The Routledge History of Witchcraft

Johannes Dillinger

Shifting Figures of the Witch in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa

Publication details


Peter Geschiere

Published online on: 20 Dec 2019

How to cite:

Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

Witchcraft research in context

The very term ‘witch’ in this title leads already to serious problems and questions in the field of African studies. After Evans-Pritchard’s classical study *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937), anthropologists have continued to doubt the wisdom of him introducing the term ‘witchcraft’ to this field. And as we shall see, there were and are, indeed, serious grounds for such doubts: Western terms like witchcraft, sorcellerie, feitiçaria and others have distorting effects when used as translation for local notions – often they give a pejorative swing to concepts that allow for a wide array of interpretations. However I can understand also the impatience of some historians with anthropologists’ squeamishness about using more general concepts – this risks to make any comparison impossible. So for this article I will just stick to the blatant fact that terms like ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ have been appropriated so widely by Africans themselves that they have become part and parcel of everyday life. However, a caveat is necessary: such translations are ‘productive’ – they affect the local notions concerned but such appropriations can also give new twists to the notions that are borrowed. Historicizing the uses of these terms remains a crucial challenge, certainly in the field of African studies.

When in 1971 I started my field-work among the Maka of southeast Cameroon — arriving as a political anthropologist but soon finding out that I could impossibly study politics if I was not willing to be introduced to the world of the *djambe* (witchcraft) that my informants saw as crucial to anything that was happening in daylight — I soon found out that they had, indeed, a highly historical conception of this dark force. In their mental map there were two major turning points. First of all the imposition of colonial state power — in this area first by the Germans (since 1905) and then by the French (who took over this part of Cameroon during the First World War). This meant the imposition of the ‘law of the whites’ who — as my informants would invariably repeat — ‘do not believe in witchcraft’, and therefore were in practice inclined to protect the witches! But independence (1960) brought a change (the second one) in this respect; as people in the village would add to their disparaging comments about the whites and their protection of the witches: ‘But now the law is made by Africans who know that witchcraft is real’. And, indeed, soon after (by 1980) state courts in this area began to convict witches to heavy terms in jail on the basis of
the testimonies of *nganga* (healers) who had ‘seen’ that the accused had ‘gone out at night’.

Moreover, since the 1990s, a third major change swept through this area and through many other parts of the continent: the Pentecostal wave that turned the war on witchcraft into a crucial challenge. In Africa, one of the main reasons of the success of the Pentecostal message was that – in contrast to the established churches who under European influence had always denied the reality of witchcraft – it offered a cure against this supposedly omnipresent danger. Witchcraft was now equated with the devil, and the Pentecostals promised its radical eradication through their constant ‘crusades’. An important element in all this was their successful use of modern media, which allowed for novel concretizations of the occult. In the Ghanaian and Nigerian video – popular all over the continent – witches play a crucial role. Showing on the screen in blatant detail what used to be largely invisible gave new impetus to people’s convictions. It created a confirmation from a safe distance, without the risk of getting oneself involved in the ambiguities of witchcraft rumours (as in everyday life), and left little scope for the ambiguities of these representations.

In this brief text I will try to refer to these three moments of changes. However, it will be clear that this is impossible for the continent at large. Africa remains the continent of staggering cultural variations. Local variations are deep and dynamic; even modern influences, supposedly homogenizing, are appropriated in highly different ways. There is certainly a continuity that recurs in people’s representations of occult aggression all over the continent (but elsewhere also). A ‘witch’ is supposed to be able to leave his or her body at night, transforming him/herself in all sorts of weird appearances, and flying off to hidden meetings with his/her companions; there they participate in orgies that in many respects transgress the normal societal values (cannibalizing one’s relatives, indulging in same sex pleasures etc.); they betray people from their own group to their fellow witches from elsewhere; their victims will slowly die unless they go to a healer who, having a ‘second pair of eyes’, can ‘see’ who are behind the attack and force them to lift their spell.4

Another common aspect is the ease with which elements from elsewhere are integrated into local beliefs. This applies in optima forma to modern technology. Witchcraft rumours all over the continent now refer to magic planes and nightly landing strips that have to be destroyed. But borrowings can also come from neighbouring groups or from Islamic representations. Common is that these beliefs travel and mingle. Equally common is that they show a surprising capacity to relate local realities (the family, the house) to global developments. It is this linking of the local to the global – which now so deeply affects people’s lives – that may explain the disturbing resilience of these notions, even (or especially) in the more modern sectors of society: the state, the school, the hospital, sports, new forms of entrepreneurship.

Yet, such general elements are interpreted in bewildering ways: people will have widely different opinions on basic questions – such as how someone can become a witch (is it a general capacity or hereditary in a specific line?); or whether witches know what they are doing or are unconscious of the harm they bring; on the role of confessions (are they necessary to neutralize the witches’ power?) and so on. In view of so much variation and uncertainty, I want to start this text with a concrete example: a brief vignette from my field-work among the Maka in which the *djambe*
(sorcellerie) came to play such a central role. From this starting point I will try to relate to historical changes and different trajectories of a more general purport.

**The witch-doctor is a witch herself**

A few weeks after I had settled in ‘my’ house in the compound of the Presbyterian catéchiste, (we are talking now of early 1971), I had the honour to receive the first visit – which was to become the first of many – from Madame Mendouga. This was, indeed, an honour since she was at the time the greatest nganga (healer) of the whole area. This meant also that she was generally considered to be an expert on the djambe (witchcraft), a field of study that had become a major challenge to me. It was clear that, from her side, Mendouga was interested in having a special relationship with a ntangue (white person). The Dutch priest who lived a few villages away had already complained to me that this woman was constantly knocking at his door. Frequently visiting white people was, for her, clearly some sort of status symbol. Most nganga are eager to profit from any opportunity to show how special they are. After all, their reputation has to be enhanced constantly.

