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# From blaming witches to blaming foreigners: The torments of the black South African's psyche



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Black South Africa's social imaginary is one that seems distorted and tormented by the ghosts of the past. They seem to be always fixated on creating metaphors to enable them escape from both self and a world-view distorted by the violent experience of apartheid and racial segregation. This self-denying, cultural escapism produces a consciousness picketed by delusional subterfuges. Anthropologists, Political Scientists and other social scientists have copiously documented this delusional tendency of native black South Africans to externalize their problems by projecting its root cause to outside forces. For instance, as the AIDS pandemic wreaked havoc amidst the South African black population, the people were in denial, disregarding all medical and scientific proofs and evidence, and instead continued to link HIV/AIDS-related deaths to *isidliso*, otherwise called "Black poison," an evil work of witches.

In "*Madumo: a Man bewitched*," Adam Ash forth paints a narrative on how the emerging democratic society of South Africa had been merged into a post-traumatic experience of the black community of South Africa. In the post-apartheid, democratic regime, the black South Africans, despite the various redistributive policies enacted by successive governments from Nelson Mandela to the present, incompetent Jacob Zuma, have found

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themselves in a dilemma: services such as electricity and housing that were once offered free, have now come under the strict intermediation of commercial forces. They also find themselves in unequal competition over opportunities in the formal sector that are preconditioned on requisite formal education and competences that must be acquired in time in formal settings, and which majority of them lack and are incapable of acquiring. So, Madumo's relatives were impatient with his new opportunity to pursue formal education since they reason he stands a chance of socially distancing himself from them. Accusing him of the death of his 50-year old mother through witchcraft, Madumo was literally expelled from his home, thus forfeiting his chance at university education and had to live a life as a vagabond at the outskirts of Soweto, South Africa's most famous township. Even Madumo didn't see his situation as the consequence of malevolent relatives; he attributed it to witchcraft and so to juju priest, *Inyanga* he went to seek solution.

Madumo's situation arises in a society where belief in witchcraft plays such a large role in everyday life. With the disappearance of the common struggle for emancipation from apartheid, which hitherto formed a convergent bond, black South Africans' sense of common purpose seems to have hollowed out into a void that became filled with reinforced witchcraft belief "as a more potent, ubiquitous cultural force." (Oomen, Barbara, 2006).

However, the belief in witchcraft and the violence that trails its path is not limited to Africa. Witchcraft beliefs are an acutely African pandemic which seems to have dominated anthropological research since Evans Pritchard's 1937's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* in contemporary Ivory Coast. Underlying this theme is the interpretation of witchcraft as both a technology of rationalization – that is, a pragmatic epistemology for the understanding of an ever-changing phenomena, as well as forming an integral part of the theory of the real (that is, as a metaphysics of being.) In recent times, the perspective has evolved into a social constructivist theory that seeks to articulate a coherent narrative of individual and communal responses to dynamical social processes especially, the social transformations of modernity. Approaches employed by diverse scholars in the study of witchcraft have been largely couched in a Durkheimian perspective, whereby social, and not natural, circumstances provide the experiential basis for belief in witchcraft. Under this influence, the interest has focused mainly on the construction of witchcraft within localities, its divergent nuances, representational



be acutely manifest against close relatives' and neighbors' conspicuous good fortune. But rather than blame their laziness and ineptitude, the black South African attributes his poverty and destitution to the evil machinations of others. But in recent times, they seem to have graduated from blaming evil spirits to blaming foreigners. Certainly, the foreigner has nothing to do with his predicament. Mandela and his successor Mbeki faced a huge challenge from the start: a yawning gap between rich and poor, low level of education, sluggish economy, and a lack of access to basic resources suffered by majority of the population. Although some progress has been made, but it has been slow and insufficient. Just as Nigeria's economy bottomed out in the past one year as commodity prices plunged, so did South Africa's. From a per capita income of almost \$9,000 in 2014, South Africa's per capita income plunged to \$5,000 in 2015 – a loss of more than 50%. The implication of this is dire for the lazy black South African –unable to keep a job and with a badly managed economy under Zuma, the black South African's world caved in and he suffered a relapse into the old scape-goating mechanism. Only now, it is a case of Stockholm syndrome. Like in Tanzania, he begins to blame the easiest prey – hardworking Nigerians and other foreigners.

Seeing the media images of blacks and law enforcement agents carting away their spoils from ransacked shops operated by Nigerians in cities like Johannesburg, it becomes clear that the primary motif for this scape-goating is simply, economic stress – misery and hunger.

But whatever be the reasons for these incessant xenophobic outbursts that often look like a state sponsored terrorism, it is important for the South African government to realize that its citizens are throwing a spanner in the wheel of progress of Africa and that the consequences of a reprisal attack in Nigeria on South African business would endanger both economies. The average Nigerian today feels that black South Africans have repaid them evil for the good they did them during apartheid. It seems for black South Africans that one good turn doesn't deserve another.

