

In the 1980s, state courts in Cameroon—notably in the East Province, generally considered as backward and infested with witchcraft—began to condemn “witches” to heavy sentences (up to ten years in jail and heavy fines). This was a striking reversal of previous jurisprudence, especially since the judges were now ready to accept the testimony of *nganga* (traditional healers) as conclusive proof. Until then it was the *nganga* who risked persecution (for defamation and disturbance). In the 1980s they became, on the contrary, crucial witnesses for the prosecution (see Fisy and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1997: chap. 6).

In the 1990s, the new African National Congress (ANC) regime in South Africa came under heavy pressure to intervene against “witchcraft.” Toward the end of apartheid, especially in the northern parts of the country became the scene of violent witch-hunts, in which gangs of young people—often associated with the ANC—played a leading role, supported by *inyanga* (experts in magic who are similar in many ways to the Cameroonian *nganga*). In 1995 the ANC government of the Northern Province (later rebaptized Limpopo Province) instituted the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province of the Republic of South Africa—commonly called the Ralushai Commission after its chairman—to look into the causes of these disturbances. In 1996 the report of this commission advised a change in the law so that not only *inyanga* and other specialists could be prosecuted but also any person “who does any act which creates a reasonable suspicion that he is engaged in the practice of witchcraft” (1996: 55).² One can wonder how the latter recommendation—which can be read as confirming the reality of witchcraft as a crime—is to be reconciled with the general trend of legislation under the postapartheid regime, notably with the modernist tenor of the new Constitution. In subsequent years the witch-hunts in Limpopo and in neighboring Mpumalanga seem to have abated somewhat. According to Isak Niehaus (2001) this is mainly due to the restoration of the authority of “traditional” chiefs in these areas.³

However, it is clear as well that the ANC government—like the Cam-

eroonian regime—continues to be under heavy popular pressure to deal one way or another with witchcraft. The general panic about a supposed proliferation of witchcraft is certainly not limited to the rural regions. In several publications Adam Ashforth (1998b, 2000, 2005) has showed, for instance, that witchcraft panics became ever stronger in Soweto, the largest township in the country. He concludes that witches have replaced the former apartheid regime as an explanation for people’s sufferings; and he adds that it might seriously affect the ANC regime’s credibility if it does not show itself capable of dealing with this threat in one way or another. Indeed, in December 2004, the South African Parliament voted with great enthusiasm (clearly inspired by President Thabo Mbeki’s call for an “African Renaissance,” which implies proper respect for “African knowledge”) for a new law that formalizes ways in which state officials can work together with *inyanga*. It is not yet clear what the practical implications of this law will be.

The aim of this essay is to compare these two efforts—prosecution and collaboration—to combat the rising fear of witchcraft. My question is whether one can expect the law—and I mean here state law—to contain this fear, which so many now see as a form of disorder that urgently needs to be addressed. In many parts of the African continent this is, unfortunately, a pressing question. At the same time it will be clear that this is also a very tricky topic: writing about it clearly entails the dangers of exoticizing—or even primitivizing—Africa as still beset by “traditional” forms of superstition. Especially in the United States, many African Americans (and also African colleagues working in the United States) tend to complain that discussing “witchcraft” implies “putting Africa back in the 19th century,” as a colleague once remarked. It is certainly true that the term itself is a most unfortunate translation of African notions with much broader meanings. However, on the African continent itself, people—academics included—stress that the popular obsession with a supposed proliferation of “witchcraft” is an ever more urgent problem.⁴ Clearly, it will not do to address such fears as stemming from the resilience of some sort of “traditional” relic that is seen as the very opposite of everything that is “modern.” As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff showed already more than ten years ago, in their seminal introduction to *Modernity and Its Malcontents* (1993), “witchcraft” has become, on the contrary, an integral part of people’s vision of modernity. The often-disconcerting dynamics of these representations precisely in the more modern sectors of life—new forms of entrepreneurship, health services, sports, politics—show that they express not so much resistance to modernity but rather an effort to interpret modern changes and gain access to them.⁵

The consequence is that in many parts of present-day Africa—certainly not only in Cameroon or South Africa—there is increasing pressure on the government to intervene. It would be highly regrettable if political correctness made academics avoid such an urgent topic. Throughout the continent people complain that colonial governments (including the apartheid one) tended to protect the witches: they intervened against the “witch doctors,” convicting them for defamation and disturbance of the peace. Many feel that, thus, the state allowed witchcraft to proliferate.⁶ However, people expect the situation to be different in the postcolony: the new government should know what to do about witchcraft.

In this shadowy field, there is therefore certainly the tendency, signaled in the introduction to this collection, toward a “legalization” of everyday life. This tendency seems to be directly related to a widespread fear of looming and encompassing disorder. It is this fear—taking on, indeed, “metaphysical” dimensions—that directly reinforces the trend toward legalization. Yet there may be a paradox here, in the sense that this very appeal to the law to set things right, instead of appeasing popular fears of disorder, dramatically reinforces them. After all, it is a moot question whether the state, with its juridical sanctions, is at all capable of dealing with this explosive issue, and this can radically heighten people’s feelings of intense insecurity.⁷ There seems to be a worrying but almost inevitable logic involved in this: the modernist state with its claims to general control tends to spread its interventions ever more broadly; thus, it risks becoming bogged down in domains that are clearly at the margins of its scope. And it is precisely the failures of the supposedly all-powerful state that can make the fear of disorder attain metaphysical dimensions.

On this point, the question raised in the call for papers for our conference as to whether the “postcolony” is exceptional (or not) is highly relevant. At first sight the whole conundrum of witchcraft and the law may seem to highlight the exceptionality of the postcolony. It is true that the glaring contrast between the kind of rationality on which the modern state is built (at least formally) and the logics involved in witchcraft thinking can expose the limits to state interventions in this treacherous field all the more blatantly. However, in a broader perspective, similar tendencies seem to emerge, ever more strongly, in the supposedly modern countries of the West. There also a strong trend toward legalization—people invoking the law to tackle an increasingly broad spectrum of issues and problems—leads to unexpected dilemmas. To Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1999, 2000), the distinguishing mark of “millennial capitalism” is the proliferation of “occult economies”: pyramid schemes, transnational financial speculations, smuggling on a global scale, Satanist networks on the

Internet, and so on—all pretty difficult challenges for the state, which is nonetheless expected to somehow remain in control. The predicament of the state sketched above is therefore not special to the African state (or even to the postcolonial one; see also Mbembe 2002). In the West as well the state seems to be drawn increasingly into fields that will inevitably highlight the limits to its power: think of the struggle over control of the Internet or the clumsy incursions into the family domain with its hidden currents of aggression.⁸ Moreover, there is an intriguing paradox here. How does this trend toward legalization and state intervention relate to the now omnipresent belief in “the” market as the solution to all problems and the concomitant conviction that the state should restrain itself as much as possible in order to give free rein to “the” economy? Can the law in such a context indeed be expected to contain popular feelings of disorder?

