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KILLING A BABOON:
APPLIED HISTORY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE APE

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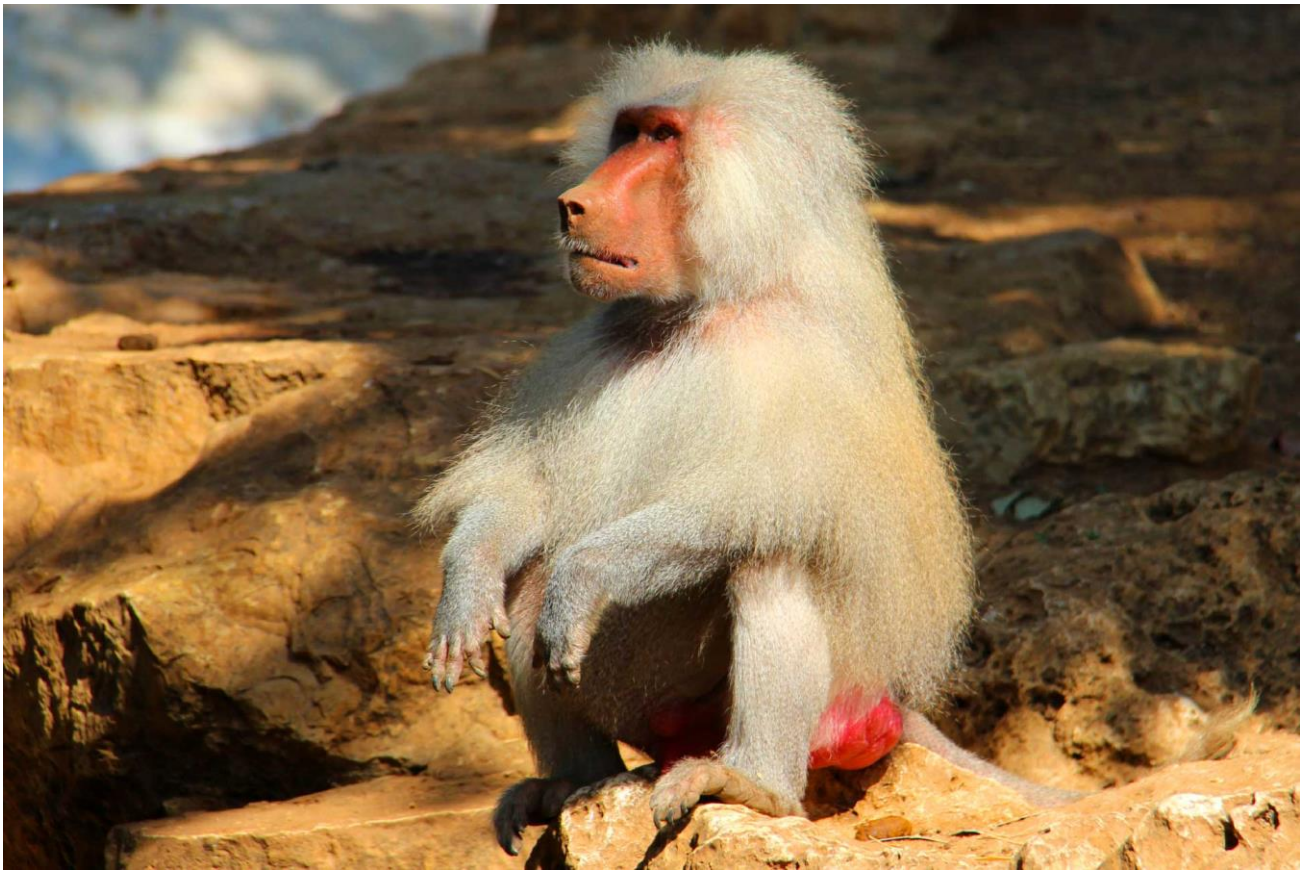

Hamadyas baboon (*Papio hamadryas*). Photo by Moataz Tawfik Igbaria. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 4.0.

