

# **Secrecy, Publicity and Power: Strategies of Occult Practitioners and University Managers**

## **Abstract**

*Various mystical, magical beliefs and practices, including some of those in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape, are bound up with secrecy and mystery, exerting part of their influence by this means. This has certain metaphorical parallels with the way in which various managerial systems in market-driven, corporatised universities in South Africa and elsewhere tend to employ obscurity and mystification as a form of power and control. However, there are possible ways of transcending confinement within the verbal-ideological control mechanisms of corporate managerialism, with their shadowy, opaque qualities that sow confusion and bring about disempowerment, and the study of folklore can play a significant role in this regard.*

## **Introduction**

Peter Geschiere (2003: 181) once described how a combination of secrecy and publicity forms part of the workings of power. He could almost be speaking of something that many academics know all too well: the strange combination of mystery and publicity that so often manifests itself at senior managerial level in many present-day corporatised universities.<sup>1</sup> Many politicians employ this strategy too, as do many traditional herbalists, healers and diviners. In the light of Geschiere's observation, this study explores the occult aspects of managerialism at contemporary corporatised universities.<sup>2</sup>

The term 'occult' is used to denote mysterious, esoteric knowledge, which may sometimes seem to have unseen, otherworldly qualities. Here, the term 'university' denotes present-day institutions of higher education in South Africa and elsewhere that have recreated themselves as market-oriented enterprises, adopting the jargon, ethos and practices of the corporate world. Numerous South African academic commentators have discussed the ways in which restructuring of this nature has affected universities in this country. Among many others, these include Eve Bertelsen, 1998; Ivor G. Baatjies, 2005; Roger Southall and Julian Cobbing, 2001; Jane Duncan, 2007; Saleem Badat, 2008; and Eddie Webster and Sarah Mosoetsa, 2001. Some of their information and insights have informed this paper.

Next, the term 'managerialism' denotes the new systems of managerial authority presiding over such institutions that promulgate, implement and enforce changes of this kind. The managerial discourse and practices in the corporatised academy that have strange, invisible aspects are focused upon, and the ways in which they serve as agencies for the mysterious workings of power are explored (Wood, 2010b:1).<sup>3</sup>

The unpredictable, confusing nature of managerial discourse and procedure comes into play here, as does the sense of secrecy within which certain features of managerialism may be steeped. Moreover, the use of arcane, convoluted jargon and the hierarchical complexities of managerial structures heighten the mystique surrounding systems of senior managerial governance. Indeed, these features of managerial jargon and praxis embody facets of what Geschiere (2003: 182) describes as the ‘concealment and the secrecy that is crucial to any exercise of power’. Before we turn to some of the occult mysteries of managerialism, let us consider how some forms of magic are bound up with secrecy and mystery, exerting part of their power by this means.

## The Occult, Power and Secrecy

The *inyanga* (medicine man) Khotso Sethuntsa (1898-1972), for example, who lived and worked in Kokstad and the Transkei, deliberately cultivated a sense of mystery and secrecy around himself, generating many rumours about the extent of his powers. ‘He was an elusive man,’ someone who knew him well remarked. ‘He’d never tell anything straight’ (Wood and Lewis/ Yako, 2004; Wood with Lewis, 2007: 75-76; Wood, 2004: 178).<sup>4</sup>

The son of someone who once knew Khotso once said:

My father used to say that Khotso was quite clever, because he refused [to divulge his secrets] . . . He didn’t usually reveal his powers publicly ... what he usually did was to show off his wealth. .... So he was clever in the sense that his powers were kept quite secret. By showing people his powers, he could end up quite powerless. The mystery was tied up with the power (Wood/ Mabongo, 2002; Wood, 2004: 178).

Then, an *n’anga* (supernatural practitioner) from Harare, who was rumoured to sell wealth-giving beings termed *chikwambos* also preferred to create a sense of mystery about his work, and about the wealth-giving spirits he and others were said to supply.<sup>5</sup> For example, he once observed: ‘I cannot go into detail about the process that one has to undergo to finally become the owner of a *chikwambo*.’ He also said: ‘I myself cannot comment on that ... and neither can I tell you which form of *chikwambo* I would recommend people to obtain’ (Muswaka/ Sekuru, 2010). Similarly, someone in the Eastern Cape town of Alice who claimed to supply wealth-giving creatures was comparably evasive about his modus operandi (Muswaka/ anonymous respondent: 2010).<sup>6</sup>

By weaving an aura of secrecy of this kind, these and other workers of magic seek to create the impression that they have access to extraordinary powers that ordinary mortals would not be able to comprehend or control. They also emphasise the rare and exceptional nature of their knowledge. Other specialised practitioners, including academics, also tend to highlight the arcane nature of their work. Even if only subliminally, a strategy of this nature draws on the ancient belief that wisdom acquired

by specially chosen individuals as a result of an intensive process of private instruction is too rare and valuable to share with outsiders. For instance, in *Sundiata* (1965: 84), the thirteenth-century oral epic from Mali, the *griot* (oral poet) narrating this legend makes reference to the way he learned his craft, emphasising the secrecy surrounding it (Wood, 2004: 179).

