

Title: An anthropological study of Swazi perception of causality with specific reference to lightning

Research Question: What are the perceptions of causality in traditional Swazi culture with specific reference to lightning?



Photo: K.P. Braun, 2008.

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Abstract

The combination of widespread traditional beliefs, a shamanic leadership and the high density of ground flash lightning in Swaziland has produced cultural interpretations concerning lightning that are significantly different from those encountered in the West. This led to the research question **What are the perceptions of causality in traditional Swazi culture with specific reference to lightning?** In order to form a response, I conducted ethnographic primary research by interviewing six Swazi informants and consulted secondary sources on the topic. I used cultural materialism as propounded by Harris as the theoretical lens through which to analyse the information gathered.

The scope of this research has been confined to lightning as a physical phenomenon and explicitly excludes other traditional views on neighbouring themes such as rain or weather at large. The number of informants was constricted due to time constraints, but they generally represent a broader trend of the different causalities within traditional Swazi culture. To investigate the origins of the perceptions of those causalities, I compared the information of my primary research with studies by anthropologists such as Booth and Kuper.

The investigation of the research question led to the insight of various different explanations, such as the mythical figures of the seven-headed snake and the lightning bird. Furthermore a syncretic fusion of traditional beliefs and rationalist approaches was encountered, which could be analysed through cultural materialism. The different causalities frequently exhibited synecdoche and cognitive discontinuities with varying degree of self-awareness of the latter.

In conclusion it was established that the perceptions of causality in traditional Swazi culture could be successfully analysed from a cultural materialist perspective, showing frequent connections between the physical environment and the causalities provided by the informants.

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Introduction

As a student at the Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa in Swaziland, I have been continuously made aware of the perceptual contrast between Western rationalism and traditional Swazi cosmological beliefs. Living in a highly academic, secular and liberal environment, and at the same time reading about deaths caused by black magic in the newspaper, gave rise to interesting questions. This became even more relevant when I discovered that some of my ethnic Swazi friends – whilst being brilliant scholars of mathematics and natural sciences – prefer to be treated by traditional healers rather than Western doctors. I decided to delve deeper into the studies of these apparent cosmological discontinuities. Whilst resident in Swaziland I have had the unique opportunity to study people and their belief systems in the last absolute monarchy of Africa, run by shamanic leaders. I decided to focus my study of the perception of causality in traditional Swazi culture on a culturally important phenomenon, the incidence of lightning. This was also formed by my personal experience of frequent, colossal thunderstorms that are unlike anything I ever witnessed in Europe. Thus I arrived at my research question:

What are the perceptions of causality in traditional Swazi culture with specific reference to lightning?

This essay analyses the cultural interpretation of a physical phenomenon from a cultural materialist perspective. The high incidence of lightning occurs in Swaziland, according to the following standard model explanation, because air that warms up over the coastal plains of South Africa and Mozambique is pushed up an escarpment, the Drakensberg Mountains. This creates friction, which induces a negative charge in the clouds. Following this charging by induction, according to Muir (2006), “eventually, the electric fields get large enough to ionise the air, and a giant current flows as a lightning bolt [...] from cloud to ground.”¹ Thus Swaziland, which lies in the extension of the Drakensberg Mountain range, experience high incidence of lightning during storm season in summer as seen in the graphic by Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in South Africa:

¹ The same article also states that the actual mechanism that triggers the lightning is not known, while the mechanism leading up to the formation is widely accepted.

