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Witchcraft after modernity

Old and new directions in the study of witchcraft in Africa

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What are the current trends in the study of witchcraft in Africa? Twenty years ago, the “modernity of witchcraft” approach was very influential. Although key texts from that framework are still often cited, its heyday seems to have passed. This overview of scholarly debates about witchcraft in Africa after 2010 shows three trends: the attempt to explain witchcraft, which stands in a long anthropological history; the focus on human rights, mainly by authors from fields beyond anthropology; and, influenced by the ontological turn, efforts to take witchcraft seriously. The article gives a critical overview of these current trends in the study of witchcraft in Africa, placing them in the context of theoretical perspectives that have preceded them, as well as looking to the future.

Keywords: witchcraft, Africa, modernity, human rights, ontological turn

Witchcraft is a topic that has long fascinated anthropologists studying African societies. Where other classical preoccupations of anthropology, such as elaborate kinship diagrams, have largely vanished, new publications about witchcraft in Africa continue to appear, even though the term witchcraft as a translation for a range of African vernaculars has been under discussion for a long time. This sustained interest in witchcraft has been referred to as a “long conversation” in which many different views have been brought forward (Sanders 2016: 493). From the 1950s to the 1970s, a structural-functionalist view on witchcraft prevailed, in which witchcraft accusations were interpreted as expressions of conflict and change in society (see Douglas [1970] 2004). However, in the post-colonial era, after the 1970s, anthropologists for a while seemed to avoid the topic of witchcraft, focusing rather on more “modern” topics like urbanization and technology (Geschiere 1997: 215).

Carrying forward the notion that witchcraft is related to the social context, Jean and John Comaroff presented the Max Gluckman memorial lecture in 1998, titled “Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the South African postcolony.” The lecture, later published in *American Ethnologist* (1999), proved to be a seminal text. Together with Peter Geschiere’s

book, *The modernity of witchcraft: Politics and the occult in postcolonial Africa* (1997), it heralded a new era in the study of witchcraft and related phenomena in Africa.¹ Many previous interpretations of witchcraft assumed that witchcraft belonged to a traditional world, expressing tensions in small-scale societies. Witchcraft in Africa was expected to disappear under the influence of modernization. Instead of disappearing, however, fears of witchcraft seem to have intensified in the past decades. The innovative aspect of the approach of the Comaroffs and Geschiere is that they see an intimate link between modernity and notions of witchcraft in Africa.

1. Jean and John Comaroff already referred to witches as “modernity’s prototypical malcontents,” in the introduction of *Modernity and its malcontents* (1993: xxix), and even earlier, in 1988, Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier published an article titled “Sorcery, power and the modern state in Cameroon.” I take the publications of Geschiere’s *The modernity of witchcraft* and the Comaroffs’ “Occult Economies” as a starting point for this new point of view, because by this time it seems that these ideas had come into focus and were shared by a large number of authors.





In 1997 Peter Geschiere wrote that it “is, as yet, too early to say whether a dominant paradigm . . . is emerging” (1997: 222). It may not have been his intention, but Geschiere’s musings about an emerging new paradigm in the study of witchcraft seems to have worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy: after Geschiere’s book, the ideas of anthropologists who linked witchcraft to the modern condition became known as the “modernity of witchcraft” or “witchcraft and modernity” paradigm. Since the 1990s, a number of publications have combined modernity and witchcraft or related phenomena in their titles,² and many more exponents of this approach could be named.

Of course, not everyone agreed with this approach. As Geschiere writes, “In African studies, especially, it has become customary for the increasingly numerous studies of ‘witchcraft’ since roughly 2000 to start with an attack on this so-called paradigm” (2016: 244). This article investigates what happened after “witchcraft and modernity.” What are the current trends in research on witchcraft in Africa, and how can these be evaluated? In order to understand current perspectives better, I will start with a brief overview of the witchcraft and modernity approach and the criticism it has received.

Witchcraft and modernity

Witchcraft is not some remnant of traditional times and small-scale societies, instead it thrives even in a modern environment: this is the premise of the witchcraft and modernity approach. Jean and John Comaroff came to this conclusion looking at the situation in South Africa after apartheid, where the hopes for a better economic environment for all South Africans did not materialize. The disappointments of young, black South Africans expressed itself in a proliferation of rumors about the occult. Similarly, Peter Geschiere noted in Cameroon how stories about witchcraft always seem to be related to politics and politicians.

To make their points, both Geschiere and the Comaroffs felt the need to broaden the concept of witchcraft. In “Occult economies,” Jean and John Comaroff speak not

only of witchcraft, but of a range of other “occult” phenomena like zombies, Satanism, and ritual murder. Peter Geschiere also favors the concept occult. Geschiere was part of a group of scholars writing about Cameroon—including also Fisiy, Rowlands and Warnier—that first started to apply the term “occult” to an African context. They preferred the term over witchcraft or sorcery because “occult” is more ambiguous, glossing over artificial boundaries between sorcery and witchcraft that are not always made in the field. Also, they argue that “occult” is a more neutral term, without the pejorative overtones of the word witchcraft (see Fisiy and Geschiere 1990: 136fn; Geschiere 2013: 6). In the end, these authors are not very rigorous in their choice of the label occult: they use both witchcraft and the occult as umbrella terms for a range of similar phenomena.

