

Through the Scrying Glass: Defining Witchcraft in Academic Study

Passer par la zone d'ombre: le défi de définir la sorcellerie dans les études académiques

Shelagh Roxburgh



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/22922>
DOI: 10.4000/etudesafriaines.22922
ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2018
Number of pages: 1029-1045
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2743-1
ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Shelagh Roxburgh, "Through the Scrying Glass: Defining Witchcraft in Academic Study", *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 231-232 | 2018, Online since 15 December 2020, connection on 02 March 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/22922> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafriaines.22922>

Through the Scrying Glass: Defining Witchcraft in Academic Study

Witchcraft as an ambiguous force exerts a power over studies of the topic, deepening the quintessential philosophical conflict inherent in knowledge. The common analogy of the blind men and the elephant is made more problematic when attempting to understand witchcraft because the elephant in question is not even in the room; it resides in a shadowy landscape behind an obscuring veil. As researchers, we are perpetually defining and describing witchcraft because it is shifting and fluid and, as a result, it is never certain that the same phenomenon is being discussed across all contexts, languages, interpretations, experiences, and cosmologies. Therefore, the researcher must remain critical and reflexive of the risks of bending the gaze back onto the self while considering witchcraft as a “positive object” to be explained “through ‘our’ terms” (Rutherford 1999: 105). Witchcraft in Africa and our fascination with this “object” risk entrenching representations of Africa in the Western imagination which has long treated the continent as “effectively different [...] because we tend to approach it more differently” (Chabal 2009: 117).

In addition to questions regarding these motivations and the power relations they produce and reproduce, studies of witchcraft in Africa, regardless of their positionality, theoretical bias, or disciplinary conventions, must all grapple with the difficulty of defining a phenomenon whose nature is secretive. If to know witchcraft is to be a witch, then researchers cannot simply step into the supernatural world and retain their subjecthood. To become a witch is to be that which is corrupted and evil, self-interested, and unreliable. The witch cannot be known because witchcraft power is inherently deceptive. Therefore, true knowledge of witchcraft is impossible; as witchcraft is protected by its own corrupting aspect, the researcher must look at it from the outside, observing witchcraft and witches as objects that are other and unknown, though they may not be foreign. For African researchers, emic studies of witchcraft must still face the challenge of discerning a society hidden within their own and bound within a conspiracy of power relationships that they cannot freely enter. These layers of resistance become denser for the foreign researcher who confronts

their subjecthood through the legacy and contemporary replication of colonialist interventionism and exoticization which further blur the object of study while refining the reflection of the self in the unknown and elusive Other.

In this article, I review a number of prominent studies of witchcraft that have been conducted over the past twenty years in academic publications in English with an emphasis on efforts to define, refine, and operationalize the concept of witchcraft. These works focus on witchcraft as an evil or, at best, ambiguous force in African societies, which permeates life in its various forms. Though it is unclear if witchcraft is everywhere, because witchcraft can be everything, or because the power of witchcraft, as a belief or reality, is so malleable and profound that it can infuse and affect anything, these authors nonetheless endeavour to contain features and experiences of witchcraft within finite spaces and moments in time in an effort to understand that which can only be otherwise glimpsed and hypothesized. Some of these works tend towards describing, rather than defining, seeking to remain fluid in concept, while others are more theoretical, building frameworks and boundaries to hold witchcraft in a static place in its relation to the world. The latter tends toward an increasingly prominent operationalization of witchcraft as power.

These studies seek to cleanly separate conceptions and concepts relating to the supernatural in order to construct a prism through which witchcraft can be separated from the spectrum of occult events and beliefs. Power, as a means to both define and apply witchcraft, provides a basis from which witchcraft can be understood in relation to social, political, and economic processes that are accessible and theoretically entrenched. The vast majority of the works reviewed in this article adopt this approach in order to link witchcraft with familiar and delineated concepts that have been made tangible and real in social sciences. For example, feminist analyses interpret witchcraft accusations and confessions in relation to patriarchy and gender-based violence, while others employ modernity, development, rights, and the state as positive objects against the null space of witchcraft. Because witchcraft can never truly be accessed as a concept that is lived rather than known, the study of witchcraft remains a study of negative space. This can be a misleading concept; though witchcraft must remain ubiquitous and blurred in the background, it can still tell us a great deal, as in art, negative space can be the real object.