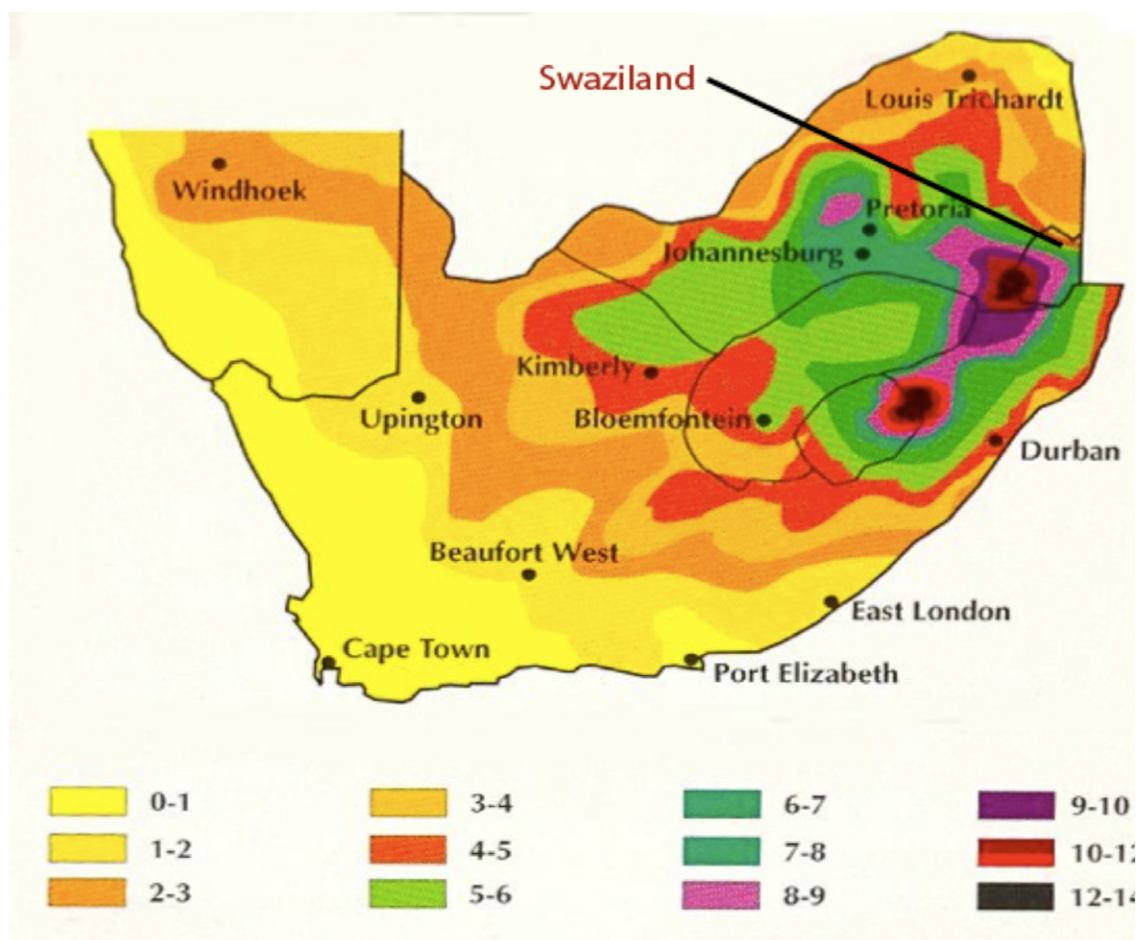


Figure 1 - Ground-flash lightning strikes per km² per annum in Southern Africa in 1996²

Another factor which increases the incidence of lightning is the Highveld, or *Inkangala*, at an altitude between 1050 m and 1400 m, covers about 29% of the country, as stated by Goudie and Price Williams (1983:13). Bhavika (2010 online) recently found that lightning density maximises at 1200 m elevation. The last contributing factor is that most of Swaziland is underlain by ancient granites, as Goudie and Price Williams (1983:17) also state. These bedrocks surface in many places and form the characteristic “craggy outcrops” that are higher than their surroundings and hence more prone to lightning strikes.

Not only the high incidence of lightning, but also the fact that the vast majority of Swazis, including the King, hold traditional beliefs, has produced a cultural interpretation that is

² Map of ground flash density of lightning strikes. Online: http://www.surgetek.co.za/more/csir_-_%20ground-flash_density_lightning.pdf (17 May 2010).

significantly different from the West. MacMillan offers an explanation of why Swaziland has retained strong traditional views into modernity:

The major peculiarity of decolonisation in Swaziland was that it was the only one of the African colonies and protectorates, with the arguable exception of Zanzibar, to come to independence as a monarchy in which real power rested with the King and a council of chiefs and elders in direct descent from those who had wielded power in the pre-colonial era. (MacMillan 1985:644).

Not only has Swaziland retained strong traditional views, it has also remained a country where the majority of the population holds an essentially shamanic belief system, which can be seen within the strong ancestral cults. The *emadloti*, ancestors, affect every area of life, according to Kuper, and Swazi practice elaborate rituals to influence the total agency of the ancestors, which has been more recently restated by Booth (2000). Kuper (1947:196) even proposed that the ancestral cult “condemns new behaviour and new ideas; it makes the living, who cherish themselves in the dead, imitate the dead” which, according to her, contributes even further to the retention of shamanic traditions in Swazi culture.

An integral part of this shamanic society is of course the shaman, in siSwati called *sangoma* (pl. *tangoma*), who according to Booth (2000:256), “divine[s] the causes of illnesses or misfortunes by drawing on their unique ties with the occult world, especially their special communication with ancestral and other spirits.” Today amongst Swazis this term has broadened to include *batsakatsi*, evildoers, who use *umutsi*, witchcraft, more commonly known as *muhti*, the Zulu equivalent.