## **Concealment, Confusion, Publicity and Power**

Meanwhile, Michael Taussig (1997: 144) observes that ‘politics is played out in the shadows’. Like Geschiere (2003: 179-182), he describes how power is reliant on that which is unseen and obscure (see also Taussig, 2003: 273, 295-300). Then, as Chris Shore and Susan Wright remind us (1999: 559), many political thinkers (including Machiavelli, Marx and Gramsci) have observed that ‘power operates most effectively when it is largely invisible to those whom it dominates’. University managerial staff may tend to exercise part of their authority by this means, while taking it to exceptional levels. The aura of mystery that often tends to surround managerial rationale and procedure is deepened by the way in which, both literally and metaphorically, many senior managerial staff may appear to have a predilection for setting themselves beyond the reach of the employees over whom they preside, by means of both verbal and physical strategies of elusiveness and evasiveness. A technique of this nature has an added advantage. By distancing themselves from other staff members, often on account of the urgent matters to which they are required to attend by virtue of their positions, senior managerial staff may symbolically elevate themselves above those around them.

In certain respects, then, senior managerial staff become comparable to ever-present, yet inaccessible emanations from another world, with the power to determine the destinies of the lesser beings subject to their control. For these and other reasons, members of senior management appear to have acquired the ability to seem ever-present even when they are absent, by virtue of the extent to which they may loom large in the minds of their subordinates even when they are far removed from them.

Geschiere's observation (2003: 181) that power ‘is always closely related to the imaginary’ is pertinent here. While various managerial authorities may exercise power by means of overt control and coercion, they may also rely on the workings of the imagination to entrench and enforce their dominion. Although they may often seem mysterious presences, their intentions and activities veiled in obscurity, wielding a power that may seem inscrutable, they take residence within the imagination, asserting their authority through its agency.

Then, even when they are physically present, university managers may remain absent in a significant sense. For instance, one academic interviewed in the documentary *Luister* [Listen] (2015), which investigates racism at the University of Stellenbosch and in the surrounding community, maintained that the vice-chancellor did not seem to be speaking as an individual. Instead, she intimated, the voice of marketing was heard, rather than his own. In certain respects, the same point may be applicable to various members of senior

management at diverse corporatised universities, both locally and internationally. In a sense, they may often seem to serve as mouthpieces of the market, into which their individual voices are subsumed.

However, as Geschiere points out (2003: 181), a combination of secrecy and publicity can form part of the workings of power. Similarly, Peter Pels (2003: 6, 3) contends that various forms of influence and control in present-day societies appear to derive a significant part of their power from an interplay between ‘secrecy and publicity ... [which] complement or supplement each other’. The paradoxical blend of concealment and public exposure that characterises many present-day corporatised universities is one facet of this. For instance, Benjamin Ginsberg (2011: 5) depicts conditions at managerially governed USA universities, describing how many of those in the most powerful positions may be veiled in degrees of obscurity, with names and faces that ‘are seldom even recognised by students or recalled by alumni’. This state of affairs may tend to be a feature of institutional life at many other corporatised, managerially governed universities elsewhere.

Nonetheless, while an aura of mystery often surrounds senior university management in many respects, they are simultaneously promoted as high-profile figures by the institutional publicity apparatus, including the Divisions of Marketing and Communication. Thus, the faces of the top university managers are frequently displayed in institutional promotional material, on the university website and in other institutional documentation (see for example Parker, 2014: 285-286). At the same time, managerial voices are often heard, in, for example, the managerial announcements, exhortations and edicts that are regularly broadcast over university computer networks (see for example Chetty and Merrett, 2014: 160-173). All the while, the institutional media may regularly feature articles about the activities, aspirations and achievements of members of senior management.