However, the aim of this contribution is more modest. The central question concerns the ability of the Cameroonian and South African governments to deal with the tricky issue of witchcraft. There seem, indeed, to be good reasons to focus on the *limits* of the law in this context.⁹ The Cameroonian example shows that a state offensive against witchcraft can be quite counterproductive. In practice it seems to have reaffirmed the popular obsession with witchcraft as an omnipresent danger. Moreover, the sanctions imposed proved to have completely opposite effects: what is the use of jailing supposed witches for several years when everybody is convinced that, by the time they are released, they will have become even more dangerous? However, such criticisms may seem to be quite gratuitous in view of the very real pressure on the government to do something. The question is, can South Africa do better?

Several factors make any attempt to control witchcraft difficult. The first is the circular and subversive character of witchcraft discourse. A precondition for any form of legislation—just as for our claims as academics—seems to be the creation of clarity and unequivocal distinctions. However, as soon as legislators have to deal with witchcraft, they—again just like academics—become entangled in a minefield of ambiguities and shifting meanings that seem to block any effort toward control.

A second factor, directly related to the first, is the problematic but crucial role of the local expert (*nganga*, *inyanga*, *sangoma*, healer, diviner, witch doctor—whatever term one prefers) as a key witness. Can judges ever establish proof in this occult domain without using their expertise? But how does one prevent this from being seen by the people as legitimating forces similar to those attributed to the witches? A related concern is the limited effectiveness that the state’s sanctions seem to have against

witches, certainly in comparison to these local experts' forms of healing. In practice, it is precisely these indispensable intermediaries who entangle judges and legislators in all the ambiguities of witchcraft discourse.

However, first, a brief excursion into witchcraft as "disorder" might be helpful—all the more so in view of anthropology's persistent heritage of seeing these representations and practices as a very effective form of "social control."¹⁰ The rest of the essay will then focus on witchcraft as exposing the limits of the law.

Witchcraft as Disorder?

In general, interventions by the law into the field of witchcraft—be it in present-day Africa or, for instance, in early-modern Europe—are based on the assumption that witchcraft constitutes a direct attack on the social order. During the heyday of anthropological witchcraft studies in the 1940s and 1950s, anthropologists certainly agreed with this view, but they gave it a special twist by also insisting on the role of these beliefs as very effective elements of social control. Max Gluckman, the guru of the so-called Manchester school, which produced a series of monographs on British "Central Africa" that deeply influenced anthropological views on witchcraft,¹⁰ typically saw witchcraft as essential for the maintenance of the social order. He compared the morality ingrained in witchcraft beliefs to that expressed in an Anglican anthem and deemed it even more effective: "beliefs in the malice of witchcraft . . . do more than ask [you to love your neighbour] as an act of grace; they affirm that if you do not love one another fervently, misfortune will come" (Gluckman 1955: 94).

It was this threat that, in his view, made witchcraft so effective in obliging "men and women . . . to observe the social virtues" (Gluckman 1955: 94).¹¹ This peaceful view is, indeed, far away from the horrors depicted (both in writing and in photographs) in the Ralushai Commission report and from Peter Delius's shocking descriptions of how, in 1986, the "comrades" in two villages in Sekhukhune land (present-day Limpopo Province) called in help from a local diviner, a certain Ramareti Shaba, who no longer threw bones but instead had developed a more modern divining technique, called "African television." On her oversized screen the figures of the "witches" would appear who were then to be "necklaced" by the comrades (Delius 1996: 195). No doubt, Gluckman would have characterized such horrors as symptomatic of a period of transition. But then we may have to see the entire postcolonial period as one great transition. Indeed, since people increasingly feel that the whole world is in constant transition, the term seems to lose its meaning.

It might be more relevant to question Gluckman's (and many other anthropologists') view of witchcraft as the opposite of the social order, serving to keep this order in shape. My informants in East Cameroon, just like several people quoted in the Ralushai Commission report seem, rather, to see it as an integral part of the social order: it may be an extremely evil force, yet if channeled correctly it can also bring riches, luck, and power. Philippe Laburthe-Tolra (1977) concluded that among the Beri of Central Cameroon, *evu* (now always translated as *sorcellerie*) is seen as the dark side of power, extremely dangerous but yet at the same time necessary for making society rich. In these societies, the link between witchcraft and power seems to express the deep conviction that any form of power, even if it is necessary, is highly dangerous. And, again, it is striking that in the Ralushai report so many comments from informants, especially concerning the position of Venda chiefs, seem to echo this view.

This view, relativizing the distinction between good and evil in witchcraft discourse, that was so strongly conveyed to me by my informants from the Cameroonian forest area, has been strongly criticized by several colleagues. The French Togolese political scientist Comi Toulabor reproaches me in his eloquent way for not making a clear distinction between the "witch" and the "magician" (the first unequivocally evil, the second able to use his or her special powers only in a more positive way; Toulabor 1999). John Hund (now at the University of the North, South Africa) attacks me even more forcefully by naming me as an outstanding example of the academic writers who are "unfortunately some of the worst perpetrators of confusion." He is clearly shocked that I repeat my informants' view of the *nganga* (traditional healer) as being a kind of "superwitch" since she or he can heal only by using the same powers as witches tend to use. 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 distinguished from 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, which so easily erodes all such comfortable conceptual distinctions (in Africa, just as elsewhere in the world; see Favret-Saada 1977 on Europe and Taussig 1987 on Colombia). It is clear that there are wide differences in how African societies view central figures like chiefs and healers and in how they relate them to occult powers (or try to separate them from these powers).¹² It is true also that in the forest societies in Cameroon where I did my main fieldwork, 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—*djambe/evu* being potentially lethal but also essential for healing, exercising authority, or accumulating wealth. 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, the chief, though certainly associated with occult powers, is normally rigidly separated from the darker manifestations of these powers. However, it might be important to emphasize that such distinctions are always precarious and never self-evident. It seems to require a constant struggle to maintain them against the inherent fluidity of any discourse on the occult. For instance, recently, when many chiefs from the Cameroonian highlands got into trouble with their subjects for their continued support of the hated regime of President Biya, people were quick to accuse them of being real witches.

There may be good reasons therefore not 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—too much for granted. Even Hund (2000: 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 differentiate 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 people quoted in the Kalushai Commission report (especially from Vendaland) say quite nasty things about *sangoma* ("with a lust for blood and easy money"; 1996: 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 do.

Rather than taking such terminological distinctions as givens, it might be more urgent to study exactly how—through what struggles and by what means—such compartmentalization is maintained. Apparently this will always entail a highly precarious struggle against the tendency of discourses on the occult to blur categories. It might be this subversive charge, undermining any clear-cut distinction between good and evil (or any at-

tempt at a clear definition, whether by academics or by lawyers), that can help us to understand the impressive resilience of these discourses in the face of modern changes. It is also this blurring—think of the Comaroff's characterization as "unroutinizable powers" (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 2004)—that makes it so difficult for the state to find reliable allies in its witchcraft struggle.

Subverting the Law: The Circularity of Witchcraft Discourse

A basic problem for any legislative intervention in the field of witchcraft is what might be called the latter's "circular" character. As mentioned, unequivocal terminology and clear-cut definitions are supposed to be crucial for any lawmaking (as they are for respectable academic research). It might be all the more important to emphasize that the very ambiguity and the fluidity of its core notions are at the heart of the resilience of witchcraft discourse. This seems to be an important reason why changes can be integrated so easily into this discourse and why it is able to explain whatever outcome an event has, making it impervious to any Popperian attempt to try and falsify it. It might also be an important reason why both lawyers and academics have such difficulty in making sense of this tricky field.

