Faustian Pacts and False Promises: the mamlambo and the market university

ABSTRACT

Aspects of Westernised modernity are steeped in mystery and magic, and contemporary indigenous orality can illuminate this. For example, oral accounts of the mamlambo, a Southern African wealth-giving spirit, acquire a new significance when considered in the context of market-driven capitalism. This paper considers one dimension of this: the striking metaphorical parallels between the consequences of a pact with a mamlambo and the situation in which present-day corporatised universities find themselves, having wedded themselves to market forces. Oral accounts of the mamlambo embody a critique of the self-absorbed pursuit of affluence that market-driven capitalism fosters; and the disastrous consequences of a bond with the mamlambo are suggestive of the damage that the alliance between academia and the marketplace has inflicted on contemporary higher education.¹

Introduction: the Mamlambo, Market Magic and the Corporate University

Features of Westernised modernity partake in mystery and magic, and indigenous oral accounts can cast light upon this. For example, oral narratives concerning the mamlambo, a wealth-giving spirit that originated among the Xhosa-speaking peoples in the Eastern Cape, acquire a new significance when considered in the context of free-market capitalism.² This paper explores one aspect of this: the metaphorical parallels between the consequences of a pact with a mamlambo and the situation in which present-day corporatised, managerially governed universities find themselves, having entered the
marketplace. In certain respects, this may seem reliant on faith in wealth-giving magic of another kind, influenced as it is by a conviction that financial well-being will descend, as if from high, by this means. It is also said that the mamlambo bestows wealth on those who enter into a pact with it, but at a terrible price, for disaster and destruction is rumoured to follow in its wake. The Xhosa term for the ownership of a mamlambo is ukuthwala³. Arguably, the disastrous implications of a bond of this kind have certain points of comparison with the damage that the alliance between higher education and the marketplace has inflicted on contemporary universities.⁴

The term "university" is used loosely and broadly to denote present-day institutions of higher education that have subjected themselves to marketisation and managerialism, emulating corporate models. Restructuring of this kind has swept through South African higher education since 1990, and through many other universities elsewhere. Comparable conditions often tend to be prevalent in institutions in countries in which neoliberal economic tendencies valorising market forces, cost-cutting measures, privatisation, competition and commercialisation exercise a powerful sway. In 1993, Canadian academic Howard Buchbinder described the development of the market university: a term that is applicable to many universities, both here and worldwide, that have reconstructed themselves as business enterprises, subjugating themselves to the dictates of free-market capitalism. At this point, we turn to a being that has a certain place, metaphorically speaking, in institutions of this nature: the mamlambo itself, a supernatural presence closely associated with money and Western capitalist practices.
The *mamlambo* is a shape-changer, but is often envisaged as a seductive mermaid, a beautiful woman or a snake, or sometimes as a handsome man. It frequently adopts these alluring forms, because it is associated with that for which many yearn (Morrow and Vokwana, 2004: 92). It is sometimes said that this being manifests herself as a white woman, and it favours fashionable Western clothing and expensive accessories, suggestive of its association with the forces of Western capitalism (Wilson, 1936: 287).

The *mamlambo* has been associated with socio-economic and political imbalances and inequalities, as have various other African wealth-giving spirits, such as the Zimbabwean *chikwambo*, the Malawian *njoka* and (under certain circumstances) the West African Mami Wata. A relatively recent Southern African supernatural presence, the *mamlambo* arose in part from economic deprivation and the lure of Western materialism. Roy Dilley notes that, in certain parts of Africa, marked inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power, and exploitative political and economic practices are sometimes viewed as stemming from the activities of malevolent supernatural presences (1992: 6). The corporatised academic sector tends to be characterised by these qualities, so arguably some might regard it as an environment in which a being like the *mamlambo* might not seem entirely out of place.