From Description to Definition

The difficulty of defining a phenomenon like witchcraft has led many authors to tend toward descriptive analysis, providing detailed accounts of discourses, experiences, and events that have been attributed to witchcraft without seeking

to encapsulate or summarize these accessible expressions of witchcraft into a coherent unit. In some cases, descriptive analyses draw on religious, cultural, and historical categories, sometimes seeking to bridge features of witchcraft belief or experiences across time and space in an effort to demonstrate continuity or in order to reject monolithic representations of African experiences. However, in these cases, what emerges is a limitless conception of witchcraft, where witchcraft becomes a means of identifying and labelling something that is simply other or different from the usual, known, or natural. In *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison*, Geschiere (2013: xx) suggests that witchcraft “has become so generalized in everyday language that its meaning becomes increasingly vague and limitless.” Yet, to “impose clear definitions and categorizations” would also limit the fluidity of witchcraft and falsely constrain the “diffuseness of the discourse” that “seems to be the secret of its power” (*ibid.*: 9-10).

In *Perspectives on African Witchcraft*, Mariano Pavanello (2016) provides a critical framework for the varying perspectives that appear in this edited volume. This framework is one of uncertainty, confusion, and context. Pavanello (2016: 4) stresses the importance of understanding witchcraft, the word and concept, as a “complex problem” to be disentangled so that “the semantic puzzle” of witchcraft as an “all-inclusive and an all-explaining device” can be translated from an “empty concept [...] into a specific cultural/historical context.” Writing from a positionality that is non-African, Pavanello problematizes witchcraft as a “kaleidoscope through which the emerging of new and gory phenomena is observed on a horizon that is dominated by uncontrollable and violent power relations.”

Here, Pavanello (*ibid.*: 6) is speaking to the construction of a binary between witchcraft and tradition versus modernity, which transforms witchcraft “into a mirror for anthropological metanarratives” that reflect “how our way of seeing the world constantly changes.” Pavanello connects the shifting and transforming of witchcraft as a concept “to the paradigm shift in social science and to the change in perception of reality and of ethics in Western societies” (*ibid.*: 7). Thus, Pavanello opens a door, not to the world of witchcraft and greater knowledge of this world, but to ourselves as scholars and researchers. Witchcraft, for Pavanello, is “one version of the idea of power over the human aspirations to health and salvation, to welfare and domination.” By looking into witchcraft, we are peering into the human experience, in our own struggle to define “the ambiguous border of the physical and mental dimensions of reality” (*ibid.*: 10).

It is easy to dismiss witchcraft as a psychological or social flaw, as Mfundo Badela (2015) does in *Why Witches Are Still Flying in Africa?* Stepping away from the deep philosophical questions of how and why witchcraft continues

to ensnare and enthrall, Badela withdraws from the theoretical complexities of critical theory and grounds witchcraft belief in the real world. In this act, witchcraft is constructed and clearly defined as a fabricated social problem, a flawed belief that is located in society and limited to the mundane reality of the known world. In this way, Badela (2015: ch. 1, para. 1) confines witchcraft in time and space: “witches are flying inside the heads of people” (ch. 1). Witchcraft, made a real fallacy that stems from the combination of traditional beliefs and “new beliefs introduced by the people from Europe, the Far East and the Middle East” (*ibid.*: ch. 1, para. 2) empowers us to target, manipulate, and eventually dispel this “scourge” (*ibid.*). The construction of witchcraft belief, the deluded conviction that witchcraft exists, as the obvious evil of witchcraft, provides a neat and clean positivist interpretation unburdened of broader philosophical consideration that leads a clear path to the eradication of witchcraft, without the complexity of seeking to understand its meaning.

The question of what we can learn from witchcraft, what insights it has to offer lead us back to Pavanello’s concern that witchcraft is viewed as a mirror. In *Evil in Africa: Encounters with the Everyday*, van Beek and Olsen (2015) are looking to evil as a positive object around which witchcraft exists in the open space of the supernatural. Evil is given force and power within the supernatural world, but then constrained within the human imagination, which van Beek and Olsen identify as the ultimate source of evil. Evil from within is expressed in “deliberate, malicious, and illegitimate uses of power”, including occult powers (van Beek & Olsen 2015: 3). Drawing on Evans-Pritchard, van Beek and Olsen define witchcraft descriptively as the cause of “misery and suffering that is undeserved and that cannot be reconciled within a normal order of things” (*ibid.*: 8). Though these authors attempt to dig deeper to the root of both evil and witchcraft, they are impeded and diverted by muddled descriptions of witchcraft, sorcery, occult power, and the varied reflections of these in Western academia. Van Beek and Olsen identify this problem, noting that “modern witchcraft studies take witchcraft as text, a commentary on and failing explanation of the ills of modernity and globalization” (*ibid.*: 10).