My first confrontation with the quite-alarming circularity of witchcraft talk was when my neighbors in the village in southern Cameroon where I had just settled started to gossip about my new friend Mendouga. The latter was a dignified lady of a certain age and with a somewhat enigmatic air who had already honored me twice with a visit. This was quite an honor since, at the time, she was generally seen as the greatest *nganga* (healer) of the area. But after her second visit, my assistant and his friends pointed out to me that "of course" this meant that she was a great *dindjamb* (literally, someone who has a *djambe*, "witchcraft"). Indeed, for them it was only because she had developed her *djambe* in an extraordinary way—thanks to the help of her "professor"—that she could "see" what the witches were doing (meaning that she had "the second pair of eyes"), fall upon them, and force them to lift their spell so that their victim (Mendouga's client) could be healed. Mendouga herself later on assured me, as all *nganga* will do, that her *djambe* was "different": her professor had bound her with heavy "interdictions" to use her powers only to heal and never to kill.¹³ However, it was clear that my fellow villagers were not so sure of this: a *djambe* is a *djambe*, and there is always the risk that the basic instinct of the *dindjamb*—that is, to deliver one's own kin to be devoured

by one's fellow witches—will break through. Indeed, *nganga* are always seen as highly ambiguous figures: they are the obvious persons to turn to when one feels attacked; yet they are also terribly dangerous. And, indeed, about all *nganga* there was constant gossip that they had betrayed their own clients, that they worked in league with the witches, and so on. Throughout the forest area of Cameroon, as in other parts of the continent, there is even a basic belief that, in order to become initiated, an aspiring *nganga* has to offer one of his or her own relatives to his or her professor.¹⁴

There is a basic circularity here: the *nganga* can heal only because (s)he has killed before. Moreover, the main protection against a *diambe* attack is to be found within the realm of the very same *diambe*. But by invoking the help and protection of a *nganga* one allows oneself to be drawn into *diambe*'s vicious circles. No wonder it is so difficult to escape.¹⁵

Again, it might be good to emphasize that this example has aspects that may be particular to certain parts of Cameroon (or maybe of the equatorial forest area). Yet the practical difficulties in keeping witch and healer apart—and the circularity this entails—seem to be much more general.¹⁶ The question is what happens when the stare with its judicial apparatus intervenes in such a tricky field?

The research by Cyprian Fisiy and myself on the witchcraft trials in the East Province of Cameroon began with a set of files from the Court of Appeal of Bertoua (the capital of the East Province) to which Fisiy succeeded in gaining access. The very language of these files shows what kind of confusion occurs when a witchcraft affair has to be dealt with in legal writing. The files are full of long vituperations by the judges against witchcraft as a basic evil: they expose it as the villagers' main form of subversion of government initiatives and as *the* explanation of why this province remains so backward. Like other civil servants, the judges clearly feel—at least in their official role—that witchcraft has to be exterminated at all costs. Any suspect who confesses to being a *sorcier* (witch) is, therefore, certain to be condemned to a heavy sentence (a longer term in jail, a heavy fine). The main witnesses against these witches are a small number of *nganga* whose expertise is clearly accepted by the court (in fact, their declarations that they have “seen” that the accused “went out”—that is, left his body at night to fly off to a meeting with his fellow witches—are in most cases the only form of “proof”). But when these *nganga* have to introduce themselves before the court in French, they announce themselves as Mr. So-and-So, *sorcier*.¹⁷ Although this is completely in line with the local way of speaking (after all, the *nganga* are *mindjindjamb*), it goes di-

rectly against the unequivocal condemnation of *la sorcellerie* as such by the judges. But, of course, they will never take the *nganga*'s introduction of himself as a *sorcier* as proof of his guilt. Such terminological inconsistencies highlight the basic ambiguity of the judges' offensive against *la sorcellerie*: the very fact that the legal offensive hinges on the help of a *sorcier* (who, moreover, is seen by the locals as the main representative of the world of the *diambe*) makes it inconsistent in a very practical sense.

This inconsistency in the language of the files points to another ambiguity in the judges' position: like other civil servants, the judges may be quite insistent in their official condemnation of *la sorcellerie* when they perform their public duties, but in their private lives nearly all of them are deeply implicated in the *nganga* world. We often saw a big black Mercedes parked in front of the relatively modest house of our *nganga* friend Mendouga. This was a sure sign that one of her elite clients—Mendouga often boasted that elites from all over the region came to her to ask for help—had a consult with her, either to have themselves *blindés* (*boûina*, “armed”) against treacherous attacks of their political rivals or possibly to ask her to attack these opponents. No wonder the judges did not see any inconsistency in accepting the help of these *sorciers* in their struggle against *la sorcellerie*.

The Ralushai Commission report is plagued by similar terminological slippages. In their effort to create clarity, Professor Nkhumeleni Ralushai and his coauthors point out an interesting inconsistency in the prevailing South African Witchcraft Suppression Amendment Act of 1957/1970. They point out that, although “the legislature’s approach [in this act] is that witchcraft does not exist” the act nonetheless forbids people “from practicing witchcraft, when it is said that it does not exist” (1996: 57). However, the report itself hardly succeeds in avoiding similar ambiguities. For instance, a central term in the report is, as can be expected, “witchcraft killings.” Yet, especially in the first chapters it is not clear whether this refers to the killing of witches or to supposed killings by witches. The case material that is so diligently accumulated in the report from various judicial archives in the Northern Province offers striking examples of both possibilities. In later chapters the authors seem to be conscious of possible confusion on this point, so they introduce alternative terms, like “witchcraft related killings,” “witch killings,” and “witchcraft violence.” But, again, the terms are not clearly distinguished. Instead, the report introduces “ritual murders” as a separate category, referring to the so-called *muti* murders (the killing of innocent victims, mostly children, in order to use their body parts to produce “medicine” that will fortify the client).

The report convincingly shows that it was especially the increasing rumors about such *miti* murders that pushed the young “comrades” into a frenzy of witch-hunts. However, one can wonder whether these “ritual murders” can be so clearly separated from “witchcraft killings”—here also there seems to be a subversive circularity, if only because the same *inyanga* who were used as “witch finders” could also be easily accused of being involved in *miti* murders. The report is no doubt right in starting from local categories; yet some closer analysis of the ambiguities implied by these notions might help us to avoid being caught in the slippages of these very categories.

As is only to be expected, things become even more complicated when the report addresses the role of the local “experts,” the *inyanga*.¹⁸ In some passages the report seems to distinguish between “diviners” and “healers” (a distinction that is seen as basic to the representations of the occult in many Bantu societies). But in subsequent formulations this distinction is again neglected. And, indeed, the commission’s case material shows how precarious such a distinction is becoming in present-day circumstances. In its recommendations the committee instead proposes another distinction: it severely criticizes the failure of “most of the legislation to draw a clear line between the so-called witch, the sorcerer, and the witchfinder” (1996: 61). The distinction between witch and sorcerer is not further elaborated in the report. But the aim of setting apart the witch finder is clear. To Ralushai and his fellow commission members the witch finder (in other passages the term *inyanga* is used) performed a key role in triggering the popular frenzy about a proliferation of witchcraft. And, no doubt with good reason, many of the report’s recommendations aim to make it possible to undertake legal action against these witch finders.

