



ARTICLE

On the mobility of ghosts: spectral journeys in the South African lowveld

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Abstract

In studies of Southern Africa, ancestors and possessing spirits have received far greater attention than ghosts. It is only in recent years that fragmentary references to ghosts have begun to appear in the ethnographic record. In this article, I seek to redress this imbalance by documenting stories and accounts of encounters with ghosts in the South African lowveld. I turn to studies of ghosts in Asia and elsewhere as an analytical starting point for interpreting their social and cosmological significance. A widespread theory in this literature is that narratives of ghosts are a means of emplacement, connecting people to places. But the theory does not capture the way in which narratives in the South African lowveld depict ghosts as essentially mobile beings. This is most evident in accounts of vanishing hitchhikers on the highways and of a ghost called *sauwe*, which captures people's minds and forces them to walk in the direction of graveyards. These narratives speak of displacement, of spectral journeys and of routes rather than stable locations. The apparitions serve as reminders of the failure to take care of the spirits of those who suffered violent deaths and bring them home. But we can also see them as traces of past injustices and of violence in a haunted landscape, and as mirrors of villagers' own historical experiences of displacement, experiences that were a hallmark of forced removals and of the migrant labour system during the apartheid era.

Résumé

Dans les études consacrées à l'Afrique australe, les ancêtres et les esprits possesseurs ont reçu bien plus d'attention que les fantômes. Ce n'est que récemment que des références fragmentaires aux fantômes ont commencé à apparaître dans les documents ethnographiques. Dans cet article, l'auteur cherche à corriger ce déséquilibre en documentant des histoires et des récits de rencontres avec des fantômes dans la région du Lowveld en Afrique du Sud. Il utilise comme point de départ analytique des études de fantômes en Asie et ailleurs pour interpréter leur signification sociale et cosmologique. Selon une théorie largement répandue dans cette littérature, les narratifs de fantômes sont un moyen d'emplacemement, en reliant les personnes aux lieux. Mais cette théorie ne saisit pas la manière dont les narratifs dans cette région d'Afrique du Sud décrivent les fantômes comme des êtres essentiellement mobiles. C'est particulièrement manifeste dans les récits de disparitions d'autostoppeurs sur les grandes routes et d'un fantôme nommé *sauwe* qui s'empare des esprits des personnes et les force à marcher vers des cimetières. Ces narratifs

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parlent de déplacement, de voyages spectraux et de routes, plutôt que de lieux stables. Les apparitions servent de rappel du manquement à prendre soin des esprits de ceux qui ont subi une mort violente et à les ramener chez eux. Mais on peut aussi les voir comme des traces d'injustices passées et de violence dans un paysage hanté, et comme les miroirs des propres expériences historiques de déplacement des villageois, des expériences qui furent une marque de retraits forcés et du système de travail migrant pendant l'apartheid.

Resumo

Nos estudos da África Austral, os antepassados e os espíritos possuidores têm recebido muito mais atenção do que os fantasmas. Só nos últimos anos é que referências fragmentárias a fantasmas começaram a aparecer no registo etnográfico. Neste artigo, procuro corrigir este desequilíbrio documentando histórias e relatos de encontros com fantasmas nas zonas baixas da África do Sul. Recorro a estudos sobre fantasmas na Ásia e noutros locais como ponto de partida analítico para interpretar o seu significado social e cosmológico. Uma teoria generalizada nesta literatura é a de que as narrativas de fantasmas são um meio de colocação, ligando pessoas a lugares. Mas a teoria não capta a forma como as narrativas nas zonas baixas sul africanas retratam os fantasmas como seres essencialmente móveis. Isto é mais evidente em relatos de pessoas que desaparecem enquanto pedem boleia nas estradas e de um fantasma chamado *sauwe*, que capta a mente das pessoas e as obrigam a caminhar na direcção de cemitérios. Estas narrativas falam de deslocamento, de viagens espectrais e de rotas, em vez de locais estáveis. As aparições servem como lembrança da incapacidade de cuidar dos espíritos daqueles que sofreram mortes violentas e de os trazer para casa. Mas também podemos vê-las como vestígios de injustiças do passado e de violência numa paisagem assombrada, e como espelhos das próprias experiências históricas de deslocação dos camponeses, experiências que foram características das deslocações forçadas e do sistema de trabalho migrante durante a era do apartheid.

Anthropologists have paid far greater attention to ancestors and possessing spirits than to ghosts. The ancestors are seen to represent genealogical unity, and their veneration binds people in collectivities. Possessing spirits are a source of misfortune, but potentially also of empowerment. They bestow on their mediums the capacity to experience alternative realities and the powers of foresight and healing. By contrast, ghosts are liminal beings, neither separated from the world of mortals nor incorporated into the world of spirits. They appear as vagabonds with limited power and no clear responsibilities (Durkheim 1964 [1915]: 274).

In recent years, however, innovative scholars have shown that ghosts, too, can address pressing social and political concerns. As scholars of Africa, we can learn a great deal from the issues raised by the more numerous anthropological studies of ghosts in Asia and elsewhere. Bear (2007) portrays ghosts as a means of emplacement. She writes that Anglo-Indians in Kharagpur, a railway colony in West Bengal, welcome ghosts as a familiar presence. As the progeny of absent European men, they find it hard to ground themselves in stable family histories. In this context, ghosts connect Anglo-Indians with the past and with domestic and religious spaces, in a manner that does not depend on lines of lineage (*jati*) or caste (*desh*). Bear relays accounts of a family who leave an extra place at their table for the ghost of a boy, and of a ghostly priest saying mass at a local church. In Kharagpur, she argues,

the Catholic Church mediates between people and ghosts, through rituals such as All Saints' Day. Stern (2019), in turn, relates ghostly encounters in Cobalt, a former mining town in Ontario, Canada, to nostalgia. In the early twentieth century, Cobalt hosted a silver mine that brought foreign capital to Canada and supported a vibrant social life. By 2001, the town was abandoned by the industry it had nurtured and fell into decay. But there have been attempts to preserve Cobalt as a destination for heritage tourism. Residents have produced an enchanted landscape, 'saturated with local imaginings that are indicators of attachment to place' (*ibid.*: 242).

