

Snakes, spells, cadillacs and Kruger millions: oral accounts of the extraordinary career of Khotso Sethuntsa*

FELICITY WOOD

University of Fort Hare

Millionaire, magician and mystery man, more than thirty years after his death, Khotso Sethuntsa still represents a significant presence in the Eastern Cape and southern KwaZulu-Natal. The old man is still out there. In the psychic, spiritual and imaginative sphere (an area which cannot be accessed by cellphones or advanced computer technology), he wields a power that is complex and hard to contain. There is a belief that his powers are still concentrated in his house in Lusikisiki; one of his daughters tells me that people who have problems come and make offerings in the main yard. Someone from the Flagstaff-Lusikisiki area says that many elderly people in the region do not want to talk about Khotso, because they are still afraid of him.¹ A student researcher of mine was warned that gathering information about Khotso was a risky business, since he would not be pleased if anyone pried too deeply into his secrets.² After his death, Khotso was embalmed, so that he could continue to be present physically as well as spiritually.³ Various Kokstad and Lusikisiki locals maintain that visiting the old man's corpse was a deeply disturbing experience.⁴

So who was Khotso Sethuntsa? When I first started asking people to tell me stories about Khotso (most people simply refer to him by his first name), I felt as if I was some kind of anomaly: one of the few people in the Eastern Cape who had never heard of him before. There are certain basic facts concerning his life - but even some of these have been called into question. He was Sotho in origin, lived in Kokstad and the Pondoland area for most of his adult life and died in 1972. A number of different dates have been posited as Khotso's date of birth, including 1882 and 1889. Khotso himself periodically lied about his age, sometimes telling people that he had been born in the early 1880s. However, the date

*. This paper arises out of a broader project into oral narratives pertaining to Khotso Sethuntsa, funded by the National Research Foundation. I am indebted to University of Fort Hare students, Fanele Sicwethsa and Anele Mabongo, who collected information relevant to my research from people in the northern Transkei. My thanks, too, to Vuyo Sijentu and other members of the Fort Hare community who assisted me in my research. I am grateful to Mike Lewis for his willingness to share information about Khotso's life with me. Finally, my thanks to Mathew Blatchford for his support.

1. F. Wood, interview with Sylvia Tloti, 17 June 2003, 4.

2. F. Wood, interview with Anele Mabongo, 28 January 2003, 13-16.

3. F. Wood, interview with Mametsi Sethuntsa, 24 March 2003, 2.

4. F. Wood, interview with staff of the *Kokstad Advertiser*: Maria Edwards, Janice Willemse and John Davids (not his real name); also Teuns Willemse 4 October 2001, 5. F. Wood, interview with Vuyo Sijentu, 3 May 2002, 4; F. Wood, interview with Fanele Sicwethsa, 30 April 2002, 3-4.

5. F. Wood, interview with Mike Lewis, 13 June 2003, 9; J. Coulter, 'The Mystery of Khotso and the Kruger Millions', *Daily Dispatch*, 22 September 1989, 6.

of birth on his baptism certificate is 1898.⁵ Khotso was renowned as a herbalist and a worker of powerful magic. Astonishingly wealthy, he owned thirty-eight properties by the mid-1960s.⁶ He had eighteen houses - distinctive structures with stained glass, blue and white tiles, ornate columns and archways and statues of lions. At night, one of my students told me, people believed that those lions would come to life and roar.⁷ Khotso drove around the countryside in his cadillacs, flaunting his wealth and scattering largesse. Every year at the Kokstad Agricultural Show, he would buy expensive new cars, paid for in cash. Khotso's father worked for Paul Kruger. So did he have access to the missing Kruger millions? Or did his wealth derive from his success as a herbalist and seller of magical charms?

His fame was so widespread that a large number of tourists, black and white, rich and poor, locals and foreigners, made pilgrimages to Lusikisiki to goggle at the man. He boasted: 'People from all over the world write to me and ask me to help them solve their problems. Of course, they know that I am the greatest and have helped many a man here and abroad.'⁸ After he died, his wealth vanished as inexplicably as it had been generated. One of my researchers encountered an adoptive son who is still in the process of trying to find Khotso's fortune⁹ and another family member I spoke to repeatedly asked me if there was a way I could help him get his share of the wealth.¹⁰

A terrain of tall tales

In attempting to establish the facts surrounding Khotso, one almost immediately begins moving into the realm of mystery, speculation and possible fabrication. The further I have ventured into the terrain of his life, the more riddles and gaps I have uncovered. So I find myself not so much holding a solid weight of information, but rather attempting to grasp a fluid world of narrative. It has been pointed out that there is little use in talking about objective narratives, since stories shift and change as they are shaped and coloured by the vested interests and value systems of the various narrators involved. Any notions of truth and meaning we may attempt to bestow on such narratives are relational constructions.¹¹ In reflecting on all the oral accounts I have heard of Khotso and his life, I am reminded of how unstable and unreliable memory is and how open to suggestion and manipulation. What we may regard as relatively reliable depictions of events may be blurred and distorted images, giving fantastical form to seemingly straightforward experience or, like a sequence of mirrors reflecting one another again and again, each attempt to recollect and retell may lead us further and further away from the original events themselves.

6. 'Now He Has 38 Properties', *Daily Dispatch*, 23 Feb. 1965, 4.

7. F. Wood, interview with Fanele Sicwetsha, 15 October 2001, 11.

8. 'Khotso, Man with a Million Dollar Smile', *Daily Dispatch*, 20 July 1968, 5.

9. Wood/Mabongo, 2003, 22.

10. F. Wood, interview with Madiba Sethunsa, 23 February 2003.

11. S. Lillejord, Solvi and G.E. Soreide, "'Tell Me Your Story': Using Narratives from Interviews to Understand Indigenous Knowledge', *Indilinga*, vol. 2(1), 2003, 92.