Here again, the report seems to get entangled in the fluidity and circularity of these local notions. Its own case material shows in great detail how difficult it is to distinguish witch and witch finder. In many cases, an *inyanga* is accused of being a witch and even physically attacked. And, as said, many of the witches who were killed in the large-scale hunts around 1990 were apparently *inyanga*. The report’s appendices spell out in detail how the “comrades” forced the accused to display all his or her herbs and pots in front of the house and explain their use. Only after this was the accused lynched. Often, the victim was explicitly accused of being involved in *miti* murders. Indeed, the *inyanga* figure as some sort of archetype of the witch; yet, as said, they also worked closely with the comrades as witch finders. Ramareidi Shaba with her “African television” screen in Sekhukhuneland (Delius 1996) may have been a particularly frightening ex-

ample of what an *inyanga* could do, but she was certainly not exceptional. In nearly all documented cases of witch-hunts by the comrades, the latter explicitly sought the help of one or several *inyanga* to help them to expose the witches. Indeed, it is quite clear that the *inyanga* were often in some sort of catch-22 situation: if they refused to collaborate with the comrades they were in grave danger of being exposed themselves as witches to be lynched. After all, any *inyanga* is a self-evident suspect. There seems to be the same circularity here as in the Cameroonian examples above: apparently the very capacity of the *inyanga* to “see” witches indicates that they are involved with the same occult powers.

Ralushai’s simple recommendation to “draw a clear line” between witch and witch finder might, therefore, be quite naive. Yet, at the same time, it touches upon a central issue in the whole conundrum: how are judicial interventions in the field of witchcraft to deal with the *nganga* and *inyanga*?

Cameroon: The *Nganga* as a Trojan Horse?

In earlier publications on the witch trials in eastern Cameroon, Fisiy and I compared the central role of the *nganga* in the judiciary offensive against witches to that of the Trojan horse that helped the Greeks to finally break the resistance of the proud city of Troy (Fisiy and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1997). As mentioned, the Cameroonian judges feel that the “expertise” of the *nganga* is crucial for establishing “proof.” How else can they prove “beyond reasonable doubt” that the accused did leave their bodies at night to attack other people? However, as I said, to the Maka and other groups in the forest, the *nganga* is the most conspicuous representative of the world of *diambe* (or *evi* or *sorcellerie* or whatever term people use). The newly enhanced prestige of these local experts—who, instead of being persecuted by the courts, now play a central role during its sessions—seems therefore to confirm the popular belief in these powers.

This official recognition of their expertise seems to coincide with new aspects in the performance of these *nganga*. Especially after 1980, a novel, more modern type of *nganga* emerged. The *nganga* I knew in the Maka region during the 1970s (e.g., our friend Mendounga) were true villagers. They hardly spoke French and their knowledge of the exterior world was limited. Some were considered rich, but people would always comment that the wealth of witches, the *nganga* included, is based upon “delight without sweat,” which seems to mean that it is easily acquired but does not last long. Most of the *nganga* lived in simple *photo-photo* houses (mud walls on a frame of poles), often situated slightly outside the village, not far from

the bush. In everyday life they remained in the background: they were thought to operate in secret.

However, the *nganga* who figure in the court files as expert witnesses against the “witches” exhibit a very different profile. They present themselves emphatically as modern figures, also in everyday life. Often, they have worked for some time elsewhere, sometimes in public service. They speak French fluently and use, with certain orientation, French (or even English) books on occultism, “Eastern magic,” and other forms of secret knowledge. They brag about their modern education. One *nganga* (thirty-five years old) told me, for instance, that he had been admitted to a Swiss medical school when his ancestor “took” him. He remained paralyzed for six months. Then he started as a “traditional healer.” But he still called himself “doctor.” These modern *nganga* often emphasize that they work with the government as members of the new association of traditional healers. Their membership card is used as a sort of license and, more generally, as a symbol of their modern prestige.¹⁹

Baba Denis, a *nganga* who played a central role in several of the court cases we could follow, can serve as an example here. Baba established himself as a “traditional healer” in a village, close to the one where I lived, in the early 1980s. But his compound was very different from that of, for instance, our former friend Mendouga (who had died in the meantime; people said she had “lost her power” several years earlier). When I visited Baba in 1988, he lived in the middle of the village on the main crossroads. His house was adorned with several large signboards: not only “traditional Healer” but also “Astrologue” and “Rose-Croix” (Rostreucian). Especially the last sign underscored the modernity of this healer: the Rostreucians are supposed to be highly present among the new state elite (President Paul Biya himself is an acolyte). Indeed, Baba often spoke of his brother who was expecting to receive an important position in the president’s office in the capital. He himself had the authoritarian air of a *fon-tionnaire*, which was hardly surprising since he had served in the army for a long period. According to the villagers, he was sent home because of “problems.” It was said that he even spent some time in prison. But this rumor only served to enhance his renown as a specialist, since—as said—people generally believe that in prison one meets the really dangerous sorcerers and learns their secrets. Baba himself, however, emphasized the scientific nature of his expertise: before the tribunal, he often explained how he applied “his science.” Like his colleague referred to above, he called himself a doctor and talked about his compound as his “hospital.”²⁰

The high profile of such *nganga*, reinforced by the official recognition

of their expertise, automatically enhances the popular idea that the *djambé* is everywhere. Of special importance in this context, moreover, is that these modern *nganga* are much more aggressive in recruiting clients and in unmasking suspects. In the 1970s, most *nganga* were still fairly discreet. They appeared in public only on special occasions, such as when the village notables invited them to perform a purifying ritual or an oracle. They were often hesitant to advance specific accusations, no doubt for fear of difficulties with the authorities but also because vague allusions seemed more useful to their forms of therapy. The treatments of a “healer” such as, for instance, Mendouga, were in fact mostly aimed at repairing family relations.

A “modern” *nganga* like Baba intervenes in a very different manner. In several of the court cases whose files we could read, it was he who took the initiative to “purify” a village, since he had “seen” that it was invaded by the witches (in one of these villages he even claimed to have destroyed a “nocturnal airstrip” where the witches “landed their planes”). During such purification actions, it was he who pointed out the witches and had them arrested by the villagers. Moreover, it was Baba who insisted that they should be handed over to the gendarmes. Other modern *nganga* as well have few scruples in hurling direct accusations against persons they often do not know. And they are constantly trying to attract new clients by warning them that they are the victims of occult attacks and that they urgently need protection against evildoers from within their close surroundings.

One reason for such aggressive behavior is clearly that these *nganga* hope to make quick money: the world of the *nganga* is becoming ever more based on money, and people often pay large sums for protection or purification. But *nganga* are also inspired by the new possibility of gaining some sort of official recognition as witch finders. It is, in fact, quite clear that the high profile of these new *nganga*, as expert witnesses before the tribunals and allies of the government, hardly contributes to putting an end to *la sorcellerie*.²¹ On the contrary, it strengthens a general sense of “metaphysical disorder” among the people, since the omnipresence of these *nganga* seems to confirm that witchcraft is, indeed, proliferating.

The Ralushai Commission Report:

“Drawing a Clear Line . . .”