Maybe this was also the reason why Mendouga spontaneously invited us – my assistant and me – to accompany her on a visit she had to make. Normally nganga are quite secretive about their consultations for obvious reasons – diagnosing a witchcraft case is a private thing – but she was clearly willing to make an exception for me. As she put it: ‘I had bombarded her with questions about the djambe – so why not come and see how she tried to deal with it?’ It turned out that she was on her way to visit our friend Bayard, then a young man in his twenties, who had recently been quite ill. We followed her to the house of Bayard’s family, where we found him in the salon, stretched out in an old bamboo chair, looking quite miserable. Mendouga sat down, looked at Bayard and then told his brother to call together the whole family: all his brothers, their wives, but also his old father (his mother had died already) and all the children. When they all had gathered around Bayard’s chair, Mendouga started talking in a soft and apparently gentle voice. From what I could understand (and later on my assistant translated further what she had said), she tried to re-assure Bayard (he would soon be all right, he had to trust her etc.), but at the same time she was clearly threatening his relatives around him: she had “seen” already who was trying to bewitch the poor young man, and as usual the attack came from close by. However, she would know where to find the culprits and how to stop them. My assistant confirmed what I had understood: she was, indeed, menacing the people “inside” that she would attack them if they would not soon lift their spell. After half an hour, she got up to leave. A little kid was sent out and returned with a chicken for her. Before we parted, she giggled – she had a most weird way of giggling – and said “Well I warned them. The boy will soon be better.” And, indeed, a few days later Bayard passed our house with his dog and his spears, on his way to go hunting in the forest, his favourite pastime.6

To the Maka, djambe – now always translated as sorcellerie – is a key notion that evokes a rich and dynamic imaginary. As I tried to show elsewhere, it is a precarious undertaking to try and give a systematic summary of these djambe conceptions. Indeed, one can hardly speak of a system here: Maka views on witchcraft seem liable to constant change, re-interpretations and even new ‘fashions’. It is precisely their
open character that can explain their surprising resilience and their capacity to graft themselves upon modern processes of change. The general conceptions, sketched before, constitute a kind of core. Basic is the frightening image of the *sjoumbou*, the nightly meeting of the *mindjindjamb* (lit. “those who have the *djambe*”). Anybody can try to get a *djambe* which is supposed to live in one’s belly. But only some (men as often as women) take the trouble to develop it. Those are the true *mindjindjamb*. At night, when they seem to be sleeping, their *djambe* leaves their body and flies off along the *tande idjambe* (the cobwebs of the *djambe*) to meet their fellow witches at the *sjoumbou*. There they stage horrible parties culminating in a cannibalistic banquet. What makes the *sjoumbou* especially frightening to the Maka is that it is about the eating of kin.8 Each witch has to take his/her turn in offering a relative who is then devoured by their companions. The next day the victim will fall ill and start to fade away. Only the timely intervention of the *nganga* can save the victim. Thus, the betrayal of kin is at the very centre of the *djambe* representations. *Djambe* is so frightening because it forces people to realize that there is jealousy and aggression in the very bosom of the family.9 To the Maka, kinship should be the main basis – not to say the only one – of trust and solidarity. *Djambe* highlights, however, that this very intimacy hides at the same time deadly dangers. This is why, as in the case of Bayard’s quite innocent affliction, the first culprits always have to be sought ‘inside’.

This core image of the *mindjindjamb* extraditing their own people to occult threats from the outside world (the other witches) has all sorts of elaborations. Witches are often supposed to be desperate because they have built up a ‘debt’ to their *sjoumbou* companions. They have to take their turn in offering a relative, but sometimes a witch can refuse to do so; then the witches will fall upon him/her. Thus, when Mekokoam – who had a reputation of dabbling in the *djambe* – suddenly died, his brother’s son told me with tears in his eyes that he had become a kind of martyr. Clearly he had refused to go on betraying his own people. Therefore the witches had fallen upon him and devoured him instead. And, as always among the witches, it will be then a sudden death: innocent people who are attacked will linger away, so that there is still time to bring them to the *nganga*; but among the witches it is a matter of win or die. Indeed, my friends talked often with some horror of the utter loneliness of a witch when he is attacked by his fellows. As a Maka proverb says ‘a witch has no brother, no father, no kin’. Witchcraft is the betrayal of kinship. Thus when a witch refuses to honour his obligations and is attacked by his fellows, there is no one who will stand beside him.

The inherent link with kinship is also a core element in the story – a kind of timeless myth – that people told me to explain how djambe had come to live among men.10 One day, Man, hunting in the forest, found *djambe* between the roots of a giant tree. *Djambe* said to him, “Give me a little meat from your booty”. Man gave him some. On this day he killed many more animals. And this continued. Every day, Man gave a little meat to *djambe*, and he returned with his bag of game fuller than ever.

This made his wife suspect something. One day she followed him secretly into the forest. She saw him kneel beside a giant tree and speak to *djambe*. When he had left, she approached *djambe* herself and asked it, “Who are you?” *Djambe* answered, “Do you really want to know? Then crouch down, spread your legs, and I will show you who I am. I will make you rich too.” Woman, jealous of Man’s success, crouched down, spread her legs and, hop, *djambe* jumped inside into her belly. Thus, Woman
brought djambe into the village. From this day on, djambe in the belly of Woman demanded meat to eat. Woman gave it all the meat Man brought back from hunting, but it was not enough. Djambe forced her to kill all the animals in the compound – goats, pigs and chicken – but it was still not enough. Finally she had to give it her own children, one by one. Thus, djambe came to live amongst men, thanks to the greed and jealousy of Woman.

This story, like any myth, allows for many readings and interpretations. There is a clear gender bias, strongly reminding of Adam and Eve. Yet most of my informants would finish the story by adding a proverb saying ‘Women may have been the first to go out (that is, leave their bodies), but men were soon to follow’, meaning that women may have a certain priority in the djambe world, but that men soon learnt their way in this domain as well.

Another implication is that djambe can be used in a positive way. In the story, it brings Man success as a hunter – no mean thing since this was one of the main marks of prestige in the old order. Only after Woman brought it into the village – that is, within the sphere of kinship – did djambe exhibit its basic instinct: the devouring of Woman’s own people.