#JusticeForRaygun is trending in South Africa. He was a young male baboon who had left his mother's troop and set off, on a journey to adulthood. This meant he had to navigate the urban hazards of South Africa's administrative capital Pretoria. No one remembers how he got the name Raygun, but his moniker became well-known; across the nation people were talking about him. Indeed, Raygun had many people cheering for him. Ordinary people shared WhatsApp messages and phone calls to shepherd him through the urban hazards in early February 2025. Aided by a local NGO, civic society rallied to guide him to safety. Within a mere five days, the little teenage baboon had travelled over 50 kilometres, navigating roads, dogs, and other perils. Towards the end of his travels, many people were already celebrating his escape into the "wild." Social media lit up with the thought of his survival and the possibility of his finding a new troop of baboons.[1] It was a moment of hope.[2]

Pretoria, South Africa. Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

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Raygun almost made it. But just as he reached the safety of the wild spaces, he unwisely doubled back and entered the grounds of a high school in Delmas. Once spotted on the roof of the school, he was pelted with objects by scores of teenagers. He ran back and forth on the roof, evidently bewildered and frightened. Then the schoolchildren climbed onto the roof. They captured him, beat him, kicked out his teeth. Then they tied him with wire to a tyre, poured petrol on him, and finally set him on fire.

To outsiders the ritual is chilling: They were "necklacing" him. This method of public execution originated in the 1980s in the townships of South Africa, inflicted by mob justice upon suspected Apartheid collaborators and Black policemen—it then spread to being used on suspected witches. Like other victims, Raygun died in agony. The schoolchildren chanted and danced as Raygun burnt. They posted his violent end on social media. No adult intervened. Apparently, the school principal did run into the melee but only to move her own car to a safe place.[3] It was reported that several teenagers had "fainted" at school earlier in the day, perhaps as a result of witchcraft. They blamed the little baboon for being an envoy of the occult, sent to bring them harm. The monster had needed to be despatched. After the schoolchildren had dispersed, Raygun's body remained on the smouldering tyre.[4] As darkness fell, a local medicine man came to remove his head, hands, and heart for *muthi*, the name for traditional or vernacular medicine in southern Africa.

What was shocking about this killing was how unshocking it was. South Africa grieved but shrugged. Some saw it as the "new normal," yet another killing in a violent country with one of the highest murder rates in the world.[5] Others perceived it through a poisonous racialised lens: Social media was brimming with accusations of savagery and irredeemable superstition. Many saw the "necklacing" as a uniquely horrifying outcome of a monstrous present.

> *Baboons were long legally labelled "vermin" and, while patchily protected today, are still killed in suburbia or on farms.*

But it is important to know that this kind of event is not new. Baboons were long legally labelled "vermin" and, while patchily protected today (as it is illegal to shoot or kill baboons without a permit), are still killed in suburbia or on farms.[6] Such killings of baboons are almost impossible to trace historically, but over the last 60 years they appear regularly as small oddities in newspapers and marginalia in state commissions of inquiry. Below, I contend that even such a scattered, fragmentary record shows consistency in why the killings happen and how they are thought about—and it opens a lens into the historical contours of human–animal relationships.

How can the death of an animal help us understand their lives? And their entwinement with human lives, past and present? Histories of animal killings come to us from different time periods and cultures: Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* in Europe; in Asia, Ying-Kit Chan's "The Great Dog Massacre in Late Qing China" and Michael Vann's "The Great Hanoi Rat Massacre"; and in southern Africa, Nancy Jacobs's "The Great Bophuthatswana Donkey Massacre."[7] In fact, there are a wealth of thoughtful studies of animal killings, including an early first-person interrogation: George Orwell's 1936 "Shooting an Elephant."[8]

Darnton set the tone in the subsequent socio-political studies of the public slaughter of animals for nonfood purposes, suggesting that the most useful entry point in understanding a culture exists where it seems most opaque. He used what he termed his "little narrative"

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about a cat slaughter as a lens to try to make sense of an event from 1730 that was very hard to understand in modern terms. Essentially, an alienated group of men—all journeymen printers in Paris—beat to death some alley cats at their misguided boss's behest. Darnton was trying to fathom both motive and emotion in his sources. He was trying to figure out why the cat killers found it both wild fun and wildly funny. He wanted us to be discomforted by such culture shock: to face strangeness head on. He said if we manage to find the radically unfamiliar then we have at least found the beginning of understanding.[9] Similarly, I hoped that by exploring the baboon killing, I would start to unravel the entangled emotions and motive behind the murderous act.

