder and witchcraft in various ways. Ferguson and Gupta (2002:989) summarized Foucault's discussion of governmentality as "all the processes by which the conduct of a population is governed: by institutions and agencies, including the state; by discourses, norms, and identities; and by self-regulation, techniques for the disciplining and care of the self". The Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) exerts itself as both a concrete mechanism of the law, as well as having the productive dimension fundamental to Foucault's understandings of power in that it creates processes of discourse, norms, and identities as well as regulation.

James Ferguson's discussion of the 'Anti-Politics Machine' (2002:400) draws on Foucault, noting that "discourse is a practice, it is structured, and it has real effects which are much more profound than simply 'mystification'". In his research on developmental policies in Lesotho he focused on the unintended or 'anti' effects of these discourses and policies, and it is this idea that I would apply to an analysis of the Witchcraft Suppression Act.

Here in South Africa we don't have that law which regulates the witch. Except in Zimbabwe, in Zimbabwe you will be sentenced. And I have also seen on the TV that in the Congo they have that court, they have that law to sentence and regulate a witch and whatever. So in South Africa we don't have that law. But it's true that there are witches. You know a witch is not a traditional healer, no. There are those people whom you find naked in your yard or at the gate early in the morning. It is believed that they failed to run away after they were there in your yard, at your kraal, witching you. And then maybe because of your strength, your power, they fail to run, to go away after what they were doing. And it's true; there are a lot who've been found. It's true, but you cannot say that you are a witch. If I say that, it will be me who will be prosecuted, because I'm accusing you. But yourself being present in that particular kraal naked in the early hours of the morning, it's not considered.  
(Captain Mannzhi, July 25, 2011)

What Ferguson suggests with his discussion of 'anti-politics' is the value of locating "a series of events and transformations not in the intentions guiding the actions of one or more animating subjects, but in the systematic nature of the social reality which results from those actions" (2002:400). I suggest that while one of the intentions of the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) was to put a stop to witch accusations and the acts of violence that frequently accompanied them, one of the unintended effects was an adjustment in discourse. Someone cannot accuse someone else of being a witch without breaking the law according to the Act; however, accusing someone of murder has legal repercussions for the perpetrator.

Talk about ritual murders thus provides a means for people to voice their suspicions, insecurities, and anxieties about the world around them. The Ralushai Report (1995) outlines some of the effects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957):

There are two schools of thought in this area, namely, those who say witches do not exist, and the ones who say witches do exist.

In our country today, this difference of opinion extends even to our system of justice in the courts. There is a conflict on the subject of witchcraft between the traditional courts and the formal courts. Traditional courts agree that witches exist, whilst the formal courts say witches do not exist.

In the past, traditional courts used to try cases of witchcraft. Once an individual was found guilty of practising witchcraft, he was sentenced by the court. The sentence took various forms. In extreme cases the witch was beaten or even killed. Other witches were ordered to leave the village and had their houses destroyed. Ostracism was the mildest form of punishment. Some witches were 'cured'. In such a case a doctor was ordered to neutralise or eliminate the evil spirit that possessed the witch.

Although many traditional courts, as well as family gatherings, still try certain cases of witchcraft, legally they are no longer permitted to do so. According to the law of South Africa such cases must be referred to the formal courts. Cases of witchcraft now come under the Witchcraft Suppression Act, No 3 of 1957 as amended in terms of the Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act, No 50 of 1970. This piece of legislation has remained unchanged to this day. (1995:51)

The Ralushai Report takes note that the Act directly prohibits individuals from either practicing witchcraft or accusing someone of being a witch (1995:54-57). This discussion also brings us back to the problem of pragmatic versus subjective reality, and has effects that go beyond simple judicial structuring. The Report's observations reveal areas where social tensions and spiritual insecurities arise due to conflicting beliefs. Relationships between the local and national government changed as the handling of witchcraft crimes moved out of the purview of the local community and into the hands of strangers. The affects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) can be felt within the individual, social,

and political bodies, and are most easily traced through the various discourses the Act creates and modifies.

