

Rape and the Tikoloshe Sexual Violence and Fear in a South African Township

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In South Africa preservation of patriarchal power may have many culturally specific forms, but ultimately violence against women, or the threat thereof, is the prevailing form of social control. It keeps women off the streets at night, restricted at home and silenced. For abused women, lack of economic access dictates their physical mobility, their access to work, education, recreation, as well as access to each other.¹

A township, in the South African sense, is a space shaped by histories of endemic state violence, one that contains both victims and perpetrators of the old regime. It is a social milieu in which people who have been living in a culture of violence for forty years are still, despite massive political change largely disadvantaged. They are now beset by new fears of crime and diffuse non-state violence. They are vulnerable to what Paul Farmer calls the pathologies of power.² Witchcraft is rife in the townships, in this paper I will deal with one of the many forms it takes in Langa, that of the Tikoloshe. The Tikoloshe is a being that acts as an agent or familiar of a witch, as it carries out the witch's wishes. The Tikoloshe however is capable of acting on its own, and is well known for its sexualised nature, in the great urban sprawl of the townships it has taken on the character of a violent sexual predator.

I conducted anthropological fieldwork in the township of Langa whose population is conservatively estimated at sixty thousand people. Langa marks the beginning of the long sprawl of African townships of Cape Town from Gugulethu onwards through to the massive settlements of Khayelitsha, altogether numbering two million plus people. People who are, or who say they are, on the move. Waiting to go home, move up and move out. Remittances back and forth to rural areas are constant, and the movement of people back and forth from rural to urban homes makes the football field size bus depots at the back of Langa a dustbowl of constant activity. Health is poor with many people living without sanitation, electricity, or water. Crime and domestic violence rates are high.

Although Langa is considered to be more prosperous than many other townships, and in places, less dangerous, it is still a community largely surviving below the poverty line and with a high level of violence. Being out

¹ Artz (1999: 26).

² Paul Farmer (2003).

late at night is a risky activity in the informal settlement zones and elsewhere in Langa. Policing remains limited with many victims of crime relying on informal networks and associations like street committees to adjudicate disputes and mete out justice.

This paper concerns events in a section of Langa known as the Zones. On any street directory of Cape Town they are a blank space. Flying into Cape Town at night the Zones barely exist - a sprinkling of small flickering lights across an expanse of darkness. Fly in during the day and the great swaths of shacks are unmissable. These are informal settlements, a contested space and term. According to Barry an informal settlement is where land is occupied according to a set of rules and processes that are not entirely legal,³ a description that tells you little about the conditions and life within the Zones. In reality the Zones are home to some of the poorest people in Cape Town, people who create a place for themselves in a vast sprawl of tin, plastic and wood shacks that spill out behind the old barracks.

'Informal houses' are the official term, 'shacks' the vernacular, in the lived community; they are homes and architectural promissory notes for a better place, better incomes and education. They are contested sites, against councils, against town planning, against the elements. These seemingly temporary informalities of architecture house generations of Africans.

Temporary is a word and sense of life in the townships that is contradictory, as many of the people and shacks have been around for years. It is a contradiction entrenched in language grown from years of enforced legislation intended to keep the Cape free from Africans in a Cape full of Africans. This is a temporary that is tenacious. Shacks made from scavenged wood, corrugated iron and packing crates are lined and decorated with the rolls of paper labels from cans of peas, carrots and beans liberated from the local canning plant. Such structures can hold their ground for years. Some are single roomed, some as large as five rooms, a crazy few are double storied. To preserve some privacy people try to partition the bedroom away from the living area in some way. In the shacks occupation can range from one to six people per shack, although two zone houses I knew had ten people living in them.