Edward Winslow Martin, *A Dog Fight at Kit Burn's*, Kit Burns's Saloon, New York. Published in James McCabe, *The Secrets of the Great City: A Work Descriptive of the Virtues and the Vices*, the Mysteries, Miseries and Crimes of New York City (National Publishing Company, 1868). Public domain.

As a historian, intentional cruelty to animals offered that shock. If there was no solace in the past (full of cockfighting, bear-, boar-, and dogbaiting), there was also little relief in the present. Tracing the genealogy of this particular vein of violence offered an entry point into the opacity—and maybe a solution.

Genealogies of Violence

In one of the earliest cases I have found on record, in 1963, villagers stoned a baboon to death. To everyone's surprised horror, a *ngaka* (traditional healer) then appeared and

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harvested the baboon's body. It was whispered that the baboon was his servant, and that he had removed body parts so that he could reawaken the creature as a monster. In 1996, a baboon popped up in the village of Majembeni, near the Kruger National Park. The creature was clearly supernatural. For one thing, he was massive and was sporting a plastic shopping bag. The villagers set upon him with iron bars and finally "necklaced" him. The woman who had first incited the crowd explained: "There was definitely witchcraft here. Just look at how long [he] took to catch alight and at how small its body is now that we have . . . killed it."[10]

In March 2003, schoolchildren in Bushbuckridge, Limpopo Province, boycotted classes after several student deaths and a lethal brawl about the results of a soccer match. Parents raised money to hire a *sangoma* (healer, sorcerer) from Eswatini to sniff out the witch. But the villagers were warned by police not to try to find the witch responsible—so they resorted to killing a baboon, believing him to be a witch's familiar, sent to curse the school.[11]

In 2008, in Nzhelele, Limpopo Province, rumours spread of a baboon deployed as a tokoloshe[12] (a supernatural baboonesque man-beast who acts both independently and as a kind of witch's familiar) to harass women, especially widows.[13] Villagers caught and killed the baboon and then blamed an elderly woman for controlling him. She feared for her own life when the crowd brought the body of the baboon to her house, singing that she too deserved to be necklaced as a witch. She lamented: "U tshinyiwa dzina zwi a vhavha u fhira wo tou fa, ngavhe vha tou mmbulaya khathihi" (My good name has been ruined, and people will never trust me again. It is painful and it would have been better if they had killed me). We can see how violence to baboons is interwoven with violence to humans.[14] Such brutality must also leave an indelible mark on those who participate in it or even witness it, in the already violent society of South Africa.

> *We can see how violence to baboons is interwoven with violence to humans.*

In 2024, in Ndwedwe in the Valley of a Thousand Hills on the east coast, a baboon wandered into a village.[15] Baboons are normally never seen in Ndwedwe, and the village dogs barked until a crowd of people gathered. The villagers captured, slaughtered, and skinned the baboon. Then a breakaway group ate him. Some worriedly reminded the community of the obvious folly of this act, as the baboon was almost certainly a servant of darkness.

The Professors of Witchcraft?

Until the 1970s, in most parts of South Africa, killing a baboon was not illegal, and belief in witchcraft was the norm, so such stories would not warrant newspaper coverage. It simply was not "news." It is thus difficult for a historian to track whether such killings are waning or increasing as time goes by. There are occasional eruptions of public concern over baboon killings to create *muthi*, coupled with killings of suspected witches or witch's familiars by vigilante groups. The colonial state had long outlawed some aspects of Indigenous healing and spiritual practices. This was entrenched under Apartheid by the Witchcraft Suppression Act 3 of 1957, which prohibited both witchcraft and witch hunting.[16] To many it seemed that, with the latter prohibition, the state had actually aligned itself with witches.