For Johnson (2013), ghosts are a more disconcerting marker of place in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city. He observes that members of the middle class associate the city's gated communities with progress, exclusivity and a desired state of modernity. But once they move in, they experience doubt. What they previously thought they had transcended re-emerges, and old anxieties of chaos and violence reappear beneath the veneer of progress. They notice cracks in the infrastructure, seldom see neighbours, suspect that criminals might occupy abandoned homes, and hear strange noises at night. These anxieties have uncanny effects. Ghosts appear as white strangers, without feet. They were once mobile people such as migrants and motorcyclists. But, after having suffered bad deaths, their ghosts cannot move on and experience rebirth in a Buddhist sense. Being in a state of stasis, they seek to halt the progress of others. For example, the ghost of a man who plunged to his death from the top floor of a building stands by the window, urging others to jump. Johnson argues that residents of these gated communities do not fear urban hordes howling at their gates, but rather the idea that their own aspirations have become hollow (*ibid.*: 317).

These ideas of emplacement, nostalgia and unrealized aspirations provide valuable analytical starting points for a more general understanding of ghosts. Ethnographic literature on Southern Africa contains only fragmentary references to ghosts. A widely documented belief is that unsettled spirits of the war dead might return to haunt both those responsible for their deaths and their families. This is true of Uganda (Van Bommel *et al.* 2014), Mozambique (Honwana 2003) and Zimbabwe (Werbner 1991: 151–6, 188–90; Fontein 2011; 2022). But ethnographers have also recorded other manifestations of ghosts. Fontein (2011) writes that, near Great Zimbabwe, the ghost of George Sheppard, a former white farmer and hotel owner, substantiates a sense of belonging by materializing his family history in the landscape. Accounts of his ghost exist alongside Maringa graves and allude to the coexistence of a different past.

In South Africa, Hull writes that ghosts of slain Zulu warriors are believed to inhabit a hilltop in the Ubombo mountains, where 'lights mysteriously flicker at night' (2017: 34). Van Wyk (2014) records stories of ghosts (*spokis*) who offer people lifts in cars at night. Some had lucky escapes when the morning sun evaporated the ghosts. Margaretten (2015) writes of the appearance of a ghostly figure called uGogo (grandmother) in an abandoned building of Durban, occupied by homeless youth. The occupants describe uGogo as 'a floating misty figure dressed in long flowing robes, her face and hair concealed by gossamer scarves'. She is allegedly displeased by negligent mothers, who abandon their babies in rural areas in order to enjoy the pleasures of town. uGogo afflicts her victims with seizures and entices them to jump through windows. The ghostly figure combines irreconcilable opposites: she is a figure from the past who inhabits the present, a grandmother who lives in a building occupied by

youth, and she demands obedience from those who desire autonomy. Margaretten (*ibid.*: 134) relates her appearance to experiences of disconnection among youth, and to anxieties of suffering and untimely deaths away from their families.

In this article, I aim to shed further light on ghostly phenomena. To do so, I draw on multi-temporal fieldwork in Impalahoek, a village of about 24,000 people in the South African lowveld, situated in the country's north-eastern periphery.¹ Villagers' lives have been profoundly shaped by broader political and economic changes: during the nineteenth century, the area was occupied by Northern Sotho refugees from wars with the Swazi, and by Tsonga speakers who escaped the devastating Luso-Gaza war in Portuguese East Africa (now Mozambique) (Niehaus 2001: 17–18). Soon, however, the occupation of large tracts of land by white farmers altered the conditions under which Africans held land. While some worked as labour tenants on white-owned farms, others became rent tenants in released areas, such as Impalahoek. Here, the settlement pattern was that of scattered hamlets, comprising the homesteads, fields and ancestral graves of co-resident agnatic clusters.

From the 1930s, Impalahoek became the reception site for hundreds of households who were displaced by afforestation projects on the slopes of Mount Moholoholo to the west, or expelled from white-owned farms towards the north to make way for cattle and crops. This influx placed great strain on rural resources. Under the apartheid system, Impalahoek became part of the Lebowa Bantustan. Officials of the Native Affairs Department implemented successive agricultural improvement schemes and relocated households to small residential sites in demarcated village sections. Previously, households buried their dead in the yard, but people were now compelled to bury corpses in communal graveyards. Population removals destroyed the last remnants of subsistence agriculture and made labour migration to South Africa's mining and industrial centres essential for household survival.

After South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, Impalahoek was incorporated into the newly constituted Bushbuckridge municipality, which became part of Mpumalanga Province. Over a period of almost three decades, democratic governance has facilitated the growth of a small middle class and has brought shopping malls, social housing and improved welfare. But village residents have also had to cope with increased unemployment, an upsurge in crime and a devastating HIV and AIDS pandemic (Niehaus 2018).

This history of rupture and relocation, repeated dislocation from land and ancestral graves, racist violence, separation from kin through labour migration, premature death and failures of anticipated futures have produced what some social theorists call a 'haunted landscape'. Such a landscape contains numerous lingering signs and traces of past inequalities, injustices, violence and unheard marginal voices. These signs regularly assume the form of unsettling ghostly apparitions that make these unresolved issues known and remind us of those who have been mistreated or ignored (Gordon 2008: 17). Yet, the ghosts of the South African lowveld are not simple metaphors of memories, and they are widely recognized as ontological realities (Lincoln and Lincoln 2015).