Yet, this critical turn draws these authors further back into description as they become focused on the insidious expressions of evil through witchcraft, emphasizing the persecution, torture, and killing that can result from witchcraft accusations. Though van Beek and Olsen note that not all witchcraft is evil, this turn toward violent expressions of witchcraft as a means to access and understand witchcraft belief is a dominant theme in contemporary witchcraft studies. The problem of witchcraft, layered as both the problem of understanding witchcraft and the problem of witchcraft-related violence, is a motivating puzzle for many researchers and readers. These parallel problems reflect the

two worlds of human experience, those lived within and those lived without; witchcraft is something within us, but it is also something within the world. One does not have to accept the existence of another world outside of our own to appreciate the multiplicity of experience. Though witchcraft may be reduced to a “natural philosophy” or “a system of values, which regulate human conduct,” as Spence (2017) defines it in *Witchcraft Accusation and Persecution as a Mechanism for the Marginalization of Women*, the meanings and experiences embedded in witchcraft, which have accumulated and transformed over time, yet which remain diverse and personal, should be explored.

In *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1995*, Katherine Luongo (2011: 8) examines colonial interpretations and terminology of “local beliefs” and “local people whom they had difficulty disciplining and whose powers they aimed to ultimately deny.” Colonial uses of witchcraft, supernatural, and magic were employed to connote “irrational and atavistic” practices intended to cause harm through malevolent power (*ibid.*: 9). Luongo’s analysis of witchcraft, as a “matrix of discourse, experience, knowledge and belief,” approaches colonialist discourses and local discourses as co-constitutive counterweights opposing each others’ power and legitimacy, yet bound in a dialectical discourse (*ibid.*). It is this conflict that is at the centre of academic concerns the task of defining witchcraft. Middleton and Winter (2013: 1), in *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, argue that the inability to understand witchcraft beliefs “in the context of the lives of those who hold them, is often at the basis of naive statement that the ‘African mind’ is different in some fundamental way from the ‘European mind’ and in an ultimate sense incomprehensible.”

Academic knowledge of African witchcraft began with and is largely focused on colonial and post-colonial encounters, and is therefore steeped in the racism and imperialism that dominated these processes. The construction of Africa in the colonial imagination is intimately tied to racial notions of Western superiority that were rationalized through Enlightenment discourses of progress, science, and modernity. Africa became a place to be known, not only for the purposes of imperialist expansion and gain, but also as a demonstration of the phenomenal powers of the Enlightened mind which could know, explain, and thus control, any aspect of the world. African minds were explained through Western sciences as inferior and witchcraft was explained as a heuristic device employed by Africans to make sense of the world. In turn, witchcraft became an idiom used by Europeans to make sense of Africa. Thus, Luongo’s investigation of what witchcraft meant to the European mind takes us further along in our knowledge of the historical context of witchcraft than Middleton and Winter’s analysis which falls back

onto a Western discourse of witchcraft without reflection, thereby blurring the historical distinction between discourses that Luongo prioritizes. Middleton and Winter (2013: 19), though incorporating local discourses of witchcraft, default to the subordination of these discourses under Western notions of rationalism and the construction of witchcraft as an idiom by suggesting that: “people will be relieved of these fears only when they relinquish their beliefs in the reality of witches.”

This is not to say that researchers who study witchcraft should also believe in witchcraft. Rather, it is to stress the importance of maintaining caution regarding the casual authority of Western knowledge. This authority is not given but constructed and consolidated through various relations of domination and oppression which should be identified in order to mitigate the risk of being replicated in studies of witchcraft, particularly those that employ static binaries or monolithic constructions of African and Western societies. Mavhungu (2012), in *Witchcraft in Post-colonial Africa: Beliefs, Techniques and Containment Strategies*, notes that the problematic construction of tradition as a binary opposition to the modern has been rerouted rather than confronted by authors who seek to locate witchcraft *within* modernity. Mavhungu also critiques the emphasis on “witchcraft beliefs in the maintenance of social order, studying witchcraft’s relation to power, but only within the local context” (*ibid.*: 14). Together, Mavhungu argues that these approaches continue to define witchcraft as “helping the modern African to make sense of that which is incomprehensible in his or her daily setting” (*ibid.*: 14).

In *Witchcraft in Post-colonial Africa*, Mavhungu also stresses the importance of local context and warns that witchcraft belief “is neither homogeneous nor coherent” (*ibid.*: 19). However, the limitations of looking too closely at one context and failing to build a broader conception or clear links between experiences of witchcraft pose another challenge. By focusing on witchcraft as a local and unique experience, the concept risks expanding beyond the confines of language, becoming so diffuse as that it is beyond the act of naming. In *Witchcraft, Witches, and Violence in Ghana*, Adinkrah’s analysis of witchcraft across localities becomes confused as it is scaled from individual “ethnic groups” to Ghana as a whole (Adinkrah 2015: 55). In an effort to embed witchcraft in local context, Adinkrah (*ibid.*) focuses on the differences between witchcraft expressions and experiences among groups, neglecting the “fundamental similarities” that are needed to bind the disparate points of analysis together. Though witchcraft is, as Adinkrah (*ibid.*) notes, “virtually unverifiable by empirical means” the absence of a unifying definition leads the author to immersive description. Adinkrah attempts to define witchcraft by detailing local expressions and beliefs but in doing so replicates a strong bias towards

Akan culture, and positioning Akan beliefs as the defining witchcraft beliefs in Ghana when the author begins to use Ghana and Akan interchangeably (*ibid.*: 56-57). Adinkrah also combines numerous practices and expressions of witchcraft that may not be defined as being part of witchcraft across all contexts, further blurring the object of study.

