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## Very Provisional Draft

### **‘L’*école de la sorcellerie*’ Problems of Reality, Discourse and Agency in Studying ‘Witchcraft’**

In March 2005, the Catholic University of Central Africa organized a conference on *Justice et Sorcellerie* on its main campus in Yaounde (Cameroon). It promised to become an important meeting since the initiator, Father Eric de Rosny SJ, has a most impressive record in addressing the problem of *la sorcellerie* as it manifests itself in ever more blatant form in post-colonial Cameroon. Already in the 1960’s he had undergone a long and difficult initiation as *nganga* (‘traditional healer’). Since then he published a series of highly insightful books on his initiation and on the dynamics of popular representations of occult forces (see notably de Rosny 1981 and 1992). And, most importantly, he had developed a series of very relevant initiatives for addressing the popular concern on the proliferation of new forms of ‘witchcraft’ against which the existing sanctions would be of no avail. De Rosny’s excellent contacts among the Cameroonian elite assured that prominent people - notably from the Ministry of Justice, which is under heavy pressure to intervene and address the popular concern about witchcraft ‘running wild’ - would participate also in this conference.

The interest in the meeting soon proved to surpass all expectations. When I arrived in Yaounde, a few days before the conference, the University people were already busy erecting a huge tent over the basketball field, since it was clear that even the biggest hall of the University (300 seats) would be too small for the audience. And, indeed, at the opening of the conference a huge audience had assembled – students from the University, but also people from the Ministry (both judges and prosecutors), lawyers, theologians, journalists and many others. Clearly the issue was seen as *très chaud* (very hot) throughout Cameroonian society.

I was invited as some sort of expert since I had published already since the end of the 1980's on the involvement of the Cameroonian courts with 'witchcraft.' Together with a Cameroonian colleague, Cyprian Fisiy, we published notably on the quite remarkable reversal in Cameroonian jurisprudence since 1980, when the State courts in the East Province began to condemn 'witches' on the basis of the expertise of the *nganga* ('witch-doctors' – see Fisiy & Geschiere 1990, Fisiy 1990, Geschiere 1997). Yet, especially the confrontation with the Justice people who were clearly as preoccupied with the whole issue as the villagers and townspeople with whom I had mostly talked until then, turned out to be full of surprises. Addressing the thorny issue of 'witchcraft' in the setting of a conference, which set out to be both scientific and applied, turned out to be a tonic and sometimes even shocking experience.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to address a few of the intriguing moments at the conference and see how they relate to recent debates among anthropologist about the dynamics of 'witchcraft' in Africa: how can these recent anthropological debates contribute to the fervent discussions during a conference like this one, 'on the spot,' on how to deal with witchcraft? I certainly do not intend to apply some sort of 'new paradigm' of witchcraft as a reaction to modernity as some colleagues have deduced from my earlier work.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the representations and practices of witchcraft address a much broader array of experiences – ill-health, bad luck, unexpected success etc. - than just people's concern about modern changes. Yet, it is clear that witchcraft discourse seems to be a tempting one for trying to deal with these changes. It was also in this context that it was discussed during the conference, in itself a 'modern' setting.

One recurrent issue during the conference was how to break out of the 'circularity' of witchcraft - for instance: how to neutralize the fact that the *nganga* (healers – nowadays also invoked as expert witnesses by the prosecution in witchcraft trials) are popularly seen as deeply involved themselves in the domain of *sorcellerie*? In this respect, Terence Ranger's recent – but quite apodictic - insistence that we have to maintain a distinction between 'religion' and 'witchcraft' in order to avoid that the latter seems to cover the whole terrain of the invisible might be of interest (Ranger 2006 and 2007). An even more striking aspect of the conference was that the issue of the 'reality' of witchcraft kept coming up, in various contexts and forms. A question for this paper is how this relates to the tendency among

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<sup>1</sup> See also the collection of the papers published by Eric de Rosny with Karthala, Paris, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See Rutherford 1999 or Englund & Leach (2000) who accuse especially the Comaroffs of launching such a paradigm - with me, apparently, as a good second.

anthropologists to address the issue in terms of ‘discourse’ - as Harry West did most eloquently in his recent *Ethnographic Sorcery* (2007).

### **The law and the question of evidence.**

At first sight, the ‘reality’ of occult aggression hardly seemed to be an issue for the law people who presented during the conferences. Especially the people from the ministry opted for an unequivocal positivist stance: ‘witches’ can only be condemned if there is clear proof of occult aggression (the French law speaks of *preuves tangibles*); if such proof is lacking, there is no case. Indeed, also in more private discussions the judges and prosecutors proved to cling much more to their positivist law training than I had expected on the basis of the court cases I studied in the East Province. During the conference most of them proved to be highly reluctant to allow *nganga* (healers) in the court room, with their ‘magical mumbo-jumbo.’ Yet, they could hardly deny that there was strong popular pressure on the state – in particular on them - to intervene somehow or other against the growing proliferation of witchcraft. So, there was general interest, also among the law people, when one judge presented an experiment for relating the modern jurisprudence to local ways of dealing with occult aggression.

Typical, this experiment had been conceived by one of the lower judges who presented papers, judge Kamtchoum of the *tribunal de grande instance* of the departments of Ntui and Mbam & Kim. His solution to the thorny issue of constituting objective evidence against those accused of witchcraft – always particularly tricky in view of the secret nature of their supposed acts of aggression - was to appeal to the *chefs coutumiers* (customary chiefs) as semi-official assessors to the court. Thus, the court could make use of their ‘customary’ knowledge on occult aggression in order to evaluate evidence. Kamtchoum’s paper raised general appreciation during the conference. Typically, the law experts – also those from the ministry – refrained from raising the obvious questions: to what extent could the chiefs’ ‘traditional’ knowledge be seen as acceptable for constituting evidence that would satisfy the positivist spirit of the law? How could a chief deal with immigrants – that is people who are not ‘really’ his subjects and who are nonetheless quite numerous in any Cameroonian setting (and often over-represented in witchcraft accusations)? An interesting circumstance was also that the judge himself was a Bamileke from an area where chiefs have a long tradition and where people do attribute the chiefly courts special abilities for dealing with witchcraft. While he tried to introduce his ‘new’ method in a very different area, populated by Bafia and

Batchenga **check** among whom chiefs are rather a colonial invention so that they are hardly attributed any special capacity to deal with the occult.