Furthermore the topic is significant in that it is original, to the extent that no study explicitly focusing on the perceptions of causality concerning lightning and the last complete ethnography, written by Kuper, is more than 60 years old.

In summary, Swaziland has a congruence of high incidence of lightning and strong traditional, shamanic views due to its, in an African context unusual, restoration³ of a traditionalist monarchy at independence. This gives the ideal material and cultural conditions for the study of the perceptions of causality for lightning in traditional Swazi belief and makes it worthy of investigation.

³ The term ‘restoration’ has some significance here, as Cummergen (2000:380) has noted: power was given back to those, namely the King and the council of elders, the *Liqoqo*, who were in power before and in certain areas during the British protectorate over Swaziland.

Methodology & Gap analysis

The problem of ethnocentricity was a challenge in avoiding the imposition of my own bias, coming from a Western rationalist perspective. Thus writing from a perspective of cultural relativism, I have attempted to keep this essay as free as possible from my own judgements. Nonetheless anthropological analysis always presents a compromise between subjectivity and objectivity. Furthermore, in a post-modern understanding that Salzmann (2001:121) alludes to, an academic research paper already imposes the content, meaning an analysis will always originate from a Western rationalist viewpoint.

To research this essay, I conducted six interviews with ethnic Swazis as primary research. The interviews, the full transcript of which are in the appendix, were all conducted in English, the second official language in Swaziland, and based on a standard-format questionnaire. Though all informants spoke it well, I might have missed certain subtleties and nuances, since some of the knowledge concerning traditional beliefs is language specific⁴. If the interviews were conducted in siSwati, some of the informants might have provided a more finely nuanced account and the views of completely rural Swazis with poor English could have been included in the research.

Another reason why I missed out on completely rural Swazis, is that my informants were a fairly homogenous socio-economic group; all were in stable employment or financially secure students. Additionally, I did not cover certain age groups in my primary research, missing out on children and the generation of grandparents and great-grandparents, with Busi Mkhabela, aged 50, being the oldest informant. Furthermore several of my informants are students at Waterford Kamhlaba and thus somewhat distanced from their original cultural milieu.

The ethical implications of my research focused on avoiding judgemental or ridiculing behaviour towards any of my informants based their cultural beliefs. But the opposite was the case; during my fieldwork I was overwhelmed by their openness and willingness to share some of their most intimate beliefs. Through cultural relativism, I could appreciate each of the explanations given, independently from criteria such as right or wrong as imposed by Western science. With the help of my informants I could gain new insights into a small but core part of Swazi cosmology.

⁴ Eriksen (2001:34) gives an excellent account of the complexity and problems surrounding translation in a wider context.

In secondary research, the academic literature on Swazi traditional beliefs is marked by its scarcity, thus my research was somewhat limited⁵. Published in 1947, Kuper's research *An African Aristocracy* is certainly a benchmark against which other literature in the field has to be judged, but the structural-functionalist perspective from which it is derived has to be acknowledged. Unfortunately there has been no complete ethnography written since Kuper.

Using cultural materialism as an analytical perspective exposes the research to inherent bias, as is the case with all theoretical lenses. Cultural Materialism, according to Salzman (2001:130), has been critiqued by symbolists to have inherent structural bias towards imposing a "master discourse". Furthermore, according to Salzman (2001:130), critics have condemned cultural materialism as "simplistic in its view of causality and crude in its view of human life" and at times "generalising, trivial and demeaning".

⁵ This paucity of academic research can be ascribed to some extent to the marginal size of the country and its economy, located at the periphery of the southern African sub-continent.

Summary of evidence

This section of the essay is a brief summary of the interviews conducted in April 2010 with the six informants. In accordance with the scope of this research essay it was necessary to focus on certain statements and disregard others, but I attempted to give a summary as true to the interviews as possible. Reading through the excerpts of the interviews I perceived a continuum to the interviews: Simphiwe Hlophe, on the one end, who knew different Swazi myths like that of the seven-headed snake and the lightning bird, had the most traditional views. On the other end, Philile Shongwe exhibited the most rationalist view, being self-reflective to the extent that she noticed her own cognitive discontinuities. Thus the structure in this section follows this continuum. All informants were ethnic and genetic Swazis, a subgroup of the Nguni language group within the Eastern Bantu.