At its greatest limits, witchcraft has also been located across time in historical studies of occult cosmologies and their relationship to specific events. In *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Seirra Leone*, Shaw (2002: 3) localizes witchcraft in colonial Sierra Leone through the memories of “Temne speakers.” Shaw’s analysis combines “ritual practices and images [...] techniques of divination, diviner’s visionary experiences [...] cosmologies of witchcraft, practices of witchfinding, colonial stories of ‘human leopards,’ and phantasmagoric rumors” in order to investigate the impact of the Atlantic slave trade on ritual and cosmology (*ibid.*). Shaw (*ibid.*: 3-7) attempts to “unsettle binary notions of ‘traditional ritual’ and ‘modern processes’” by rejecting a presumed “opposition between embodiment and inscription” by exploring memory and the “experiences of [...] cultural actors themselves.” Similarly, in *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*, White (2000: 9) investigates local rumours and gossip about vampirism to reveal “the mobility, the internationalism, and the economics of [...] colonial bloodsuckers.” Though White (2005: 5) expressly attempts to avoid reducing these stories “to African misunderstandings of colonial interventions,” they are drawn, like Shaw, into the complexity of individual experiences of unseen and unknown forces which are dominated by uncertainty, bringing our focus back, though unwillingly, to witchcraft as a means of understanding the events these authors centralize.

It is incredibly difficult to escape the reflex of defining witchcraft as a means to explain misfortune. This approach is not only central to Western studies of African witchcraft, it has also greatly informed local conceptions of witchcraft in the past and present. In my own fieldwork (Roxburgh 2014), individuals in Ghana and Cameroon would defer to anthropological works employing this definition when discussing witchcraft in their own *milieux*. In one interview, a respondent did not want to answer the question of how to define witchcraft and instead instructed me to find an anthropologist to define the concept. Adding to this is the fine balance between describing and defining witchcraft across historical, social, religious, and cultural contexts which can broaden the concept as efforts to populate the null space of witchcraft with additional features further distracts from the task of isolating witchcraft itself.

Witchcraft as Power

In an effort to move away from the interpretation of witchcraft as explaining events through a mistaken belief, many authors are focusing on the emerging paradigm of witchcraft as a form of power. Witchcraft as power questions what witchcraft does in its social context without constructing a hierarchy among diverse notions of reality. Importantly for studies of witchcraft, this approach fosters a coherent interpretation of witchcraft that can be applied across numerous contexts in time and space. Rather than seeking to understand what witchcraft explains, witchcraft as power centres what witchcraft does in a society. In this light, witchcraft can be coherently contained as an extension of one being's will over another's against the latter's wishes. Like political, social, and economic power, witchcraft power gives one the exceptional ability affect and act over another in the real world.

This interpretation of witchcraft power draws not only on a Weberian definition of power but can also be demonstrated to have strong parallels with Foucauldian notions of power, particularly when this will is exerted psychically and enacted from within. Weber (1922: 152) defined power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." Foucault (1980: 90) expanded the notion of power as a coercive capacity and problematized the centrality of the state by suggesting that "power is neither given, nor exchanged, but rather exercised, and it only exists in action." Rather than being the product of authority, as suggested by Weber, a Foucauldian interpretation of power views powers ubiquitous, "as something which circulates" through social relations, where "individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application" (*ibid.*: 98).

In *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa*, Ellis and ter Haar (2004: 4) suggest that in Africa "all power has its ultimate origin in the spirit world." Employing a broad definition of religion as "belief in the existence of an invisible world [...] that is home to spiritual being with effective powers over the material world," Ellis and ter Haar (2004: 14, 84) interpret witchcraft as an aspect of religious power that is "particularly strong" because it is "exercised in secret." However, the greatest threat posed by witchcraft in the visible world, according to these authors, is its accessibility. Since anyone can access witchcraft power, it thereby poses "a constant threat to the ideological order and thus to political stability" (*ibid.*: 88).

