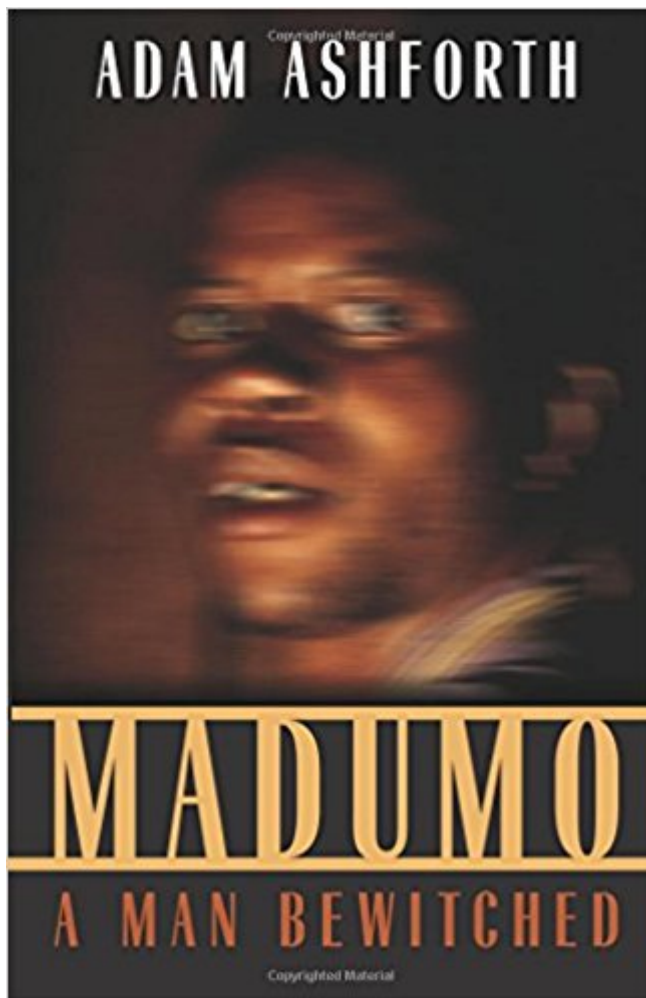


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# Madumo, A Man Bewitched



## Synopsis

No one answered when I tapped at the back door of Madumo's home on Mphahlele Street a few days after my return to Soweto, so I pushed the buckling red door in a screeching grind of metal over concrete and entered calling, "Hallo?" So begins this true story of witchcraft and friendship set against the turbulent backdrop of contemporary Soweto. Adam Ashforth, an Australian who has spent many years in the black township, finds his longtime friend Madumo in dire circumstances: his family has accused him of using witchcraft to kill his mother and has thrown him out on the street. Convinced that his life is cursed, Madumo seeks help among Soweto's bewildering array of healers and prophets. An inyanga, or traditional healer, confirms that he has indeed been bewitched. With Ashforth by his side, skeptical yet supportive, Madumo embarks upon a physically grueling treatment regimen that he follows religiously-almost to the point of death-despite his suspicion that it may be better to "Westernize my mind and not think about witchcraft." Ashforth's beautifully written, at times poignant account of Madumo's struggle shows that the problem of witchcraft is not simply superstition, but a complex response to spiritual insecurity in a troubling time of political and economic upheaval. Post-apartheid Soweto, he discovers, is suffering from a deluge of witchcraft. Through Madumo's story, Ashforth opens up a world that few have seen, a deeply unsettling place where the question "Do you believe in witchcraft?" is not a simple one at all. The insights that emerge as Ashforth accompanies his friend on an odyssey through Soweto's supernatural perils have profound implications even for those of us who live in worlds without witches.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