My position, then, is not so much that of someone claiming a certain type of control over Khotso - in terms of an ability to offer authoritative information, cutting through fact and fiction to arrive at definitive conclusions about his life - but rather as yet another hanger-on in his circus parade, which cavorts unsteadily through the shifting terrain of tall tales around him, eagerly absorbing stories, constantly generating new ones. In this article I am, essentially, adding yet another narrative strand to the web of tales surrounding Khotso Sethuntsa. After all, I am, to borrow David Maines' description of academics, one of those 'spinners of professional tales we call theories.'¹² What has drawn me to Khotso is not so much an attempt to resolve the riddles surrounding him - made extra tricky by the fact that Khotso was reputedly an accomplished liar - but a sense of fascination in the way in which his life history makes us strikingly aware of the power of story.¹³

For some people, the word story may conjure up the sense of something ephemeral, separate from real life, but as many writers including Hayden White, Walter Ong and Fredric Jameson point out, our perceptions of life are cast in the form of stories. Ong, for example, explores the way in which we use narrative as a way of processing human experience.¹⁴ To quote Miller Mair, we need stories 'to weave a web of meaning within which we can live.'¹⁵ Because stories act upon us, shaping our sense of who we are and where we come from, as Isabel Hofmeyr notes in her study of oral narrative in a Ndebele-Sotho chiefdom,¹⁶ we can also use stories to act upon others: to enlighten, entertain, manipulate, beguile and control. This is where Khotso's special magic lay, not simply in supernatural expertise or financial wizardry, but in his consummate skill in creating stories - whether drawing on fact, fabrication or a confusing blend of both - and using them to further his own ends. The shifting, multifarious and highly coloured nature of these tales springs in part from the vibrant, changing nature of narrative and also from the enigmatic, wildly imaginative and unscrupulous nature of their creator. It has been observed that we use stories not only to let those around us (and ourselves) know who we are, but also to indicate who we would like to be.¹⁷ And Khotso put even more creative energy into the latter part of this process than most of us do. Of course, the dynamic between the specific contexts within which Khotso told his stories, his own self-image and the tales themselves played a role too. As Somers and Gibson remark: 'Agents adjust stories to fit their own identities, and, conversely, they will tailor a "reality" to fit their stories.'¹⁸

12. D. Maines, 'Narrative's Moment and Sociology's Phenomena: Towards a Narrative Sociology', *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 34(1), 1993, 32.

13. As Hayden White reminds us, the construction of histories is a particularly potent form of story-telling. See, for example, H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London and Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

14. W. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 104.

15. Cited in K. Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 15.

16. I. Hofmeyr, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale That is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Portsmouth: Heinemann; Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993), ix.

17. A. Lieblich, R. Tuval-Mashiach and T. Zilber, *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation* (London: Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 56.

18. M. Somers and G. Gibson, 'Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Construction of Identity' in C. Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 61.

Of course, not all the tales surrounding Khotso were ones he put about himself. But he knew one of the central principles underlying the successful weaving of narrative: that stories - especially dramatic and extraordinary ones - breed stories. If you begin constructing that chain of narrative effectively, story will follow story and if you are adept in the art of story, you can turn these narratives to your own advantage.

A man of magic

Khotso was an outsider, both by virtue of his Sotho background and his astounding wealth. A different person would perhaps have sought ways to blend in and Khotso did attempt to establish himself in the communities in which he lived, through acts of generosity and various forms of community support.¹⁹ But the stories he related about himself, rather than integrating him into the communities around him, emphasise that he was separate, different, unique. Over and over again, they set out to prove that he was not like ordinary people. In a number of different accounts, the fact that Khotso wished to keep himself and his family separate from the surrounding community in various respects comes through very clearly. For instance, one of Khotso's daughters, Mamestsi, talks about how she and her siblings were not allowed to visit other peoples' houses in Pondoland, in case they were offered pork to eat. Pondo people ate pork, a practise that Khotso believed caused bad luck.²⁰

In examining the role of narrative in Khotso's life, we could start with the very first story of all. When Khotso was a young man, looking after cows for Eric Scott, a farmer in the Kokstad area, the cattle strayed and Khotso was punished. He predicted that Scott would suffer because of the way he had treated him. In 1925, a violent tornado struck Scott's lands, ripping the roof off the farmhouse and smashing the walls, yet leaving the neighbouring farms untouched. As the headline in the *Kokstad Advertiser* put it, it was 'the cyclone which set Khotso on the road to success.'²¹ Mike Lewis, who lived in Kokstad, and has collected a great deal of information about Khotso's life, observes:

Whirlwinds are fairly frequent in that part of the world. But one of them happened to coincide with his dispute with that white farmer. The whirlwind happened to go through that farmer's house, right through the middle of it, as is recorded in the *Kokstad Advertiser*. And Khotso boasted about it and made himself famous ... because of that. Whether you put that down to his supernatural abilities or not - that's one frame of reference - but certainly, he used [it].²²

19. Wood/ Madiba Sethuntsa, 44-45; F. Wood, interview with Anele Mabongo. 8 November 2002, 8, 11-12.

20. Wood/ Mamestsi Sethuntsa, 5.

21. 'The Cyclone Which Set Khotso on the Road to Success', *Kokstad Advertiser*, 1 Feb. 1973, 3.