Simphiwe Hlophe, 20 years old, currently in his second year of IB and from a rural background, gave four different explanations to why lightning occurs – explicitly excluding chance as a possibility – out of which three, the seven-headed snake, the lightning bird and traditional healers, *tangoma*, could be classified as different approaches within traditional Swazi belief and one as Christian. He regularly attends evangelical mass. His first explanation was that lightning occurs because “God is giving us rain, so it has to come with lightning”. The description of the snake was particularly detailed, including its appearance, “a shape shifter”, which “blows up houses, causes rain and can kill people” and how a *sangoma* can control it by obtaining the egg of the snake and taming the new snake hatching from it.

His beliefs are also a fusion of traditional religious beliefs and Western rationalism when he says, “Now I think it has to do with the composition of the soil. If the rocks contain a lot of metal or iron, lightning is more likely to strike there.” The traditional belief is nonetheless dominant, as he immediately afterwards added, “If lightning strikes by your house, you need to see a traditional healer.” In his opinion, either displeased ancestors or jealous people who hire *tangoma* are the reason why people get struck. For Simphiwe Hlophe this is not a one-way process; one can “get protection from a *sangoma*. But [...] you can’t protect yourself if it is caused by the powerful snake.” He also articulated the belief that white materials and mirrors attract lightning.

Busi Mkhabela, 50 years old and living in an urban area, also presented a causality that is largely influenced by traditional Swazi beliefs. She finished her education in Form 3, works as a childminder and does not attend church services. She acknowledged the Western explanation for lightning; but was unable to explain it. While she acknowledged the seven-headed snake, she gave total agency to the lightning bird, the Hammerkop also known as the Tekwane. According to her, lightning digs a hole when it strikes the ground and lays an egg inside it. The lightning bird, which signifies the lightning, will then strike again in order to retrieve its egg.

To her this explains firstly why lightning repeatedly strikes in the same place, and secondly how *tangoma* are able to control lightning; they “take the Hammerkop’s egg and mix it with other *muhti*.” *Tangoma* can then put it where they want the lightning to strike and “lightning will strike that place where the eggs are moved to, because the lightning bird is looking for its egg”, so Busi Mkhabela. Like Simphiwe Hlophe she also acknowledged *tangoma* to have power to protect a given homestead by “bury[ing] some *muhti* in the four corners of the house.”

Again Western rationalism overlapped with traditional Swazi belief, when she said that “lightning strikes at high points, especially where there are rocks”, but then explaining that it strikes houses because of *muhti*. Furthermore she strongly separated Western and traditional beliefs when talking about chance: “In Western culture lightning can occur by chance in summer. But not in my tradition, Africans can make it happen even in winter.”

While Sylvester Mhlanga, age 18, currently in the first year of IB, grew up in rural environment, he moved to town at the age of 14 and has lived there since on his own. He is an active member of the Zionist church⁶, with his pastor having taken over parental functions in the past. Asking him why lightning occurs, he gave me a simple scientific answer that lightning is caused by charges. He told me that people can get struck by chance while at the same time he said that he has “heard stories that one can go to the *sangoma*, tell him to kill someone and [...] he will organise it so that the person gets struck.” During the interview his strong belief in Christian pre-destination became evident. When asked if one can protect oneself from lightning, he answered: “If it [the lightning] is meant for you, it will take you. [...] there is no way that you can avoid it.” On the other hand his belief that objects struck by lightning have different energy from

⁶ A syncretic Christianity, under royal patronage and African-controlled that is marked through its incorporation of traditional Swazi values and beliefs. Kasenene characterized it as Swaziland’s ‘civil religion’. (Kasenene 1988:47)

normal objects relates to Swazi beliefs. He fused his personal experience with what he had learned in school, stating “I feel the energy is different in those places; different places have different charges, as we learned in physics.”

Nkosing’phile Shongwe, 21 years old, a student in her second year of IB from a semi-rural background, leaned towards Western rationalism. As she told me, “according to Swazis lightning occurs because someone is bewitching you. I don’t believe that.” She had a folk understanding of physics, saying, that light lightning occurs because “protons and electrons in the earth attract the electricity in the sky.” Her causality exhibited traces of Swazi beliefs, such that shiny objects attract lightning. She expressed that one’s mental state affects whether one is likely to be struck or not, when saying, “if you think that lightning is going to strike you, you will end up being struck.” Concerning the protection from lightning, she stated, “as far as some people are concerned, you have to sit in some place, away from metal, water and other objects that attract electricity. I don’t believe that, I do all that but lightning has never struck me.”