**The *nanga* as *contre-sorcier*? Breaking out of witchcraft's circularity.**

A comparable ambiguity came to the fore around the *nganga* (healers) who were very present during the conference as well. Indeed, de Rosny, himself a generally recognized *nganga*, has made a long-time effort in order to give them more official recognition in the struggle against *la sorcellerie*. His basic idea, already present in his earlier writings, is that in order to deal with this issue a kind of common front is required - not only a judicial offensive but a collaboration with theologians, psychiatrists, doctors, botanists and, not in the last place, *nganga*. Thus he founded, already in the 1990's, a working group with people from all these different backgrounds – a very enthusiastic group, which regularly meet and in which *nganga* work closely together with highly trained scientists. During the conference, this group was very present. In one of the panels they further developed this idea of a united action.

A complicating factor is, however, that precisely in the forest area around Yaounde people tend to emphasize in no uncertain terms the deep involvement of the *nganga* in the forces of witchcraft itself. Indeed, the *nganga* is often quoted as the best example that the forces of *evu* (a term of the Beti) or *djambe* (Maka) – key-notions that people now invariably translate by *sorcellerie* – can be canalised and, thus, can be used not to kill (or 'eat') but to heal. It is only because the *nganga* has developed the *evu* in his/her belly that (s)he can see what the witches are plotting, 'fall upon them,' and force them to lift their spell. *Nganga* will always profess that their 'professor' (who helped them to develop their *evu*) bound them with a heavy oath to use their power to heal and not to kill. But people are never completely sure of this. There is always the risk that the basic instinct of the *evu* – that is to attack and 'eat' one's relatives – will break through.<sup>3</sup> In practice the *nganga* are always seen as highly ambivalent and even threatening figures. My informants often described them as *djambe*-people who have 'beaten all records.' No wonder, therefore, that the *nganga* who appeared as experts of the prosecution in the witchcraft cases that Fisiy and I studied for the East Province, invariably introduce themselves before the court as *Monsieur X*, *sorcier* (see further Fisiy & Geschiere 1990 and Geschiere 1997).

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this area there are also tenacious rumours that *nganga* even have to sacrifice a relative to their professor in order to get initiated. One of the most intense moments in de Rosny's book *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (1981) is the difficult negotiation to make his 'professor' in his case accept a goat instead.

A recurrent theme in the discussions within de Rosny's group is how to break this circularity (that is, the basic idea that the main protection against *evu* has to be found within the treacherous domain of *evu* itself). De Rosny insists therefore on the distinction between *sorciers* (malevolent witches) and *contre-sorciers* (bonafide *nganga*). However, in everyday speech it turns out to be very difficult to impose this distinction. Thus, during the conference several *nganga* kept referring to themselves as (powerful) *sorciers*. Even more revealing of this basic ambiguity was the reply of one of the *nganga* from the audience during the group's panel. Asked how he succeeded in healing his patients, his reply was: *Evidemment je retourne le mal....* (of course, I send the evil back [meaning: to its perpetrator – PG]). This concise statement most forcefully sums up the ambiguity of the *nganga* figure: to the patient he may be a healer and protector; but to the supposed perpetrator (witch) to whom the *nganga* 'returns' the evil aggression, it is the latter who is a witch using his secret powers to attack and to kill.<sup>4</sup> This basic ambiguity of the *nganga* proves to be very difficult to overcome in everyday life. There was, indeed, a general feeling that this makes him less fit a figure for the court room.<sup>5</sup> However, this leaves the question as to how then the judges and the prosecutors can assemble convincing proof of occult aggression?

### **The impact of the media: witchcraft becomes an uncontested reality.**

The issue of reality acquired a for me unexpected urgency when during the conference a film was shown. I had seen part of the film before (and I will show a brief sequence from it at the seminar). It was made by an acquaintance of de Rosny who, during the early 1990's happened (??) to be in a village half-way Yaounde and Douala, when a girl was brought to the gendarmes who started to 'confess' that she had been part of a witchcraft coven which had killed several elders; questioned by one of the gendarmes she continued to accuse ever more adults of the same village of having participated. In the film a theologian and a psychiatrist comment on the girl's ever more vivid confessions and accusations (the psychiatrist, who apparently never saw the girl, concludes on the basis of the images that the girl must talk about events that really happened - how else could she go into so much detail?). The film is quite vivid – especially when the shock of the accused adults is shown who hardly know how

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<sup>4</sup> I switch here to the male form since in more modern contexts the *nganga* is mostly a male. Thus, while in the village female *nganga* are as numerous and often as reputed as their male colleagues, it are only male *nganga* who are cited as experts in the court-room (see Geschiere 1997).

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, this was the tenor of my own presentation for the conference (based on a comparison of the state's dealings with witchcraft in Cameroon and SAfrica, and the role attributed to 'traditional healers' in this – see Geschiere 2006). So it may very well be that I am a bit biased in concluding that there was general doubt during the conference as to the *nganga*'s role in the court room.

to fend off such dangerous accusations. But in itself, the story is not exceptional. The figure of the confessing child-witch who betrays his/her companions is a pattern known from a wide range of cultures; and everywhere the children's confessions exemplify an amazing (hysterical?) eloquence.<sup>6</sup>