Witchcraft, as spiritual powers, rivals the political power of the state, presenting a challenge which the state cannot "formally encompass" thereby limiting the reach of the state in its effort to "monopolise violence" in the

visible world (*ibid.*: 107-110). Ellis and ter Haar attribute the exceptional power of witchcraft in society, not only to its uncontainable source which is protected in the invisible realm, but also to its “moral aspects” (*ibid.*: 150). Witchcraft is not only a phenomenal power that permeates the world while evading institutional control, its mechanisms and moral expressions also evoke a damning critique of power. When the ambiguous power of witchcraft is employed “at the expense of others” it is deemed immoral and evil, exposing deep moral concerns about the proper use of power in society (*ibid.*: 151). In “Religion and Politics: Taking African Epistemologies Seriously,” Ellis and ter Haar (2007: 386) build on their analysis of witchcraft as power and advocate the recognition of witchcraft as part of African modes of thought or epistemologies that “may be of universal application.”

In this approach, Ellis and ter Haar go beyond the desire to understand Africa through witchcraft or witchcraft through African experiences by suggesting that African conceptions of witchcraft power have something to teach the world about the morality of power itself. This sentiment is echoed by Ferguson (2006) in *Global Shadows: African and the Neoliberal World Order*. In this work, Ferguson outlines the moral imperatives of African thought which offer “discourses capable of generating critique, cleansing, and renewal” that is lacking in the dominant discourses of the West (*ibid.*: 174). Thus, witchcraft as power permits scholars to access the core aspect of witchcraft belief across contexts and at varying levels of society.

Witchcraft as power also presents researchers with a prism through which political, social, and economic events, experiences, and responses relating to the supernatural can be analytically contained while still allowing for fluidity and transformation in the conception of witchcraft itself. Importantly, witchcraft as power allows for competing concepts of power, discursive institutional efforts to eradicate witchcraft, and the operation of witchcraft and its relation to other processes of power in society to be perceived with greater clarity and precision. Isak Niehaus’s works on political transformations and witchcraft in South Africa demonstrate the breadth and depth of insight that is possible when applying this approach. In *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*, Niehaus (2001) demonstrates the varying levels at which witchcraft can be interpreted as power; through the use of supernatural forces, and through the use of witchcraft discourses which can be employed as tools of resistance and domination.

Niehaus (2001: 8-10) demonstrates how an analysis of witchcraft as power can help overcome Western notions of power as “social relations of domination and subordination” and move away from the emphasis on institutions in order to understand how concepts of governance, power, and domination

are constructed in “east and southern African contexts.” In distancing his analysis from the “perception of witchcraft as an idiom of social relations,” Niehaus (*ibid.*: 128-132) offers insight into the political significance and instrumentalization of witchcraft accusations and witch-hunting in South Africa. Though Niehaus (*ibid.*: 132) offers numerous correlations between the political interests of elites and expressions of witchcraft attacks, accusations, and anxieties, this analysis is measured with the cautionary disclaimer that the “relationship between witchcraft and political processes are [...] often very complex and defy attempts to contain them in single-strand theories.” Niehaus (2012: 7) builds on this complexity in *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa* noting that “we cannot explain witchcraft beliefs purely in terms of their systemic agency [...] as the intended and patterned outcome of social processes and structures.” Niehaus suggests that it is important to investigate witchcraft in both social and “domestic contexts” (*ibid.*).

In his analysis, Niehaus clearly links individual concerns regarding resistance, security, and liberation with overarching political events and transformations in South Africa. Witchcraft, for Niehaus (2001: 8), became a paramount concern in 1960 when apartheid government introduced “agricultural ‘betterment’ and the Bantu Authorities Act” in Green Valley, policies that forced massive resettlement and introduced villagisation. The mass relocation of households dispossessed South Africans of their lands, “forcing a greater reliance on migrant labour,” and “imposed new forms of intimacy” and inequality between neighbours who were strangers to one another (*ibid.*: 8). Following this upheaval, Niehaus notes that “in the wake of social dislocation”, Christian churches “came to serve as cohesive moral communities”, with “rapid conversion” laying the foundation for the demonization of witchcraft beliefs and practices (*ibid.*). Traditional authorities governing witchcraft were also eroded as the Bantu Authorities Act prevented chiefs “from intervening against witchcraft” (*ibid.*: 9). Bridging individual and collective experiences of the consolidation of state power, Niehaus demonstrates how myriad forces combined to create an “opening for ever more violent interventions against witches” and how these violent interventions would become integrated within the discourses of national liberation from both apartheid and the immorality of witchcraft (*ibid.*).