In Michel Foucault's book, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (1990[1978]), he outlines some of the intricacies of discourse; the various meanings that putting something into language can have, and the power it creates and exerts through words and silences. While this particular work is concerned with the productive nature of discourses surrounding sex, including those that are seemingly repressive, many of Foucault's insights are applicable to other categories of discourse, as suggested by Luise White (2000). Foucault examines the issue of sexuality and its supposed repression at the level of language and discourse. He argues that prohibitions on various levels of speech on the topic of sex produced new and altered discourses. Following Foucault, I would suggest the topic of witchcraft and the discourses that surround it, have been altered because of the effects of laws such as South Africa's Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957). That is not to say that people do not talk about witches anymore because of a law, but that their discourses have changed. As Foucault notes, "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (1990[1978]:100). Added to this argument is the element of power that comes into play with the repression or execution of certain discourses, such as law. Foucault suggests that that "there is no escaping from power, that it is always-already present", and we have the means to analyse mechanisms of power such as law and judicial systems (1990[1978]:82-89). These power mechanisms "took charge of men's existence, men as living bodies" (Foucault 1990[1978]:89).

The intention of the Witchcraft Suppression Act was to put an end to the discussion of witchcraft altogether, it has also, to some degree, inadvertently given voice to the discussion of ritual murder. Ritual murder is not just witchcraft. It is murder, and that goes against pretty much any law. Ritual murder presents a category in which people can voice some of their anxieties and concerns without necessarily needing all the empirical evidence. A mutilated body provides proof; proof of what is open for interpretation by individuals, communities, and governmental authorities. Discourses about ritual murder offer a way to unite contradictions within people's lives.

I mention the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) because I see it as one example of the effects of the political body on the individual and social bodies. In Chapter Two I discussed the many contributions other researchers, such as the Comaroffs (1999), Geschiere (1997), Smith (2001), Murray and Sanders (2000, 2004), Turrell (2001), Evans (1993) and Ashforth (2005), have made to the discussion of the Body Politic. Changing political and economic systems are often seen by them as being at the heart of studies on the occult in Africa. The Act is a small example in comparison to the far-reaching effects of capitalism, democracy, modernity, and the like, which have been tackled by other scholars. It is also a more locally felt effect of these larger processes, just as putting new laws like these into effect was popular during colonisation, and their discursive power still carries weight.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:7-8) suggest, the political body is about “the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective) in reproduction and sexuality, in work and in leisure, in sickness and other forms of deviance and human difference”. I have already given examples of some of the frustrations people have with

dealing with the police, and at the same time the limitations that are present in current police procedures for dealing with cases of ritual murder. Much of those limitations are due to the inability to deal with subjective realities in a formalized, bureaucratic, and scientific system based on pragmatism and empirical evidence. There are systems in place to try and deal with community concerns during police investigations, such as drop boxes for people to submit accusations and witness accounts anonymously. Pastor Paul and Pastor T told me about how they tried to draw attention to ritual murder:

I think it was in 2003 or 2004 when we had a ritual murder in our area. At first, we had a case of a young man. He was staying at a village not very far from Thohoyandou. We got the information that he was ritually murdered, so, myself, Pastor Paul, my brother and others, we went there to see the family. They did explain that he was last seen with some young people visiting a butcher nearby. The driver, I don't know who that person was, but he was driving them. I think after they were dropped, this one stayed with him and then after some time he was found dead in a small river around that village. According to the police they said he was eaten by fish. And in our assessment we do not have fish who can eat a human person. More especially in a place where we do not have big rivers, so it was a surprise. We told the police many times but, unfortunately, they were not of assistance. So we even went to Polokwane to see the police. We engaged with them well but it was not successful. At that time we also had another ritual murder case in another village, Makonde. One of the victims is still alive, but the boyfriend died at the scene where it was taking place. We had a rally in that area where the MEC [see below] participated with us along with the local government. We all went there to talk to these people so we can end these ritual murders. I forgot that when we went to see the MEC we had a list of people, I think there were about forty, who were victims and nobody can tell us where those people are. The people involved in the Makonde case were arrested and two were sentenced to life. The other one was just given one year because they said that he was only found with human body parts in the fridge. So they cannot say he is a ritual murderer, just a traditional healer. They were very, very upset about the judgement by the judge or magistrate. So we have quite a number of murder cases in this area. But I think with the help of God we can end this one day.