The patterns that emerge from the ways in which the South African courts try to deal with witchcraft and from the Ralushai Commission report differ from those in Cameroon. Yet there are also many similarities as

far as the daily context is concerned. For instance, in everyday life in South Africa, *inyanga* are certainly as present as the *nganga* in the Cameroonian context. The Ralushai report quotes an article by Mihalik and Cassim (1992: 138): “By 1985 there were some 10,000 sangomas and inyangas practising in greater Johannesburg. These traditional healers were consulted at least occasionally by 85 per cent of all black households and were supported by a national network of approximately 40,000 traders in healing and magical herbs. The African Traditional Healers Association claimed a membership of 179,000 outnumbering western doctors by 8 to 1” (1996: 48).²² These figures are quite convincing for anyone who has visited the Durban *multi* market, which serves as a magical hub for the whole of South Africa (and beyond). Moreover, it is also clear that these specialists played a key role in the outbreak of the shocking witch-hunts of the “comrades” in the Northern Province toward the end of apartheid. Delius’s stories about Ramaredi Shaba and her fearsome African television screen are paralleled by many similar reports in the rich case material collected in the Ralushai report (see also Niehaus 2001). As in the judicial offensive against witchcraft in Cameroon, these local specialists were indispensable to the comrades’ action against similar dangers: who else could “sniff out” the witches?

However, the eagerness with which the comrades—apparently encouraged by the changing political context—took matters into their own hands, and the violent consequences of this, gave the whole issue of witchcraft a somewhat different twist than in Cameroon (and many other sub-Saharan countries). In Cameroon, witchcraft as such became increasingly defined by politicians as the ultimate form of subversion of the state, sabotaging *le développement* and undermining the position of the state elite. Indeed, while I was living in the village in eastern Cameroon, I regularly witnessed officials haranguing the villagers and telling them that they should stop sabotaging the government’s development projects with their eternal witchcraft, or else . . . The judicial offensive against witchcraft after 1980 seemed to be as much inspired by such worries among the Cameroonian authorities as by pressure “from below” (from the people) on the state to do something about the proliferation of occult attacks. In South Africa, at least in the former Northern Province, it was the proliferation of violent witch-hunts—the summary executions of witches by the comrades—rather than supposed conspiracies by the witches that posed an urgent threat to the state. As several observers noted, the witch-hunts seemed to indicate that the state was no longer in control in the area, which was highly problematic both for the apartheid regime and for the subse-

quent ANC government (see also Ralushai Commission 1996: 231). The vital question became, therefore, what the state courts had done—and could do—to contain these hunts. It is notably on this point that Ralushai and his coauthors evaluate the rich array of cases in the appendices of their report.

The authors note with clear dismay that in several cases the courts did not intervene at all. This seems to have occurred especially in those cases where chiefs were actively involved in the witch-hunts. The report sees this refusal of at least some courts to act as a crucial failure since it must have encouraged further witch-hunts (Ralushai Commission 1996: 236, 270). It notes also that in several cases where the courts did condemn the perpetrators of witch killings, they imposed punishments that were purely nominal, which again could only encourage the further spread of the hunts (240, 245). Only in a few cases were proper punishments imposed on the main culprits of the lynchings (247).²³ Moreover, the report notes that in none of these cases was judicial action undertaken against the *inyanga* who had been involved in “sniffing out” the witches; it clearly sees this as another failure of the judiciary apparatus (187, 269).

Indeed, Ralushai and his coauthors seem to recognize—and rightly so—that the *inyanga* were at the heart of the whole problem. Several of their most stringent recommendations are directed against the *inyanga* and the problematic implications of their role as witch finders. For instance, the new Witchcraft Control Act (which the commission proposed as a replacement for the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 with its amendment of 1970) retains the article from the older law that declares guilty and “liable on conviction” anybody who “employs or solicits any witch-doctor, witch-finder or any other person to name or indicate any person as a wizard or a witch” (art. 1c, Ralushai Commission 1996: 55). Since it is central to the expertise of any *inyanga* (or any healer in general) that she be able to “see” the source of the occult aggression undermining the client’s well-being, this article would mean that anybody who consults a local healer would risk prosecution. How is a client to stop the healer from exercising the gift that is supposed to be the secret to her powers? Not only the impressive figures quoted above but also the rich case material in the report’s appendices vividly illustrates the omnipresence of the *inyanga* in everyday life. So how is this article ever to be applied with any degree of success?

The report’s draconic recommendations against *inyanga*—understandable as they may be—are also difficult to reconcile with the emphasis in its opening pages on the need to take the popular concern about witchcraft

seriously. For instance, after a few preliminary pages about the composition and the procedures of the commission, with eloquent simplicity the report raises right away what might be considered the crucial issue: “The question may be asked whether a community that still strongly believes in witchcraft can be blamed for insisting that the old man, who had made the threat [of witchcraft], should not be removed from the area” (1996: 13).²⁴ The question that automatically seems to follow from this is whether it is possible to take such concerns seriously without involving in one way or another a local expert? Indeed, in other passages as well the commission seems to highlight both how indispensable the *inyanga* are for reassembling the population and, at the same time, what dangerous and unreliable partners they are for any attempt by the government to intervene.

The report seems to look for a way out of this dilemma in the institution of a National Traditional Healers Association. No fewer than twenty-three pages of the report (1996: 64–87) concern a “Proposed Draft Legislation to Control the Practice of Traditional Healers.” This draft is strongly influenced by the Zimbabwe example, where such an association has been functioning since the 1980s. Professor Ralushai himself and Mr. Ndou, another commission member, visited Harare and had a long interview with Professor Chavunduka, vice-chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe and president of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association. They also talked with other members of the executive committee of this association. The legal text they proposed on the basis of these interviews has a strikingly disciplinary character. It mainly consists of a long enumeration of all sorts of control boards and possible disciplinary measures against “improper or disgraceful conduct” by members. The text does not spell out what such conduct might be, but the rest of the report (notably the proposed text for the Witchcraft Control Act) makes it quite clear that this would especially be “to name or indicate any person as wizard or witch.” As a consequence, the heavily disciplinary tenor of the proposed Traditional Medical Practitioners Act seems to have a very circumscribed view of what “traditional healing” is: if the whole aspect of “seeing” is cut out, what is left of this “healing”?

The basic problem is, again, the highly fluid character of notions of healing and healing power. The proposed act on traditional healers reminded me strongly of long debates in Cameroon on how to distinguish “*bonafide*” and “*malafide*” *nganga*. In Cameroon as well, some people advocate official recognition of a national association of traditional healers (which, as mentioned, has existed for some time but without clear official approval). The idea is here as well that it would help to separate char-

latans—and in this context people often mention Nigerian “specialists”—from real *nganga*. Some insist that the line should be drawn between healers working with herbal medicine and other forms of “local knowledge,” on the one hand, and those dabbling in “witchcraft,” on the other. However, to the people in general such distinctions are never convincing: at least the capacity to “see”—to have “the second pair of eyes”—is believed to be crucial to any form of local knowledge. In this respect again, any distinction in the field of occult knowledge seems to be precarious and constantly shifting. There may be good reasons to doubt whether Ralushai’s disciplinary Traditional Medical Practitioners Act could ever resolve the ambivalences of popular perceptions of healing and protection against occult aggression.

