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Blood Money: An Examination of Oral Narratives Concerning Wealth-giving Snakes in the Career of Khotso Sethuntsa, with Particular Focus on their Socioeconomic Implications*

Felicity Wood

Summary

This article examines the oral narratives concerning the millionaire herbalist Khotso Sethuntsa's purported ownership of wealth-giving snakes and his career as a seller of these magical serpents, a practice known as *uthwala*. It is argued that the *uthwala* narratives featuring Khotso Sethuntsa (hereafter referred to as the Khotso narratives) are shaped by the specific milieu from which they spring. Particular attention is paid to socioeconomic factors in this regard. The Khotso narratives provide a striking illustration of the way in which socioeconomic changes in South African society affected not only the material world but also perceptions of the indigenous spirit world. A number of other significant contextual aspects are taken into consideration, including the effect of Western religion on African belief systems and consequently, on indigenous oral narratives. This study also pays attention to the moral dimension of the Khotso narratives, examining the way in which these accounts can provide a way of passing moral judgement on one particularly wealthy individual who flaunted his wealth in a poverty-stricken community. The moralising dimension of the Khotso narratives is related to the way in which these stories express some of their narrators' needs, preoccupations and desires, while serving as a means of realising some of these desires, albeit purely at an imaginative level. Finally, the Khotso narratives offer insights into the nature and function of oral narrative in the South African context.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die mondelinge narratiewe oor die miljoenêr-kruidokter Khotso Sethuntsa se beweerde besit van slange wat mense ryk maak, en sy loopbaan as 'n handelaar in hierdie magiese slange; 'n praktyk wat bekend staan as *uthwala*. Daar word aangevoer dat die *uthwala*-narratiewe (vervolgens na verwys as die Khotso-narratiewe) gevorm word deur die spesifieke milieu van hulle ontstaan. Besondere aandag word gegee aan die sosio-ekonomiese veranderings in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing wat nie alleen die materiële wêreld nie, maar ook persepsies van die eilandse spirituele wêreld affekteer het. 'n Aantal ander veelseggende kontekstuele aspekte word in aanmerking geneem, insluitend die uitwerking van Westerse godsdien

op Afrika-geloofstelsels en gevolglik op eilandse mondelinge narratiewe. Daar word ook aandag geskenk aan die morele dimensie deur die wyse te ondersoek waarop hierdie verhale ruimte laat vir morele oordele ten opsigte van een besonder welgestelde individu wat te koop loop met sy rykdom in 'n brandarm gemeenskap. Die moraliserende dimensie van die Khotso-narratiewe hou verband met die wyse waarop hierdie stories sommige van die verteller se behoeftes, preokkupasies en begeertes uitdruk, terwyl dit ook die doel dien om sommige van hierdie begeertes te realiseer, hetsy op 'n suiwer denkbeeldige vlak. Die Khotso-narratiewe bied ten slotte insig in die aard en funksie van mondelinge narratiewe in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks.

The Tswana-speaking peoples in southern Africa use the same word for money and blood: *madi*, suggestive of the way in which money is the lifeblood of modern existence, yet also carrying with it a sense of the dangerous, destructive effects that an obsession with money can have on the lives of individuals and communities.

In the southern African context, the association between money and blood calls to mind some particularly potent and dangerous occult beings: the so-called *muti*, or magical, snakes, the *ichanti* and *mamlambo*. These creatures live in rivers, and have powers of metamorphosis. They have the capacity to bestow great wealth on their owners, but at a terrible price.

In analysing narratives dealing with wealth-giving snakes, I will focus on a group of stories concerning the millionaire herbalist Khotso Sethuntsa, or Khotso, as he is commonly called. He has perhaps been more closely associated with these types of serpents than anyone else in South Africa and there is a large body of oral narratives testifying to this. In his day, Khotso was regarded as one of the principal sellers of *uthwala* (wealth-giving snakes and medicine for good fortune) in South Africa. I am currently writing his biography.

“Stories”, Ken Plummer observes, “do not float in the air but are grounded” (1993: 336). This study explores the nature of the terrain from which the Khotso stories spring, examining the way in which specific contextual factors shape the nature of the narratives themselves. There is, particularly, the socio-economic milieu. As African society shifted from a traditional, communal economy to a modern capitalist economy, with the emphasis on individual enterprise, giving rise to increasingly marked economic inequalities, this affected not only the material world, but also the indigenous spirit world. The way in which socioeconomic changes made their presence felt in this latter sphere is strikingly illustrated by the body of oral narratives concerning Khotso's purported ownership of and control over wealth-giving snakes. (Hereafter, these narratives will be referred to as the Khotso stories.)

There are a number of other significant contextual aspects that have bearing on the Khotso narratives. These include the effect of Western religion on indigenous African belief systems and, moreover, the attitudes and circum-

stances of the various narrators themselves, their relationships with Khotso and their perceptions of the process of *uthwala*. Many of these aspects are connected, ultimately, to socioeconomic factors. More broadly, this study offers insights into certain features of the nature and functioning of oral narrative in the South African context.

Khotso came from an isolated village deep in the Maloti mountains in Lesotho, yet became fabulously rich. For most of his adult life, he lived in South Africa, first in Kokstad and then in the Transkei. Astonishingly wealthy, he owned thirty-eight properties by the mid-1960s. He had eighteen houses, bizarre palatial structures, with blue and white tiles, ornate columns, archways and statuary. Khotso drove around the countryside in Cadillacs, flaunting his wealth and scattering largesse in his wake.¹

Khotso's career was characterised by tremendous ostentation and exhibitionism. When he purchased his luxury cars, for example, he preferred to do so at events like the annual Kokstad Agricultural Show, where he would have a large audience. He would arrive with attendants carrying suitcases full of banknotes, which they would open and slowly count out before an astonished crowd. Journalists repeatedly wrote of his lavish, seemingly casual displays of wealth. Laughing, he would send fistfuls of banknotes cascading round him and sackfuls of money would lie, like overstuffed cushions, in the corners of rooms. He would, sometimes, brandish big sparkling stones which he boasted were diamonds in front of photographers and visitors.

As far as many people were concerned, someone like Khotso, from a poverty-stricken background, illiterate, but fabulously rich, was clearly involved in the ownership of wealth-giving snakes. Part of the reason why he was viewed with awe and fear and perceived as somehow set apart from the communities around him was because of the widespread belief that he controlled such serpents and could sell them to others.² “[T]he person who really wants wealth, he will contact Khotso”, says Bonga Vika, from Mount Frere in the Transkei. “If a man comes from Khotso, that means he has some sort of snake” (Wood/Kwinana & Vika 2001b: 1).

