

Afrika verstaan wil word.

Wanneer die boek so gelees word, is dit feitlik onvermydelik om dit nie as 'n viering en regverdiging van die "Bevrydingstryd" te sien nie. Die onwerkbaarheid van en die ellende wat die apartheidsbeleid vir duisende mense ingehou het, kan nie ontken word nie en Ross wys tereg daarop. Tog sou 'n meer genuaseerde en kritiese aanbieding van die rol van die ANC en meer aandag aan ander opposisiegroepe (PAC, Black Consciousness Movement en die Kommunistiese party van Suid-Afrika) teen die staat, die rol van opposisie in die algemeen in breër perspektief geplaas het.

Benewens politieke vraagstukke, spreek die boek ook sommige sosiale en ekonomiese vraagstukke aan. Verbande word byvoorbeeld getrek tussen die rol wat die apartheidsbeleid op die ekonomiese oorlewing of pogings tot oorlewing van swart mense in die stede en die reserwes gespeel het. Die ewels van vandag soos geweld, armoede en werkloosheid word eweneens voor die deur van Europeërs sedert kolonisasie tot apartheid gelê. Weereens is so 'n verklaring té simplisties van aard as die kompleksiteit van die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing in ag geneem word.

Terwyl daar nie werklik nuwe materiaal ontleed word nie, het Ross nietemin daarin geslaag om 'n breë beeld van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis te skets met die klem veral op die twintigste eeu en hoe belangrike prosesse, gebeure en beleidsrigtings swart mense gedurende die hele periode geraak het. Die boek kan nuttig op voorgraadse vlak gebruik word, maar, soos met alle boeke, moet dit krities gelees word.

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Witchcraft discourse in universal mode

PETER GESCHIERE, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*

University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville

English edition 1997,

Translated by Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman from the original French edition ("Sorcellerie et Politique en Afrique - la Viande des Autres").

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In Africa, the historical process of modernisation does not lead to the demise of belief in witchcraft. Rather, belief in occult forces actually adapts to the new political economy of globalisation. Moreover, the ambiguity of witchcraft discourse needs to be understood not only in terms of its negative associations with danger and fear, but also in terms of positive values. These are the main theses of this important work by the well-known Dutch anthropologist from Leiden, Peter Geschiere, on the changing role of the belief in occult forces in West African society. This book, originally written in French, is now available in an elegant English translation, due partly to the author's participation in the translation and rewriting of the original text.

Current historical knowledge about witch-hunts in Europe, the USA and other parts of the modernised world seems to imply the gradual disappearance of accusations of witchcraft and witch-hunts as a form of social illness, concurrent with the rise of science and all that modernity stands for. The existing analyses of anthropologists have been oriented towards the interpretation of witchcraft accusations in terms of their direct social functions as indicators of stress fault lines in society. Anthropologists used to study witchcraft as a conservative social force, conceptualised in the moralizing terms of good and evil. This book fundamentally questions these approaches and distinctions and starts its reinterpretation from the richness of meanings about the occult found in the local context. The discourse of witchcraft and related actions are furthermore contextualised in terms of the political economy of the village and the nation as an historical process.

Three themes link the material in this well-written book together: the ambiguity of witchcraft in relation to power, the importance of regional variations, and the close link between witchcraft and kinship. The book consists of seven chapters based on fieldwork done between 1971 and 1994 in southern Cameroon, with two 'comparative interstices' which take a wider look at the phenomenon in that country, and an afterword which is an evaluation and critique of the various ways in which anthropologists and historians have tried to make sense of witchcraft.

The people in Cameroon believe that, in order to attain success, witches consume the substance of others. This capability is strongly linked to power and therefore used for political and economic competition. Geschiere demonstrates how ideas and actions linked to witchcraft have responded in a dynamic and adaptive way to the new contexts of bureaucracy and wealth. While studying local-level politics through participant observation, he began to understand that occult power (*djambe*, living in the belly) was not simply something evil for the Maka of southeast Cameroon, but also had positive connotations for them. Geschiere approaches witchcraft as a discourse with its own reality which should not be explained away as imaginary, but which needs to be understood as discourse and related to its context.