22. Wood/ Lewis, 3.

This story, which laid the foundation for all the other legends surrounding Khotso, emphasises that he possessed tremendous powers and - even at the most lowly point of his career, when he was a humble farmhand - was not a person to be trifled with. These points get made over and over again, in a number of different narratives. One of his adoptive sons relates this tale:

This woman took a pumpkin from his field without asking ... She just stole it and got that pumpkin to her home. They chopped the pumpkin, put it into the pot to feed her children. [Then] the pumpkin talked: 'Why are you chopping me? You didn't ask my father ... I don't want to be cooked without consulting my father.' Hey! This woman was afraid ... Then the pumpkin said: 'If you don't want to go to my father, consult the police.' [When the woman went to the police station, they took her to Khotso] ... He said, 'Why are you stealing from my field?' [She pleaded:] 'No! I'm hungry ... My children have nothing to eat.' He said to her, 'Don't you ever steal again in my field. If you have nothing, just come to me, I'll help you.' [He gave her a magic tickety, which was never used up and eventually she became rich.]²³

Other tales celebrate Khotso's triumph over more powerful adversaries. Once, his sheep crossed a railway line and got hit by a train. Khotso complained to the railway manager, who said it was not his fault that the train had happened to hit the sheep. Khotso then said that if he was not prepared to reimburse him for his sheep, the train was not going to go that route again. So the next time the train travelled along that route, it broke down. Mechanics were called in, but they could not find out what the problem was. The train stayed like that for several days, and eventually Khotso got reimbursed for the sheep that he had lost and the train continued along its way. On another occasion Khotso wanted to acquire some land, but the chief who controlled that area blocked him. Khotso became angry and a date was set for a fight. Anele Mabongo, from Lusikisiki, says: '[W]hen that day dawned, the chief brought his army, you know, armed with spears. [Khotso came in his Cadillac] and the only thing he did, he just opened his boot and it was said that lions leaped out and ate all the chief's [troops].'²⁴

In these tales, staple features of rural life, sheep and pumpkins, and the ultimate urban status symbol, the Cadillac, all provide Khotso with an opportunity to display his powers. Ong has remarked how, in oral traditions, audience expectations help fix specific themes and formulas in a particular narrative context.²⁵ With stories such as these in circulation, people in Pondoland and East Griqualand would have come to expect the extraordinary and the astounding

23. Wood/ Madiba Sethuntsa, 45-46.

24. Wood/ Mabongo, 2003, 5.

25. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 67.

when they heard the name Khotso Sethuntsa. This allowed for the proliferation of more and more fantastical and extravagant evidence of the latter's magical expertise.

'The snake will swallow you'

When we return to the initial story, we encounter another feature that forms a key element in so many of the tales concerning Khotso, the supernatural serpent: in this case, the snake in the sky - the *inkanyamba*, the tornado spirit. The tornado represents a particularly potent presence in the sphere of indigenous supernatural belief and as such, it is particularly significant that it should be at the centre of this, the initial story. And then, there is the snake itself, which, as W.B. Hammond-Tooke observes, is the creature that appears most frequently in the symbolic structure of Cape Nguni cosmology.²⁶ Khotso's ability to control natural forces helped reinforce his connection with dark and dangerous occult practices. In Pondoland, witchcraft is especially associated with the ability to control the weather. Moreover, the story spread that if Khotso could control a particularly potent and destructive otherworldly serpent such as the *inkanyamba*, then it was quite possible that he could exert his mastery over other powerful supernatural beings taking on a snake-like form. The loose, generalised way in which terminology relating to the area of indigenous supernatural belief can be applied helped assist this notion. (Sometimes, for instance, my informants would use the term *inkanyamba* to denote not only Khotso's sky snake, but the other magical serpents he controlled. It is likely that this term could have been used in a similar fashion in Khotso's youth as well.) So this initial narrative helped open the way for the growth of many other tales, springing from certain basic source material, but branching out into diverse areas of their own.

Over and over again, we encounter stories in which Khotso is connected with snakes. He was said to possess many snakes, both real (which he was said to keep in his house for protection) and magical. Even the real snakes were regarded as partaking in the aura of sinister strangeness which surrounded him for, as one informant remarked: 'I would think they were supernatural, because where Khotso was concerned, nothing would be ordinary.'²⁷ In the Eastern Cape and elsewhere in southern Africa, people suspected of witchcraft have often been accused of keeping snakes²⁸ and this would have served to reinforce the conviction that Khotso was capable of acts of sorcery. 'He had apparently many creatures for particular functions,' says Fanele Sicwetsha. '[He had] many snakes, he would chose a particular type of snake, one for killing people, one for mak-

26. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, 'The Symbolic Structure of Cape Nguni Cosmology' in M.G. Whisson and M. West, *Religion and Social Change in South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975), 27. Hammond-Tooke points out that the peoples known as the Cape Nguni, who extend from the KwaZulu-Natal border to the Fish River, all speak dialects of the same language and display a great deal of cultural uniformity. These peoples include the Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bhaca, Xesibe, Bomvana, Hlubi, Zizi and Bhele (15, 19). Moreover, we encounter hybrid supernatural snakes in San/Bushman rock art, and in certain respects, the San/Bushman spiritual world influenced and was inter-related with the spiritual world of the Xhosa-speaking peoples.

27. Wood/ Sicwetsha, 2001, 12.

28. I. Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics* (David Philip: Cape Town; London: Pluto, 2001), 163, 168.

ing people rich, you see.’²⁹ This latter type of serpent, the wealth-giving snakes such as the *mamlambo* and *ichanti*, were the creatures with which Khotso was most frequently connected. As far as many people were concerned, someone like Khotso, from an impoverished background, virtually illiterate, yet fabulously wealthy, was clearly involved in *uthwala*, the possession of such snakes. Part of the sense of awe and fear surrounding Khotso arose from all the narratives dealing with his control over these beings, and his ability to sell them to others. ‘[T]he person who really wants wealth, he will contact Khotso ... If a man comes from Khotso, that means he has some sort of snake,’ says Bonga Vika from Mount Frere.³⁰ In 1962, W.D. Hammond-Tooke stated that the Bhaca people (from the Kokstad-Pondoland area) maintained that two men, one in Durban, the other in Kokstad, were famous sellers of *intlathu*, wealth-giving snakes.³¹ It is probable that Khotso was the second man in question. Stories abound concerning the endurance tests that people who went to Khotso for *uthwala* had to undergo. Most commonly though, they involved being overwhelmed or engulfed by a giant snake. Tsolwana Mphayipheli, from Lady Frere, repeats a local tale: ‘When you go to him, he will make you strong power. He will take a snake and the snake will swallow you ... After some few days, ... the snake will spit you [out]. Then ... the people will fear you.’³²