Conclusion

As mentioned, very different patterns emerge from the ways in which the state, or the law, get entangled with witchcraft in Cameroon and in South Africa. Yet somewhat similar vicious circles seem to stand out. In Cameroon, the results of the judicial offensive against *la sorcellerie* since the 1980s have been far from conclusive. On the contrary, it seems to have aggravated the popular obsession with the proliferation of witchcraft as an omnipresent form of disorder. A practical reason for this is the blatant inefficiency of the judicial apparatus. Court cases drag on for years. When people are finally summoned and come to the tribunal—often after a burdensome journey—they are told that one of the magistrates had urgent things to do elsewhere and that the *affaire* has once more been postponed, and so on. Witchcraft cases that are taken to court often attract a lot of attention, certainly in the village(s) concerned. And precisely the fact that such cases drag on and on reinforces the feeling of disorder. No wonder that lately people seem to look elsewhere for solutions, notably in the rapidly growing Pentecostal churches. Indeed, the Pentecostals seem to be much more efficient than the state in dealing with witchcraft dangers.²⁵

At a more general level, this judicial offensive seems to be counterproductive because of its inherent inconsistencies. In their efforts to suppress witchcraft as a dangerous form of subversion, undermining even the state itself, the judges have to enlist the help of the *nganga*. How else can they ever hope to establish proof that the accused have, indeed, practiced witchcraft?²⁶ However, their alliance with the *nganga* as expert witnesses proved to have the opposite effect: it bestowed some sort of official recognition on these local specialists. And since for the population the *nganga* are the outstanding representatives of the world of the *djambel-sorcellerie*,

this reaffirmed people's preoccupation with occult threats. Moreover, it promoted the emergence of a more modern type of *nganga* with a much more aggressive approach—both to potential clients and to people they accuse—who play a key role in the general excitement about the proliferation of witchcraft as a metaphysical form of disorder.

The dealings of the law with witchcraft in South Africa, though quite different, seem to be haunted by similar circularity and ambiguity. The members of the Kulusai Commission, like several other observers, identified the *inyanga* as having played a crucial role in the fierce witch-hunts in the former Northern Province, which threatened to destabilize this part of the country during the transition from apartheid to ANC rule. The commission's report severely criticized the courts for their leniency toward the perpetrators of these lynchings and especially toward the *inyanga* whose role as witch finders had been indispensable in starting the hunts. Moreover, it insisted (1996: 61) that the *inyanga* should remain apolitical—meaning that they should stay out of party politics. The commission clearly realized how dangerous it is to mix the world of occult healing with the politics of the state. However, the commission emphasized also that the legislator should take the popular fear of witchcraft more seriously. Therefore, it could hardly propose banning the *inyanga* altogether. As a consequence, without taking into consideration the fluidity and secrecy that is crucial to any form of occult healing, it launched a quixotic project to create an official association that would discipline the healers and select the “legitimate” ones.

Apparently any form of state intervention in this tricky domain runs up against the basic ambiguities of witchcraft thinking as personified by the *nganga/inyanga*.²⁷ Is there a solution to this stalemate? To an outsider (like me), it might be tempting to conclude from all these ambiguities and circularity that the state should stay out of this treacherous field as much as possible, and that adventurous interventions like those of the Cameroonian judges with their efforts to subdue *la sorcellerie* are highly inadvisable. Indeed, witchcraft and the minefield it offers to any judicial intervention seem to be a good example of the paradox highlighted above (and in chapter 1 of this volume) that the very trend toward ever further “legalization” reinforces the sense of disorder: the modern state is drawn into a terrain where it is not equipped to exercise control. How are judges to establish proof amid so much secrecy? What can the state do if its sanctions do not apply? The consequent failure inevitably creates an acute feeling of disorder, since even the state with all its pretence of control seems to be powerless.

However, from close range such a conclusion might be all too facile. Popular unrest is very real and hardly possible for the state to ignore.²⁸ There are, of course, alternatives. One of the reasons for the decrease in witch-hunts—at least the more open ones—in South Africa seems to be the reaffirmation of the chiefs' traditional prerogatives.²⁹ Indeed, the chiefs still have their own ways of dealing with the occult. However, it is clear that such dependency on “traditional” chieftaincy has its costs for a government intent on bringing development and progress.³⁰ In Cameroon, the rapid rise of Pentecostalism with its own forms of combating witchcraft (as the work of Satan) seems to have taken away some of the pressure on the state to do something about these occults threats. Yet the example of Ghana, where Pentecostalism appears to be intent on developing a political project that may take over the state, shows that this alternative also has its costs.

Is the best alternative then a drastic paradigm change of the law that allows the state courts to take witchcraft seriously? This is what both the Kulusai Commission and the national Commission on Gender Equality suggest; and authors like Hund (2000), Peigmin (2003), and Ludein (2003) seem to share this view. New legislation should allow the state courts, with the help of “legitimate” *sangoma*, to distinguish between false accusations and well-founded suspicions of witchcraft and, thus, to intervene against both false accusers and those (“the” witches?) who are, indeed, “engaged in harmful practices.” The above might suggest that this approach has its dangers. If state politicians deem it necessary to link up, in one way or another, with the *ngangdi/inyanga* who dominate this field, they should at least take into account that these local experts are inherently ambivalent and that any effort to separate good from evil—construction from destruction, healing from killing—will always remain highly precarious in this field, just like any attempt to discipline these trickster figures. Moreover, the costs of the state's involvement in this minefield of ambiguity may be clear: if state officials pretend that they can play a role in the witchcraft struggle but find themselves mired in its ambivalences, the prestige of the state might be even more damaged than if the state had abstained from involvement in the first place. This seems at least to be the lesson of the Cameroonian example.

In my view, there is good reason to doubt whether the solution can be found at an “ontological level” (Hund 2000) or by launching a “paradigm change” (Commission on Gender Equality 1998) that tries to formally reconcile the bureaucratic logic of the modern state with witchcraft thinking. This might only reinforce the idea of a principled incompatibility of

the two. However, this does not exclude more practical combinations. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2004) suggest a very promising alternative. They discuss a case in which a local magistrate (at Lehuruse Magistrate's Court in South Africa's remote North West Province) succeeds in handling, within the limits of the law, a very "dangerous" affair with clear witchcraft implications. Witchcraft is discussed here not as an exotic belief—to be accepted or not—but as part and parcel of daily life. The whole affair is treated as a breach of contract—should the applicant still pay a certain sum of money to a healer?—rather than in terms of occult aggression (real or not). Thus, the magistrate succeeds in addressing "contemporary African concerns . . . without offending Euro-modern legal reason." His approach is in terms of practical social contextualization rather than ostentatious moral relativism. One can wonder whether such a pragmatic approach is possible when the issue is a supposed killing and not just payments of money—whether in such a more serious case it is possible to contain people's anger without either accepting or refusing the "reality" of such accusations. Nevertheless, it is clear that "legal code and local custom can act upon each other in supple, surprising ways" (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 2004: 199). Such a practical approach might fit better with all the ambiguities of the witchcraft *comanduum* than trying to find a one-and-for-all solution on an ontological level.³¹

Notes

Many thanks to Jean-François Bayart, Thou Makhura, Achille Mbembe, Isak Niehaus, Barbara Omen, Eric de Rosny, and the participants of the Radcliffe/Harvard conference—notably Arjun Appadurai, Adam Ashforth, Rosalind Morris, Janet Roitman, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes—and, of course, to the editors of the present volume for their valuable criticisms and suggestions.

