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South Africans and the blame game

By Bongo Adi | 10 March 2017 | 4:15 am



Xenophobic Attack

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 to escape from both self and a worldview 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 externalise 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 Ashforth paints a narrative on how the emerging democratic society of South Africa had been merged into a post-traumatic experience for the black community of South Africa. In the post-apartheid, democratic regime, the native black South Africans, despite the various redistributive policies enacted by successive governments from Nelson Mandela to the present, incompetent Jacob Zuma, have found 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 over 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

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since they reason he stands a chance of socially distancing himself from them. Accusing him of the death of his 50 years' old mother through witchcraft, Madumo was literally expelled from his home, thus forfeiting his chance at university education and had to live a life of a vagabond on 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 South Africa. Witchcraft belief is 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 rationalisation – 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 social construction of witchcraft within localities, its divergent nuances, representational symbolisms and political instrumentality.

This instrumentalist interpretation seems to dominate the study of witchcraft not only in anthropology, sociology and social psychology, but also, more recently, in economics as well.

In Tanzania, a Berkeley professor of economics, Ted Miguel in 2005 used empirical data to draw a link between drought, poverty and witch-killings. Controlling for crop failures due to protracted drought in northern Tanzania using data on rainfall, Prof. Miguel shows that poverty (owing to crop failures, which in turn is due to drought or over-drainage) stimulates "fictitious" witchcraft imaginations that lead to the perpetration of social violence, particularly witch-killing, targeted principally against the socially disadvantaged – elderly women, infants and other vulnerable and defenseless members of the community. Stronger members of the society, anticipating poor harvest, employed witchcraft accusations to eliminate these less capable and vulnerable members to reduce the number of claims to already depleted food rations. We have also seen this pattern of witchcraft profiling at work in many parts of Nigeria where parents would torture or expel their infant children under the guise of witchcraft when in fact, the plan is just to eliminate their responsibility for the upkeep of their children. Similar scenarios played out in medieval Europe where it has been shown that witch-hunting enacted a process of violence and scapegoating that had direct links to deteriorating economic conditions brought about by severity in temperatures.

But it seems that the symptom of scapegoating and other-directing of the source of negative outcomes have become more endemic in South Africa. As Oomen puts it, "these days, almost every black South African, and not a few white ones, will agree that witchcraft-related events have increased over the past decade. Police statistics, for instance for the Northern province of Limpopo, show a rise in witchcraft-related violence from 115 cases per year in 1994 and 1995 to 1,093 in 1996 and 1,293 in 2001. The general sense that more evil spirits are at work than ever, for instance because of HIV/AIDS, drives masses of people to traditional healers like sangomas and inyangas (of whom there are an estimated 800,000 in South Africa) and leads to a paralysing atmosphere of insecurity and distrust."

The post-apartheid native black community seem to have privileged witchcraft belief in response to perceived political and economic anxieties. Now that apartheid is gone, competition turns inwards and directed against themselves and perception of inequity can be acutely manifest against close relatives' and neighbours' 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 the rich and the poor, low level of education, sluggish economy, and a lack of access to basic resources suffered by majority of the black 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 2011, South Africa's per capita income plunged to \$5,000 in 2015 – a loss of more than 50 per cent. 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 scapegoating 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 scapegoating 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 realise 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 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 citizens to unleash mayhem on hapless foreigners. These paint a picture of orchestrated attacks 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 seen 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.

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