The authors who follow the Comaroffs and Geschiere hold that witchcraft—or the broader “occult”—is somehow linked to modernity. What exactly this modernity entails, is not often made explicit. Modernity is generally interpreted as fluid and context-specific, but the authors refer to a limited number of processes: politics in the post-colonial nation-state, a neoliberal market economy, individualization, and, to a lesser extent, urbanization. This, it seems, is what constitutes African modernity. What the authors who follow the “witchcraft and modernity” approach also rarely systematically discuss, is how exactly witchcraft and modernity are linked together. Between authors, the opinions seem to differ; and even within the works of one author the relation between witchcraft and modernity can be described in strikingly different terms. In the literature that belongs to the “witchcraft and modernity” mode of analysis, I distinguish two main ways of speaking about the relation between witchcraft and this ill-defined concept of modernity: witchcraft is *in* modernity, and witchcraft is *of* modernity.

The first way of speaking about witchcraft and modernity makes the simple observation that a belief in witchcraft does not disappear under the influence of processes of modernization. In apparently modern sectors of society, such as the city, in parliament, in hospitals and universities, people still speak openly about witchcraft and fear its powers. These rumors about witchcraft can also incorporate contemporary or modern items, like witches flying in airplanes and evil factories producing possessed goods. In this way, new or modern elements of life are absorbed in African imaginaries of spiritual power, without intrinsically changing the notion of witchcraft. Witchcraft has always given meaning to misfortune

2. Examples include *Spirit possession, modernity and power in Africa* (Behrend and Luig 1999), *Magical interpretations, material realities* (Moore and Sanders 2001), *Magic and modernity* (Meyer and Pels 2003), and *The power of the occult in modern Africa* (Kiernan 2006).



and inequality. In contemporary Africa, witchcraft still functions as an explanation for these human experiences, even though now these challenges are often caused by global forces.

For the second way of speaking about witchcraft and modernity, witchcraft is not only *in* modernity, but essentially *of* modernity. Modernity or the process of modernization has changed the discourse of witchcraft in important ways. Where previously witchcraft operated within the intimacy of the village, new forms of witchcraft or the occult find victims on a global scale—although some connection to intimate relations is generally still present (Geschiere 2013: 49–50). Also, narratives about witches and the occult enable people to “cope with the modern changes” (Geschiere 2006: 60), and especially to deal with the ambiguities of living under conditions of modernity. Modernization comes with desires and opportunities for wealth, travel, consumption, and luxury. These opportunities, however, also instill fear. By expressing the ambivalence of fears and desires inspired by modernity, narratives about witchcraft and the occult help audiences to handle their own feelings towards the modern world. Narratives about witchcraft can even be interpreted as symbolic critiques of the modern condition. Jean and John Comaroff interpret rumors about zombies as an expression of experiences of dispossession: “Zombie production is thus an apt image of the inflating occult economies of postcolonial Africa, of their ever more brutal forms of extraction” (1999: 299). Luise White gives a similar reading of stories about firemen and ambulances, driving around at night to steal blood (2000: 34). In the modern economic and social climate, Africans feel exploited and jealous of those few that are somehow able to acquire wealth, and the narratives about witchcraft and related phenomena are ways to express and deal with this.

Two broad strands of criticism have been leveled against the approach that connects witchcraft and modernity. Witchcraft is already a long-contested term with a specific English or European background, used as a translation for a variety of African terminologies. The witchcraft and modernity school not only adopts this concept but even broadens it further by introducing the concept “the occult.” The term “occult” makes it easy to group together diverse practices, such as witchcraft, medicine murders, Satanism, zombies, and the illegal trade in body parts. Authors like Terence Ranger (2007) and Murray and Sanders (2005) have argued that each of these phenomena should be studied in their own

right, as products of unique historical circumstances. Gerrie Ter Haar and Stephen Ellis (2009) further point out that “occult” is by no means the neutral term that Geschiere presents it to be. Using the word “occult” is a way to set apart aspects of religion that are thought to be harmful, adverse or unacceptable; and the concept should not be used as valid etic terminology (Hanegraaff 2012: 157).

The other side of the witchcraft and modernity equation is under attack as well. As Sally Falk Moore (1999) has argued in her response to “Occult economies,” the concept of modernity remains broad and ill-defined. Modernity is, according to several authors, too often a concept brought in from the outside, a category that locals do not use to describe their experiences. For Blair Rutherford, writing from his experience in Zimbabwe, the new fixation on modernity in the study of witchcraft is actually a continuation of the functionalist perspective that pervaded studies in the decades after the 1950s (1999: 102). Witchcraft is again reduced to an underlying theme or social process, this time that of modernity. Harri Englund and James Leach bemoan the way in which modernity acts as a metanarrative which is assumed beforehand to be the context for local people’s concerns (2000: 236). What this “modernity” exactly entails is rarely interrogated. Maia Green and Simeon Mesaki therefore note that “the modern as a category applied to social practice is essentially a category applied by us analysts rather than by our informants” (2005: 372). According to Ruth Marshall, in this way the anthropologist “assumes a godlike aura” (2009: 30) as the one who is able to decipher and interpret the meaning of local assertions. Authors following the witchcraft and modernity mode of analysis seem to interpret narratives as allegorical tales that need to be deciphered to find their true meaning. According to Adam Ashforth, this interpretation “suffers from the singular defect . . . of treating statements that Africans clearly intend as literal, or factual, as if they were meant to be metaphorical or figurative” (2005: 114). Unlike a poet, the narrator of a story about witchcraft has no intention to speak in metaphors. Marshall adds to this point that witchcraft should not be reduced to a text in search of a meaning. Rather, speaking about witchcraft is a mode of action on the world (2009: 28).