However, what I found striking and even shocking in this case was that practically the whole audience (hundreds of people) seemed to take the girl's dramatic confessions absolutely for granted. The girl's ever wilder denunciations were greeted with enthusiastic laughter and applause; while the accused and their increasingly desperate defence were greeted with hissing and scorn. Later on, I tried to understand why I found this upsetting and even shocking. It was not only this massive response (it was still a very big audience), but even more the general consent that seemed to reign in the hall. In the villages where I did my main research – and occasionally also in townships – I had often sat in on palavers where people launched accusations that were even more gruesome and where people defended themselves in even more dramatic ways. But at such occasions, there was hardly ever complete consensus. Accusations in village palavers nearly always meet with mixed responses. There are often sceptical voices who express severe doubts as to the story of the accusers. Moreover, relatives of the accused will, at least initially, tend to defend him/her: what for the family of the supposed victim seems a blatant example of evil witchcraft can be qualified as legitimate self-defence by the family of the accused. Moreover launching direct witchcraft accusations can be highly dangerous in the local context. Such accusations will most trigger a snowball effects: accusations will proliferate and can easily fire back, turning the accuser himself into a serious suspect of witchcraft. As one of my friends used to say: persons who always accuse others of witchcraft are like the owl – they are the first to 'go out' [= leave one's body] at night. Indeed, witchcraft palavers in the village can easily turn into some sort of *maelstrom* in which each and everybody is sucked into a whirlpool of accusations. So there are good reasons to be prudent with uttering direct accusations.

The context of watching a film on witchcraft or a video on TV is markedly different. Here, distance creates safety. The onlooker has no reason to fear that he himself can get involved. Moreover, the films – and this certainly applies to the Nigerian videos that are increasingly popular in Cameroon and mostly centre upon very explicit images of witchcraft - leave no room for scepticism and debate. Thus, the visual representation of witchcraft – as in

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. the famous case in 17th century Salem (NEngland) on which Arthur Miller based his *The Crucible*; there are also parallels with recent upsurges of children accusing adults (teachers and others) of Satanist practices, both in the USA and Europe.

the film during the conference, or on popular video's and TV – creates a kind of 'super-reality.' The relative truth of witchcraft accusations at the local level – in which consensus is at most temporary, and always leaves room for contestation and doubt, certainly when time passes – is replaced by a much more absolute truth.

### **The anthropologist cross-examined**

My most direct confrontation with the issue of 'reality' was, however, when the anthropologist-presenters were cross-examined: Did they 'believe' in witchcraft? What was their attitude? In the rest of the paper I want to focus especially on this issue since it relates directly to recent debates among anthropologists.

During the conference, the first who was put on the spot by such questions was a French colleague, Alban Bensa (EHESS, Paris) whose main field-work is in New Caledonia. De Rosny had asked him to open the conference in order to highlight that Cameroon (or Africa) was not exceptional in its preoccupation with a proliferation of witchcraft. Bensa offered an engaging presentation which, indeed, helped to place the conference theme in a more general perspective. However the very first question to him, from a young man at the back of the hall, clearly took him by surprise: 'Did he believe himself in witchcraft?' Bensa replied, in good Parisien style, with a brief: *Eh bien, non – je n'y crois pas*, implying that the question was completely irrelevant to him and asking for the obvious. The reaction among the audience was quite different: if he did not believe in it, how could he understand what was at stake? As an outsider, he could never arrive at a deeper understanding of what was at stake in witchcraft affairs.

Striking is that the question in itself was quite a modern one. In the village this would be, indeed, a nonsensical question since it implies a possibility of choice – as if one can choose to believe or not to believe. Even the staunchest Presbyterian *catéchiste* will take it for granted that the occult forces are real (all the more reason to completely condemn them). In a scientific environment – after all the conference took place at the University campus - such a question becomes relevant, but in this case as some sort of a catch question: it clearly served – as so often in people's dealings with white anthropologists and other scientists - to marginalize them: they might pretend to understand witchcraft, but their categorical disbelief made any 'real' understanding impossible. Interestingly, there is a convergence here with recent trends in anthropology itself. For instance, Mick Taussig insisted also that, in order to understand the hold of these representations (*pinta's*) over people's mind it is necessary to 'go along with them' (Taussig 1987). Elsewhere (Geschiere 1999) I have tried to argue that,

certainly in relation to people ‘in the field,’ the anthropologist is faced with a highly uncomfortable dilemma by such questions. Emphasizing that witchcraft is at most an ‘imaginary offence’ since it is an impossibility (as for instance, Evans-Pritchard did, helped by his strict distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, the former being only imaginary and the latter all too real) risks to block a deeper understanding of people’s obsession with it. However, emphasizing the reality of these forces (as, for instance, de Rosny does) implies that one has to take horrible accusations and even more horrible sanctions quite seriously.

I was on only during the second day of the Yaounde conference – so I could prepare an answer to the tricky question of ‘belief.’ The question duly came, and I took the line anthropologists generally take since the impact of Foucauldian notions in our discipline. I emphasized that discourses create their own reality and that this most pointedly applied to a powerful discourse like witchcraft; that even natural scientists learned to accept there were different ‘realities,’ and that therefore witchcraft could have its own claim to truth next to scientific analysis. This answer seemed to pass. And an animated discussion followed on other aspects of my talk.

However, in a short but stormy discussion after the conference, when we discussed with the main organizers the merits of the meeting in more informal surroundings, I unexpectedly landed in a similar confrontation about ‘reality’ as colleague Bensa. A Cameroonian Jesuit, Father Martin Birba, who as staff member of the Catholic University had chaired one of the last sessions in a most eloquent way, came back to his observations on the *école de la sorcellerie*. He insisted now most emphatically that there was only one way to put an end to *la sorcellerie*: we has to find this *école* and destroy it; only then would all these nasty attacks be ended. I was very intrigued by his notion of an *école de la sorcellerie*. Again, it is a kind of modernizing expression: for many Cameroonians the school is still the epitome of modernity. Apparently, in Birba’s view, even *la sorcellerie* was included in the modern world; even this secret knowledge was reproduced in a modern way. So I tried to challenge him on this notion: Did he really think that such a school could be found? Where was it located? But he clearly sensed my doubts and turned on me with some fieriness: He was not at all convinced by my emphasis on words: witchcraft was not real because people spoke so much about it – this was NOT what was at stake; my approach risked to hide the very reality of witchcraft, and so on. He followed this up by a long story of how some people had confessed to have been to this ‘school of witchcraft.’ He was certain, this school was out there in the bush; and we had to find and destroy it. Clearly my line about witchcraft as a discursive practice was for him completely beside the point.

