Depuis la fin des années soixante-dix les tribunaux de l'État dans la Province de l'Est du Cameroun condamnent des sorciers et des sorcières, sans même avoir de « preuves tangibles ». C'est un renversement de la jurisprudence courante. Depuis les temps coloniaux les tribunaux poursuivaient surtout les féticheurs qui, aujourd'hui, apparaissent même comme témoins principaux dans les procès de sorcellerie. C'est surtout sur leur « expertise » que les juges basent leurs verdicts. Le présent article se fonde sur l'analyse de vingt-deux comptes rendus de tels procès devant la cour d'Appel de Bertoua et sur des recherches anthropologiques dans les villages maka de cette région. Ces procès s'insèrent dans une offensive plus large de l'État contre la sorcellerie considérée comme une force subversive. À maints égards les féticheurs y jouent un rôle clef. L'appel des juges à l'expertise de ces féticheurs est révélateur de l'ambivalence de l'élite elle-même vis-à-vis des forces occultes. Les résultats peuvent choquer certains et ils sont de plus, contre-productifs : le féticheur risque de devenir moins un thérapeute qu'un agent judiciaire, les sorciers ne sont plus guéris et la croyance aux forces occultes n'est pas érodée mais plutôt renforcée.

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Judges and Witches, or How is the State to Deal with Witchcraft?

Examples from Southeast Cameroon*

Since the end of the seventies, the State Courts in the East Province of Cameroon have regularly convicted ‘witches’. This is a novelty. Until then, conviction by the State Courts was only possible when there was concrete proof of a physical attack. But recently, people accused of witchcraft are convicted without such concrete proof and often without having confessed. The Courts then impose heavy sentences—fines and nearly always imprisonment, even up to ten years.1 In Cameroon, these court cases have attracted a great deal of attention. This is hardly surprising since the sentences deviate clearly from the earlier jurisprudence. Since colonial times, the State Courts rather persecuted the witch doctors for falsely accusing people of being ‘witches’ and damaging their reputation. But now witch doctors appear in court as key witnesses, pointing out witches. Apparently, their expertise is taken very seriously by the judges—in many cases, the accused are mainly convicted on the basis of the witch doctors’ testimonies.

The drastic interventions by the Courts in the Cameroonian East Province are not really exceptional. Since Independence, there has been a mounting feeling in many parts of Africa, also among the educated...

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* This article is based on a series of files on recent witchcraft trials in the Courts of the East Province of Cameroon (notably from Bertoua) which we were able to consult due to the kind cooperation of the authorities. Data from these files were complemented by Geschiere’s fieldwork in this area. An earlier version of this text was prepared for a project on ‘The Transfer of Knowledge in Africa’, organised by Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Valentin Mudimbe; we thank both of them for their comments on the earlier version. A collection of articles on this project will be published in 1992 at Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

1. For the period 1981-1984, FISIY (1990a) counted thirty cases in the files of the ‘Cour d’Appel of Bertoua’, the capital of the East Province. In this province there are moreover four ‘Tribunaux de Premiere instance’ in each of the centres of the départements; apparently, these Courts also regularly convict witches. In 1987 and 1988, Geschiere made two short visits of this area. His impression was that the prosecution of witches by the State Courts had increased rather than decreased. Geschiere began his fieldwork in this area in 1971. Then, similar convictions would have been impossible.

Cahiers d’Études africaines, 118, XXX – 2, 1990, pp. 135-156.
elite, that the State could no longer remain indifferent to sorcery or witchcraft. Due to the impact of modern changes, the occult forces are said to be on the increase. Many Africans, Western-educated intellectuals included, feel that in this respect there are dangerous gaps in European law. They reproach the colonial authorities for protecting the witches because, according to colonial jurisprudence, judges refused to sentence them without concrete evidence (Fields 1982, 1985). In the words of a Cameroonian friend: ‘But with decolonisation, all this is going to change. You white people think witchcraft does not exist. But now Africans hold the positions of authority and they know witchcraft is all too real here. Soon the law will be changed, so that judges will be able to deal with the witches.’

The agitation about witchcraft is widespread in modern African society and the official courts can hardly remain indifferent. To paraphrase the words of a Zairian judge: it is hard to accept that ‘les citoyens connaissent un déchirement psychologique’—that they live in ‘une situation schizophrénique’ because the State Courts treat sorcery cases as involving imaginary offenses whereas customary judges take the same offenses very seriously and impose heavy punishments (Kimvimba 1978: 311). The issue of how modern judges in Africa can deal with witchcraft/sorcery, and particularly the question of how to produce sufficient evidence, has become a recurrent theme in many articles by Africans in legal journals.