Musa Zulu, 36 years old, finished Form 5 and a member of the Zionist church, grew up in the rural areas, but now lives in an urban environment, working as a gardener. He also showed a folk understanding of physics, saying that lightning occurs when different gases mix. He indirectly mentioned the lightning bird when explaining that lightning can be directed because “when there is lightning there is an egg that is coming down. *Tangoma* take the egg and mix it with some *muhti* and put it in the soil where they want to strike it.” Additionally he stated that he does not “believe that the seven-headed snake has anything to do with lightning.” Most of his knowledge about lightning was based on a Western approach, but some of it was fused with traditional knowledge, i.e. when listing the materials and objects that attract lightning: “Metal, telephone lines, mirrors and bright materials can attract lightning.” The same pattern appeared again, when he talked about possible ways of protection from lightning and suggested both the planting of aloe vera and the installing of a lightning rod on top of the house. The aloe works according to Musa Zulu because “the lightning likes sharp objects so it will strike the aloe and not your house.”

Philile Shongwe, aged 17, from a rural background and currently in her first year of IB, produced the most rationalist responses. She belongs to the International Christian Family Church, though her responses did not exhibit Christian influence. The physical

explanation she gave was the most exact of the six informants, but she explicitly does not believe in chance. For her lightning occurs because “air warms up and when it is made to rise due to mountains, it causes friction. This friction charges the clouds. When the charge becomes too big, it discharges in the form of lightning.” This Western view was evident in most of her responses, she was also the only who clearly stated that others cannot really protect oneself, saying, “in a thunderstorm I say save yourself.” Interestingly she admitted that when panicking during a thunderstorm, she resorts to, what she calls “superstition”, being aware of her own cognitive discontinuity and conflictual explanations. She blames the presence of white materials for the occurrence of lightning, because, as she said, “when I am frightened I get insecure and hold on to those beliefs.”

To restate the evidence summarized in this section, there is a continuum from traditional to rationalist views. Important to note is that even the informant with the least traditional views, Philile Shongwe, resorts to traditional views under certain circumstances. Thus different degrees of the same traditional views were observed for all informants.

Analysis

In order to analyse the data gained in my primary research, I will use cultural materialism as propounded by Marvin Harris (2001). Lightning is a physical phenomenon and most of the causalities I encountered, have, according to Hicks and Gwynn (1994:69), “develop[ed] as a response to these material realities”. To form a response to my research question, causalities such as the seven headed snake, the lightning bird et al., the idea of Other, and the influence of Christianity and Western rationalism will be discussed.

All the informants, with the exception of Philile Shongwe, were not aware of their own cognitive dissonances. Instead they syncretised Western and traditional explanations into a unified worldview that showed both influence of modernity and tradition, a common phenomenon in folk societies. Thus I will analyse the different causalities provided, rather than a meta-narrative that is very general and indistinct in an imagistic, metonymic ethnicity such as the Swazi one.

As early as 1933 as Werner (1933 online) identified that the Hammerhead or Hamerkop (scopus umbretta) is widely perceived as the lightning bird, the Tekwane⁷ within the Eastern Bantu. Though Werner can surely be criticised for her devaluing tendencies towards Africans, the similarity between her description of a Xhosa account and what Busi Mkhabela said is striking: “It lays a big egg where it strikes, which eggs bring ill-luck to the neighbourhood where laid” (1933 online).

As Busi Mkhabela stated, lightning “digs a hole and lays an egg inside.” And indeed, lightning seems to produce a hole: when it strikes the ground the intense heat – a single bolt can generate, according to Lide (1996:14-33) up to 30,000 K, five times hotter than the surface of the sun – vaporises the moisture in the ground which blows away the surrounding earth and leaves behind a small crack or hole.

Also the statement that the lightning bird lays an egg inside this hole could have been based on physical evidence. The intense heat of the lightning bolt “vaporizes and melts the soil into a fragile hollow tube” (2010 online) forming a fulgurite, so Alden. Under certain circumstances looks like the egg of the Hammerhead, the lightning bird, especially since the fulgurites (picture on the next page) are hollow.

⁷ siZulu for lightning bird, a term also commonly used in siSwati.

Furthermore the domed nest of the Hammerhead, when built on the ground or a cliff, does certainly resemble a Swazi hut, a synecdochic connection. This emphasis the connection between humans and the Hammerhead and explains that lightning strikes a hut when the bird mistakes it as its own nest. Additionally its natural habitat, as stated by Maclean (1993:63), “most inland waters, even small temporary roadside pools filled with rainwater”, complete the picture of a synecdochic mythology as water not only attracts lightning, but its silvery surface reflecting the sunlight also resembles lightning flashes.



Figure 2 – Fulgurite formed by lightning⁸
ABOUT.COM PHOTO: "Sand Fulgarite" By Andrew Alden



Figure 3 - A Hammerhead's nest built on rocks⁹
Photograph by Arnold vd Westhuizen. Reproduced with permission.

