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El Negro, el Niño, witchcraft and the absence of rain¹

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One wonders what must have gone through their minds as they tore out the insides of someone's brother, husband or father and stiffened him to put him as a public spectacle in a museum alongside other 'artefacts'.²

For more than a century, Europeans have gawked at the body of an African man and laughed their lungs out.³

In the first half of the year 2000 the Republic of Botswana was blessed by the arrival of extensive and long lasting rains.⁴ In the second half of the year, the remains of El Negro a man who had died 170 years before were returned from Europe and buried in Tsholofelo park in Gaborone, the capital of Botswana. In 2001 the rains failed, and on the ninth of January rumours surfaced that blamed the arrival of El Negro for the failure of the rains.

One may wish to argue that what the rumours said could not possibly be true, but what is a fact is that people were discussing these ideas and seeing the presence of El Negro as central to the absence of rain. People clearly saw the world and current issues in terms of these rumours. In the following article I will be discussing these rumours. By relating them to the broader issues of Tswana ethnology and contemporary history, the rumours will be placed within a context. By so doing insight will be given into the manner in which such rumours can come into being, and, perhaps more importantly so, what these rumours have to say about the contemporary world. The paper provides a summary overview of the absence of rain and the development of El Negro rumours in January 2001, where after rainmaking, magic and witchcraft in Tswana culture are discussed. Exactly who or what El Negro was, is outlined in the following section, after which the arrival of El Negro's remains in Botswana, and the shaming of Botswana is described. Finally the paper seeks to situate the El Negro rumours in the context of popular consciousness, previous work conducted on rumour, and 'Radio Trottoir'. In conclusion the paper argues that the El Negro rumours allowed for the articulation of deep seated grievances on the part of large sections of the population within the context of Tswana cultural thinking and discourse.

Rumours and rain

In late 2000 as the skies remained clear in Gaborone, and the daily maximum temperatures continued to rise it became clear to one and all in Botswana that the rains were failing to arrive. Shortly before Christmas 2000 rumours started to surface of young women who had been observed throwing salt into fires in such a manner as to prevent the rains from coming and destroying their festive season hair styles.⁵ Generally these rumours were told with a twinkle in the eye and a fair bit of good-natured banter regarding the irresponsibility of the youth. However, on ninth of January 2001 far more sinister rumours which linked the absence of rain to the buried remains of El Negro started to emerge and develop.⁶ Essentially these rumours argued that the return of the body was witchcraft that stopped the rain from coming.⁶

The El Negro rumours were spread throughout Gaborone and its satellite towns through the cut-throat efficiency of the privatised public transport system which consists of mini-buses that roar along set routes throughout the day.⁷ Virtually everybody I spoke to mentioned that it was either in the taxi or at the taxi ranks that they first heard other people speaking about El Negro and the absence of rain. Though people, with very few exceptions,

did not claim to believe in the rumours, they were generally very willing to speak to me about what they claimed to have heard.⁸ Throughout the ninth, tenth and eleventh of January the El Negro rumours continued to spread and develop. On the twelfth and thirteenth of January, it rained and the rumours appeared to disappear. In part on the 15th of January because, as one informant put it, 'It is Monday, people are tired from the weekend'. On the whole it appeared that the El Negro rumour had blown itself out, that all the permutations and scandal had been explored, and that very little new would come of it unless new evidence arose. However, the El Negro rumour surfaced again briefly in a slightly different setting when it was reported on the 16th that people in the Northeast of the country were facing starvation on account of the failure of the Mopane worm to appear in sufficiently large numbers. The Mopane worm is a moth larva which is collected and dried in large numbers as a highly sought after source of animal protein.⁹ Being dependent on the coming of the rains, the absence of rain, which in the public's mind was linked to the presence of El Negro, also led to an absence of Mopane worms.¹⁰

In essence the gist of the El Negro rumours can be distilled into a number of parts, some of which were excluded or included in the rumour depending on whatever appeared to be most convincing. Thus the rumours nearly always carried variations of the four following parts:

- (a) The people of Botswana are poor, yet the government chose to purchase bones, a skull in particular, from another country at great cost. At the same time there was a variation to the theme which alleged that the government of Botswana had received extensive amounts of money in exchange for accepting the skull.
- (b) However, the people of Botswana did not even know who the person was for it was just bones. It is different from what the people saw in Spain. It could be anybody. It is the bones of a Bushman.
- (c) South Africa did not want it, why did they not want it and what are they hiding from the people of Botswana.
- (d) Even so the Botswana government flew it down for lots of money and buried it with great ceremony and pomp, yet the poor remain the poor.

Hereafter the rumour developed along either one or a combination of the three following strands.

- (a) That the bones are those of a Bushman whose burial has greatly angered the ancestors, Chief Tshekedi Khama in particular.¹¹
- (b) That the bones are part and parcel of extremely powerful medicine purchased by the ruling party to prevent the coming of the rains. This will ensure the failure of the harvest, keep the people poor, maintain their dependence on the ruling party, and ensure its continued hold on power.
- (c) That the bones are those of a person who did not come from Botswana, and who has either upset the ancestors, or is himself extremely upset.

In essence what the people were discussing whilst driving in the taxis through the streets of Gaborone to and from work, was that what ever had been buried in Tsholofelo park in Gaborone was something that prevented the rain from falling. Many people claimed that it was a powerful form of medicine that had been planted by the ruling party Botswana Democratic Party, *Domkrag*.¹² Underlying all of these fears was the common issue of not knowing exactly who or what these buried bones were from, and the inability of the populace at large to be able to gain an insight into why these bones should have come to be buried in Gaborone.