When Ashforth, an Australian social scientist now at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, returned to South Africa for the summer he found his friend Madumo, an affable, philosophically inclined, habitually unemployed young man, actively tormented by witchcraft. Cast out by his family, shunned by his friends, and plagued by bad luck, Madumo, with Ashforth's help, began a desperate search for a cure. Their quest took them to Mr. Zondi, a traditional healer (inyanga) who consulted the spirits in a small tin shack in the slums of Soweto, to the headquarters of the Zion Christian Church, an African-evangelical hybrid where they were barraged by eager prophets, and to the distant suburbs of Johannesburg, where they hosted a ritual feast for the ancestors. Journalistic in tone, Ashforth's book joins Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola* in a growing tradition of personal ethnographies where the narrator is less than omniscient, confidants are friends and not "informants," and the boundaries are blurred between observer and observed, between truth and fiction. Ashforth offers his compelling story with very little in the way of explanation. He makes no appeals to anthropological theory. The book does not even include a glossary. Indeed, one of his major points is that spiritual beliefs are untranslatable. He concludes that witchcraft is "something akin to a religious mystery," ultimately incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it.

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Deviating from the tendency of most works on witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa to examine and interpret the phenomenon from a broad sociopolitical and cultural standpoint, this book is a narrative of individual experiences. Ashforth (social science, Inst. for Advanced Study, Princeton Univ.) takes as his protagonist his South African friend Madumo, who seeks political and economic motivations behind the superstitious tales he reports. Not for readers insistent on scientific rigor and discipline, this work neither attempts to explain nor pretends to understand witchcraft or why it is so widespread among black South Africans. The author raises many questions without providing convincing answers. Nevertheless, the meticulously detailed accounts and contemplative discourses make the book both exciting and informative. Recommended for larger public libraries.

DEdward K. Owusu-Ansah, Murray State Univ. Lib., KY Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Was an interesting read.

A great book!

The complexity and problems in the lives of South Africans in the newly minted post-apartheid state are richly interpreted in *Madumo*, both by westerners like Adam Ashforth and Africans he has known in Soweto. Witchcraft is taken up by both westerners and South Africans as an active encapsulation of these struggles, and the relevance of witchcraft to a modern life and a modern future is debated. As Ashforth says, "Despite the dawning of democracy, people were still suffering. Yet the task of interpreting the meaning of misfortune was becoming more complex." (9) *Madumo* describes the conflict of a modern man trying to honor his ancestors: "the problem with us that we Africans, when life picks up and things are going smooth for us, we normally forget about our ancestors. Because we are trying to follow western culture." (24). The youth are ignorant of tradition, especially in an era of rural exodus, and a plethora of dangerously creative witchdoctors reflects this. The elder members of the society are still expected to govern and judge the plans of youth, however: one witchdoctor, Dr. Zonki, reflects that in the normal course of events, but especially with regards to witchcraft, *Madumo* must "approach the elders of [his] family and do this in the proper way" (199). This shows a more resilient side of ancestor worship, and witchcraft's role in preserving tradition, however shabbily. The recent "deluge of witchcraft" (98-99) points out just how people use bewitchment to come to grips with living in a new South Africa. As a tool, it not only reinforces gender roles and traditional life, it has proven capable of innovation and has been profitable for many. It has also survived the secularism of the new South Africa; Dr. Zonki himself mixed potions for the fighting Inkatha in the hostel of Soweto, and yet has no trouble because of this past in the new pluralistic state. A space for the interpretation of social and physical ills, as attributable to malevolent forces outside of one's control, has survived the fall of apartheid as well. "For all the talk of ubuntu, or African humanism by the new African elite, on the streets of Soweto the practice of everyday life was tending ever more towards the dog-eat-dog" (232). The new era puts blacks in conflict over housing and electricity, which are no longer free as a concession of the apartheid government against violence. The difficulty of everyday pursuits is reflected in the "university-thing" comments of *Madumo's* relatives, who are impatient with his pursuit of his new opportunities. These sentiments might be echoed by any working family struggling with a devalued Rand and the expensive prospect of academics (17). The rise in witchings and witch doctors is also related to the emergence of AIDS, which is sweeping the country. Ashford notes that "none of the dispositions of professionals writing about Africa seemed to make much sense" (244). While I might agree with him, I want to hear more about how he sees the western tradition, which itself is based upon histories of occultism and itself has religions grounded

