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PAVANELLO, Mariano (ed.). 2017. Perspectives on African Witchcraft. London/New York: Routledge. 226 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-21756-0

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Perspectives on African Witchcraft gathers contributions by seven anthropologists, both established and junior scholars, mostly from Italian universities. The edited volume reflects that the anthropology of witchcraft (and, in a broader sense, magic and religion) is a highly sophisticated and diversified field of enquiry. As *Perspectives on African Witchcraft* testifies, through the prism of witchcraft, we can learn more about colonial and postcolonial governance, transnationalism and diasporic life, religious change and the rise of Pentecostalism, or the ambiguities of healing if we look at these – and vice versa. The contributions are highly diverse in style and theoretical approach and tied together only by a common interest to explore power relations and "the universes of ideas, perception, violences, emotions and repressions that incorporate beliefs and practices that we define as witchlike" (p. 9), as editor Mariano Pavanello puts it in the introduction. This intention implies a crucial question: Who defines what is "witchlike"?

More than other objects of enquiry, witchcraft forces researchers to self-reflectively engage with own beliefs and differing lifeworlds, demanding of the anthropologist the difficult choice of where to locate oneself. In the lifeworld of the actors, in which witchcraft undoubtedly exists as an efficacious force? Or outside of their interpretative frameworks? In an introduction filled with vignettes and thoughtful methodological considerations, Pavanello (who is also responsible for two long chapters, meaning that his writing alone accounts for half of the book) observes that most contemporary anthropologists have settled for the second option, observing the debates from a distance rather than from within. He recommends, however, that researchers should come to terms with multiple regimes of truth by resorting to "epistemological pluralism, as some sort of cognitive schizophrenia" (p. 10).

The authors navigate the demands of an "epistemological pluralism" as they creatively engage with ambiguities, overlappings and contradictions. In a chapter on healing and harming among Dogon specialists, Roberto Beneduce, for instance, comes back to the old question of what distinguishes a healer

from a sorcerer, a distinction that is as widely made from Cameroon to Mozambique as it is crossed (p. 204). Beneduce then draws attention to the fact that colonial medicine itself has been ambiguous, especially where it complied with techniques of oppression and torture. In the colonial situation, Western medical science was part of the strategies of othering and exerting power. Certain strands of "local" knowledge then automatically held subversive potential that was, at times, activated against foreign domination. Dogon healers, Beneduce argues, employed their magical-therapeutical knowledge in a "complex of counterpower and rebellion" (p. 206), making whole villages invisible to hide them from colonial intervention. The relationship between colonialism and witchcraft is examined and further differentiated in other chapters of the volume.

In an anthropological reading of legal texts, Elisa Vasconi scrutinizes how colonial authorities in the Gold Coast constructed witchcraft as a legal offense – a process that was observable also in other territories, though not necessarily at the same time. Under the blurry term of witchcraft, colonial legislators lumped together a multitude of healing practices, thereby criminalizing many therapeutic methods and imposing, at the same time, Western standards of health and healing. In effect, Vasconi argues, the construction of witchcraft was "a tool of the colonial government" (p. 82), especially in the case of popular healers who were seen to pose a political threat to colonial rule. She also argues, however, that anti-witchcraft acts were the result of negotiations between African leaders, missionaries, and colonizers – a claim that would deserve further research, not least because of the legacy of these encounters. Several anti-witchcraft decrees from the colonial era continue to be used by authorities in contemporary Ghana, including those that stipulate the criminalization of accusers and witch-finding practices. As in the case of the colonial government, it is only herbal medicine that is seen as an acceptable and "good" part of traditional practices from the perspective of state authorities (p. 92).

Pino Schirripa deals with witchcraft from the perspective of Pentecostalists in Ethiopia. He demonstrates that due to historical reasons – the oppression of the succeeding regimes of Haile Selassie and the Dergue – evangelical and Pentecostal Churches have overlapped. The oppression has not stopped the extremely adaptable Pentecostal movement from growing, as it has done in many other parts of the world. With a following of meanwhile over fourteen million persons these forms of worshipping have posed a serious challenge

to the still dominant Orthodox Church. As Schirripa shows, what is at stake in this challenge is a very distinct clash of "tradition" and "modernity," as the Pentecostals in Ethiopia draw much of their identity from an opposition towards the Orthodox Church – which is rendered not only as obsolete, but also as pagan and diabolical in Pentecostal discourses.

Osvaldo Constantini also looks at Pentecostal Eritrean and Ethiopian Churches, but explores these in the diaspora in Rome, Italy. His analysis is less concerned with inter-confessional rivalries. Foregrounding the diasporic context, Constantini shows how the community members create a space of belonging that is practically free from nationalist conflict, ethnic strife, and regional chauvinism. In his treatment, the Pentecostal Congregation in Christ appears as a truly transnational network that escapes the ideological grip of the nation-state and breaks with divisive nationalist notions of the past. This stand is firmly grounded, as Constantini highlights, in a general call on all members to "abandon the ways of sin and witchcraft (which include politics and Orthodox practices) in order to become a spiritual person" (p. 178). As a reader, one cannot but note that through this very opposition, the nation-state framework seems constitutive of the identity, even as it is rejected – as conscious rejection is very different from ignorance.