Rain making and death

It has been noted of Tswana society that *Kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*—a chief is a chief by the people, but in return a chief must ensure the fall of adequate rainfall. It was thus a fortuitous

sign for Festus Mogae when it rained on the day in which he formally inaugurated as the president of Botswana following the general election of early 2000. In the past and in the present the failure of rain, in a society where the word for blessing and good fortune, *Pula!*, is identical to the word for rain, reflected on the failing of a chief and indicated that the land was impure or bewitched.¹³ Writing throughout much of the 20th century the grand old man of Tswana ethnology, Isaac Schapera has emphasised time and again the central importance of rain and rain-making ceremonies in Tswana society.¹⁴ Indeed, ceremonies connected with the bringing of rain were considered to be the most important ceremonies in which a chief could be involved. In the same manner in which the writings of Schapera confirmed the earlier observations of hunters and missionaries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so too the writings of the Comaroffs continue to emphasise the central importance of rain and rain-making in contemporary Tswana society.¹⁵ The central importance of access to and control over rain was an issue that soon became apparent to European missionaries who started working within Tswana society in the early nineteenth century. Not surprisingly *baroka ba pula*, rainmaking specialists, were accorded a high status in Tswana society; a position of status which the missionaries sought to acquire for themselves.¹⁶ At the risk of being accused of writing in the ethnographic present, I wish to refer in length to text written by Schapera in 1950, not because I wish to claim that Tswana society has remained unchanged, but to reiterate the central importance of rain-making within Tswana society:

The chief had a special rain enclosure (*segotswana sa pula*) behind the hut of his great wife, where several pots of rainmaking medicines were kept. Every year, before the cultivating season started, the immature girls ceremonially brought water to the pots; they and the immature boys were then sent to sprinkle some of the contents over the fields and cross-roads near the capital. If the rain did not come, driftwood and other objects connected with water were burned in the enclosure, so that the smoke should summon the clouds; sometimes, too, men were sent to capture alive a wild animal of a specified species and sex, which was then slaughtered, portions of its flesh being added to the mixture in the pots. Failing this, the women would gather at the graves of the chief's ancestors and, sprinkling them with water and beer, would sing special songs of prayer for rain. Ultimately the chief himself would go to one of the graves, accompanied by the people; there an unblemished black bull was slaughtered, and portions of its meat, the skin, bones, etc., were burned on the grave; and as the smoke rose, he would pray to his ancestor 'to let the rain fall'. As a last resort, search would be made for objects out of place (e.g., a pot hidden in a tree), which were thought to have been deposited by sorcerers to keep off the rain; such objects were doctored and thrown into a river bed or pool, and the people then gathered at the tribal council-place to be sprinkled with the contents of the rain pots and freed from contamination. Throughout the rainy season, too, all newly bereaved people were reported to the chief, on whose instructions they were smeared with the juice of irritant bulbs used as rainmaking medicines; this treatment was intended to 'cool' their bodies and prevent them from scorching the land wherever they went.¹⁷

In essence the person who controlled rain could also determine the course of society. Death, as with all aspects of life, in Tswana society was inextricably linked up to rain. The spirits of the dead needed to be domesticated. Failure to do so could lead to all manner of misfortune, of which the worst was the absence of rain.¹⁸ It was the duty of the deceased's maternal uncle to ensure that a dead person was buried properly. As one of Schapera's informants put it in the 1940's, it was the maternal uncle's duty, 'to handle the putrefaction of his sister's children'.¹⁹ The spirits of the dead, *badimo*, it was held, lived in a parallel world, alike to all intents and purposes to the one in which the living lived. Indeed, a world, 'where a man would continue to herd his grandfather's cattle and a woman

to cultivate the soil'.²⁰ However, the spirits of the dead took a keen interest in the world of the living and could influence and determine events in the living world:

They rewarded with good health and prosperity those who treated them with becoming respect and obedience, but punished with sickness, economic loss, or some other misfortune those who neglected them or who offended against the prevailing social code, of which they were the guardians. Hence, in order to retain their favour, they had to be specially propitiated.²¹

The term *sepoko* (pl. *dipoko*) undoubtedly derived from the Dutch *spook*, ghost, is currently used to refer to the spirit of those dead who come back to bother the living. *Dipoko* are held to rest in the ground during the day and to emerge at night to avenge wrongdoing done unto them and to seek that which they desired or possessed in life. In the urban setting of Gaborone, it is reported that *dipoko* can also manifest themselves in the bodies of animals, particularly owls, cats and dogs, and that there are times in which they appear to the living in the day time.²² In addition to this there are stories of phantom cars and phantom hitch-hikers that are also classified as *dipoko*.

Writing of surviving relatives Schapera noted that their blood was believed to be 'hot'. Consequently it was believed that should such a person go about, there was a distinct danger that they would injure people, cattle, and crops—the mainstay of Tswana society in the past—and most importantly, such a person would keep away the rain, for wherever they tread the ground would become scorched.²³ It was therefore essential that such a person be taken to be 'cured' immediately:

This was formerly considered so important, particularly because of the dangers threatening the rain, that the chief or village headman, as soon as any death was reported to him, would himself send one of the recognised 'tribal doctors' to purify the survivor.²⁴

Such a person would be confined to his or her homestead and subject to a series of taboos and restrictions until they had been purified. Though the purification ceremonies conducted differed from doctor to doctor, the general procedure followed was fundamentally the same. The roots and bulbs of certain plants, 'especially those used in making rain', would be used to purify the mourner, in such a manner that their would no longer be hot and threaten the arrival of rain.²⁵

Failure to observe the correct rites and practises associated with the stages, through which human beings went from life through death to an existence as ancestor, could threaten all of society through the absence of rain. To prevent this from occurring all in society anxiously watched to ensure the correct behaviour of all, and expected and called upon *dingaka* (ritual specialists) and *dikgosi* (chiefs) to ensure that this occurred. Not surprisingly those who consciously sought to stop rain were guilty of the most extreme form of witchcraft, for this was an activity that threatened the course of life and society as a whole.

