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Tribes and Tribals, Special Volume No. 2: 43-53 (2008)

## **New Magic for New Times<sup>1</sup>: Muti Murder in Democratic South Africa**

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**KEYWORDS** Medicine murder; occult; witchcraft; magic; millennial capitalism

**ABSTRACT** 'Muti murder' refers to killing with the purpose of harvesting body parts for use as traditional medicine or 'muti'. Some commentators suggest that South Africa is currently witnessing an 'epidemic' of occult-related violent crime. While it is tempting to read muti murders as the uncivilised relic of past ways of life yet to be made civil through ever greater incorporation into the institutions of constitutional democracy, the paper argues that this easy binary masks the significant sense in which the conditions of the present actually give rise the phenomenon of muti murders. Occult economies draw on cultural cadences with long histories but they also need to be understood as taking a very specific form in late capitalism. Historically shown to increase during times of social stress, muti murder in contemporary South Africa can be understood as arising in a context of political transition characterised by uncertainty in identity formation, poverty, inequality, exceptionally high rates of criminality and gender-based violence in particular, and an HIV/AIDS epidemic whose management continues to be marred by official denials, secrecy and stigmatisation.