There are two types of *muti* snakes, the *ichanti* and the *mamlambo*. The former tends to be associated with indigenous kinds of wealth, such as animals and crops, while the *mamlambo*, a hazardous, enticing figure, has become very closely associated with the allure of Western materialism.³ This being is able to take on the form of a beautiful woman. Appropriately enough, she generally wears Western clothes and even takes on a Western appearance (Wilson 1936: 287). Khotso, who surrounded himself with Western-style trappings of prosperity, was particularly closely connected to the *mamlambo* (e.g. Wood/Sigwili 2001d: 3-4).

The heady, seductive nature of the desire for individual material profit is suggested through the sexually alluring nature of the *mamlambo*. Often she is

depicted as a *Western* mermaid: partly a curvaceous woman with long flowing hair, part snake. She calls to mind the West African figure of the perilous, siren-like Mami Wata who, likewise, proffers great wealth and power, but has the capacity to bring about terrifying ruin (Siegel 2000: 1-2).

The *mamlambo*'s shape shifts and changes. As a serpent, it has shining, hypnotic eyes and it sometimes has a brilliant jewel set in its forehead. It can also appear in the form of bright, shiny objects. Anthropologist Isak Niehaus points out that the fact that *mamlambo* is associated with things that shimmer and glisten, like water, lights and the gleaming scales of a snake, links it more closely to symbols of wealth, such as coins, which sparkle and shine. Money and water, Niehaus continues, share certain similar attributes, in a comparable manner to money and blood. Both money and water are viewed as essential for survival in today's society, yet both can be constructive and destructive (Niehaus 2001: 59, 58).

Khotso's special *muti* for wealth and luck had temporary, short-term results, and it was far less pricey – and dicey – than going through the full process of *uthwala*, through which one could obtain fortune on a long-term basis. People who went to Khotso for *uthwala* were required to go through various ordeals. These often involved confrontations with snakes, although the test could take different forms: for instance, being chased by a great black tyre (like a giant dark snake that had bent itself into a hoop), swallowing needles or facing an oncoming train – a serpentine artefact of superhuman force. “You'd see it coming at you and have to sit between the rails”, says Roseberry Maloi, who grew up in Kokstad (Wood/Maloi 2002a: 3).

One vivid account of the *uthwala* ordeal comes from Lekhotla Tseane, District Secretary at Qachas's Nek, Lesotho, who describes how one of his extended family members went to Khotso in order to gain wealth. Tseane's description of the final stage of the test follows:

The other stages, he did not mention them, but he wanted to talk about this one, the final stage ... it was more powerful. That is the stage if one goes through it, one has won With him, it was in the final stage when he was asked to ask his wife to brew some beer. She had to carry it in a traditional clay pot to a place that was between two mountains [in Lesotho], actually a pass.

The man had to sit and wait near the clay pot and not look around. He had to stay there, and he would see a lot of things happening. He was also told not to react; he had to just let them happen and go by. And this story was said by him.

He said he first experienced some poultry, chickens, hens coming and dipping their heads in the pot, drinking a little bit of beer and then passing by. And then there followed some livestock: sheep, goats and then cattle, horses – in groups, all drinking from the pot. What surprised him was that the pot remained full. And finally, he heard a sound coming from the East, and he saw a big light coming through the pass, as if the moon was passing over the pass. It was by then at night.

He sat, he waited, and the sound grew louder and louder as it approached, and the light also grew wider and bigger, until it got to him. Then he realised the light was actually like a big eye. As it approached him, he realised that the body was that of a snake, a huge snake ... with one big eye. And when the body of the snake started wrapping itself around the pot, himself he got a fright and stood up and ran away. He had failed.

(Tloti & Wood/Tseane 2004b: 5-6)

Yet, there are a few accounts of occasions when someone managed to go, successfully, through the full process. James Lunika, who carried out a number of important duties for Khotso, and became so close to the latter that Khotso referred to him as his prime minister, describes how he had to take one of Khotso's clients down to the Mzintlava river, near Khotso's Kokstad house, for *uthwala*. One evening, Khotso introduced Lunika to one of his customers, a white man whose name, apparently, was Smith. His garage business in Cradock was ailing and he needed Khotso's help. Lunika was told that he would have to look after Smith and carry out everything that he was instructed to do. Lunika relates:

The following day, we went to one of Khotso's special pools, there on the Mzintlava. Khotso said that the white man would have to bathe there for luck. Smith would have to take all his clothes off, and step onto this stone, just in the water, near the bank of the river. Khotso gave me a rope. One end would have to be tied round Smith's wrist. I would have to hold onto the other end of the rope. Khotso went away and we did everything he'd told us to do.

Then the stone Smith was standing on moved! It went right towards the middle of the pool. It sank right below the surface. Smith disappeared underwater and then he'd reappear from time to time, looking terrified! I called out to the man – but I'd forgotten to hold on to the rope.

Afterwards, I thought that the stone this man had been standing on could have been the back of Khotso's snake itself, and that the snake was wrapping itself around Smith, under the water, cleansing him, to attract luck and money.

Next thing, Smith rushed out of the river. I suppose the snake must have finally let go of him. Then he ran off, straight into a thorn tree. He ran into town, towards the main street and disappeared. He didn't even stop to put his clothes back on. I tried to follow him I didn't know where he'd got to, but as I was looking for him, I saw Khotso. He said, "What's the matter with you? ... I told you to look after the white man, and now you've gone and lost him!"

So we were looking for Smith. And then we saw this police van, with two black policemen in the front and there was Smith in the back. They'd given him an old pair of white overalls to wear.

As soon as he saw us, he started shouting: "There's the old devil! There's the young devil! They tried to kill me! They put me in the river with this huge snake!"

Khotso kept calm. “Oh” he said to the policemen, “my son here was just taking him for a cold bath in the river. But then he started shouting things about snakes and ran away.”

The policemen must have decided that this was all Khotso’s business [and they shouldn’t get involved]. So they tried to calm Smith down, but he wouldn’t listen and he stormed out of town.

But – six months later, Smith came back! He had a new car, he was wearing smart clothes and he had his wife with him. He was so pleased to see us. He introduced his wife to us and he hugged Khotso and called him his friend. “Thanks to you, my business is doing so well that now I can afford to employ three new mechanics at my garage!” he said.