Witchcraft and magic

In the present the issues of witchcraft and ritual murder are very much a part of the everyday for most people living in southern Africa and the Republic of Botswana.²⁶ In discussing the state and witchcraft, Cyprian Fisiy has put the case even stronger when he referred to mass circulation papers in Africa and stated that:

There is an indication that witchcraft and sorcery discourses constitute the primary concern of most African communities.²⁷

On the same days that El Negro was being discussed and described in the rumours that circulated through the taxi borne commuters of Gaborone, one of the Botswana's quality papers carried an article that dealt with the crash landing of wizards onto buildings in Zambia.²⁸ In addition the paper reported on the ritual murder of a person for body parts in

Mochudi, Botswana. Police were reported as looking for the murderer of the appropriately named Mr. Bongi Moloi (*Moloi* being the Tswana term for sorcerer or witch).²⁹ Assistant Commissioner K. Japinga of the Botswana police was quoted as saying, 'We normally reach that conclusion [that he was murdered for ritual purposes] after we have found out that the body parts were removed by hand'.³⁰ Recently a newspaper article reported on the arrest of two men in Gantsi who 'cut off women's breasts and male private parts from fresh corpses in the mortuary'. The men were arrested after they had been found in possession of human remains which they were trying to sell to a 'traditional doctor in the village'.³¹ On a more innocuous note Botswana youth—in a manner not at all dissimilar to their Gothic rock counterparts in northern Europe—flirt with the occult, as is made clear by the rapper Aka Bloode, who recently fronted the *Wizards of the Dessert*.³²

The use of magic may not necessarily be for the evil purposes. In the past and in the present Tswana magic consists primarily in the use of 'medicines (*dithlare*) for the attainment of certain specific ends which cannot be achieved by empirical methods alone'.³³ Medicines can be used for all manner of purposes, be it protecting a newly acquired motor-vehicle, improving one's health, acquiring the affections of a specific person, success in business and school, or enhancing the fertility of livestock. The corollary is of course that medicines can also be used destructively. Though any person can fashion and prepare medicines, there are specialists, *dingaka* (sing. *ngaka*), to whom people can turn for professional advice.³⁴ Amongst the *dingaka* there are those who practice divination through the use of specialised tokens made of bone, wood, ivory and the like. These tokens are cast in such a manner as to be used to determine insight into all manner of issues, be it wrong doing in the past, possible future scenarios, or current conditions.

There is extensive reference in the ethnographic literature on Tswana society that refers to magic that is used maliciously. The Tswana term *boloi* is used to refer to the practice which is glossed by anthropologists as 'sorcery' in English, whilst its practitioners are referred to as *baloi* (sing. *moloi*). Both men and women can become *baloi*. There are two main categories of *baloi*—those of the night and those of the day. *Baloi* may consciously practice witchcraft out of motives of greed, jealousy and the like.³⁵ As with witches elsewhere in the world—and there is no doubt that modern Setswana conceptions have been modified by cultural contacts as far as Europe and America—*baloi* have familiars, can fly, can disappear, cast spells, prepare and use medicines for unjust purposes, and transform people into the living dead (*mathlowane*). Botswana has a series of legislation against witchcraft, yet, as the murder of Mr. Moloi and the rumours accompanying El Negro indicate, witchcraft is very much a part of everyday life in Botswana at the present.

Belief in and the practice of witchcraft extend across all levels of contemporary Botswana society. A few years ago students at the university of Botswana rioted on account of the ritual murder of a young girl in Mochudi, the same settlement in which Mr. Moloi was recently murdered. In November 1994 the mutilated body of Segametsi Mogomotsi was found, in due course the girl's stepfather was arrested. Initially the stepfather confessed to the ritual murder of Segametsi and implicated a number of well-known business people in the deed. However, the stepfather soon retracted his statement:

In contrast with the graphic and gruesome description he had previously given of their involvement in his daughter's murder, he now stated that he had no evidence to suggest that any of them might have been involved. He explained to the police that a traditional doctor had told him that Segametsi had been killed by three men and a woman and that all these unnamed people were involved with new business enterprises. He himself had then concluded that the people he had previously named must be the ones to whom the traditional doctor had referred.³⁶

Though all the people mentioned were arrested, all with the exception of the stepfather were released for lack of evidence. In late January 1995, school children, from the school

which Segametsi had attended, marched to the District Commissioner's office to present a petition demanding an intensified investigation into the murder of the schoolgirl. The marchers clashed with police and full scale rioting broke out. The businesses and houses of principal suspects were burnt. Though the Special Support Group (paramilitary police) were deployed, and government ministers and the Attorney General travelled to Mochudi and spoke to the populace, tensions did not decline. As a commentator noted:

In the absence of meaningful information from the police, the populace simply provided its own. As these stories gathered both momentum and corroborative detail, they became accepted as unchallengeable fact. If they were not true, it was asked, why would everyone believe them to be true? And because they were therefore true, it automatically followed that those who had been arrested by the police were the undoubted murderers.³⁷

Though, through the use of force, the authorities were able to quash the unrest in Mochudi, further rioting and unrest soon spread. In Gaborone a self-styled Revolutionary War Council distributed pamphlets calling for a mass demonstration and demanding 'that justice should take its course without [the] state's intervention'. University of Botswana students broke into and disrupted a working session of the National Assembly. A rioting mob, pursued by tear gas firing members of the SSG, tore through the central business district of Gaborone. On the 19th of February, as rioting continued to spread, the President addressed the nation in a radio broadcast, and announced that the police and the army had been instructed to restore law and order in the country.³⁸

Considering the fact that Botswana bears the well earned reputation of a country with respect for the rule of law, high level of social tolerance, and a distinct dislike for violence, the events of early 1995 indicate the extent to which people felt threatened by what was perceived to be government collusion in the practice of witchcraft. The murder of Segametsi, or more precisely the failure of the established authorities to bring to book the perpetrators of the crime, brought to the fore the extent to which witchcraft was seen to be part and parcel of the established elite. Recent work by Elizabeth Eldredge on ritual murder in colonial Basutoland, specifically outlined the conscious involvement by the elite of many in a community in the committing of ritual murder. That is, that the actual act, the breaking of extreme taboo and the involvement of many, ensures the further compliance of many.³⁹ It was the children of Segametsi's school who called for further investigations into the murder.⁴⁰ When they were met only with repression and silence others joined them who felt that they too were excluded and unheard.⁴¹

El Negro and popular consciousness

During the funeral service conducted for El Negro at the graveside in Tsholofelo Park, the minister officiating at the ceremony made what was probably an unconscious Freudian slip when he stated that El Niño had been a son of Africa who had now finally been allowed to return to the continent of his birth.⁴² In so doing the minister did express the truth, for El Negro was indeed a child of Africa⁴³, yet at the same time he gave voice to the presence in popular consciousness of the term El Niño and all that has come to be associated with this term.