### **Anthropological approaches.**

I hope the above indicates how this conference became for me a condensation of all sorts of predicaments that beset anthropologists when they try to relate to the fierce debates within the society concerned on how to deal with the intangible, but all the more urgent issue of people's preoccupation with 'witchcraft running wild.' An obvious question is what recent turns in our debates on witchcraft in Africa can contribute for dealing with such predicaments. For reasons of space I will limit myself here to two recent and quite different contributions:

- Terence Ranger's renewed plea for sticking to a sharp distinction between religion and witchcraft, in order to avoid 'lumping together the African occult' under 'witchcraft' as an all-pervasive notion (Ranger 2007; see also Ranger 2006)
- Harry West's emphasis on words and 'articulated visions' as crucial in the 'constitution of sorcery.' In his view people therefore tend to see the ethnographer, with his endless questions about sorcery, as himself a sorcerer (West 2007).

#### *Ranger and the problem of distinctions in the occult.*

In two recent articles Ranger (2006 and 2007) warns most emphatically that 'witchcraft' is becoming an all-pervasive category in African studies in which all sorts of aspects of the occult are indiscriminately lumped together. It is one thing that Scotland Yard – like colonial authorities or present-day Pentecostals – have this tendency. But Ranger is really worried that at least some recent anthropological publications – part of the wave of witchcraft studies after the surprisingly abrupt return of the topic in our discipline since the early 1990's – directly contribute to this. In his 2007 article, Ranger launches therefore an urgent plea for 'disaggregating' and further 'historicising the African occult.' In his 2006 text, he is even more explicit: we must take the distinction between 'religion' and 'witchcraft' must more seriously even if it is often difficult to clearly distinguish the two. He chides the Comaroffs for 'bringing witchcraft belief and other phenomena under the idea of "the occult"'<sup>7</sup>; Ellis and Ter Haar (2004) for pretending to offer an account of religion while discussing witchcraft and 'other occult practices'; and Crais for using a 'lumping category of magic' which obliterates the distinction between witchcraft and 'other forms of instrumental magic.'<sup>8</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>7</sup> At stake is here especially the Comaroff notion of 'occult economies' as a reaction to 'millennial capitalism.' In his 2007 text Ranger's critique is rather that thus, their view of the 'occult' is too one-sidedly connected to reactions against modernity.

<sup>8</sup> Ranger 2006:360; in his 2007 text, however, Ranger expresses his appreciation of Crais' way of 'historicising' the occult. See Crais 2002.

Ranger returns to his pioneering work on the role of spirit mediums in the guerilla warfare in the Zimbabwean war of liberation. A topic like this one can only be studied if one starts from a clear distinction: the role of the mediums has to be seen as part of an African religion; they are only involved with witchcraft in their capacity of witch-finders. Ranger's conclusion is, therefore, that '...despite this new work on "magic" and "the occult" I shall continue to use "religion" and "witchcraft" as distinct and opposed terms' (Ranger 2006:361).

Ranger's worries about 'witchcraft' becoming a kind of panacea are certainly grounded, all the more so since the topic had made such a spectacular comeback in African studies since the 1990's. There are structural, historical reasons for this 'lumping:' in colonial days, missionaries included everything that had to be combated, 'traditional religion' foremost, under the category of despicable 'witchcraft'; present-day Pentecostals with their equation of tradition and an omnipresent devil tend to do the same; and the ways in which 'witchcraft' has become a public issue, now openly and most emphatically discussed on TV, in newspapers etc. further reinforced this trend. So if anthropologists want to address the tenacity and spectacular dynamic of representations of occult forces in many parts of the African continent (as elsewhere) it is, indeed, important not to be taken along by this generalizing tide. Yet, a problem with Ranger's insistence on the distinction between 'witchcraft' and 'religion' is that in practice the two seem to be constantly shading into each other. Moreover, especially in his 2006 article, Ranger risks to equate 'religion' with 'good' and 'witchcraft' with 'evil.' A question is whether we can thus deal with the ambivalences and the shifting character of many representations of the occult. Precisely this fluidity might be crucial to understand why these representations remain so resilient and why they seem to adapt themselves so easily to rapidly changing contexts.

There are intriguing parallels here to the problems, outlined above, with the distinction between *sorciers* and *contre-sorciers* during the Yaounde conference – a distinction which de Rosny emphasizes so strongly in order to separate his *nganga* (healers) from evil intending witches. Above I mentioned already that this distinction is particularly difficult to maintain among the people who live in the forest area of Cameroon around Yaounde, since they emphasize in a particularly blatant way the circularity of 'witchcraft': as said, the *nganga* is the main protector against *evu* (*sorcellerie*) but (s)he can only do so since (s)he has developed his/her own *evu* in a most spectacular way. This emphasis on the difficulty of distinguishing healer and witch has been one of the points for which my book on witchcraft (1997) was strongly criticized. For instance, the French-Togolese political scientist, Comi Toulabor, reproaches me in his usual eloquent way for not making a clear distinction between the

‘witch’ and the ‘magician’ (the first unequivocally evil, the second only capable to use his/her special powers in a more positive way – Toulabor 1999). John Hund (now at the University of the North, South Africa) attacks me even more forcefully by quoting me as an outstanding example that academic writers are ‘... unfortunately some of the worst perpetrators of confusion.’ He is clearly shocked that I repeat my informants’ view of the *nganga* (“traditional healer”) being a kind of ‘super-witch’ since (s)he can only heal by using the same powers as witches tend to do. For Hund this is an ‘overwhelming misunderstanding’ (Hund 2000: 369/70). He insists instead that healers (for him especially the *sangoma* of South Africa) should be radically kept apart from the witches.