The post-1994 new democratic government has fretted over the 1957 act for three decades, first setting up a 1996 commission of inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murder

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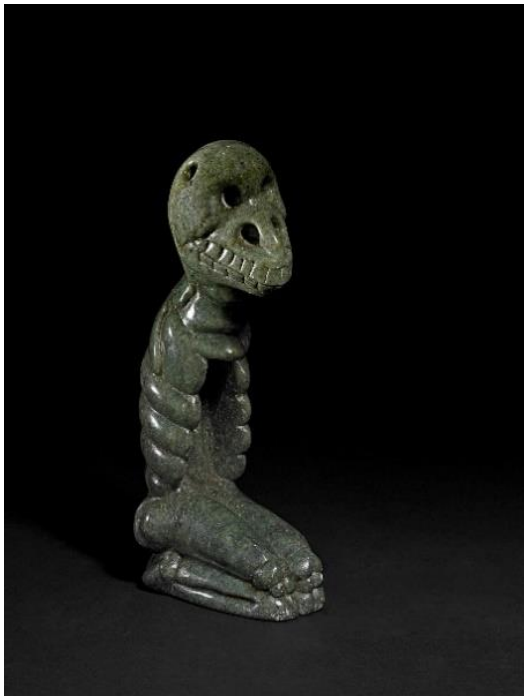
(called the Ralushai Commission after its chairman Victor Ralushai).[17] This commission recommended that instead of focusing on accusations and fraudulent claims of occult powers, the act should be replaced by a "Witchcraft Control Act" that would criminalise the actual practice of witchcraft. In other words, the commission assumed and therefore affirmed the reality of the occult. A more recent proposal is that the act should be replaced by a "Prohibition of Harmful Witchcraft Practices Act" illegalising both accusations of witchcraft (which remain rife) and some specific practices of harmful witchcraft (like *muthi* murders).[18]



Sylvester Mubayi, *Skeletal Baboon Spirit*, c. 1969, serpentine, 31.5 x 8 x 14.5 cm, The British Museum, object no. Af1996,18.27, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1996-18-27. © The Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. The work was part of Frank McEwen's collection, which he donated to the British Museum. Mubayi worked in a rural sculpting community in the Nyanga district, established by Frank McEwen.

What is clear is that belief in the occult cannot be dismissed as the mere residue of tradition that will become increasingly shed by new generations. Cosmologies shift with shifting contexts, of course. Who can forget the baboon cruising around Nzhelele like a gangster, ostensibly eyeballing women while carrying a condom and wearing a golden necklace?[19] Nevertheless, such beliefs still have enduring salience: Credence in the supernatural persists and the persecution of perceived witches and occult baboons continues.[20] Baboons are not only killed by terrified people for their role in the occult, but are also killed and harvested for their body parts by Indigenous healers.[21] Indeed, the Ralushai Commission referred to baboons as "professor(s) of witchcraft."[22] They meant—in a wry acknowledgement—that the baboons were agentic beings, not mere body parts in *muthi*, but actively involved as agents of supernatural evil.

> *Credence in the supernatural persists and the persecution of perceived witches and occult baboons continues.*

How do we explain the exaggerated violence to baboons in South Africa—and how do we fix it? Can our discipline of history play a role in a current crisis?[23] After all, from its inception, history has sought lessons from the past. So perhaps we can use applied history, which endeavours to understand current challenges by looking at historical precedents and analogues.[24] Normally we historians begin with an event and then explain what happened and why. Applied historians flip this process: They start with an in-progress predicament and then scour the historical record to offer precedent, perspective, and probable consequences. Or to simply inspire our imaginations about possible solutions.

This sense of exigency to learn from the past animated some of the very earliest historians, like the Athenian Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE), who used his history of the Peloponnesian War as a cautionary tale for future generals.[25] Two and a half thousand years later, his legacy looms large.[26] Yet, with the post-Rankean rise of history as a university discipline, the past was supposed to be only apropos itself—not to be mined for present-day use. The

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historian was ostensibly only an objective observer: a time traveler forbidden to meddle. There was thus an epistemic rupture between past and present. Essentially, the past had been rendered, as L. P. Hartley put it, a "foreign country."