MEC means Member of the [provincial] Executive Council. It is like the minister in other places, the MEC of police. There are a lot of MECs. Social Development and Health... So we have many MECs, just like ministers. We requested some different people to bring the information to us. That is how we got the list that we submitted to the MEC. Mostly they are ritual murder

cases. We even had a meeting in Thohoyandou where we requested people who came to address us. Some are pastors, some people who did anthropology at the universities, the MEC, the police. We gathered in Thohoyandou so we can look at it from different perspectives. There was a committee which we mandated it to go and make further research. That committee was to work along with the police so they could give a report at a later stage. Unfortunately the people who are leading are the police and they, according to my assessment, they did not do their work well. (Pastor T, August 17, 2011)

Pastor Paul also told me how members of his community attempted to change the law in order to make it a legal offense to be found with any human tissue, but they were unsuccessful. Political processes such as the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) affect discourses surrounding witchcraft and ritual murder at an individual and social level. At the same time individuals are coming together around issues such as ritual murder in order to make changes in the laws and bring greater awareness to such practices and who might be involved in them.

## **CONCLUSION**

The previous chapter focused on the individual body in order to show how lived experience influences whom and how people in Venda talk about ritual murder. I discussed aspects of experiences based on categories such as age and gender, and looked at perceptions of the body briefly. This chapter builds on this understanding by looking more closely at the social and political body, while focusing on a few particular tensions and anxieties that were most prevalent in my field research. I highlighted some of the tensions and insecurities faced by communities as well as the effects of larger processes such as the law. While the discussion has been focused on broader issues, it is still important to remember the individual's involvement at every level. I have attempted to show how perceptions of ritual murder, how it is talked about and by whom, as well as

the political processes that are in place to deal with it, interact and influence each other. Previous research has not encompassed all the different levels and spheres of social interaction that comes into play around a phenomenon such as ritual murder, often relegating it to a category, such as an aspect of witchcraft or a new way of understanding and adapting to a modern world. While I have only presented a few small examples of a much larger web of interconnections, we can see the complexities of meanings and influences at work.

This chapter was organized into three main sections covering issues of subjective versus pragmatic reality, the social body, and the political body. One of the biggest challenges I had while doing my research was in trying to reconcile the knowledge that ritual murder was something that was happening, and knowing that there was a lack of empirical evidence to support these claims. To me this was an important place where all three bodies overlapped and no single one could claim the most influence. Individual experience and the perspective of the social body fought to reconcile inconsistencies and contradictions, while the political body focused on pragmatic reality and hard facts in order to determine whether a ritual murder had occurred or not. As I examined different perspectives and kinds of evidence I uncovered many of the insecurities and anxieties that I highlighted in talking about the social body. Social and economic disparities are a very real problem for people living in Venda, and ritual murder provides various means for dealing with these issues whether it be through actually carrying out a crime, or just through talk about such phenomena.

The last part of this chapter, the political body, examines the affects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957) and how this has led to a possible shift in discourses

that focus on ritual murder instead of witches. I use Michel Foucault to discuss how discourse and power work together and against each other. I argue that the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957), while meant to suppress all acts and talk of witchcraft, had the unintended effect of heightening discourses about ritual murder because unlike witchcraft. Acts of witchcraft very rarely involve pragmatic evidence making it difficult to prove or charge individuals with, whereas ritual murder often produces physical evidence in the form of an obviously mutilated body. When people talk about their insecurities and anxieties, when there is no way to mend the contradictions they are dealing with, and no answers or help available, talk about ritual murder offers a point of solidarity. It is a point of action, whether it is action the community takes to put an end to ritual murder, or an action that is perceived to have been taken in order to improve an individual's economic and social status through committing ritual murder.