Of course, the whole witchcraft conundrum would be a lot easier to solve if such a separation could be applied so easily. The problem is, again, the subversive character of witchcraft discourse that so easily erodes all such comfortable conceptual distinctions (in Africa, just as elsewhere in the world – see Favret-Saada 1977 on Europe or Taussig 1987 on Columbia). It is clear that there are wide differences in how African societies view central figures, like the chiefs or the healer - notably in the way in which they relate them to the occult powers (or try to separate them from these powers).<sup>9</sup> It is true also that in the forest societies in Cameroon where I did my main field-work, the central notions (*djambe* among the Maka and *evu* among the Beti) are extremely broad and fluid, covering a wide array of different expressions of the occult, from highly negative to fairly positive ones – *djambe/evu* being potentially lethal but also essential for healing, exercising authority or accumulating wealth.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere I tried to show (Geschiere 1997) that, for instance, in the more hierarchical societies of Cameroon’s western highlands, there is a determined effort to “compartmentalize” the sphere of the occult through clear terminological distinctions between more negative and more positive forms. In these societies, notably the chief – even though he is certainly associated with occult powers - is also seen, at least ‘normally, as rigidly separated from the darker manifestations of these powers; indeed, to follow Ranger, in many respects the chief and his entourage seem to be sanctified by ‘religion’ (rather than being associated with ‘witchcraft’). However, it might be important to emphasize that even in these societies such distinctions are always precarious and never self-evident. It seems to require a constant struggle to maintain any distinction against the inherent fluidity of discourses on the occult. For instance, recently, when many chiefs from the Cameroonian highlands got into trouble

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<sup>9</sup> Such variations make it a bit disconcerting that Hund still speaks so easily of “African culture.”

<sup>10</sup> In many African societies notions that are now translated as ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’ used to be currently associated with chiefs and more generally with any form of exercising authority (see, for instance Crais 2002:49 on Eastern Cape, and for Bantu societies in general, Vansina 1990:96 *passim*).

with their subjects for their continued support to the hated regime of President Biya, people were quick to accuse them to be real witches.

There may be good reasons therefore to take the distinctions that are often emphasized in the literature on South Africa between ‘witch’ and *sangoma* – or between the *sangoma* as a ‘priest-diviner’ and the *inyanga* as his disreputable colleague – not too easily for granted. Even Hund (p. 373) emphasizes that they all use ‘... the same occult forces,’ but he insists that there is an ‘ontological’ difference. Again, one can sympathize with his effort to separate the *sangoma* as a reliable ally in these dark struggles. But who makes this ontological difference between actors who are so closely involved with the same forces? And how can such a distinction be maintained in practice? It is clear that widely different views of the *sangoma* pertain in daily life. Several spokesmen quoted in the Ralushai report (especially from Vendaland) say quite nasty things about *sangoma* (‘... with a lust for blood and easy money...’ p.268). Adam Ashforth (2000) quotes a *sangoma* (for whom Ashforth clearly had great respect) who told him that someone asked him to use his powers to kill another man. Which the healer ‘of course,’ refused to do – yet the prospective client clearly had another idea of what *sangoma* do and do not. Rather than taking such terminological distinctions as givens, it might be more urgent to study how exactly – through which struggles and by what means - such compartmentalization is maintained.

A similar approach might work for Ranger’s distinction between religion and witchcraft. Rather than imposing such a distinction categorically – and there is a tendency to do this in Ranger’s 2006 article – it might be better to study how people try to map the domain of the occult and how the distinctions they make are being reproduced, maintained and adapted. Clearly, this will be a difficult struggle in most contexts. There are no doubt good reasons why Ranger sees the *mhondoro* (spirit medium) in Zimbabwe as clearly belonging to the realm of religion. Yet even they are in constant danger of being associated with the witches – especially when people begin to disagree with their interpretations (see Spierenburg 2003) Witch-finding is a recurring element for the *mhondoro* as for many African religions. Yet, there are so many stories from different parts of the continent that the witch-finder of today will be denounced tomorrow as himself an evil witch. Rather than try to ‘freeze’ the fluid domain of the occult by taking categorical distinctions for granted, it might be more clarifying to focus on the ways in which people struggle to maintain or re-define such distinctions. As said, it might be precisely the fluidity of the representations of the occult and their blurring tenor – which constantly seem to undermine any fixed categorizing, so that

always multiple meanings and explanations remain possible<sup>11</sup> – that can explain why they can remain so highly relevant in rapidly changing circumstances. This emphasis on an ongoing struggle for compartmentalization against a basic blurring tenor certainly fits in with Ranger's plea for a further historicizing the African occult – but this might mean also historicizing and constantly differentiating our own conceptual distinctions in this treacherous field.<sup>12</sup>

*West: Words and agency in the study of witchcraft.*

Harry West's equally recent *Ethnographic Sorcery* (Chicago U.P. 2007) relates in a similarly challenging way to the predicaments coming to the fore during the Yaounde witchcraft conference, outlined before.<sup>13</sup> His book can be read as a self-reflexive complement to his monograph '*Kupilikula*' – *Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* also published by Chicago U.P. (2005) and launched in London by Ranger who in his 2006 article cites it as a very good example of how to historicize 'the occult.' Indeed, the 2005 book offers a fascinating analysis of the highly complicated trajectory of these notions under Portuguese colonial rule, the rigid Marxist-Leninist approach under Frelimo, and now under an equally ideological neo-liberal regime in which donors play a central role. Both books focus on the people of the Mueda Plateau (N. Mozambique), and the ways in which they conceive of sorcery and try to deal with it. But after the historicizing monograph, the shorter second book has a clearly different outlook. In this book the anthropologist himself is much more present. West focuses with admirable honesty and perspicacity on an issue that plagued anthropologists ever since they started to study the shadowy topic of witchcraft / sorcery – that is the issue of belief and reality. West also was constantly confronted with the question whether he 'believed' in the 'reality' of the terrible forces he was studying. He acknowledges that such questions have inspired a vast number of authors before him to very nuanced and not-so-nuanced answers: from Malinowski's 'subjectively true' but 'objectively false,' and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. the Comaroffs' characterization as 'unroutinizable powers' (J.&J. Comaroff 2004)

<sup>12</sup> In my view – and I hope I got the core of the argument right – this is precisely at stake in Clifton Crais' seminal exploration of how in the Eastern Cape the 'politics of evil,' with changing conceptions of witchcraft as a core element, took shape in a long-term interaction with state formation in its specific trajectory from 'bureaucratic rationality' to the 'instrumental rationality' of Apartheid. Especially Crais' first chapters offer a deeper understanding of how the notion of 'witchcraft' crystallized in this process.