In 2018, Jean and John Comaroff published an updated version of their article on occult economies. Although they spend some time responding to their critics, their arguments are mostly brushed away as “frankly



spurious” (2018: 291) and “hard to take . . . seriously” (2018: 293). The remainder of their article is exactly what it claims to be: an update, repeating the same text as the original version, but with some added references to newer scholarship. From this updated version of “Occult economies,” published twenty years later, it seems that nothing has changed in the study of witchcraft in Africa. This, however, would be a misrepresentation. Jean and John Comaroff may not be willing to respond and adapt to their critics, but within the wider field of the study of witchcraft there has been development over the past twenty years. Within this contemporary research I distinguish three different trends: attempting to explain witchcraft; working towards policies and human rights; and taking the notion of witchcraft seriously. In the following sections I will discuss these current perspectives on the study of witchcraft.³

Explaining witchcraft

Attempts to give explanations for the conviction that witchcraft exists are as old as anthropology itself. Within the anthropology of witchcraft, two questions have been

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3. In my discussion of current scholarship, I have included not only publications that speak about witchcraft, but also those which speak about a wider spectrum of witchcraft-like phenomena, sometimes labeled as “the occult.” There are several reasons for this choice. Since this article discusses the intellectual legacy of the modernity of witchcraft approach, I have included scholarship that, like Geschiere, the Comaroffs and other authors who follow this approach, uses the concept of occult as well as that of witchcraft. Another reason is that these phenomena show clear family resemblances. The idea of Satanism in Zambia, for example, is closer to notions of witchcraft than it is to Western forms of religious Satanism such as the Church of Satan. While it is important to situate phenomena in their specific ethnographic context, similarities between a range of phenomena related to agents that cause spiritual harm are clear. A final reason is that on-the-ground distinctions between originally diverse phenomena are starting to blur. This may be an effect of what Adam Ashforth (2005) calls “spiritual insecurity,” or it may be caused by Pentecostal theologies that reject any involvement with the spirit world as evil and demonic (cf. Onyiah 2004; Stroeken 2017). The fact is that even Africans are not too clear anymore about the differences between spirits, witches, Satanists, and zombies.

asked over and over again: Why do people believe in witchcraft? and, Why do people accuse each other of being involved with witchcraft? Both questions attempt to explain witchcraft, the first reflecting on witchcraft as a mentality or a way of thinking, the second focusing on its social context. The classical anthropology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mainly discusses the former, questioning whether a worldview that incorporates witchcraft is rational or not (see Moore and Sanders 2001: 2). Anthropologists following evolutionary theorists like Lucien Lévi-Bruhl and James Frazer interpret witchcraft and magic as a characteristic of primitive, pre-logical thought, or as a misunderstanding of chains of cause and effect. In response to these theories, E.E. Evans-Pritchard argued in his classic volume *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* that witchcraft functions within a coherent worldview, and can therefore not be discarded as irrational or mistaken. As a way of thinking, witchcraft can explain why misfortune befalls a specific person.

Evans-Pritchard mentions a second element of witchcraft as well, namely that fear of witchcraft has a function in society as a confirmation of the society’s value system. He further notices the fact that accusations of witchcraft are not random, but patterned, affecting mainly ambiguous social relations (Douglas [1970] 2004: xvii). In a review article, Mary Douglas describes how, thirty years after Evans-Pritchard’s seminal work, another element has been added: that accusations mainly flare up in times of rapid social change (Douglas [1970] 2004: xviii). These acknowledgments of a link between witchcraft and the functioning of the wider society has been followed by many anthropologists, who focus on the social context of witchcraft conflict instead of merely looking at witchcraft as a way of thinking. For example, a number of authors interpreted the rise of anti-witchcraft movements in relation to the colonial situation (Goody 1957; Marwick 1950; Richards [1935] 1982; Willis 1968, [1970] 2004).

The modernity of witchcraft approach, novel as it may have been, clearly fits within the explanatory frames used by previous scholars. It argues that the social changes brought by modernity lead to an increased preoccupation with witchcraft. Narratives about witchcraft give meaning to these changes and the new anxieties and inequalities they bring. More recent articles also try to explain witchcraft. An author who is quite close to the witchcraft and modernity approach is Julien Bonhomme. In an article (2012) and book (2016), Bonhomme does not



discuss witchcraft as such, but other forms of spiritual harm that share a family resemblance with notions of witchcraft, such as phone calls and alms that may kill you, and, most extensively, rumors about genital theft. Rumors about genital theft, or penis-snatching, have abounded in West Africa since the 1990s. Bonhomme sees these rumors as a window on the anxieties of social life in contemporary Africa. The rumors reflect a fear of ordinary, daily social interactions: taking a call, accepting charity, and shaking hands with a stranger. Bonhomme connects the rumors, which are in general an urban phenomenon, to insecurities connected to urbanization and modernity. Genital theft happens when strangers greet each other, and phone calls and alms from strangers may be dangerous too. Anonymity is a defining characteristic of both these rumors and modern urban life, where unfamiliar people with unknown intentions meet on minibuses and in the markets. The rumors show how anonymity is experienced as a source of vulnerability and exposure. In this way, rumors about genital theft are “by-products of Africa’s modernity” (2012: 226).