Yet again, various university managers and certain occult practitioners may have some aspects in common in this regard. For instance, the *inyanga* Khotso Sethuntsa surrounded himself with an aura of secrecy, while carrying out various forms of highly effective self-advertisement and self-aggrandisement. Other occult practitioners, such as the *n'anga* from Harare and the practitioner in Alice, South Africa, have made use of similar strategies. For instance, the Alice practitioner who sold wealth-giving beings ensured that the advertisements promoting his wares were publicly displayed throughout the town, although he remained an elusive, mysterious figure. Thus, these and many other workers of magic rely on interweaving secrecy and self-promotion, in order to emphasise their supernatural expertise while surrounding themselves with an air of mysterious power, wielding an influence over many of those around them by this means.

While publicity of this kind plays a significant role, other forms of mystery and mystification may be employed at corporatised universities, heightening the mystique surrounding senior managerial staff. Above all, the occult quality of institutions of this kind feeds on an ever-prevalent sense of mystery. For example, university salaries are a closely guarded secret. Roger Southall and Julian Cobbing (2001: 19, 40) for instance,

observe that there was a lack of transparency around salary issues - particularly those of senior management - at Rhodes University in 2001. Meanwhile, in 2006, the University of Fort Hare's salary list was duplicated and distributed, revealing striking salary discrepancies. However, the *Daily Dispatch* reports that the university management declined to disclose how salaries were determined. Instead, the confidential nature of staff members' salaries was emphasised by the university's spokesperson and other prominent employees.<sup>7</sup> Yet even when salary details are disclosed, the largesse bestowed on senior managerial staff may remain shrouded in obscurity. At diverse institutions in South Africa and elsewhere many senior university managers tend to receive significant parts of their salaries in the form of perks.

Then, other areas of mystery may prevail around certain disciplinary codes that may sometimes be used to enforce managerial authority. For instance, Rhodes University authorities were reluctant to discuss such issues with the local academic staff union, NTESU, in 2001 (Southall and Cobbing: 19). There may also be a risk that an employee who falls foul of senior management may be subjected to disciplinary action for breaching what may seem to be an obscure or even problematic institutional regulation. Duncan (2007, 10-11) cites several examples of South African academics who have been dismissed from their institutions for reasons of this kind, including UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal) academic Fazel Khan. Other UKZN academics Nithaya Chetty and John Van Den Berg were subjected to disciplinary procedures for sharing information about Senate meetings with members of the university community outside Senate; and, allegedly, for leaking this information to the media (Chetty and Merrett, 2014: 173, 149). Van Den Berg and Chetty's case highlights the extent to which secrecy surrounding university documentation and discussion may become so extreme that even 'the most banal of university documents [may become] confidential ... and the most basic of university discourse vulnerable to disciplinary action' (Chetty and Merrett, 2014: 122). As Chetty and Christopher Merrett indicate (2014, 151), restrictive measures of this kind are by no means unique to UKZN. Instead, they form part of a growing trend.

Moreover, the reasons for the introduction of new procedures and sudden, dramatic policy changes with far-reaching implications may seem unfathomable (Wood, 2010a: 234). Such conditions abound in South Africa and elsewhere (see for example Southall and Cobbing, 2001: 14-21; Gudeman, 1998: 2). For instance, Chetty and Merrett note (2014: 205-206) that UKZN has undergone a process of '[i]nterminable and often seemingly pointless change' since the 1990s. They also maintain that this could sometimes further the interests of the university authorities, serving as 'a method of control that [could] diminish dissent'. Meanwhile, Martin Parker (2014: 284), currently employed at a UK university, describes the 'speed and violence' of the changes that took place at the business school where he was formerly employed when a new dean took charge.

Irish academic Steve Hedley (2010: 137, 140) remarks that managerial structures often seem in a process of flux and change, and that this creates the impression of instability and uncertainty. Hedley also makes specific reference to the effect of 'frequent "restructuring" exercises with poorly defined objectives', adding that 'whatever

rationality and purpose may inhere in central university processes is very probably not apparent from the point of view of typical department members'. Indeed, the reasons for the frequent changes and disruptions that characterise much contemporary university life may be so incomprehensible that they may seem to stem from forces beyond human ken, or from a comparable source: the inscrutable sphere of institutional management (see also Parker, 2014: 284; see also Wood, 2010a: 234-235).<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the reasons why particular edicts and changes are suddenly and unexpectedly enforced may sometimes seem to border on the inexplicable. New sets of commandments (often relating to the performance of various obscure bureaucratic rituals, the practical functions of which appear to be fully comprehensible only to those who have been initiated into the mysteries of managerialism) regularly descend from on high, often at short notice (Wood, 2010a: 234). On these and comparable occasions, the style of managerial governance may seem simultaneously hands-off, heavy-handed and offhand.