2. There is good reason to question whether terms like ‘sorcery’, ‘witchcraft’, or the French ‘sorcellerie’ are good translations of the African terms. In many instances these Western terms have highly pejorative overtones which do not do justice to the African terms. Often, a more neutral translation like ‘occult forces’ is to be preferred. However, in this text we want to relate to present-day discussions in Africa in which terms like ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’ are commonly used. The witchcraft trials in the East Province, the subject of this article are always talked about in Cameroon in terms of ‘sorcellerie’. Therefore we want to retain this term here. We use ‘sorcery’ and ‘witchcraft’ (in French both are ‘sorcellerie’) without distinction. The classical anthropological distinction, proposed by Evans-Pritchard on the basis of his Azande material, does not apply to the belief in djambe (‘sorcellerie’) among the Maka.

3. Confer, for instance, the recent witch hunts in some parts of South Africa. However, this tenacity of witchcraft/sorcery is certainly not confined to Africa. For instance, KAPFERER (1983, 1986) tries to show that in Sri Lanka, the belief in occult forces plays a pivotal role in the further penetration of capitalist relations. And TAUSIG (1987), following a parallel line of analysis, indicates that interventions by Indian shamans are crucial to the success of World Bank projects among peasants in Colombia.


5. Cf. inter alia FADILA 1975, KIMVIMBA 1978, MAMBOU PEBBELFOOT 1985, MATTI 1976, MBOUKOU 1985, YOMBI 1984; see also SCHOFFLEINS 1988 and ROYROY VAN SHLWAM 1988. It is striking that the pleas for a direct intervention by the State in witchcraft affairs come mainly from francophone Africa; in anglophone areas, the idea that the State should intervene in this occult domain seems to be less self-evident. Murray Last (oral communication) suggests that this is related to general differences in the present day role of the State in former French and British Africa. Due to the different colonial traditions of government the State is more interventionist in the former French colonies. Similar contrasts would occur for instance in the domain of health care.
The reversal in the jurisprudence in the Cameroonian East Province and the convictions of ‘witches’, often on the basis of what seems to be precarious evidence, indicate that the concern of State officials with witchcraft/sorcery can have drastic consequences. The main issue in this article is how exactly this new intervention by the Courts occurred? Who took the initiative and which groups are playing a role in it? An obvious question is to what extent the government itself initiated these new kinds of witch-hunting? There are indications that a special role is played by a group of modern figures within the village itself—a kind of local elite of village chiefs, party officials, municipal councillors and richer farmers. But another figure emerges even more clearly from the files of the witchcraft trials and from the fieldwork data—that is the witch doctor. These witch doctors play a crucial part in the prosecution since only they have the expertise to ‘prove’ the witches’ guilt. In many cases, moreover, it is they who have taken the initiative to drag the witches before the Courts. The reason for the judges’ reliance on the witch doctors seems evident: how else are they to find ‘proof’ of these hidden forms of aggression? Yet there are also more general reasons for this collaboration: in many respects, a kind of alliance has developed since Independence between the new State elite and these witch doctors. However, one can wonder whether the witch doctors will not prove to be a Trojan horse instead of an ally for the judges. To the villagers, the witch doctor is the representative par excellence of the occult forces. The question is whether the involvement of this ambivalent figure will not confuse the new judicial offensive against the witches, making its effects highly contradictory?

Witchcraft Trials in the East Province of Cameroon

In Cameroon, the East Province has a gloomy reputation. It is the most sparsely populated part of Cameroon and access is difficult because of the dense, marshy forest. To the people in Yaoundé (the capital of Cameroon), the East Province is a remote corner, where ‘le développement’ has as yet barely penetrated. However, this hardly applies to the area of the Maka, where most of the witchcraft cases discussed here took place. Since 1950, this part of the province has become relatively

6. In debates on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries witch hunts in Europe, parallel categories are mentioned. Thomas, for instance, emphasised the role of the new rich at the village level, while in Muchembled’s vision the initiative for the witch trials came rather from the State and Church elites (Thomas 1971, Muchembled 1978a, 1978b). However, it may be interesting to note, that in these trials an equivalent to the great role of the witch doctors in the Cameroonian trials seems to be lacking. This difference might be characteristic for the continuing involvement of African State elites themselves with the occult forces (see Geschiere 1988a and below).
prosperous thanks to the rapid spread of cocoa and coffee cultivation. The ethnical prestige of the Maka nonetheless remains very low. The Germans, the first colonisers of Cameroon, characterised the Maka as the ‘Primitivsten aller Primitiven’ (‘the most primitive of all primitive people’) because of their lack of ‘staatenbildendem Sinn’ (‘State-forming genius’). The highly segmented patterns of organisation of the Maka, lacking any form of central authority, indeed impeded the colonial pacification. The Germans thus experienced unexpected difficulties in subduing the small Maka groups.7

The Maka still have a reputation of roughness and lawlessness. This ethnic stereotype also includes the notion that ‘la sorcellerie’ flourishes in their region. In 1971, the Minister of Territorial Administration, Mr Ayissi Mvodo, visiting the East, began a speech with the memorable words: ‘Before I came here, I believed the main activities of the people of the East were drinking arki (locally distilled spirits) and committing witchcraft’. He wanted to add that he now knew this was not the case. Unfortunately the ‘applause master’ gave the signal after the first phrase so that the rest was lost in the noise. The Minister had, in any case, concisely summarised the current notions about the Maka. In Yaoundé, people were therefore hardly surprised that the first news about witchcraft trials came from Bertoua, that is from the East. The general comment, also from our colleagues and other intellectuals, was that in the East, the State had to intervene against witchcraft. Otherwise matters would get out of hand there.