(Tloti & Wood/Lunika 2003: 4-7)

But unlike Smith and many others like him, there are some people who do not want to be associated with *uthwala*. One man in Kokstad, who ran a highly successful funeral parlour and was a good friend of Khotso’s, successfully passed the ordeal, local gossip insists. The man himself is dead, so I went to speak to his family. They were adamant that no such thing had taken place. “We are Christians”, his sister said. “My brother would never have got involved in anything like that.” (Tloti & Wood/Makana 2004d: 3)

When one encounters narratives such as those told by Tseane and Lunika, the question arises: did the process of undergoing the *uthwala* ordeals, imbued as they were with paranormal phenomena and visitations from the spirit world, constitute a significant spiritual experience in any way for Khotso’s clients?

It seems clear that the majority of those who went to Khotso for *uthwala* believed implicitly in the latter’s capacity to work supernatural wonders to bring sudden, startling wealth into their lives. One man now living in Mdantsane, who went to Khotso for his short-term medicine for money and luck, said: “If Khotso was alive today, I wouldn’t have the financial problems that I do.” (Lewis & Wood/Yako: 2004) For him, as for so many of Khotso’s clients who came for *uthwala*, it was the material benefits that really counted.

For those like Tseane’s relative, who experienced the full *uthwala* ordeal, it was a venture into magical dimension for success and economic profit – hedged about with alarming, even frightening occult dimensions. There is a sense of awe and even fear surrounding Khotso in Lunika’s story and many other *uthwala* narratives. Yet, Khotso was essentially perceived as an enigmatic individual with mysterious expertise in the realms of the occult, controlling the mystical forces that could bring about wealth, rather than a shaman-type figure.

Thus, the *uthwala* narratives tend to strongly suggest that going to Khotso for *uthwala* was not a spiritually fulfilling experience. Smith, for one, did not come away from his encounter with Khotso’s snake uplifted by his encounter. The *uthwala* ordeals were not so much about spiritual enhancement, but rather

about psychological strengthening. James Lunika took a pragmatic view, as he so often did. He believed that Khotso's clients who underwent the *uthwala* process probably did experience something very frightening, because such ordeals made good business sense. Khotso was testing his clients' determination. If they could get through the terrifying tests, quite possibly they might well find the resources within themselves to obtain the fortune they sought (Tloti & Wood/ Lunika 2004a: 10). This could, for instance, well have taken place in the case of Tseane's relative. If he had managed to endure the entire ordeal, this could have resulted in a strengthening of inner resolve.

These practical, material dimensions of the Khotso stories and the way in which they contain certain elements of belief, means that they cannot be viewed purely as myths. While some of these narratives may have been fabricated and all of them possess certain fantastical, magical elements and specific mythic features, which will be touched on below, the term "myth" seems nonetheless inappropriate. In a sense, the word implies something "out there": of no immediate reality for tellers and hearers. The Khotso narratives can hardly be viewed in this light. Ruth Finnegan reports that in African oral literature there is often an absence of a specific term which could be translated as "myth", even though the narratives in question may strike some outsiders as mythic (Finnegan 1970: 365). This could suggest that in many African oral traditions, narratives with otherworldly, magical elements are not necessarily perceived as somehow detached from the physical world, floating in the realm of mythology. The Khotso stories provide one such example of this trend.

It would, likewise, not be fitting to describe the Khotso narratives as folktales, since the term can have its problematic aspects. Finnegan, for one, has observed that in some contexts, the word "folk-tale" can have derogatory implications, denoting, for some, an essentially simplistic, undeveloped type of narrative (Finnegan 1970: 14). The literary historian Isabel Hofmeyr, similarly, maintains that the term "folk-tale" can carry with it a sense of antiquated quaintness. Moreover, it could belittle the genre, implying that such stories deal only in make-believe (Hofmeyr 1993: 28).

The fact that in terms of the traditional perceptions of the Sotho- and Xhosa-speaking communities within which Khotso worked, there are no clear distinctions between everyday physical life and the spiritual dimension is relevant here. As Janet Hodgson puts it in her study of Xhosa spirituality, "[n]ature, man and unseen are involved in total community" (Hodgson 1982: 17). In other words, the mystical and magical exist as a significant presence within the quotidian world.

The *mamlambo* and *uthwala* narratives concerning Khotso Sethuntsa, springing as they do from such perceptions, are worth examining, particularly because they provide an illustration of what can take place in an oral narrative framework in which traditional beliefs in the supernatural and latter twentieth-

century, Westernised, capitalist perspectives become intertwined.

Paradoxically enough, the Khotso stories are often closer to certain underlying truths when their more extraordinary, incredible and, at times, even unreliable aspects are most apparent. Hofmeyr cites David Bynum, who maintains that the essence of story-telling resides in the “truth of wonderfully implausible things” (Bynum quoted by Hofmeyr 1993: 36). Then, there is A. Portelli’s claim that “oral history approaches truth as much as it departs from facts”. Further to this, Portelli argues that “‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically true, and this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts” (Portelli 1994: 53, 51). Oral history researcher Sean Field expands on this. Narrators may be letting slip elusive truths about themselves and their identities in the course of seemingly implausible or unreliable accounts, he points out (Field 2001: 251). As bewildering and mysterious as they are, the Khotso stories are nonetheless deeply revealing in terms of what they suggest about their tellers’ places within and perceptions of their socio-economic and spiritual milieu. Moreover, such narratives provide us with certain insights into their narrators’ belief systems, preoccupations, needs and desires. Then, there is also the way these tales highlight the way in which some of the forces at work in the society from which they arise have such a deep-seated impact that they make their presence felt in the realm of oral narrative.

In order to examine what it is that these narratives have to suggest to us in this regard, certain specific points, many of which relate not only specifically to the Khotso stories, but the study of oral narrative in general, first need to be touched on. The Khotso narratives can then be considered in the light of such concerns.

There is, to begin with, the issue of context. In analysing the Khotso narratives, this particular concern comes to the fore. While these stories may seem an assortment of strange and astounding tales, some of them possibly utterly fantastical, they are not free-floating fantasies. As Finnegan observes, orality does not take place in a vacuum. She repeatedly draws particular attention to the way in which oral narratives form part of their social context and are influenced by this and also by their narrators’ places within that milieu (Finnegan 1970: 14, 15, 331).

Ken Plummer makes similar points. In his study of oral narratives, he asks: “What are the links between stories and the wider social world?” It is important, he argues, to consider possible reasons why certain stories are voiced at particular moments. Also, Plummer continues, another question arises: why tell one story (or one particular type of story) and not another? (Plummer 1993: 338) Why, in the case of this study, have so many narratives concerning the *mamlambo* and *uthwala* arisen around Khotso? Why, moreover, have so many of these stories taken on a specific shape in, for example, their treatment of Khotso and his purported relationship with the *mamlambo*? To a

large extent, many of the answers to such questions lie in the sphere of the socioeconomic. At this stage, the emphasis that Plummer places on the way in which the shifting, changing nature of history and culture (and, we might add, various other, related factors, including economics, politics and spirituality) leads interpretative communities to hear and tell variously could be borne in mind, since, as we shall see, this has bearing on the Khotso narratives (p. 339).