At first glance, Bonhomme’s analysis follows the witchcraft and modernity approach. However, he does this in a way that is very aware of the criticisms of this approach. Instead of lumping phenomena together, Bonhomme uses a microsociological approach inspired by Erving Goffman. He further does not see the narratives about penis-snatching and other occult phenomena as metaphors for a modern condition. Rather, he argues that ideas and fears about witchcraft respond to the world as it currently is. In Bonhomme’s case, this is a world affected by a process that has long been associated with modernity, namely the anonymity of living in the city.

Most contemporary authors, like Bonhomme, make sure to avoid being accused of lumping disparate phenomena together by focusing on one context—a specific rumor, or a certain place. Unlike Bonhomme, these authors, even if they discuss witchcraft in an urban context, interpret this as “contemporary” rather than “modern.” Alexis Malefakis (2018), for example, writes about a group of shoe vendors working in Dar es Salaam. They all come from the same village and are often relatives. When they arrive in the city, they often find housing and their first entry into business through a relative who is already settled. Although they are mutually dependent on each other for help and inside knowledge of how the shoe market works, they also distrust each other. The shoe

vendors see their rural upbringing as inadequate to the challenges of life in the city, especially budgeting and planning. Sharing this background makes them distrustful of each other. Success of one among the group is always accompanied by accusations of witchcraft; they also feel that witchcraft is used to prevent others from being successful. Malefakis concludes that in this particular group, accusations of witchcraft enforce the code of conduct that comes with belonging to the same collective, where individual success is believed to come at the cost of everyone else. Malefakis writes about living in an urban context, and partaking in the economy. Yet, his frame of interpretation does not see witchcraft as a commentary on globalization, urbanization or market economy.

Like Malefakis, Luisa Schneider (2017) writes about living together in an urban, African context. Her topic are *ogbanjes*, spirits who are born as children and often die very young. The phenomenon is known in several West African countries. In Sierra Leone, where Schneider did her research, *ogbanjes* are understood as punishment for the moral transgressions of women. In rare cases, teenagers or adults confess to being an *ogbanje*, often expressing their desire to stay in this world as a human being rather than go back to the spirit world where they belong. Growing up as an *ogbanje* is not an easy task. They may suffer from fits or other problems which are interpreted as spiritual attacks. Schneider argues that the experiences of self-confessed *ogbanjes* reflect tensions that accompany the process of growing up. In traditional culture, conflicts with parents cannot be expressed directly. *Ogbanjes* have a rare opportunity to express the feelings that come with adolescence and coming of age, in which connections with the family are in a tense relationship to the desire for self-development and agency. They are able to reveal how they feel that they differ from their earthly family members and at the same time voice their desire to belong.

Schneider could have placed her discussion of Sierra Leonean *ogbanjes* within the theoretical debate about the influence of globalization on African concepts of personhood—as, for instance, Birgit Meyer (2015) and Naomi Haynes (2017) have done. Meyer, for example, argues that Pentecostal forms of Christianity enforce the development of individual identity and agency. Schneider, however, does not see the tensions expressed in the stories of adolescent *ogbanjes* as reflections of a shift to a more modern notion of personhood. Rather, she sees them as a result of the local or traditional notion that



social relationships are prioritized above individual identity (2017: 142).

Both Malefakis and Scheider take for granted that witchcraft and related phenomena operate in contexts affected by modernity, like the city, the market economy, and the process of coming-of-age. In these and other recent articles about witchcraft (e.g., Hickel 2014; Niehaus 2010; Snow 2017) witchcraft is described as a contemporaneous phenomenon, existing in the same time and space as modernity, and often related to politics and the distribution of power (see also Rio, MacCarthy, and Blanes 2017: 3). Yet, authors shun the more intimate and explicit links between witchcraft and modernity that Geschiere and Jean and John Comaroff proposed, especially the analysis of narratives about the occult as metaphorical or metonymical commentary on politics or economic exploitation. Katrien Pype states it explicitly in an article on the relation between technology and fears of occult harm: “I propose to move beyond a symbolic and pragmatic analysis of the consumption of a global commodities culture. I . . . ask what the animization of ICT [Information Communication Technology] goods reveals about what it means to live in an African city today” (2017: 119). These authors rarely use the ill-defined concept of modernity from the witchcraft and modernity approach as an analytical category, emphasizing instead how contemporary notions of witchcraft are related to local ideas about, for example, kinship, power, and personhood. In anthropological scholarship after 2010, witchcraft has become neither traditional nor typically modern; it simply is contemporary, a part of living in Africa in the now.