Usually a shack costs around R980 to build (approx 122 Euro) but can be as little as R100 (12 Euro). People rebuild when devastating shack fires rip through the crowded zones. In outer reaches of Khayelitsha the grounds itself shifts, houses slide on the sand dunes of Monwabsi Beach and balance on precariously thin crusts of clay. Sometimes, it seems the only mortar that holds

³ Barry (1999).

them is the family bond and collective will of those who live within them. Along with economic insecurity comes spiritual insecurity in the form of bewitchment and occult attack. The shape of the occult is influenced here by the conditions in which its' victims live. For the people in the Zones sexual assault is one of the most common forms of violence.

South African epidemiological research shows that 60% of females teenagers reported physical assault by male partners and 28 to 30% reported forced sexual initiation.⁴ A qualitative study⁵ conducted among pregnant teenagers in Khayelitsha (a neighbouring township to Langa) showed violence to be a consistent feature of teenage sexual relationships and the primary means by which pervasive male control over female partners was enforced. Wood and other researchers found that sexual assault was so common that it was becoming a normalised part of sexual relationships. For women subjected to violent assault the avenues for protection, justice and recovery through any kind of formal state mechanisms remain poor. With regard to rape in South Africa it is estimated that only one in twenty to one in thirty five rapes are ever reported to the police.⁶ South African Police crime statistics for Langa from April 2002 to May 2003 reported one hundred and eighty murders;⁷ one hundred and seventeen attempted murders; ninety-nine rapes and ten indecent assaults; six hundred and seventy four attempts of grievous bodily harm and four hundred and fourteen common assaults (compared to the former white suburb of Rondebosch which had one murder and four rapes over the same time period). Using Wood and Jewkes assessment of levels of underreporting it is possible that Langa in one year had at least two thousand rapes.⁸

Violence towards women is the most frequent kind of violence enacted in the township. Thus women's movements and perceptions of their lived world differ from their male counterparts. Valentine's work on female movement in urban space argues that women develop individual mental maps of places where they fear assault.⁹ I argue in this paper that an abiding and underlying current of fear of sexual aggression, and frequent encounters with sexual violence tripped a flurry of experiences, stories and rumours concerning a sexually aggressive occult creature. This activity highlighted the grave situation of assault in the community, and enabled women to seek out some form of healing and fostered coping strategies in the face of a constant sexualised threat.

⁴ Wood and Jewkes (1998).

⁵ Wood, Maforah, and Jewkes (1998).

⁶ Wood and Jewkes (1997).

⁷ Security (2007).

⁸ Wood and Jewkes (1997).

⁹ Valentine (1989, 1991, 1992a, 1992b).

Rape Mile

To describe the Zones, even to hold it entire in memory is hard. They are only a recent part of Langa, yet it is now difficult to visualize the bleak and barren salt-flats, the sparse land that lay beneath this mass of humanity, difficult to imagine how fast it has changed and how many must have come to build such a place. Now the Zones are as thickly crowded, populated by tsotsis, CapeRastas, amagqira, amasangoma, daggarokers (dope smokers), arrivals from North Africa and Zimbabwe, scattered fragments of Umkhonto weSizwe cadres; and thousands of ordinary men, women, children and babies for whom life is extraordinarily hard; all of them living in shacks crowded up against one another, each housing anywhere from one to eight people. At times you have to turn sideways to slide through the alleyways. The Zones are a 'free' region, a place where the government has virtually no authority, where police buzz suspicious cars with helicopters and firemen and ambulances set a cautious foot. There is courage here and ingenuity, kindness and laughter, but there is appalling violence, deprivation, sickness and despair too.

Underneath the great electrical pylons feeding Cape Town lies a dense stretch of shacks a couple of miles long nicknamed Rape Mile. This subsection of the Zones along with most other sectors lack reasonable sanitation, electricity and water. The strip aligns along the edge of the N2, a major arterial highway into Cape Town. Along the very edge of the highway is a line of bucket (night soil) toilets nicknamed 'loo with a view'. This line of toilets, the only ones servicing the area, is never visited at night for fear of assault or occult attack. On the other side of the N2 is Bonteheuwel a former coloured township. Bonteheuwel has experienced many gang wars and along with Athlone and Grassy Park suburbs is one of the most violently disputed territories between Hard Livings and the Americans gangs.