Since stories are so intertwined with the societies from which they spring, the issue of power comes into play. Stories, Plummer tells us, “‘ooze through the political stream’, becoming caught up in the shifting flow of power” (Plummer 1993: 339). The power dynamics at work in the Khotso stories and, more broadly, in their social context itself is worth considering. When examining the presentation of the *uthwala* process and the ownership of a *mamlambo*, it is worth investigating where power is centred and the shifts and overturnings that take place in the power relations in the narrative. These cast light on various central concerns of the narrators and certain key features of their socioeconomic context.

For the narrators and their communities, the issue of wealth was – and still remains – an especially significant concern. In consequence, the power of wealth (and the desire for wealth) becomes an especially potent force at work in the Khotso stories. Then, there is the potency of belief itself. The tales concerning Khotso’s association with *uthwala* and the *mamlambo* exercise such a hold on the emotions and imaginations of so many of their narrators and their listeners precisely because many such individuals find it hard to simply dismiss such stories as yarns (or folk-tales, some might say) with no basis in reality.

Then, another form of power evident in the Khotso stories relates to the nature of oral narrative itself. Orality can lead into areas of potency through the power of the spoken word. Hofmeyr, for one, emphasises this: “[E]ven a slight acquaintance with oral literature in a field work situation reminds one of the respect with which many rural communities view words as a form of eloquence and power.” (Hofmeyr 1993: 181)

A key feature of the oral narratives concerning Khotso is the way in which the latter harnessed the potency of words to further his own career or, for that matter, the way in which words could be turned against him. This capacity of oral narrative to exercise a considerable influence over human perceptions and beliefs is commented on by Kennedy C. Chinyowa who points out that Plato banned oral artists from his ideal republic for this very reason:

[H]e could not see himself ruling effectively if the oral artists enjoyed so much power and influence. One is led to conclude that orality has always held sway over the shaping of human consciousness and experience. If viewed in the light

of its spellbound influence over the human mind and body, orality means power.
(Chinyowa 2001: 129)

Because he well knew that oral narratives possess power, Khotso harnessed this potency. He was the key weaver of many stories (in part, because he was not overly fond of the truth) and a major force in getting them into circulation, for highly practical reasons of his own. As a seller of *uthwala*, any stories relating to his mastery over certain aspects of the supernatural world, including magical serpents, fulfilled a material function, because they were intended to further his career. Also, spreading extravagant stories about his astounding capabilities was a way of attracting attention and increasing his fame, which he liked for its own sake, while also believing that it would be good for business.

Because stories act upon us, shaping our sense of who we are and where we come from, as Hofmeyr points out, we can also use stories to act upon others: to enlighten, manipulate, beguile and control (Hofmeyr 1993: ix). Khotso was a consummate weaver of tales within which he could ensnare others, the seductiveness of his story-telling comparable to the beguiling nature of the *mamlambo* herself. This, perhaps, is where the issue of myth comes to the fore. A substantial number of the Khotso narratives can be viewed as part of a process of myth-making: firstly on the part of Khotso and next, among those around him. For Khotso, narratives dealing with his association with *uthwala* and his relationship with the *mamlambo* provided a form of self-dramatisation, building him into a powerful, even heroic figure with mastery over some of the most dangerous creatures in the supernatural world, while serving as a form of self-publicity.

Even when a tale is told by others, Khotso is often present as creative force within it, steering the nature and direction of the narrative. Today all narratives concerning Khotso come to us second- or third-hand, filtered through the narratives of others. These narrators' treatment of these tales, their attitudes towards them and the functions that they may have fulfilled for them represent the next group of issues relating to oral narrative in general and, specifically, to the Khotso stories themselves that can be taken into consideration.

In their tellings of tales concerning Khotso, diverse narrators would rework them, making them their own. This is a general feature of oral narratives. They are not passed down unchanging, but instead they are individually embroidered and re-created, as Finnegan, among many others, has observed (Finnegan 1970: 387). The stories that others told about Khotso could, thus, elude their central character's direct control. In this process, of course, the narrative may cease to function in Khotso's interests.

One issue to be borne in mind here is that the needs, emotions, desires of narrators can affect the tales they tell, their stories becoming what people wish

for or would like to have happened. Field and various others dwell in particular on this aspect of orality in their research, indicating how a lack of emotional and material fulfilment can affect the nature of the narrative process. Oral histories, for instance, can become the “art of possible” (Field 2001: 249-252).

Particularly in the telling of oral narratives which partake in the unlikely or downright fabulous or irrational, such as the Khotso stories, narrators may be dealing not so much in what actually took place, as what they wish for. “The impossible” Portelli maintains, is a space within which “the world of our desires is possible” (Portelli 1991: 56).

The appeal of many of the Khotso narratives lies in the way in which they hold out a number of possibilities to both tellers and listeners. The majority of these possibilities relate, in various ways, to the lack of, or the acquisition of wealth. As such, these narratives could be viewed as an illustration of what Chinyowa describes as the strategies of survival adapted by African orality to strengthen, restore and benefit (even if only in an imaginative, psychic sense) one specific group that is dominated by others (Chinyowa 2001: 131).

There is, for one thing, the issue of desires and needs. The *mamlambo* and *uthwala* stories about Khotso were told and retold so frequently, coming to constitute one of the most prominent groups of oral narratives in the northern Transkei, and they exercised such a fascination over the imaginations of so many people precisely because they dealt with one thing desired by so many: the possibility of wealth. One especially alluring promise the Khotso stories offer is that riches could, perhaps, lie within any ordinary individual’s grasp, despite his or her unpromising circumstances. The Lotto advertisements that we see today exert a comparable type of appeal. On the other hand, the popularity of the Khotso tales could also stem from their completely different, compensatory function. They could serve to reassure less prosperous members of a society that an accumulation of great fortune such as that possessed by Khotso could bring no lasting good.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Khotso’s heyday, the Nationalist government had taken over and the downward economic spiral was intensifying for the black rural poor, particularly those in what became the Bantustans. Even today, the Transkei is regarded as one of the poverty-stricken parts of South Africa, situated as it is in the Eastern Cape, the poorest of the provinces. Small wonder, then, that the Khotso stories are still being told and retold so often in that region.