But slowly the idea that the past might still be helpful in today's problems found traction. It may have been that historians became weary of interlopers—politicians and pundits—using historians' material. Intellectually, the stimulus towards applying a longer time span was consequent to a loss of faith in relativism and calls to embrace long-term perspectives.[27] Politically, further impetus derived from perceived "big threats" like 9/11 and the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed historians to find analogous precedents. Economically, the academic job-market crisis catapulted many excellent scholars out of academia into the public-history sector. All of this stimulated a new hunger for the oldest way of doing history. *A historian might still find the past to be a foreign country, but applied history opened the borders.*

> *In unpacking a relationship between people and other primates we need to understand the entangled histories of both.*

Environmental historians, perhaps more than those working in other subdisciplines, are increasingly applying history to present concerns. Maybe the burning ecological crises draw academics more inclined to activism. Historical perspectives, for example, increase our understanding of the dynamic nature of landscapes, ecological systems, and multi-species assemblages. They are seldom easy to reconstruct. Records are absent, ephemeral, or fragmentary. These challenges, however, do not diminish the value of history. Instead, they highlight the need for deeper and comparative histories.[28]

While some historians work with big data sets, I have focused on finely detailed cases and thinking about how lessons from these studies might be relevant to today's debates. My work here is interdisciplinary as I draw on research from ethology, biology, and conservation science. This kind of applied animal-sensitive history is intended to be not only *about* animals, but *for* them. They appear here not only as subjects in their own pasts but for their futures. In unpacking a relationship between people and other primates we need to understand the entangled histories of both.

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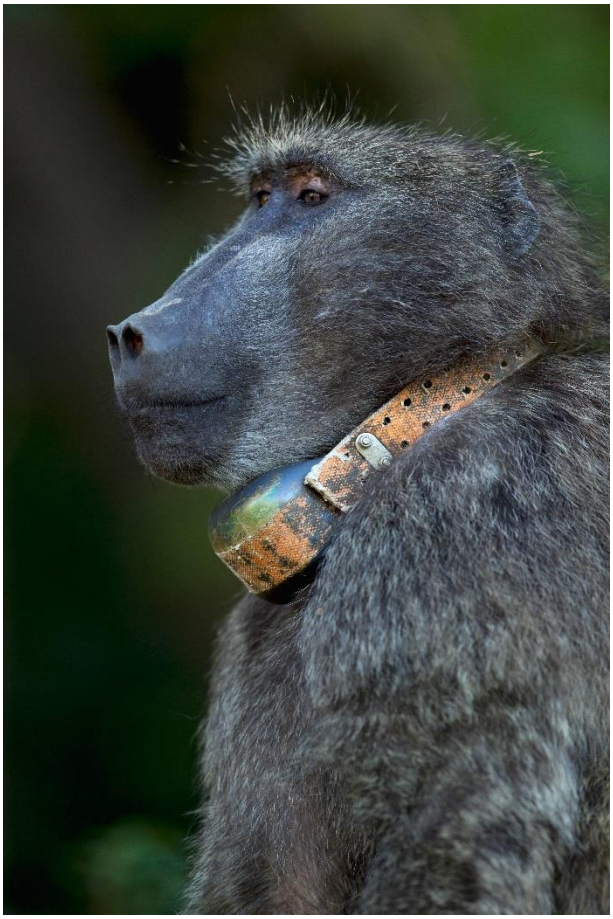
Burglar Baboons



Chacma baboon (*Papio ursinus*) alpha male wearing collar so the troop can be tracked to try and avoid human conflict, South Africa. © picture alliance / Minden Pictures / Cvril Ruoso. All riahts reserved.

Crucially, we must not forget that baboons are victims for many reasons, frequently casualties of middle-class suburban possessiveness of secure spaces. Public outrage and violence towards baboons are both disproportionate to the damage these primates wreak. Deeper study of the rhetoric and discourse behind the outrage suggests that it is not simply about the baboons. Instead, it is a reflection of societal anxiety more generally, with baboons acting as proxies for humans. Baboons are characterised in the press and on social media as burglars and as intruders. A frightened and frustrated citizenry create their own secure spaces behind high walls, razor-wire fences, and expensive security systems. This kind of perception of a specific species as a security threat is not unique—only contoured by context. In South Africa, people fear burglars, they fear those who intrude on suburban safety, and they want them removed. But this proves impossible—so they take their frustration out on the baboons.[29]

Of course, baboons are complex agential beings whose culture is closely entwined with ours. They are synanthropes, evolved to be able to live near and benefit from human society. Thus, baboons also enter "human spaces"—either as troops or individuals. This is a consequence of their ecological and behavioural flexibility (and a deep history of close coexistence with our species) in being able to survive in our anthropogenically modified habitats. So, unlike most other animals, baboons "intrude" easily into human spaces—which already feels "unnatural" to people used to the shy, human-averse smaller wildlife surrounding urban settlement.