There are also accounts of people being placed in darkened rooms and seeing trains - serpentine artefacts of superhuman force - rushing towards them.³³ ‘[Y]ou would see a train coming at you and you’d have to sit between the rails,’ says Roseberry Maloi, who was born in Kokstad and grew up in Pondoland.³⁴ A number of Kokstad locals maintain that Khotso and his servants were often seen throwing bread and banknotes into the Mzintlava River as offerings to his snake.³⁵ After Khotso’s death, the stories continued. Some people believe that his corpse was preserved so that his wealth-giving snake could continue visiting him - or, on the other hand, that the Mount Ayliff river monster, a creature with a horse’s head, a snake-like body and a fish’s tail is Khotso’s snake, which has had no-one to maintain it since he died.³⁶ What made the tales of Khotso’s miraculous abilities to generate and bestow wealth particularly frightening was the awareness that the wealth-giving snakes that he controlled always demanded blood: the blood of animals or even the blood of humans - for instance, those closest to its owner, such as family members. As anthropologist Isak Niehaus observes, the desire for money can dominate people’s lives, just as a *mamlambo* ensnares its owner, so it is thus entirely appropriate that the *mamlambo* should feed on human blood.³⁷

29. Wood/ Siewetsha, 2002, 9.

30. F. Wood, interview with Bonga Vika, 6 September 2001, 1.

31. W.D. Hammond-Tooke, *Bhaca Society* (London: Oxford, 1962), 285.

32. F. Wood, interview with Tsolwana Mpayipheli, 25 October 2001, 9.

33. Wood/ Mabongo, 2002, 9-10.

34. F. Wood, interview with Roseberry Maloi, 5 December 2002, 3.

35. Wood, *Kokstad Advertiser*, 4.

36. Wood/ Vika, 11, 9.

37. Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*, 59.

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 the 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.³⁸ Hofmeyr emphasises the extent to which the stories we tell 'seep into popular perceptions and understandings.'³⁹ Rumours thrive on secrecy, and over time, these can come to seem more and more plausible, gradually assuming the weightiness of solid fact. Niehaus, for example, describes how rumours can give an air of factuality to something like witchcraft.⁴⁰ It is this factor that bestows a sense of physical solidity on accounts of Khotso's magical snakes, making them seem as much a part of the everyday world that he inhabited as his Cadillacs and lion-topped gateposts.

The Kruger connection

On the other hand, there were the Kruger millions. Rumours about Khotso's reputed access to Kruger's missing fortune proliferated particularly because Khotso spent so much time fuelling such stories himself. His parents worked for the Kruger household and he wove many stories about the Kruger connection. '[They] shared the love and sorrow of the Kruger family,' he declared in a deposition describing his parents' relationship with Paul Kruger and his wife, which he submitted to Kruger House in 1956.⁴¹ For Khotso himself, Kruger became transformed into a subject of spiritual devotion, as his deposition makes clear:

Portraits of the President adorn the walls of [Khotso's] house. He explains this as follows: as the Roman Catholic Church worships the Mother Mary, so we worship President Paul Kruger, whose living spirit is always with us to bring us happiness and prosperity.⁴²

Whether the dour Calvinist Kruger would have relished the comparison with the Virgin Mary is a moot point.

Khotso's house was full of Kruger memorabilia, and every year he celebrated Kruger Day by holding a huge feast. He even went to the extent of claiming that he had a special psychic bond with Paul Kruger, describing how, when he was a young man, hunting jackals in the Lesotho mountains, Kruger's spirit appeared to him, telling him that he would become very rich. Later on, he claimed to be in daily contact with Kruger, who provided him with sound finan-

38. Wood/Mametsi Sethuntsa, 10.

39. Hofmeyr, "'We Live our Lives as a Tale that is Told'", 36.

40. Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*, 128.

41. K. Sethuntsa and C.J.R. Fortein, 'Deposition to Kruger House', 1956, 1. Because Khotso was virtually illiterate, he told his parents' story to a coloured Kokstad schoolmaster, C.J.R. Fortein, who wrote it down for him. Khotso's signature is scrawled at the end.

42. Sethuntsa and Fortein, 'Deposition to Kruger House', 2.

cial advice and even gave him horse racing tips. Once, he even appeared to him in a vision and told him to back the winner of the 1954 Durban July Handicap.⁴³ 'So [Khotso] maintains that his wealth and affluence can be attributed to the late President Paul Kruger, who is worshipped in a special room and signifies to him all that is worth while in life,' Khotso affirms in his deposition.⁴⁴

While the significant position accorded to Kruger in the minds of many Afrikaners pales besides the apotheosis bestowed on him by Khotso Sethuntsa, the fact that Kruger acquired an almost mythic, iconic status among many Afrikaners did seem to have some influence on the way he was perceived in certain sections of the black community. Credo Mutwa, who, like Khotso, felt that it was in his interests to establish alliances with the white ruling elite and, like the latter, had a tendency to present his own mythologies as established fact (although Khotso far outdid him on both counts) made the following assertion: 'Paul Kruger ... was worshipped by the Bantu of the Transvaal. And when I say worshipped, I mean literally worshipped - as people worship a god.'⁴⁵

Khotso's politics were similar to those of Mutwa, and their veneration for Paul Kruger may have sprung from their sense of allegiance to the white Afrikaner establishment. In both men's cases, this became overlaid with their own distinctive, even idiosyncratic versions of African spirituality. It is also likely that the prominent position Kruger occupied in Khotso's personal belief system stemmed in part from the importance the latter attached to money and power. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he worshipped both these things. For Khotso, Kruger exercised his dominion at two different levels: in a public sense, as leader of the Afrikaner nation and in a more intimate sense, as head of the household in which his parents were employed. But a special part of the attraction Kruger held for Khotso relates to the former's association with wealth - in this case, the missing Kruger millions.