Although most of the communities in which the Khotso stories were related were economically struggling, there was, also, the widespread, potent myth of economic betterment that dangled before the eyes of those who were less financially desperate, such as, most probably, Smith himself, the central figure in Lunika’s story. A person from a less economically deprived background, he has the wherewithal to run his own business. Yet Smith, and many others like

him, had heard the stories about Khotso and were impressed enough by such narratives to seek him out, because they held out the hope that he could bring tremendous wealth into their lives.

There is, also, the fact that even today, decades after his death, Khotso remains, as one informant put it, “a man of mystery and magic” (Wood/Mpayipheli 2001e: 1). No one could be certain who exactly he was, what kind of powers he possessed and, above all, how he had acquired his fortune. As Miller Mair puts it, we “need stories to weave a web of meaning within which we can live” (Mair in Plummer 1995: 15). The advantage of the narratives concerning Khotso’s connection to the *uthwala* process and the *mamlambo* was that they seemed to offer outsiders a means of interpreting the man and his career. Simultaneously, for the members of poorer communities, these tales provided them a way of coming to terms with their own, harsh economic situation.

The Khotso stories still retain their impact and continue to seem significant enough to be frequently narrated in the Transkei partly because of the solid weight of reality with which they often appear to be imbued. Paradoxically enough, this quality could have originally stemmed from their fantastical, astounding elements. The oral narratives concerning Khotso that contained these latter features seemed especially liable to make their way into widespread gossip and hearsay about his life. These kinds of narratives had the tendency to eventually move from the flimsy, unreliable area of rumour onto the more solid terrain of fixed belief. Hofmeyr notes that “[t]he quality of magic and miracle that many have noted as being a hallmark of the oral narrative often seeps into more widespread popular perceptions and understandings” (Hofmeyr 1993: 36).

One example of this process was the way in which Khotso’s association with wealth-giving snakes reached such proportions that even as mundane and innocuous a dwelling as the family’s outside toilet in his Mount Frere house became transformed into a site of fascination and potential menace. Mametsi Sethuntsa, one of Khotso’s daughters, complained that because the toilet door was always kept closed, people assumed that the family’s wealth-giving snake had to be concealed inside the latrine (Wood/Sethuntsa 2003b: 10).

The highly subjective, even extraordinary nature of people’s perceptions of Khotso and the distinctive, specific qualities in the tales that many of them tell springs, in part, from the way such narratives are influenced by their vested interests and value systems. The type of relationship a particular narrator may have had with Khotso and the extent to which they themselves were actually involved in the events they described play their part too. Another factor influencing the perspectives of various narrators would have been the question of class.

For middle-class people, such as Tseane, secure in his own relatively

superior position in the bureaucratic hierarchy would not have needed to undergo the full *thwala* process. Thus, a sense of distancing and detachment is contained in the story, because the events contained within it do not have to touch him in any way. He himself would not have needed to have sought *thwala* from Khotso, so the tale he tells can remain securely in the realm of local legend. It is possible that this sense of distance was also facilitated by the fact that he did not know Khotso himself. His sense of distance from his subject matter allowed considerable space for a degree of embroidering and restructuring. Compared to some of the more shadowy, confusing events contained in some of the other *uthwala* narratives in circulation, springing at times from the narrators' own bewildered responses to the weird events that may have taken place around them, Tseane's story has an almost formulaic, carefully organised narrative pattern to it, such as one often encounters in fairy-tales, with a clear-cut beginning, middle and end.

The tale begins with an unsettling combination of the mundane and the mysterious, the claypot of beer placed on a mountain pass at night, for the protagonist to sit beside as he awaits his ordeal. Then the suspense builds up, with the succession of creatures making their way, one after the other, to drink out of the pot, finally culminating in the most terrifying being of them all – as if the various farmyard animals, prosaic, yet phantasmagorical at the same time were leading up to the climax of the story. There is the arrival of the most significant apparition: a huge, spectral being designed to terrify all except the most utterly steadfast and determined. Even the narrator's relative, who proved courageous enough to endure all the other, preceding ordeals, is unable to withstand this. The story ends on this memorable note, having reached its climax and conclusion at the same time.

These features would, after all, have made the tale more dramatic and striking, thus giving the narrator a good story to tell, thereby impressing his listeners. As District Secretary, Tseane occupies a position of authority, yet having a particularly remarkable tale to tell has its uses, in that it helps reinforce his position of superiority, making him pre-eminent in the field of story as well as in local bureaucracy. In a group interview session in Qacha's Nek, during which a number of narratives concerning Khotso were recounted, Tseane's story was one of the tales that particularly stood out.

Other individuals whose responses to the *uthwala* process could have been affected by the issue of class are the family of the Kokstad funeral parlour proprietor who rejected the idea that he had undergone *uthwala*. As middle-class people from a financially stable background, they had no need for *uthwala* in their own immediate family circle. While Tseane chooses to tell an elaborate tale about his own relative's *uthwala* ordeal, they, on the other hand, prefer to dismiss the idea of any connection with this process out of hand. Possibly Tseane's superior social status gives him the confidence to let

outsiders know that one of his family members went for *uthwala*, while the other family, less secure in their own social superiority, deem the idea unseemly to the family dignity.

Alongside the issue of class, there is the way in which various narrators' own relationship with Khotso and their involvement in the *uthwala* process could have bearing on the tales they tell. Like Tseane, Lunika finds it easier to talk expansively about the full *uthwala* process, because he did not have to go through it himself. He held a middle-class clerical position and could recount the story of the terrified Smith's encounter with the great snake in the river with a great deal of amusement, his position of personal detachment from the process enabling him to turn the event into a story alive with comic elements. However, partly because of his own involvement in Khotso's affairs and his personal bond with the latter, Lunika accords Khotso a central position in the story, as an all-knowing, all-controlling presence in a mysterious business, while allowing space for the twist at the end, when the transformed Smith reappears, congratulating the man he formerly regarded as having diabolical designs on him as having wrought financial miracles in his career. In general, informants found it far easier to talk about the experiences of others, because then they would not need to engage with the personal, potentially frightening supernatural implications of undergoing the full *uthwala* process.

Since the *mamlambo* is such a central presence in the Khotso stories, some attention should be paid to this being herself. The prominence of the *mamlambo* in southern African oral narratives that touch on the indigenous supernatural is a result of external religious pressures and deeply felt social and economic changes in African society, as is her very nature itself.

Through orality, as Chinyowa and various others have said, African society creates and re-creates itself (Chinyowa 2001: 128). In this process, however, ancient images and symbols can be reworked, mutating into disturbing and hazardous presences. We see this, in particular, in the way in which the image of the snake changes in South African oral narratives.

