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# The modernity of witchcraft

## Examples from Cameroon

*Peter Geschiere*

One of the most striking aspects of everyday life in post-colonial Africa is the pervasiveness of 'sorcery', 'witchcraft', '*sorcellerie*' or whatever term people use to indicate the occult.<sup>1</sup> Discourses on the occult forces seem to pervade all aspects of society, especially the more 'modern' ones. Whether it concerns football matches or national politics, the success of new entrepreneurs or the failure of a development project, it seems hardly possible to discuss what 'really' happened without referring to these discourses.

To many western observers, this 'modernity' of witchcraft may come as a surprise. The idea that such beliefs are 'traditional' obstacles which will fade away under the impact of 'Modernization' or 'Development' is very tenacious: despite all the critique of the modernization paradigm, this basic idea keeps surfacing. However, if one wants to understand why these discourses remain so relevant in present-day Africa, it is important to emphasize that far from being merely 'traditional', they do address and interpret the modern changes in all sorts of ways. It is true that in some contexts, these discourses can have a 'traditionalising' tenor, opposing development and change. But it seems that there are also all sorts of articulations possible: these discourses seem to intertwine very easily - be it following different patterns - with new developments, such as the penetration of money, the emergence of wage-labour and the spread of new consumption goods, but also with new forms of individualism and violence, or whatever form 'modernity' may take in Africa.

Discourses on witchcraft and sorcery have always dealt with issues of personal ambition, inequality and violence. In everyday life, such issues appear to be manifest aspects of modernity. People are shocked *and* fascinated by the new inequalities, which seem to transgress the old communitarian restrictions and which appear therefore to stem from new forms of individualism and evoke novel patterns of violence.<sup>2</sup> But these are, as said before, familiar themes in witchcraft and sorcery. No wonder, these discourses seem so relevant to many Africans for understanding the modern changes and for trying to deal with them.

We shall see that in this articulation of witchcraft and modernity highly variable patterns can evolve. In some parts of Cameroon, witchcraft discourses seem to serve mainly to combat the new inequalities. Here, witchcraft rumours seem to have a strong levelling impact. But in other parts of the country, similar discourses seem rather to affirm and encourage the accumulation of new forms of wealth. In order to understand such variations, a more historical perspective on the transformation of these discourses, and on the societies concerned, seems to be needed.

Of great importance in this context is the role of the post-colonial state. In general, state officials seem to be highly concerned by the apparent

proliferation of witchcraft. Ever since Independence, they have marked, time and again, witchcraft as being one of the most dangerous forms of 'subversion'. Officials tend to blame the failure of government projects on local witchcraft, which they seem to equate with a diffuse but omnipresent conspiracy against the state. Often, one can wonder to what extent witchcraft - mainly expressed in rumours, allusions and suggestions - is really directed against the state. But the strong attacks on it by government officials - who often turn out to be themselves deeply enmeshed in the occult world in private - has had its effects. Witchcraft has as such become a political issue.<sup>3</sup>

But even though there seems to be, in general, concern about witchcraft amongst the officials, there are - again - important regional variations in the ways in which the state intervenes in practice in this treacherous domain. In the East Province, state courts have begun to condemn witches - without any concrete proof of physical aggression but mainly on the basis of the expertise of the *nganga* (witch-doctor) - ever since the end of the seventies. This is all the more remarkable since it is completely in contradiction with the preceding jurisprudence.<sup>4</sup> In the Centre and South Provinces, the Courts seem to be more circumspect, but here too, it seems that there is heavy pressure on the state to intervene in witchcraft affairs. In the Western Provinces - the third area to be discussed below - there are, as yet, hardly any examples of parallel interventions by the state and people here seem to feel that the threat of witchcraft has to be dealt with in other ways.

In this article, I want to briefly compare three witchcraft affairs in different parts of Cameroon. Each case seems to exemplify a different pattern in the relationship between witchcraft and the new inequalities. Moreover, in each case, the role of the state varies strongly. It seems that especially the various ways in which state interventions articulate with local discourses on the occult, are of crucial importance in understanding the different scenarios illustrated by these cases.

### **New witch-trials in the East: judges in alliance with witch-doctors**

My first example comes from the East Province, where the witchcraft trials are taking place. To many in Cameroon, it was not at all surprising that the first trials occurred in this province, since everybody seems to agree that witchcraft is particularly rampant there. In Cameroon, the East is generally considered to be one of the most backward parts of the country. One of the reasons is that this part of the forest area has remained inaccessible. But this stereotype seems to reflect also the great problems, during colonial and even post-colonial times, of incorporating the societies of the East into the state and the market economy. An important factor is that these societies are strongly segmentary in their organization. The Maka, for instance, lived until the colonial conquest (1905/10) in small, exogamic family villages which were completely autonomous. Within the village, the family elders exercised strict

control over the women, the young men and other dependents of their group. But between the villages no form of central authority existed. On the contrary, there was a constant state of hostility between them.<sup>5</sup> At most, villages which claimed a common descent could meet - especially when there were marriages regularly between them - in order to resolve their conflicts. But such reconciliations were always precarious; there was always the risk that the basic hostility might flare up again.<sup>6</sup>