in the invisible and the transubstantiated, as reflecting possible egress from the problems facing these South Africans. Should we come down upon "folk wisdom" which anchors witchcraft, or should we subscribe a movement towards the "folk wisdom" of Western modernity (245) which supports secularism and "enlightenment"? Ashforth gives us a detailed and localized view of witchcraft as an institution and inescapable fact of South African life, but the modern era and its changes are probably having an increasingly positive and liberalizing effect upon this tradition. Although this is perhaps equally as much memoir of Ashforth as it is social history of Sowetan bewitchment, the book is fairly straightforward, and the writing is succinct and modest. We may find ourselves wondering just how useful this book is, however, as something beyond candid reportage. Can we really understand what motivates the ongoing crisis of identity in Africa? Ashforth is right at least in that we should, because the implications of African demise will affect us all in coming years, from AIDS to terrorism. It is also worth considering, as this book does, what tradition can really do for people.

Although he is now a professor in the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, Adam Ashforth has spent much of the past ten years in Soweto, living there full time until the elections of 1994, and then going back for three months each year. He has friends there, so he goes to South Africa for his vacations. *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (University of Chicago Press) tells the story of one such friend, and the extraordinary lengths toward which friendship goes. It is a warm, generally happy book blending memoir, reportage, and sociology. It is steeped in witchcraft. Madumo, a friend from Ashforth's first stay in Soweto, has been thrown out of his house because a prophet of the Zion Christian Church told Madumo's younger brother that Madumo had used witchcraft to murder their mother, and Madumo had been thrown out of the family home. Much of the book has to do with the counter-witchcraft Ashforth helps Madumo hire, through a medicine man named Mr. Zondi. Madumo has to be washed with herbs and earth from Madumo's mother's grave. There is a ritual cutting of Madumo's hands and legs, with mercury rubbed into the cuts. A white hen is slaughtered in a pre-feast to assure the ancestors of goodwill and more to come. Other herbs induce vomiting, the sort of purgative that has been favored in folk medicine for centuries, but which makes Madumo seriously ill. Ashforth tells a surgeon friend about what Madumo is going through, and the surgeon explains the danger. The vomiting can cause dehydration, kidney failure, and bleeding from the esophagus. Ashforth seriously worries if he had been too simple-minded in endorsing the Zondi cure. The treatments bring improvement for Madumo. The improvement can't promise him a new place in his family, or within the South African economy, however; the strange daily life and

business ways of the Sowetan community are a constant theme in this unique memoir. The main theme is, of course, the pervasive belief in witchcraft, and Ashforth explains how as a form of belief in the supernatural it takes its place with other religious ideas as a way of trying to make sense of the world. Ashforth is often asked if he believes in witchcraft, and he resoundingly doesn't. But he also knows that there are no arguments persuasive enough to make believers think that Madumo's treatment is placebo any more than those who pray can be convinced that prayer is not a real interaction with the divine. Trying to argue Madumo out of his beliefs would have availed Ashforth nothing, while paying for the treatment did give his friend a new life. Thus the materialist harnessed counter-witchcraft to help a bewitched friend, and brought results.

I really liked that Ashforth wrote it in a narrative way. I had to read this book for my Anthropology class and our professor gave us a list of books to choose one. I was looking at two different books and then I picked up this book. It makes it much more interesting when Anthropologists make the story interesting to read. It is also quite an eye-opener in terms of witchcraft in South Africa. I found it interesting to read why there is so much witchcraft in Africa and why it has increased. I won't tell you why...you have to read it :)

Maduma is a young South African accused of using witchcraft to kill his mother - his act falls under the local police's special 'Occult-related Crimes Unit' and his friend, author Ashforth, helps him search for a solution. Spiritual and social issues blend in a fascinating biographical and cultural coverage.

This was a required text for a cultural diversity class. It served the purpose of exposure to other cultural beliefs. However, it would not have been a choice of mine to read this for enjoyment.

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