This chapter has only been able to examine a few of the social and political insecurities that are relevant to people living in Venda. There is a lot of room for further research in this area, focusing on both ritual murder and the social and economic disparities that people are contending with. One area of particular interest is the formation of community groups and the action of individuals to make changes within South Africa through raising awareness, and through attempts to change laws. Acts of ritual murder are not just about individuals trying to make a difference for themselves; discourse about ritual murder is not just an outlet for people to voice their frustrations. Ritual murder, as an act and an idea, is bringing people and communities together to enact change. In the following chapter I will discuss areas for possible research in more detail.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION**

The aim of this thesis is to broaden the understandings of ritual murder in the Venda region of South Africa through individual's narratives and experiences, and to reinvigorate the ongoing academic discussion of the occult in Africa. My research focused on a number of areas including the history of ritual murder in Venda and for Venda peoples, experiential narratives, and some of the dominant discourses surrounding ritual murder and South African law.

In trying to make sense of the phenomena of ritual murder, the meanings it holds, and the experiences of individuals living in the Venda region I chose a theoretical framework that would help to reveal the processes by which those meanings are derived, changed and made 'real'. Chapters Four and Five use Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock's (1987) 'three body' framework in order to show how the individual, social and political bodies influence and affect each other. Imperative to this framework is an understanding of the history of the Venda region and ritual murder. Chapter Three describes these histories with the help of oral accounts related to me by individuals I met while doing my field work in Venda. My analysis attempts not just to express these experiences and meanings of and about ritual murder, but also to suggest areas where we academics might broaden our understandings of such phenomena through further research.

### **GENERAL OVERVIEW**

Throughout this thesis I have talked about our need to broaden our understanding of phenomena like ritual murder and the occult. Chapters One and Two provided the background to this argument by examining research and current works on the subject.

Several of the points I highlighted in the beginning of my thesis, in regard to a need for further research, included the need for a cultural history of ritual murder and an understanding of how people in a particular location are experiencing, perceiving, and talking about ritual murder now. Chapters Three through Five have attempted to fill some of those gaps, and to lead us in a direction amenable to further research. These three chapters build upon each other in order to give a more complete analysis of ritual murder as it is understood today, while still acknowledging the larger processes that influence discourses and actions.

Chapter Three is an in-depth look at the ethnographic and historical background of Venda peoples, with a focus on ritual murder. While this information is important in order to grasp the social and political issues that people are facing in their daily lives, what is most remarkable about this chapter is the use of narratives from participants in order to talk about the historical meanings linked to ritual murder. Using these narratives I have traced ritual murder back to the days prior to Venda peoples settling in the region they now occupy in South Africa. These stories talk about Venda beliefs, and show how they have altered over time and contact with other peoples. It also highlights concerns over past insecurities, such as prestige and survival, versus the social and economic insecurities people living in Venda face today. Having an understanding of this history, as presented by Venda peoples, reveals some of the meanings ritual murder holds for people today, and how perceptions and meanings have been altered over time.

Chapter Four and Five use the theoretical framework of the “three bodies” as laid out by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987). Chapter Four focuses on the individual body, “understood in the phenomenological sense of the lived experience of

the body-self” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:7). Starting with a discussion of body parts, this chapter moves on to consider the lived experiences of individuals I had the opportunity to interview while I was in the Venda region. In order to broaden the discussion beyond body parts I introduce Judith Butler’s (1988) discussion of gender in order to show how different experiences sediment to create individual experiences of ritual murder. Using categories like gender and generation show how biological and cultural influences shape individual experiences and knowledges. I focus on differences between age groups, gender, geography, religion, and authoritative voices in order to show how these differing backgrounds influence narratives about ritual murder. This inclusion of the individual is an important step towards further understanding and research on the topic of ritual murder. As I have noted in several places, the individual is so often left out of previous research on topics such as ritual murder and witchcraft in favour of exploring the broader social and political issues that are connected with these phenomena. Individual narratives form a base of knowledge with which the social body responds by building upon individual’s stories and distributing them through the media and other social outlets. The individual is an intrinsic part of the social and political bodies, having an effect upon them and in turn being affected by them.