Thus, the mythical story, like the little scene described earlier of Mendouga’s visit, can already give some idea of the harassing ambiguities that make the djambe discourse – as so many other African discourses on the occult – so difficult to get out of. The idea that djambe powers, in spite of the menacing image of cannibalistic nocturnal meetings, can also be used in a positive sense, have all sorts of wider implications. It affects, for instance, most directly the role of the healer (nganga) as the main resort against witchcraft. For me it came as a surprise that all my informants would insist that, of course, Mme Mendouga had a very well developed djambe herself. Indeed, nganga are supposed to be able to heal only because they themselves are deeply involved with djambe; they are described as some sort of super witches – one informant even said they were mindjindjamb ‘who had beaten all records’. Thus, they are a striking example that it is possible to canalize djambe in order to use it in a constructive way; but at the same time they highlight the relativity of such more positive uses of djambe. Nganga themselves will always emphasize that their ‘professor’, who helped them to develop their djambe, bound them with terrible ‘interdictions’ (itsi) to use their powers only to heal and never to kill. Yet, people are never so sure of this: the nganga has an extremely powerful djambe, this is why s/he can heal. But there is always the danger that the basic instinct of the djambe will break through: that is, to kill one’s own kin. Indeed, many rumours about nganga make the link with kinship in an even more direct way. Acquiring the ‘second pair of eyes’ is a basic step in their initiation into djambe. After all, it is this ‘second pair’ that enables the onkong to ‘see’ what the witches are doing and to know where to find them. But people whisper that a nganga only received this gift from his/her professeur after offering a relative as a counter-gift. The nganga can only heal because s/he has killed; significantly, it is the betrayal of one’s own kin that is crucial for one’s initiation into the djambe.

Similar ambivalences occur in all sorts of contexts. The lessje kande (speakers in the council) – that is, the old men who knew how to overrule opponents in the often tempestuous deliberations in the village council – were supposed to be able to do so only because they had the djambe idjouga (the witchcraft of commandment). Even I had my djambe – the djambe le ntangue, the witchcraft of the white – which
meant that I drove my old 2 CV Citroën without making accidents. Also the new elite (mostly public servants who had made quick careers through the rapid Africanization of the state apparatus after independence) were in all sorts of ways linked to the same djambe. People would whisper, for instance, that regularly even the préfet’s black Mercedes (then the new elite’s status symbol) would be parked in front of Mme Mendouga’s simple house. Apparently he needed her services to ‘armour’ him in the murderous competition among the new elites for prestigious position in the politico-administrative hierarchies. Indeed, all positions of success and power – whether traditional or modern – were and are linked to special access to in the world of the djambe. The basic ambivalence is, therefore, that the powers of the djambe can be used both for levelling and accumulating. Djambe is often inspired by jealousy – a dangerous weapon of the poor against the rich; but it can also serve to enhance power and success as ‘armour’ for the rich and the powerful.

Ambiguities and variations

There are certainly important variations in this respect, also among neighbouring societies. In anthropological parlour, the Maka and other societies in the forests of South and East Cameroon, are characterized as ‘segmentary’: prior to colonial conquest (around 1900) they lived in small family hamlets without any fixed position of authority at a higher level. Inside the family hamlets elders ruled over women and young men. But in case of internal conflict family segments could split off and create a new village elsewhere. In those days the forest was still very much an open frontier. In neighbouring parts of present-day Cameroon, for instance among the ‘Bamileke’ who live in the western highlands, relations had (and have) a more hierarchical slant. Here strongly institutionalized chieftaincies, with a rich superstructure of title societies and complex court rituals, still retain great moral authority. Here the discourse on occult powers is much more compartmentalized. While among the Maka djambe is used as one umbrella notion, covering all sorts of manifestations of occult power people in the western highlands tend to set chiefs, healers and other dignitaries apart from the more negative sides of the occult. These authorities – just as the healers among the Maka – are certainly supposed to have their own access to such occult powers, but these are seen as different from the ‘witchcraft of the night’. However, it is important to emphasize that even such conceptual distinctions remain precarious and are often contested. For instance, in the 1990s when democratization acquired full swing also in Cameroon (after decades of most authoritarian one party rule) many Bamileke chiefs had to steer a difficult course between President Biya, who desperately clung to power, and their own subjects. The latter sided massively with the opposition while President Biya used his power over the chiefs (after all, they were paid by the regime) to marshal votes for him. In those days, many people were very quick to assume that the chiefs had strayed from their sacred mandate. Rumours abounded that they were siding now with the witches, riding at night in an egoistic pursuit of riches and success. It was in those days that chiefly palaces were burnt and their Pajero’s (then the new status symbol) destroyed – events that would have been unthinkable in the 1980s. Apparently, the basic circularity of witchcraft discourse – powers that can heal or bring success are the same that can be used to kill and destroy – risked breaking through, even in more hierarchical settings.
Maka discourse on the *djambe*, as so many other ‘witchcraft’ discourses from Africa, highlights ambiguities that pose uncomfortable challenges to anyone who tries to create some order in this treacherous field – not only to authorities of state (see the next section) but also to academics. One implication is that a focus on accusations of witchcraft – almost inevitable for most historians (but in this they are often followed by many anthropologists who have more leeway to tap alternative sources) – risks leading to limitations. Of course, accusations are a tempting starting point since they are one of the few concrete manifestations of what for the rest is supposed to take place in secret and out of sight. The problem is, however, that those accusations that are openly expressed will be mostly those directed against the weak. The basic ambivalence that these occult powers can also be used by the rich and powerful risks to remain out of sight.\(^\text{13}\)

Moreover, striking shifts in the discourses on the occult over the last decades in the wider region indicate that the balance between levelling and accumulative implications is subject to constant changes. Decolonization and the rise of a new elite through the rapid Africanization of public service (roughly since 1960) seemed to coincide with an increasing popular preoccupation with forms of witchcraft that are emphatically discussed as new: the witchcraft of ‘selling’ more or less replacing the one of ‘eating’. In southern Cameroon people use different names for this new witchcraft: *ekong, jamla, kupe, nyongou*. But the basic plot is the same: these new witches turn their victims into zombies who work on ‘invisible plantations’ (often located at Mt. Kupe in West Cameroon).\(^\text{14}\) These *ekong* witches can be recognized by their ostentatious show of new forms of wealth – which apparently has been accumulated by the labour of their zombie-victims. The *ekong* panic thus seems to express people’s bewilderment about the new inequalities, accompanied by ostentatious consumerism. It brings also a tilting of the balance: witchcraft becoming more explicitly associated with the rich and the powerful. Clearly, in the African context as well, witchcraft cannot be studied as a system locked into itself. The ongoing dynamics of these representations requires a constant historicizing of the notions involved and their shifting implications.