¹ I use pseudonyms to denote the place of fieldwork and all personal names. This is done to protect the identity of my research participants. Unless specified otherwise, all local terms are in the Sepulana dialect of Northern Sotho.

In this article, I draw on information collected during ongoing participant observation in Impalahoek since 1990, and on semi-structured interviews that I conducted with twenty-five villagers specifically on the topic of ghosts during August 2019. I had previously been acquainted with most of the research participants, and the remaining few were friends of friends, who participated in the same networks of sociability that I did. They generally valued the opportunity to speak about phenomena and events that were exciting and that engaged listeners, precisely because such talk interrupted the ordinary flow of life and challenged conventional modes of understanding. In this respect, research participants framed ghosts within 'zones of the extraordinary' (Niehaus 2013). Only one potential interviewee said that she did not wish to talk about ghosts because she found the topic too emotionally daunting.² Talk of ghostly apparitions, like that of witchcraft, took the form of episodic melodramas that were emotional and forthright in their moral lessons (*ibid.*). The stories, nonetheless, had very diverse sources. In some cases, research participants relayed stories that were very much akin to urban legends. In others, they provided accounts of what had purportedly happened to kin or friends, or they spoke of their own frightening personal encounters with ghosts. Listeners were often less sceptical of tales based purely on hearsay than they were of first-person accounts. Stories possessed an aura of factuality when they contained the formulaic elements of a believable ghost story (White 2000).

A central theme of many narratives was the mobility of ghosts. Far from depicting ghosts as agents of emplacement, as much of the existing literature suggests, research participants emphasized the status of ghosts as displaced beings who were highly mobile and frequently engaged in spectral journeys. The places mentioned were not stable locations, but points of origin, markers of routes, and destinations. This accords with the perception that ghosts constantly transgressed temporal, physical and social boundaries.

Ghosts through time

Through time, ghosts have been differently imagined and represented in the South African lowveld. Moses Malatsi, the oldest research participant, who came of age during the 1940s, recalled that, as a child, he heard that ghosts were abnormally tall, elongated figures without legs and heads. When he was about ten years old, Moses claimed to have seen a ball of fire hovering in the air about a metre above the ground, and then exploding like fireworks. Elders told him that this was the manifestation of the ghost of a person who died long ago but who had not settled in their grave.

Local representations of ghosts have also been shaped by people's interaction with white Afrikaans-speaking farmers and urban workplace supervisors, and with Mozambican migrants and refugees. It is significant that the Northern Sotho word for ghost, *sepóko*, derives from the Afrikaans word *spook* (Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1985: 974). The Afrikaans notion of a ghost appears to be that of a more anthropomorphized spectral human figure. This influence is apparent in local versions of the legend of Kruger's missing millions. Elderly research participants told me that, during

² Research participants told me that one should not speak about a ghostly encounter until at least some time has elapsed, as this might attract the attention of vengeful ghosts.

the South African war of 1899–1902, republican (*boer*) soldiers buried gold in the lowveld. The soldiers reportedly killed and buried humans, horses and dogs along with the treasure, so that their ghosts could guard it. Their ghosts reportedly drove treasure seekers insane and caused them to see policemen and even trains emerge from the ground.

In southern Mozambique, the nineteenth-century wars between Nguni and Ndau warriors, the twentieth-century struggle for national liberation against Portuguese colonial rule, and the subsequent civil war between RENAMO rebels and the FRELIMO government gave rise to the concept of *mpfhukwa*. The *mpfhukwa* were the unsettled and bitter spirits of those killed in war who had not received a proper burial; they were believed to haunt those responsible for their deaths (see Honwana 2003). Generations of migrant labourers from Mozambique, and a large number of refugees during the civil war (Ngwato 2011), kept residents of Bushbuckridge closely in touch with developments across the international border. One research participant relayed a story of a cattle thief who killed a Mozambican refugee working as a cattle herder in Bushbuckridge. Not long afterwards, the killer too died a gruesome death. He started speaking to himself, sometimes shouted ‘Help!’, and held his hands above his head, as if he sought to protect himself from some unseen danger.³ Hence, the Mozambican representation of ghosts was that they were more vengeful and dangerous than their South African counterparts.

Throughout the period of my fieldwork, research participants said that ghosts were a product of a failure of care. Whenever a violent death occurred – suicide, shootings, stabbings or motor vehicle accidents – it was incumbent on relatives of the deceased to cleanse the place of death and bring home the body and spirit.⁴ First, an ambulance took the corpse to the mortuary. Then, late on the Friday afternoon, mourners fetched the corpse and drove the hearse to the place of death. Here, a senior relative – ideally the father’s sister (*rakgadi*) – swept the ground with a branch of the African weeping wattle (*mosehla*)⁵ and a white cloth. While working, she recited the family praise poem and asked the spirit to accompany the deceased home to their final resting place, where they could stay with the ancestors. The family placed the cloth next to the coffin and tied the tree branch to the rear of the hearse, so that it dragged on the road surface all the way home. In one case, mourners fetched the corpse and spirit of a murder victim in Johannesburg and dragged the branch for 500 kilometres on the national road.

In the case of any violent death, the corpse should remain in the hearse, outside the gate, and should never enter the yard. This, I was told, was a precaution to prevent the spirit of the deceased from haunting the home. ‘If you bring it into the house, deaths might occur.’ Those who wished to see the corpse for the last time (*ho hloboga*)

³ A parallel notion is a condition known as *iqungwa* in Zulu. Clegg (1981: 192) translates this concept as ‘death wish’. A shadow of the deceased spirit clings to the killer and attracts violence; the killer will constantly put himself in situations where he will have to kill someone or be killed.