As Dilley's point intimates, it is believed that the corrupt influence of malign occult spirits such as the *mamlambo* can infect not only the lives of those individuals who enter into a pact with them, but also those around them and society at large. In the specific case of the *mamlambo*, this results in part from the morally abhorrent behaviour that is needed
to sustain a pact with this being. For example, in exchange for wealth, the *mamlambo* demands blood sacrifices, including the sacrifices of those closest to its owner. Alliances with other wealth-giving supernatural beings elsewhere in Africa often require offerings of a similar kind. The belief that the *mamlambo* feeds on the blood of those whom its owner holds dear is symbolically appropriate, for the lust for individual accumulation may exact a price from those closest to the accumulator. Then, ultimately a pact with a *mamlambo* is said to bring about misery and disaster. Those who undergo *ukuthwala* become enviably wealthy, but it is rumoured that their lives end unenviably in suffering and despair, as did the lives of many of those closest to them. So how can this be compared to the way in which universities have wedded themselves to market forces? Metaphorically speaking, there are a number of distinctive parallels.

In certain respects, corporatised universities that subscribe to the notion of the magic of the market are comparable to the owner of a *mamlambo*, who enters into a pact with this being believing that it will work its enchantments for his or her benefit, only to fall under its control. In this respect, they have become drawn into that which Jean and John Comaroff term occult economies, "the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends" (1999: 279). Alluding to both occult economies and forms of consumer capitalism, Francis B Nyamnjoh observes that "[a]gency as independence only creates dependence" (2001: 46). This form of entrapment is applicable to universities. In seeking to attain economic security through seemingly independent means - for instance, by attempting to generate "third-stream" sources of funding from the corporate domain -
they have embraced market forces to further their own interests, yet have found themselves in thrall to these very same forces.

The figure of the *mamlambo*, market forces given beguiling form, symbolises both the perils and temptations of an economic system that is sustained by the suffering of many in order to benefit a few. Individual prosperity, thus, comes at a broader social cost. Various writers have discussed the way in which certain beings, discourses and practices associated with the occult are expressive of criticisms of capitalism, which can encourage a self-absorbed striving for wealth at all costs. For instance, Isak Niehaus's description of witchcraft familiars in the Lowveld touches upon this, while Jane Parish examines the way in which witchcraft discourses among the Akan of Ghana contain comparable criticisms of individual material accumulation (Niehaus, 2001: 45 - 62; Parish, 2001: 62; 118). Barbara Frank also discusses similar issues in relation to the West African wealth-giving spirit, Mami Wata (1995). Accordingly, certain destructive consequences of the ownership of a *mamlambo* are suggestive of the damage that the alliance between universities and the marketplace has wrought in institutions of higher learning.

**Sacrifices and Betrayals**

Firstly, there are the sacrifices the *mamlambo* demands. Jean and John Comaroff argue that sinister occult presences such as the deadly, seductive *mamlambo* "provide disconcertingly full-bodies images of a world in which humans seem in constant dangers of turning into commodities, of losing their life blood to the market and the destructive
desires it evokes" (1993: xxix). This is also applicable to universities, in which staff members become human resources to be sacrificed to the imperatives of the market.

In the current academic climate, one inhales the miasma arising from the sequence of sacrifices that form an integral part of the worship of the corporate divinities. Indeed, the necessity of staff retrenchments, non-renewal of contracts, freezing of other posts, and radical budget cuts is repeatedly stressed, as a reminder that regular sacrifice is a cornerstone of market-oriented university practice. Another, related sacrifice is the notion of academic collegiality. This wilts and shrivels in a working environment which operates in terms of a system of managers and subordinates. When former colleagues are relegated to these positions, the bond between academic kindred spirits falls away. Moreover, in the face of ongoing academic retrenchments, there has become less and less space for the luxury of collegiality, as the institutional climate encourages betrayal. When co-workers become aware that the ritual sacrifice of some of their number might temporarily propitiate the high priests and oracles of the corporate academy, they cease to be colleagues. Consequently ties of friendship, loyalty and collegiality may have to be sacrificed in the interests of the presumed economic advancement of an institution or the survival of a department. Therefore, although universities have inherited various morally dubious practices from the past (including the backstabbing that has long been a feature of academia) they have expanded upon and intensified these.

