

P R E F A C E



In the time I have taken to research and write this book, South Africa has changed dramatically. The project that I undertook as South Africa was loosening the grip of the apartheid state in the early 1990s has emerged in the postapartheid world that finds the country struggling with the legacy of its troubled past. My own slow work habits aside, the project changed in part as a reflection of later events. While resistance to colonial rule and the apartheid state is still a significant element in the story, the broader cultural meanings of resistance and violence have become more prominent.

Studying beliefs in witchcraft and their impact on people's actions has become trendy. In writings about South Africa, topics that used to be confined to ethnographies have become part of the academic mainstream. While there is a danger that witchcraft beliefs may be used to explain too much, there has been a real benefit in taking spiritual beliefs seriously as historians and other scholars confront difficult questions about how colonized people ordered and interpreted the world and their political options. Recognizing that spiritual beliefs are not a simple handmaiden of material frustrations or desires creates the potential for a richer description of people's lives and for a more complete explanation of events.

I did not start this project with the idea that tax payments as a ritual of rule had a connection to beliefs in the supernatural. But as I engaged with my sources I came to think there was such a connection. There were certainly plenty of dry documents reporting the rate of tax payments and detailing down to the last shilling who owed back taxes and how best to get them to pay up. But there were other kinds of documents—including court transcripts and transcripts of meetings as well as the proceedings of various commissions—where Africans testified, often eloquently, about taxes and about their relationships with state officials. Magistrates' reports and letters expressed official unease about the same topics and speculated why Africans were or were not paying their taxes and why they had suspicions about state officials' intentions. The words of African officials—headmen and chiefs, clerks and translators—also appear in the archives at various moments, often in an official capacity, to explain the actions or beliefs of their peers. Missionaries left letters and reports of their own, many of which contain observations and concerns about African supernatural beliefs and their connection either to acceptance of the political order or unrest. These writings and

archives have formed the bulk of my sources, and they provide evidence for the persistence of beliefs among many rural Africans in the supernatural generally and in the workings of witches and other malevolent actors in particular to shape events both in their personal lives and in the broader political and social realm.

I also encountered mentions of witchcraft beliefs when I interviewed people in various Transkeian districts in 1990. The Xhosa name for the poll tax, or General Rate, that virtually all the informants used was *irhafu yempundulu* (lightning-bird tax), a reference to the mythical lightning bird, which can be sent by witches to harm their enemies via lightning strikes or by sucking blood. (Govan Mbeki, a leading figure in the ANC in the 1950s and 1960s who wrote the first account of the revolt that took place in the Transkei at that time, also notes that name for the poll tax.) This direct association of a particular tax with a supernatural being caused me to delve more deeply into the archival sources for additional evidence to support the broader claim that many rural Africans commonly associated colonial rule with whites' supposed abilities to manipulate supernatural powers. The works of anthropologists—especially Monica Wilson's very important *Reaction to Conquest*, based on research conducted in the 1930s—also provide quotations from various African informants that directly link witchcraft practices to the exercise of colonial power. These materials and sources were more than suggestive of a critical role being played by supernatural beliefs in the routine assumptions many Africans made about the state. They provide ways into the worldviews and beliefs of people who both helped to build a particular version of colonial rule in the Transkei and then tried to tear it down.

Let me provide a quick note on spelling of African words and names in the text. In general, I have used the commonly accepted written version of various place names and people's names, although there are often two or more versions of a single name (for example, the older version "Umditshwa" and the more correct spelling "Mditshwa," or the older version "Gangelizwe" and the more correct spelling "Ngangelizwe"). I have allowed the spellings in original sources to remain as they are in the original, and hope this will not cause too much confusion.

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the numerous intellectual debts I have incurred in the course of this project. Amherst College provided me with the financial support to conduct the research for the project and the time to write it. My colleagues in the history department were also extraordinarily supportive, and I have learned a great deal by talking to them and teaching with them. My fellow African studies colleagues in "the Happy Valley" have also taught me a

great deal and extended my horizons beyond the boundaries of South Africa. Various scholars have read drafts, provided comments, and occasionally forced me to see the error of my ways. First on the list is Catherine Higgs, who read the whole manuscript and gave me invaluable suggestions. Mitzi Goheen has also been a kind but incisive critic of the chapters she has read at various stages. William Beinart read an earlier version of some of the material and provided excellent criticisms. Jeff Peires generously helped me and discussed the project when I came to Umtata in 1990 to conduct interviews in the Transkei. My research assistant (who asked for anonymity at the time) in the Transkei in December 1990 was extraordinarily helpful and conscientious as he assisted me with interviews. Archivists in the Cape Town, Pretoria, Pietermaritzberg, and Umtata archives depots, as well as those in the Cullen Library, were always knowledgeable and gracious. Detailed comments were provided by anonymous reviewers, including those who read the whole manuscript for Ohio University Press, and those who read the earlier versions of the individual chapters that were published as journal articles. Gillian Berchowitz, the press's senior editor, also gets my thanks for taking on the project, for sharing her own comments and suggestions, and for her elucidations of other people's comments.

I also thank Harrison M. Wright, now professor emeritus of history at Swarthmore College, for initially teaching me not only about South African history, but also about doing research and for instilling in me a real interest in digging out information wherever it leads. He also introduced me to Joan Broster, whose vocation was the documentation of African rural life in the Transkei. During my first visit to the Transkei in 1979, she took me around the countryside, introduced me to people, and shared her knowledge, all of which made me see African rural life as more than a question of material resources and population migration. In that same vein, I have an enormous debt to the numerous Africans, often unnamed, whose lives and testimonies I have found in the archives and have used in the writing of this book.

My debts to my family, including my husband, Peter Siegelman, and my son, Dan, are boundless. They have enriched both my life and this book.