Article

To Find an African Witch

Anthropology, Modernity, and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe[1]

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Abstract ■ This article critically examines the emergent anthropological analytic that situates African witchcraft within modernity, global capitalism and state structures. Despite the contrast the authors of this analytic make with what they call the older anthropological analytic that viewed witchcraft as a sign of traditional African social organization, I suggest that both approaches neglect the various social projects, social identities and power relations involved in witchcraft, including those surrounding anthropology as a discipline. I elaborate this point through discussing some of the overlapping and contesting forms of authority, including my own as anthropologist, involved in a witch-finding exercise that took place in the early 1990s on commercial farms and Communal Lands in Hurungwe District, northwestern Zimbabwe.

Keywords ■ Africa ■ anthropology ■ farm workers ■ modernity ■ politics ■ postcolonialism ■ race ■ witchcraft

> The real question, and the one Malinowski raised by demonstrating that, in the case of 'natives,' you don't have to be one to know one, is what roles the two sorts of concepts [experience-near and experience-distant] play in anthropological analysis. Or, more exactly, how, in each case, ought one to deploy them so as to produce an interpretation of the way a people lives which is neither imprisoned within their mental horizons, *an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a witch*, nor systematically deaf to the distinctive tonalities of their existence, an ethnography of witchcraft as written by a geometer. (Geertz, 1983: 57, quoted in Scott, 1992a: 317; emphasis added)

Signs of witches

Heading west on the Lomagundi road from Harare towards Kariba, one encounters a somewhat unusual road sign announcing the town of Karoi, the largest town in Hurungwe District. On a meter-high wooden sign encased in a stone cairn at the side of the highway, the town's name appears in bold relief, enhanced by the presence of a large 'witch' underneath it

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(see Figure 1). It ostensibly refers to the English translation of the chiShona word ‘karoyi’, ‘little witch’.[2]

I am using the road-sign as an allegory of sorts. I traveled by that sign many times while carrying out doctoral research on commercial farm workers living and working on white-owned tobacco farms in Hurungwe in 1992–3[3] before reflecting on it. For the longest time, I took it to be a natural icon of a witch, referring to the name of the town and, perhaps, to the ubiquitous presence of witches and witchcraft practices in the district, like other districts in the country. It was only after hearing that it was made by a white[4] farmer’s wife during the height of the liberation war in the 1970s that I began to reflect on the signification of the sign in terms of the racialized social arrangements of Karoi and the surrounding commercial farms. In the 1970s, the political structures and economy of Karoi and the district were controlled by those classified as European, just as in the rest of racially segregated Rhodesia. Although the formal racial segregation ended when the name of the colony changed to Zimbabwe in 1980, the white minority of Karoi and the district have still largely dominated the economy and have influence over the local political structures in Hurungwe.

In terms of this history, I now became aware that the ‘witch’ on the road-sign was a specific European icon. I realized how the icon is situated

Figure 1 Road Sign Indicating the Town of Karoi

in a particular genre of children's fairy tales with roots in Victorian England (Purkiss, 1996) and is thus marked by 'adult disbelief'. Accordingly, I then interpreted the sign as an icon of colonial discourse, of white Rhodesians associating the belief in witchcraft by Africans with child-like fantasies, a sign of their moral backwardness in contrast to contemporary Western reason, of stagnant tradition compared to dynamic modernity. For me, the road-sign became an icon of colonial Other-ing (see Rutherford, 1996: 181ff).

Just as the sign can lead to a singular interpretation – belief in witchcraft is equivalent to children's fantasies – my reflection also provided a neat equation – white Zimbabweans view African witchcraft as a sign of backward tradition. Although this certainly is an opinion held by many white Zimbabweans whom I met, this interpretation neglects the contested and varied ways in which 'African witchcraft' as a discursive object is in play in the formation of social identities, constitutes and is constituted by power relations, and shapes social projects that do not always fall within such neat (post)colonial categorizations. I will argue this by discussing witch-finding practices that occurred on commercial farms during my research and the various responses to it from different social actors, including myself. In so doing, I want to critically, though sympathetically, examine what is becoming an emergent anthropological analytic that situates African witchcraft *within* modernity, global capitalism and state structures and, accordingly, that makes African witches icons of local–global interactions and processes.

A number of recent anthropological studies of witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa have claimed to have gone beyond the previously dominant disciplinary analytic that saw witchcraft as erroneous beliefs performing some functional role for traditional African social organization. These recent studies view witchcraft as a set of shifting and versatile practices and idioms deployed within local communities in response to wider social forces of state domination, capitalist commoditization and modernity itself (e.g. Auslander, 1993; Austen, 1993; Bastian, 1993; Comaroff, 1997; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993, 1997; Englund, 1996; Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996; Geschiere, 1997; Niehaus, 1995; Rowlands and Warnier, 1988; West, 1997). There is a common assumption that the 'local' passively receives and then reacts to an outside force, be it modernity, capitalism or the state (though see Shaw, 1997). Although I think that these recent studies offer many insights into the social conditions and signifying practices concerning African witchcraft, there is little sustained attention, or critical reflexivity (Fabian, 1983: 90), concerning the genealogy of current representations of African witchcraft in particular African locales or in anthropology.