As this indicates, the sacrifices required in commodified universities encompass ethical concerns. This is ironic, in the light of the emphasis that now tends to be placed on the
idea of ethics (embodied, for instance, in university Ethics Committees and the Ethical Clearance Certificates now required by various researchers). However, these can serve as a means of entrenching the authority of those in positions of power and influence, be they institutional, state-related or corporate. For example, those applying for an Ethical Clearance Certificate may be required to indicate that they comply with the norms and values of the officials that issue certificates of this nature. Meanwhile, university Ethics Committees may encourage research that furthers their specific sets of interests, or those of the particular power players, both internal and external, to whom they are beholden.

In a work entitled *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) Richard Sennett examines the way in which former work-related values such as "endurance and loyalty", firmness of character and personal integrity have been eroded by the requirements of contemporary workplace, shaped as these are by the pressures of market capitalism. This favours short-term "profit-seeking alliances" and calls for a willingness to adjust or relinquish personal convictions, values and codes of conduct in accordance with present exigencies (cited in Otto, 2004: 224). Comparably, the "market morality of profit" now tends to exercise a sway over much academic activity (Mamdami, 2007: 76; see also Bok, 2003: x; Thomas, 2009: 4-5).

Just as the owner of a *mamlambo* is driven by an overriding desire for wealth, so market-driven universities pursue economic profit above all else. They pay a high price for this, as there are other kinds of sacrifices involved. A *mamlambo* demands that its owner sacrifice those closest to him or her; and similarly those employed at contemporary
corporatised universities are required to sacrifice that which was, in essence, closest to their hearts: the workplace ethos that make for effective teaching and research. Thus, both the ukuthwala pact with a mamlambo and universities' uneasy pacts with the corporate world are sustainable only if they strike at their souls.

The story of Faustus may spring to mind. Marlowe's Faustus, we may recall, also enters into a pact with commercial as well as spiritual aspects, selling his soul to further his own intellectual ends. However, he does not benefit from the transaction. During the rest of his career, he does not prosper as he sought to do. At this point, we return to the ukuthwala pact with a mamlambo, and consider the fates of those who embark upon it.

**Academic Malcontents**

It is also said that sorrow and misfortune tend to be visited upon the households of those who embark on a pact with a mamlambo. Comparably, anxiety, despondency and despair often seem to be features of corporatised, managerially governed universities. Just as a pact with a mamlambo brings misery in the end, so a career at a corporatised university may ultimately offer neither security nor contentment. An inordinate number of university staff members at such institutions suffer from depression or chronic stress-related ailments, some of them life-threatening. Indeed, depression, tension and general low staff morale have now become widespread, endemic features of both local and international academic life. These issues have been widely commented on, both locally and internationally.
For example, University of the Witwatersrand academics James Pendlebury and Lucien van der Walt depict the "pervasive insecurity" and "demoralization" now prevalent at their institution (2006: 88). Then, UNISA academic Peter Stewart describes the extent to which "a sense of malaise, stress and cynicism" has taken hold at various South African universities, mentioning that an increased use of tranquilisers has become prevalent (2007: 137, 135, 138). More broadly, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza and Adebayo Olukoshi maintain that "morale has never been lower" at many African institutions (2004b: 602). Eve Bertelsen expands on this, drawing attention to the "high levels of anxiety" in the academic workplace worldwide, observing that in general "[a]cademic confidence, loyalty and commitment are at a low ebb" (1998, 144). Eddie Webster and Sarah Mosoetsa corroborate this, making reference to a *Times Higher Educational Supplement* report conducted in the UK in 2002, which indicates that "more than half of those who work in British universities are on the brink of depression or anxiety, while a quarter have suffered a stress-related illness in the past twelve months" (cited in Webster and Mosoetsa, 2001: 2). In general, as Webster and Mosoetsa observe (2), the findings and conclusions of the above report are applicable to many universities elsewhere in the world, including those in this country.