To these societies, the state as it was imposed after the colonial conquest, with its claims of automatic obedience, was a complete novelty. Consequently, the colonial authorities had great problems, not only in 'pacifying' these areas - it took the Germans five years to subdue the relatively small Maka group - but also to mobilise the people's labour for the market economy. The French, who during the first world war conquered this part of Cameroon, instituted a highly coercive system of labour control, since they believed that only government coercion could make these 'backward' people produce surpluses for the 'mise en valeur' of the area. Elsewhere, I have tried to show that the precarious articulation of the old, 'tribal' order, with the authoritarian forms of control imposed by the state, still marks present-day relations in the villages.<sup>7</sup>

To people in Yaoundé (the capital of Cameroon), it is evident that the '*mentalité primitive*' of the Maka and other groups in the East, explains why it is especially in this province that the state courts had to intervene against the proliferation of witchcraft. The following case exhibits a pattern which seems to be characteristic for the witch trials by the state courts in the East.<sup>8</sup>

During the summer of 1982 there was mounting unrest in Baman, one of the more important villages in the Maka area (East Province).<sup>9</sup> People were worried about a series of deaths in the village. But there was also a lot of talk of '*des bruits insolites*' which were to be heard at night near the compound of Moboma, an elderly bachelor, living in the middle of the village. Several people asked the chief to intervene and he referred the affair to a certain Baba Denis. This Baba originates from Baman but he left the village when he was still quite young. In 1982, he returned 'to purify' the village - as he explained it to the Court - since he had become an accomplished '*professeur-guérisseur*' in the meantime. Indeed, within a few months after his return, he had become known as a particularly strong witch-doctor in the whole district.

In Baman itself, his purifying efforts had immediate effects. Dozens of people came to hand over their '*produits maléfiqes*'. But Moboma and two other men of the same quarter, Mpande and Mezing, refused to do so, despite repeated admonitions from Baba. After the chief's complaints, Baba decided to intervene more energetically. He told the chief to detain Mo-

boma, and, accompanied by a few notables and a large crowd of curious villagers, he proceeded to Moboma's house.

After entering the house, Baba placed himself in the middle of the 'salon', and started to make his incantations, his right hand raised and in his left an iron filled with burning coals. This went on for some time, but then Baba suddenly pointed at Moboma's bed and at the door. The notables rushed to these places and indeed found extremely incriminating material: enough panther's whiskers 'to decimate the whole village'. In the general excitement, all sorts of other accusations were made, against other persons too (as usually happens on such occasions). This time Mpande became the target of new accusations (probably because he had refused to hand over his '*produits maléfiques*' to Baba, but also since he was a nephew and good friend of Moboma). Several boys shouted that Mpande had given them panther's whiskers and bamboo-splinters to bury at strategic places. The aim was to kill the director of the school, to stop the Catholic priest from visiting the village and to ensure that the chapel which the Protestants were building would never be finished. And indeed, the director had recently died, the Catholic priest had not visited the village for a long time and the Protestant chapel was still only half finished.

Baba finally put an end to all this commotion by summoning the chief to send immediately for the *gendarmes*. His 'discoveries' left no doubt about the guilt of Moboma and his accomplices. Therefore, they should be punished properly. The *gendarmes* came the same day to arrest the three culprits.

Nearly nine months later - on the 10th of May 1983 - the affair was finally judged by the *Tribunal de Première Instance* of Abong-Mbang, the town of the *département* under which Baman resorted. In front of the judges, all suspects denied everything. Moboma even suggested that Baba himself must have planted the panther's whiskers in his house (suspects often complain that witch-doctors pretend to find things in their house which they had never seen there). But the judge seemed more inclined to believe the testimonies of Moboma's uncle Tsoung, of the boys whom Mpande tried to use, and especially of Baba. The latter explained that the '*bruits insolites*' from Moboma's compound were caused by '*aeroplanes magiques*', for which Moboma had made a landing-strip behind his house. Baba also demanded a substantial compensation (500,000 fr. CFA - at that time about £ 1300) from Moboma, since the latter had allegedly attacked him while he (Baba) was busy destroying the magical air-strip.

He suddenly became so weak that bystanders had to carry him off and he would have certainly died from this attack if he had not succeeded in definitively destroying Moboma's powers.

The Court was clearly impressed by this last testimony. One of the accused, Mezing, against whom no specific incriminating charges had been brought, was released. But Moboma and Mpande were sentenced to 5 years in jail and a fine of 30,000 fr. CFA (= about £ 80). Moreover, Moboma had to pay a compensation to Baba to the tune of 40,000 fr. CFA (= about £ 100). This was a lot less than Baba had claimed, but the Court's verdict on this point implied an official recognition that a *nganga* (witch-doctor) like Baba was entitled to compensation from any sorcerer who is supposed to hinder him (or her) in his work. Of course, to Baba, this was highly encouraging. Five months later, the same case was heard by the Court of Appeal in Bertoua, the capital of the Eastern Province, where the verdict was confirmed on all points.

The course of events in this case had surprising aspects, not only for outsiders but apparently for the villagers themselves as well. Yet, one can detect in it many current elements from the local discourse on the occult forces. The panther's whiskers, which Baba found in Moboma's house and which caused so much consternation, are often mentioned as a favourite weapon of the witches. Even when cut up fine, they remain so hard that they will pierce a person's intestines if they are mixed in his food. Common is also the fact that the accusations originated from within the circle of close kin: it was Tsoung, Moboma's uncle, who first complained about him and he played an important role in the course of the affair, first helping Baba and later as a witness for the prosecution in Court.

