

7. See e.g I B Tabata, *The Awakening of a People*. At his trial in 1963 Mandela also spoke of his fascination, as a child, with accounts of tribal heroes.

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WELVERDIEND SPELLS DEATH A STORY OF OVERKILL

Brian Oswin

Epilepsy is Infectious

Welverdiend is neither unusual or unique.

It is a place where young men who have been beaten to death in a police station: just another small incident, in a remote town, in a country in which violence has become routine.

Welverdiend is little more than a village, 80 miles to the west of Johannesburg. It is serviced by blacks in the township known as Khutsong, a 'sprawling, trash-strewn township of 60,000 that sits on a treeless plain between Welverdiend, about ten miles west, and the conservative mining town of Carltonville, five miles east', writes Scott Kraft, a *Los Angeles Times* staff writer. For some utterly unknown reason the young men of the township seem to suffer from epilepsy which comes on when they are interrogated in the police station. Then, without any previous history of that complaint, they throw a fit and die soon after. Because the illness is so widespread the relatives are not informed of the fatality. However the epilepsy is sometimes transitory. After two or three days it might appear that it was only a phantom disease. The victim did have a fit, but soon recovered. Then, apparently, another young man had a fit,

because he assaulted and killed his friend. It all happened inside the police station—witnessed by the policemen who stood by, unable to intervene. Because freedom is coming to South Africa, this leads to a police inquiry. It might even lead to an inquest where witnesses will swear on oath, and...justice will be seen to be done.

The first time this mysterious disease was noted in Welverdiend was in January 1990. Before this the young men did not seem to have shown signs of epilepsy, catalepsy or any other -lepsy.

It was Nixon Phiri who first showed signs of the disease. He was one of several youths arrested on 16 January inside a Khutsong squatter camp and taken to the police station. One by one the youths were taken into an interrogation room to be questioned. Phiri and his friends were accused of burning a van in the township. Thomas Tshabalala, aged 16, told lawyers that he had been punched and kicked until he signed a confession. Phiri was made of harder mettle. According to Tshabalala and two other youths, Pule Mac Mothupi and Ismael Booyens (in separate and independent statements), Phiri was told to remove his shirt. He was then taken outside and they heard him screaming and his body hitting the floor. Phiri was shouting: *Yo nana yo, na sena!* It is not me! Booyens said he saw Phiri taken outside where water was splashed over his face. He was then taken back to the interrogation room.

There were renewed screams and then silence. Nixon Phiri was dead.

Two weeks later Tshabalala and Mothupi were among 25 killed during police action 'to quell township disturbances'. Booyens took the hint and went into hiding.

There was an internal police inquiry and there police officers reported that Phiri had been nervous and agitated. He began talking incoherently. The mysterious disease had apparently taken hold of him because they said: 'He suddenly started shaking...and fell off a chair against a steel cabinet.' There were two policemen present, one white and one black. They said they tried to apply mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, but he died. The report on that investigation, released nine months after the death, said that all the officers in the unit testified to the truth of the story.

That was strange, because the lad had grown up on a white-owned vegetable farm about ten miles from the township and had no previous signs of illness. Not, that is, since the age of two when he had a brief period of what his mother called 'chest pains'. Nonetheless, after intensive police questioning, both his mother and aunt signed statements saying that Phiri had suffered epileptic attacks from childhood. Neither of the women could read and both attached their thumb prints to their respective documents. 'We were scared', said Mrs Phiri, in an interview with a journalist.

The story of the steel cabinet, so conveniently placed, was suspiciously like the yarn concocted by the police to explain the death in 1977 of Steve Biko. It was thus fitting that Dr Jonathan Gluckman, who had exposed the circumstances surrounding the death of Biko, should have been called in to conduct a private autopsy. He found that Phiri had died of a brain haemorrhage associated with external injuries. He said that he would be surprised if the

injuries had been caused by an epileptic seizure and said that he thought the youth had been badly beaten up.

Donald Brunette, the Transvaal attorney general, has said that following the police inquiry there was no case against anyone.

Epilepsy Strikes Again

Only six months later, on 12 July, 15 year old Eugene Mbulawa, described as a 'young activist', was in the same interrogation room. His best friend, William Makgatje, was also present. Handcuffed, he waited his turn to be questioned.