⁴ Villagers identify four different components of the person: flesh (*mmele*), blood (*madi*), breath or wind (*moya*) and aura (*seriti*) (Niehaus 2002). They translated the former two components as ‘body’ and the latter two as ‘spirit’.

⁵ The *mosehla* is widely recognized as a powerful cleansing agent. It can be used to brush one’s teeth, strain maize meal, filter beer and sieve peanuts. In the bush, its strong smell is believed to ward off snakes.

had to view it in the hearse. On the Saturday morning after the funeral service, relatives took the coffin to the graveyard and lowered it into the grave. They placed the white cloth inside the coffin and the *mosehla* branch on top of the grave. In this manner, mourners reunited the body and spirit that death had torn apart.⁶ Should these rituals not be performed, I was told, the spirit would be left in an angry and restless state, dislocated from the home of its kin and the graves of its ancestors. In this case, the spirit would continue to hover around the place of death and might seek to wreak revenge on the living.

A common belief is that uncollected spirits are responsible for the emergence of high death zones on the highways. South Africa has an alarmingly high road accident death rate – 15,500 deaths were recorded during 2007 alone (Lamont and Lee 2015: 477). The N40, which cuts through the eastern corner of Impalahoek, on the way from Hazyview to Hoedspruit, is calculated to be South Africa's eleventh most dangerous road.⁷ Research participants considered a bridge on the outskirts of Impalahoek, where many fatalities occurred, as one of the most haunted sites along the road. Moses Ndlovu, who drove minibus taxis along the N40 during the late 1980s, told me that, as he approached the bridge one morning at 3.30 a.m., he saw the figure of a white woman standing in the centre of the road. He twice hooted at her, but she did not budge. Moses then changed to first gear and saw that her eyes shone like fire. Suddenly, she disappeared. Other villagers, too, claimed to have seen the same spectre of a woman cross the road at night. She reportedly died in a road accident, and she distracted the attention of drivers to cause further deaths.

The same kind of hauntings occurred in homes that were not thoroughly cleansed after death, or where the deceased person had not received an appropriate burial. A much talked about case during fieldwork was that of a popular drinking tavern, managed by Caswell Ndlovu, a former policeman from Burgersfort, and his wife, Afisi. In 2011, Caswell unexpectedly died of heart failure. Contrary to his kin's wishes that he should be buried with his own ancestors at his natal home, Afisi arranged for his funeral to be held in Impalahoek. The law, but not public opinion, was on her side. During the next few years, a spate of misfortunes occurred. In 2014, a notorious criminal gang robbed the tavern and raped both Afisi and her fifteen-year-old daughter. She was too traumatized to continue operating the tavern and subsequently leased it to three different businessmen. All failed to register a profit. Former bar staff claimed that they constantly sensed Caswell's presence at the tavern and regularly saw a shadow move in the passage behind the counter. The spirit, they said, was vengeful and desperately wished to be buried in Burgersfort.

But from interviews it was clear that ghosts did not simply connect people to places, as in the situations described by Bear (2007), Stern (2019) and Johnson (2013). Instead, ghosts were on the move, and frequently compelled those they met to travel with them. In this respect, research participants described two very different kinds of spectral journey. The first is a variant of the well-known plot of the vanishing

⁶ See Lee (2012: 205–6) on the ritual of 'fetching the spirit' from the road, and Jiyane *et al.* (2012) on 'fetching the spirit' from hospitals in different parts of South Africa.

⁷ 'These are the twenty most dangerous roads in South Africa', BusinessTech, 13 September 2017, <<https://businesstech.co.za/news/motoring/198576/these-are-the-20-most-dangerous-roads-in-south-africa/>>, accessed 28 May 2021.

hitchhiker (Bennett 1998; Johnson 2007), in which a ghost secures a lift from a male driver along the national road and then the ghost mysteriously disappears. In the second kind of journey, an anonymous ghost called *sauwe* captures men walking about late at night and forces them to walk in the direction of graves and graveyards, located well beyond the village borders.

The vanishing hitchhiker

The ghostly hitchhikers encountered along highways near Bushbuckridge are frequently said to be the spirits of white people. This is because white South Africans and tourists do not cleanse places of death, nor do they fetch the spirits of the deceased. Some research participants observed that white people do sometimes erect crosses and lay flowers at the places where loved ones died in motor vehicle accidents, but they were unsure whether this practice prevented hauntings. The ghosts of white people, however, were perceived to be less dangerous than those of their fellow black citizens, largely because the former hardly ever fortify their bodies with powerful herbal potions.

Many accounts of vanishing hitchhikers were based purely on hearsay. The well-known ghost of a white woman hitchhiker is said to stand at night at a place at Lekokoto, near White River. Should one stop to give her a ride and ask where she wishes to go, she is likely to speak in the past tense and give the curious answer: 'When you found me, I was going to White River!' The question 'Do you have a house there?' elicits the answer 'No!' Should you enquire further whether she lives with her parents, she will say: 'No! We had an accident. Five years ago, we died along the road.' Then, after uttering these words, she suddenly disappears.

I was also told of several hitchhikers on roads leading from Phalaborwa and Tzaneen. A middle-aged black man, possibly a worker in the copper mines, was purported to stand at a place for hitchhikers outside Phalaborwa, with a large bag. He would never ask for a ride, but when motorists drove past, even at high speed, and looked in the rear-view mirror, they might see his figure sitting in the rear seat of their car. This would cause them to swerve or apply the brakes. Should you tell others about your encounter, they would not find your story believable and might tell you that you had been hallucinating or had taken drugs. Some hitchhikers from Tzaneen would drive with you for about four kilometres and would then suddenly say 'Thanks! This is where I died!' They would then disappear into the darkness. Another male hitchhiker would ask for a ride to Casteel, and, while driving past recently built settlements, he would comment: 'Man! This place is developed! Before I died, there were only bushes over here.' He, too, would suddenly vanish.