A basic element in the witchcraft discourse of the Maka - and in other parts of the forest area of South Cameroon - is the notion that witches have a special substance, the Maka call it *djamb*, in their belly which permits them to leave their body. Potentially, everybody has a *djamb* but only special people take the trouble to develop it. Those are the true *mindjindjamb* (witches). At night, when the owl calls, they leave their body and fly away along invisible threads (the *tand-i-djamb*) to the *sjumbu*, a kind of witches' sabbath where they meet their accomplices. The climax of these nightly encounters are huge cannibalistic banquets. Each witch has to offer one of his (or her) relatives. The witches eat the heart of their victim, who immediately falls ill. He will surely die, unless he finds a *nganga*, strong enough to force the witches to lift their spell. The *djamb* belief of the Maka has many more aspects. It is part of a complicated world view in which all of man's environment is animated. The forces of the *djamb* lend themselves also for all sorts of more positive uses. *Djamb* is indispensable for the exercise of authority (the *djamb idjuga*) or, in former days to have success in war (the *djamb-le-domb* - 'witchcraft of war').

And it is only because he (or she) possesses such a highly developed *djamb* that the *nganga* can heal.<sup>10</sup> But the dark core of this imagery, the cannibalistic feasts where witches betray and eat their own kin, is a true obsession for the Maka.

In the story above the nightly activities of the witches are supposed to have acquired new aspects: Moboma's airstrip and his '*aeroplanes magiques*'. But this is certainly not uncommon. On the contrary, the Maka constantly mix modern elements with their *djamb*-belief: the magical objects sold by mail by Western firms are incorporated into the *djamb* imagery as easily as the wonders of the modern technique. Another new element in this story - this time not of Western origin - are the confessions by the boys that, on Mpande's instigation, they had buried bamboo-splinters 'to block the progress of the village'. This refers to the *ngbati*, a new form of witchcraft which according to my informants was completely unknown to the villagers before the sixties. It is supposed to have come from the Mvele (that is from the northwest). The *djambe* belief of the Maka - and here again there are clear parallels with other societies in the Cameroonian forest area - has nothing 'traditional': it is highly innovative, constantly incorporating new elements - one could even say, constantly following new 'fashions'.

The role of Baba, the *nganga* in this story, exhibits the same intertwining of familiar and novel elements. Familiar is, for instance, the idea that the *nganga* has to enter into a struggle with the witches and that he may be 'surprised' by them (as in Baba's complaint that Moboma had suddenly attacked and nearly killed him, while he was destroying his magical air-strip). Familiar also, is that the *nganga* is such a dangerous figure. As said before, for the Maka, a *nganga* can only vanquish the witches because he himself is a kind of super-witch. There is a strong belief throughout this area that a *nganga* can only be initiated by his own 'professor' if he is prepared to sacrifice one of his own relatives. The *nganga* can only heal because he (or she) has killed.<sup>11</sup>

But in Baba's performance, the novelties - compared, for instance, to the behaviour of the *nganga* I knew in the seventies - are much more striking. Some, moreover, seem to have far-reaching consequences. There are some formal innovations which, apparently, have a Christian background; for instance, the 'incantations', he makes in Moboma's house (although, unfortunately, I could not persuade him to give more detailed information on this point). In other respects as well, Baba is inclined to employ Christian elements: he burns candles when receiving his clients, has a cross hanging in his 'bureau' and employs all sorts of 'sacred' books. The use of the flat-iron 'filled with burning coals' is another example of his innovative spirit. On this point as well Baba shrouded himself in mystery and none of my informants could give any explanation either. It seems to be a personal invention by Baba himself, with no roots in Maka culture. Striking is also the publicity of Baba's performance: he stages his 'discoveries' in front of a large crowd and seeks publicity in all sorts of ways. His predecessors in the seventies were far more inclined to work in private.

The most drastic novelty is of course that Baba forces the chief to pass the whole affair on to the *gendarmes* and the Courts. In the seventies, the *nganga* still tended to be afraid of making themselves much too visible for the state. Of course, some of them also had clients amongst the highest ranks of the new elite of state. But these were private, more or less hidden contacts. They were rather afraid of the *gendarmes* since they were not at all sure to what extent the state condoned their practice. Baba not only saw it as his duty to deliver the witches to the *gendarmes*, he also acquired an important - and to the villagers, highly prestigious position - as an expert witness at the Courts.<sup>12</sup>

An important theme in this case is the threat - and the lure - of new forms of individualism. As in so many witchcraft affairs, the story can be read as reflecting the struggle of the local community to maintain control over ambitious individuals in its midst, in this case Moboma and his companions, who try in their own way to get access to the miracles of modern technique. In this sense, the story seems to exemplify the levelling impact of the witchcraft discourse, helping to restore communitarian values against personal ambition.

But if we focus on what actually happens in the daily world, it rather reflects the other side of the same discourse, which, as said before, can also serve to affirm the strong emphasis on personal ambition in these societies.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is Baba, the witch-doctor, who uses the local conceptions of the occult to further his own ambitions and to give the role of the *nganga* a new kind of prestige. It is rather he who emerges from the story as a 'sovereign subject', emancipating himself from communitarian restrictions. His collaboration with the *gendarmes* and the Courts gives the *nganga* role completely new aspects. He reveals himself as a true broker between the village and the authoritarian state. Because of his past - he has served for some time in the army - he has, at least in the villagers' eyes, considerable knowledge of the new world outside the village. He introduces also all sorts of new magical knowledge (his 'sacred' books, the ways in which he employs Christian symbols etc.). The story indicates that Baba uses all this to give the role of the *nganga* a new scope. To the villagers, a 'modern' *nganga* like Baba becomes linked to the coercive apparatus of the state and it is because of this that he seems to be better qualified to deal with the proliferation of witchcraft.