Khotso enjoyed confusing people. Sometimes he would maintain his practice as a herbalist and magician had brought him wealth; then would claim that he owed his fortune to Kruger's guidance and at other times he would hint that because his father had been Kruger's coachman, he knew where the Kruger millions were buried.⁴⁶ The large quantities of Kruger rands that Khotso owned also helped; these became associated in people's minds with the Kruger millions.⁴⁷ In 1964, he offered thousands of rand to anyone who could recover eight 44-gallon drums which were swept away when the Mzintlava River was flooded in Kokstad. According to the press, he claimed the tins were full of muti,⁴⁸ but he told his Kokstad friend Theo Christodoulou that they contained some of the Kruger millions.⁴⁹ He declared that making money was not his primary consid-

43. Coulter, 'The Mystery of the Kruger Millions', 6; Sethuntsa and Fortein, 'Deposition to Kruger House', 2.

44. Sethuntsa and Fortein, 'Deposition to Kruger House', 2.

45. C. Mutwa, *Indaba My Children* (New York: Grove, 2000), 104.

46. 'R2m Secret of Life Khotso Dies at 92', *Daily Dispatch*, 26 July 1972, 4; Coulter, 'The Mystery of the Kruger Millions', 6.

47. F. Wood, interview with Fabio Petronio, 4 October 2001, 3.

48. *Daily Dispatch*, 26 July 1972, 4; Coulter, 'The Mystery of the Kruger Millions', 6.

49. F. Wood, interview with Theo Christodoulou, 4 October 2001, 1.

eration, emphasising that he only charged R2.00 for a consultation,⁵⁰ but then he also boasted that he had received a million-dollar order for muti from an American client.⁵¹

‘Government witchcraft’

There was, however, a political dimension to Khotso’s interest in Kruger. ‘We all know that Khotso of Kokstad had become the greatest friend of Afrikaners and other Europeans,’ Khotso proclaimed in his deposition to Kruger House. ‘He learned to love Oom Paul Kruger’s children from his mother Khaki.’⁵² From the 1950s onwards, it was public knowledge that Khotso aligned himself with the white minority government. The extent to which not only indigenous forms of the supernatural, but the ‘government witchcraft’ (to use Sean Redding’s phrase) of the Afrikaner establishment formed part of the trappings of power with which Khotso surrounded himself becomes strikingly clear when one visits Mount Nelson, his Lusikisiki house.⁵³ Alongside the statues of lions and eagles, there are busts of Paul Kruger and various other Afrikaner leaders. On either side of a flight of stairs, above statuettes of Khotso and his father and grandfather is the insignia of the old South African Republic. Khotso was friendly with a number of Nationalist Party leaders, including J.G. Strijdom, D.F. Malan and H.F. Verwoerd, the black politicians they controlled, such as K.D. Matanzima and Botha Sigcau,⁵⁴ and, reputedly, their crony in the world of commerce, Sol Kerzner. It is claimed that Kerzner let Khotso stay in his hotels for free, because he was a drawcard for white clients.⁵⁵

Of course, Khotso probably liked associating with the wealthy ruling elite, the government representatives and the people with whom they were in cahoots, because of the potency of associative magic, endorsed even by those who do not believe in any other form of the supernatural. But one significant spin-off from Khotso’s connections with prominent Afrikaner politicians would have been that it intensified the fear of his ominous, uncanny abilities, bearing in mind the widely held assumption that whites had access to particularly strong magic⁵⁶ and the underground beliefs that the state possessed supernatural forms of potency, which it used to work evil. This latter perception was strongly held in the northern Transkei, helping fuel the Pondoland rebellion of 1955-63, as Redding indicates.⁵⁷ Adam Ashforth also argues that a commonly held perception in Soweto during the apartheid era was that the government, in its oppressive, exploitative actions, was seen as ‘an unmitigated source of evil.’ Ashforth continues: ‘Beyond the apparent face of political power ... people perceived an originary source of

50. Coulter, ‘The Mystery of the Kruger Millions’, 6.

51. *Daily Dispatch*, 20 July 1968, 5.

52. Sethuntsa and Fortein, ‘Deposition to Kruger House’, 1.

53. S. Redding, ‘Government Witchcraft: Taxation, the Supernatural and the Mpondo Revolt in the Transkei, South Africa, 1955-1963’, *African Affairs*, vol. 95, no. 381, Oct. 1996, 555-579.

54. Wood/Madiba Sethuntsa, 15-16; Wood/Mametsi Sethuntsa, 10.

55. Wood/Ploti, 7.

56. M.H. Wilson, *Reaction to Conquest* (London: Oxford, 1936), 316-317.

57. Redding, ‘Government Witchcraft’, 557-560.

evil power. The hidden, secret, nature of this power fostered fantasies about an enormous capacity for causing misfortune.⁵⁸ In its scale and malevolence, then, the power of the state was viewed as comparable to that possessed by forces of occult evil.