1. The Ralushai Commission report (1996: 270, 273) refers to "revolutionary forces" which—toward the end of the 1980s—sought to "politicise the rural communities" and therefore "chose witchcraft and ritual killing to destabilize these communities."

2. Moreover, for this offense the Ralushai Commission report proposes the heaviest punishment of the three categories it distinguishes. Also characteristic seems the name of the new law proposed by the Ralushai Commission: *Witchcraft Control Act*, which was supposed to replace the old *Suppression of Witchcraft Act of 1957* (my italics).

3. This is striking since the Ralushai Commission report (1996), in contrast, tends to emphasize the involvement of chiefs with witch-hunts. Regional differences might be involved here (Niehaus writes especially about the Lowveld/Mpumalanga while the commission's report is mainly based on findings from Limpopo (notably Venda/land). It is to be noted, moreover, that even though full-

scale witch-hunts became much less frequent, general panics about zombie practices, murders caused by *muti* (substances used by healers and sorcerers), and such hardly abated.

4. In many parts of the continent, public debates on this issue are waged using terms like "witchcraft," *sorcellerie*, etc. Therefore, it seems futile to try and avoid them in our analysis. It is true that these are Western notions but they have been appropriated on such a scale in public debates in Africa that academics would close themselves off from what is going on in society if they refused to use these notions.

5. However, as several authors have emphasized recently, Africa is certainly not exceptional in this. See, for instance, Jean Comaroff's seminal comparison (1997) of witchcraft fears in postcolonial Africa with the popular obsession with child abuse and Satanism in the West. See also Joan S. LaFontaine 1998 and my effort (1999) to highlight intriguing parallels with the upsurge of spirit cults in Taiwan during its economic boom and my comparison (2003) between "witch doctors" and "spin doctors" in, respectively, African and American politics.

6. Yet, there seem to be good reasons to nuance this contrast between the colonial state (as acting against witch doctors) and the postcolonial state (as more inclined to intervene against witches). Many colonial civil servants realized that, by convicting *niganga* (who had attacked or even executed witches), the government gave people the impression that they were protecting the witches. Therefore, officials often hesitated to take a clear stance. See Fields 1982 and also the very interesting research by Thou Makhura (2002) on state interventions in the Lowveld (South Africa) in the early twentieth century. For parallels in West Africa see the drawn-out debate on this issue between British civil servants in Nigeria and Southern Cameroons in the 1930s (National Archives of Cameroon, Buea, Aa 1934, 16).

7. See Ashforth 1998a and 2005 on "spiritual insecurity" in Soweto. Jean and John L. Comaroff emphasize that, indeed, witchcraft marks the limits of the law—its "unroutinizable powers" making it a basic challenge, not only to (post-)colonial officials, but even to local rulers of earlier times (2004: 189).

8. Indeed, in the West as well, the family proves to be *un nouel de vîpîères* (*à la Mauriac*) not only for its own members but also for outsiders such as therapists, social workers, officials from child protection agencies, and many other government services. In this respect as well, the differences from witchcraft discourse, which, at least in many parts of Africa, invariably looks for the origin of occult aggression within the family, are not that great.

9. My title is a form of academic piracy from the title of one of the main research programs of WISER (Witwatersrand Institute for Social and Economic Research): *The Limits of the State*. Clearly, the latter title relates very well to present-day predicaments in South Africa (and elsewhere).

10. See, among others, Marwick 1965 and Turner 1954. Mary Douglas (1970) is probably right in emphasizing that these monographs might have been more influential than Evans-Pritchard's much quoted, but less followed, book on the Zande.

11. See also Douglas 1970, where she makes the ironical comment that for some time anthropologists managed to depict witchcraft as "domesticated" and "not running amuck"—in stark contrast to historians.

12. Such variations make it a bit disconcerting that Hund still speaks so easily of "African culture."

13. Thus, the *nganga* is the best example that witchcraft's evil forces can also be regulated and used in a highly constructive way: it is only because the *nganga* has learned to control his or her dangerous powers that he or she can heal. However, this control is always seen as precarious and so is, therefore, any distinction between more constructive and more destructive uses of the *diambi*.

14. Eric de Rosny (1981, 1992) describes this as a crucial moment in his own initiation as a *nganga* in Douala. De Rosny is a French Jesuit who has worked in Douala for more than forty years now. After his initiation as a *nganga*, he combined local forms of healing with Christian notions and practices in a very sophisticated and at the same time honest way. Luckily, in his case, the demand of his "professor" for *une tête sans poil* (an animal without body hair—i.e., a human being) could be met by offering a goat as a substitute.

15. See Geschiere 1997 for a more detailed analysis of Mendounga's vicissitudes (and those of other *nganga* in eastern Cameroon). See Ashforth 2000 for a very vivid (and therefore all the more disconcerting) description of how his friend from Soweto was sucked ever deeper into witchcraft's circular reasoning on his long quest among all sorts of healers. The overview of court cases in the Ralushai Commission report (1996) indicates also that a considerable number of "witches" killed by the youth gangs around 1990 were *myanga*. Apparently, to the people "myanga" and "witch" were more or less equivalent (which did not stop them from asking the help of other *myanga* in "sniffing" out the witches within the community).

16. Such practical difficulties are certainly not special to Africa: for similar "confusions," see Favret-Saada 1977, on the Bocage in France in the 1970s.

17. The *nganga* who play a role in such court cases are mostly men. This is quite striking since locally *nganga* are at least as often women. But with the "modernization" of the profession (which occurred especially in the 1980s), men seemed to take over, especially when *nganga* performed in more modern contexts (as in the court room; see below and Geschiere 1997). Possibly this is only a temporary phenomenon, since there are signs that in the forest area of Cameroon female *nganga* are catching up with their modern male colleagues.

18. It is also striking that the report does not try to set up a clear distinction between *myanga* and *sangoma* (the latter term is used only occasionally).

19. In Cameroon, this organization of traditional healers is still not officially recognized, in contrast to other countries (Ghana, Zimbabwe; see below), but it has some sort of semiofficial status.

20. Characteristic also is that he referred to his clients not only as his "patients" but also as *les coupables* (the guilty).

21. At stake here is not only the impact of the *nganga* on the courts but also, conversely, the effect of their performance before the courts on their role as healers. In earlier publications (Fisy and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1997) Fisy and I emphasized that the association of the *nganga* with the courts and the gendarmes in their offensive against *la sorcellerie* seems to turn them into disciplinary figures (auxiliaries of the authoritarian state). It remains to be seen how this will affect their performance as healers.

22. It is striking of course that these authors seem to take for granted that only black households make use of the services of *myanga*.

23. "The harsh sentences imposed by the courts in the Venda Supreme Court

have also played a significant role in curbing these killings. Venda is quiet now except for the case at Mutale" (Ralushai Commission 1996: 270).