The case has similarly ambivalent implications if we focus on the relation between *djamb* and violence. At first sight, the violence seems to come from Moboma and his gang. The villagers directly linked their nocturnal experiments with modern techniques to the series of deaths in the village. But, again, in the daily world it is rather Baba who unleashes a formidable amount of violence, which is, moreover, of a new type. The forceful way in which he publicly exposes Moboma is already remarkable and rather different from the more subtle ways in which *nganga* proceeded in the seventies. Even more striking is that he does not proceed by trying to neutralize Moboma's powers in order to 'cure' him, as *nganga* used to do. Instead, he delivers him to the *gendarmes*. Since colonial times, the latter have become for the villagers the very equivalent of violence. People believe that every suspect who is brought

to their office receives first of all a 'warning', in the form of a thorough thrashing. In the case above - as in most of the witchcraft files we could consult - the judge adds his own kind of violence by condemning the accused to a long period in jail. Because of the collaboration of the *nganga* with the *gendarmes* and the judges, witchcraft rumours suddenly lead to a new sort of violence.<sup>14</sup>

### The South: the murder of a witch and the dilemma of the State Attorney

Elsewhere in Cameroon, the judicial authorities seem to be more reluctant to intervene so directly in witchcraft affairs. In the South and the Centre Province, however, where local forms of organization have similar segmentary tendencies as in the East, there seems to be strong popular pressure on the state to intervene. This was clearly illustrated by the following case with which Cyprian Fisiy and I were confronted during a brief period of research in Kribi, a small town on the coast of South Cameroon.

In 1991, the villagers of Ndoua, a small locality 30 kms to the north-east of Kribi, dragged an old man to the *gendarmes* in town. They insisted that he had already killed several people with his witchcraft and that the village had to be rid of him. The State Attorney looked into the matter but, after a few days, he ordered the *gendarmes* to release the man since there were no '*preuves tangibles*' against him. The consequences were dramatic. A few months later, the villagers set the house of the old 'witch' on fire and he died in the flames. This was brought to the attention of the *gendarmes* who immediately came to the village and arrested 17 persons, all young men. In February 1992, they were still in prison.

We had the chance to discuss this affair with the new State Attorney (the successor to the one who had released the old man). He complained that the case put him in an impossible dilemma. He insisted that he was a 'positivist': in principle, the Court should only consider cases of witchcraft if there was concrete proof (the '*preuves tangibles*' mentioned before) of physical aggression; in this sense his predecessor had acted rightly. This also meant that now, he could not simply release the young men; that would be condoning murder. On the other hand, if the Court convicted the young men for having killed the old man, people would say that the state protected the witches and this was not acceptable either. Therefore, his predecessor had acted wrongly after all: he should at least have kept the old man in prison for some time until the excitement in the village had died down.

According to this State Attorney, the whole affair was typical of the pressure exercised by the population on the judicial authorities. He maintained that in most of these cases, the initiative did come from below, while he and most of his colleagues were rather inclined to stick to the 'positive spirit' of the law.<sup>15</sup> The great problem was, however, that on this point the law did not 'correspond to our culture'. The state could not neglect the urgent demands of the population to intervene against witchcraft. The solution the State Attorney proposed for his dilemma, during our interview with him, had quite frightening implications. He concluded, that even if the letter of the law in the strict sense did not allow for any actions against such a witch, the Court should take account of the wishes of the local community which evidently wanted to get rid of a person so unanimously suspected of witchcraft. The state had to ensure order in society and therefore he felt, in any case, that he had to take steps to remove such witches in one way or another from local society.<sup>16</sup>

In this case again, the link between witchcraft and violence is highly ambivalent. Moreover, it is complicated by the role of the state, be it in strikingly different ways compared to our first case. To the villagers, it was clearly the old man who had released violence in the village by his dark powers. In daily practice, the roles seemed to be reversed: it were the young men who committed violence by effectively killing the old man. What is remarkable in this case, is that there is no clear role played by a *nganga*, who is in principle the obvious person to try and deal with such hidden violence. Apparently the villagers felt that they had to put the matter directly into the hands of the officials and that, since the state claimed complete control over violence, it should also deal with the proliferation of witchcraft. Consequently, the first State Attorney's refusal to be involved in the case, triggered a definitive act of violence by the youngsters. One can sympathize with the second State Attorney's complaints about his predicament: the popular pressure on the state to use its coercive apparatus against witchcraft indeed puts the judicial authorities in a difficult position.

### **The West: zombies and the hidden violence of the new rich**

In the Western Provinces of Cameroon, especially, a different pattern has evolved in the relationship between witchcraft, new forms of individualism and violence. Here, for some decades now, rumours abound about a new form of witchcraft which is closely linked to the new forms of wealth and which evokes specific patterns of violence and counter-violence.