I find this lacuna unusual in this time of sensitivity to anthropological representation, what has been called the literary/postmodern/postcolonial turn/crisis in anthropology (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Scholte, 1987; Scott, 1992b). By focusing on African witchcraft as a positive object, much of this new analytic does not turn out to be that novel.

Other than including many more factors and wider processes in their explanations, much of the recent work on African witchcraft and modernity follows a similar strategy to that of its anthropological predecessors, trying to know the natives in terms of Western rationality and, to echo the Geertz epigram above, to ensure that their analyses are not trapped by the mental horizons of the Africans and yet sensitive to their cultural understandings. But this historic anthropological project, as David Scott notes, is unable to answer the:

> . . . question regarding the relation between Western power/knowledge and local discourse, namely, how the practices under the observation of the former, and the discourses to which it so meticulously attends, have come, *as discourse*, to form an area both solicitous of scrutiny and susceptible to inquiry. (Scott, 1992a: 318; see also Kaplan, 1995)

By neglecting their own positioning within the anthropological project of proving the ultimate rationality of non-Western practices and beliefs (e.g. Asad, 1993; Fabian, 1983), these current studies downplay their own interventions in the highly contested moral and political field regarding African witchcraft. Although they attend perspicaciously to the moral fields surrounding the topic within diverse local African communities, they tend to minimize the differing public discourses concerning African witchcraft (coming from government officials, church leaders, journalists, anthropologists, to name but a few) and the various projects of which they are a part which, in turn, articulate with the social identities and power relations within the 'locale' discussed. Knowledge of witches is very much tied to strategies of authority for all commentators.

The allegory I want to put forward is that just as I first took the road-sign to be a natural icon of 'witches' and then of 'colonial discourse', there is a tendency in the anthropology of witchcraft to take their object to be iconic of wider processes which they can naturally scrutinize, ignoring that their scrutiny, just like the road-sign, is constituted by and constitutive of specific social projects which are as partial as any other viewpoint on African witches. They distance themselves from their 'object' of study, rather than, as Kathleen Stewart has put it, being 'contaminated' by their field of study, 'mix[ing] with its object and includ[ing] itself as an object of its own analysis' (1991: 395).

Through this distancing, this analytic shares with the 'old' one it claims to have surpassed a form of functionalism, explicating African witchcraft as a response to underlying (modern, no longer traditional) social processes. Like functionalist analyses more generally (Faris and Wutu, 1986), the contributors to this 'new' approach to African witchcraft are unable to comment on their own positioning within competing strategies of governance, let alone explicitly engage in the politics of witchcraft.

I now briefly sketch out the witch-finding exercise in Hurungwe. Next, I situate my argument concerning the current and old anthropological

analytic of African witchcraft, before turning to provide an interpretation of some of the social projects regarding witch-finding practices that occurred in Hurungwe in the early 1990s, including my own positioning in some of them. This paper is less about witchcraft per se and more about the larger webs of power involved in finding, seeing and constituting African witches.

The 'illumination' of witches

My experience with the witch-finder operating in Hurungwe District was not without difficulty, mediated through varying agendas and anxieties. As such, it helped to throw in question the untroubled authority which others have in explicating 'African witchcraft'.

When I first arrived in Karoi in April 1992, I stayed with the two Catholic parish priests as I looked for a place to stay on a commercial farm. It was here that I first heard about the witch-finding practices. The older priest had disrupted what he called a 'ceremony' shortly before my arrival which he happened upon by chance. He had done so because not only was witch-finding illegal under the Witchcraft Suppression Act, but also because he argued that such action unfairly stigmatized people by the label 'witch' without any pretense to a 'fair trial'.

A few days after finding a commercial farm in the district to act as a base for my research on commercial farm workers (which I call Chidhad-hadha farm), I heard from one of the two white farm owner-operators that he had recently received a request to bring in a local 'witch-doctor' to rid the compound of witches. 'Although I do not believe in such superstitions', the farmer declared, 'after checking with other workers that this was a genuine request, I approved it. The week before you arrived, this "witch-doctor" held some witch-finding ceremony charging every worker $10[5] to be tested. He made off with over $2,000!' he added with a look of incredulity.

The next day I asked a foreman about the recent witch-finding event. He claimed that he and the other foremen were instrumental in organizing it. 'There had been a number of deaths recently, including a tractor-accident which left its driver dead, and many people had been talking about being visited at night by witches. I myself had unexplained wounds on my back and legs which the local Health Clinic could not treat', he added while revealing patches of discoloration on his body. 'So we recruited one of the traveling spirit mediums sent by ZINATHA.' ZINATHA is the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association, a government-sanctioned organization that is supposed to certify legitimate healers (see Lan, 1985: 219–20).

He gave the first description I had heard referring to this particular witch-finding practice. For the next eight months I heard details from

various people on the farm and in nearby Mukwichi Communal Land where this medium had also performed similar ceremonies. Below is a generalized, and therefore somewhat abstracted, reconstruction of the witch-finding practice, called the 'illumination' (*kuvheneka*), based on the accounts of the ones that occurred at Chidhadhadha and in various locations in the nearby Communal Lands[6] and resettlement farms.