**Colonial authorities confused by witchcraft’s ambiguities**

My informants in the early 1970’s had a clear mental map of the history of witchcraft in their area. As so many African spokesmen in those days they would emphasize that the law had to change. After independence the country had inherited a white men’s law. White men do not believe that witchcraft is real, so they refused to punish the witches. But now, Africans are making the law; as the representative of our *canton* (a young man with some schooling) explained it to me: ‘Soon the law will be changed and then we can finally deal with the witches’.

So often this mental map of change from colonial to post-colonial did have some truth in it, but in practice developments were much more complicated – a muddling-through in which principles mixed in complex ways with trial and error. For the colonials – certainly in the early stages after ‘pacification’ (for Cameroon roughly since the first decade of the twentieth century) – witchcraft was not completely unreal. On the contrary, they had a clear image of the witch. For them the representative of the dark world of witchcraft was the *Medizinmann* as the missionaries.
of the Basler Mission – in the German period in the forefront in dealing with local beliefs – would call him. As the most concrete manifestation of the world of darkness, he was their idea of the arch-witch, and so he had to be combated at all costs: a victory over him would entail the collapse of this evil world. Note the shift of images: the ‘healer’ as he is called mostly in present-day literature was to the early colonials the prototype of the witch.\textsuperscript{15} – And, indeed, until the very end of the colonial period, the main attacks of both the missionaries and the state authorities were directed against these most visible representatives of the occult.\textsuperscript{16} In this sense there is some truth to my informants’ complaints that the colonial authorities used to protect the witches – after all, as far as they did interfere with this hidden world they targeted the very persons who claimed to protect people against the witches. All over Africa the colonial period was marked by constant waves of anti-witchcraft movements: prophets and healers promising the definitive eradication of witchcraft by their medicine. And, certainly where such movements were relatively successful, the colonial authorities were highly watchful.\textsuperscript{17}

However, underneath what was indeed the formal colonial vision –殖民 rule bringing the victory of rationality over irrational and therefore unruly people – things were much more complicated. On a very concrete level, it is clear that for various regions colonial officials did realize that attacking ‘witch-doctors’ would be interpreted by the population as giving free reign to the witches. Karin Fields showed for British Central Africa, how circumspect and also hesitating British civil servants were in intervening in local struggles over witchcraft and anti-witchcraft. I stumbled in the Buea archives of former British Cameroon on a huge file called ‘Notes on Witchcraft in Relation to Administrative Problems’ (1934–1946).\textsuperscript{18} Apparently a discussion had been started on this issue during the annual conference of all Residents of Nigeria and the Cameroon of 1933. The Chief Secretary in Lagos tried to orchestrate an ongoing discussion by continuously asking Residents to react. The file shows how conscious administrators on the spot were of being confronted by an impossible dilemma: on the one hand all too real unrest among the population about a supposed proliferation of new forms of witchcraft; on the other, the principle of the law that seemed to require interventions against ‘witch-doctors’ for disturbing the peace and attacking innocent persons. In many respects there is continuity here with the predicament of post-colonial officials when they do decide to intervene (see the next section).

Collateral to such colonial reconsiderations, a growing interest in local practices of healing could lead, in some instances, to a more nuanced image of ‘traditional healers’. A spectacular example for Cameroon was, for instance, the much-celebrated career of Father Éric de Rosny, a Jesuit who in 1957 arrived in Douala and subsequently was authorized by the Church, to be initiated by a local expert as a \textit{nganga}. His way of combining priesthood with a practice as healer became greatly respected in Cameroon, also after independence. It expressed again a dramatic shift in the Church’s image of the witch.

More in general, the image of the colonial state as a champion of rationality – be it not a very successful one – has lately come under attack. Authors like Florence Bernault (i.p.) or Joseph Tonda (2005) emphasize most strongly that the all too easy acceptance of a basic contrast between the life worlds of the colonials and the colonized (modernity versus tradition) serves to hide deeper and often hardly conscious convergences. For Tonda, it is vital that we overcome for Africa as well the notion of
'a Great Divide’ between, on the one hand, ‘the work of God’ (= the missionary activities), the impact of the State, the role of the world market, and, on the other l’esprit sorcellaire (witchcraft). All these elements were and are converging—and not opposed—in the production of what he calls Le Souverain Moderne, the Leviathan of corrupt rulers with global connections that is the pest of present day Africa. Bernault supports this overarching vision by studying in detail how colonial interventions (both ideas and practices) articulated with local views producing novel conceptions of spirits, cannibalism and evil. For my informants in the 1970s the law inherited from colonial rule remained a law of the whites and, as such, foreign to African realities. However, and this is more in line with Tonda’s and Bernault’s view, subsequent developments would show that this law could give rise to surprising interpretations, much more in line with local imaginaries (see the next section).