This first trend in the current scholarship on the anthropology of witchcraft in Africa is characterized by the attempt explain why people believe in witchcraft and why they accuse each other of involvement in witchcraft. In their explanations, current scholars do not stray far from the foundations laid by Evans-Pritchard and others. For Malefakis, for example, the notion of witchcraft enforces group morality, and Schneider, Bonhomme, and Pype show both the capacity of occult beliefs to pinpoint social tensions and their ability to help people cope with difficult circumstances. The idea, common in the modernity of witchcraft approach, that witchcraft is a veiled critique of the modern condition is, however, no longer used as an interpretative framework. Even the intimate relation that Bonhomme still sees between modernity and occult rumors has become uncommon. Rather, witchcraft is described as a phenomenon con-

temporaneous with modernity, in the now, but not specifically of modernity. Large-scale theories about witchcraft or the occult are no longer in fashion; phenomena are investigated within their own social, cultural, and historical context.

The second strand in the contemporary study of witchcraft in Africa takes a radically different direction by focusing not on understanding witchcraft by explaining its beliefs, but on how it causes problems. It is probably not a coincidence that this second strand is upheld not by anthropologists, but by scholars from other disciplines. In the next section I will discuss their approach to the study of witchcraft.

Correlations, policy, and human rights

The study of witchcraft is no longer just the province of anthropology, history, or religious studies. Contemporary scholarship on witchcraft is produced in a range of disciplines, including health sciences, development studies, social work, and missiology. I have included these nonanthropological publications because these works are often well aware of the main discussions in the anthropological literature on witchcraft, and although their arguments may be problematic, these disciplines look at the topic with new eyes. Some offer different methodologies than the classical ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing. Often, they investigate what the effect of notions of witchcraft is on their sphere of interest, such as the influence of witchcraft on sexual decision-making (Tenkorang et al. 2011), on lay-reported causes of death (Fottrell et al. 2012), and on social behavior and social capital (Hadnes and Schumacher 2012; Gershman 2016). I will discuss the example of these two latter publications, which both discuss the relation between witchcraft and trust.

Does a worldview that includes notions of witchcraft promote or undermine trust and cooperation? If Evans-Pritchard is right, and fear of witchcraft helps people to act more generously towards members of the community, they may be able to cooperate, if not trust each other. On the other hand, in 2005, Frederic Golooba-Mutebi, an anthropologist and social scientist, wrote about his fieldwork in a South African village: “A damaging effect of the belief in witchcraft has been the depletion of trust,” making it hard to shake off poverty (2005: 951). In a recent monograph, Peter Geschiere (2013) wrote about the triangle of witchcraft, intimacy,



and trust. Specifically, those intimate relations that one would expect to be trustful, namely those between family members, are laden with the danger of witchcraft. Hadnes and Schumacher, and Gershman, investigated the relation between the belief in witchcraft and trust with quantitative methods. In a small-scale experiment, the economists Myriam Hadnes and Heiner Schumacher (2012) explored the economic impact of traditional beliefs. They define traditional beliefs as fluid and loosely conceptualized, but with a focus on occult forces such as the ancestors, other spirits, and witches. Traditional beliefs further hold that transgressions of the moral code are swiftly punished. This moral code favors behavior that supports cohesion, and is other-regarding and egalitarian. The study compared how informants primed with an interview on traditional religion and informants without such an interview act in an experiment called the Trust Game. This Trust Game was developed by Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe in 1995 and has been used in different context to measure trust in economic decisions. In the Trust Game, two participants (A and B) are anonymously paired. Both receive an amount of money. Player A can then choose to send his allowance to player B; the amount will be doubled in the process. Player B chooses which amount to send back to Player A. In Hadnes and Schumacher's research, those participants who spoke about traditional beliefs before the game sent more money to their anonymous partner, and thus showed more prosocial behavior.

The research by the economist Boris Gershman (2016) is on a much larger scale. He uses survey data from nineteen sub-Saharan countries to investigate the correlation between witchcraft beliefs and various forms of social capital. The data show that individuals who believe in witchcraft trust others less, especially neighbors, relatives, and other acquaintances. Local institutions such as the police and local courts are also trusted less, but not (significantly) the larger government. In line with an argument brought forward by Isak Niehaus (2010), witchcraft is experienced as a private matter that is not a legitimate concern for the government, and exists in a different sphere from the government. Gershman also finds that people who believe in witchcraft are less likely to participate in charitable giving and in religious group activities. Both fear of witchcraft and fear of being accused hinder social relations. The statistics confirm that witchcraft beliefs enforce not just mistrust but an antisocial culture, which is maintained in the socialization of children, where values like aggression and forti-

tude are preferred above trust, honesty and generosity. Gershman concludes that the belief in witchcraft impedes socioeconomic development.

The conclusions of Hadnes and Schumacher, and Gershman, seem to contradict each other: the former find positive effects, the latter negative. However, in their conclusion Hadnes and Schumacher already concede that, although their experiment seems to show that traditional beliefs have a positive effect on social welfare, "the fear of supernatural punishment can also lead to increased distrust among individuals" (2012: 703). Hadnes and Schumacher investigate traditional beliefs as a complex, while Gershman focuses specifically on witchcraft. Gershman does state that other traditional beliefs do not have the detrimental effect on trust that witchcraft has. Quantitative studies like these, investigating the influence of notions of witchcraft on other spheres, do need a firm base in more qualitative anthropological research, in order to provide more details about what people actually mean when they talk about witchcraft or other traditional beliefs, and to give attention to local differences. The studies, in general, are aware of this, and often recommend practitioners in their field of study work at a better understanding of the local context (see Tenkorang et al. 2011; Fottrell et al. 2012).