Chapter Five focuses on the social body represented by Scheper-Hughes and Lock as a point of “exchange of meanings between the ‘natural’ and the social worlds” (1987:7), and the political body, which refers to “the regulation, surveillance and control of bodies (individual and collective)” (1987:7-8). Key to an understanding of the issue of ritual murder and all three bodies is the issue of evidence: empirical and subjective. Individuals and communities have different understandings of ‘proof’ and the meaning of

evidence; whereas ‘authoritative’ bodies such as the police and High Court have a different understanding of what constitutes ‘proof’. This differing understanding of evidence builds upon insecurities that already exist in the Venda people’s social world such as poverty, unemployment, and concerns about government corruption. Lastly, in order to provide a brief example of the effect of the political body I discuss the Witchcraft Suppression Act (1957), which was passed in South Africa and prevents people from not only practising witchcraft, but makes it illegal to accuse someone of acts of witchcraft. I have suggested that this Act has altered some of the discourses surrounding ritual murder and witchcraft: murder is illegal and a body provides concrete evidence of a misdeed that can be punished by the law. While it may be illegal to accuse someone of witchcraft, it is not illegal to accuse someone of murder.

These chapters significantly build on past research, such as the works I examine in Chapter Two, and provide an understanding of ritual murder as experienced by individuals living in a particular place. In Venda, ritual murder is both real and imagined. It holds meanings for the people who live there that stretch far into their past, complicating claims that *muti* and ritual murder are products of ‘modernity’. Discourses about ritual murder contain key information about the insecurities, tensions, and anxieties people are faced with; as well as showing how these discourses affect and are affected by the individual, social, and political bodies. Ritual murder, as an occult phenomenon, is complicated and cannot be put down simply to belonging to a pragmatic or subjective realm of understanding. Discourses surrounding it do more than just talk about the world; they also draw on power in various spheres in order to create action. My research and findings, as presented here, are merely a place for us to start delving, to reopen the

academic discussion about occult phenomena, and to present areas where we might begin new studies.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This thesis only just touches on some of the more evident issues surrounding the topic of ritual murder, or *muti*, and how it is experienced by people living in the Venda region of South Africa. There are a multitude of directions to take the topic from here, and I look forward to the opportunity to grow my research while pursuing a PhD in the future.

The amount of time that I was able to spend doing field work for this study was limited to two months, and it was just as I was preparing to leave South Africa that I met some key contacts who attempted to broaden my understanding of ritual murder. Their discussions with me revealed much about social tensions in the region, not only with incoming immigrants and the already settled Indian community, but also between Venda peoples and their chiefs and administrators. While I was able to get some data about these issues it was mostly gained from older interviewees, leaving the voice of the younger generation (those below the age of forty) out of much of the discussion.

Some of the informal conversations I had with individuals of a similar age with myself (mid-thirties and younger) revealed rumours about ritual murder that started on social sites such as Facebook or personal blogs. These rumours take the shape of urban legends warning women to avoid one-night stands with strangers for fear of what they might do. The 2005 Makonde attack, the last known 'official' ritual murder in Venda, is used as a moral lesson by many youth to deter lovers from wandering off into the bush. Ritual murder is a very moralized topic. From a younger perspective it seems to be about

the victims and their morals: wandering off to have sex with someone could lead to death or worse. Individuals over the age of forty seem to focus more on the morals of the perpetrators, calling them greedy, lazy and un-Christian. Perceptions of different social, religious, and age groups need further research and analysis. Social tensions stemming from unemployment, immigration and new settlement in the region as well as a slowly 'modernizing' state are evident at all levels, but further examination of how ritual murder is utilized at different levels to talk about these tensions would add much to current understandings of the Venda region. I have only been able to scratch at the surface of this much larger discussion here.