Post-colonial attempts at clarification: a judicial offensive against the witches

It was only in the 1980s that I got the news that, indeed, as my Maka friends had predicted, state courts were now willing to convict witches. They did so mostly on the evidence of local nganga who confirmed that they had ‘seen’ that the accused had ‘gone out’ at night. This was a complete reversal of existing jurisprudence. Still in the 1970s, nganga like my friend Mme Mendouga had good reason to be afraid of the authorities. She may have had powerful allies—remember what was said earlier about the préfet’s car being parked in front of her modest house—but she was always in risk of being denounced by one of the ‘witches’ she had ‘smelled out’ for defamation. Prevailing jurisprudence would then oblige the courts to take such complaints very seriously. However, as soon as judges became rather inclined to act against people suspected of witchcraft, they came to see local healers in a different light. They needed to establish proof in one way or another. And how else could they do this than by appealing to the expertise of local witch-doctors? After all, they were the only ones who could ‘see’ the invisible aggression of the witches.

The first examples of state courts condemning witches we know of came from the East Province, notably from the capital Bertoua, quite close to Makaland. At the time people said it was no wonder that it was there the courts started to convict witches. Everybody knew that witchcraft was particularly rampant in the East. Even officials from elsewhere, like most of the judges, would have good reason to fear for themselves when they were affected there. The files I could study together with Cyprian Fisiy, a law specialist, then my Ph.D. student, all follow the same pattern. Witnesses from the accused’s village would spell out their misdeeds. In a few cases the accused would confess, but in most cases they would severely deny. However, this was not a hindrance for the judges to condemn them, since in all cases they seemed to see crucial evidence of a guérisseur (healer) who confirmed that he had seen how the accused ‘went out at night’ and had plotted together against their victims. Often it was the guérisseur himself who had taken the initiative. In several cases this role was played by a certain Baba Denis, who would declare that he had been asked to ‘apply his scientific knowledge’ in order to ‘purify’ a village; how certain people had refused to deliver their magical objects; how he had gone to their house and unearthed very evil gris-gris; and how he then had told the village chief to call the gendarmes to arrest
the stubborn witches. For the judges such testimony was apparently so convincing that they sentenced the accused to severe punishments: up to ten years in prison and heavy fines.

A comparison with Mme Mendouga, my friend in the 1970s, shows that the changing configuration since the 1980s allowed the *nganga* to take on a new profile. Mendouga was certainly interested in the ‘ways of the whites’ – in those days a current expression among the villagers. She liked to frequent whites. But she preferred in general to keep a low profile. Like other *nganga* in those days she lived in quite a modest house, a bit hidden from the main road. In her daily behavior she was very much a woman from the village. *Nganga* like Baba Denis have quite a different stature: they are much more in the open, aggressively enhancing their presence and insistently offering their services to anybody who can pay.

For them there is little reason to keep a low profile. After all, government officials are now prepared to give them an official role in the intensification of their campaign against witchcraft. They emphasize in any way they can that they are modern figures – they dress European style, often sport huge sunglasses; most of them returned from the city after a longer stay there and the emphasize their urban background; in the village they often build their ‘hospitals’ right in the center of the place, trying to attract attention with big signs; they boast of their medical knowledge, claiming to apply their ‘science’, and are prepared to work closely with the *gendarmes* to have unrepentant ‘witches’ locked up and dragged before the courts.

Meeting, for instance, Baba Denis who now lives in a village quite close to the one where I used to live was full of surprises for me. On his return from the city a few years earlier he had settled in a big house in the middle of the village – very visible at the crossing of two throughways. It was adorned by three big signs. One said *Docteur Baba Denis guérisseur*; the next one *astrologue* (astrologist – a new notion for most villagers); the third *Rosecrucien* (Rosicrucian – Cameroon’s President Paul Biya is supposed to be deeply involved in this secret association). Baba received us dressed in a European costume that was somewhat shabby but included a tie.

He took off his big sunglasses, asking us to come into his ‘consultation room’ – an office-like room with a big desk, a shelf of books (some from Western medicine but also a few books on Eastern magic), and, in contrast to the formal, almost bureaucratic atmosphere, several burning candles.

Clearly Baba did not like the idea of being interviewed. So he did most of the talking himself, explaining to us how he used his ‘science’ to bring peace to the villages. He emphasized his important contacts in Yaoundé, mentioning that his brother still worked at the Presidency, and insisted on showing me how well he kept records on his patients, dutifully noting the dates of their visits and other details. In other aspects as well he imitated the style of a *fonctionnaire* (civil servant) with a dry, bureaucratic air. The villagers often commented that he had learned this formal style in the army, where he had served for quite some time. According to some, he had been sacked because of financial irregularities, even spending some time in jail. Yet this served only to further enhance his prestige as a *nganga*, since everybody knows that the prison is the place to learn the really dangerous secrets.

Baba’s ways of enhancing his credibility had other new aspects. He emphasized the scientific nature of his expertise, styling himself as a *docteur* with his books, his hospital, and his files. But even more striking was that he spoke about his patients
as les coupables (the guilty ones). In other respects as well his approach was quite far from Mendouga’s reassuring behavior. Nganga, like Baba, become threatening figures, working closely with the gendarmes, ready to hand over witches to la Justice. In Baba’s case this was clearly related to his privileged role as one of the nganga who were regularly asked to testify in court. But in the 1980s many nganga with a lesser profile than Baba, especially younger ones, similarly became much more aggressive in their quest for potential clients. People often told me how they would be approached by a nganga they hardly knew who would warn them that their compound was mined with evil and assure them that he knew how to purify it – of course for a handsome fee. The nganga were obviously not exempt from the general trend toward increasing commercialization, and this made them all the more aggressive in their search for clients.

It is all the more striking that a nganga like Baba Denis, when he has to present himself before the court, invariably introduces himself as ‘Baba Denis, sorcier’. Clearly even for a modern figure like him it is self-evident that as a healer he can only heal since he has such a well developed djambe. However this terminological confusion (for the judge anyone who confesses to be sorcier is automatically guilty, but apparently this applies not to the sorcier-guérisseur) is symptomatic of the state offensive stranding in the ambiguities of witchcraft. A major problem turned out to be, for instance, the inefficacy of the state’s sanctions. People are beginning to wonder what good it is to lock up witches for years in prison. This will certainly not help to neutralize their dangerous power – as nganga used to do in the past. On the contrary, when they will come out of prison they will be even more dangerous since one learns the real secrets there.