Yet more powerful forces than institutional managerial structures are at work here. For instance, Shore and Wright (1999: 566) describe how the Higher Education Funding Council in the UK (the HEFCE) once acknowledged that it was in its interests 'to keep systems volatile, slippery and opaque', alluding specifically to the mutable nature performance indicators as an example of this. Thus, the HEFCE deemed it advisable to retain specific performance indicators for two years only, since after that time 'people get wise to them' (cited in Wood, 2010a: 235). Meanwhile, in South Africa, the website of the National Research Foundation (the NRF), upon which applications for research funding and researchers' rating applications are conducted, is prone to sudden changes - possibly for some similar reasons. Arguably, perhaps, some of the obscurities surrounding senior managerial policy and procedure may stem from the complex, mystifying aspects of the higher education milieu.

Moreover, such mutations and permutations, which can suddenly strike without warning, could perhaps give rise to the notion that the actions of certain senior managerial staff are comparable to those of some invisible supernatural agencies, accountable to no one except themselves. If university procedures seem inscrutable and confusing, then university employees may begin to lose a sense of direction and purpose, and their work itself may seem drained of meaning. For instance, a report produced in 2006 by Fazel Khan at UKZN, highlights the sense of meaninglessness prevalent among academics at his institution. Khan has been dismissed for bringing his institution into disrepute (Duncan, 2007: 11). According to his report, this feeling arises when 'the function, purpose and meaning of your work does not make sense' (cited in Duncan, 2007: 11). This state of affairs is a widespread malaise, infecting many academic environments in South Africa and elsewhere.

These conditions are exacerbated by a lack of information. This may especially concern important decisions and developments that particularly affect employees and students. For instance, Jane Duncan (2007: 6) describes how the South African Ministry of Education released a National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa in 2001, advocating increasing student enrolments in commerce, the sciences, engineering and

technology, business and career-oriented programmes. Various departments in the Humanities were somewhat disturbed by this, although the Minister assured them that they would not be unduly affected by this development. Notwithstanding this, however, a number of Humanities departments have been closed down. This is indicative of the extent to which information may be obscured or withheld from those whom it most directly concerns, both by senior managerial staff and sometimes by those external authorities who preside over them. (Sometimes the lack of clarity at senior managerial level may stem in part from this.) Unsurprisingly then, various South African university employees tend to discover more about current conditions at their institutions from the media than from members of university management and the university publicity apparatus. For instance, various staff members at Fort Hare tend to glean much information about events and developments at their university from the pages of *The Daily Dispatch*. As commentators such as Ginsberg (2011: 4) remind us, comparable conditions may prevail at many other institutions in diverse parts of the world.

Hedley (2010) discusses the extent to which the state of confusion now prevalent at many contemporary universities is closely connected to their internal hierarchical complexities. Universities now consist of multi-tiered structures of administrative authority, and each level may deal with different types of issues. However, when they discuss the same issue, they may perceive and respond to it in diverse ways, depending on the exigencies of their specific context. Thus

mutual incomprehension grows . . . (As an example, try asking a random sample of university employees what the recent ‘restructuring’ exercise was designed to achieve.) Certainly the production of a university strategic plan, most of the content of which is incomprehensible to most of those supposedly guided by it, is likely to promote cynicism, rather than the sense of communal purposes which is presumably its aim (2010: 136).

Confusion of this nature can fulfil certain functions which have been employed for comparable purposes in certain mystical practices. For instance, those who purport to possess otherworldly powers, performing magical acts of dubious provenance, and those who carry out fraudulent conjuring tricks rely on baffling and bewildering those who behold them, so as to deceive them into believing that they are in the presence of superior individuals endowed with exceptional abilities that transcend those of ordinary mortals (Pels, 2003: 7). Once again, this may call to mind Geschiere's observations about the relationship between publicity, secrecy and power.

Ironically, despite the emphasis now placed on transparency and accountability in many present-day restructured universities, the hegemonic nature of senior managerial dominion, the hierarchical complexities with which it is surrounded, and its shadowy, imprecise workings have rendered it both aloof and elusive, and thus less accountable. The arcane, impenetrable nature of managerial authority is intensified by this lack of cohesion and clarity. Bruce Baker's description (2004: 47) of the complex organisational structures in the ‘modernised’ public services in the UK highlights an aspect of this. He observes that ‘the very fragmented nature of [their] organisational networks ... obscures

who is accountable to whom for what'. Ultimately then, the extent to which those who preside over the process can be held accountable for what takes place beneath them becomes obscured. Therefore, paradoxically, the new hierarchies of managerial and administrative authority purportedly imposed to bring about greater accountability have brought about diminished accountability in certain respects.