Different terms are used for this new form of witchcraft: it is called *ekong* in Douala, *nyongo* in the Southwest, *ekom* among the Bakossi and *famla*

in the Northwest (the 'Grassfields') and in the West (among the Bamileke, famous for their commercial talents). A general name is *kupe*, after Mount Kupe (100 kms to the north of Douala) which plays as such a central, but mysterious role in these beliefs. The basic story is, however, nearly the same everywhere. These witches are no longer supposed to eat their victims as in the older forms of witchcraft, but to transform them into a kind of zombie and put them to work. Often these witches are said to transport their victims in lorries to Mt. Kupe where they have to work on invisible plantations. Throughout Cameroon, Mt. Kupe has thus become associated with mysterious - and suspect - wealth.

Elsewhere, Cyprian Fisiy and I have tried to place these beliefs in a broader historical and regional context.<sup>17</sup> Most people see Douala, the main harbour of this region, as the place from which these new forms of witchcraft originated. They are often explicitly connected to the growing impact of European trade in the 19th century. Only later the belief seems to have spread into the *Hinterland*, together with the new consumption goods. It emerged only towards the end of the colonial period in Bamilekeland, together with the rise of new entrepreneurs in this area. Later, it reached the northwestern Grassfields and only quite recently it became prevalent in the South, the Centre and the East.<sup>18</sup>

Characteristically, these beliefs again seem to interpret old elements in a new context. Even this 'modern' form of witchcraft, often associated with the new cities, is still closely connected with the familiar kinship patterns: the witches are still supposed to deliver a close relative in order to become member of the feared *ekong* associations and healing is only possible if the *nganga* succeeds in reuniting the family. But these old elements are now expressed in a new idiom, which has strong commercial - one could even say, capitalist - overtones. *Ekong* witches are said to 'sell' their relatives; the witches go to the 'market of sorcery' at night and it is from there that they bring back their riches; they transport their victims 'in lorries' to 'invisible plantations'.<sup>19</sup>

In this form as well, the link between witchcraft and new forms of wealth is highly ambivalent. The rumours about *ekong*, *famla* or *kupe* all seem to express a deep distrust of the new rich who are supposed to owe their success only to a new form of hidden violence, breaking through the old communitarian restrictions. At the same time, these stories betray a true fascination with the new consumption goods which are seen as the manifestation *par excellence* of these hidden forces. Moreover, the concrete effects of these rumours and accusations often seem to be quite limited. Warnier observes that *famla* rumours are circulating, about nearly all successful Bamileke entrepreneurs, without it really affecting their position.<sup>20</sup>

It seems that especially the societies of the West and the Northwest - from which, after Independence, a true commercial bourgeoisie emerged, which is now supposed to dominate the Cameroonian economy - have their own mechanisms to legitimize the suspect forms of new wealth. This affects both the role of the state and the implications of these witchcraft discourses

for the exercise of violence. It is quite striking that in these areas, despite the general unrest about *famla* and *kupe*, there are as yet no parallels to the witchcraft trials in the East. Neither are there clear signs of popular pressure on the state to intervene against these new forms of witchcraft. It seems that these societies have their own ways to control the violence evoked by these new witchcraft rumours.

A very interesting manuscript, unfortunately not yet published, by Patrick Mbunwe-Samba from the Northwest, on 'Witchcraft, Magic and Divination', is a rich source of stories on *kupe* and *famla*.<sup>21</sup> A characteristic example is the following story about Mr. Paul Ngong Langdji, who worked as a headmaster in several towns of the Northwest; the story tells about his frightening experiences when he returned to this home area but also about his final triumph.

After many transfers in his long career, Mr. Paul settled to teaching among his own people in the village of Nkor in Noni area in Bui Division. In this village, stories started circulating that Paul was planning to give school children in for *Kupe*, that in actual fact he had buried a pot in the school in which children's finger nails were cut and stored and that the eventual outcome would be that one day, when lightning struck, it would destroy a large number of school children all at once; some said fifty would die! As these stories developed the village population began to get more and more anxious and disturbed. It is not certain what the last straw was but we are told that the Parent Teachers' Association (PTA) of the school organized a secret meeting at which they resolved that Paul was practising witchcraft and that the Senior Divisional Officer (SDO) should be asked to transfer him. The PTA sent a copy of the letter they had written to the Senior Divisional Officer to Paul. Paul replied demanding that they prove their baseless allegations.

Instead of waiting to get a reply from the SDO whom they had petitioned, the group came to school and drove Paul away from the class and then began to plan to kill him by attacking his entire household. The headmaster of the school was forewarned of the plans being made to take Paul's life and he sneaked in, in time to warn Paul and his children. They narrowly escaped capture by exiting through the back door. The story of this dramatic escape is told in many versions in Nkor today, some even saying that Paul disappeared transformed!

If this plan had succeeded it would have shown how a few people can scheme and manipulate a group to create problems which could have far-reaching consequences.

We are told that Paul did not take this lying down. In the following days, the forces of law and order descended on Nkor and eight people were arrested and detained at Kumbo, the divisional capital. We were informed that the case was actually taken to the magistrate's court. The case was tried and the suspects were discharged and acquitted on technical grounds, because it was argued that there were women among the men but they were not also arrested.

It is revealing to note that Paul stood as a candidate in the parliamentary elections of April 1988 and the results from the Noni area show a lot of support for him in spite of the feelings of some Noni people about the case. This was indeed a very encouraging sign. In our last interview with some Noni people in July 1989 it was remarked that the population of Nkor has now realised that there was actually no truth in the matter. The Nkor people have now come to realise that there was a clique behind the entire drama and are now friendly with Paul with whom they not only drink together but also exchange visits.