One can wonder also what this new alliance with the state authorities implies for the the nganga themselves. One effect is that the nganga is forced to become ever more visible – and, indeed, even aspiring nganga who are not (yet) invited to perform in the courts seem to be eager to be out into the open. Nganga, like Mendouga, were working especially towards reconciliation (remember her performance at Bayard’s sick bed). Someone like Baba Denis is much more of a disciplinary figure, threatening the villagers to extradite them to the feared gendarmes. Clearly, the image of the witch is again subjected to new and quite dramatic shifts. An open question is to what extent will these affect their role as healers?

Finally, it should be noted that all these convictions still take place under the existing law that comes straight out of the old colonial law. In contrast to what my friends said in the 1970s a change of the law was not even necessary for enabling the state to attack witchcraft as such. The judges base their sentences on art. 251:

Whoever commits any act of witchcraft, magic or divination liable to disturb public order or tranquility or to harm another in his person, property or substance, whether by taking a reward or otherwise, shall be punished with imprisonment from two to ten years and with a fine of five thousand to one hundred thousand francs.

Under colonial rule this article seemed to be directed mainly against ‘witch-doctors’ (confer the mention of ‘taking a reward’). It is characteristic for the fluidity of the notions involved that now the same article can be invoked for allowing judges to convict witches.
Over the last years people seem to become increasingly disappointed in the efficacy of state interventions against witchcraft. Not only that the state’s sanction seem to be highly ineffective – in the East there are already several cases of convicted witches who return home after their term in jail and then are immediately the subject of other frenzied rumours – but also the inertia of the state apparatus is highly disappointing, in this respect as well. People have to wait endlessly before their case is dealt with before they are summoned to town only to find that their case is after all still not on. Moreover, over the last few decades, another countervailing force announced itself that seemed to be much more effective: Pentecostalism.

A new appearance of the witch: Pentecostalism and the diabolizing of witchcraft

For many parts of Africa – especially since the 1980s – Pentecostalism has developed into a true wave. And one of the reasons of its spectacular successes on the continent was that it promised to eradicate witchcraft. Of course Pentecostal missionaries, especially American ones, had already long been active in Africa. But the 1980s brought a sudden proliferation of Pentecostal churches, sects, and movements all over Africa. The switch in Pentecostal preaching around that time from ‘asceticism to accumulation’, was very important for the rapidly increasingly popularity of the Pentecostal message throughout the continent. The new ‘gospel of prosperity’, to which most churches shifted, preached that true believers did not have to wait until the hereafter; they would get rich here and now.

Even before the switch to the prosperity gospel, Pentecostalism had brought a completely new approach for the struggle against witchcraft. While the established churches – to which most Pentecostal converts belonged earlier in their lives – tended to deny the reality of witches, the Pentecostals have always taken witchcraft more seriously, equating it with the devil. Thus the struggle against witchcraft, as a major manifestation of Satan himself, became the basic theme in their version of Christianity. No wonder that in Africa the public confessions that form the climax of Pentecostal services mostly center on former escapades in witchcraft, from which the speaker was saved by a dramatic conversion. While the older churches, established by missionaries in colonial times, have difficulty in promising a cure for witchcraft (since they tend to deny its very existence), the Pentecostals offer definitive certainty that they are able not only to protect against witchcraft but also to take this evil away from anybody who does not stray from the right path (or openly repents of having strayed from it). Their cure is simple: the moment of conversion – the archetype of which is Saul/Paul’s shattering experience on the road to Damascus, when God spoke to him and turned him from an unbeliever into the new church’s most zealous apostle – will save the true believer from witchcraft.

Of special interest to our topic is that the Pentecostal solution for witchcraft differed not only from that of the missionary churches but also from the approach of the nganga. A healer like Mendouga saw it as her task to repair relations, particularly inside the family. And even a more modern nganga like Baba Denis, who is proud to deliver stubborn witches to the gendarmes, still see themselves as healers. His aim in ‘purifying a village’ is to neutralize the dangerous powers of the djambe. In contrast, the Pentecostals advocate ‘a complete break with the past’.

310
means a break with the family, since it is seen as the very seat of the devil. Indeed, many authors emphasize that central to Pentecostalism in Africa is a determination to liberate the believer from the pressures of kinship. Thus the new message seems to bring a decisive turn, and the solution seems to be as drastic as it is simple: the believer must leave the family behind in order to be liberated from its witchcraft-infested intimacy. Thus (s)he will enter a new intimacy, that of the global Pentecostal community, in which trust is guaranteed since it is based on faith. The question is of course whether this radically new approach succeeds in puncturing the witchcraft issue in practice.

Has the Pentecostals’ principled attack on the family and its intimacy, now equated with the devil, really broken open the conundrum of witchcraft as an attack that comes ‘from inside the house’? The answer is far from clear yet. First of all, it seems that there are great variations in the degree to which people are admonished to keep their distance from the family. In Ghana this seems to be a major theme, even in everyday life. But in Malawi, Harri Englund does not see a similar tension – on the contrary, he notes that ‘mudzi, the term for both “home” and “village.” had deep moral connotations among born-again Christians no less than other residents of the township.’ For Congo-Brazzaville, Joseph Tonda notes Pentecostals’ distrust of the family; yet this does not seem to lead to a dramatic break – maybe because in this area more extensive kinship links had already been quite reduced. My Pentecostal friends in Cameroon seem to hardly see a problem in reconciling their faith with intense preoccupation with family issues – including active participation in huge funeral rituals.