Some of the tragic effects of Pentecostal spiritual warfare, with its strategies of demonization and the localization of evil, stand at the centre of Andrea Ceriana Mayneri's ethnography of street children in the Central African Republic's capital of Bangui. He concludes that witchcraft accusations, often made by stepfathers and stepmothers, play a major role in "producing" new street children who will then roam the streets of Bangui. The accusations that result in a stigmatization of children often occur in contexts of Pentecostal worship and spiritual cleansing. For Ceriana Mayneri, this is not only problematic in itself, nor is it a purely Pentecostal problem – rather, he interprets it as a sign of a broader tendency of unravelling generational solidarities, a breakdown that rocks the very foundations of the gift economy.

If the contributions mentioned so far may have allowed some readers to remain detached from nagging questions of ontology and epistemology, Mariano Pavanellos's chapter on witchcraft and the Akan culture of dreaming (in which dreams are as real as the world in the waking state, according to the author's interpretation) demands a stand and will most likely elicit reactions of both approval and outright rejection. In this chapter, Pavanello unfolds the argument that witchcraft is indeed real (i.e., not only

in the mind of those who claim that it is real) and carries, at times, positive moral connotations – a view that stands in opposition to the understanding of witchcraft, widely shared in academic circles, as a practice that is harmful and maleficent by its very definition. Backing up his ethnographic evidence with insights from psychoanalysis, Pavanello thus works against both the widely shared definition of witchcraft as "evil" and the tendency to view witchcraft as a mere belief.

In the shortest chapter of the volume, Angelantonio Grossi looks at the role of witchcraft in Ghana's public space by analysing the case of a popular self-declared traditional priest who offers his services via social media networks and claimed to have performed juju against corrupt politicians. For Grossi, the case is important as it demonstrates that the formation of public spaces does not lead to a secularization, but rather that a reconfiguration of religion and the occult.

With the exception of Vasconi's text on the Gold Coast, all of the contributions mentioned above follow the well-established pattern of discussing a particular ethnographic case study. The volume profits from the long-term ethnographic research that some of the authors have conducted in particular regions; three of the authors have been researching certain localities or groups over more than two decades.

Lastly, there is a chapter by the editor Mariano Pavanello that goes well beyond the form of any conventional, book-chapter length ethnography. In an ambitious 54-page essay (that in many ways appears like a densely compressed monograph rather than a book chapter), Pavanello takes the reader on a tour de force depicting similarities between African and European beliefs concerning power and the supernatural. Looking at epics and histories of rulers in both Europe and West Africa (including texts on Sunjata Keïta of Mali and Osei Tutu of the Ashanti) from the 12th to 18th centuries, Pavanello argues that in all cases is there a link made between supernatural abilities and power. After having established this commonality in the understanding of political power, he shows – drawing on an impressively broad body of anthropological and historical work – entanglements that resulted from the increasingly frequent intercultural encounters in the age of European commercial expansion. Pavanello points out that the age of the slave trade and increasing missionary activity partly overlapped with the age of witch-hunts in Europe. Pavanello makes a convincing case that there is a lot to gain from exploring encounters and

reciprocal relations – bringing about entanglements in mentalities, governance, and jurisdiction – rather than just comparing units that are imagined as standing apart from each other. It is this chapter that most eloquently points towards new avenues for research. On a more general level it also provides a compelling argument for closer cooperation between the disciplines of history and anthropology that goes beyond a comparison of European history and extra-European ethnography.

The range of approaches and multitude of insights in this volume can at times feel a little overwhelming, especially for newcomers to witchcraft studies. At the same time, through its very range, the work provides an entry point to diverse fields of research and makes clear that witchcraft as both a prism and an object of research enriches discussions. Pavanello's contributions, in particular, bring together research from several disciplines, covering more centuries and localities than can possibly be digested in a single reading.

The question of what the point of studying witchcraft is – and how this can be done – can, of course, evoke many replies. *Perspectives on African Witchcraft* does well in that it offers tentative answers that self-reflectively engage with the associated methodological and political caveats. An understanding of witchcraft-related phenomena as indicators of crisis – treating them like a litmus test of social pathologies – proves untenable in several regards. In the concluding sentence of his contribution (and the book), Beneduce warns that conceiving of witchcraft or sorcery solely as a metaphor or irrational expression of social tensions, "we would run the risk of ignoring people's experience, the real anguish that they are familiar with, faced with threats and violence, and we might reproduce 'hierarchies of credibility' not very different from those of the colonial era" (p. 212). In this sense, "cognitive schizophrenia" and "epistemological pluralism," as called for in the introduction, is not only helpful, but necessary to come to terms with today's social realities and power relations.