In the second half of the nineteenth century Peruvian fishermen began referring to the periodic warming of the coastal waters off the South American Pacific coast at Christmas as El Niño, meaning 'The Child', or 'The Little One'. El Niño drove off the fish yet caused extensive rainfall in the coastal deserts of South America. The term El Niño appeared in print for the first time in 1892 in a Peruvian scientific journal.⁴⁴ In the course of the twentieth century it has become increasingly more apparent that El Niño, which is part and parcel of a meteorological phenomena known as the El Niño Southern Oscillation, is one of the major determinants of global rainfall patterns.⁴⁵ With intervals of between two to ten

years, El Niño appears approximately thirty times every century. Throughout the world El Niño and its opposite La Niña have been blamed for all manner of catastrophes, be they extensive flooding in southern Africa, the failure of the Monsoon in the Indian sub-continent, or the absence of rain in Australia. It would be no lie to state that in much of world in the present El Niño and 'Global Warming' are the two terms chosen to attempt to describe and explain weather conditions. Throughout 2000, as floods ravaged the southern half of Africa, El Niño and 'Global Warming' were consistently pulled out of the hat to explain what had happened. El Niño, in whatever way that people believe it to be, has entered into the popular consciousness of much of the world Botswana included.

In 2000 the island of Madagascar lying off the eastern coast of southern Africa was struck and ravaged by no less than four cyclones.⁴⁶ As the people of Madagascar struggled to deal with the devastation that befell them, the cyclones tended to peter out in the Mozambican channel, but drenched southern Africa with rains so extensive as had never been experienced before. In early February cyclone Leon developed just to the south of Sumatra. In the coming days Leon traversed the Indian Ocean as a tropical storm. A few days before it reached Madagascar, Leon was upgraded to the status of hurricane and renamed Eline. Eline travelled straight across Madagascar and the Mozambique Channel before it hit the Mozambican coast on 22 February with sustained winds of up to 130 mph⁴⁷ When Eline hit Mozambique an estimated 300 000 people were already homeless on account of earlier flooding. In Botswana, extensive rains had already left nine dead and up to 90,000 people homeless after destroying nearly 10 000 homes across half the country.⁴⁸ It was therefore hardly surprising that the government of Botswana began preparing for the expected arrival of Cyclone Eline. Members of the diplomatic community, development agencies, business community and Non-governmental Agencies were called to meetings and briefed as to the coming of Cyclone Eline and its expected consequences. Following one of the meetings an employee of the United Nation Development Programme in Botswana, returned to brief her colleagues. The UNDP employee informed her colleagues of the coming of devastating winds and rains, which, she said without blinking an eyelid, were being caused by the impending arrival of an 'Alien'. In first instance it was thought that the employee had been joking, yet on closer questioning it turned out that she truly believed, not only in the undisputed existence of extra-terrestrial beings, but that, an 'Alien', wreaking death and destruction in its path, was fast approaching the Republic of Botswana.⁴⁹ Obviously the name of a cyclone, 'Eline' had become confused with the term 'Alien'; a term loaded with all manner of meaning in popular consciousness. Once this occurred, 'Alien' entered into the realm of rumour, an alternative explanation as to what was happening in the world.

It is more than likely that in Botswana connotations of rain and weather, which are associated with the term El Niño, came to be transferred to the term El Negro. How one would actually show this to be the case is difficult to see, but as the words of the minister officiating at the grave of El Negro indicated, the two terms could be and were unconsciously inter-changed. The use of the term El Negro in a variety of different social settings, as indicated by the use of the term by students, marriage guests, and funeral attendees, indicates the extent to which El Negro had entered into the popular consciousness of people in Botswana. Here it nestled close to and probably alongside the other loaded term, El Niño, that had also entered into popular consciousness.

'Radio Mall', rumour in Gaborone

In the run up to the first of January 2000, the BBC World Service broadcast a programme which claimed that downtown Gaborone had to be quietest capital city on earth in which to celebrate the coming of the new millennium. Following the general election of early 2000, the newly president dryly noted that the general elections had been peaceful and uneventful,

and that he had no desire to see this change. Botswana is indeed, what the Americans would call, a 'laid-back' country. Peace and stability are two attributes that spring to mind, attributes which no person would like to see end. This is not to claim, however, that Botswana are citizens cowed into submissive silence. Far from it, indeed, society and politics in Botswana is characterised by extensive and heated debates. Its free media delights in raking failing politicians, corrupt businessmen, or opposition figures across the coals. The image of president Mogae being lambasted on national television by squatters in the settlement of Mogoditshane, is a fair indicator as to the extent to which press freedom is respected and encouraged in Botswana. In addition to its free press, Botswana, along with many other African states, subscribes to the informal news network known as *Radio Trottoir*, Radio Pavement in Francophone states, and 'Radio Mall' in Gaborone.

'Radio Mall' first started broadcasting in the early 1960's shortly after the 'Mall', a kilometre of low-rise buildings housing, offices, embassies, shops, and banks had been built in the new capital city of what would become the republic of Botswana. Radio Mall, as with *Radio Trottoir*, in other countries carried information too far-fetched, painful, or truthful to be carried in any other form of media. In the 1980's long before other media, 'Radio Mall' carried hard news, on up coming South African Army raids, the successes of Umkhonto we Siswe operations, and finally the collapse of the Mangope regime in the South African homeland of Bophuthatswana.⁵⁰ In addition 'Radio Mall' carried scandalous reports on the sexual peccadilloes of well-known people. However, as Gaborone has continued to grow, 'Radio Mall' has become more and more of a misnomer. No longer do people meet and chat exclusively on the Mall, instead, as people have to commute from ever further away, conversation and news tends to be situated ever more in and around the taxi stands and ranks of Gaborone's public transport system.