The witch-finder only worked where there was a demand for his services. When he received a request, he stipulated that he and his helpers be paid a fee up-front to cover travel expenses. Once the sum was negotiated, they would arrive at the location and build a temporary grass shelter (*musasa*) for the event. On an appointed day, every person in the community was called to be tested. All the adults lined up and began clapping hands to assist the medium to become possessed by his spirit (people gave contrasting answers whether the spirit was a *mudzimu*, ancestor spirit, *shave*, animal spirit or *mhondoro*, royal ancestor). Once possessed, the medium became the spirit and, along with his two helpers, entered the shelter. One assistant was the interpreter of the spirit and the other was the 'secretary' writing down the names of those who were found to be witches.

The adults of each household entered the shelter together and stepped over the medium's walking stick lying on the ground. Through this walking stick, which, I was told, acted like an x-ray machine, the spirit was able to tell whether the people were witches or not. After being illuminated, those deemed innocent were told to go to one side outside of the shelter. When a witch was 'caught', that person had his or her name written down and was told to go to the other side outside the shelter. One of the helpers would later go with the accused person to his/her house. This helper also had a walking stick. He used the powers of the stick to find the tools of witchcraft hidden, usually buried in the floor, in the witch's house. The tools were usually *dumwa* (charms), medicinal herbs wrapped up in a cloth, or items that permit the witch to direct familiars and/or lightning (*mushonga wezvivanda, wemheni*) against his/her enemies. The accused then carried these items, often generically called *nyanga* (horns), back to the public gathering, showing them to the gathered crowd before disposing of them in a fire. Next, the assistant or the medium gave the accused witch cuts (*nyora*) on the forehead, at the small of the back, and on the back of arms and legs with a razor blade and, in a few accounts, rubbed medicine (*mushonga*) in them. The cuts removed what was deemed the witchcraft 'illness' from the person.

The accused was then made to drink a medicine called either *mushonga*, the generic word for any medicinal potion made with herbs, or *muteyo*, a medicine made from a small tree of the same name that had been used in the past for trials of witches in the area (see Gelfand, 1959: 163f, 1962: 127f). After drinking the medicine, according to informants, the person then acted as s/he did when performing as a witch at night, sometimes doing grotesque dances, other times turning into a hyena, and often vomiting and excreting

diarrhoea. This medicine was supposed to prevent the person from returning to witchcraft. The medium warned the discovered witch that death would befall anyone returning to witchcraft.

Less than a week after arriving on the farm, my Zimbabwean research assistant and I were walking through the workers' compound one morning, when a man in his early 30s intercepted us and, after greetings, asked if we wanted to meet the medium. After we had accepted the invitation, the man walked us to the far edge of the compound where the medium was currently residing in one of the compound's huts. He was using Chidhadhadha as a temporary base.

The medium, barefoot and wearing a long black cape, was likely not much older than 30. He seemed apprehensive at first; a mood which I initially interpreted as his wariness of white people, though by the end of our interview I had a different understanding of his anxiety. There were a number of young teenage girls hanging around the huts who, throughout our two-hour interview, were constantly ordered by the medium and his helpers to buy them cigarettes and soda pop from the farm store, and *chibhuku* (a commercially made sorghum-based) beer from the beer-hall. The assistant who intercepted us provided the money to procure these items. Fifteen minutes after our arrival, a second helper, whom I call Mr Badza, arrived to join the interview. Despite the early hour, he was already quite drunk. He became more drunk as the interview progressed.

The hermeneutics of our interview were quite dynamic. As my chiShona was quite poor then, I relied heavily on my assistant to ask my questions and translate their answers. He also pursued questions on his own. Though we were addressing the questions to the medium, the answers could come from him or one or both of his helpers, usually in chiShona, but occasionally in English. Moreover, when the three answered the same question, they often contradicted each other.

The medium claimed he was not a *n'anga* as many were calling him, but a *svikiro yemhondoro*, a medium of a royal ancestor. *Mhondoro* are the spirits of past rulers, autochthonous or conquering, of a territory. Chiefs, or claimants to chieftainships, have genealogical ties with these royal ancestors and use the *svikiro yemhondoro* for important annual rituals (see Garbett, 1966; Lan, 1985). This medium said that he and the mhondoro were from the nearby Dande area, the region where the anthropologist David Lan had carried out his well-received research (see Lan, 1985) and which was well known in Hurungwe and elsewhere to be the place of the 'big' Korekore mhondoro.

Excited about the possible connection to David Lan's celebrated work, I began to draw on my understanding of *mhondoro* through his work (and that of others) and asked rather specific questions regarding the ties of the medium's spirit to the chiefs, various taboos he observed and his spirit's ability to make rain. Some of his answers and practices went against the grain of what Lan (and other anthropologists) had written. The three must

have sensed my disappointment and my slight suspicion about their authenticity, for when I showed surprise that they declared ignorance about *Guruuswa* – the place of 'long grass', which is supposed to be the original home of the Korekore (see Lan, 1985: 75ff) – and my assistant had to re-ask the question, pointing out that we knew this term from 'books', a temporary pandemonium broke out.

Mr Badza, who was quite drunk now, accused us of talking about the sacred place of the *mhondoro* and claimed that we needed to pay a fine of $40 for our transgression. The medium and the other helper argued with him, eventually calming him down, but agreed that the best course would be for us to clap to the *mhondoro*, who would not only decide what penalty we should pay but also could answer any further questions we had. I now became scared, thinking that there were few, if any, ways one could argue with a *mhondoro* and that his 'penalty' for us could be unlimited. Moreover, I did not want to cause an even greater disturbance during the first week of my stay on the farm. But whereas my fears could be glossed as *realpolitik* concerns regarding fieldwork, my assistant, as he informed me afterwards, was also scared of possible preternatural retribution.