Though Niehaus rightly notes that there is a need to continue to expand our knowledge of witchcraft as a term used to represent specific power relations and moral judgments of these relations, there are still a great number of political and social processes that are only now being explored. In *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power, and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880-1963*, Redding (2006: ix) recognizes the “danger that witchcraft beliefs may be used

to explain too much” but also notes that “taking spiritual beliefs seriously [...] creates the potential for a richer description of people’s lives and for a more complete explanation of events.” Like White and Shaw, Redding returns to the past to investigate and re-interpret social and political events with witchcraft discourses retained as part of the lived experience of these times. Looking at colonial taxation policies, Redding (*ibid.*: 198) demonstrates the importance of witchcraft beliefs in “people’s everyday lives,” drawing a line from these beliefs to the actions of the colonial state Redding finds that many people believed the colonial “state manipulated supernatural powers through its taxation and law enforcement policies” and that these powers “made it possible for a small number of whites [...] to rule a vastly larger number of African subjects.” Redding suggests that those who were associated with the state and colonial policies became suspect as well, increasing tensions and fostering greater violence against “local witches and wizards” who were believed to be empowering the colonial state (*ibid.*: 198-200).

Taxation appears, at first, to be a narrow entry-point, however Redding demonstrates the utility of this keyhole approach to witchcraft. In *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*, Ashforth (2005) enters into the complex political and social processes of witchcraft through the principles of liberal democracy and the classical concept of the social contract. Ashforth suggests that witchcraft belief present a fundamental threat to democracy because it undermines the ability of the liberal state to provide freedom, protection, and stability. Though Ashforth (*ibid.*: 12) stresses that his is “not a work of political theory,” he insists “that unless the dimensions of spiritual insecurity are understood, politics in Africa is incomprehensible.” Spiritual insecurity, for Ashforth (*ibid.*: 13-17), results from experiences “of suffering as harm” and motivates a “desire for justice” that “is difficult for political leaders to satisfy [...] in the liberal democratic state in its modernist configurations.” The epistemological gulf that exists between people who live among witches and the modern states that govern their societies presents a fundamental conflict underlying all social and political processes. Ashforth points to the “long shadow cast over Western social thought by the concepts of enlightenment, reason and modernity” that has distracted writers with “questions of rationality and modernity” (*ibid.*: 111) and undermined our understanding of the ongoing colonial conflicts embedded in witchcraft discourse.

In *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique*, West (2005: 3) shares Ashforth’s concern regarding witchcraft and democracy, and agrees that “the project of democracy is impossible” as long as state and society “speak mutually unintelligible languages of power.” West (*ibid.*) centres his analysis on a “comparative study of neoliberalism and the political

cosmologies that find continued expression in the wake of the former's global spread." In *Kupilikula*, West (*ibid.*: 5-7) explores "Muedan conception of power as expressed through *uwavi* discourse" through the "unmaking and remaking of another's exercise of power." Through this analysis, West (*ibid.*: 266) suggests that *uwavi* serves to reconcile "the indomitable dialectics of life" revealing a philosophical wisdom of power and employing this as an antivision that "inverted, overturned, and/or negated [...] the visions of neoliberal reformers." Thus, West demonstrates the processes through which witchcraft discourses continue to resist the globalizing influences of neoliberal imperialism, leading discussions back to the treacherous territory of understanding the relationships between witchcraft discourses and the processes of a globalizing Enlightened order.

Risking the problematic binary that is constructed in studies of witchcraft through modernity, as a perspective and concept, Geschiere (1997) explores questions of African modernities, Enlightenment, capitalism, and the globalization of Western culture in *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*. In this work, Geschiere (1997: 8) addresses the "paradox" of globalizing processes of modernity, noting that they do not lead to "cultural uniformity" but rather "increasing heterogeneity," stressing the "ease with which witchcraft discourses in Africa incorporate the money economy, new power relations, and consumer goods." Witchcraft discourse, in Geschiere's work, binds "human action [...] to uncertainty, ambiguity, and hidden dimensions," while witchcraft power itself represents "both profound distrust and an impassioned lust for power" (*ibid.*: 43). Together, these aspects of witchcraft, uncertainty and distrust of power, oppose the core philosophical notions of modern social and political processes, which are founded on reason and rationality, as techniques of power and the means to know and therefore control the world.

Witchcraft, in opposition to Enlightenment-based notions of the modern, presents a realm that is unknowable and ungovernable, and therefore impenetrable to the modernizing efforts of Enlightened order, truncating the efforts of the state and capitalism to transform the world. In *Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya*, Smith (2008: 6) explores witchcraft and development as parallel processes of that enable "the extension and multiplication of the person," though one operates in secret while the other is transparent. From this perspective, Smith (*ibid.*: 20) argues that witchcraft and development are "opposite potentials" of productive capacity and that witchcraft gives "meaning to the utopian vision of development" by demonstrating the limits and inequalities of this process. For Smith (*ibid.*: 9), witchcraft, as the "socially destructive" opposite of development, extends its

explanatory potential by justifying Kenya's delayed progress. At the same time, Smith (*ibid.*: 247) argues, Kenyans may employ witchcraft in an effort to direct development and bring the process under "social control."