Further to this, the Higher Education Supplements of international and local newspapers, such as the *Times* in the UK and locally, the *Mail & Guardian*, cast light on the extent to which psychological pressures feature prominently in the daily lives of academics. There are many other examples, including Mamdani's account of conditions at Makerere University, Uganda; and Steve Hedley's description of the decline of staff morale in Irish
higher education (2010). Meanwhile, Malcolm Saunders discusses this phenomenon at Australian universities, citing research findings of other Australian academics, including Margaret Thornton, in this regard (2006: 1 - 7). A few of the factors that have given rise to conditions of this kind are worth mentioning.

A great deal of tension and worry is generated by job insecurity. This is caused in part by the terror of retrenchment, which hangs over many staff members, many of whom occupy temporary or contract posts. Also, many academics tend to fear that, as a result of the ongoing monitoring and surveillance that has become a persistent feature of the corporatised university environment, grounds might be found for their dismissal. The future is a source of fear for another reason. University audits inflict severe stress on a recurrent basis and, even when an audit is not in progress, the prospect of the next dreaded visitation from the auditors looms large in many employees' minds (see for example Dibben and Higgins, 2004: 32). However, from a managerial point of view, audits have the advantage of reducing academic staff to a state of anxiety and weariness, thereby rendering them more malleable. In this respect, regular audits constitute a distinctive feature of the general managerial principle which Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter term "management by stress" (1988; cited in Roper, 2004: 134). Other forms of external and internal assessment compound this. The extent to which they may seem ever-present and ongoing wears staff down further. For instance, UK academics Pauline Dibben and Paul Higgins maintain that importing systems of performance measurement from the private sector into the public services has had this effect, resulting in "increased stress and exploitation" (31).
Present concerns weigh heavily on many staff members' minds in other respects. In many countries, South Africa included, the academic condition may seem to be one of deprivation. Salaries, internal budgets and staff numbers are restricted, while infrastructures supporting academic activity have diminished, often because the funding required to sustain these is no longer available or has been channelled elsewhere. Making reference to a survey carried out at selected African universities in 1994, Uwem E. Ite notes that inadequate remuneration is one of the foremost sources of discontent among academic staff in this continent (2004: 251). In their discussion of UK universities, Rosemary Deem, Sam Hillyard and Mike Reed highlight a widespread problem when they describe how academic salaries and status have declined concurrently (2007, 40), simultaneously undermining staff members at financial and psychological levels.

In various respects, this diminution of money is interconnected with the erosion of time. For instance, as an HoD in the UK remarked, as "the salaries have fallen behind ... the workload has gone up exponentially" (cited in Deem, Hillyard and Reed: 55). Bertelsen also alludes to this, describing how "more and more of our time is taken up by lengthy meetings whose recurrent agenda is how to do more for less" (140; see also Zeleza and Olukoshi, 2004a: 32). This state of affairs leads to what David Coldwell describes as immiseration: "the erosion of academics' discretionary time to think, conceptualise and postulate new ideas" (2008: 3). Indeed, as the term suggests, immiseration has the potential to reduce many academics to a state of misery and frustration, for it deprives them of that which drew them into an academic career in the first place. Thus, academics
often tend to succumb to depression, feeling that they now function in a context in which academic professionalism is valued primarily in terms of the extent to which it can serve the interests of managerialism. For instance, citing Rodney Nilsen (2004), Australian researcher Malcolm Saunders remarks that "teaching and research have been not merely degraded and devalued but totally subordinated" to the university administration (2006: 2; see also Webster and Mosoetsa: 4; Thornton: 164; Greene, Loughridge and Wilson: 1).

There are certain parallels between the position of contemporary academics, who exist primarily to sustain and support corporate, managerial dominion - and also that of the forms of market capitalism to which they are bound - which drains them of many of their intellectual, imaginative and psychological energies, and the victims of sinister occult forces in Africa. The process of ukuthwala and the suffering caused by the mamlambo, which can take physical, emotional and psychic forms, provide examples of this. In general, African witches are renowned for their obsession with eating (Geschiere, 1997: 203), and consequently witchcraft is sometimes envisaged in terms of spiritual and psychic devouring (see for example Schmoll, 1993: 193 - 220; Bastian, 1993: 133). The mamlambo, for example, consumes blood: both the blood of those offered to it and, metaphorically speaking, the hearts-blood of those who have bound themselves to it.