So we retreated, thanking the men for the interview and putting off indefinitely our chance to meet the *mhondoro*. Our fears were not just one-sided. My assistant told me afterwards that during the arguments that ended our interview, Mr Badza had openly accused us of working for the police (as well as saying something to the effect that in this period of 'ESAP' – Economic Structural Adjustment Policy – people should be able to make money whatever way they please).

The reason for Mr Bazda's fear I found out later, the broad contours of which are as follows. A month before our arrival, this medium had 'illuminated' the compound of a neighbouring commercial farm. One of the accused witches, an old Malawian man, died a day after taking the *muteyo*, anti-witch medicine. The police picked up the medium and his helpers and took them to their station in Karoi but did not press charges. By asking a series of pointed questions in the pursuit of anthropological knowledge, Mr Bazda, at least, associated us with wider persecutory forces.

Enduring traditions in the anthropology of African witchcraft

Many of the current writings on the nexus of African witchcraft and modernity contrast their analyses with the older analytic on the basis that they acknowledge the modernity of the phenomenon under study. The classic studies of African witchcraft predominantly interpreted witchcraft as an idiom or belief that is erroneous but internally logical which emerges from, and provides a form of normative control over, social relations embedded in 'traditional African social organization' and, for some, in its encounter with 'modern social change' (e.g. Crawford, 1967; Evans-Pritchard, 1937;

Gelfand, 1967; Gluckman, 1956; Marwick, 1965). The anthropologists advocating the self-declared 'new' analytic castigate this approach for over-emphasizing the traditional-ness, the conservative nature, of witchcraft in contrast to what they take to be the modernity of witchcraft:

> Witches . . . have long been the hostages, in our scholarship, of pre-modern 'tradition,' of an anthropology bent on showing how their perverse logic preserved closed local worlds. Yet, a wealth of research in Sub-Saharan Africa has long attested to the modernity of such enchantment – and the concomitant enchantment of modernity. (Comaroff, 1997: 10; see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993, 1997; Geschiere, 1997)

The emphasis of this 'new' analytic is to examine the signifying practices involved in witchcraft accusations and beliefs and to view them as moral registrars of local responses to the wider modern changes of which they are a part. Rather than having their cogency and rationality lie in 'traditional' African social organization, African witches and witchcraft practices are said to be rational on modernity's terms. Let me indicate the somewhat unified direction of this new analytic. African witchcraft is now seen as: 'not only a mode of popular action but [also] . . . at the centre of the State-building process both in the present and in the past' (Rowlands and Warnier, 1988: 121); 'modernity's prototypical malcontents' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: xix); a moral economy speaking to 'relationships between communal norms and externally centered market economies' (Austen, 1993: 92; see also Apter, 1993); a moral geography that 'presents in microcosm the imagined precipitancy and excitement of the transnational African informal economy, which is encompassed neither by international boundaries nor by formal governmental structures' (Auslander, 1993: 188); an 'idiom of choice for trying to understand and control the modern changes' (Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996: 194); 'an argument about moral personhood [which] . . . represents individualism as an inversion of morality . . . [which are] central defining features of modernity' (Englund, 1996: 273); a local discourse that 'has allowed those who participate in its reproduction to see the goods and technologies of modernity as both desirable and disruptive' (West, 1997: 25); an occult economy that 'has proven to be every bit as expansive and protean as modernity itself – thriving on its contradictions and its silences, usurping its media, puncturing its pretensions by revealing that the primordial lives on in its midst' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1997: 12); and, a:

> . . . language that 'signifies' the modern changes: it helps one to understand new inequalities, unexpected and enigmatic as they are, as seen 'from below'; it promises unheard-of chances to enrich oneself; and it can serve as a guide to find one's way in the networks of modern society, reproduced on a much wider scale than the familial relations at home. (Geschiere, 1997: 24)

Although not completely unified in approach (cf. Geschiere, 1997: 222), the common theme is its new twist to an old anthropological interest.

African witchcraft is now viewed as: part of 'the local' encompassed within, rather than in contrast to, 'the modern'; as symbolic signification rather than underlying social function; and as engaged in power and process rather than in norms and structure.

However, this contrast ignores the larger projects and moral debates which the older anthropological studies on African witchcraft were a part of – projects and debates, as I will later put forward, that the new analytic continues.

Witchcraft was a significant concern for colonizers in Africa. Or, I should say, what colonial officials, missionaries and settlers defined as witchcraft and sorcery was a significant concern. For, as some have argued, European colonizers often lumped diverse practices, moral concepts and person categories under the rubric of witchcraft and sorcery, drawing on their own European categories and history for these terms (Crick, 1979). Colonial officials were typically concerned about witchcraft as being false superstition, a source of possible uprising and, more importantly, involved in a competing form of jurisprudence, giving different African leaders or diviners authority to identify and punish witches who, to these Europeans, were innocent people (Fields, 1982; Mittlebeeler, 1976). Legislation was passed, typically with contradictory reasoning, that declared witchcraft to be a false belief in contrast to Western rationality and that punished those who accused or divined others as witches more than those who were said to practice witchcraft or sorcery (Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996; Melland and Young, 1937; Mittlebeeler, 1976).