Witchcraft, like a mirror, provides a reflective surface from which the dark sides of modernity and development may be viewed, though it can also be argued that witchcraft itself is the reflection, as it presents a distorted image of these idealized discourses. Witchcraft may be seen as a formidable threat to modern projects such as democracy, development, modernity, and neoliberalism because it reveals the worst of these political, social, and economic processes, laying bare the sordid histories and corrupted intentions buried within these discourses and enacted by institutions. At the same time, as Niehaus (2001, 2012) has cautioned, maintaining the complexity of witchcraft requires an openness to instances where witchcraft discourses have been instrumentalized to benefit the consolidation of power. For example, in *Bewitching Development*, Smith (2008: 27-28) notes that the Kenyan government seeks to shift blame for poverty and inequality away from the state toward witches who are constructed as the antithesis of, and therefore barriers against, development.

In "Witchcraft and Statecraft: Five Technologies of Power in Colonial and Postcolonial Coastal Kenya," Ciekawy (1998: 120) reveals "how the production of discourse about magical harm [...] was integral [...] to the process of state formation." Looking at witchcraft as a "disciplinary technology," Ciekawy seeks to complicate the notion of witchcraft as a colonial apparatus of power that is distinct from local conceptions of supernatural power. Ciekawy (*ibid.*: 120-121) argues that the use of the term witchcraft "points to the continuation [...] of a focus on negative aspects of African people's cultural conceptualizations and form of action concerning magic and power" while "ignoring the political context of colonial domination." For Ciekawy (*ibid.*: 123), witchcraft, as a technique of power, is a discourse of state power that cannot be disconnected from the role of the state in enabling certain individuals "to exert a dominant influence on the politics of magical harm." In this light, witchcraft is not the antithesis of modernity or the state, but rather a "discourse of power that centralized and hierarchicalizes magical ideas and practices" (*ibid.*), thereby replicating aspects of domination and imperialism of the colonial experience in the supernatural. Thus, Ciekawy (*ibid.*: 132) exposes the role of the state in forming our "imagining concerning magical harm," and provides a dire warning: "[i]f the past is any prediction of the future, it is difficult to be optimistic about the products of the witchcraft-statecraft dialectic and its potential to legitimate the inhumanity of the state's project" (Ciekawy 1998: 134).

A House of Mirrors

Studying witchcraft in the absence of a clear definition has led many authors to look at expressions of witchcraft in relation to other experiences, concepts, and processes, in order to create a landscape of interpretation that is layered by experiences of witchcraft as a power over reality. Contemporary analyses, though sometimes imperfect and incomplete, build toward an increasingly defined object, or at the very least, the contours of a shadow object. In the process of attempting to understand witchcraft, witchcraft experiences continue to transform and merge with other aspects of our constantly evolving reality. Witchcraft discourses produce and reproduce experiences with a fluidity that escapes containment and eludes certainty. In its wake, academic studies continue to struggle with the complexities of an unknowable power whose history within academia and Western fascination is fraught and treacherous. Witchcraft studies engage a historically racist subject that was used by scholars to oppress, and which remains rife with inequality, domination, and marginalization.

Understanding witchcraft as a form of power is an important step forward as this approach can help reveal complex power relations across all levels, from the domestic experience of intimate violence, to the competition between state and society to define and control reality, to the researcher and researched. Like a hall of mirrors, witchcraft reflects itself as a subject of study, constructing another violent Other of the researcher, as it replicates the inequality between the natural and supernatural world, and the dominating and oppressive powers on both sides of the mirror. Despite the risk of becoming lost in these reflections, and the greater risk of replicating the dark facets of ourselves that witchcraft reveals, studies of witchcraft in Africa continue to engage “in a massively important debate about what types of knowledge are appropriate and applicable for whom” (Ellis & ter Haar 2004: 195).

By studying witchcraft, we are ourselves bewitched, as our engagement with the supernatural forces our own biases to the fore and links us all to global processes of harm that we, as part of humanity, are both complicit in and victims of in our daily lives. Despite the difficulty, the way forward is to continue into greater uncertainty. However, this is impossible without greater diversity and an opening of academic discussions of witchcraft to broader participation, not only to broaden our understanding but also to resist the marginalization of non-Western conceptualizations of reality that remain embedded in witchcraft studies. In order to prevent discussions from reflecting themselves, we must work to ensure that new theories and paradigms are able to emerge and multiply.