The serpent is an important being in the indigenous spirit world. This is borne out by anthropologist W.D. Hammond-Tooke, who observes that it is the creature that occurs most frequently in Cape Nguni cosmology (Hammond 1975: 27). But today, the snake is an ambivalent symbol for the Zulu- and Xhosa-speaking peoples. On the one hand, it plays a constructive spiritual role, acting, for instance as a spiritual messenger animal and playing a crucial role in the calling and initiation of *amagqirha* and *izangoma*, the traditional healer-diviners. Moreover, certain Zulu- and Xhosa-speaking clans, such as the Majola, regard specific snakes as the *amakhosi*, the manifestations of their ancestors (Wilson 1936: 260; Bernard 2001: 6).

But the snake has since come to take on dangerous, even deadly qualities. In consequence, in various contemporary oral and written narratives, the

supernatural snake now often manifests itself as the *mamlambo*, a perilous occult presence that needs to be cast away as soon as possible, in contrast to the guardians and benevolent emissaries from the spirit world that appear in older works of African fiction such as A.C. Jordan's *The Wrath of the Ancestors* (1980)⁴ and Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* (1931). In Bheki Khumalo's short story "Mamlambo" (1991), for example, the title creature, coiled, but prepared to unleash disaster, lurks in a suitcase and has to be swiftly and surreptitiously passed on. Similarly, in many South African oral narratives, including some of the Khotso stories, the sinister, hazardous qualities of the *mamlambo* are stressed.

In this regard, Western religion has played its part. In the eyes of the Christian church, traditional African beliefs and rituals were sinful, heathen practices. As a result, certain elements of the traditional supernatural and spiritual world eventually came to be viewed in more ambiguous terms, or even as emanations from a dangerous occult realm.⁵ Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) discusses the effect that this hostility to traditional African spiritual beliefs had on literature, in the form of the written word. The prevalence of the *mamlambo* in much South African oral literature indicates how deeply such antipathy to long-standing elements of indigenous spirituality also permeated various African oral traditions.

The snake, in particular, was affected by these changing perceptions, since of all the creatures in the Bible, it is the serpent that is most closely associated with diabolical forces. There is something Biblical about the way in which the *mamlambo* is sometimes referred to as *inyoka yamadoda*, the snake of men, emphasising its deadly seductiveness; and the sense in which the ownership of such a creature is perceived as amounting to a moral fall. With their emphasis on pacts with seemingly enticing representatives of the forces of darkness, in alliance with the material world, stories of the *mamlambo* call to mind Christian narratives about the nature and consequences of dealings with the devil. With such influences at work, it could become easy to view the snake in a special pool as a deceptive, perilous presence, rather than as one of the protective *amakhosi*.

But there is another especially powerful factor altering perceptions of the snake in traditional African belief systems: the forces of economic change. The Khotso stories provide a striking example of the extent to which these economic forces had such a powerful effect on individuals and communities in southern Africa that they made their impact felt not only on people's physical existences but also on their spiritual, emotional and imaginative lives.

It has been argued, for instance, by the anthropologist Penny Bernard, that the negative images of the snake, in the form of wealth-giving "*muti*" serpents, developed through contact with modern economic forces, specifically the pressure to accumulate individual wealth (Bernard 2000: 13). This ties in with

the way in which the notion of the *mamlambo* was spread among southern African peoples through the migrant labour system, the latter indicative of the fact that individuals had lost the capacity to support themselves through their traditional lifestyle and had become dependent on white-owned commercial operations, such as mining and farming, in order to support themselves and their families (Niehaus 2001: 46, 56).⁶ The link between the *mamlambo* and outside representatives of the capitalist system was reinforced by the widely held belief that the *mamlambo* could be purchased by migrant workers at the mines from whites or Indians who, because of their relatively well-off, privileged positions, were viewed as having access to particularly strong magic.⁷ Moreover, in a range of interviews I conducted in 2001 and 2002, a number of my informants stated that the *mamlambo* could be obtained from Indian or white shopkeepers in Durban or Johannesburg.

Since the significance of the *uthwala* process was primarily perceived in terms of Western capitalist ideals: that is, the material benefits it could bring, it was hardly surprising that the appearance and nature of the denizen of the supernatural realm most closely associated with *uthwala*, the *mamlambo*, embodied this association with Western economic forces. Her *Western* features and garments, especially, helped to emphasise this connection.

Just as an individual may be captivated by the desire for wealth, or held fast in the spell of the seductive *mamlambo*, so people are caught up in narratives, as has often been pointed out. Consequently, individuals tell their tales within the metanarratives that surround them (Maines 1993: 22). One such larger narrative, in case of Khotso and various other narrators referred to here, would be that of Western materialism, imbued as it is with compelling, alluring images of personal economic profit. A number of the narratives describing the *uthwala* ordeal, such as Tseane's, derive some dramatic, suspenseful qualities from the fact that, as the protagonists struggle to endure the phantasmagoric terrors that confront them, the fortune that they might obtain hangs in the balance.

The desirability of owning a *mamlambo* is suggestive of the desirability of economic prosperity. On the other hand, the perils that ownership of the *mamlambo* entails are suggestive of the hazardous allure of *Western* materialism, which seems to promise far more than it actually delivers and can inflict deep damage on the lives of individuals and communities.

One reason why the Kokstad funeral parlour owner's family might not have wanted to be associated in any way with *uthwala* was because of all the dangers linked to the possession of a *mamlambo*. The being will eventually control its owner – just as the desire for money can come to govern people's lives. Certainly, Khotso's life was dominated by his adoration of money. All too often, his personal relationships seemed to take second place. *Mamlambos*, it is believed, are intensely jealous, and they do not take kindly to competition

from flesh and blood women. Ellen Jones, one of Khotso's wives, relates: "Money just had to flow in, one way or another. He loved the smell and touch of it, coins and notes. No getting out of it. There were pillows of money." (Lewis/Jones 1997: 5) We can bear in mind that the word *thwala* can also mean abduction.⁸ Was Khotso so carried away by his obsession with fame and wealth that he lost touch with certain basic realities? Was he a man possessed – either by the snake-like *mamlambo* itself or the heady, treacherous dreams of economic prowess that it embodies?

In exchange for the wealth it provides, the *mamlambo* demands sacrifices: such as the blood of animals and eventually even, it is maintained, the blood of those closest to its owner, such as family members. "It's like a motor car", remarks Fort Hare student Bonga Vika. "You've got to service that motor car. If you don't, the motor car will start [giving you problems]. If you don't keep the *mamlambo* up properly, it will turn dangerous." (Wood/Kwinana & Vika 2001b: 4) The fact that the *mamlambo* is said to feed on the blood of such people suggests how material profit can take place at the cost of personal relationships. The sense of evil and menace associated with the blood-sucking wealth-giving snakes emphasises the damaging effects – on both the individual and society – of an unbridled desire for material gain (Niehaus 2001: 46-47).