24. The quotation sums up, with admirable brevity, the basic dilemma of any official who has to deal with a witchcraft case. Fisy and I came upon exactly the same problem in various parts of Cameroon. For instance, during an interview we had in 1992 with the new prosecutor at Kribi (in the Province of the South), he complained to us that right after his installation he had been caught in the same dilemma. Just before his arrival in Kribi, his predecessor had been confronted with a gang of young men from the village of Ndoua who dragged an old man to his office and demanded that the man be locked up since he was a witch. His predecessor refused to do so. A few months later the young men set fire to the old man's house, who perished in the flames. Now the new prosecutor was stuck with the young men in his jail. "What can I do? If I have them accused of murder, the people will say the state is protecting witches. If I let them go, people might start murdering witches throughout the region." The prosecutor, therefore, tended to accept (clearly with some hesitation) the proposition that if a community wanted to expel a "witch," the state had to accept this decision (if only for the protection of the accused; see further Geschiere 1997: 185). The catch here is of course the notion of "community." Only in very exceptional cases will a whole community agree about a witchcraft accusation—rather, it seems to be in the nature of witchcraft that there is always disagreement over it. These quotations from the Ralushai report and from the Kribi prosecutor may show, therefore, that there is some urgency for anthropologists in debunking the notion of "community"—yet another of those notions that our forebears launched with so much success, also outside the discipline, but now come back to us with a vengeance.

25. See Meyer 1999. One may wonder to what extent the Pentecostals will be able to stay out of the vicious circles of witchcraft discourse. For instance, in Nigeria there seems to be a rapid increase in rumors about the involvement of the more successful preachers in pacts with the witches or Satan to get rich, etc.

26. In Fisy and Geschiere 1990 and Geschiere 1997 we discussed two opposing explanations of the sudden reversal in the Cameroonian jurisprudence on witchcraft. Did the initiative for the judicial offensive against the witches come from above, from the government that was increasingly worried about witchcraft as a supreme form of subversion? Or was it rather pressure from below, from a population that was becoming ever more obsessed with the supposed proliferation of witchcraft, that made the judges intervene in this tricky terrain? Interestingly, there is a similar debate among historians of the great witch-hunts in early-modern Europe. Some (e.g., Muchembled 1978, 1981) see the witch trials as the logical outcome of an *offensive criminalisatrice* by the absolutist state, supported by the church, in order to subdue popular culture. Others (e.g., Briggs 1996; see also LeVack 1995; Marneff 1997) emphasize, in contrast, that the main epidemics of witch-hunting in early-modern Europe occurred in areas where the state was relatively weak; they try to show that the courts were often reluctant to give in to popular pressure to intervene against the witches. In the Cameroonian case there are signs that the government—with its hegemonic project of "nation building" and its constant appeals to *vigilance* against all the forms of *subversion* that seemed to threaten national unity (Bayart 1979)—became increasingly worried about witchcraft as a form of subversion that was especially hard to control. Yet it is clear as

well that there was heavy pressure on the courts “from below” to do something about occult threats.

27. It is striking that one of the few, more-or-less formal follow-ups to the work of the Ralushai Commission seems to be haunted by the same challenge of creating clarity in a by-definition highly ambiguous field. In September 1998, the participants in the National Conference on Witchcraft Violence convened by the Commission on Gender Equality in Thohoyandou (the capital of Venda land, Limpopo Province) composed a highly committed declaration to put the issue on the national agenda. Like the Ralushai Commission report, they asked for new legislation to replace the 1957 Witchcraft Suppression Act, which was seen as “fueling witchcraft.” The new legislation would allow the separation of “those who are engaged in harmful practices . . . from those who are falsely accused.” Apparently the implication is that not only the false accusers but also those engaged in harmful practices (the “witches”?—thus, implicitly, accepted as real?) should be “brought to book.” To this aim the declaration requests “clear definitions for words and concepts such as ‘witch,’ ‘wizard’ and ‘witchcraft’” and a “Code of Conduct” to control the practice of “traditional medicine” (Commission on Gender Equality 1998; see also Ashforth 2005: 256); Mawhungu n.d.). Again, this courageous declaration risks remaining an empty wish if the ambiguity of all positions and concepts in this field is not taken into account.

28. Eric de Rosny, the French Jesuit who had himself initiated as a *nganga* in Donata and has worked with issues of witchcraft and healing for more than forty years (see de Rosny 1981, 1992), insists that the state *has* to play a role in assuaging popular fears of witchcraft. For him the state, church leaders, and psychotherapists should form a common front to deal with these issues. In March 2005 he organized a conference on justice and sorcery at the Université Catholique de l’Afrique Centrale in Yaounde, which became a major event due to the presence of a huge audience and the participation of several judges and officials of the Ministry of Justice (the papers of this conference were published in de Rosny 2005). Riekie Pelgrim (2003) concludes, on the basis of a series of interviews with members of the police in Limpopo Province, that it is hardly possible for a state official to function if the state does not propose some sort of solution to the witchcraft conundrum. Adam Ashforth (2000, 2005) and Hallie Ludsin (2003) seem to share this view.

29. See Niehaus 2001. See also Oomen 2005 for a very rich analysis of how “traditional chiefs” (in earlier years often seen as strooges of apartheid) succeeded in reinstating themselves as indispensable spokesmen for and partners with the ANC regime, and possibly also in witchcraft affairs. However, the capacities of the chiefs and their customary courts in this field must not be overrated. The renascence of chieftaincy certainly did not lead to a decrease in the popular anxiety about witchcraft (as evidenced by the continuing stream of rumors and cases of violence in relation to zombie practices, *muti* murders, and such). Moreover, if the chief increasingly become associated with the modern state, witchcraft as an “un-routinizable form of power” (J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff 2004) may become a hard-to-handle challenge for them as well (cf. similar trends in Cameroon; see Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Geschiere and Ndjio 2003).

30. This is one of the less controversial theses of Mahmoud Mamdani’s much-discussed book (1996).

31. Maybe such a more pragmatic approach could be undertaken by having the law give healers some leeway to try and reconcile cases—without formally collaborating with them but clearly setting limits to their actions. After all, any witchcraft discourse always contains its own procedures for attempts at reconciliation (or protection). Summary executions, as in the case of the comrades’ witch-hunts, are not in accordance with “local custom”—certainly not if one has not first tried out the other solutions available (attempts to neutralize dangerous witchcraft, etc.); so it is certainly not clear why state courts should be especially lenient in these cases. Leaving some scope for alternative local arrangements for resolution—without making them part and parcel of the state’s judiciary apparatus—might ease the pressure on the state to intervene. A hopeful sign is also the quite surprising outcome of Riekie Pelgrim’s recent research in parts of Limpopo Province. She notes a continuous increase of witchcraft affairs brought before the state courts in the 1990s. However, since around 1995—and in contrast to earlier periods—these concern mostly complaints about defamation (people starting a lawsuit against fellow villagers who openly accused them of witchcraft; Pelgrim 2003: 109–12). Apparently this change was promoted by Seth Ntshai, minister of safety and security for the Northern Province (he was also one of the main initiators of the Ralushai Commission). He made several tours through the area during which he strongly emphasized the possibility of bringing such accusations before the courts. This might be an example of a limited state intervention that did have certain effects. Again, a more piecemeal and varied approach seems to have more of a chance to diffuse people’s anxieties about witchcraft and to relativize the representations involved than efforts to bridge the chasm between law and witchcraft discourse in ontological terms.

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