It was in the taxis and at the taxi stands of Gaborone that in late December 2000 the first accurate reports on extensive levels of rainfall at Madikwe, three kilometres beyond the frontier in South Africa, were first heard on 'Radio Mall'.⁵¹ It was here too that on 9th January 2001 the first reports surfaced on the manner in which the remains of El Negro prevented the rains from coming through to Gaborone and Botswana as a whole.

El Negro and the absence of rain

Writing on reports dealing with the traffic of heads in southern Africa, Luise White has noted:

My point here is... that the metaphorical is itself the material, and the ideas enshrined in popular consciousness thrive as popular consciousness.⁵²

In terms of popular consciousness El Negro came to be linked to the multitude of ideas that relate to the natural weather phenomena known as El Niño. In addition, El Negro, and the events surrounding the return of what were alleged to be his remains, came to be linked to a multitude of issues, that ranged from Bushmen, the sale of body parts, witchcraft, upset ancestors and corrupt politicians. In the conversations that took place in the taxis and 'Radio Mall' of Gaborone the return of El Negro in combination with one or more of the issues described above came to be seen as being responsible for the absence of rain in Gaborone. That is, a discourse that implicitly accepts and acknowledges the influence of the metaphysical and supernatural on everyday life, serves as an explanation as to why things occur in the manner in which they do in the world. The words of Cyprian Fisiy, writing on sorcery, are equally relevant to the discourse in Botswana which includes the metaphysical and supernatural:

Sorcery discourse serves as an explanation why things go wrong in a community. These discourses provide the primary paradigm for explaining both fortune and misfortune. By using witchcraft

discourses in this manner the community tries to understand *why* things happen in a particular way rather than *how* they happen...In one of the leading studies of witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard (1937:72) pointed out that while Azande are aware of the physical circumstances of accidents and disease, witchcraft discourses explain why a particular sufferer and no other was the victim. 'Witchcraft explains why events are harmful to man and not how they happen.'

As with all people who watch the daily news broadcasts and weather forecasts on national television, the people living in Gaborone know about high pressure zones and so forth. As with their compatriots in northern Europe, they believe that they know how weather works. However, they do not know why, and it is this fundamental issue that they seek to answer. In this instance, 'Why is it not raining in Gaborone?' It was in attempting to answer this question that people linked the coming of El Negro, in conjunction with one or more of the issues—Bushmen, body parts and witchcraft, upset ancestors, and politicians—to the absence of rain.

El Negro and Bushmen

At times the El Negro rumour sought to emphasise that El Negro had been a Bushman.⁵³ No doubt this strand of rumour came to be reinforced every time correspondents and media dismissed the available evidence and chose to refer to El Negro as a Bushman.⁵⁴ Thus, with blatant disregard for the results of earlier investigations and reports, the large circulation South African daily newspaper, *The Star*, carried as one of its front-page headlines, 'Botswana welcomes return of Bushman's body used as colonial exhibit'.⁵⁵ As to why *The Star* should have chosen to misinform its reading public, became apparent in the last paragraphs of the article:

Bushmen still living in Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve have over the years battled the government over its plans to resettle them and make way for tourist development.⁵⁶

In effect, the choice of *The Star* to use the return of the remains of El Negro to highlight opposition to the planned removal of Bushmen from the Central Kalahari, served merely to once again emphasise the position of Bushmen as the inhabitants of the bush. That is, to paraphrase Gordon, the qualities of Bushmen as being grounded not in humanity but in animality.⁵⁷ As the anthropologist couple Jean and John Comaroff have stated:

It will be remembered... that Tswana social architecture distinguished the town from the bush. The wild was the threatening realm of spirits, plants, and animals of unruly potential. It provided the vital ingredients for both healing and sorcery, and, most important, was the habitat of Sarwa ('bush' people) and other (less than social) clients and serfs.⁵⁸

The bush is seen as the site par excellence of magic. In present-day Botswana, Bushmen continue to be seen as the epitome of the Bush, and all that it entails. In the public mind they alone live and survive in the Bush, and as such they are able to control the extreme powers that reside in the Bush. Given the above, it follows that, the state funeral, only the second in Botswana's history, of, if the rumours are believed, a Bushman, would indicate the dabbling of the powers that be in the most extreme forms of magic.

El Negro and body parts

Recently Luise White has written on the traffic in body parts and heads in particular in the southern African region. Her work, which though it focussed primarily on events in Zimbabwe, reflects discourse in Botswana. As White pointed out:

proper burials released spirits from their corporeal bodies so that grave robbing produced a spirit's wrath and useless organs. Body parts could be removed, mixed, and given to another human being,

but they never lost their bodily integrity: they never ceased to belong to the person into whom they were born, regardless of whether that person was dead or alive.⁵⁹

From the little that we know of El Negro, we can be certain that when he was buried the first time, he was buried properly in accordance with Tswana tradition.⁶⁰ In other words, unless the Verreaux brothers deployed powerful protective medicines of their own when they dug him up, his spirit (*badimo*) would have come forth to vent its wrath. In addition, his spirit would have watched and followed his various body parts. Discussing El Negro an informant noted that after having been dug up, El Negro must have said, 'What is this place, where am I now, who has done this to me?'⁶¹ El Negro would have been well aware of where he had been buried by his relatives and anxious to return there intact.⁶² In 1993, prior to the repatriation of El Negro, a post-mortem, which included a complete body-scan, was completed, the conclusions of which were that the young man had died of a pulmonary disease.⁶³ It stands to reason, that for such a conclusion to be reached, there must have been a fair amount of tissue still in existence. Indeed, the photographs of El Negro in Banyoles, clearly show that whilst on display, the young man still had his hair and nails. In the light of the above, one of the most shocking aspects regarding the return of El Negro's remains to Botswana was the fact that instead of a body Botswana took delivery of some bones. This extended beyond the immediate embarrassment felt by all and expressed by a few, of expecting a body and receiving some bones, into the realm of witchcraft and trade in body parts. Not surprisingly people asked the obvious questions, what had happened to the body, where were the organs, the hair and nails, the remaining bones? Where were his clothes, and his grave goods? What had happened to these things, and who had ordered that El Negro be transformed into a pitifully small pile of bones? These are questions that remain unanswered, not only to those who commute around in Gaborone's taxis, but also to those in the highest social echelons of the country.⁶⁴ In a country where ritual murder, and the traffic and use of human body parts in sorcery are a reality, it cannot be considered surprising that people conclude that the same has happened to El Negro. Even if those involved deny that they have used the remnants of El Negro for ritual purposes, the valid question as to what they did with his remaining body parts, remains standing.

