



## ARCHIVE, PROJECTS

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## Visual conversations with the world of the occult

Written by Gemma Padley



Sangoma



All images © Virginie Rebetez

**When Swiss photographer Virginie Rebetez arrived in South Africa, she became fascinated by tribal rituals, the "invisible world", and the imagery that surrounds it**

“The project is about the traces the ‘invisible world’ leaves on our world,” says 36-year-old Virginie Rebetez. “I don’t like the word ‘witchcraft’ – it has bad connotations. In Europe, we are afraid of people who communicate with the invisible world, but there are many ways of explaining events. I am also fascinated by the South African imagery that relates to this world of ‘spirits’ and the way in which characters and animals feature in rituals.”

Born in Lausanne, Rebetez worked on the project two years ago during a four-month residency in South Africa organised by Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council. “I’m interested in the invisible world in general – how we communicate with it, what it is and so on. Johannesburg is not an easy place to arrive and work in by yourself, especially if you are white and working on this kind of subject. But through the residency I met people who helped me.”

Rebetez, one of 10 emerging photographers selected to exhibit at last year’s Hyères International Festival of Fashion and Photography, met with experts in the occult and sangomas – traditional healers – to better understand their rituals. “A sangoma is a traditional doctor that black South Africans visit when they have a physical or spiritual illness,” explains Rebetez. “There is a belief that ancestors guide and protect the living, so sangomas contact patients’ ancestors who give instructions on how to heal them. They are respected but also feared.”

The project’s title, *Tokoloshe*, comes from the name of an evil creature or demonic spirit. “In Zulu culture, a tokoloshe is a dwarf-like, evil creature that can make itself invisible and is called upon to cause trouble. They are thought to be the cause of illness or death; a car accident, for example, is sometimes seen as the consequence of a tokoloshe that has run out into the road,” she explains.

The combination of portraits, landscapes and still lifes creates a narrative and a rhythm, she continues, helping her highlight crucial aspects. “Showing isolated elements or

close-ups is my way of telling a story.”

*Find more of Virginie’s work [here](#).*

*First published in the April 2014 issue. You can buy it [here](#).*

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