<sup>13</sup> The text of this section is a longer version of a comment that will be included in a debate in the next issue of *African Studies Review* on West's last book. At the time of writing I have not yet seen West's reply to these comments that is to appear in the same review. My text addresses several aspects of the book, but I preferred to retain these digressions for this paper since all – be it in a more or less indirect way – relate to the issues raised at the Yaounde conference. Moreover I hope that they also provide interesting starting points for our discussions at the seminar.

Evans-Pritchard's straightforward denial of witchcraft as 'impossible'(this in contrast to 'sorcery'), to more recent protests against a reductionist approach that explains witchcraft away as a screen for something else (for instance, inequality or modernity), and therefore saddles the informants with some sort of 'false consciousness.' West sets out to surpass this stalemate by a consequent analysis of what he felt he was doing when he kept on discussing sorcery with 'his' people. Especially his focus on his changing perceptions of his own role as his field-work unfolded leads him to original conclusions.

The book has an elegant and evocative set-up. It is built around a series of vignettes from West's field-work in Mueda – some of them quite vivid – which are interspersed with more theoretical discussions, based on an impressively wide reading. Two of these vignettes seem to be central to his argument – appropriately one is placed at the very beginning of the book and the other all at the end. The first one takes place in an early stage of West's field-work. West, invited to give a lecture at a local research centre, takes a striking example from his research on the spot as his starting point: people's conviction that many of the man-eating lions in the area were 'sorcery-lions' (sorcerers who transformed themselves into lions). Analysing this in line with Victor Turner's symbolic approach, West tried to show that these sorcery-lions can be taken to 'stand for' people's ambivalence vis-à-vis power. Whereupon Lazaro, a good friend, gets up and with some friendly hesitations tells him 'Andiliki (West's local name), you don't understand.... These lions... they aren't symbols – they're real' (p.5). Indeed, a pregnant statement, that in a most evocative way sets the tone for the whole book. In a later chapter, West paraphrases it as, 'Andiliki, metaphors don't kill the neighbours, lion-people do'(p.24).

The vignette at the end of the book is as vivid but has a quite different purport. Towards the end of his field-work West meets again with Chomo, the 'President' of the local branch of the Mozambican 'association of traditional healers.' Chomo is quite boisterous, he claims to be the 'President of Mueda' and there is the suggestion that he is quite drunk. Suddenly he insists that he has to 'vaccinate'(initiate?) West. This is no minor thing: it means a cut with a razor and rubbing quite dangerous substances (for instance, acid from a battery) in the wound. Understandably West panics a little. He feels that his field-work has failed if he would estrange 'the most respected' of all Muedan healers by refusing his treatment. Then he takes heart and starts a long dialogue with Chomo about how he has accumulated knowledge through his long conversations with him and others. In the end Chomo acknowledges this: 'Andiliki, you know' (p.93). And clearly Chomo agrees to accept this as an equivalent to his

‘vaccination.’ They all go to bed. The next morning Chomo turns out to have disappeared during the night, as healers do.

Between these two vignettes, West develops an argument of considerable sophistication, which is so rich and also open that it is impossible to summarize. A central line seems to me a growing emphasis on words, knowledge and especially ‘articulated visions’ as crucial in the constitution of sorcery (p. 60). Thus, West learns in the course of his field-work that people increasingly begin to approach him as some sort of sorcerer / healer precisely because of his quest for knowledge in this tricky field. Quoting Favret-Saada’s famous study of witchcraft in present-day Normandy, West insists, on the one hand, that one can only study sorcery by participating in it; but, on the other, that by the very act of studying it (that is, striving for ‘an articulated vision’) one contributes to its ‘construction’ (p.56). Thus, for him undertaking an ethnography of sorcery gradually shaded into sorcery itself. And, indeed, during a moving visit to the grave of an old healer and friend who recently died, his successors confirm Andiliki-West that the old man respected his knowledge and recognized ‘a certain ability’ in him (p. 75/6). For West this means the same as the acquiescence of the boisterous Chomo that his (West’s) knowledge made a vaccination superfluous. Clearly both recognized the ethnographer as a ‘fellow sorcerer’ (p. 76).

Reading West’s chapters I became impressed by the subtle and tentative way in which he develops his argument, in constant interaction with ethnography and theory. Yet, I was wondering also whether there is not a clear tension between the two examples above. And since many of our ancestors learnt us that tensions are productive I want to elaborate a bit on this. An obvious tension is the one between acts and words. While Lazaro’s statement in the first example seems to refer to acts (‘these lions eat people’), the latter examples refer rather to words, knowledge and visions. Concomitantly there is what one could call ‘the return of the metaphor.’ After Lazaro’s chiding reminder that these lions are all too real (‘they eat people’), the notion of metaphor seems to be written off by West. He quotes, for instance, with apparent approval Luise White that metaphor is often interpreted as a ‘polite academic term for false’ (p. 35). Yet subsequently the ‘metaphor’ is saved by West through the introduction of a sharp distinction between two domains in Muedan ‘life-world’, the ‘visible’ and the ‘invisible’ (p.61). Thus, Lazaro’s ‘sorcery lions’ can after all be seen as a metaphor, in the sense that with them Muedans ‘bridge the chasm’ that separates the visible and the invisible: the lions belong to the latter, but are brought into the first. It is precisely from such bridging between separate domains that metaphors take their force.