The Maka of southern Cameroon had no central authority when they were subjugated by German military and commercial power. Consequently, in the later French colonial period, the creation of a new type of chief and the opportunities

provided by education and urbanisation led to new forms of inequality. The new elite captured the state machinery after independence, but did not change the basic relation of authoritarianism between the state and the local population. In this context of differentiation, hierarchy and autocratic politics, inequality and dependence created the conditions for the continuation of the link between power, kinship and witchcraft. The local discourse about witchcraft, according to Geschiere, is ambiguous and unsystematic, even fluid in nature. For instance, a healer can protect one against the use of *djambe*, but is himself also associated with it. *Djambe* can be used for good or bad purposes and it is highly adaptable to new circumstances. Witchcraft can level inequalities as well as serve to promote accumulation of wealth and power. On the local level in the village, much of the power differentials between individuals is played out through the rhetoric (linked to witchcraft) which is displayed in the contestations of the village palaver.

Witchcraft is also associated with the politics of a larger scale, that of the national level. The new educated elite of the urban centres retain their links to the rural areas, but are ambivalent about the village, because, they say, they will be eaten there. Villagers expect the elite, with their educational qualifications and higher consumption patterns, to be their patrons. The new elite, however, is associated with witchcraft which they use for their own preservation during competition on the village level, and also on the national level. The political context of one-party domination creates uncertainty and submerged intraparty competition, a fertile terrain for the use of witchcraft. The adaptability of witchcraft to modern conditions is also exemplified by the commercialization of witchcraft materials, the use of magical technology from foreign countries, as well as the integration of modern technology into witchcraft discourse (witches are said to use aeroplanes, for instance). Further manifestations of a dynamic adaptation in the discourse of witchcraft is provided by a new form of a witchcraft of riches in which the *nouveau riches* are believed to turn others into zombies to work for them.

Such is the modernity of witchcraft that the postcolonial state tries to intervene in order to control its power. Professional people and successful farmers, fearing the jealousy of those they left behind economically, accuse vulnerable individuals of witchcraft. In its effort to control the disruptive potential of witchcraft, the state allows healers to become expert witnesses in court trials, where those found guilty are heavily sentenced without clear proof of their guilt. This process changes the healers into aggressive disciplinary figures, whereas in the past their role was to reunite those accused of witchcraft with the broken circle of kinship. Interestingly, the pentacostal churches seem to be better equipped to handle witchcraft in the public space, by allowing their members to act out their witchcraft fears and by healing them from Satanic evil through exorcizing and cleansing rituals. The importance of this material for a historical comparison between Africa and Europe during the beginning of the modern era is strong, especially in the light of historians' such as Carlo Ginzburg's work on the subject. In the witchcraft trials in Europe the persecution of witches (mostly women) was also linked to the

encroachment by the state and church on the lives of local communities. The study of Geschiere, therefore, allows a fascinating comparison between the nouveaux riches of Europe in the times of the witch-hunts and what happens now in Africa.

Ultimately the book points to the prime importance of the link between witchcraft and kinship. Kinship ideas underlie the persistence of witchcraft discourse as the 'dark side of kinship'. Aggression ultimately threatens from within the family, where trust and mutual support should be dominant. It is especially the stretching of kinship links between the rural and urban areas, without losing the grip of kinship obligations, that is the basis for anxiety about the growth of witchcraft.

In the afterword the author indicates that in the last couple of years a stream of literature on witchcraft and modernity has appeared. One reason for this renewed interest, with a new theoretical approach, is that African governments have brought witchcraft into the open by their attempts to control it. Another is that anthropologists, who used to see witchcraft as functional to the maintenance of order in local contexts, have changed their approach from an emphasis on village studies and witchcraft accusations to a study of the witchcraft discourse in its totality and in its various contexts. In analyses, the historical changes of witchcraft discourse, as well as its inherent ambiguity and adaptability in modern conditions, have become much more central.

The style of the book is a very successful mix of case material, theoretical argumentation and contextualisation. This is partly achieved by a fluent and clear style of writing, but also by a strong focus around the three basic themes. Comparative material from various parts of Cameroon, from different historical processes and from other parts of Africa and Europe give the book a much wider relevance than the purely local. The text will surely be a stimulating factor in Africanist research and will prove to be very useful in teaching on witchcraft and local-level politics. For the South African reader the book has special value when read with the recent work of Niehaus and Ashforth in mind, who analyse the upsurge in witchcraft accusations since the early nineties in Mpumalanga and Soweto. The growth of Zionist churches in the region is also indicative of the need to deal with these beliefs. Ultimately, it is important to keep in mind that witchcraft discourse tries to deal with what Geschiere calls universal problems. In this sense accusations of racism or of the violation of minority rights also serve to address the universal and atemporal problems which witchcraft discourse tries to address: adversity and competition.

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