The fact that Paul Langdji succeeded in standing for parliamentary elections as a candidate for this area allows the story to be seen in its correct perspective and reveals the intrigues of some interested parties, who thought that they could challenge his candidature in this way.<sup>22</sup>

The most surprising element of the story is in the ending itself. Despite all the backbiting, Mr. Langdji enjoys a measure of success in one of the most prestigious elections in the area. This seems to be a common pattern in similar stories from the Northwest and the West: accusations of *kupe* or *famla* against ambitious individuals create problems for them but ultimately do not seem to harm their career.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere we argued that this may relate to the particularly important role of chiefs in this area.<sup>24</sup> This is one of the great differences with the segmentary societies from the forest area, discussed above. Both in the West and the Northwest there is a strong tradition of chieftaincy which goes back centuries before colonial rule. In many respects, the chiefs in these areas seem to have consolidated their powers despite all the changes in colonial and post-colonial times. Even to the modern elites from this area, who now live in cities elsewhere in the country, chieftaincy is still a crucial issue. In various ways, the chiefs have succeeded in incorporating these new elites into the association of their court.

In the Mbunwe-Samba's story above, the chief does not figure. But in most of his other stories, chiefs play a central role. In some cases, they appear to support local accusations of *kupe* against ambitious individuals. But in others, they protect the accused and seem rather intent on associating them and their new wealth to the court. Cyprian Fisiy, who is from the same area,

emphasizes that all depends on whether the new wealth is 'dedicated' - he speaks also of 'offered' - to the chief.<sup>25</sup> Already in pre-colonial times, accumulation of wealth through trade abroad used to be very important in these societies. The chief was supposed to act as a kind of pivot in the enrichment of his subjects: it depended on his powers whether they had success in dealing with parties from outside the realm.<sup>26</sup> Wealth, accumulated outside the chief's control was seen as asocial and indeed associated with witchcraft. But wealth which was legitimized by the chief's blessing was viewed as the fruit of rightful personal ambition.

As said before, most chiefs in this area are intent on participating in the new forms of wealth as well. They create novel, 'pseudo-traditional', titles at their courts which are bought by the new elites, who succeeded in making a career in the new centres of power outside the chiefdom (but who by descent are often not qualified to assume the pre-existing titles). Thus the chiefs succeed both in profiting directly from the new wealth of their subjects abroad and in incorporating them in the traditional associations around the court.<sup>27</sup> Another effect is that the new wealth of these subjects, which all too often is highly suspect, is 'white-washed', as Fisiy calls it. In these areas, the chiefs seem to be acting as a kind of crystallization point for legitimising the new forms of wealth, which is so blatantly missing in the segmentary societies of the forest discussed above.

From all this an original pattern emerges in the relations between witchcraft, individualising tendencies and violence. The *famla* and *kupe* imagery expresses strong suspicions vis-à-vis the new forms of wealth which are attributed to dangerous individual ambitions and new forms of hidden violence. It can evoke violent reactions, as Mbunwe-Samba's story about the conflict between Mr. Paul Langdji and the Parent Teachers' Association of his school indicates. But it seems that the chiefs have been able to evolve their control over wealth and violence, so as to keep up with the modern changes. By incorporating the new forms of wealth within the traditional associations of their court they are supposed to keep the hidden violence of *famla* and *kupe* in check. Therefore, they are also in a position to control the counter-violence that *kupe* and *famla* rumours evoke.

This is certainly important as a background to the success of new entrepreneurs from these societies: here, new forms of individual success are, at least to a certain extent, still incorporated in the communitarian institutions of the chief's court.<sup>28</sup> This in sharp contrast with the general distrust of the new forms of wealth in the forest societies, which still seem to constitute an unresolved problem there. It can also explain why the state is far less involved in witchcraft affairs in the West and the Northwest, despite the general unrest about *kupe* and *famla*.<sup>29</sup> The chiefs still seem to be able to control the violence and the counter-violence called forth by the rumours about these new forms of witchcraft.

One can wonder, however, whether the chiefs will retain, in these areas as well, the moral power to do so in the future. Their close alliance with the new elites and the selling of new titles seem to involve them also in a quite

ruthless pursuit of the new forms of wealth.<sup>30</sup> Goheen, writing about Nso - the chiefdom to which the Noni area of the case above, also belongs - summarizes the doubts of the population with a powerful image: Will these businessmen and civil servants who buy these novel titles from the chief really turn out to be his 'new leopards' with whom he will ride at night, himself transformed as a lion, in order to protect the realm? Or will they prove to be 'witches of the night' who will corrupt his power from the inside?.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The above may indicate why discourses on sorcery/witchcraft remain so highly relevant for many Africans, in interpreting the modern changes and (re)defining identities in the face of these changes. By their very nature, these discourses seem to address what are both the most frightening and fascinating aspects of modernity: the emergence of new inequalities and novel forms of individualism, accompanied by new patterns of violence. Indeed, these discourses often make a direct link between individualism, communitarian reactions and violence.