Moreover, the ways in which baboons mirror us permit their close proximity to us. Like us, they are inquisitive, socially complex, and flexible, with enough manual dexterity to raid kitchens, gardens, orchards, and dustbins. Because of our shared deep history, some baboons lose their usual suspicion of humans and deploy scare tactics and even violence (although this rarely) to acquire food. This precipitates human–baboon conflict even before the added cosmological factor of the occult baboon.

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Baboons raiding a City of Cape Town municipal bin. South Africa, 4 August 2024. © picture alliance / Matrix Images / Alan van Gysen. All rights reserved.

There are some who refuse to even name the baboon or ever utter the vernacular names for baboons like *imfene*, *tshwene*, and *mfenhe*. Some adults rather use the euphemism *selo sa thabeng* ("the thing from the mountain"). We need to ask why it is mainly the baboon—out of all the other animals—who has come to play this role in our popular imagination.

Digging Deeper

The answer may be both psychological and historical. The roots are deep: An interdisciplinary analysis that pushes back into deep time, drawing on palaeontology, palaeoecology, archaeology, and rock art offers evidence humans and baboons have shared a prolonged sympatry, living closely for hundreds of millennia. There was arguably a mutualistic relationship between us with advantages for both species (including the shared utility of alarm calls warning both primate species about communal predators like leopards and snakes). This resulted in coevolution for the close sympatric living we see today (and that appears so "unnatural" or even supernatural). Baboons were "people" in the cosmology of some hunter-gatherer groups and shape-shifting between human and baboon was common. Some groups (the Ncube, AmaTola, or VhaLaudzi) chose baboons as totem animals. Baboons were associated in Indigenous belief systems with the use of root medicines. [30] These medicines offered protection against enemies, ailments, and supernatural evil.[31]

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The breach in the affiliative and amicable deep history of the baboon–human relationship accompanied the shift from hunter-gatherer lifeways (or transhumant livestock herding) to sedentary crop farming. Crop farmers suffered the baboon depredation of their harvest (they still do). Baboons are omnivorous, and they devour a variety of crops. In fact, they tend to feed off plants throughout their maturation cycle (from seedling to harvest time).

Moreover, as baboon-eating predators (like leopards) have been historically extirpated near farmland, baboons have flourished unchecked, thus intensifying the threat to food security. To make matters worse, baboons do not finish eating one thing before moving onto the next, leading to losses that are disproportionate to troop size.[32] While raiding is encouraged by natural-forage paucity in the dry season, baboons actually prefer some crops like maize and beans over wild food.[33] Commercial and subsistence farmers respond to such pillaging with lethal reprisals against baboons. In conflict over crop raiding, people fear and even suffer attacks from baboons, especially women and children (who are responsible for field-guarding) and whom baboons seem to fear less.[34]

But baboons came to be more than a threat to food security—they became a threat to psychological security. They have remained linked with the occult or witchcraft (a flawed term that imperfectly captures local nuances), which is usually interpreted as malign and remains part of the cosmologies of most South Africans.[35] It may be loosely defined as "illegitimate action engaging capacities of human persons to cause harm or accumulate wealth and power by mysterious means."[36]

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Farm worker during a day of fending off baboons on the Buitenverwachting Wine Farm in the wine-growing area of Constantia, Cape Town. They wear leopard-print clothes and lion masks in an attempt to scare off the baboons. © picture alliance / AP photo / Halden Krog. All rights reserved.

Historically, baboons became wrapped up in these "illegitimate actions," understood to work as witches' familiars (as tokoloshes or as themselves) or, occasionally, to be witches themselves.[37] Witches ride baboons backwards, approach homesteads in reverse, and are nocturnal, so they disrupt all that is "normal." The baboon familiar fits in the logic of this cosmology as a creature who is "out of place," escaping the boundaries of the normal system of meaning. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time is entirely normal for baboons: Young males tend to leave their natal troops when they are aged about seven or eight to seek mates in other troops (which ensures genetic diversity).[38] Today, these young males end up perceived as "out of place" because they follow historic dispersal routes that are now human spaces thanks to rapid urbanisation.