Ironically too, 'transparency' often has a paradoxical meaning. By means of regular enactments of transparency (including the rites of the audit procedure, carefully stage-managed performances of internal and external evaluation, and bureaucratic rituals bestowing the appearance of productivity while seemingly laying all open to scrutiny) combined with ritualistic incantations of terms like 'transparency' and 'accountability', that which is depicted or enacted in the name of transparency serves to obscure more than it discloses. Thus, while the idea of transparency has been foregrounded in contemporary restructured university discourse and procedure, it furthers forms of concealment by weaving an illusion of openness. Once again, this calls to mind Pels's and Geschiere's aforementioned points about the ways in which certain kinds of enchantments, some of which are at work in contemporary societies, are reliant on a skilful interplay between disclosure and concealment. For instance, the more frank and open a magician may appear to be, seemingly revealing all about his or her arts and equipment, the more he or she may be concealing. Thus his or her apparent transparency may serve as a means of dissembling (Pels, 2003: 7; Taussig, 2003: 273; 295-300).

All in all, the hegemonic nature of senior managerial dominion, the hierarchical complexities with which it is surrounded, and its shadowy, imprecise workings have rendered it both aloof and elusive, and thus less accountable. Ironically enough, however, the mysteries of managerialism are often enacted at the same time as the corporate fables of transparency and accountability are invoked. On account of these and other above-delineated features, managerial practices can obfuscate, intimidate and complicate simultaneously.

## Conclusion

To move forward, we need more light than shadow, but certain present-day managerial practices tend to obscure more than they illuminate. Let us draw on our own disciplines to help us light a way forward.

Shore and Wright (1999: 571), for instance, consider the way in which anthropological approaches and insights can be harnessed 'to challenge and move beyond current ... orthodoxy'. The same could be said for the study of folklore and African orality. We can draw on these and various other academic disciplines for guidance and sources of insight as we expose and interrogate the systems of power and control in our societies and workplaces. As Henry A Giroux (2007: 205) maintains, we need to 'develop multiple strategies for taking back the universities from the corporations'. As we have seen, various systems of power, be they mystical, magical or managerial, may depend on shadowy areas of secrecy and obscurity. By perceiving established features of our

experience from perspectives shaped by our own particular disciplines, we may defamiliarise and destabilise that which may sometimes seem customary, fixed and inevitable, and begin to ‘to un-mask the way power is disguised and the mechanisms through which it can be made effective’ (Shore and Wright, 1999: 571). Indeed, this has been one of the principal aims of this study.

As we revisit and re-appraise the power structures at work in our societies and our workplaces that control and constrain our lives - and also the way their ascendancy depends in part on our own acquiescence - we may begin to free ourselves from their grasp. This may bring about intellectual, imaginative and psychic freedoms which may - just possibly - pave the way towards freedoms of other kinds.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledging the fact that ‘corporatisation’ can have diverse meanings, Australian academic Margaret Thornton utilises the term to indicate the application of business practices to public institutions to make them more like private corporations. This accords with the contemporary neoliberal political agenda, which includes the privatisation of the public domain, commodification, consumerism and a preoccupation with profit-making (2004: 163).

This definition of corporatisation is applicable here. Thus, the terms ‘corporate’ and ‘corporatisation’ are used to denote universities that tend to conform to the above-delineated criteria (see also Hedley, 2010: 119-120).

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on wider research into the occult aspects of contemporary corporatised, managerially governed universities. Various earlier studies have explored other dimensions of this issue so, where indicated, this paper draws on the same key concepts.

<sup>3</sup> For further definitions of corporatisation and managerialism, see also Thornton, 2004: 163; Hedley, 2010: 119 - 120; Ozga, 2011: 143, 145.

<sup>4</sup> My thanks to Michael Lewis for introducing me to Lala Yako, and for sharing his information and insights on *ukuthwala*, the ownership of a wealth-giving being, with me.

<sup>5</sup> A *chikwambo* is a form of wealth-giving magic in Zimbabwe; and this can also denote a spirit that bestows wealth.

<sup>6</sup> The Alice practitioner offered a wealth-giving supernatural being that took the form of a *mamlambo*, often said to take the form of an alluring human being or a snake. Belief in the *mamlambo* originated in the Eastern Cape; and then became more widespread.

Research Assistant Wendy Muswaka conducted a series of valuable interviews about wealth-giving spirits, and some of her research is cited in this paper.

<sup>7</sup> See Baatjes, Spreen. and Vally, 2012: 156. See also George, 2006; Mapham and George, 2006; Deal with the Problem, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Various points in this and the next two paragraphs also appear in an earlier study, although in another context, furthering a different set of arguments (Wood, 2010a: 234-235).

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