Anthropologist Barbara Frank observes that according to the social expectations prevalent among the West African peoples she studied, the way wealth was enjoyed – either individually or communally – was indicative of whether or not it had been obtained legitimately. In the eyes of the society, wealth should not be privately and selfishly utilised, but rather shared (Frank 1995: 333-334). A similar point could be applied to the society in which Khotso lived. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the wealth belonging to an individual like the latter, who hid and hoarded most of his money and repeatedly embarked on extravagant acts of conspicuous consumption, should somehow be perceived as having morally dubious origins. The fact that he kept the source of his wealth shrouded in secrecy helped reinforce this notion. Fanele Sicwetsha, who once lived in Mount Frere, remarks: "[I]n a traditional set-up, people believe that you've got to earn what you've got, work hard for it You know, [then] people were poorer, especially blacks at that time." (Wood/Sicwetsha 2002b: 1-2) This idea pervades many of the accounts of Khotso's association with *uthwala* reinforcing the sense of moral condemnation that pervades many of these narratives.

In part, many of the stories linking Khotso with *uthwala* and the *mamlambo* do hold out some tantalising promises of the possibility of wealth. But even more powerfully, they also provide a means of levelling condemnation against him on the grounds of his wealth, which clearly constituted a controlling force in his life and which he paraded ostentatiously in the midst of economically destitute communities. Indeed, the fact that Khotso's fortune had been

accumulated in the face of so much poverty served to add force to the stories that laid emphasis on the sinister side of his career. The irony of these kinds of narratives is that while Khotso harnessed the power of words to make money, words themselves were turned against him precisely because he had money.

The hold the Khotso narratives still exercise over the imaginations of many in the most economically deprived areas of the Eastern Cape and other relatively poor parts of South Africa is due, in part to the fact that they also serve to reinforce a notion that wealthy individuals could perhaps be pitied, for it is possible that great material prosperity may, in the end, cause more harm than good. In this way, the Khotso stories illustrate the way in which oral narratives can expose their narrators' desires, by revealing not only what their narrators think might have happened but also what they feel ought to have taken place.

There is a certain ghoulish relish with which some informants outline all the mysterious deaths and disasters that are purported to have befallen Khotso's extended family, the implication of this being that this was the result of the old man's dealing in dark magic. The unaccountable disappearance of Khotso's fortune after his death would have, in many people's eyes, have furnished further proof that he practised *uthwala*, since it is believed that when a person who went through this process dies, their riches go to the grave with them. It is said that wealth accumulated without the blessing of the ancestors is morally dubious and does not survive the accumulator (Wood/Mabongo 2002c: 12; Wood/Ploti 2003c: 5).

Many people who knew Khotso maintain that it is possible that the very supernatural forces that gave him fortune and fame directly contributed to his eventual sexual, spiritual and ultimately economic decline. For instance, as far as Lunika is concerned, when Khotso's powers began to wane in the 1960s, it was because his relationship with Nkosasana (as the *mamlambo* is sometimes termed) was breaking down. Under the Group Areas Act, Khotso was forced to move away from Kokstad, a white area, into the Transkei, a black area, in 1960. In leaving Kokstad, Lunika maintains, Khotso had to distance himself from his special pool, where his wealth-giving snake lived, and where he carried out regular rituals to keep it content. Also, Khotso was notoriously promiscuous, which would not have pleased his *mamlambo*. "Nkosasana didn't like Khotso's constant meddling with women", said Lunika. "He was changing them left and right all the time and she eventually got tired and left him." (Ploti & Wood/Lunika 2004a: 7) In such narratives it seems that Khotso's association with the *mamlambo* ultimately led to his downfall. Certain accounts depict Khotso as a somewhat pathetic figure near the end of his life, his body physically swollen and unable to walk without help, complaining that he had lost not only his sexual potency but most of his customers, who ceased believing in him when they saw that he needed the help of white doctors. It is

generally maintained that even most of his wives abandoned him as he lay dying.

Hofmeyr relates that in oral narratives with fabulous elements, fantastical “inversions, ambiguities, transgressions and hallucinations generally survive only until the end of the story when the moral order is unequivocally reinstated” (Hofmeyr 1993: 36). This is very much the case in the narratives concerning Khotso’s career, many of which tend to conclude by emphasising that pride always comes before a fall. Such tales suggest that Khotso eventually had to pay the price for his boastful ways, which had frequently involved the public flaunting of his wealth. Also, the way he liked to present himself as a man with control over supernatural forces could be viewed as a form of hubris. Towards the end of his life, some stories relate, the elements of the occult world that he had claimed to master demanded their due from him.

Narratives concerning Khotso can, thus, serve as forms of hero worship and hero debunking, sometimes performing both functions simultaneously. Here again, they display certain mythic qualities. As the above-quoted observation by Portelli indicates, narratives containing extraordinary, fantastical features have a special capacity to make the incredible possible. Through this, they can realise certain desires, albeit purely in the world of the imagination.

On the one hand, people need encouraging, inspirational success stories featuring figures who may seem heroic simply because of what they have managed to accomplish in the face of tremendous odds. Khotso, a millionaire from obscure, penurious origins, with, reputedly, tremendous powers over mystical, magical beings and creatures that most people would lack the inner strength and courage to approach in any way, let alone succeed in bending to their will, seems heroic in certain significant respects in many narratives. But, while people need their heroes, there is also a deep-seated need to see those very same heroes brought down, even if only as a comforting reminder that the average ordinary individual who lives his or her life out on a mundane plane of being is, in the end, the most fortunate. The double-edged process of myth-making that elevated Khotso to great heights, while also bringing him down would have seemed particularly appealing to many black South Africans in the Transkei and the surrounding areas. Even for those who did not have to eke out dreary, deprived existences, the options for economic advancement would, in most cases, have seemed limited.

Finnegan and many others have commented on the frequency with which stock figures appear in African orature. While the hero is one well-known protagonist in oral narratives in general, the trickster is an especially familiar figure in African oral traditions. This latter character can, of course, eventually get his or her comeuppance (Finnegan 1970: 345, 361). Khotso, the spinner of especially tall tales, who delighted in bewildering and bamboozling those

around him, was adept at trickery. It is thus, hardly surprising, that while there is a body of oral narrative celebrating his exploits, there are also tales that recount how he eventually met his downfall because he overreached himself.