But, also, there were the rumours that Khotso's wealth could have derived from some type of diabolical pact of a political, rather than a supernatural nature. Various friends and family members told me that Khotso claimed that he gave the Nationalists the strength to obtain political power and stay in control.⁵⁹ 'They were his clients,' Madiba Sethunsa stated. 'I can put it that way. They wanted power to lead.' In 1948, on the eve of the elections, Verwoerd, then Minister for Bantu Affairs, had a secret, late-night meeting with Khotso. Evidently, the latter presented him with a small bottle of some of his special medicine for good luck at the end of the meeting. What exactly Verwoerd might have done with Khotso's gift we do not know, but the story ran that the Nationalist Party won the election in 1948 because they had Khotso's muti. A great deal of speculation surrounds Khotso's relationship with the Nationalists. Lewis suggests that Khotso was, perhaps as a result of the Kruger connection, working as some kind of intelligence agent for the Broederbond in the Transkei.⁶⁰ It has been claimed that Khotso would visit Pretoria regularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Did he use these trips to liaise with members of government? His daughter, Stella, recalls how Khotso would visit Verwoerd in the 1960s and how she and other children were taunted at school because of this.⁶¹ Moreover, there is the role that Khotso may have played in assisting Botha Sigcau to obtain the paramount chieftainship of Eastern Pondoland. According to tradition, his brother, Nelson, should have been made chief, but Botha was the candidate the Nationalists favoured. Some informants maintain that Khotso used muti and exerted his own personal influence to assist Botha's cause.⁶²

Inevitably, Khotso seemed to be the loser, because under the apartheid legislation he was obliged to relocate from Kokstad to Lusikisiki in 1957. He had built himself a palatial house in Kokstad and he did not want to move, but he was forced to by law. He must have felt a sense of betrayal and also tremendous humiliation at being reduced to the level of just another second class citizen, relegated to an isolated rural backwater. '[H]e was angry,' says Mike Lewis, 'and the story is that when he had to leave Kokstad ... there was a tornado following him, because he was angry!'⁶³ As we know, Verwoerd was assassinated in 1966 and some people claimed that they could see Khotso's hand in that. Dimitri Tsafendas claimed to be inhabited by a giant tapeworm. According to Henk van Woerden's biography of Tsafendas, which flies in the face of popular

58. A. Ashforth, 'Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in the New South Africa', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, vols. 150-152, nos. 2-4, 1998, 527.

59. Wood/Madiba Sethunsa, 16; Wood/Mametsi Sethunsa, 6-7.

60. Wood/Lewis, 8.

61. M. Lewis, interview with Stella Sethunsa, 17 March 1997, 3.

62. F. Wood and S. Tloti, interview with James Lunika, 21 February 2004, 10; M. Lewis, interview with Jo Jordan, 5 June 2004, 1.

63. Wood/Lewis, 10.

legend, the latter was not acting under the orders of his tapeworm when he killed Verwoerd.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, connections between Tsafendas's inner monster and the serpents controlled by Khotso make for some intriguing flights of imaginative speculation. There is also the fact that Khotso apparently told his family that after he died things would get out of hand for the government.⁶⁵ Fortunately for Khotso's reputation, South African history is full of turbulent episodes. The year after his death, the Natal strikes took place; and four years later, the Soweto uprising.

The power of mystery

Khotso worked hard to create an aura of mystery around himself, within which more and more extravagant stories concerning his wealth and power could develop. He planted the seeds of many of these stories himself, making sure that there was plenty of space for ambiguities and uncertainties. A number of stories describe his shape-changing abilities - he could 'turn into a snake, a donkey, a pig, any shape he wanted to be.'⁶⁶ In the same way, Khotso slides in and out of wildly divergent personas in the range of stories surrounding him: from genial philanthropist to kingpin in a criminal cartel dealing in human body parts; from gifted herbalist to unscrupulous manipulator of human weaknesses; from the promoter of black empowerment to secret agent for the Broederbond. Ong points out that in orality, words are not mere signs (quiescent visual phenomena) but, to quote Homer's epithet, 'winged words'. They fly away from us, possessing an elusiveness and a certain inaccessibility. They can be glimpsed, but they cannot be pinned down.⁶⁷ Because stories about Khotso fly in the face of logic, empirical fact and resolutions, they enable the man himself to evade our grasp.

Anele Mabongo's father used to work for Khotso. He relates:

My father used to tell me that ... because [Khotso] was rich, whites were quite attracted to him, because they wanted to know the secrets of his riches. But my father used to say that Khotso was clever, because he refused [to divulge his secrets] to those peoples ... He didn't usually reveal his powers publicly ... what he usually did was to show off his wealth, you see ... [So] he was clever in the sense that his powers were kept quite secret. By showing people his powers, he could end up being powerless. The mystery [was tied up with the power].⁶⁸

64. H. van Woerden, *A Mouthful of Glass* (Johannesburg: Jonathon Ball, 1998).

65. Wood/Madiba Sethuntsa, 16; Wood/Mametsi Sethuntsa, 6-7.

66. Wood/Mpayipheli, 8.

67. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 77.

68. Wood/Mabongo, 2002, 13-14, 18.

In *Sundiata*, the thirteenth century oral epic from Mali, the narrator concludes with these words: 'I was able to see and understand what my masters were teaching me, but between their hands I took an oath to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed.'⁶⁹ This highlights the conviction, often encountered in orality, that words have an innate power, but there is a danger of losing this if too much is divulged. While writers such as Munro S. Edmonson, Ong and Hofmeyr remind us of the sense of potency - and danger - associated with words in oral tradition,⁷⁰ underlying this is a sense that this power can easily be dispersed if words are too widely disseminated.

Ironically, there is always the possibility that by deliberately bamboozling and mystifying others, Khotso might eventually have ended up deceiving himself. Did outrageous lies and emotional manipulation gradually turn into fact in his mind? Did he begin to believe in his own fabricated versions of himself? Ong points out that the word 'text' comes from a root meaning 'to weave'; and oral discourse has been envisaged in the same way, the word 'to rhapsodize' meaning essentially 'to stitch songs together'.⁷¹ The stories we weave, like a brightly coloured fabric, can dazzle and delight, and we attempt to capture our impressions and experiences within their many different strands. But often it is we ourselves who are captivated, for like a spider web, stories may seem lightweight and ephemeral, yet once we - both tellers and listeners - are caught in them, they can hold us fast.