Witchcraft is often singled out as a problem, as in Gershman's study. Theologian David Ngong seconds this point of view. Echoing Mary Douglas's (1970: xiii) remark that anthropological studies of witchcraft in Africa domesticate this phenomenon by pointing at its beneficial social effects, Ngong (2012) argues that anthropological attempts to uncover the function of witchcraft go hand in hand with a failure to criticize the negative effects of the belief in witchcraft. A second category of research into witchcraft published by authors from sectors beyond anthropology is aimed at finding solutions to the problem of witchcraft: what to do about accusations of witchcraft, and how to deal with notions of witchcraft in African worldviews? Missiologists and theologians ask how the church should handle accusations and fears of witchcraft in African congregations (Stabell 2012; Harries 2012; Baloyi 2014; Garrard 2017). But, most of all, these questions are placed in the context of the protection of human rights. Here, the victims of witchcraft take center stage: albinos (Mulemi 2014; Brilliant 2015), children (Secker 2012; Agazue and Gavin 2015), the elderly (Crampton 2013; Eboiyehi 2017), and women in general (Federici 2010). These groups are often already vulnerable, and accusations of witchcraft and the



violence that may ensue threaten their human rights. IGOs like the UN and the European Parliament have issued reports on witchcraft violence, and so have NGOs like Save the Children and Stepping Stones (Ashforth 2015:6).

The academic articles on witchcraft violence and human rights concede that it is not easy to devise policies to deal with witchcraft. Combating witchcraft violence is not high on the agenda of many African governments (Secker 2012). Even if laws are in place, they may not be enforced, and mob justice even involves traditional and community leaders (Eboiyehi 2017: 260). Community groups and civil organizations are called upon to support the fight against witchcraft violence (Federici 2010; Secker 2012). However, this solution proves to be complicated as well, since civil society in many African countries consists mainly of foreign institutions. On a local level, where the witchcraft accusations are made, communities place their trust in traditional and religious leaders, who share the community's fear of witchcraft, rather than in the more skeptical foreign institutions (Kleibl and Munck 2017). The human rights discourse that civil organizations use has also come under close scrutiny in different African countries, where the feeling is that human rights constitute an imposition of specifically Western values (Secker 2012: 33). Finally, accusations of witchcraft often take place in a context of conflict and contest within families. Social action and programs aimed at teaching people about their rights do not solve the problems within families that lie behind witchcraft accusations (Crampton 2013).

Studies that take the human rights approach are not unproblematic. Even in the quantitative scholarship discussed at the beginning of this section, witchcraft is always labeled as a superstition. Despite repeated urges to understand local ways of viewing the world better, there seem to be few attempts to see witchcraft as anything else than an evil, backward illusion. In a recent article, Adam Ashforth (2015) criticizes the human rights approach to witchcraft for lacking a grasp of local systems of meaning. On an emic level, victims of witchcraft are those who feel harmed through the supernatural actions of a suspected witch. Although the human rights approach calls for justice for the victims of witchcraft, there is no justice for these emic victims, because the crimes perpetrated by witches are labeled as imaginary (Ashforth 2015: 7). Alexandra Crampton is one of the few authors to make explicit her awareness of the perspectives of the people who actually live in a world with

witches, when she writes: "Within rights based discourse, the moral boundaries of witchcraft violations appear far more clear than they may to those who genuinely fear witches" (2013: 209).

Are articles that view witchcraft as a problem and often describe it as superstitious or backward even worth being mentioned as a current trend in the study of witchcraft in Africa? Seeing witchcraft as a superstition is not a new trend. But a renewed attention to this perspective is relevant, both as an object of anthropological reflection and as a cause for critical evaluation of anthropological theories. Unlike the explanations of witchcraft discussed in the previous section, the study of witchcraft that asks for better policies and a protection of human rights can hardly be accused of domesticating witchcraft. The suffering caused by witchcraft conflict has been overlooked in the past, and it would be good if anthropologists who study witchcraft would account for these harmful and dysfunctional aspects of witchcraft beliefs as well—as, in fact, the authors mentioned in the next section of this article do.

In this section I have argued that studies of witchcraft written by authors from other disciplines bring a new perspective. Quantitative methods form an addition to the traditional ethnographic descriptions, and policy-based research speaks out clearly to the violence, hurt, and loss of lives that witchcraft accusations can cause. On the other hand, this view of witchcraft is one-sided and fails to do justice to the fear of witchcraft experienced in African communities. In the following section, I will discuss a third strand in the contemporary study of witchcraft in Africa, namely scholarship that attempts to take local conceptions of witchcraft seriously, without attempting to explain or condemn notions of witchcraft.

Taking witchcraft seriously

More than ever, "taking people seriously" has become an adage in ethnographic fieldwork and writing. It is of course the duty of any ethnographer to take his respondents seriously, but the greatest champions of "taking people seriously" in recent years have been proponents of the ontological turn in anthropology. According to the ontological perspective, different expressions and beliefs are not just culturally specific ways of responding to the world, but reflect ontologically different worlds (see Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). An anthropologist



who encounters something that he does not understand should not reject it, nor try to interpret or explain it, but should take it at face value as an invitation to understand his informants on a new level.