Sucking gasp of mud on the feet, the slipperiness of the wet clay mixed with oil and sludge causes me to skid, slide and half skate towards the corrugated iron and black plastic shack, skirting the open gash that runs just left of the Mile that serves as a pit for rubbish. Everywhere is an incessant humming vibration from the massive electrical pylons carrying power to a far richer elsewhere, a claustrophobic hum that causes the hair on my neck to stand up and sets my teeth on edge. This is a place where one could imagine Uncanny things.

'Rape Mile' is so named because of the high level of sexual assault that happens here. Although I did not conduct a formal survey of the level of sexual assault in Rape Mile, it is significant that most people knew the area by

that name and nearly always offered the explanation that there was not a woman who lived there who had not experienced some form of sexual assault. These accounts were not recorded and written notes were usually not taken because of the sensitivity of the topic. Although, the women knew that I was conducting and gathering material for research and had agreed to tell their stories, it was clear to me that the degree of removal from a formal interview situation directly impacted on their comfort level; as a result I chose not to take notes during the interviews or record them, I wrote up notes only afterwards.

Excerpts like these are typical of the stories related to me by women in and around 'Rape Mile':

I live alone in a little shack – just one room – and all of a sudden the lights went out. My friend who was visiting she was scared but lights go out all the time in this place so I said 'Don't be scared'. Then the front door was kicked in. These guys came in and starting shouting at us. "Bitches! You whores!" One of them ripped off my dress and raped me right there on my own bed in front of my friend. I couldn't say anything anymore... I think that man, that... really that boy took something away from me. They took my self-respect...and, me I don't feel like me anymore. (Minnie, 19yrs old).

When I was raped I was so ashamed. I was torn up in my heart and in my self, you know. At the time I was bleeding a lot and really hurt and torn down there. I just took some aspirin and went to sleep, I didn't know what else to do but to go on with my life. It wasn't until I had my baby I was told I had HIV. (Faith, 24 yrs old).

I was killed when they came and raped me – they took turns until I kind of died inside, and now I have HIV and its like they get to kill me again all over again. I see them, those boys – sitting around at the shebeen, but I have nowhere else to go. I can't have a baby; I can't have a life...I don't even feel like I am here in this world anymore. (Pumla, 19 yrs).

These high levels of sexual violence in Rape Mile produced another set of stories and coded the area as even more perilous. Rumours and stories began

to report a plague of *Tikoloshes* lose in Rape Mile which were violently assaulting women at night.

Tikoloshe is usually described as a small very hairy man about knee height, with a squashed face, and buttocks like a baboon. He has a penis of prodigious size that he carries over his shoulder like a club. My PhD research found that the *Tikoloshe* although in the past and in some rural areas is still regarded as a mischievous relatively harmless trickster, in urban space he becomes a violent highly dangerous sexual predator.

I first heard of the attacks when women began to come for treatment and protection to an Igqira (amaXhosa) traditional healer I had close associations with; they introduced me to other women who had similar experiences and I began to question healers in the Zones. Rape Mile's proximity to Bonteheuvel became significant during an interview with a Zionist healer who argued that there were serious problems down in that area for the Muslims (coloureds) had become envious of African power: "... the Muslims have seen what African power could do and they want that. So they learn a little and buy dirty things and make *Tikoloshes* but they could not control them ... now there was a plague of *Tikoloshes* running up and down through that whole place."

The following, again, are excerpts of stories related to me, violent and traumatic experiences for the women who endured them.