While much of my data stems from individual narratives, stories and gossip surrounding instances of ritual murder, this is but merely a stepping off point for a discussion that is slowly becoming more globalized through the Internet. I cannot begin to list all of the personal and news sites available online that report on and discuss ritual murder, and from a plethora of perspectives.<sup>24</sup> The occult, and ritual murder in particular, should not be overlooked as powerful topics that draw people together and proliferate 'real' world discussions while being carried out online.

Yet another avenue of investigation I wish I had had the opportunity to pursue is the formation of groups actively raising awareness and working against ritual murder. At the end of Chapter Five I briefly mention how two local pastors involved in my study

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<sup>24</sup> In March 2010 the US Department of State released an online report about human rights issues in South Africa, *muthi* killings were on mentioned (<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/af/135977.htm>). Blogs created by people around the world have talked about muti or ritual killings in sub-Saharan Africa (<http://www.stuffyoushouldknow.com/blog/albinos-in-africa-murder-for-magic-a-human-rights-nightmare/>; <http://afrikaner-genocide-achives.blogspot.ca/2011/04/michael-van-eck-muti-murder-victim.html>; <http://whatisyourrrintelligence.blogspot.ca/2010/02/muti-murder-of-maanda-sendeza-makonde.html>; <http://tho-news.blogspot.ca/2010/06/african-muti-used-to-help-south-africa.html>; <http://methodius.blogspot.ca/2008/11/muti-murders-and-ritual-killing.html>). These are just a few of the examples available online.

were trying to bring ritual murders to the attention of local and government authorities. Communities, religions congregations, academics and government officials have occasionally come together in order to discuss ritual murder and the impact it has in the region. Looking at such groups raises numerous questions about the experiences of the individuals involved, groups' perspectives, methods of raising awareness and their effectiveness as well as revealing social tensions in a new context.

In 2000, Nancy Scheper-Hughes published an article about the global trafficking of human organs, highlighting the “need for new international ethical standards for human transplant surgery” (2000: 191). In her article she covers the issue of international human organ trafficking in a number of locations, including South Africa, and talks about some of the abuses and human rights issues not being addressed by current standards. Organ harvesting and trafficking, as well as ritual murder, are human rights issues that need to be addressed and their legal definitions updated. The Venda region is adjacent to Kruger National Park, which is also one of the routes across the border into Mozambique. Simon Fellows, a researcher working for the Human Rights League in Mozambique, published a report in 2008 and for a time kept up a blog on the Internet about the issue of trafficking body parts for *muti* purposes. Fellows' blog, which he co-authored with A. Rosario, mentions that there is no legal definition of trafficking human body parts, only live humans. Fellows and Rosario (2009) cover a lot of topics surrounding *muti* or ritual murder including trafficking for business purposes; they highlight some of the struggles of survivors in Mozambique as well as discussing the differences between traditional healers and witchdoctors. I keep coming back to the issue of a legal definition of trafficking body parts though, and this is an issue that has come up with my pastors as

well. The pastors mentioned the need to have South Africa pass a law making it illegal to be found with human tissue in one's possessions. Changing the law in this regard has been one of their main foci for the last couple of years, and they keep hitting a wall when presenting their argument to government authorities. While people in Venda did not think there was much trafficking of body parts in their region, they had all heard stories about the trafficking of body parts in other areas. According to Simon Fellows (2008), Kruger National Park is one of the main areas for the trafficking of human body parts between South Africa and Mozambique. Further research on the topic of ritual murder can benefit the ongoing struggle for a global definition of trafficking body parts and help raise awareness at a local level to further the efforts of individuals who wish to see such legal changes put into effect.

In closing, this research is only the beginning of a new discussion on occult phenomenon, like ritual murder, and the meanings it holds for the peoples who believe in its efficacy. Further research will not only provide further insight into the social and political implications of ritual murder in Venda, but into the larger global impact of individual and cultural beliefs and the insecurities they reflect in response to the series of cultural, social, and political issues that continue to arise throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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