⁸ Photograph of fulgurite. Online: <http://geology.about.com/od/rocks/ig/fulgurites/fulgur2.htm> (17 May 2010).

⁹ Photograph of a Hamerkop's nest. Online: <http://aliwalbirdblog.blogspot.com/2008/04/hamerkop-nest.html> (17 May 2010).



Figure 3 - A traditional Swazi hut, *guca*¹⁰

Similarly to the silvery water, other traditional causalities surrounding lightning exhibit synecdoche. The often repeated statement by the informants that white or shiny materials such as mirrors, white curtains and paper attract lightning, is a clear example where two objects share characteristics because they look similar. Also in the case of Musa Zulu who declared that aloe vera and the horn of cattle attract lightning, synecdoche explains this causality, as both objects resemble the spiky form of a lightning flash.

The seven-headed snake, in siSwati *nyoka-makhandakhanda*, can only be partly reduced to a materialist explanation. Merely the habitat of the snake, water, which attracts lightning, and its physical resemblance in its form and its shiny scales of lightning bolts, can be explained through synecdoche.

The concept of Other in a cultural context was present in almost all of the informants accounts. Most of them exhibited awareness of different beliefs and causalities. Simphiwe Hlophe and Busi Mkhabela, who displayed the most traditional views, both acknowledged the existence of Other and restricted its validity to their own ethnic group. This cognitive discontinuity became most explicit in Busi Mkhabela's

¹⁰ Photograph of a traditional Swazi hut. Online: <http://fitzmahan.net/AfricaTour/Images/swazi%20hut.jpg> (17 May 2010).

statement about lightning, saying, “In Western culture lightning can occur by chance in summer. But not in my tradition, Africans can make it happen even in winter.”

The definite separation between Western culture and traditional beliefs was opposed by the conceptual fusion of Western rationalism and traditional shamanistic beliefs that frequently cropped up in the interviews. For example, Sylvester Mhlanga’s statement “I feel the energy is different in those places; different places have different charges, as we learned in physics” fuses Western explanations about charges and lightning with the traditional Swazi belief, where everything has energy, because the spirits of the ancestors inhabit the natural world, as Kuper (1947) noted.

Most of the other explanations are causal connections, where the informants were aware of the effects, but unable to account for the connection, again an effect of the fusion of different causalities. This produced in a number of cases apparently disconnected causalities. For example the idea that humans who engage in physical exercise during thunderstorms are more likely to be struck by lightning due to the air around them heating up: Western rationalism supports the experiential evidence of Swazis, but the explanation put forward is that the thin layer of sweat on the skin increases conductivity and not the heat around that person.

Furthermore Christian influence occasionally cropped up, fusing in with both traditional and Western views. Concepts of pre-destination and of God as one single entity were displayed by certain informants, often causing conflicting accounts by introducing cognitive discontinuities.

Conclusion

This investigation into traditional Swazi beliefs surrounding lightning has produced a number of conclusions. Firstly all my informants of my ethnographic research exhibited a syncretic blend of traditional belief and Western rationalism. Several different explanations and causalities surrounding lightning occurred, which were either entirely traditional, Christian, rationalist or a fusion of several of the former views.

Secondly cultural materialism proved to be an effective lens, producing several explanations for the origin of different causalities. In case of the lightning bird all the physical realities could be traced back to the mythical explanations, such as the identification of the egg as a fulgurite, the nest as a hut and the sparkling, reflective water as sharing visual similarities with lightning. Synecdoche was the prevailing form of causality and evident in most of the different explanations such as the belief that aloe vera and cattle horn attract lightning. Overall I focused on different competing explanations rather than prioritising a single meta-narrative.

As a scope for further research several fields can be identified. Firstly a study of other Nguni people would give insight into the origins of the differing competing causalities. Secondly a more thorough study of the Swazi beliefs including a larger number of informants and more diversity amongst them, might give further insight into some of the causalities encountered, such as the seven-headed snake. Considering the success with which cultural materialism was applied to certain causalities in this study, the possibility exists that the same theoretical perspective could be extended to other phenomena within Swazi culture.

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Interview with Nkosing'phile Shongwe, student, Waterford Kamhlaba, Mbabane, 15th April 2010.

Interview with Musa Zulu, gardener, work place, Tembelihle, 22nd April 2010.

Interview with Philile Shongwe, student, Waterford Kamhlaba, Mbabane, 10th May 2010.

Appendices

The transcripts of the interviews follow the same order as the summary of primary research.