Other accounts more closely resemble the American urban legend of a woman hitchhiker who leaves an item in the vehicle; when the male driver contacts her family to return it, he finds that she is deceased and died in some unexpected way (Brunvand 1981; Bennett 1998). One story was of a young woman who travels from Phalaborwa to her parents' home in the village of Cottondale, in Bushbuckridge. After the driver had reached her destination and had stopped at the gate of her parents' home, she would alight and say, 'Please wait here! I want to get into the home to give you some money for the ride.' The driver would wait in vain for her to return. If he should knock at the door of her parents' home and ask for her, they would ask: 'Where

are you from?' Should he say, 'From Phalaborwa!', they would reply: 'You are not the first person to whom this has happened. You have transported a ghost – this person was not a human being. She was the ghost of our daughter who died in a car accident three months ago.' In this way, the driver had done the moral deed of collecting the spirit, bringing her home, and reuniting her with her loved ones. There was also a theme of sexual disappointment: narrators described the young woman as extremely attractive and claimed that she deliberately targeted single male drivers.

Several male research participants told of their personal encounters with ghosts along the highways. Yet only one account – that of Lucky Shokane, a single man who was a skilled panel beater – involved transporting a ghostly passenger. Lucky told me that one evening he and his friends were drinking at a local tavern until midnight, and he then drove each of his friends home. On the way to his own place, Lucky noticed a young woman walking by a bridge near a graveyard. He stopped and asked, 'What's wrong? It is late!' This was followed by an elaborate conversation. Lucky noticed that she wore a cream dress, was of a light complexion, and was extremely attractive. At the end of their conversation he propositioned her to have sexual intercourse, and she agreed. But she said that first she wished to see her baby, who was with friends, and then fetch things from her own home. Then she would accompany him to his place. 'On the way, I did the talking and she said nothing. I tried to romance her and take her hand, but she did not respond. This is when I realized that she was too quiet and did not want to have sex. Therefore, I did not persist.' After she had seen her baby, Lucky drove her to her home. She said that she stayed in a small two-roomed home behind a large house, and asked him to wait in the car. Lucky did not see any light go on in the home. 'I started to think something was wrong. I started to be scared and my hair stood straight on the back of my head. I was too afraid to go outside, so I went home.' The next day Lucky returned to speak to her neighbours. But they did not know her, and he found that the two-roomed home was completely deserted. Therefore, Lucky concluded that she was a ghost, who merely wanted him to take her home.

Other drivers recollected their personal perceptions of uncanny phenomena along the Kampersrus road. The area was once the heartland of the Northern Sotho Moletele chiefdom, but had been occupied by white farm owners since the early twentieth century. Betwell Mogale, a fruit and vegetable salesman from Impalahoek, told me that he once observed a white man and white woman fighting by the roadside and fiercely beating each other with their fists. 'White people usually don't fight in public,' he said. 'I thought the man might kill her, so I turned around to separate them. But when I came to the spot, they had disappeared. I think they were ghosts.' On another occasion, Betwell saw a coffin lying in the centre of the very same road. 'Maybe,' he suggested, 'it had fallen from a moving vehicle. Otherwise, someone had put it there for a purpose.'

In the accounts above, research participants seemed to fear the extraordinary and uncanny nature of ghosts, and their capacity to challenge conventional everyday modes of understanding, more than their actual deeds. This is despite the notion that disappearing hitchhikers distracted the attention of drivers and caused them to stop concentrating on the road. But there were also accounts in which ghosts resembled the Mozambican idea of a vengeful spirit more closely. Daniel Manzini, a sales representative who regularly travelled the highways, emphasized the potentially

destructive capacity of ghosts. During 2015, he and his cousin, Albert, were driving on the road past the Strijdom tunnel to visit a kinsman in Mashinini. At a curve on the Abel Erasmus mountain pass, they encountered a man riding on a bicycle. He drove on the barrier line and came straight towards them at very high speed. Daniel could not swerve, as his car had defective shock absorbers, and he only narrowly missed the cyclist. 'I saw him in the mirror. There was a car behind us, but the man just disappeared.' In Mashinini, he and Albert told their kinsman about their uncanny experience. A neighbour informed them that at that very place a truck once knocked down an old man on a bicycle. The old man died there, and today his restless spirit seeks revenge. Daniel described himself as a completely innocent potential victim, who did nothing to provoke the malevolent ghost.

The journeys travelled by the ghost hitchhikers were mostly from their places of death along the highway towards their homes in the village. In a sense, the ghosts sought to complete journeys cut short for the deceased and to elicit the help of generous drivers to do the work of transporting their spirits, work left undone by their own relatives. But, as in Amos Tutuola's classical novel *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), the completeness of death proves elusive (Nyamnjoh 2017). The narratives caricatured gender in an almost comical manner. Women hitchhikers enacted the role of the proverbial damsels in distress and seduced male drivers into taking them for rides along the highway. But they invariably disappeared and thereby frustrated the drivers' quest to pursue any romantic relationship. This can be seen as an act of revenge against masculine domination of the roads and men's sexual assertiveness. The male ghosts who appeared along the highways, such as that of the old man on the bicycle, were depicted as more unreasonable and less in control. They struck out violently against drivers in order to cause further accidents along the road, in revenge for their own deaths.

