I must admit, I started off determined not to like this book. Firstly, I found Ashforth’s previous work, Madumo a Man Bewitched (Chicago, University of Chicago Press and Cape Town, David Philip, 2000), to be superficial and self-promoting on the part of its author. Secondly, I am deeply sceptical of scholars from overseas who find it necessary to begin their works by expounding on the degree to which they have become ‘sons’ and ‘brothers’ to African families (p. ix). Despite the degree to which they may become embroiled in the daily lives of their ‘informants’, the latter remain just that. Admittedly, the researchers may develop close relationships with, and a genuine empathy for, these cultural brokers and interpreters. However, out of their fieldwork periods, they return home to their lives and families in the United States or in Europe. Africa is so far away. Now acknowledged ‘experts’ on Africa, they interpret ‘us’– the African ‘other’ – for their ‘home’ audiences. They may try to suspend disbelief and understand what they call ‘witchcraft’, and explore its consequences, while doing fieldwork. However, on their return to the States or Europe, they do not have to live with the local consequences of the perceived forces of evil that they write about. Admittedly, their informants may have been ‘bewitched’. These informants may have been the targets of gossip, or been drawn into accusations and counter accusations of ‘witchcraft’. However, it is not the close friends, peers and students of the visiting academics who are affected, either as victims or avengers. At the end of their fieldwork, they leave and go back home. Maybe they return again for a further research period, or a number of further fieldwork periods. However, they always leave Africa – their ‘research field’ – to return ‘home’ where real-life (and their ‘serious’ academic work) happens.

Having said all of that, I found Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa – a work which ‘emerges in large part from the experiences documented in Madumo’ (p. xiii) – exceptionally interesting and well-written. Adam Ashforth first visited Soweto in 1990, intending to focus his research ‘upon the politics of representation in a transition to democracy’ (p. x). In doing so, for the first time in his life, he found himself living in ‘a world where people were presumed to have capacities for causing harm to others by supernatural means’, where ‘people … feared sickness and death by witchcraft’ and where friends
were ‘accused of killing others by witchcraft.’ Never before had he had someone he ‘loved hounded to an untimely death as a witch’, or ‘been a subject of witchcraft’ himself (pp. xii-xiii). These issues became ‘particularly pressing’ for him on his return to Soweto in 1997. This was when he found his adoptive ‘brother’, Madumo, ‘in a crisis of witchcraft’ (p. xiii). Shortly after the death of his mother in the previous year, in response to accusations levelled by Zionist prophets, Madumo had been accused by his younger brother of being responsible for her death through ‘witchcraft’. Having financed Madumo’s quest for a cure, and with his informed consent, Ashforth documented this process in Madumo. Since then, he has obviously done a lot more thinking and a lot more research. In doing so, and in producing a far more conventionally academic text than Madumo, he has set out to take seriously (in other words, treat ‘as literal statements) propositions about witchcraft’ (p. xiv) that do not fit easily into his own secular humanist ideological background. It is in achieving this in engaging the central research question of ‘What implications might this have for democratic governance within a modern liberal state?’ (p. 11) that the strength of Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa lies. As Ashforth points out to his global audience: ‘their world is my world’ (p. xi) and ‘Africans living in a world of witches at the turn of the twentieth century also live in the same world as the rest of us – whoever we might be’ (p. 316).

The work is divided into three parts. The first of these (pp. 7-130) engages what Ashforth calls ‘the social dimensions of spiritual insecurity in Soweto at the turn of the twenty-first century’ (p. 1). Here he shows how the fears, doubts and dangers arising from the perception of exposure to invisible evil forces are interlinked with other spheres of insecurity in daily life in the community at this particular time. These insecurities are the product of forces such as political instability and violence accompanying the death of the apartheid regime and in the birth of a new democratic society; the perceived escalation of criminal activity accompanying the process of transformation; poverty, the changing divisions of wealth and increasing socioeconomic inequality in the transforming society; and disease (particularly the spread of the HIV-AIDS pandemic). The section concludes with an examination of the implications of ‘witchcraft’ beliefs in this modern, urban setting. Contemporary Sowetans, he argues, suffer the consequences of spiritual insecurity in ways which have a life and reality, a dynamism, of their own. This, he argues, exposes the limitations of standard anthropological, and other approaches which analyse ‘witchcraft’ beliefs in terms of the concepts of ‘rationality’ and ‘modernity’. If we are to understand them, we can only do so in terms of their success in answering the ‘why me?’ and ‘why now?’ questions for which Western science has no answers.