The preceding also indicates that discourses on the occult sketch highly different scenarios in the interaction between individual ambition and violence. In some contexts, witchcraft is supposed to combat the new inequalities by forms of violence which can remain hidden, but which can also become highly concrete. In other contexts, the same discourse seems to affirm and encourage individual ambition - which, after all, is nothing new to these societies. The *famla* powers with which, for instance, many successful Bamileke entrepreneurs are associated are often supposed to be so formidable that they make them invulnerable to levelling reactions. There is a clear contrast here with the societies of the southern forest area, where witchcraft mainly seems to act as a levelling force.

In this paper, which offers no more than a first and rapid comparison, this difference was mainly related to the role of the chiefs who, in the West, serve as a crystallization point for legitimising the new, suspect forms of wealth. In the forest, such a crystallization point is clearly lacking. Consequently, the new forms of accumulation seem to remain an unsolved problem here.

However, it might be worthwhile to try and deepen this comparison. No doubt, other, more hidden factors play a role as well. An obvious theme to analyze more deeply is doubtless the relation between witchcraft and kinship which is basic in all these discourses. Warnier and Rowlands emphasize that there are fundamental differences between kinship discourses - and their implications for new forms of accumulation - in the West and in the southern forests.<sup>32</sup> In the West, kinship itself would offer certain forms of protection against the 'strategies of disaccumulation' which are so dominant in the kinship relations in the forest area. Such differences must have direct

consequences for the ways in which kinship articulates with witchcraft, personal ambition and violence.

Finally, the above shows how vital a role the state has come to play as a catalyst in witchcraft affairs and their implications for individualism and violence. Apparently, in this field (as, probably, in any other field), the state should not be seen as a conscious actor. Despite the general fear among state officials for the levelling force of witchcraft, they do not seem to follow a common, well-defined strategy. It is not even clear to what extent the drastic interventions of the state courts in the East Province are the result of a clear political choice. One can interpret them also as a sign that officials are giving in to strong popular pressures on the state to intervene. In this context, 'the state' can better be seen as a crucial arena - a power-field - which is more and more pervaded by the hidden forces of witchcraft.

Again, there is a striking contrast here between the West, where people seem to be more intent on keeping the state at bay, and the forest societies, where it becomes increasingly impossible for the state not to be involved. Historically, there is a tragic paradox here. During the first decades of colonial rule, it was precisely these segmentary societies, not used to any kind of central authority, which strongly resisted the imposition of the state and the new forms of domination and violence it brought. Now, these same societies seem to feel themselves so unable to solve their internal conflicts that they appeal to the state to intervene in the most private of spheres, that of witchcraft and kinship. Clearly, the harshest forms of violence in the stories above - at least if one focusses on what happened in the daily world - were unleashed by an unholy alliance of the local witch-doctors with the state.

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*Peter Geschiere*

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Notes:

1. A brief note on terminology might be required here. I have serious misgivings about using terms like sorcery or witchcraft (or '*sorcellerie*'). In general these Western terms are awkward translations of African notions which have much broader implications. Often a less pejorative and more neutral translation, like 'occult forces' might be preferable. The problem is, however, that these Western terms have now generally been appropriated by Africans (also in public discussions, newspapers etc.). Therefore I prefer, despite these misgivings, to retain these terms. Moreover, I do not follow the classical anthropological discussion between 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery', proposed by Evans-Pritchard on the basis of his Azande material, since it is hard to apply in the Cameroonian societies discussed here.
2. Mbembe, 'Provisional notes'.
3. Geschiere, 'Sorcery and the state'.
4. In colonial times and in the first decades after Independence, state courts rather tended to prosecute the witch-doctors (for defamation and breach of peace, because of their accusing persons to be witches). This made the people in many parts of Africa complain that the state was protecting the witches, because it hindered the witch-doctor to combat them. As a friend in the East of Cameroon explained to me, in 1971: 'You whites do not believe in witchcraft. Therefore, in colonial times, the state could not act against witchcraft. But now, all this is going to change. Nowadays it is the Africans who are in command and they know witchcraft is all too real here. Soon the law will be changed, so that judges will be able to deal with the witches'. Apparently not even a change in the law was necessary to intervene more directly. In this Province, state courts are now indeed condemning witches, as my friend predicted, but on the basis of an existing - and fairly vague - article on '*sorcellerie*' in the Cameroonian *Code Penal* (which is heavily inspired by the French *Code*). See Fisiy and Geschiere, *Judges and witches*.
5. The Maka characterize the former relations between the villages as *domb* - a term which they now translate as 'war'. This translation can have incorrect associations: war was not continuous; rather there was a constant threat of aggression, manslaughter and raids (see Geschiere, *Village communities and the state*).
6. This basic, segmentary pattern is to be found throughout the forest area of southern Cameroun. There is a fundamental contrast here with the chiefly societies of the mountain area of West and Northwest Cameroon, where more complex hierarchies had evolved and which will be discussed in a later section of this paper.
7. Geschiere, *Village communities and the state*.
8. Due to the kind assistance of a Cameroonian colleague, Cyprian F. Fisiy (now in the USA), I have been able to consult 22 files of witch trials in the East, covering a period between August 1982 and December 1984. Fisiy found these files in the archives of the Court of Appeal in Bertoua (the capital of the East Province). Most files also contained copies of an earlier trial of the same case before one of the '*Tribunaux de Première Instance*' in this province. Moreover, I collected detailed information on six other cases in various Maka villages. On the basis of this material, Fisiy and I published several articles together (Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Judges and witches', 'Sorcery, witchcraft and accumulation' and 'Sorcery discourses'). I thank him for a most stimulating collaboration and for his kind permission to reproduce the following case here.
9. Sources for this case: *Jugement du Tribunal d'Abong-Mbang*, no. 1163/cor; doss. 83.400.762/PG/BE, 1982-3, arrêt no.8/cor, 4-10-1983, *Cour d'Appel*, Bertoua; and my own investigations in the village. The names of the village and the accused here are pseudonyms. However, I have retained the real name of the '*professeur-guéris*'.