Johnnie Walker and the *sauwe*

The most authoritative Northern Sotho dictionary defines the word *sáúwe* as meaning to 'lose one's bearings' (Ziervogel and Mokgokong 1985: 1157). By contrast, research participants used the word as a noun, to describe a dark shadow or black cloud that descended on those walking alone at night along footpaths within the village, took possession of their minds and forced them to walk in an unintended direction. The *sauwe* had no specific form, was invisible, hard to describe, and literally could not even be dreamed of. Research participants, nonetheless, believed it to be the ghostly manifestation of an unknown person. In the words of a middle-aged man who formerly worked for a Johannesburg liquor company: 'The *sauwe* possesses your mind ... It will drive you like a moving corpse – or a zombie – and take you in the direction it wants to go. You will keep moving like Johnnie Walker [the most popular whisky brand among the South African elite].' While walking under its influence, you would be protected by the *sauwe* from being robbed by thugs or bitten by snakes.

My middle-aged interviewee's use of the word 'zombie' (*setlotlwane*, plural *ditlotlwane*) is particularly insightful. In local belief, witches have the capacity to transform their victims into zombies. They first captured their victims' auras (*seriti*) and then progressively took hold of different parts of their bodies, until they possessed the

entire person. But witches deceived the victims' kin by leaving an image of them behind. At home, witches shrank their zombies to a metre in size, cut out their tongues, and used them as nocturnal servants to do menial domestic work. Hence, research participants conceptualized zombie making as the 'theft of persons' (Niehaus 2005). Like ghosts, zombies are 'undead' and in a kind of 'wandering exile'. In narratives about the *sauwe*, the status of ghost resembles that of the witch, and that of its human victim the zombie, who is exploited and driven in a direction the victim does not choose.

The *sauwe* did not strike at random but captured those who disturbed it by intruding on its lair and by making excessive noise in the early morning hours. Drunken men, returning home from drinking taverns, were most vulnerable to attack. This, I was told, was because their minds could easily be controlled. While the drunken victims thought that they were going home, they were, in fact, walking in the direction of a graveyard well beyond the village borders. In the most formulaic story, the victim assumed that he had reached his bedroom but would wake up in the graveyard, having slept on top of a tomb. But the *sauwe's* mission was seldom accomplished; most walkers came to their senses and regained their bearings before they had reached their intended destination.

Regular customers of the Ntseketske tavern told me of a man who took the wrong road home. When he came to his senses, about an hour and a half later, he stood in front of the graveyard, trying to open its gate. His clothes were torn, he had cuts and bruises all over his body, and he had been walking barefoot. Another regular drinker at the tavern reportedly slept in the cooking hut (*lapa*) of his neighbour's home. The *sauwe*, he said, made him believe that he was sleeping in his own bedroom.

Richard Malatsi, who drank at a different tavern, called GaMokoena, claimed that he had twice been abducted. In 1988, he awoke, having slept on the floor of the ancestral hut (*ndumba*) at his parents' home, and having hung his clothes over a clay pot (*pitsa*). Nine years later, Richard became aware that he had walked from GaMokoena, past a secondary school, past a graveyard, and through dense bush until he reached the fence of a nature reserve. He then walked along the fence, looking for an opening. 'I think I walked all night long, and the *sauwe* only left me at sunrise.' The force of the *sauwe* was clearly apparent to one of my research assistants. While returning home from the night vigil preceding a funeral, he passed his next-door neighbour walking in the opposite direction.

When I asked him, 'Where are you going?', my neighbour said, 'Home!' I told him that he had taken the wrong route, but he argued with me. The next day the neighbour told me that the *sauwe* had taken him for a ride, and that he had woken up in the bushes.

In only one account did the *sauwe* appear in human form. A research participant told me of the experiences of his friend, Freddy Mnisi, who once walked home from the Elite Funeral Parlour, his place of employment, to his home in Phelindaba. On the way, he stopped to drink two quarts of beer and to purchase a packet of cigarettes. At about 11 p.m., Freddy encountered a man standing at an intersection, and together they took the Phelindaba road. It was too dark for Freddy to see his face. While walking, the man asked for a light, and he finished off his entire cigarette by taking only two

very strong puffs. As they walked further, the two men continued to smoke; when Freddy's pack was finished, the man continued to offer him more cigarettes. They reached Phelindaba by midnight but continued walking, past the village, until sunrise, when Freddy's ghostly companion mysteriously disappeared. At 8 a.m., workers found Freddy lying beside the road at the Mariepskop forest. His feet were so swollen that he could no longer walk, and his lips and chest burned profusely. After the workers had taken him home, Freddy vowed to stop smoking. It was his addiction to nicotine, he said, that rendered him vulnerable to the *sauwe*.

Sceptics expressed the opinion that these stories were little more than an excuse for irresponsible drinking and for womanizing. A mathematics teacher, who said that ghosts were a figment of people's imagination, remarked to me: 'I'm not sure if it is the *sauwe* or alcohol. I think it is liquor that affects their minds.'⁸ Another research participant said that men might claim they had been taken by the *sauwe*, while, in fact, they had spent the evening with extramarital lovers. Heavy drinking provoked moral condemnation. Drinking taverns were excessively noisy, especially when they played loud juke-box music until the early morning. Most taverns closed at midnight on weekdays, at 2 a.m. on Saturday mornings, but not till 6 a.m. on Sunday mornings. Some men stayed at the tavern for the entire weekend, simply dozing off in their cars, and spent a huge portion of their salaries on liquor and cigarettes. In the week before my visit to the field, police tried to force a local tavern to close at 3 a.m. on the Saturday morning, but drinkers threw empty beer bottles at them. A community meeting failed to resolve the issue. Parents reportedly told the police that if they closed the taverns, their sons might simply drink further from home, and that this situation would be even more untenable.

The unscrupulous conduct of elders who drank excessively at home was another source of concern. For example, an elderly woman drank home-brewed beer with neighbours to celebrate the return of their sons from the circumcision lodge. She went to the toilet but disappeared and was found in a neighbouring village, ten kilometres away, the next day. She was so exhausted that kin had to take her to hospital, where she was placed on an intravenous drip. This elderly woman and her kin, too, blamed the *sauwe*.