For example, Southern Rhodesia's first Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance was passed in 1894, four years after the British South African Company occupied and established the colony for Britain. The law was further elaborated in 1899 with stiffer penalties given growing concerns over the 'problem'. Still the governing act in Zimbabwe today, it is directed at five categories of offenders, three being different types of diviners, one being a person who consults a diviner and the fifth being the person who practised witchcraft.

Moreover, the holding of witchcraft beliefs by Africans was frequently taken to be a sign of their backwardness in comparison to Europeans and thus a justification for continued European rule. As the acting Chief Native Commissioner of Southern Rhodesia argued in 1954:

> The measure of the Natives' progress from the state of savagery can be gauged to a large extent by their departure from or adherence to witchcraft beliefs. There is no doubt whatever that only a handful are completely free of the shackles of sorcery and witchcraft. (quoted in Mittlebeeler, 1976: 161)

It is important to emphasize that such claims were *assertions* of the contrast between European and African, and were as much part of the project to homogenize 'white-ness' as much as to oppress Africans (cf. Stoler, 1989). For example, on the rare occasion when Europeans were charged

under the Act, particularly for hiring witch-finding diviners on behalf of their African servants, there often was public commentary on the un-European nature of such an act. In one case from Southern Rhodesia in 1938, when the convicted European farmer asked for mitigation of the sentence, the judge replied harshly, 'there is less to be said in mitigation when the crime is committed by a person of enlightenment than when it is committed by one who is handicapped by the shackles of ignorance, rooted traditions and custom' (quoted in Mittlebeeler, 1976: 142).

Whereas the official colonial stance towards witchcraft was to try to eradicate the belief in it through criminal prosecution (and, more positively, by educating Africans into Western reason) and took it as sign of the evolutionary difference between European and African, there were other colonial projects that differed, or even challenged, this one. Some colonial officials disagreed with the prohibition against 'witch-doctors'. They argued that the administration ignored the reality and terror of witchcraft for 'natives' and that by prosecuting witch-finders and not witches, Africans see colonizers on the side of witches and not the majority. In a book written in part to build up support in England to change these laws in British colonies in Africa, two officials from British Central Africa declared that we must put forward '*laws drafted on the recognition of the reality of witchcraft in native eyes*' (Melland and Young, 1937: 137; emphasis in original). These same officials argued that colonial officials should recognize and collaborate with, not prosecute, witch-doctors, perhaps taking a proactive role in prosecuting witches and even suggesting the establishment of 'a witch detention camp' (1937: 150). Although this latter idea never went far, in practice many colonial officials in Central Africa at least did not actively implement the anti-witchcraft laws and even tried to re-deploy anti-witchcraft movements to shore up their administration of Indirect Rule (Fields, 1982). A similar tactic was occasionally used by European employers who hired 'witch-doctors' to hunt out witches amongst their employees (Bloomhill, 1962: 11, Mittlebeeler, 1976: 142). In both of these social projects, the approach taken was what anthropologists would call a cultural relativist one and what legal scholars deem an 'as if' one, acting 'as if' witches were real. Yet such an approach does not prevent dismissive evaluations of such practices. Witchcraft beliefs were still used to distinguish European from African along a teleology of civilization. As Frank Melland put it, quoting Mary Kingsley, colonial officials need to 'learn to think black at the same time getting Natives to think white' (Melland and Young, 1937: 139).

Anthropological studies of the topic during this period were inserted into these moral debates of government (in the Foucauldian sense of calculating actions to act upon the actions of others) occurring amongst colonial officials, settlers and missionaries. The anthropological concerns with the beliefs, logic, and the function of witchcraft and sorcery were not merely academic interests and debates, but also often were very clearly

directed to the practical problem of colonial administration. As Evans-Pritchard begins his essay on 'Sorcery and Native Opinion':

> It is important to understand native opinion about black magic, not only for the anthropologist but also for the colonial administrator and missionary, if they wish to show to the peoples whom they govern and teach that they understand their notions about right and wrong. (1931: 22)

Others were less concerned about convincing the colonial administrators about the distinctions and logic of witchcraft beliefs and wanted instead to indicate the limits these beliefs imposed upon Africans and their development. As Max Gluckman concluded his essay on African witchcraft:

> Beliefs in magic and witchcraft help to distract attention from the real causes of natural misfortune. They also help to prevent men from seeing the real nature of conflicts between social allegiances. We can only hope that it may yet be possible to run a society without any of this kind of distracting obscurity. (1956: 108; see also Gelfand, 1967)

So the anthropological analyses of witchcraft during the colonial period were implicated in colonial debates concerning witchcraft. They were so engaged as part of the broader social project of building up the credibility of their discipline through providing Western scientific explanations of why non-Western practices were really quite rational, despite initial appearances. These epistemological evaluations were also implicated in producing broader colonial divisions between the West and the rest. Almost every colonial anthropological study on witchcraft assumed that it was an erroneous belief and a sign of backward peoples, of 'thinking black'.[7] In other words, colonial-era anthropological studies were also assertions about the colonial contrast between European/African, white/black, science/magic, modern/traditional, even though they were advocating a cultural relativist approach (see also Favret-Saada, 1989).