Spirits and ancestors

Initially when speaking to people, the issue of El Negro's spirit in exile in Spain was of no interest to those whom I spoke to. What was important was that the highly troubled spirit had accompanied some of its body to Botswana and to its grave at Tsholofelo Park. Informants generally agreed that his spirit accompanied all parts of the dismembered body, unless it had been prevented from doing so through the use of strong medicine. As such at least one informant was anxious to know whether Spaniards were *magkoa* (Whites) and whether or not El Negro's spirit would visit upon those who had stripped the remaining body parts of El Negro before his journey from Spain to Botswana.⁶⁵ As such, for most informants, considering that the materials buried at Tsholofelo Park were not medicines associated with witchcraft, but were indeed the mortal remains of El Negro, there was no doubt that these remains had been accompanied by the spirit of El Negro. A spirit whose remains had been laid to rest in foreign soil and without the ministrations of his relatives. A spirit therefore that would continue to roam to seek retribution and to be laid to rest properly.

The aspect of El Negro being without family, except in the broadest sense of being a 'son of Africa', was particularly troubling to many. How could it be that these mortal remains had no relatives, for all humans have family members. In a sense this line of reasoning followed that expressed by Zimbabweans when under the auspices of the Zimbabwean government a monument to the unknown soldier was unveiled in 1998: 'former guerillas

who were present wondered how a soldier could be unknown—they wanted to know who he was, where he was from, and they wondered what purpose a single soldier served'.⁶⁶ Why was this person without relatives being accorded a state funeral? In addition, if he came from what is now South Africa, why did the South Africans not wish to bury El Negro, what, effectively, was it that the South Africans knew about El Negro that prevented them from burying his remains in South Africa?

Politicians

In a sense the differing strands of thought relating to El Negro outlined above all come together in popular ideas expressed with regard to politicians. Since independence the city of Gaborone has consistently voted for opposition parliamentarians in both local and general elections, and the city is known to be the centre of organised political opposition to the ruling party. Even so, fractious political infighting within opposition parties has consistently ensured that the Botswana Democratic Party has been able to win convincingly at every national election since independence. The result is that Gaborone, though it is the site of the most concerted opposition to the ruling party, is the seat of government led by the ruling party.⁶⁷ Not surprisingly this has led to consistent debate within Gaborone and a generous dose of scepticism on the part of the public with regard to the official pronouncements of the government. In other words an atmosphere in which rumour flourishes.

With regard to the state funeral of El Negro many people demanded to know why the government should spend the amounts of money which it did on the remains of a man without family and an unknown past. In addition, and on a far more sinister level, many people believed that the government had either received or paid large sums of money for what was effectively witchcraft medicine. Medicine which ensured that the rain stayed away and increased the poverty and dependence of the people at the mercy of those in power. The consistent refrain in both of these strands of thought, be it that El Negro was but a mortal, or that what was buried was medicine, was that the government had paid large amounts of money on El Negro at the expense of its own people.

Conclusion

It will be clear that in dealing with the burial of El Negro in Tsholofelo Park, there were a number of differing ideas as to what exactly had come to be buried there and why. When El Negro came to Botswana people were faced with an array of questions. Was it merely the mortal remains of a man who died 170 years ago, was it the mortal remains of a man whose spirit had had to watch his body being robbed, gutted, stuffed, stripped, and displayed, was it powerful witchcraft that had been purchased by politicians from the Spaniards, was it the pride and goodwill of Botswana, or was it a combination of all these things that came to be buried in Tsholofelo Park?

When rain failed to arrive in early 2001, rumours started that linked the absence of rain to the presence of El Negro. Apart from the slips of the tongue and the unconscious linking of El Negro to 'El Niño', these rumours which existed within popular consciousness and were debated in the everyday life of Gaborone commuters, came to be linked to all manner of already existing ideas that related to one or a combination of issues dealing with Bushmen, spirits and ancestors, witchcraft, sorcery and the trade in body parts, and politicians. That is, ideas relating to El Negro came to be incorporated and discussed within already existing ideas as to how the world works and is ordered.

The funeral of El Negro and the subsequent absence of rain confirmed to many that which they already believed. In a circular argument, people argued that the politicians were powerful and rich precisely because they were involved in witchcraft, and the absence of rain was evidence of this involvement. The El Negro rumours allowed for people to

articulate their deep-seated grievances *vis-à-vis* those in power on a number of levels. However, these grievances, be it the waste of government money on a bushman, or a homeless person with no family, or witchcraft medicines for already powerful politicians, all relate to one issue, that those in power had failed to care for those without power. The spending of vast amounts of money on the remains of an unknown person was seen as being unjust. El Negro may very well have deserved to be buried with full pomp and ceremony by the Batswana state, but when the anticipated arrival and display of a full corpse failed to materialise, people began to question the validity of El Negro and their government's desire to accord the remains the status which it did. In effect, it can be said that the rumours were the expression of public dissatisfaction at having been hoodwinked by the Spanish. Far from the return of El Negro being a return with honour, the arrival of a small casket of bones signalled to one and all that all was not well. The rumours that followed in early 2001 were a manner by which people could express and entertain their distrust of those in power in Botswana, those who had allowed Botswana to be shamed for their own selfish interests, and not those of the people.