Another complicating factor is the constantly contested position of the pastor, who is, of course, vital for the establishment of new forms of trust that would surpass the old predicaments. One thing that Pentecostals throughout Africa – and probably not only there – seem to have in common is that preachers are constantly scrutinized regarding whether they live up to their own preaching. Of course this raises endless rumours that they have been found wanting. As early as 1999 at Ekok, the Cameroonian border station with Nigeria, far out in the bush, I was able to buy one of these eloquent Nigerian posters showing a short strip of images: a successful Pentecostal preacher arriving in his own plane, with his Mercedes waiting for him. His driver takes the road, but he is stopped at a police checkpoint. The policemen open the boot and find it full of cranes! Clearly the reverend himself is a witch! Yet, it is all the more striking that Pentecostal movements succeed to stay, at least to a large extent, outside the vicious circles of witchcraft reasoning. As said, most anti-witchcraft movements were time and again drawn into the spirals of witchcraft suspicions – former witch hunters being sooner or later accused of being witches themselves. But this is less the case for Pentecostal movements. One reason might be the Pentecostal openness for constantly new prophetic revelations, so strongly emphasized by Marshall. But Marshall emphasizes at the same time that this openness blocks the possibility that Pentecostalism offers a stabilizing alternative.

Moreover, in a broader perspective the circular power of witchcraft discourse does make itself felt, also against this new opponent. All authors quoted here agree that in the end Pentecostals’ radical attack on witchcraft works to confirm precisely its omnipresence. Pastors never tire to admonish their flock to remain vigilant since the devil/witchcraft is lurking everywhere – even inside the community. And the intensive use
the new religious movements, especially those of a Pentecostal signature, make of the media only reinforce this sensation of an omnipresent threat. As said, especially the new video industry emerging in the 1980s in Ghana and now especially productive in Nigeria’s ‘Nollywood’ – puts the fight against witchcraft center stage. As Meyer highlights, these video film makers are very keen on constantly improving their ‘special effects’ technology. Thus, many films revel in showing morbid details of nightly meetings of the witches, weird transformations and gruesome attacks – thus making the invisible visible in abundant detail. The effect is double: confirming weird suspicion but at the same time creating safe distance. One of the basic wisdoms for people in Maka villages (as elsewhere) used to be that people who saw witchcraft everywhere were like the owl (who calls the witches at night to their meetings); probably they were the first ones ‘to go out’ themselves. Visualizing witchcraft on the screen makes it possible to see from a safe distance – it will serve to confirm one’s suspicions, without the risk of being drawn in oneself.32

The shifting images of the witch inspired different attacks to liberate people from this evil in colonial and post colonial Africa. The colonials – both the missionaries and the public servants – hoped to lift the spell by targeting the ‘medicine men’ – for them the archetype of the witch. The post-colonial authorities rather targeted persons who went out at night to join in evil conspiracies – for them the real ‘witches’. The Pentecostals direct their ‘crusades’ against the devil who, to them, manifests himself through witches inside the family plotting to make the pious stray from the Narrow Path. What is striking is that in all these cases, such attempts at a radical eradication of witchcraft seem to be mostly counter-productive. This stands out most clearly for the Pentecostal example. Precisely the pastor’s never ceasing insistence on the omnipresence of the devil and thus of witchcraft, confirms the very reality of this threat.33 One can point to many parallel examples elsewhere. To quote a very extensively studied one, the witch hunts in early modern Europe, for that period as well it is clear that the most radical attacks seem to open an endless spiral of ever wider suspicions and accusations. Relief came rather from an increasing scepticism about certain convictions and from their expulsion from the public sphere. A recent collection *Penser la Sorcellerie en Afrique* (Fancello i.p.) makes the very valid point that at present ‘counter-witchcraft’ makes more victims in the continent than witchcraft itself ever could.

Eric de Rosny, whose nuanced wisdom in dealing with such urgent issues, is for me still unsurpassed, regularly quotes a proverb of the Duala, a fishing and trading group on the coast of present-day Cameroon, who gave their name to the big city of Douala: ‘You have to learn to live with your witch’.34 Maybe there is more hope for a solution of the witchcraft problem which is taking on extremely urgent forms in many parts of Africa (and again, certainly not only there) in such an attitude that suggests accommodation rather than an attempt at radical eradication.

Notes

1 Many have also emphasized that labeling local imaginaries as witchcraft has dangerous ‘orientalizing’ implications in African contexts, implying a basic opposition between Western rationality and African irrationality (cf. Peter Pels 1999).


4 At first I was somewhat disappointed that the Maka imaginary resembled in so much detail the European visions of what witches do. Some borrowing can certainly not be excluded. Already at that time some nganga would boast of possessing books on global magic, and many of them quoted the bible. However, the recurrence of some of these basic elements (leaving one’s body, transformation, flying, nightly meetings) all over the world can serve as a warning against attributing too much to borrowings from European lore.

5 No pseudonym (since the whole affair took place already more than thirty years ago, I do not think it is necessary to use any).

6 The whole story is a bit exceptional because mostly clients go and see a nkong in his (or her) house. But Mendouga explained to me that this was only a light case. And since she knew Bayard’s family quite well and had to come to our village for other things in any case, she had accepted to come and see him at his place. However, if it would turn out that it was more serious than he would have to come to her house, because there she had her ‘mirror’ and all her other niedou (medicine).


8 In present-day Cameroon, the Maka have acquired a solid reputation for cannibalism. Indeed, in their stories about pre-colonial confrontations between hostile groups (and also about the conquest of the area by the Germans) cannibalism is a recurring element. However, as the elders emphasized to me, this was only possible in or after confrontations with strangers (non kin). What makes the djambe and the sjoumbou so shocking is that it is about the eating of kin (see further Geschiere, _Modernity, 1997_).

9 Eric de Rosny, trans., _Healers in the Night_ (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), stresses the force of the same image for the Doualaa (in the coastal area of Cameroon) as the very centre of their ewusu representations. See also Philippe Laburthe-Tolra, _Minlaaba, historie et société traditionnelle chez les Béti du Sud Cameroun_ (Paris: Champion, 1977) on the Beti in Cameroon’s Central Province. Clearly, the Maka (and other African societies) are not that exceptional in this respect. There are intriguing parallels here, for instance, with the emphasis in psychoanalysis in Western societies that primal forms of aggression come from within the family.


11 Peter Greschiere, _Village Communities and the State: Changing Relations among the Maka of Southeastern Cameroon since the Colonial Conquest_ (London: Kegan Paul International, 1982).