But this constitution of witchcraft in this wider colonial problematic and moral debate is rarely discussed in the new approach to witchcraft and modernity (though Geschiere, 1997 hints at it). Rather, the problem with the older analytic becomes theoretical and methodological, which the newer one 'solves' by focusing on the modernity of witchcraft. In so doing, they tend to downplay their own contamination by wider projects and moral debates, predicated in part on finding witches. Rather than viewing their interpretations as being situated contributions to ongoing debates and projects, they replicate the earlier anthropological functional exegesis of African witchcraft. African witches now become icons of local–global interactions and processes.

I argue that there are two broad projects which these studies are often engaged in, projects which have roots in the earlier anthropological studies. First, there is an ongoing effort to legitimate the discipline, in this case to redeem anthropology for the 1990s and beyond.[8] This is especially clear in the Comaroffs' writings, where the emphasis on witchcraft as part and

parcel of modernity and globalism is to explicitly demonstrate how anthropology is able to critically discern the 'new world order' and is continuing the social scientific heritage of the discipline:

> . . . our skills and sensibilities ought to be put to the effort of detecting – from diverse, discordant acts and facts – emergent social processes and patterns; the sacred charter of the discipline is to explain the existence of such partly-obscured, barely audible, often nascent phenomena in the world. (1997: 6; see also discussion of comparative historical anthropology in Englund, 1996 and Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996)

This claim resonates with what they elsewhere put forward as 'neo-modern' anthropology as an alternative to what they call the relativism of 'post-modernism' (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). The aim, to return to Geertz, is to avoid an ethnography of witchcraft by a witch or a geometer.

Second, showing that witchcraft is an idiom for talking about and criticizing very modern processes is also integral to the moral projects many of these scholars assign to their studies. By demonstrating that witchcraft has a very contemporary and Western rationale and meaning, they are arguing against those who dismiss witchcraft as a sign of backwardness: Africans are not illogical or traditional, but very much part of our contemporary world, their witchcraft is a commentary on the ill-gains, inequities and forms of domination found in late 20th century Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993, 1997; West, 1997).[9]

However, these evaluations are not as straightforward as these analysts would like. Although witchcraft is viewed as a critique of the inequities of the new world order, it is difficult to elevate it to the level of resistance or effective political program. Unfortunately, in the eyes of the (neo-)modernist commentators, it is all too often directed against the wrong people: 'Their immediate moral targets are other Africans while they leave the European bases of power mystified to a point where they can only be avoided, not effectively invaded' (Austen, 1993: 105; see also West, 1997). Echoes of Gluckman's despair of witchcraft's 'distracting obscurity'? Peter Geschiere movingly struggles with his own dilemma about not wanting to dismiss witchcraft beliefs in Cameroon as false but not wanting either to 'emphasiz[e] too strongly the reality of these beliefs' (1997: 21), lest he inadvertently fuel the moral panic felt by many Cameroonians concerning this force.

Here Geschiere acknowledges the real concerns about the violence and trauma of witchcraft. But he tries to resolve them through epistemology, vacillating over whether to treat witchcraft as real or not. Indeed, the new analytic, like the older one it claims to have replaced, evaluates African witchcraft through Western epistemology. Explaining African witchcraft today, as in Evans-Pritchard's time, helps to constitute the identity of being an anthropologist. The concepts and terminology are different, but the competing discourses, identities and practices that are caught up in witchcraft accusations and practices still become largely reducible to idioms

reflecting some underlying sociological process or cultural theme. And it is based on these epistemological evaluations that the moral worth of witchcraft is appraised: as modernity's malcontents (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993), as false consciousness (Austen, 1993), as ambiguous power that needs to be officially contained (Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996; Geschiere, 1997). There is nothing inherently objectionable in such assertions. However, I find that it is unfortunate that they are constrained by their functional explanations and thus there is no critical reflexivity on the politics of their assertions, of how their (epistemologically based) moral appraisals articulate with similar and competing ones in the fields of power, social identities and social projects predicated, in part, on finding (African) witches. I will try to go beyond such limitations in regards to my appraisal of the Hurungwe witch-finding practices that took place in the early 1990s.

Power, identity, and witch-finding in Hurungwe District in the 1990s

How to interpret witch-finding in Hurungwe District in 1992–3? I discuss elsewhere the signifying practices of the generalized procedure, which evoke similar themes to that of the Ngoni witch-finder discussed by Mark Auslander (1993; see Rutherford, 1996: 473–4). Here, I will touch on some of the specific social projects of which this witch-finding event was a part, social projects that were not merely iconic of underlying social organization or processes of modernity.

The witch-finder was very much implicated in various routines and projects of authority. Following claims made by the witch-finder, his assistants and supporters that he was affiliated with ZINATHA (though this was contradicted by a ZINATHA spokesperson in Mawoneke, 1993), many workers I talked with believed that the witch-finder was sent by the national government to remove the witches in their community. 'Finally', one said with satisfaction, 'the government is concerned about our real problems and is no longer making witch-accusing illegal.'