Notes & References

1. I would like to thank Nancy Jacobs for suggesting that this topic was worth an article, Ms. Meiki Maotwe for first alerting me to this topic, *African Affairs*'s anonymous reader, and Neil Parsons—the man who knows more about El Negro academically than anybody else—for news, views and critical suggestions.
2. *The Voice*, Friday October 6–12, 2000, p. 6, Editorial.
3. *Mmegi, The Reporter*, 6–12 October 2000, Editorial.
4. To be sure there were floods, indeed, Gaborone the capital of the Republic was at one stage physically cut off from the outside world.
5. Extensive braiding with extensions in a variety of colours appear to have been the fashion. Braiding is an expensive, long, and painful operation which can take anything up to eight hours of sitting. The advent of extensive rains with its increased humidity would have changed the texture of the hair necessitating continual alterations. In addition the splendid hairdos would have remained hidden from sight for most of the time under plastic bags against the rain.
6. Though nobody I spoke to linked the two issues I do believe that it was more than coincidental that on the very date that the El Negro rumours first started emerging, southern Africa, Botswana included, experienced a lunar eclipse. In the early evening the full moon rose blood red in colour in a cloudless sky, and for about three hours the moon which displayed a series of colours which ranged from green through to pink travelled through the shadow of the earth.
7. It is interesting to speculate that, in the very first week of most Batswana back in the urban setting of Gaborone after a festive season generally spent in the rural areas, most people were still unconsciously thoroughly infused with a mindset that continued to emphasise the importance of the meta physical. It must not be forgotten that it is in the rural setting of the village that most Batswana are confronted once again with their ancestors.
8. In total between 10–18 January approximately 30 people were spoken to in informal settings that ranged from liquor stores, butcheries and supermarkets, through to chats with domestic workers, gardeners, waiters and taxi drivers.
9. The Mopane worm, which in its dried form is also served as a bar snack similar in texture yet rather more tangy than American bar pretzels, is featured on the newly minted 5 Pula coin.
10. The *Botswana Daily News* January 16, 2001, No. 9, p. 3 carried an article 'Botswana face phane crisis this year' which blamed the absence of worms on the over exploitation by unscrupulous people of this limited natural resource. An academic was quoted as saying, 'It is about how people harvest the resource and not a problem of rainfall'. However, as one of my informants reminded me with infallible logic of a conspiracy, the government had brought El Negro to Botswana, the *Daily News* was the government paper, of course it would blame the absence of Mopane worms on something else.
11. Tshekedi Khama was the strict powerful and highly respected *Kgosi* of the Bamangwato from the 1930's to the 1950's.

12. The symbol and popular name of the Botswana Democratic Party is the manual jack, which used to be used to jack up waggons and trucks. The Setswana name *Domkrag* is derived from the Afrikaans and Dutch word which translates literally as 'stupid power'. In the run up to first democratic elections in Botswana in the early 1960's the term 'democracy', which was one of the rallying calls of the BDP, sounded like the powerful term *Domkrag*, the term remained, and the BDP has led the Republic of Botswana through more than thirty years of prosperous multi-party democracy.
13. For a brief introduction to the history of Tswana and the importance of rainfall to southern African societies as a whole see, R. Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1999), pp. 15 - 20. Incidentally it is worth mentioning that Pula has been made the official term for the Botswana's unit of currency.
14. For an overview of Isaac Schapera's work see *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, Volume 12, Numbers 1 & 2 1998, a special issue in honour of Schapera's seventy-five years of scholarship including a bibliography compiled by Suzette Heald, pp.100-115; Isaac Schapera, 'The "Little rain" (*pulanyana*) ceremony of the Bechuanaland BaKxatla' in, *Bantu Studies*, 4, pp. 211-6. In addition see, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (International Institute of African Languages and Culture: 1938 London); *The Tswana* (International African Institute: London 1953), p. 22 & 60.
15. Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*, Volume I, (Chicago 1991) p. 336, n. 20.
16. For a discussion on this topic see, Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. I, pp. 206-213; & Paul Stuart Landau, *The Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (James Currey: London 1995) pp 24-29.
17. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 60.
18. Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. I, pp. 153-5.
19. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 59.
20. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 59.
21. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 59.
22. Interviews and pers.comm. Gladys Maotwe, Koketso and Godfrey; Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 61.
23. Isaac Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe*, first published 1940, (London 1971) p. 279.
24. Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 279.
25. Schapera, *Married Life*, p. 280.
26. For some contemporary work on witchcraft and ritual murder see, Elizabeth Eldredge, *Unmasking Colonial Rule: Murder and the Use of Terror in British Basutoland, 1946-1960*, presented at the Forty-Third Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, 16-19 November 2000, Nashville; Cyprian F. Fisiy, *Law out of context: Witchcraft Trials in Cameroon*, presented at the ASA Annual Meeting Toronto, 3-6 November 1994; Roger Gocking, *A Chieftaincy Dispute and Ritual Murder in Elmina Ghana, 1945-46*, presented at the ASA Annual Meeting San Francisco, 25 November 1996; Birgit Meyer, *The Power of Money. Politics, Sorcery, and Pentecostalism in Ghana*, presented at the ASA Annual Meeting Columbus Ohio, 13-16 November 1997; Bradford Strickland, *Witchcraft and AIDS: Some Negotiations of Power Among the Kunda of Eastern Zambia*, presented at the ASA Annual Meeting Toronto, November 1994, & *Situating the Moral Ambiguities of Mankwala and Witchcraft in Zambian Ethnography*, presented at the ASA Annual Meeting Orlando, 1995; Luise White, 'The Traffic in Heads: Bodies, Borders and the Articulation of Regional Histories' in, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 23, Number 2, June 1997, pp. 325-338. Of particular importance and influence in the current discussion relating to witchcraft in Africa in the present has been the work of Cyprian Fisiy and Peter Geschiere. Peter Geschiere with Cyprian Fisiy, 'Domesticating Personal Violence: Witchcraft, Courts and Confessions in Cameroon' in *Africa* 64 (3) 1994, pp.321-341; Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft. Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, (University Press of Virginia: Charlottesville 1997)
27. Fisiy, *Law out of Context*, p. 2, n.1.
28. There have also been reports on a flight of sorcerers from the town of Maun who flew down to Gaborone in either 1998 or 1999. These sorcerers were reported to have flown on blankets, and one of the sorcerers is said to have crash landed in the low income residential area Old Naledi after he had swerved to avoid crashing into Kgale hill. The sorcerer was reported to have worn bracelets, anklets, necklace and belt fashioned out of human fingers. My informants claimed that after the