I must confess that I am wondering whether this does do full justice to Lazaro's powerful statement. I have also some doubts on West's attributing some sort of ontological quality to the separation between the visible and the invisible. In many parts of present-day Africa it is rather the constant and intricate intertwinement of the visible and the invisible in daily life that is emphasized in people's conceptions of occult aggression. For instance, in southern Cameroon where I did most of my field-work, people certainly see a distinction between the two, but it is rather a distinction of access. In order to know one's way in the invisible one has to acquire 'a second pair of eyes' and to develop one's *djambe* or *evu* (key terms that people, respectively the Maka and the Beti, now generally translate as *sorcellerie* - see above); thus, one acquires the power to 'go out' (*ouas*). In contrast, 'innocents' - people whose 'belly is empty' - do not even see what is going on around them and they do not know how to enter the invisible world. Yet, for them also, the invisible is constantly present as part and parcel of everyday life. In such a vision the were-animals - which in Cameroon as well are many and equally frightening - hardly bridge a conceptual chasm. On the contrary, their presence in the every day world is as is to be expected.<sup>14</sup> What is then gained by interpreting witchcraft phenomena as metaphors? The danger of this might be clear. It can easily imply some sort of false consciousness - since the notion assumes a reference to another domain of which the people concerned do not seem to be conscious - and thus relativize people's perception of these phenomena as very real and threatening. Maybe Lazaro, with his powerful statement, wanted indeed to warn Andiliki for what notions like metaphor can do...<sup>15</sup>

The increasing shift to 'articulated visions' and words as constitutive of sorcery, after the powerful opening statement about the 'reality' of these man-eating lions raised similar questions for me. Of course, one can not oppose 'words' and 'acts.' Still, my understanding is that in the various African settings where I worked just words do not suffice to summarize people's image of what is going on in witchcraft / sorcery. One of the few general traits of

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. also Filip de Boeck on '... the slippage between visible and invisible' in present-day Kinshasa (F.de Boeck and M.-F.Plissart, 2006:57). De Boeck's powerful ethnography certainly conveys that this slippage has taken on blatant forms in Kinshasa. Yet, it remains to be seen whether it is radically new. The suggestion that earlier on there was a clear separation of the visible and the invisible reminds of the assumption of an earlier 'magical equilibrium' that plagued historians of the witchcraft craze in early-modern Europe (cf. notably Robert Muchembled, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Appiah's ironical attack on anthropologists' use of symbols as explanation (K.A.Appiah, 1992:179). West seems to share this - that is, after his first unhappy attempt to explain Muedan sorcery-lions as symbols - but is keen to resurrect, after initial doubts, the view of sorcery as a metaphor; hence his emphasis on the separation of the visible and the invisible. I am still wondering whether this does not lead to the assumption of 'some sort of false consciousness' - an assumption which seems to go against the grain of West's intentions. If people see a constant interaction between the visible and the invisible, it can only be the anthropologist who observes a chasm and a metaphor deriving its force from bridging this chasm. The problem may be that the term metaphor seems to have become as poly-interpretable as 'witchcraft'; yet, it seems to retain a powerful implication of 'less true.'

witchcraft discourse may be that it precisely refers to human agency as the explanation behind each and every (unfortunate) event. These acts may be hidden; therefore they remain often hypothetical. Indeed, the anthropologists will mostly know them only through words / discourse. This does not preclude that to the people concerned such acts remain most concrete and decisive. West is certainly not alone in approaching sorcery in terms of discourse and words.<sup>16</sup> But he goes to great length in relating this to his ethnography. Hence it becomes possible to spell out in detail where his approach might raise questions.

The image of the ethnographer being recognized as sorcerer/healer because of the knowledge, ‘articulated visions’ and the words (s)he wields leaves me wondering. In southern Cameroon and elsewhere, the initiation as healer (or as witch) requires a series of quite specific steps – thresholds, to be taken with great difficulty. As diviner, a healer has to acquire in any case ‘the second pair of eyes’ which will enable him/her to ‘see’ in the invisible world. Moreover, a firm criterion for anyone to be recognized as witch or healer is the ability to ‘leave’ one’s body (that is, to transform oneself – in a ghost, an animal or whatever). The fixed question of the healer before treating a patient will always be ‘did you go out?’ – only then the doctor will know how to treat the patient (since it is vital for any therapy to know whether the client has dabbled in witchcraft or not). Moreover, the healer him/herself will always be supposed to ‘go out’ on difficult journeys in order to combat the witches and ‘bring back’ the patient’s ‘soul’ (as people say nowadays). Of course, the people I know in Cameroon often speak often of *la sorcellerie des Blancs*. For instance, in 1971, the major sign that I had my own kind of *djambe* was that then I drove an old 2-Chevaux without making accidents, and so on. But my *djambe* could only be called so in a very broad sense of the term (in fact, this is where I would be tempted to use the word ‘metaphorical’ since people were clearly conscious of the fact that they were transferring the term *djambe* to another domain). I was certainly not supposed to leave my body at night. People would come to me to have their wounds dressed – since I had bandages and sterilon – but definitely not when they thought witchcraft was involved. What could I do? I could not even see the witches (since I had refused to take the second pair of eyes), let alone attack them and force them to lift their spell. My ‘knowledge’ was certainly respected – especially the idea that I would write a book – but being recognized as a *nganga* (healer / sorcerer) required at least the claim that one has

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. for a related approach James Siegel (2006), who focuses on efforts to name (and thus grasp) the ‘uncanny’ as productive of ‘witchcraft.’

undertaken certain actions and thus crossed powerful thresholds.<sup>17</sup> As said, these hidden ‘acts’ will be known to the ethnographer only through discourse. But it would be a mistake to suppose that therefore to the people as well, all this is just words.<sup>18</sup> Again, Lazaro’s powerful statement seems to me to point in another direction for N. Mozambique also.