The Comaroffs argue that menacing occult presences such as the mamlambo "are modernity's prototypical malcontents", symbolic embodiments of the disillusion, disruption and despair generated by forms of Westernised modernity (1993: xxix). In various respects, Western capitalist agencies can reduce those who believe that they can
fulfil desires and work magic on their behalf to a comparable state. Then, certain aspects of the malaise of despondency and depression that afflicts present-day corporatised academia can be viewed in relation to this.

**Disillusion, Disempowerment and Disaster**

Those who trust the false promises proffered by the *mamlambo* are doomed to disappointment, and wealth acquired by means of an *ukuthwala* pact proves temporary and unreliable. Meanwhile, those who believe that Western capitalist practices will bring about their salvation may find that they have invested their hopes in dreams that bring disillusion in their wake. Like the owner of a *mamlambo*, they may become disempowered as they discover that they have vested their hopes in that which was essentially a mirage; or they may forfeit their independent volition as they become passive agents harnessed to further the interests of systems that may not operate to their advantage.

Nonetheless, despite the extent to which they can undermine and subjugate those who subscribe to them, images of Western material advancement and the economic practices allied to them continue to exert their enchantment. Meanwhile, the being that embodies their magic, the *mamlambo* itself, exerts a similar spell, despite the fact that pacts with this being are said to bring more suffering than satisfaction in their wake. Similarly, although commercialisation and bureaucratisation have intensified over the decades, the longed-for economic security and stability that such processes seemed to promise still tends to remain a dream.
Not only can a career at a corporate university decline into disillusion and despair, but ultimately it can even culminate in calamity, just as a pact with a mamlambo eventually leads from disappointment to disaster. When individuals unexpectedly receive money in abundance from the mamlambo, the wealth they receive gives rise to greater loss than gain, its dangers outweighing its benefits. The mamlambo strikes at the heart of the family, depriving its consorts of their spouses, their fertility, their human sexual relationships, their children, and their domestic happiness and harmony, sowing suspicion and discord in the family circle. Ultimately, it may even bring about their own destruction. Metaphorically, this is indicative of the human cost involved in the pursuit of wealth.\(^8\) Viewed from another perspective, this has certain parallels with the price of commodification in present-day higher education.

In the end, contract positions may not be renewed, threats of retrenchment may no longer be held at bay, departments may be closed down; and even those in management may find their positions uncomfortable and precarious. Yet again, Marlowe's Faustus could be borne in mind. Although his pact with the devil appears to promise much, his "tragical history" ends in darkness and horror. Eventually, he is compelled to relinquish his grandiose aspirations and the spiritual price that he is required to pay looms large. Significantly, one of the areas in which Faustus's failure is particularly evident is that of knowledge production, despite the fact that he sought to add to the store of human knowledge by means of a diabolical pact.
There is another dimension to this. Just as readily the devil and his lieutenants welcomed Faustus into their midst, so they turned upon him, inflicting terror and torment when they felt inclined to do so. Then in the end, having toyed with him for a while they discarded him, by abandoning him to his fate. Comparably, the mamlambo lavishes temporary affluence, but it can suddenly and capriciously turn against its owner, transforming wealth and good fortune into poverty and suffering. Meanwhile, senior university managers serve the interests of those to whom they are beholden, but the benefits of a pact of this nature are not always lasting or binding. Power can be withdrawn as readily as it was extended, along with the privileges that accompanied it. Thus some of those in senior managerial positions may perhaps learn that their positions are Faustian ones in these respects. In a manner of speaking, they have turned "to the dark side" of managerialism (Taylor, 2003: 1), only to discover that management does not look after its own; just as the owner of the mamlambo may learn that this being can bring about a reversal of fortune as dramatic and disproportionate as the startling elevation to prosperity that it originally engineered.