Khotso has been dead for over three decades, but he still remains very much alive in the Eastern Cape oral imagination. In 1997, for instance, a number of South African newspapers caused mingled fascination and fear when they carried reports that a strange serpentine monster was lurking in the Mzintlava river, near Mount Ayliff, killing livestock and people. Various individuals I spoke to felt this creature could have been one of Khotso's supernatural snakes, which has had no one to maintain it since its death. "And it's hungry now", says Bonga Vika (Wood 2001b/Vika: 4). While the exact identity of this creature was unclear, many of my informants called it a *mamlambo*, as if this being represented such a well-known figure in the indigenous supernatural that she was the first to spring to mind when reports of a mysterious, otherworldly underwater being were widely circulated.

Moreover, there are stories of how Khotso's magical snakes, sometimes still referred to as *mamlambos*, are so enraged that they are no longer properly cared for that they have returned to two of his houses, in Kokstad and King Williamstown, to wreak havoc. The man currently residing in the former house showed us a broken wall, which he said was caused by Khotso's snake, which came up from the river (Kukard 2004: 2; Tloti & Wood/Ngodudlu 2004c: 3).

In such accounts, the *mamlambo* is perceived as a dangerous presence lurking long after Khotso's demise. This embodies the sense that a desire for excessive individual material gain has consequences that can cast a long shadow into the future, outlasting the lifespan of the individual concerned. Khotso's family, certainly, was riven by bitter battles for what remained of his estate, which continued for decades after his death. Likewise, the *mamlambo* remains such a potent presence in modern-day oral accounts of the indigenous South African supernatural that, once invoked, the creature cannot simply be written out of the story, just as it is no straightforward matter to do away with the social and economic tensions and imbalances it symbolises.

The figure of the *mamlambo* is a recurrent presence in rural and urban legend, mass-based culture and contemporary literature, indicative of the prominent position the being continues to occupy in this country's popular consciousness.

Accounts of *mamlambo* sightings have drawn crowds of people, some motivated by curiosity, others believing that they might be able to gain in some way. In an article on the *mamlambo* in the Eastern Cape, Sean Morrow cites the account of Maton Makhapela, who maintains that when he was a migrant worker on the Witwatersrand, he saw the body of what he believed to be a *mamlambo*, trapped in the water:

Sis Mamlambo has a beautiful head She was pretty. It's just that she had bits cut off – cutting off fingers and arms and things. People who knew about medicine, they were buying bits with huge amounts of money. Even white people were around, to buy, with their cars.

(Makhapela quoted by Morrow & Vokwana 2004: 198-199)

A more recent case, which took place several years ago, provides an example of the widespread fascination that the *mamlambo* continues to arouse. The *Daily Dispatch*, an East London newspaper, reported that a mermaid was on display in the city aquarium. The “mermaid” in question was the aquarium manager’s wife, who sat, suitably attired, in a tank. This attempt at a mild joke dramatically misfired. Hordes of people flocked to the aquarium, many of them believing that they would be able to gaze upon the *mamlambo* herself. They were furious when they found that they had been made into the subjects of a prank.⁹

The *mamlambo* has also made her way into certain works of South African fiction. A well-known example is Maseko’s story “Mamlambo” (1991), which has been widely anthologised. The image of the *mamlambo* even seeps into mass-based culture. One such instance took place last year, when SATV screened a short film entitled *Mamlambo*, a tale set in a modern-day urban setting. The figure of the *mamlambo* is invoked at the outset and subsequently, the action centres around a *mamlambo*-type figure, a mysteriously enchanting young woman, who eventually brings about the death of the central character, a young man who has become besotted with her.

In conclusion, I return to Khotso himself. Decades after his death, the stories still go on. When Khotso died and his empire collapsed, it is said that those people whose fortunes were based on his magic suffered calamities and financial ruin, their wealth vanishing off the earth along with Khotso himself (Wood/ Tloti 2003c: 3).

In a sense, it seems as if his powers are still present. People still visit some of his houses, particularly his headquarters in Lusikisiki. There, they periodically make offerings in the yard. Certain friends and family members residing in Khotso’s houses are prepared to take people through the process of *uthwala*. It is said that Khotso’s snakes still reside in the deep pools in the section of the Mzintlava that flows past his Kokstad houses. But now they are perceived particularly as *amakhosi*, sliding away, as it were, from any attempts to encase them in the role of conduits for forms of Western capitalist profit.

In the end the Khotso stories also have a certain elusive quality of their own. When they are analysed in terms of their socioeconomic context, their significance can be grasped in certain respects, but nonetheless their more ambiguous, enigmatic aspects evade academic analysis. The exact nature of

Khotso's powers remains in doubt and whether or not the events described in many of the narratives actually took place is still impossible to ascertain. Thus, these tales suggest that within indigenous oral narratives that touch on the supernatural, there are areas of mystery that remain inaccessible to the academic researcher, remaining resistant to clear-cut explanation and containment.

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Notes

1. Certain points in this study relating to Khotso's career have been made in an article entitled "Snakes, Spells, Cadillacs and Kruger Millions: Oral Accounts of the Extraordinary Career of Khotso Sethuntsa" in *Kronos* (2004).
2. In 1962, the anthropologist W.D. Hammond-Tooke stated that the Bhaca people, in the Transkei and southern kwaZulu-Natal, maintained that two men, one in Durban and the other in Kokstad, were famous sellers in *intlathu*, wealth-giving snakes (Hammond-Tooke 1962: 285). It is probable that Khotso was the second man in question.
3. Anthropologist Monica Wilson's observation that some people in Pondoland said that the *mamlambo* and the *ichanti* were the same but that the best informants distinguished between them (Wilson 1936: 286-287) held true in my own interviews.
4. *The Wrath of the Ancestors* was initially published in the early part of the twentieth century. A later, English translation of the novel was published in 1980.
5. Chinyowa discusses this issue in some detail, commenting on Ngugi's *Decolonising the Mind* in this regard (Chinyowa 2001: 130).

6. Similarly, Barbara Frank examines the way in which the belief that individual wealth is gained through a dangerous pact with the spirit world, requiring human sacrifice, became more widespread in West Africa after Western, capitalist economic practices resulted in marked economic inequalities (Frank 1995: 331).
7. Wilson observed this in Pondoland in the 1930s (1936: 287). Today, I have noticed that similar beliefs still prevail.
8. “*Thwala*” can also denote bearing a large load on one’s head; a burden so heavy that it cannot be carried in a normal fashion. In other words, it suggests carrying a huge weight that one is not properly equipped to take on.
9. My thanks to Sean Morrow for drawing my attention to the significance of this event in a seminar paper on the *mamlambo*, presented in 2001 at the University of Fort Hare. An edited version of this paper, which omits this particular account, has been recently published in *Kronos*.

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