12 Miriam Goheen, _Men Own the Fields, Women Own the Crops: Gender and Power in the Cameroon Highlands_ (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

13 This is why historical studies of processes where witchcraft accusations risk overflowing such limits, incriminating also the rich and powerful, are of particular interest. A striking example are the Trier processes of the 1580s where Jesuits used young boys as mediums who were supposed to attend witches’ Sabbaths as some sort of spies. The results were dramatic since they started to accuse prominent citizens. See Johannes Dillinger, ‘Evil People’: _A Comparative Study of Witch Hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier_ (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2009.); Behringer, _Global_, 95–98.
14 More recently people will say that Mt. Kupe, the magical mountain about which there are so many rumours as the source of illicit wealth, is only a relay station. The zombies would no longer be put to work on the spot but rather ‘sold’ from there in international circuits (like the mafia) – a telling example of how witchcraft is supposed to stay in tune with an increase of scale of social relation: it seems to ‘go global’ now. But the special role played by the whites in rumours of ekong or famla suggests that this is nothing new. See, for instance, E. de Rosny, Les Yeux de ma Chevre: Sur les Pas des Maîtres de la Nuit en Pays Douala. Paris: Pion. De Rosny reports, for instance, that when he went to a village near Douala to talk to an old chief about ekong he was suddenly blocked by angry young men who became very upset when they heard that a white man had come to the village to talk about zombies to the chief. Also some recurrent patterns in ekong stories suggest a link with old traumas about the slave trade (see de Rosny 1981; Peter Geschiere, Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in Comparison. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

15 The shift from ‘witch’ to ‘healer’ is all the more striking since the my emphasis on the Maka notion that the healer is him/herself a witch – although corroborated by many other examples – drew severe criticism from several colleagues, to whom such an equation amounted to sacrilege (see Geschiere, Africa, 74–75).

16 Compare Mongo Beti 1956 and his evocative description how the main character of his novel (the priest – cf. the title Le pauvre Christ de Bomba) glorifies in the persecution of the Medizinmann.

17 A striking aspect, to which I will come back later, is that almost all of these anti-witchcraft movements after some time would be caught in the vicious circles of witchcraft reasoning – the witch hunters being sooner or later identified themselves as dangerous witches (see Geschiere, The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997, 253; 17).

18 National Archives Buea (SW Cameroon) AA 1934, 16.

19 Confessing witches have long been a challenging issue in witchcraft studies. In the African context a powerful motivation to confess might be that a confession indicates the suspect’s willingness to give up his/her secret powers. Only after a confession can the nganga work to neutralize these powers. A witch who refuses to confess is a really dangerous one. Of course, in the Bertoua court the effect of a confession is the opposite: it is a sure way to be sent to jail. This again raises questions as to the role of the healer who is involved in obtaining such a confession: the court situation seems to block his capacity to heal (see later in the chapter).

20 Another difference is that these modern nganga who sport a more public profile are almost without exception men, while earlier nganga in the villages used to be both women and men.

21 The tie was a special sign. In the village hardly anybody wears one – only the vendé kirke (elders of the Presbyterian Church) might put on a tie when going to church.

22 Robert Akoko, Pentecostalism and the Economic Crisis in Cameroon (2007)


26 Of course there are obvious parallels here with the approach of the first missionaries in Africa, who often tried to detach the first converts from their families. However, as soon as
the missions became more established, they tried to include whole families in their conversion projects. For instance, the *sixas* in South Cameroon – boarding schools at mission stations where young women were trained to become Christian housewives – indicated a determined effort to change the family from the inside (see Mongo Beti, *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1956); Vincent 1976; Guyer 1984:44). But this increasing involvement of the churches with the family made them defenceless against the creeping impact of witchcraft closely linked to this familial sphere. The Pentecostal message seems to manifest an effort to take distance once more.

29 Tonda, *La guérison*.  
30 Geschiere, *Africa*.  
32 Also the role of mostly Pentecostal pastors in exorcising ‘child-witches’ confirms people’s suspicion of an omnipresent danger. Especially since the 1990s Kinshasa, the huge capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, became the scene of an intensifying popular panic about children-turned-witches. More recently similar obsessions developed in Lagos and other big African cities. Parents will chase their own children out of the house because the latter would sacrifice innocent relatives for their nightly conspiracies. Such ‘street-children’ often confirm these rumours by boasting about their nightly escapades. Pentecostal pastors soon developed ever more dramatic therapies to exorcise Satan/witchcraft from the children. Their exact role in such panics is under debate. Filip de Boeck (2005) who was one of the first to write about this does not see the pastors as instigators of the panic (a suspicion expressed by several NGO’s working with street children). On the contrary, according to de Boeck the Pentecostals’ therapies would at least open the possibility that the children will be re-integrated back into their families (although many families refuse to take the child back even after it has been exorcised). But it is true that in this respect as well, the fervent activity of Pentecostal pastors and their helpers (often women and prayer groups) reinforce a vision of the omnipresence of what they seek to combat.  
33 The recent diabolization of witchcraft by the Pentecostals in Africa suggests a parallel with what happened in early-modern Europe. However, there is also a striking difference that might be of special consequence for the haunting question how people will ever become less preoccupied with witchcraft. In Europe, the linking of local witchcraft rumours to the devil served to lift occult aggression out of the local sphere, making it part of a cosmic battle between God and the Devil (see, for instance, Thomas Robisheaux, *The Last Witch at Langenburg: Murder in a German Village* [New York: W.W. Norton, 2009] for a particularly telling example of how ‘the last witch of Langenburg’ had to reiterate her confession under torture several times until she described her evil dealings with the devil in exactly the words the judges wanted to hear; this was vital for the hold of the devil over the town to be broken). African Pentecostals’ linking of witchcraft to the devil similarly seems to make it part of a cosmic battle; however, by placing the devil in the heart of the family, witchcraft is again brought back to local struggles and suspicions from which it is hard to keep one’s distance (see further Geschiere 2013, *Africa*, 200).  

**Bibliography (selection)**