But there is more to these ghostly abductions than their association with drunkenness. What is telling about these accounts is the routes travelled. The *sauwe* nearly always took their victims north and west, and hardly ever south or east. It is precisely from these directions that households were forcefully removed to Impalahoek before the 1960s. The families of many current residents of Impalahoek had worked as labour tenants on white-owned farms in the north, but they were forced to move into the reserve after the mechanization of production operations allowed for more intense cultivation of the land (Harries 1989: 89; Niehaus 2001: 17–29). This meant that they were estranged from their ancestral graves, which still lay on the northern farms, some of which later became game lodges. Other households were relocated to

⁸ One research participant believed that the experience of those taken by the *sauwe* resonated with those of persons abducted by thieves. The thieves would learn their victims' PIN numbers by observing them withdraw money at auto-tellers, offer them a lift, and then drug them with a spiked drink along the way. The hapless victims would awaken by the roadside and discover that their bank cards, mobile phones and even shoes had been stolen.

Impalahoek from the slopes of Mount Moholoholo in the west during the implementation of afforestation projects (Niehaus 2001: 17–29).⁹ Hence, we can see the spectral journeys of the *sauwe* as a quest by spirits of the uncared for and forgotten dead to forge connections with living persons, even though the latter may not be their actual descendants.

Mirrors, moralities and displacements

Kwon's (2008) study of ghosts of the American war in Vietnam offers an alternative perspective to the literature I cited in the introduction to this article. Kwon emphasizes the distinction between ancestors and ghosts, and highlights the issues of displacement and morality. He observes that there has been a revival of rituals for the dead in the aftermath of the war. Vietnamese households distinguished between the categories *ong ba* (grandparents) and *co bac* (uncles and aunts). They honoured the former at ancestral altars and central community temples, and, in this way, they affirmed genealogical solidarity and moral unity. Ghosts were the products of bad deaths away from home; the deceased had not settled in the world of the dead and remained on the periphery of this world. Vietnamese villagers were sympathetic towards those who had disappeared, desperately sought to find lost kin, and spared no expense to rebury their remains in family graveyards. At the same time, they were curious about the identity of ghosts and the circumstances of their deaths and sought to accommodate them in external household altars. For example, villagers burned incense, offered votive dollars and hung cold drinks on trees for the ghosts of French and Moroccan soldiers, American GIs and Asians in American uniforms. Unlike the state, families did not discriminate between the ghosts of civilians and soldiers, war heroes and counter-revolutionaries. Kwon (*ibid.*) argues that this concern arises from the perception that the ghosts of strangers mirror the displacement that survivors themselves experienced during the American war. Vietnamese people were driven from their homes and resettled in fire-free zones, while 'mass killings' terminated their family lines.

We can see several analogies between the Vietnamese situation and the situation that prevailed in the South African lowveld at the time of my fieldwork. For one, Kwon's relational approach shows that the ancestors are more likely to be markers of places than ghosts. The Anglo-Indians of Kharagpur, described by Bear (2007), made no clear distinction between ancestors and ghosts, and the Canadians described by Stern (2019) sustained little active relationship with their ancestors. In these situations, ghosts seem to substitute for the ancestors as agents of emplacement. This interpretation is reinforced by Stern's observation that heritage workers who did not come of age in Cobalt, and who had no access to the nostalgic reminiscences of elders within their families, were more likely to encounter ghosts (*ibid.*: 241). In Johnson's (2013) discussion of Chiang Mai, ghosts appeared in modern, middle-class gated communities that were novel spaces, far removed from any places that the ancestors of suburban residents might have inhabited. In Vietnam, as in South

⁹ There is also a deeper historical significance. During the battle of Mount Moholoholo of 1864, Maripe's Northern Sotho warriors defeated Swazi invaders of the lowveld. The unburied remains of many deceased warriors reportedly lie at the foot of the mountain (Niehaus 2001: 23–4).

Africa, ghosts were displaced beings par excellence and addressed a different set of concerns than the ancestors did.

Kwon (2008) also highlights the issue of care; in certain important respects, we can read narratives of ghosts as moral tales. The Vietnamese narratives about ordinary families taking care of the ghosts of deceased enemy soldiers depict a broader, more inclusive morality than is evident in the memorial practices of their country's post-revolutionary government. In South Africa, by contrast, narratives of ghosts highlight the failure of kin to live up to the moral responsibilities of care. Ghosts were deemed vengeful precisely because surviving kin neglected their duties of cleansing the place of death, fetching the spirit of the deceased and bringing it home. Violent deaths on the highways and on village footpaths were, in many respects, comparable to experiences of war. The traumatic nature of death, coupled with neglect, caused a profound sense of disorientation and anger among the spirits of the deceased. Research participants conceptualized anger (*befelwa*) and rage (*sibefedi*) as outcomes of an injury to the heart (Niehaus 2009: 27).

Herein lies the difference between possessing spirits and ghosts. Research participants identified possessing spirits as those of people killed during the nineteenth-century wars and distinguished between the Malopo (who were Sotho), the Ngoni (who were Shangaan, Zulu and Swazi), and the fierce Nzau (from Musapa in Mozambique). Possession involved some degree of culpability, because the spirits usually possessed the descendants of those who killed them in battle and left them childless. The signs of possession included both physical and mental sickness. During a ritual, which included drumming, instructors exhorted the spirits to speak through the mouth of the afflicted person and state their demands. Once appeased, the spirits gradually bestowed the powers of divination, foresight and healing on their mediums. The Malopo specialized in healing venereal diseases and sick children; the Ngoni in treating paralysis and skin diseases; and the Nzau in detecting witchcraft. Hence, the possessed persons converted restless foreign spirits from hostile to benign agents. But in the case of ghosts, such work did not occur. Unlike the possessing spirits, ghosts did not simply haunt those responsible for their deaths and their descendants, but anyone who intruded on their lairs.