- man had been arrested he was clothed and released by the police. Botswana sorcerers are also reported to have flown on loaves of brown and white bread.
29. The Phuthadikobo Museum in Mochudi, the town in which Mr. Moloi was murdered, has a number of photos on exhibit of Bakgatla rainmakers in the 1930s, in addition to a collection of rainmaking pots.
 30. *The Botswana Gazette*, Wednesday 10 January 2001, page 3, 'Ritual murder confirmed in Mochudi' by Ditso Anneleng; and page 8 in the 'Science' section of the paper an article entitled 'Wizards: Zambians amazed by crash-landing flying wizards' a syndicated article by PANA/Misanet. Later reports noted that Mr Moloi's penis, tongue and armpits had been cut out: *The Botswana Gazette*, Wednesday 17 January 2001, pp. 1–3.
 31. 'Two Gantsi men suspected of cutting out organs from corpses in mortuary', in *The Botswana Gazette*, Wednesday 18 April 2001, p. 5.
 32. 'Bloode is too 'nasty' for the Wizards!' in *The Botswana Gazette*, Wednesday 31 January 2001, p. E2. That the *Wizards of the Dessert* are well aware of their flirtation is evidenced by their recent album *Sangoma*, which roughly translates as diviner, traditional doctor, spirit medium. See the recent discussion on H-SAFRICA@H-NET.MSU.EDU that dealt with the origin of the word Sangoma.
 33. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 61.
 34. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 61–6.
 35. Schapera, *The Tswana*, p. 65.
 36. Sandy Grant, *Etcetera: Events, Issues, Places and People of Botswana*, (Leitho Publications: Odi 1998) p. 167.
 37. Grant, *Etcetera*, p. 170.
 38. Grant, *Etcetera*, p. 175.
 39. Eldredge, *Unmasking Colonial Rule*.
 40. In a manner that mirrors the findings of Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony', in *American Ethnologist*, Volume 26, Number 2, February 1999.
 41. Particularly disconcerting in the present is the continued ritual murder of innocents in Mochudi. On 8 January 2001 the badly decomposed body of eight year old Brenda Bokole was found near the village. At least one informant claimed that El Negro, whose body had been similarly abused, had caused the rain to stop falling so as to draw attention and express his anger to the continued witchcraft and ritual murder in Mochudi. 'Police about to crack ritual murder case?', *Mmegi/The Reporter*, 9–15 February 2001, p. 3.
 42. Pers. comm. Neil Parsons.
 43. Indeed, the placard erected at the grave of El Negro in Tsholofelo park refers to him as a 'son of Africa'.
 44. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elniño/reach/1880.html>
 45. A glance at materials dealing with El Niño as a natural phenomena will indicate what a frighteningly magnificent event this actually. An event that causes sea levels to rise no less than 150 cms, transport more water than all of the American great lakes together, consume more energy than all fossil fuels ever burnt and so forth. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elniño>
 46. For a website which provides an overview of hurricanes that reached southern Africa in 2000 see, http://weather.unisys.com/hurricane/s_indian/2000/index.html.
 47. http://weather.unisys.com/hurricane/s_indian/2000/LEON_ELINE/track.dat. For an overview of the impact of Eline on Mozambique and southern Africa as a whole see, http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000feb2/24feb-moz_floods.html
 48. <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000feb2/22feb-floods.html>
 49. Pers. comm. M.G. Janssen, a medical-anthropologist employed by one of the UN agencies in Gaborone, Botswana.
 50. Numerous people have noted how in the run up to South African cross-border operations, rumours would fly around Gaborone. In some instances these rumours allowed people to ensure the safety of their lives and those of their loved ones by moving them from their usual places of residences.
 51. Large numbers of taxis commute daily from Gaborone to Johannesburg and back again. These provide up to date reports on developments in all manner of spheres, including in this instance that extensive rains had fallen just beyond the frontier in South Africa.
 52. White, *JSAS*, p. 336.

53. I am well aware of the various pejorative names given to the descendants of the first inhabitants of the southern African continent. In this instance I follow the example of Robert Gordon, who noted, 'The term Bushman is...a "Lumpen category" into which all those who failed to conform or acquiesce were dumped. It was not an ethnic group but a sociopolitical category derived from the wider setting', *The Bushman Myth: The Making of a Namibian Underclass* (Westview Press: Boulder 1992), p. 6.
54. In one instance, whilst being interviewed live on Dutch radio, I was asked to tell them about, '*dat kleine bosjesmannetje*' ['That little Bushman']. Unfortunately the literal translation into English fails to bring across the condescension implied in the double use of the diminutive in the Dutch. Neil Parsons reported similar frustrations in most of the more than 35 interviews which he conducted with the media at the time of El Negro's funeral.
55. *The Star*, 5 October 2000.
56. *The Star*, 5 October 2000.
57. Gordon, *The Bushman Myth*, p. 2.
58. Comaroff, *Revelation and Revolution*, Vol. 1., pp. 152 – 153.
59. White, 'Traffic in Heads', p. 329.
60. Research conducted by Neil Parsons of the history department at the University of Botswana, has brought to light that El Negro was buried along with a small leather bag containing, small glass beads, seeds, and small bones. 'It could indicate that he was some kind of *ngaka* (traditional doctor)'. <http://ubh.tripod.com/afhist/elnegro/eln07.htm>
61. Pers. comm. Mma Meiki Maotwe, Gaborone, 20 April 2001.
62. This aspect ties into a later question as to how a person cannot have relatives.
63. <http://ubh.tripod.com/afhist/elnegro/eln-pm.htm>
64. One university history lecturer wondered what had happened to the iron frame that had supported El Negro, throughout the 170 years in which he had been displayed. One can also ask what happened to the materials with which he had been stuffed.
65. Meiki Maotwe and Dikaledi, 18 April 2001.
66. Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn Mcgregor & Terence Ranger, *Violence & Memory: One Hundred Years in the Dark Forest' of Matabeleland* (Oxford 2000), p. 262.
67. Wayne Edge and Mogopodi Lekorwe editors, *Botswana, politics and society* (Pretoria, 1998) & *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* Vol. 14, No. 1, 2000, Special Issue: Elections and Democracy in Botswana.