Part two (pp. 133-239) investigate the ways in which the contemporary inhabitants of Soweto interpret and deal with the invisible forces which, in their experience, act upon their lives. Looking at spirits and other invisible beings,
persons, images, objects and substances (especially, but not exclusively, muthi), Ashforth illuminates ‘how everyday statements about witchcraft and other forms of harm involving invisible forces can be taken by reasonable people living in the modern world as plausible accounts of reality’ (p. 2). He continues by examining issues of pollution and their association with death. According to Ashforth, these issues are central to any understanding of the stigma and denial surrounding AIDS. In following through the notion of spiritual insecurity, he also explores the role played by colonial conquest, urbanisation, transformations of kinship structures, Christian Evangelisation and African Initiated Churches (AICs) in perpetuating insecurity or attempting to bring about spiritual security. The chapter ends with an examination of what Ashforth calls the ‘vulnerabilities of the soul that complicate issues of personal responsibility and individual autonomy’ arising from ‘the pervasive spiritual insecurity of everyday life’ (p. 2).

Part three (pp. 243-318) examines the suppression of indigenous judicial procedures aimed at dealing with managing the problem of ‘witchcraft’ in African communities from colonial times. Discussion of the response of the post-apartheid government to issues of spiritual insecurity includes a reading of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) as a failed witch-hunt. Arguing that these matters provide a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the democratic state, Ashforth concludes this section with an examination of the history of attempts to eradicate ‘witchcraft’ beliefs through African education in South Africa, and current efforts to redesign the curriculum.

There are two appendices. The first (pp. 319-323) is a brief excursus on the literature on Soweto and the second (pp. 325-329) is a transcription of ‘The Thohoyandou Declaration on Ending Witchcraft Violence, Issued by the Commission on Gender Equality’, of 10 September 1998.

For me, one of the great strengths of the books lies in the fact that Ashforth has chosen to ground his study in a contemporary urban context. Most studies of ‘witchcraft’ in South Africa are based in rural communities. This makes it easy to see beliefs and actions as somehow being removed from the socio-political centre of the country – cultural ‘survivals’ among less-sophisticated and less-connected rural people. Ashforth firmly turns this notion on its head, demonstrating that it is very much an issue at the centre of modern city life. Gossip, jealousy and malice – the classic triggers of ‘witchcraft’ accusations – are present in all societies, both rural and urban. Indeed, they are often both more prevalent, and more hidden – and hence more ‘secret’ and dangerous – in cities than in the rural areas. Similarly, pride is as much of a ‘magnet for witchcraft’ in the towns as in the rural areas.

Ashforth manages to explore these issues in a way which does not exoticise belief and action. ‘Most of the time, people in Soweto live in their bodies in ordinary sorts of ways’ that sceptical outsiders would not find ‘outlandish’ (236). Recourse to beliefs about ‘witchcraft’, and taking action in terms of these
beliefs, is simply one way, among a multiplicity of others, of looking at the world and acting to bring security in a fundamentally insecure situation. Just as a car can be hijacked, so one’s mind may be hijacked by *muthi* (p. 227). On a broader level, it is possible to describe TRC as a (failed) witch-hunt (pp. 270ff.). Ashforth situates his argument about these issues in the wider context of violence in Soweto and in South Africa generally – the bitterness in the heart which is the legacy of apartheid and the pervasive sense of social injustice that continues, and has been heightened, in the post-apartheid period. When the community do not trust the police, or the wider judicial system, to protect them against physical and mystical violence, they are forced to turn elsewhere for security. ‘Witchcraft’ accusations and witch-hunts are not the only solutions adopted. Indeed, they often form only part of the complex of actions undertaken by people to cope with the stresses, strains and uncertainties of daily life. Vigilantism, street committees, African Initiated Churches and the so-called ‘mainline’ (Protestant, Catholic and Pentecostal) churches all have a role to play. People may even turn to the law to deal with the symptoms, rather than the underlying causes, of insecurity. Whether we explain them in terms of ‘witchcraft’ or other terms, the dangers and insecurities of life in contemporary Soweto (and in the wider South Africa) are real. In fact, ‘witchcraft’ accusations are often the exception, rather than the rule. They provide a subtext - often exposed only through gossip, innuendo or joking behaviour - which underlies other methods of attempting to deal with violence, insecurity and danger. In many ways, ‘people talk about witchcraft least when it matters the most’ (p. 313).

Ashforth premises his analysis of spiritual insecurity, the core support of his argument, ‘upon a presumption of malice underpinning community life.’ This he describes ‘as a negative corollary of the doctrine of *ubuntu*.’ Where ‘the philosophy of *ubuntu* proclaims that “a person is a person through other persons,” everyday life teaches that life in a world of witches must be lived in terms of a presumption of malice that adds: *because they can kill you*’ (pp. 1 & 86).