Independent Researcher, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ADINKRAH M., 2015, *Witchcraft, Witches and Violence in Ghana* (New York-Oxford: Berghahn Books).
- ASHFORTH A., 2005, *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- BADELA M., 2015, *Why Witches Are Still Flying in Africa?* (Johannesburg: Partridge Publishing). E-book.
- VAN BEEK W. E. A. & OLSEN W. C., 2015, "Introduction: African Notions of Evil: The Chimera of Justice", in W. C. OLSEN & W. E. A. VAN BEEK (eds.), *Evil in Africa: Encounters with the Everyday* (Bloomington: Indiana University): 1-28.
- CHABAL P., 2009, *Africa: The Politics of Suffering and Smiling* (London: Zed Books).
- CIEKAWY D., 1998, "Witchcraft and Statecraft: Five Technologies of Power in Colonial and Postcolonial Coastal Kenya," *African Studies Review* 41 (3): 119-141.
- CIEKAWY D. & GESCHIERE P., 1998, "Containing Witchcraft: Conflicting Scenarios in Postcolonial Africa," *African Studies Review* 41 (3): 1-14.
- ELLIS S. & TER HAAR G., 2004, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press).
— 2007, "Religion and Politics: Taking African Epistemologies Seriously," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45 (3): 385-401.
- FERGUSON J., 2006, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham: Duke University Press).
- FOUCAULT M., 1980, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books).
- GESCHIERE P., 1997, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press).
— 2013, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- LUONGO K., 2011, *Witchcraft and Colonial Rule in Kenya, 1900-1955* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- MAVHUNGU K., 2012, *Witchcraft in Post-Colonial Africa. Beliefs, Techniques and Containment Strategies* (Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group).
- MIDDLETON J. & WINTER E. H. (EDS.), 2013 [1963], *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London: Routledge).

- NIEHAUS I., 2001, *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (Sterling: Pluto Press).
— 2012, *Witchcraft and a Life in the New South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- PAVANELLO M. (ED.), 2016, *Perspectives on African Witchcraft* (London: Routledge).
- SHAW R., 2002, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- SPENCE S., 2017, *Witchcraft Accusations and Persecution as a Mechanism for the Marginalisation of Women* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing).
- REDDING S., 2006, *Sorcery and Sovereignty: Taxation, Power and Rebellion in South Africa, 1880-1963* (Athens: Ohio University Press).
- ROXBURGH S., 2014, *Witchcraft, Violence and Mediation in Africa: A Comparative Study of Ghana and Cameroon*, PhD Diss. (Ottawa, University of Ottawa), <<https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/31641>>.
- RUTHERFORD B., 1999, "To Find an African Witch: Anthropology, Modernity, and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe," *Critique of Anthropology* 19 (1): 89-109.
- SMITH J., 2008, *Bewitching Development: Witchcraft and the Reinvention of Development in Neoliberal Kenya* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
- WEBER M., 1947 [1922], *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- WEST H., 2005, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Realm in Mozambique* (Chicago: University of Chicago).
- WHITE L., 2000, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

ABSTRACT

Numerous authors have noted cyclical interest in the subject of witchcraft in Africa with a “revitalized” rise emerging in the 1990s that has been sustained by innovative research and continued popular interest in news media and activism (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998: 1). Closing in on a century of research, it is difficult to determine whether our understanding of witchcraft has deepened since the canonical work of Evans-Pritchard among the Zande in 1937. The following review summarizes twenty works on witchcraft that have been published in English in the past twenty some years and demonstrates how our understanding of witchcraft has broadened to incorporate new expressions and experiences. At the same time, this article considers whether increasing conceptual complexity is drawing us closer to a clear definition of what witchcraft is, as a concept or phenomenon, or providing greater certainty as to whether it even exists in the ways that we study it.

Keywords: Africa, defining, research, studies, witchcraft.

RÉSUMÉ

Passer par la zone d'ombre : le défi de définir la sorcellerie dans les études académiques.— De nombreux auteurs ont noté l'intérêt cyclique pour la sorcellerie en Afrique, avec une montée « revitalisée » émergeant dans les années 1990, soutenue par la recherche innovatrice et la poursuite de l'intérêt populaire pour ce sujet, dans les médias et auprès des activistes (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998: 1). Après presque un siècle de recherches, il est difficile de déterminer si notre compréhension de la sorcellerie s'est approfondie depuis l'œuvre canonique d'Evans-Pritchard chez les Azande en 1937. Cette revue résume vingt œuvres sur la sorcellerie qui ont été publiées en anglais au cours des deux dernières décennies afin de démontrer comment notre compréhension de la sorcellerie s'est élargie pour intégrer de nouvelles expressions et expériences. En même temps, cet article examine si la complexité conceptuelle croissante nous rapproche d'une définition claire de ce qu'est la sorcellerie, en tant que concept ou phénomène, ou si elle offre une plus grande certitude quant à l'existence de ce phénomène et objet d'étude obscur.

Mots clés: Afrique, définir, études, recherche, sorcellerie.