In the anthropology of witchcraft in Africa, “taking people seriously” becomes a particularly popular phrase after 2015. The authors mentioned in the previous sections, who attempt to explain the phenomenon of witchcraft, or try to come up with policies to deal with it, can both be accused of not taking people seriously. The former sometimes interpret witchcraft in terms that their informants would not use, and the latter view witchcraft as a superstition and reject the whole notion. Although publications about witchcraft that explicitly place their research in the frame of the ontological turn are rare, witchcraft is in recent work taken much more at face value. One way of taking witchcraft seriously is to acknowledge the harm experienced by those who fear witchcraft. Not only scholars have denied this reality, African governments too have been reticent in their response to witchcraft. Many African states have held on to colonial laws against witchcraft that banish the practice of witchcraft, as well as accusing another person of being a witch and traditional practices of finding and dealing with witchcraft.⁴ For the official institutions of the state, the harm experienced by those who feel victims of witchcraft is invisible, which leaves them without justice and without protection (Marsland 2015: 27f). Like the state, Christian mission churches have denied the existence of witchcraft. This has long been accepted as one of the reasons for the rising popularity of Pentecostal churches in Africa, because the Pentecostal churches do acknowledge the existence of external spiritual forces of evil, and promise both protection and restoration.⁵

Several recent publications describe local initiatives to reach beyond the gap between official institutions and local communities who fear witchcraft. In these cases, local communities take witchcraft seriously, and the authors publishing about these initiatives are also

not trying to interpret, explain, or reject the notion of witchcraft. Ashforth (2015) discusses new forms of local jurisprudence to deal with witchcraft. In a Malawian court, accusations of witchcraft are taken seriously, and come to a fair trial that demands proof. This is possible, because in the local jurisprudence of witchcraft accusations, a distinction is made between being a witch and practicing witchcraft: “In terms of this distinction, being a witch is a matter of shame and suspicion, but not, in and of itself, a crime; causing injury and harm by occult means, however, is unambiguously criminal, though devilishly hard to prove” (Ashforth 2015: 8). Because it is so difficult to find evidence that a person has practiced witchcraft, trials do not end in convictions. They do, however, give both victims and the accused the opportunity to share their experiences and grievances. An accusation of witchcraft that goes to court is also less likely to end in mob justice. Even though Malawian laws concerning witchcraft, which are remnants from British colonial law, are skeptical about the existence of witchcraft, they can be used to acknowledge local fears.

Rebecca Marsland (2015) describes a similar situation in Tanzania. Here, a new set of bylaws prohibits certain traditional practices surrounding funerals, thereby improving hygiene and diminishing the risk of transmission of infectious diseases. Surprisingly, the staunchest supporters of these laws were not government or public health officials operating from the capital, but young, ambitious local ward leaders. Marsland explains how all of the prohibited traditions had to do with reciprocal giving—at a funeral, which can span several days, the whole community comes together, bringing gifts, and is in return provided with food by the bereaved family. Many people see this as useless expense, and for poor families the demand may be impossible to meet. However, if guests are not satisfied with the meals at the funeral, they may start to complain. These complaints, according to local beliefs, have the power to make a person ill and even lead to their death. According to local rumors, there was an epidemic of deaths caused by unsatisfied visitors at funerals. The new bylaws are so popular because they may help to curb this problem. Instead of being laws to promote health and hygiene, these laws are indigenous anti-witchcraft measures, sanctioned by the state.

Ashforth and Marsland commend these Malawian and Tanzanian initiatives for taking witchcraft seriously, while withholding their own judgment. For some secular

4. For a comparison between Ghana and Cameroon, see Roxburgh (2017). For a history of witchcraft and the state in South Africa, see Petrus (2011). For the situation in Malawi, see Ashforth (2015).

5. For one of the first studies that made this connection, see Meyer (1999). For a recent recapture of this argument, see Asamoah-Gyadu (2015).



academics, the attempt to take their informants seriously leads to questions about academic practices and certainties.⁶ Reflecting on her fieldwork, Shelagh Roxburgh (2018) has become aware of an oversight in the ethical considerations of her research. An ethical review committee approved her research into witchcraft in Ghana and Cameroon without many questions. However, during the research, her research assistants fell prey to witchcraft attacks and episodes of severe spiritual insecurity. As a consequence of this experience, Roxburgh pleads for an ethic of spiritual care in research that addresses witchcraft and other spiritual issues. Acknowledging epistemological diversity, this ethic of spiritual care would encourage researchers to consider not only physical and psychological risks in evaluating the ethical viability of a project, but also spiritual risks like the threat of witchcraft (Roxburgh 2018: 11).

The recent scholarship on witchcraft discussed in this section takes notions of witchcraft at face value. But is that always the right thing to do? Peter Geschiere asks the poignant question, “does this not also mean that monstrous accusations against old women or horrible punishments imposed on child witches have to be taken seriously?” (2010: 247). Isak Niehaus sees ethical problems with this as well. Reflecting on the death of his research assistant Jimmy, Niehaus (2018) writes about a different set of ethical considerations than Roxburgh. When Niehaus’s research assistant and friend falls ill, Jimmy links this to the witchcraft of his father; Niehaus himself, on the other hand, suspects it is HIV/AIDS. Jimmy’s father had a history of being accused of witchcraft, which Jimmy never believed until things in his own life started to go wrong. As an anthropologist, Niehaus wants to understand how Jimmy gives meaning to his illness, but he also wants to be able to be critical. In Jimmy’s case, Niehaus suspects that the explanation of witchcraft helped Jimmy to avoid personal responsibility, for contracting the disease as well as spreading it. This case has led Niehaus to see an ethical problem with evaluating culture on its own terms. An uncritical approach to witchcraft overlooks its negative consequences, such as the avoidance of biomedical treatment. A researcher should, from a position of “critical empathy,” also question the beliefs of his informants: this is intellectually and ethically the most honest thing to do.