- seur' Baba Denis, since he has become a public figure by his regular appearances as an expert witness before the state courts.
10. It is especially because the *djamb* forces lend themselves also to such more positive uses that the translation by '*sorcellerie*' (witchcraft/sorcery) - which is very common among the Maka nowadays - has unfortunate associations (see above and Geschiere, *La viande des autres*).
  11. See also Mallart, *Ni dos ni ventre* on the Evuzok of South Cameroon and Copet-Rougier, 'Catégories d'ordres' on the Kako, to the north-west of the Maka.
  12. Baba, and a colleague of his, a certain Aliguéna, who enjoyed a similar prestige in this area, played a decisive role in seven of the twenty-two Court cases of which we could consult the files. In none of these seven cases were any of the accused acquitted.
  13. Cf. Guyer, 'Wealth in people', who views the drive towards 'multiple personal self-realization' as characteristic for the societies of the Equatorial forest. In the Maka area, this emphasis on personal ambition is restrained by strong levelling mechanisms (the close link between witchcraft and jealousy; the segmentary implications of the kinship discourse). Elsewhere, I have described the tension between personal ambition and levelling mechanisms as characteristic for this society, in the past as well as nowadays (Geschiere, *Village communities and the state*).
  14. This collaboration also seems to be accompanied by the emergence of a new type of *nganga* who emphatically sport modern attributes (books, sunglasses; Baba has also a large sign on his '*bureau*' telling that he is affiliated to the 'Rose Croix', a Western and more or less secret association which is very popular among the new elite in Cameroon). These *nganga* are also much more aggressive in their accusations: they often take the initiative to point out witches (clearly, they try in this way to recruit new clients, who are told that they urgently need the services of the *nganga* to protect themselves against these witches) and they do not deem it necessary to shroud their accusations in vague allusions, as *nganga* often used to do in the seventies. By handing over the accused to the *gendarmes* - instead of curing them - these modern *nganga* become highly punitive figures. One can wonder whether this does not affect their capacity to heal (see Geschiere, *La viande des autres*).
  15. It seems that in this respect he differed from his colleagues in the East, who do feel that the law allows them to convict witches without '*preuves tangibles*'. Apparently different interpretations of the law are possible on this point. According to our information, the *Cour Suprême* in Yaoundé (the capital) did uphold the verdict of the Bertoua Court in the few cases that the convicted 'witches' appealed against their conviction. The State Attorney in Kribi maintained that neither he or his colleagues had received clear guidelines from above in the matter.
  16. Unfortunately, during my last visit to Kribi (1993), I could not get any information about the further course of this affair.
  17. See Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Sorcery, witchcraft and accumulation', and Geschiere, *La viande des autres*. See also the very vivid descriptions of De Rosny (*Les yeux de ma chèvre* and *L'Afrique des guérisons*) of his own experiences with *ekong* and healing in Douala; also Ardener, 'Witchcraft', on the Bakweri; and Balz, *Where the faith has to live*, and Ejedepang-Koge, *The tradition of a people*, on the Bakossi.
  18. There it is called *kong*. According to some informants, *kong* also played a role in the preceding case from Kribi (supposedly, the villagers were very upset by the witchcraft of the old man since it concerned this new form).
  19. The word 'plantations' has particularly strong connotations in this area. Already at the end of the 19th century, the Germans had created here one of the few large-scale plantation complexes in West Africa. The recruitment of plantation labour - at first through direct coercion or by the intermediary of the chiefs, later through more

- commercial forms of wage-labour (already in the thirties a true labour market had developed) - affected the whole western part of Cameroon.
20. Warnier, *L'esprit d'entreprise*.
  21. Mbunwe-Samba, *Witchcraft, magic and divination*.
  22. *Ibidem*, 56-58.
  23. Cf. also a similar story by Fisiy referring to another village in the same area (Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Sorcery, witchcraft and accumulation').
  24. Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Sorcery, witchcraft and accumulation' and 'Sorcery discourses'.
  25. Fisiy, *Power and privilege*; cf. also Fisiy and Geschiere, 'Sorcery discourses'.
  26. Warnier, *Echanges, développement et hiérarchies*.
  27. Goheen, 'Gender and accumulation', and *Men own the fields*.
  28. See also Warnier, *L'esprit d'entreprise*.
  29. Indeed, from the case above of Paul Langdji, a reverse pattern emerges (compared to the cases from the South and the East). In Langdji's case, it was he who appealed to the court (and not his accusers). Apparently, the court was determined not to become involved in this case. It more or less protected Langdji against the witchcraft accusations. But it refused to deliver a clear verdict with an excuse that seemed quite thin (that women had been among Langdji's attackers but they had not been arrested). The contrast with the readiness of the courts in the East to intervene in a most unequivocal sense against the witches is quite striking.
  30. Cf. Fisiy, *Power and privilege*.
  31. Goheen, *Men own the fields*.
  32. Warnier, *L'esprit d'entreprise*, and Rowlands, 'Economic dynamism'.