Simphiwe Hlophe, 20, from a rural background and in IB2, attends evangelical mass regularly.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

Firstly God is giving us rain, so it has to come with lightning. Secondly if the big snake moves from one lake to another it can cause lightning, or when it is really angry. The snake has seven heads and can change to anything. You need to bribe it with money to get along with it. You can feel its presence at certain lakes. They are building a new airport and the snake lives close to it, so there are many problems: it blows up houses, causes rain and can kill people, so it is difficult to complete the building. Thirdly if someone is jealous or angry, they can go to a traditional healer to make it strike you.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

No. It's always one of those three reasons.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

The explanation I got as a kid is that lightning is carried by a bird, when it strikes it has its eggs planted into the ground. It will strike again and try to retrieve the eggs. Now I think it has to do with the composition of the soil. If the rocks have a lot of metal or iron, lightning is more likely to strike there. If lightning strikes by your house, you need to see a traditional healer.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

Yes, mirrors, white stuff, like cloth. That's what we were taught. At home when there is a lightning storm we cover the windows and the mirrors and hide everything that is white.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

Yes, they can tame the powerful snake. The snake lays eggs, so they get the eggs and when it hatches they have it under they control. There are a lot of snakes; they breed like humans. The snake is a shape shifter. Some people will buy tame snakes and keep them in their house. They can beg the snake to make lightning strike in certain places.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

When people do evil deeds they get struck. If you don't please your ancestor, or people direct it to you. It also strikes you, if you drive the snake mad, for example if you try to get its eggs. If you steal stuff from it, it will try to catch you and strike you.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

Anybody can get struck by lightning.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

No, I don't think so. There is always a reason.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

You have to get protection from a sangoma. But it depends on the cause of the lightning. You can't protect yourself if it is caused by the powerful snake. I don't think there is any medicine man who is powerful enough to control the wild, untamed snake.

Busi Mkhabela, 50, lives in an urban area, finished Form 3 and does not go to church. She works as a childminder.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

Western explanation says it is about... [She hesitated] Traditionally we Africans used to make lightning. They used to, before. When lightning strikes it digs a hole and lays an egg inside. The hole is just a crack, the egg stays to the ground because it is sticky. I saw the egg once at my mum's place. It looks dark and like a yoke. Herbalists who want to make lightning would take it and mix it with the Hammerkop's egg and mix it with other muhti. They would put into a homestead and lightning would strike there many times. Lightning will strike that place where the eggs are moved to, because the lightning bird is looking for its egg. The lightning comes back to fetch the egg. When there is terrible lightning the egg gets laid into the hole. The hole is the nest for the egg. I don't know if the eggs can be hatched. That's why Africans don't like the Hammerkop. When you see it at your house you believe something evil is coming.

We also say that when the seven-headed snake moves there is a storm, it can even cause a hurricane. That means the snake is moving. But these are two different explanations and there is no connection.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

I can't say by chance. In Western culture lightning can occur by chance in summer. But not in my tradition, Africans can make it happen even in winter and they can kill many people.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

Now I believe lightning strikes at high points, especially where there are rocks. Traditionally it happens because there is something happening to your house.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

There are some objects that attract lightning, like things that are shiny. I can't remember anything else.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

Yes, by using the eggs mixing it with other things, certain muhti. It can go straight to you out of a hundred people inside a house.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

Most people they don't know what to do when there is lightning. They run and make the body hot, use water, go under trees or to higher points.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

People, cows even animals can be struck. Anyone can be struck; it depends on where the person is.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

It sometimes happens by chance, but mostly there is a reason.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

Africans make a way to prevent the lightning to strike the houses. They used to go to the traditional healers and bury some muhti in the four corners of the house. It is still done now.

[REDACTED], 18, member of a Zionist Church, IB1, from rural background but living in town since the age of 14 on his own, with his pastor taking care of him.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

Scientifically it is proven that there are charges and the charges are attracted to trees and buildings etc. There is also a belief about lightning and witchcraft.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

Yes, it does occur by chance.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

I don't know about that. Certain trees attract lightning; they should not be there in a homestead. Trees like pine trees attract lightning. I forgot the other names because they are long and difficult. I have been in town since I was 14.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

Yes those trees for example.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

You can use witchcraft. I have heard stories that one can go to the sangoma and tell him to kill someone. You pay him and he will organise it so that the person gets struck.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

Because the lightning wants to earth. Maybe sometimes it is because of witchcraft. Don't bath, run or be under trees. They used to tell us when we were young.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

If you don't obey the advice that I just gave.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

Yes I think so.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

I don't think so. If it is meant for you, it will take you. Everyone got his or her destiny. If it was meant that you will die by lightning it will happen, there is no way that you can avoid it. God knows where everyone is going, he sees where you are going.