6. Another example is Murrey (2017).

The articles discussed in this section show that attempts to take the local views on witchcraft seriously help scholars to stay clear of both outright condemnations and undue metaphorical interpretations of witchcraft. It seems to be an ongoing debate, however, how far this “taking seriously” should go. Seeing notions of witchcraft as elements of an ontologically different world has the unwanted consequence of setting apart cultures and portraying them as “Other” (Geschiere 2013). The publications about witchcraft in Africa do not take the ontological turn to its extremes. However, even the less radical examples discussed in this section present difficult ethical questions.

Conclusion

Twenty years after the heyday of the modernity of witchcraft approach, three trends in the study of witchcraft in Africa can be recognized. These trends are not completely new; rather they have developed in discussion with the modernity of witchcraft approach and expand further on it. The first trend is a continuation of the anthropological tradition of attempting to explain the phenomenon of witchcraft, a longstanding tradition to which the witchcraft and modernity approach belonged as well. Although in current scholarship witchcraft is described as contemporaneous with modernity rather than as specifically modern, the idea that witchcraft is not a remnant of traditional times but has its place in modernized contexts as well is widely accepted. In a review article, Peter Geschiere wonders, “to what extent anthropologists have succeeded in spreading [this] message outside the discipline” (2016: 246). The second trend in the study of witchcraft, which is mainly produced by scholars working in other disciplines, shows that this is a relevant question. Many of these non-anthropological studies of witchcraft view witchcraft as a superstition and as something to be overcome. What these studies contribute to the study of witchcraft are new, quantitative methods and a firm focus on the detrimental effects of witchcraft accusations. Rather than asking about the function of the notion of witchcraft, they acknowledge the suffering of its victims. But who are these victims? The third strand of within the study of witchcraft in Africa, influenced by the ontological turn in anthropology, tries to stay closer to local conceptions of witchcraft, in which the victims are those who feel threatened and under attack by the witches in their



community. Rather than interpreting narratives about witchcraft as metaphorical texts, this new scholarship takes them at face value. This approach inspires relevant questions about academic practices, questions that may lead the way to a more decolonized anthropology.

Perhaps the biggest unresolved issue behind the study of witchcraft is what to say about the reality of witchcraft. For Evans-Pritchard, the answer was clear: “Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist” (1937:63). Later approaches, influenced by cultural relativism and postmodern questions about ultimate realities, try to skirt the question by maintaining that, for the study of witchcraft, it is irrelevant whether witches do or do not exist (Bond and Ciekawy 2001: 6). People believe that they do exist, and base their actions on that belief. These actions—conflicts, violence, narratives told, etc.—form an interesting object of study, whether or not witchcraft is real. Current strands in anthropology, influenced by the ontological turn, raise the question whether “belief” is the right word to describe the notion of witchcraft. Witchcraft precedes opinions and truth claims. In the ontologically different world with witches, truth is established in a different way; in that world, witches are real.

The publications discussed in this article inhabit a range of positions on the reality of witchcraft. Some authors, especially those who write from fields other than anthropology, would heartily agree with Evans-Pritchard’s remark. Most of the anthropological publications seem to take the second position, that an opinion on the reality of witchcraft does not matter for the study of witchcraft. However, in my years as a lecturer in anthropology and religious studies on a university in Zambia it has become clear to me that this position has its own problems. Whether or not researchers take witchcraft to be real influences the questions they ask. As James Smith remarks, scholars of witchcraft “usually understand popular concerns about witches to be broadly metaphoric, or perhaps metonymic, of other concerns that are personified in alleged witches” (Smith 2019: 72). But only someone for whom it is clear that witches do not exist feels the need to interpret the notion of witchcraft as a symbol for something else. For many of my students, witches are real; they do not need to be interpreted or explained. It is a real shame, of course, that there are so few publications from scholars from the African continent published in high-ranking journals. However, it is interesting to note that most of the African authors of publications discussed in this article take the stance that witchcraft is a superstition.

The opinion of the researcher can stand in the way of an appreciation of the experiences and fears of informants. Some publications, discussed in the latter section, move in the direction of accepting the reality of witchcraft within a local ontological framework. I feel more for Isak Niehaus’s suggestion for a critical empathy: the empathy to attempt to share the world of informants, combined with a critical reflection on one’s own opinions and how they can stand in the way of asking the right questions, and the ability to critically engage with the perceptions of informants. A study of witchcraft done from a position of critical empathy will not denounce witchcraft as a mere superstition, nor will it reduce witchcraft to a symbolic discourse. Empathy also helps researchers to acknowledge the fears of those who live in a world of witches. At the same time, the call for being critical conveys the conviction that a world with witches is not so radically different that conversations about right and wrong are no longer possible.

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