All in all, then, the nature and implications of a pact with the mamlambo can cast much light on market-driven, managerially governed academia, highlighting the misery and anxiety with which it is fraught, the morally problematic features it has acquired in its emulation of corporate models, and the disillusion and despair that it has generated.
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Interviews

The following respondents were interviewed by Sylvia Tloti, Wendy Muswaka, Abbey Alao, Felicity Wood and Michael Lewis between 1997 and 2010:

James Lunika (Caquba, Transkei)
Lunathi Kwinana and Bonga Vika (Transkei)
Fanele Sicwetsha (Elubacweni, Transkei)
Anele Mabongo (Lusikisiki, Transkei)
Lala Yako (East London)
Anthony Nkosana Faro (Lesotho)
Pascal Makeka (The Hermitage, Lesotho)
Luxolo Lunxaba (Mdantsane)
Luthathando Mbilini (Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal)
Malemame Liphoto (Ntselemanzi, Alice)
Khulekile Sikolakhe (Transkei)
Lizwe Nxala (Ntselemanzi)
Khanyisa Madyibi (Transkei)
Luthando Mbilini (Osizweni, Newcastle)
Unathi Sophazi (Mthatha, Transkei)
Matieho (Lesotho)
Xolani Mawu (Whittlesea)
Sphamla Mhlobo (Alice)
Mvumikazi Khala (Noupoort, Eastern Cape)
Nthabiseng (Mafeteng village, Lesotho)

Those respondents who not wish to be mentioned by name are omitted.

**References**


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Notes

1 This paper forms part of wider research into the occult aspects of contemporary corporatised academia (see for example, Wood 2010a, 2010b).

2 Accounts of the *mamlambo* are particularly widespread in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape.

3 The *mamlambo* is believed to reside in water, so her full name in Xhosa is *uMa-Mlambo*, the mother of the river.

4 Much of the information concerning the *mamlambo* in this paper derives from a series of interviews conducted between 1997 and 2010 in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho by Felicity Wood, Sylvia Tloti, Wendy Muswaka, Abbey Alao and Michael Lewis (see Acknowledgements). The respondents interviewed had known certain *ukuthwala* practitioners well, or knew of members of their extended families or communities who had undergone *ukuthwala*. Other respondents had received information from older people who knew much about the *mamlambo* and the practice of *ukuthwala*, or lived in communities in which many accounts of the *mamlambo* and the *ukuthwala* process had been related. (For published work discussing this, see Wood with Lewis, 2007; also Wood, 2009, 2008a, 2008b, 2005.) This paper is also guided by descriptions of the figure of the *mamlambo* in several studies exploring perceptions of the occult among various Xhosa-speaking communities in the Eastern Cape, and certain
Tsonga- and Northern Sotho-speaking inhabitants of the Lowveld regions (Wilson, 1936; Morrow and Vokwana, 2004; Niehaus, 2001). Various other ethnographic studies (cited in this paper) have also proved informative.

5 As the careers of leading southern African *ukuthwala* practitioners, such as the Transkei *inyanga* (medicine man) Khotso Sethuntsa (1898 - 1972) testify, the trade in *ukuthwala* developed under white minority rule, from the early twentieth century onwards (Wood with Lewis, 2007; Wood 2008a, 2005). Moreover, belief in the *mamlambo* spread through southern Africa as a result of the migrant labour system, which arose as individuals lost the capacity to sustain themselves through their traditional communal lifestyle, and became economically dependent on white-owned capitalist operations, such as mining and commercial farming, as Niehaus observes (46, 56, 61).

6 Dilley is making specific reference to Peter Geschiere’s research into forms of wealth-giving magic in the Cameroon (1997) here. However his point could also be related to other wealth-giving spirits from other parts of Africa, the *mamlambo* included.

7 There are numerous oral accounts that testify to this. Some of the best-known deal with the eventual fate of one of the most prominent sellers of *ukuthwala* in southern Africa, Khotso Sethuntsa, who was said to be a millionaire. His sons died young, one of them declining into depression and alcoholism long before his death. A number of his wives suffered from chronic diseases, and Khotso himself was beset by suffering and pain near the end of his life. After his death, his family was riven by bitter legal battles for his estate (Wood with Lewis, 2007, Wood, 2008a, 2008b, 2005). See also Wilson, Morrow and Vokwana, and Niehaus, for example.