This is the greatest challenge that a baboon will face in his life: He must navigate a new world entirely alone, travel long distances through unknown territory, where food and safety are elusive. Modernity exacerbates this ancient problem in a new way: Baboons now occupy fragmented territories. The increased use of land for agricultural and urban purposes has displaced baboons from their historical patterns of distribution. Baboons on the urban edge are under severe human pressure, with 50 to 70 percent of them dying human-induced deaths (hit by cars, poisoned, or shot).

These suddenly solitary wanderers face the loss of old friendships and alliances, the threat of unpredictable predators and hazards, and, finally, rejection from unfamiliar baboons when they try to join new troops. These pressures precipitate physiological changes, increased testosterone and cortisol, which in turn suppress their immune systems if kept at

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high levels for long periods.[39] It is a perfect storm: an exodus from his family and his community, a forced flight through an unknown landscape, coupled to a hormonal hurricane in his own body. At the same time, he appears in a landscape where people are unused to solitary baboons or baboons at all. He is primed to become a being terrifyingly "out of place."

Winelands in Western Cape, showing agricultural fields of planted vineyards. © THEGIFT777 on iStock. All rights reserved.

As humans become alienated from them, and as it becomes statistically rarer to see a dispersing baboon (as baboon numbers drop), it will appear ever more "unnatural" and become more difficult for the baboons themselves, in an increasingly vicious cycle. The baboon "out of place" is interpreted through an existing cosmological and experiential lens. *What is natural appears unnatural in an alienated world.*

This is exacerbated by a psychological factor: Baboons engender discomforting cognitive dissonance in us. They provoke sympathy, indeed empathy, by coming into focus as almost-us. Then, with the final click of the intellectual collimation, they are in complete focus and are revealed as *not us at all*. This is integral to the "uncanny": the familiar made strange, described by Sigmund Freud as *Das Unheimliche*. *They are us and not us.* A frisson stems from this ambiguity: a shiver and a laugh, a strangeness and a familiarity—in essence, coupled with the shock of recognition is the shock of unrecognition. Historically, the uncanny creature has been used as a proxy or scapegoat to account for anything unsettling or unlucky. The uncanny might also be what unconsciously reminds us of ourselves—the dark side of ourselves, the "animal side," the "almost-human" side—own illicit and repressed impulses. So we project these upon the uncanny thing, which we can then blame for any inexplicable troubles that befall us. This is the nature of scapegoats.[40]

> *Baboons engender discomforting cognitive dissonance in us.*

Thus, the supernatural baboon remains enduringly an instrument to explain the inexplicable

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and offer a community catharsis. Moreover, given the long shared evolutionary past and concomitant synanthropy, baboons can cross into urban and suburban spaces—unlike other wild animals—and retain an unsettlingly humanoid. Most of all, is their "humanness"—they are unsettlingly *almost-us*: satyr and satire in one. They are in our spaces, unlike other animals. They offer an inverted mirror to ourselves. The familiar and the unfamiliar therefore becomes—literally—a witch's familiar.

Anthropocene Apes? The Value of Applied History

The image of the "supernatural baboon" perpetuates hostility towards baboons in a way that is very different to suburban outrage and different also to the ancient agriculturalist antipathy towards baboon crop raiders. Far more baboons die by accident (hit by cars) and by design on farms and in suburbia than those killed as witches' familiars or agents of supernatural evil.[41] But the spectacularly cruel natures of the latters' deaths warrant much public attention in recent times. To understand the history of both these traditions of conflict is vital in combatting them—and also important in understanding why we need to combat them.

Baboons are classified as "Least Concern" by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. It is important to understand statistically the killing of occult baboons discussed in this essay is no threat to them on a species level, but it does terrible damage to (human) society, polarising people in an already fractious and fractured country. And, of course, it results in the deaths of these social, smart, and sentient creatures. Because of their resilience and flexibility, they have the ability to survive in our nature-depleted domesticated spaces. This makes baboons one of the quintessential "Anthropocene apes"— just as we are. Apart from us, they are among few large primates who thrive in the modern world. Their ability to flourish alongside us in a world hostile to biodiversity and headed to a mass extinction, offers some fragile and friable hope. How to recover the hope felt when Raygun nearly made it back to the wild?