Such considerations seem to me important, not just at an ethnographical level, but in relation to the more general direction we want to go with ‘sorcery studies’- a field that has become quite vibrant since its abrupt re-birth in the early 1990’s. The image of the ethnographer as a sorcerer seems to me to be only tenable if we use the notion of sorcery in a very general way. Indeed, as said, the Maka as well attributed to me the *djambe le mitangue* (witchcraft of the whites). These notions – also their western equivalents – lend themselves to a broad (metaphorical?) use, precisely because of their open, loosely defined character. Yet, this broad range should not make us overlook that there are certain core elements that seem to mark the real thing within the broader use of the term. In most parts of Africa (but also, for instance in Europe) witchcraft, sorcery, or whatever term is being used, still refers to quite special capacities and thresholds: the ideas mentioned before of getting a ‘second pair of eyes’, the ability to ‘leave’ one’s body’, to fly, to transform oneself; in people’s representations, all of these relate to special acts.<sup>19</sup> It is this idea of hidden forms of agency to which only some have access that makes this whole discourse so frightening and obsessive (and so closely related to issues of power). There seems to me a risk that our self-reflexivity – and our desire to understand better what we are doing - steers us a way from such harsh truths. As said, witchcraft may come to us through words / discourse, but one of its few general traits is that it always stresses agency. I wonder whether this does not set certain limits to the possibility of analysing it in terms of discourse.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. de Rosny’s story about his long initiation as a healer and the heavy price even he had to pay to his ‘professor,’ quoted above. Other anthropologists tell similar stories about all the sacrifices they had to make to be initiated – always after a long and painful process.

<sup>18</sup> West refers especially to the parallels of his interpretations with Favret-Saada’s study of witchcraft in Normandy (J.Favret-Saada 1980). Indeed, in her work there is also a heavy emphasis on the power of words and intentions. Yet, I remain intrigued by the complete absence of all the representations that up to today dominate European conceptions of witchcraft in many places elsewhere in her version of the Normandy imaginary (in most European contexts all the supposed ‘acts’ mentioned before for Africa take centre space: the emphasis on leaving the body, on flying, on meeting one’s fellow witches at night and feasting with them; but they are strikingly absent from Favret-Saada’s stories). Is this a difference per area or of interest of the ethnographer?

<sup>19</sup> Another core element that could be mentioned here is the close link with intimacy, in Africa notably the family. The most dangerous witchcraft / sorcery attacks come from ‘inside.’ Especially lately there is a tendency in many areas to believe that this boundary is increasingly transgressed. Yet it remain striking that even in instances of supposedly novel forms of witchcraft there is often an ultimate reference to intimacy as a source of vulnerability.

The formula of the ethnographer as sorcerer - and also the image of the ethnographer as being part of someone else's story à la Borges (West's Preface) – is certainly very elegant; it may also offer a redeeming solution to anthropologists worrying about their involvement in witchcraft studies. But is it very meaningful to the people concerned? The shift to words and articulated visions seems to gradually distance West's book from the harsh struggle people are waging to contain witchcraft or even get out of it, while becoming enmeshed in it ever more (cf. the horrors evoked by the Nigerian and Ghanaian video's). Addressing similar issues elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> I advocated rather a historical approach to try and defuse the present-day preoccupation with witchcraft. Self-reflexivity seems to take the preoccupation with occult aggression as a given. Yet, it remains important to point out that witchcraft obsessions have their high and low tides – in Cameroon, as in Mozambique –, which poses the challenge to try and understand which factors affect such fluctuations.

However, even if I am inclined to pursue other directions than West sets out in this seminal book, this does not preclude my appreciation of it. Indeed, it is impressive that such a relatively short book raises so many important questions. Clearly the constant interaction between powerful ethnography and sophisticated theorizing 'works' in this case – and it is on purpose that I use here another dangerous term in sorcery talk.

### **To conclude (even more provisional)**

It may be high time to return to the predicaments outlined before in relation to the Yaounde conference of *Justice et sorcellerie*. For me, both my reactions to West's seminal book and my experiences at the Yaounde conference - Father Birba's deep dissatisfaction with my effort to relate his emphasis on the reality of *la sorcellerie* to a vision of it as 'discursive practice (a view that seemed to be indeed singularly inapt to most of the participants in their struggle with an omnipresent witchcraft) – make me wonder about the limits to an analysis in terms of discourse. Lately this notion has overrun anthropology and many related disciplines – no doubt with inspiring consequences. But it may be important to signal that this focus on discourse can raise problems also. One is that, at least in some contexts, it risks to distance us from the way people involved address certain issues - in this case the popular obsession with a proliferation of 'witchcraft.' This problem becomes a lot more pressing when one leaves the academic setting. During my last visit to the village in Cameroon, my assistant (with whom I work for more than 30 years) was suddenly the subject of direct accusations of witchcraft

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<sup>20</sup> P.Geschiere 2000. Confer also for a more pragmatic approach that remain very close to such daily tensions: Jean and John Comaroff, 2004.

which could easily have had violent effects. At such a moment the notion of ‘discursive practice’ is rudely shaken up by most concrete acts. During the Yaounde conference this notion proved to be equally ineffective in the discussion with opinion leaders who feel they have to re-act against hidden, but all the more threatening witchcraft actions. Similarly, it might be no accident that in West’s first book with its more historical outlook people’s concern with witchcraft as a horrible threat is much more present than in this second book with its emphasis on sorcery as constructed by words.

A related and wider problem is the strong emphasis in witchcraft discourse itself on acts as decisive. As said, witchcraft comes to the researcher mainly in the form of words (rumours, allusions) since the acts are mostly supposed to be taking place in the dark. Yet, it remains basic to the very notion in witchcraft discourse (this might be an almost universal feature) that each and every event, notably when it is shocking or unexpected, is attributed to specific human acts: any explanation in terms of witchcraft – whatever this notion might mean – refers to acts by specific persons and of special effectivity. All the more important – it seems to me – that an analysis of witchcraft in terms of discourse gives central place to this strong emphasis on human action as crucial (*sorry, for these loose thoughts – might be interesting to further discuss this at the seminar*).

In another respect, the above suggests at least a clear conclusion. All the examples above seem to confirm Ranger’s plea for further ‘historicising the African occult.’ However, it might be clear as well that this historicising should include the efforts towards classification (disaggregation?) – both by the people involved and by (more or less) scientific observers. In order to counter the tendency to make the notion of ‘witchcraft’ serve as some sort of panacea, attention to distinctions and conceptual differences in the field of the occult remains no doubt very important. However, it might be even more important to historicize also such distinctions and the heavy struggles to reproduce them. The basic blurring tenor of these representations, the fluidity of the notions invoked and their shifting meanings are crucial for understanding the striking resilience and dynamics of these perceptions in the face of rapid change.

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