- *Is an object in any way different after it has been struck by lightning? How is it different?*

We believe you shouldn't go where lightning has struck, because you might attract lightning on you. Maybe there was something that made it struck there, and you might take it with you and it might strike you. Maybe the lightning struck because there were different charges, which you might attract if you go there. I feel the energy is different in those places; different places got different charges as we learned in physics.

Nkosing'phile Shongwe, 21, in IB2, from a semi-rural background.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

I heard it from a teacher, who was saying that protons and electrons in the earth attract the electricity in the sky. According to Swazis it is because someone is bewitching you. I don't believe that, I think it is nature.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

Yes.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

I don't know. I think it has to do with science.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

Yes, like shiny metal, movements, where it becomes hot. If someone moves, the temperature around them rises and they are more likely to attract lightning. I don't believe

this to be true. Maybe people do attract lightning, maybe you don't. Sometimes it has to do with what you think: if you think that lightning is going to strike you, you will end up being struck.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

No, no one can direct lightning.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

Maybe I could say because they are in the place where lightning was supposed to strike.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

Everyone can be struck.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

Yes.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

As far as some people are concerned, you have to sit in some place, away from metal, water and other objects that attract electricity. I don't believe that, I do all that but lightning has never struck me.

Musa Zulu, 36, from a rural area, but living in town, is member of a Zionist Church, finished Form 5 and works as a gardener.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

It happens when different gases mix. I don't believe that the seven-headed snake has anything to do with it.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

Yes.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

It's because of the altitude. Lightning always strikes the highest point.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

Water attracts lightning. Electricity attracts also lightning. High points and pathways also attract lightning. Metal, telephone lines, mirrors and bright materials can attract lightning. If you are hot from moving around you can also attract lightning.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

Some traditional healers and some witchcraft can do that. I don't know exactly how they do it. Others say when there is lightning there is an egg that is coming down. Traditional healers take the egg and mix it with some muhti and put it in the soil where they want it to strike. For example if someone wants me to be struck, they would put it by my house.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

Sometimes you find people who are herding the cattle, the horns of the cattle can direct the lightning at you. Sometimes if you are too hot or playing with water, you can get struck.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

Anybody can get struck by lightning. It doesn't matter who you are, you can get struck.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

No, there is always a reason. Those who are struck were not careful enough.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

Yes you can protect yourself, by putting a lightning rod on top of your house. Some plants you can plant next to your house, they protect you from lightning, for example aloe vera. The lightning likes sharp objects so it will strike the aloe and not your house. No, I don't think that other people can protect you from lightning. Traditional healers can protect you though; they take a necklace and bury it next to the house.

Phile Linda Shongwe, 17, from a rural background, in IB1 and member of International Christian Family Church.

- *Why do you think lightning occurs?*

Air warms up and when it is made to rise due to mountains, it causes friction. This friction charges the clouds. When the charge becomes too big, it discharges in the form of lightning.

- *Does lightning occur by chance?*

No, for the reason I just stated.

- *Why does lightning strike in different places?*

I don't know. Altitude is a reason sometimes. Certain things attract lightning, like metal, water.

- *Do certain objects attract lightning?*

Yes, like metal stuff. If you are surrounded by mirrors, it seems like the lightning is closer than it is and causes the superstition. You feel you are in danger, even though you are not. I don't believe that white stuff attracts lightning, but if I feel particularly frightened on a given day in a storm, then I might explain why lightning occurs by referring to the presence of a lot of white. I get superstitious because that's what people told me and when I am frightened I get insecure and hold on to those beliefs.

- *Can people direct lightning? If so, how?*

No.

- *Why do people get struck by lightning?*

Bad location, bad timing. I don't believe in bad luck, but yeah wrong place at the wrong time. Usually there is a logical explanation. Well, I guess in certain cases people will create an unfortunate situation, like someone walking with an umbrella, or people swimming in a storm, taking a shower, using an electric toothbrush without wearing shoes.

- *Who gets struck by lightning?*

Anyone can get struck.

- *Can it happen by chance?*

No. There is always a reason, something must have triggered it. Something a person might have done to trigger it. I don't believe in chance.

- *Can you protect yourself from lightning? Can other people protect you from lightning? If so, how?*

Yeah, there are better places you can be during a lightning storm than others, like for example inside a car or a reasonable good home protected by a lightning rod on the roof, away from water. Other people can help by providing shelter, but generally speaking in a thunderstorm I say save yourself.