One of the most effective ways of preserving mystery is through fear - and this is where stories worked particularly to Khotso's advantage: fulfilling a very similar function to the signs many South African homes are bedecked with: armed security companies, dangerous dogs, poisonous snakes, trapguns - keep away! These warnings are easy enough to prove or disprove, but the tales dealing with Khotso's ability to deal with trespassers, those who tried to probe too deeply into his secrets or questioned his powers, exude a very different, more insidious type of menace. The cautionary tales dealing with the dire fates of those who fell foul of Khotso played particularly on generalised fears of the unknown forces - whether of this world or another - that Khotso might possibly have at his disposal. While the general sense among many Kokstad and Pondoland locals that I spoke to was that Khotso could be kind and generous, many informants also conveyed the sense that it was unwise to cross him in any way or attempt to probe his secrets. People made statements like: '[I]t was quite dangerous to get on the wrong side of Khotso ... if he became your enemy.'⁷² 'If you ask too much, you'll end up getting problems. ... [I]f you release that information [concerning Khotso] to a person, maybe you get cursed or something.'⁷³

69. D.T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Harlow: Longman, 1965), 84.

70. M.S. Edmonson, *Lore: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 81; Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 32; Hofmeyr, "'We Live our Lives as a Tale that is Told'", 181.

71. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 13, 21-22.

72. Wood/Mabongo, 2002, 14.

73. Wood/Mabongo, 2003, 29, 9.

Mike Lewis narrates how someone tried to expose Khotso as a fraud:

One person went to his house in Lusikisiki in the 1960s, in order to go through all the routines to become rich. [Later on], this particular chap [said that he] ... had been coming to Khotso for quite some time, but he wasn't getting rich ... So he went to Khotso to complain ... And Khotso said, 'well, if you're not happy, pick up that bag of money there.' When Khotso lived in Luskikisiki, he used to keep huge bags of money in the corners of rooms. So he said, 'okay, pick up that bag of money and go.' So the guy picks up this bag of money and he's walking out of the yard and he falls down dead!⁷⁴

Several informants cited stories they had heard of how Khotso would send his supernatural snakes after his enemies. Roseberry Maloi states: 'People believed that if you hurt [him], they would come after you at night, you see!'⁷⁵ Apparently Khotso intensified fears like these by claiming that even when he was dead, he would still have the power to harm those who criticised him. No wonder that most people preferred to play it safe. Sylvia Tloti, from the Flagstaff area, maintains that it was only the staunch Christians who were not afraid of Khotso.⁷⁶

A moral twist

However, stories did not always seem to work to Khotso's advantage. Stories can empower, but they can also eventually turn around and bite their creators. While tales describing Khotso's supernatural capabilities highlighted his uniqueness, at the same time he would have been aware of how they emphasised his own position as outsider: set apart from the communities around him by his Sotho origins and his fabulous wealth. Some of Khotso's children have complained that, because of the outrageous stories surrounding their father, he and his family were the constant target of malicious speculation.⁷⁷ For instance, when his first son died, this was attributed, in certain quarters, to Khotso's involvement in *uthwala*.⁷⁸ 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 being that this was the result of the old man's dealing in dark magic.

The sense of evil and menace associated with the blood-sucking, wealth-giving snakes which Khotso was rumoured to control emphasises the damaging effects - on both the individual and society - of an unbridled desire for material

74. Wood/Lewis, 11.

75. Wood/Maloi, 4.

76. Wood/Tloti, 6.

77. Wood/Madiba Sethuntsa, 13; Wood/Mametsi Sethuntsa, 10.

78. Wood/Lewis, 6.

gain.⁷⁹ The heady, seductive nature of this desire is suggested through images of the *mamlambo*, which is said to manifest itself in the form of a sexually alluring woman.⁸⁰ Often the *mamlambo* is said to be a mermaid-like being: half woman, half fish, with long flowing hair, comparable to the West African figure of the perilous, siren-like Mami Wata.⁸¹ 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’ snakes, developed through contact with modern economic forces, specifically the pressure to accumulate individual wealth.⁸²

In part, many of the stories linking Khotso with *uthwala* 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 poverty-stricken communities. Fanele Sicwetsha 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.’⁸³ This idea pervades many of the accounts of Khotso’s association with *uthwala*, reinforcing the notion that a fortune of the magnitude of his, its origins shrouded in secrecy, could not possibly have been honestly obtained. The unaccountable disappearance of Khotso’s money after his death would, in some people’s eyes, have furnished further proof of his involvement in *uthwala*, since it is believed that if a person who went through *uthwala* dies, their riches go to the grave with them.⁸⁴

This moralising dimension extends to encompass the people who obtained wealth through Khotso, the implication being that they were compromising themselves morally and spiritually and would eventually have to pay the price. One such instance is the story of the woman who stole the pumpkin from Khotso and was given the magic tickety. Eventually she grew frightened and tried to return the tickety to Khotso, only to discover that it was too late.

‘Why are you so stupid?’ he asked her. ‘You had nothing and I gave you wealth! ... Now you return your wealth to me. You are so stupid – you’ll die poor and poor and poor.’ ... Then her business was in disaster afterwards ... She was in debt and the money was gone.⁸⁵

79. Niehaus, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics*, 46-47.

80. This is described, for example, in discussions of the culture of Xhosa-speaking groupings in the Transkei and southern KwaZulu-Natal by Hammond-Tooke (1962), Monica Hunter-Wilson and J. Broster in *Amagqirha: Religion, Magic and Medicine in the Transkei* (Goodwood, 1981). See also Sean Morrow and Nwabisa Vokwana’s article on *uMamlambo* clay models in this issue.