Immorality is also significant in the deeds of the haunted. This was perhaps less apparent in the case of male drivers who transported vanishing hitchhikers, although their over-assertiveness in sexual matters did come into play. In the case of the *sauwe*, where the ghosts were nearly always faceless and anonymous, the focus of attention shifted to their living victims. Research participants invariably described men who were abducted by the *sauwe* as immoral drunkards who wasted money that should be used to build a home and support dependants on beer and cigarettes, and who walked about the village during the early morning hours. It was almost as if the *sauwe* enacted righteous punishment on troublesome men and attempted to expel them from the village into the graveyards and the bush.

Alcohol and tobacco appear as important multivocal symbols in my research participants' accounts of ghosts. On the one hand, their consumption is a well-known marker of dangerous, immoral conduct. Drunkenness was a prominent cause of motor vehicle accidents and was widely associated with disagreeableness and fighting. In 2020, the South African Road Traffic Management Corporation claimed that drunk driving accounted for 27.1 per cent of fatal crashes in the country (White 2020).

Likewise, the dangers of smoking are well known, largely from the health warnings on cigarette packets. On a few occasions, I observed drinkers at taverns jokingly refer to the beer they were drinking and the cigarettes they were smoking as 'keys to the mortuary'. Moreover, alcohol and tobacco induced an altered state of consciousness and a feeling of being outside oneself, which were also associated with communion with the spiritual world. This link between alcohol, tobacco and the deceased was apparent in several practices. Gravediggers were often served with strong Boxer tobacco, cannabis and home-brewed beer to immunize themselves against the dangers of working in a place where spirits roamed. In rituals, descendants often poured sorghum beer on the altar (*ganzelo*), to cool, placate and honour their ancestors (McAllister 2006). Descendants and diviners alike used snuff to facilitate communication whenever they invoked the ancestors or possessing spirits (Murray 1975).¹⁰

Following Kwon's (2008) line of argument, we can also see ghosts as mirroring the displacements that villages in the South African lowveld endured. These include apartheid-era removals, such as relocations into areas reserved for exclusive African occupation, and resettlements into new village sections resulting from the implementation of agricultural improvement schemes. Stories of travelling ghosts on the highways also capture experiences of the constant movements by male labour migrants between their villages of residence in the rural periphery and their workplaces in the cities. In the apartheid era, when influx control legislation prohibited inhabitants from Impalahoek from taking up residence in the urban areas, these journeys were compulsory. Today, they are also undertaken by women and have a discretionary character. But death on the road still has devastating consequences for the livelihoods of rural dependants. Stories of ghostly hitchhikers and of the *sauwe* also speak of frustrated aspirations and of the experience of being forced to take unwanted directions, directions not of your choosing. Hence, ghostly apparitions are not simply the outcome of the neglect of errors by villagers; they also express broader discontent about political and economic changes.

A comparison with the situation in Vietnam thus enables us to see how accounts of ghosts highlight crucial social concerns in the South African lowveld. As displaced beings, ghosts mirror the dislocations households experienced during the apartheid-era population removals and the separation of kin by the system of migrant labour. These accounts also highlight families' failure to care for deceased kin, and they comment on the over-assertiveness of male drivers and the immorality of drunkards who disturb the living and dead at night.

Conclusions

In the South African lowveld, ghosts were most certainly less prominent entities in the cosmological imagination than ancestors and possessing spirits. The invocation of common paternal ancestors established and reinforced ties of consanguinity that were crucially important in the quest for sociability and support in times of economic

¹⁰ Murray (1975: 76) writes that, in Lesotho, 'the idiom of smoking' says something about the relations between the living and the dead. 'Broadly speaking, men give *kwae* [tobacco] to the shades for invoking their goodwill on the public behalf ... women receive *kwae* [snuff] from the shades for relief and illumination.'

uncertainty. Through the agency of possessing spirits, diviners claimed the authority to heal and to restructure fragmented social relations. As I have tried to show in this article, although ghosts are more marginal, they too address pressing social and political concerns, notably those of displacement, alienation and a failure to care for the spirits of the deceased.

In the South African lowveld, ancestors are more likely to be conceptualized as agents of emplacement, firmly housed in family graves or in communal graveyards. Ghosts were displaced from lineages and networks of kin. Their location was not in dining rooms and in churches, as among the Anglo-Indians of Kharagpur (Bear 2007); in abandoned mineshafts, as in Cobalt, Canada (Stern 2019); in empty homes, as in the gated middle-class communities of Chiang Mai (Johnson 2013); or on the former battlegrounds of the American war in Vietnam (Kwon 2008). Ghosts traversed the highways that connect villages, towns and cities, and they travelled on the footpaths between different village sections. Even when ghosts were experienced inside buildings, their footsteps could usually be heard in passages that connect different rooms.

Ghosts transgressed physical, temporal and social boundaries and had the capacity to make connections that would otherwise be impossible. Not only were ghosts not circumscribed by place; they also assumed the diverse forms of flickering lights, elongated figures at village taps, human hitchhikers, invisible clouds and shadows. Ghosts, too, were not confined to any specific time: the traumas they experienced in the past kept on replaying in the present. Moreover, ghosts transgressed the boundaries separating bodies and spirits and between different social groups. While profound racial segregation still prevailed in the South African lowveld during my fieldwork, black travellers regularly encountered the ghosts of white people on the national highways and roads traversing Impalahoek. The boundaries that separate people from other people do not separate people from ghosts. This is also true of the situation in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and in Vietnam, where local people regularly encountered the ghosts of foreigners, white persons and American GIs.

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