At first, this left me with the uneasy feeling that he was returning to some kind of colonial mindset where Africans were seen as suffering from spiritual insecurity because they did not worship the ‘true God’. However, as his argument develops, it is clear that the insecurity that he is referring to is that which drives all of us to seek solutions to the threats and uncertainties that we encounter in our daily lives, and to give meaning to our lives. For Ashforth, all our precepts upon which we have been content to live our lives ‘in a world without witches are demonstrably as baseless as those supporting’ the residents of twenty-first century Soweto ‘as they make their way through witch-ridden worlds.’ For Ashforth though, ‘it is better to live in a world without witches.’ Liberation from ‘the reality of invisible evil forces leaves … [us] free in important material ways’. However, such ‘freedom is a luxury … predicated on
security’, a security which is at present absent for many of the people of South Africa (p. 317). This is an interesting contribution to our understanding of not only Soweto but all of us and our inner – and external – demons.

As is to be expected, there are some things that I would have like to have seen done differently. Firstly, I feel strongly that the work would have benefited from a stronger comparative perspective. Many of the themes which emerge from the book are reflected in the works of authors such as Peter Geschiere, Wim van Binsbergen, Clifford Geertz and Terence Ranger in other parts of Africa. Ashforth’s exploration of ‘spiritual insecurity’ could only have been deepened by comparison with their works, many of which (with the exception of those of Ranger) appear in the bibliography in any case. I would also have liked to have seen more of a dialogue with authors working within South Africa, such as Isak Niehaus and Edwin Ritchken.

Secondly, I do not think that Ashforth has adequately established the connection between ‘witchcraft’ and national-level politics. It is debatable whether or not a significant number of people actually expect the state to actively provide them with protection against metaphysical violence. Certainly, there are a considerable number of people who would like the Witchcraft Suppression Act to be scrapped and who would welcome new legislation which would enable them to retaliate against assaults by ‘witches’. However, I would argue that it is unlikely that people expect the state to provide them with the means of doing this – what they seek is the freedom to consult indigenous specialists in these matters.

Thirdly, Ashforth specifically states that he will not ‘presume to dispense policy advice on how to deal with’ the problem of spiritual insecurity ‘other than to point out that it informs virtually every aspect of social life and thus impinges on virtually every aspect of politics’ (p. 19). Given the crucial role that this concept plays in his argument, and his assertions about the failure of the post-apartheid state to deal with issues of spiritual insecurity, this is a serious omission. One would certainly have liked to have seen thorough discussion of possible scenarios for consideration in tackling the problem. More detailed discussion of attempts to deal with problems arising out of witchcraft beliefs and accusations through education would also have been extremely useful.

Fourthly, I feel that Ashforth has paid insufficient attention to the relationship between ‘witchcraft’ and HIV-AIDS. He certainly refers to it, and sees it as being extremely important (see especially pp. 9, 18, 45, 81, 91-92, 106, 108-110 & 154-156). However, in a previous article, he suggested that this epidemic would stimulate a parallel epidemic of ‘witchcraft’ accusations (‘An Epidemic of Witchcraft? The Implications of AIDS for the Post-Apartheid State’, African Studies, 61, 1, 2002, pp. 121-143). Not only does he seem to downplay this controversial but interesting idea in the present work, he also
fails to provide an in-depth analysis of those who attribute HIV-Aids to ‘witchcraft’, and why they do so.

Fifthly, I feel that ‘zombies’ – people magically killed and transformed into slaves by ‘witches’ do not receive sufficient attention in the text (pp. 41-42, 277 & 234-235). For me, dehumanised, enslaved people doing the bidding of their owners are an incredibly powerful symbol of the alienation and exploitation of dependent wage labourers, and the proletariat in general, under capitalism. Ashforth mentions their existence but does not unpack their meaning in enough detail.

Sixthly, Ashforth mentions the generational conflicts involved in contemporary witch-hunts. In the past, these were under the control of the ‘kings and chiefs’ and actions were taken by the elders of the community. Recognised judicial procedures and channels of appeal were in place. Today they are often a form of mob-action under the control of youths. There is arguably a greater potential for witch-hunts escalating out of control than was the case in the past (pp. 256ff). It is a pity that Ashforth did not develop these themes more fully.

Lastly, the terms ‘witches’ and ‘witchcraft’ are highly problematic. They carry a western cultural baggage which frequently obscures what local people mean when they use them. In my own work, I escape this problem by using the local terms for these beliefs and practices. In the polyglot Soweto, Ashforth is unable to take this course of action. One would nevertheless have liked a through discussion on problems of definition and usage in the preface or the introductory chapter.

Despite these omissions, and having come a full circle from my starting point, I heartily recommend this book for the specialist, and more general, reader on ‘witchcraft’, religion, legislative reform, socioeconomic inequalities, violence and insecurity in South Africa.