81. Like the *mamlambo*, Mami Wata is a dangerous, seductive figure, offering great wealth and power, but also possessing the capacity to bring about terrifying ruin. Brian Siegel examines this in his paper, ‘Water Spirits and Mermaids: The Copperbelt Case’, presented at the Southeastern Regional Seminar in African Studies (SERSAS) Meeting, University of Western Carolina, 2000, 1-2.

82. P. Bernard, ‘Negotiating the Authenticity of Traditional Healers in Natal.’ English version of paper published as ‘Guerisseurs Traditionnels du Natal: Une Authenticité Négociée’ in V. Faure, ed., *Dynamiques Religieuses en Afrique Australe* (Paris: Kathala, 2000), 13.

83. Wood/ Sicwetsha, 2002, 1-2.

84. Wood/ Mabongo, 2002, 17; Wood/ Tloti, 5.

85. Wood/ Madiba Sethuntsa, 46-47.

When Khotso's empire collapsed, it is said that people whose fortunes were based on his magic suffered calamities and financial ruin, their wealth vanishing off the earth along with Khotso himself.⁸⁶

Unlike some of his family members, Khotso himself would most probably not have been unduly troubled by the negative aspects of the stories surrounding him, since he seemed to be guided by the belief that any publicity was good publicity. Nonetheless, it seems that the type of stories he spread about his abilities eventually soared up and up, then got beyond his control, finally plunging into a downward trajectory. Tales celebrating Khotso's extraordinary capacities also evolved into accounts dealing with what happened when, to quote informants, he '[got] carried away by his powers.'⁸⁷ Thus, we encounter narratives that are essentially morality tales about the perils of hubris. For some, it must have seemed that Khotso believed so profoundly in himself that it inevitably affected his capacity to believe in anyone greater than himself. In consequence, we have stories such as the following, often related with horrified fascination:

[H]e drove around the countryside, maybe seeing boys who were herding cattle ... He'll stop the car, get out of the car and ask the boys: 'Who's greater - me or God?' The boys will say, 'You!' ... So he felt that he was greater than God!⁸⁸

There are many similar stories, culminating in the point when God struck Khotso down by lightning.⁸⁹ There is a narrative symmetry here: since all the stories started on the day Khotso used a storm to punish his opponent, it seems fitting that his career should end with defeat at the hands of someone whose control over the elements was even stronger than his own.

Even when we move into the relatively factual terrain of newspaper reports dealing with Khotso's physical decline and demise, these seem to have a quality of moral fable to them, expressing the underlying message that pride comes before a fall. This is evident, for instance, in a description of Khotso in the last year of his life, his limbs swollen, unable to walk without help, complaining he had lost not only his sexual potency, but also most of his customers, who ceased believing in him when they saw him being treated by a white doctor.⁹⁰ In this account, the decline of Khotso's magical powers is connected to the dwindling of his sexual capacity, suggesting that Khotso's supernatural snakes - with their phallic as well as spiritual associations - had abandoned him. There is, similarly, a certain degree of schadenfreude in articles in the *Daily Dispatch* claiming that sixteen of Khotso's twenty-three wives walked out on him as he lay dying⁹¹ and that his funeral fell flat, with the majority of the mourners drifting away long before the speeches were over.⁹²

86. Wood/Tloti, 1, 5.

87. Wood/Mabongo, 2003, 26.

88. Wood/Mabongo, 2003, 24-25.

89. Wood/Mabongo, 2002, 15.

90. 'Khotso, 92, Loses His Sex Power', *Daily Dispatch*, 20 May 1971, 4.

91. 'Sixteen Wives Walked Out on Dying Khotso', *Daily Dispatch*, 27 July 1972, 4.

92. F. Croney, 'No Tears for Khotso as Funeral Fizzles', *Daily Dispatch*, 7 August 1972, 2.

But it would be going too far to conclude that stories eventually turned against Khotso. We are told that he expired, old and enfeebled, of heart failure in hospital in Durban.⁹³ It is probable that he would have preferred people to believe that he had departed from life in a more dramatic manner, being taken out in an epic conflict with the ultimate adversary. So, if his spirit is indeed alive in his Lusikisiki house, he is probably gratified that his death has been transformed in this way in the annals of local lore.

In the end, Khotso is most accessible to us by story. Attempts to provide objective, factual information about him in, for example, newspaper articles, are pervaded with gaps and lacunae, giving us a flat, curiously unconvincing picture of the man. On the other hand, it is in stories that he really lives. Walter Benjamin distinguishes between information and storytelling, maintaining that the former is antithetical to the latter, because it allows no space for individual imaginative engagement and interpretation.⁹⁴ Much of the impact of the Khotso stories, for instance, lies in the narrators' emotional and imaginative involvement with their material and the varying combinations of shock, amusement, incredulity, bewilderment and fascination that accompany the telling and retelling of these narratives. Because such accounts offer the possibility for this type of interaction, they possess, potentially, a depth and a resonance that bare factual data lack. In fact, Benjamin emphasises, part of the art of storytelling is to keep a tale free from information.⁹⁵ The Khotso narratives, precisely because they lack so much solid information, wield a power that bare facts cannot.

In conclusion, a final story. In the 1990s, the *Daily Dispatch* reported that a man persuaded some people to part with their money and their clothing on the grounds that he was Khotso's son and he would be able to draw on his father's magic to produce a fortune for them. After waiting expectantly in a room in their underwear for several hours, while the man was supposedly conjuring up wealth outside, the group grew suspicious and emerged to find that the man had vanished.⁹⁶ However far-fetched and fraudulent they may appear, stories that invoke the name of Khotso Sethuntsa still have the power to capture people in their spell.

93. *Daily Dispatch*, 26 July 1972, 3.

94. W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1970), 88-90.

95. Benjamin, 88-89.

96. H. Kopp, 'Trickster Leaves 6 in Undies', *Daily Dispatch*, 21 August 1994, 3.