> *Their ability to flourish alongside us in a world hostile to biodiversity and headed to a mass extinction, offers some fragile and friable hope.*

Hope lies not in furious, racially inflected outbursts on Twitter/X but in a two-pronged approach: law-enforcement buttressed by education. Several brave NGOs focus on rescuing the individual animals themselves—we should support them. The National Council of SPCAs (NSPCA) and local SPCAs already do a heroic job, with very limited resources but unlimited courage. They focus on criminal prosecutions, under the Animals Protection Act 71 of 1962, as well as animal rescues. The NSPCA has posted a 20,000 South African rand reward for information leading to a successful conviction of Raygun's persecutors.

In simple individual cases of animal cruelty, rigorous law enforcement is both vital and sufficient. But in dealing with community cosmology and societal supernatural belief, education initiatives may be just as useful.[42] The NSPCA is set to embark on a broad programme of education about animal legal protection and how to respond to an animal "out of place" like Raygun.[43] This is laudable but not enough: We *all* need to be part of this. Educators, traditional and church leaders, community leaders, and the media need to promote knowledge about animal sentience and behaviour. Grief at Raygun's killing should channel into fundraising too, just as other high-profile animal deaths have.[44] If something may be salvaged from the tragedy it is the power of public outrage in triggering social

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change. Everyone can be an activist in supporting the NSPCA and its provincial branches—they need us. Hope lies in action.

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The best thing is such education initiatives that emphasise baboon sentience and our shared cross-species characteristics, that encourage curiosity and—eventually—fondness for fellow primates. But there is also hope in a weirdly unexpected place, a place normally full of doom and gloom: the tabloids. Tabloids have become enormously popular, creating a space for the supernatural to be discussed openly (rather than in secret). The *Daily Sun* is read by five million people each day. Their pages overflow with sensational supernatural stories. This has filtered into popular understanding and worked in tandem with a growing tabloidisation of the baboon as witch's familiar, which has produced memorable headlines like: "Ghost baboon terror!"; "Baboon trashes Gogo's furniture"; "Villagers fear hairy tormentor"; "Curse of the baboon hand"; and, hauntingly, "Ghost baboon farts outside every night."[45]

Some take the reports seriously, but it is clear that many people both write and read the articles tongue in cheek.[46] In fact, the *Daily Sun* reported Raygun's death with some sympathy and a slight challenge to the occult's credibility: "Baboon Horror: R20k Reward up for Grabs!"[47] Overall, the tabloids increasingly writing of the occult baboon with ribald humour might stimulate another transformation in the baboon–human relationship. It might create more "sympathetic monsters": The tabloids' satirical satyr and the burlesque baboon are creatures of almost endearing caricature. It must be conceded that there is a risk that when the monster is rendered ridiculous, it might precipitate (in people) an even more callous view of baboons exacerbated by contempt and untempered even by cautiousness.[48] This would still be bad, but nevertheless better. While contempt can lead to passive callousness, fear leads to active cruelty.[49]

At least some of the action-inducing horror would be removed. As Freud observes: "Even a 'real' ghost . . . loses all power at arousing . . . any uncanny horror in us as soon as the author begins to amuse himself at its expense and allows liberties to be taken with it." Maybe the reimagined baboon of the tabloids might help conquer the terror of the supernatural baboon. Reinvented into a creature of Rabelasian ribaldry and ridicule by the tabloids, the monster becomes as powerless as once it was powerful. *The threat is neutralised when the witch's familiar becomes merely familiar.* The popular press and social media might effect a move from shock to schlock. Remove the fear, remove the violence.

RIP Raygun

Notes

[1] "Baboon Beaten and Burnt to Death by School Children," *George Herald*, 10 February 2025, https://www.georgeherald.com/News/Article/National-News/baboon-beaten-and-burnt-to-death-by-school-children-202502100415.

[2] This essay draws on Sandra Swart, "Little Grey Men? Animals and Alien Kinship", *Global Environment* 16, no. 1 (2023): 12–39, https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2023.160102; "Beasts of the Southern World: Multispecies History and the Anthropocene," in *History Beyond Apartheid: New Approaches in South African Historiography*, ed. Thula Simpson (Manchester University Press, 2023),

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