As the two largest economies in Africa, any diplomatic tangle between the two would be felt in the entire continent. Nigerians are willing to pass off these sort of incidents as occasional and random events that often manifest in densely populated, inner cities of developing countries, but things get serious and call for deeper reflection when it is discovered that law enforcement agents in South Africa are collaborating with unruly

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citizens to unleash mayhem on hapless foreigners. These paint a picture of planned and orchestrated attack on foreigners. Barbaric as this sounds in a purportedly modern economy like South Africa, we see this as a manifestation of the failure of leadership that has become characteristic of the current political elite in South Africa today. It is obvious that Jacob Zuma's leadership has failed to produce dividends for the larger majority of black South Africans who are now inclined to take out their frustration on hapless foreigners.


In yet another video clip circulating online, a young South African in his twenties was issuing threats and asking black foreigners from other African countries to leave South Africa or be lynched. It is obvious that black African foreigners are the singular target of these xenophobic attacks and the only explanation to this is that South African blacks have succumbed to the Stockholm syndrome where a captive gradually becomes emotionally identified with his captor. It seems that the black South African's psyche has suffered irreparable damage. But the logic of this irrationality is that we are still going to witness the self-annihilation of the black South African. Because after he has expelled and annihilated other African blacks from South Africa, he will certainly turn back on himself. Apartheid may have ostensibly gone, but it seems that the psychological damage to the black South African psyche is final.

## Bongo Adi


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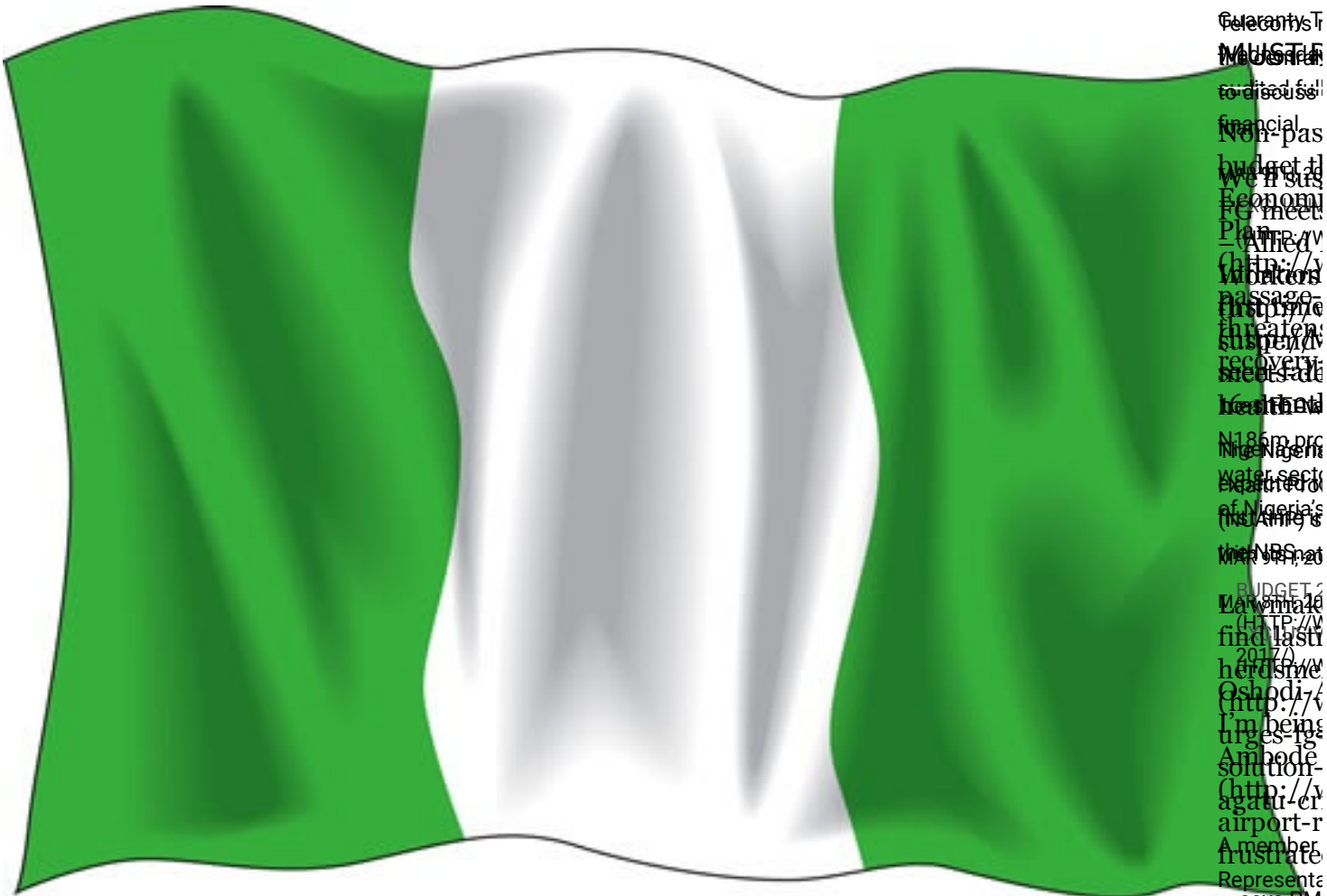
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