More importantly here, the witch-finding practice was strongly supported by the forms of government where it took place. For the witch-finder to get access to the farm workers on the commercial farms to begin with, he first had to get permission from the farm operators. Not only did the operators of Chidhadhadha provide it but they also paid the initial $150 fee to get him to come to the farm – a practice which occurred on other farms that got 'illuminated' in the district. Second, he had to get permission from the *vanhu vakuru* ('big people') of the farm; that is, the foremen. Like most of the other commercial farms in the area, it was the senior foremen who were the main authorities in the compound and at work, given their close identification with the farm operators (Rutherford, 1996). Indeed, it was

the senior foreman who collected the fee ($10) from every household in the compound at Chidhadhadha.

The white farm operators thus acted 'as if' witches were real in order to meet the demands of their foremen. In other words, they were promoting a cultural relativistic attitude, a spurious egalitarianism between them and the domestic labour hierarchy they promoted. Like what David Scott has called the 'founding ideological structure of our discipline [of anthropology]' (1992b: 387), the farm operators allowed for the reality of witchcraft for non-Western Others but then used it to explain the inadequacy of their beliefs in comparison to Western rationality. To them, this was further proof of the backward nature of their workers: as one put it, 'They believe in witches, a belief which *we* got rid of centuries ago!' But they condoned it as part of their management projects, as being sympathetic to their workers, to the 'boys', as they called them.

Whereas the witch-finding procedure fitted into the forms of government on the commercial farms and helped to confirm for some white farmers the backwardness of their workers, it also was challenged by other social projects predicated on different social identities. The biggest public challenge to this procedure came from the Catholic Church and from fundamentalist Protestants, not from state representatives, despite the law against witchcraft accusations. The Catholic priests of the district strongly opposed the witch-finding, mainly on the grounds of social justice. They saw it as a form of false prosecution and extortion from poor Zimbabweans, aided and abetted by local authorities. The parish priest visited the police, local government officials, and Church-attending commercial farmers, urging them to prosecute and prohibit this 'ceremony' from taking place. Rural catechists were urged to tell their parishioners to boycott the ceremonies and to view it as an unlawful, fraudulent activity. Although these activities were part of the priests' attempts to bolster the Church's moral authority in the district, they were also in keeping with a history of social activism in the name of human rights and social justice that certain Catholic organizations have engaged in in Hurungwe District and in Zimbabwe more generally (Auret, 1992; Scholz, 1973).

But not all Christian critics viewed it through the lens of social justice. Several white commercial farmers I knew were fundamentalist Christians. It was they, for instance, who gave me the history of the Karoi road-sign, noting that the woman who painted it suffered for invoking the Dark powers by being forced to flee her farm due to the fighting in the late 1970s. They saw the witch-finder as also trafficking in the Devil's work. They assumed that all references to spirits or spiritual power in Zimbabwe actually indicated Satanic forces and that as defenders of the Christian world it was their duty to do battle with them. So when workers and the foremen on their farms asked to bring the witch-finder to the compound to expose the witches, these farmers not only vehemently turned down the request but also carried out an explicitly Christian cleansing ceremony of their own in

the compound. The aim was to drive out the demons and to fortify the Christian base of their farm. (Such actions, and generally their fundamentalist beliefs overall, were derisively commented on by many neighbouring white commercial farmers as being almost as irrational as witchcraft beliefs themselves.)

As for local government officials, their views were ambiguous. Some declared that witch-hunts are illegal and that the police should arrest those involved. Other civil servants, however, justified the action as one that helped to assuage the legitimate fears of the people by finding those who were causing harm. This ambivalence has also been played out in larger national debates concerning the relevance of the Witchcraft Suppression Act as it currently stands (see Chavunduka, 1980, 1986; Mafico, 1986), including recent attempts to revise the 1899 legislation.[10]

An article on the Hurungwe ceremonies published in a national monthly magazine was also very critical (Mawoneke, 1993). Placed under the table of contents title of 'superstition', the article included comments of villagers from Mukwichi Communal Land who viewed the 'ceremony' as fraudulent, risky (as the same razor blade was used to make incisions on different individuals, leading to the possibility of HIV-contamination), and causing untold harm to social relations within families and communities. This skeptical and dismissive view of witchcraft beliefs as the unfortunate continuation of superstitious tradition is the common one promoted in Zimbabwean media stories on the topic, part of their project of urging their country to become modern, to become developed.

A superficially similar interpretation emerged amongst many farm workers several months after the 'illumination'. More and more workers began to view the witch-finder as a fraud. For evidence, they pointed to his youth, his breaking of taboos for mhondoro mediums (smoking European cigarettes, drinking soda pop, riding in vehicles), the large amount of money he charged, and, especially, his inability to find the real witches causing so much illness, misfortune and death in the compound. Unlike the journalist, they did not view the witch-finder through the dichotomy of tradition/modernity. Rather they viewed the illumination through their common social project of making it in their *upenyu hwemabhoyi*, life of boys. The event at first was viewed as an authoritative response to the everyday reality of the presence of witchcraft. For the workers I knew, witches and witchcraft were as common as *varungu* (Europeans; bosses), *foromani* (foremen), and *maparti* (the ruling Party, ZANU PF). All provided differing forms of protection, dangers, and unpredictability which one had to negotiate with and be cognizant of. Occasionally, they would overlap in novel arrangements, leading, for example, to something like the 'illumination' event traveling through Hurungwe. Occasionally, the configuration changes and one's sympathies no longer lie with the constituted social arrangement.