The youths were accused of causing mayhem in Khutsong, a charge they denied. Mbulawa was accorded the usual treatment: he was slapped across the face and, while being interrogated, a policeman kicked his feet out from under him, sending him crashing to the ground. Makgatje was taken away and the examination apparently continued. Ten hours later Mbulawa was unconscious and an ambulance was called. The disease had struck again. The ambulance men were informed that Mbulawa had had an epileptic seizure.

On 13 July the youth died without recovering consciousness. The attorney engaged by the boy's family demanded that the police be charged. Once again, there was a police inquiry at Welverdiend. It seems that if Eugene Mbulawa had had an epileptic seizure, that was not the cause of death. In fact, it was reported that Makgatje, handcuffed and under police control, had murdered his friend. Presumably, he had also been the victim of a seizure. On 20 September, two and a half months after the police had watched him murder his friend, he was so charged.

The sordid details of events leading up to the interrogation and deaths have been disclosed by the lawyers acting for the family. In the slum-yards that are called townships, the youth of Khutsong have been led into a spiral of violence that is the outcome of deprivation, desperation and destruction. For some time now the police of the area have cracked down on political protest, particularly in the schools. In waves of counter-violence the Khutsong youth have burnt cars and homes, attacked police cars and black policemen. They have accepted no external discipline but called themselves loyal soldiers of Umkhonto we Sizwe. Mbulawa, whose parents lived under more comfortable conditions than others in Khutsong, was known to his school friends as 'Castro' because he spoke so often of the achievements of Cuba, and was said to have belonged to the group of 'freedom fighters' known as the 'Kadafi gang'. To the police he was no 'freedom fighter' and no Castro. Just 'a cheeky kaffir' who was asking for trouble.

In June the police dropped leaflets on Khutsong from an aeroplane offering rewards of R5,000 (about \$2,000) for assistance in arresting troublemakers. This was an invitation to armed vigilante groups to go from house to house seeking out the miscreants. Finally, in what seems an obvious trap, peace talks were arranged between the vigilantes and the young rebels. Soon after they met, supposedly to drive to Johannesburg for talks, the police swooped and arrested 23 youth, including Mbulawa and Makgatje. They were driven to

Carltonville and forced to take cold showers, fully clothed. It was mid-winter and they were left dripping wet, without towels or blankets, for the night. The next day they were driven to Welverdiend and the round of tortures began.

According to statements collected by the lawyers, they were subjected to tortures, including electric shocks to the genitals. At the end of the day most confessed to the charges made by the police. Mbulawa and Makgatje were kept for the end. These were the two with whom the police particularly wished to deal.

They did. Mbulawa was beaten beyond recognition. He was the only one who did not appear in court next day because he lay in hospital, unconscious. He died that evening.

Too many people had seen his battered and swollen mouth, his loose teeth, his rasping breathing, to accept the claim that he had died as a result of an epileptic death. There had to be another reason. Ten weeks later Makgatje was charged with murdering his friend by 'slapping and hitting him with clenched fists'. Quite obviously, Makgatje had been afflicted with this mysterious disease and, in an uncontrollable fit, although handcuffed and under the watchful eye of the police, had turned on his friend.

Equally obviously, no policeman would ever, or could ever, have hit the poor youth. The Transvaal attorney general Donald Brunette, a man of some reading and a man of law, who knows what Marx and Lenin said, explained why the accusations against the police were made:

Its written in Marx's books. Its written in Lenin's books. You must discredit the security forces. It's part of the tactic of revolution. And we've had this from the ANC for 30 years now.

Presumably aware of the fact that this might not be altogether convincing he added: 'No policeman is going to be so stupid as to just kill a guy in a police station. There are a whole lot better places to kill him.' He offered no further details.

It is categorically denied, in circles that know, that Donald Brunette has ever suffered from epilepsy, catalepsy or narcolepsy.

My thanks to Alex Buchman who sent me a cutting from the Los Angeles Times of 23 October 1990, with an extended report on the events of Welverdiend by Scott Kraft. I have drawn heavily on Mr Kraft's account. Side by side with the story of Welverdiend, the Los Angeles Times carried a report on its front page of an award of \$12.5 million to be paid to the family of a black man beaten to death by two skinheads, members of the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) movement, in Portland, Oregon. They were egged on to further violence by the two leaders of WAR. The jury decided that the award must be paid by the two leaders, the two skinheads, and WAR.