I heard a noise like a cat or something on the roof. Then my husband was thrown to the ground and he was paralysed. I saw all this even though I was like I was asleep. This thing came and got on top of me and had sex with me. Afterwards I fell asleep, in the morning my legs (upper thighs) had sperms on them and I was sore down there, and now I have sharp pain like stabbing low in my belly (pointing to lower abdomen), the *Tikoloshe*, for now I am sure that is what it was, raped me. (Thandi, August 2000).

...I became afraid to sleep for it would come to choke me, its hands around my neck so that I could not breathe... it was a killer, I knew, and I became very afraid. (Zukile, September 2000).

I woke but it was like I was sleeping, dreaming you know. I heard a noise outside then it was there on my bed it put its mouth on mine and its tongue was funny...like a sponge in my mouth...although it was hairy it was cold, cold as stones. (Vuliswa, June 2000).

I looked up and saw it crawling like a shadow across the ceiling I couldn't move or cry out I watched it and it came there... and put its hands out and pulled itself down the wall (pointing to the ceiling where it joined the wall behind her bed)...it came down that wall to my bed, I must have made some sound and my sister came into the room and saved me. (Lindiwe, late July 2000).

I heard scratch, scratch, like a chicken but no one has chickens here and I could not see because we have no lights at night in this place (pause) after that nothing then it comes like smoke from the corner of my room and I couldn't breathe I couldn't move and it came on top of me... that little heavy thing and put its cold hands around my neck (like this) and then it raped me...I was so scared it would kill me. (Phillipa, September 2000).

The *Tikoloshe* carries a magic stone or charm (*ikhubalo*) in its mouth or hand that renders the creature invisible to all except the witch who binds the creature. If a *Tikoloshe* drops its magic stone it immediately becomes visible. Take this account of a rape attributed to a *Tikoloshe*:

That *Tikoloshe* he comes at night, maybe after midnight or so, I hear a stone tapping...running down the roof. After this sound of a stone that *Tikoloshe* was in the house, as if it just came like smoke through the walls. (Celia, August 2000).

These attacks sharpened the edge of fear in a population coping with already high levels of widespread gendered violence.

Framing experience as witchcraft is a work of building confidence in the face of uncertainty. Without such confidence the limits of power and agency left to people are excessively limited to the point of anomie. The discourse of witchcraft then gives a template within which one may act, and in this particular way the discourse gives power over situations and events that escape every other means of knowledge and agency. By reading events in Rape Mile as *Tikoloshe* activity people open different paths to comprehend sexual violence and through these openings power and agency can flow.

For the women who live in Rape Mile and elsewhere in the Zones being attacked by a *Tikoloshe* is something that they can seek help for. They go to diviners and healers, to the African Independent Churches whose services are largely aimed at curing bewitchment. At the surgeries of healers and in the space of the services they can heal. At the surgeries a woman attacked by a

Tikoloshe is cleansed physically, her home is cleansed and sealed and wards set around the house and on her person to seal her against attack. She is encouraged to talk about her experience and in turn diviners have been known to put pressure upon street committees and other informal authorities to clean up the community. Cleaning up the community entails lobbying for good lighting, for regular patrols of volunteers at night to making sure that people talk to one another. If a community is re-cast as 'filthy', that is spiritually unclean, then it is a magnet for witches and familiars and no one wants that situation. Where a community may fail to act for rape victims, they may to clean up witchcraft.

This attention to experience as occult disturbance allows people to seek change and protest conditions that spawn violence. For women whose fears of assault, and assault itself, are very real, *Tikoloshe*- encounters enable them to speak out without placing themselves at risk from retaliation from specific gangs or being a threat to male dominance in general. The *Tikoloshe* is a particular fear made real; he has become, at least in the more dangerous sections of the townships, the epitome of sexual violence. The *Tikoloshe* is a threat to women but his presence prods men into considering that their women are at risk from sexual attack from a being that they cannot control. His presence puts pressure on them and the community as a whole to be 'right' in their relations within the home and within the community, which includes refraining from sexual violence both inside and outside of home.

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