Conclusion: finding African witches

How have I interpreted the witch-finding practice? My initial response was similar to that of the Catholic priests and of the skeptical workers, but it was embedded in a different practice with very different stakes. I viewed it as a money-making activity facilitated by the dominant power relations on the commercial farms. This interpretation was as much influenced by a social justice perspective towards what I took to be the consequences of this 'illumination' on the workers as by the moral argument in the current anthropological analytic on emphasizing the modernity of African witchcraft (see Rutherford, 1996: 458ff). But now I am not too comfortable in reducing it all to an idiom of power for there were different practices and identities informing the actions. Some authorities supported it with a cynical cultural relativism, others challenged it from Christian ontologies or social justice ethics, while my interaction was shaped by dominant anthropological interpretative analytics of witchcraft and indigenous cosmologies. All of which took place in, and helped to constitute, overlapping and competing social projects predicated on particular forms of knowledge, social identities and power relations which were not simply iconic of 'modernity'.

So my interpretation now rests on discussing some of the articulating and conflicting interpretative traditions (on Hurungwe commercial farms, in Zimbabwe, and in anthropology) that facilitate making African witches visible. It is part of a social project of trying to shake up positivist tendencies in our discipline, a project that is very different from others predicated on finding witches. Instead, it is predicated on making visible the techniques of those who find witches – I do not claim competency in finding witches in Zimbabwe, or elsewhere. To find African witches, one has a rich and conflicting legacy of forms of scrutiny, moral evaluations and social identities which shape the various projects of witch-finding, including those using the current conventions of Western rationality. I have been arguing against the anthropological tradition of treating 'African witchcraft' as a positive object that needs to be explicated through 'our' terms, even if it is just to say that it too is part of 'our world', without, at least, acknowledging the contested moral field of the phenomena in which 'we' too participate. As for Geertz's ethnography of witchcraft by a witch, it shows the condescending aspects of cultural relativism of our discipline: not only is it improbable, for surely the example is intentionally ridiculous to 'us', but it is impossible in anthropology, both 'old' and the self-declared 'new', for such an attempt would presumably be viewed, 'illuminated' in a way, solely as the representation of a voice of someone confined to always being the 'native', traditional or modernized. Let me conclude by suggesting that the road-signs we erect to navigate our interpretations should be taken to be constructions contaminated by a politicized world rather than as icons of what is really 'out there'.

Notes

1 This article was originally presented at a joint Canadian Anthropology Society/American Ethnological Society annual conference held in Toronto, Canada, 7–10 May 1998. I gratefully thank Udo Krautwurst, Tim Scarnecchia and Eric Worby for their useful comments. Responsibility for my arguments, however, lies entirely with me.
2 An early (pre-1940s) settler farm in the area was called 'Karoi' and it became the center of a post-Second World War European ex-soldier settlement scheme named after it. The new town that emerged to service these farms took its name from the scheme. Karoyi can also refer to the part of the river where discovered witches were drowned by members of the community in the past (Gelfand, 1967).
3 I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada as well as the Social Sciences Grants Sub-Committee and the Centre for Society, Technology and Development at McGill University which provided support for my 16 months of field and archival research in Zimbabwe.
4 'White' and 'Black' are commonly used in Zimbabwe (as elsewhere) to denote people whose ancestry lies in Europe or sub-Saharan African respectively. Although there is a tendency in academic literature to treat these labels as more 'natural' indices of human differences than, say, biological 'races', this is not to say that these terms are not as culturally constructed as other racial labels (Wade, 1993).
5 All currency is in Zimbabwean dollars. The rate of exchange in 1992 was US $1 = Z $5.20.
6 Communal Lands is the post-independence name for the smallholder African peasant areas which were called Native Reserves and Tribal Trust Lands during the colonial period. In that period, land tenure was racially segregated, with those classified as Africans unable to purchase land in the better agricultural areas which were reserved for those classified as European (Palmer, 1977). This land area, presently called commercial farms, is now open to purchase by members of any 'race', though the majority of owners currently are still of European descent.
7 'In no department of their [Azande] life was I more successful in "thinking black", or as it should more correctly be said, "feeling black", than in the sphere of witchcraft. I, too, used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft, and it was often an effort to check this lapse into unreason' (Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 99; see Hirst and Woolley, 1982: 258ff).
8 It is interesting that these current studies have helped to overcome the dominant tendency in Africanist anthropology circles from the late 1960s to the late 1980s to treat 'witchcraft' or its study as a sign of colonial contamination (see Moore, 1994: 74ff for an overview of this period). I thank Eric Worby for this comment.
9 Even in a relevant critique of the Comaroffs' model on the grounds that it reduces African witchcraft to solely a contest between local worlds and global modernity, the author concludes that witchcraft discourses in Dedza, Malawi, are about moral personhood and a critique of individualism, which is a constitutive part of their modernity (Englund, 1996).
10 Interestingly, it is the social anthropologist and former vice chancellor at University of Zimbabwe, Gordon Chavundake, who as head of ZINATHA is spear-heading the revision of the Act to redefine witchcraft so that it acknowledges the reality of witches in order to prosecute them rather than diviners. He has marshalled support of many chiefs and legislators, leading some to suspect that the Act will be revised (Moyo, 1997).

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