A survey of the files of these witchcraft trials draws an image which is alarming not only because of all the nasty things the witches are supposed to have done but more so in view of the harsh punishments imposed by the Courts: jail sentences of up to ten years, fines of up to 100,000 CFA francs and damages of up to 2 million CFA francs.8 The main proof consisted of testimonies by witch doctors and, in only some cases, confessions by the accused; in several cases one of the accused, often a younger person, confessed and thus dragged down the other accused despite their denials.9 The accusations mainly concerned attacks by

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7. On changing relations in Maka villages, see Geschieri 1982.
8. We have consulted the Court files on twenty-two witchcraft trials in the East Province covering a period from August 1982 to December 1984. These files mainly concern the ‘Cour d’Appel’ in Bertoua, the capital of the East Province; but there are also related files from the four ‘Tribunaux de Première instance’ in this Province which equally convicted alleged witches. In addition to these files, we collected oral information on six similar cases. In the twenty-two Court cases, altogether thirty-eight persons were accused of whom twenty-six were convicted and only eight were acquitted (for four persons we have only partial information).
9. Of the thirty-eight accused in total, twenty-two denied the charge but only seven of them were acquitted. Six accused had earlier confessed before the witch doctor and/or the gendarmes but withdrew their confessions in Court saying that they had been maltreated; these were all convicted. Only in eight cases (of the total sample of thirty-eight) did the accused clearly confess (two of these cases concerned children; another confessing accused was acquitted, since his confessions concerned activities of nearly ten years ago but his
occult forces or the possession of magical objects which were supposed to threaten the village as a whole. Moreover, there were a few cases of love magic. The large majority of the cases concerned events in the villages; only four of the twenty-two were located in town (most of these concerned love magic). This is surprisingly little in view of the many rumours of witchcraft in the urban context. Another surprising aspect is the low number of women among the accused (only six of the thirty-eight). The Maka have a saying that ‘women were the first to leave their bodies’, meaning that they have a certain priority in the occult world (although men are supposed ‘to have followed rapidly’). In the villages, women are certainly as often mentioned in relation to witchcraft as men. Below we shall see that mainly cases with modern aspects come before the Courts; they often concern supposed attacks on the progress of the village or on modern figures. This is perhaps why the accused are mainly men.

Within the Village: New Inequalities and the Discourse of *djambe* (‘Witchcraft’)

The following example can indicate which groups play a role in these witchcraft cases, how the Courts get involved and in what way the judges tend to deal with these cases.

Witches eat the heart of a village teacher

On the 14th of June 1983, the Tribunal de Première instance of Abong-Mbang sentenced four young men from the village of K. to jail (sentences of one, four and

alleged ‘companions’ were convicted on the basis of his confessions; the files on two cases were unclear on this point). It is of course an intriguing question as to why these accused confessed. Finlay and Rowlands (1990) suggest that they did so because, according to popular conceptions, curing is only possible if one confesses. A problem is, however, that in the East Province public confessions are fairly rare. In that area, witch doctors often put heavy pressure on their clients to confess any secret dealings they may have done or else they could not be cured. But such ‘confessions’ are mostly made in private. In any case, it is clear that particularly on the point of confessions, popular conceptions and the approach by the Courts clash: after their confession, the accused do not get a cure, but a harsh sentence. Apparently, most of the accused in Bertoua understood this and consistently denied the charges.  

10. In fifteen cases, the charges concerned murder or an attempt at it (in three of these cases the accused was a witch doctor). In four cases no victim was mentioned but the possession of magical objects was supposed to endanger the village in general. Of the three cases of love magic, two concerned women who were supposed to have made their lovers impotent (by far the highest damages were accorded in these cases).

11. The majority of the thirty-eight suspects were men and of middle age (eighteen persons between forty and sixty years old), but there were also several younger persons among them (four between ten and twenty years, three between twenty and thirty years), and a few very old men (three older than seventy years—these were all acquitted after having consistently denied everything). The number of bachelors was fairly high (twelve persons), but here again there are several counterexamples (one of the accused was a man with twenty children).
Moreover, they had to pay a fine (30,000 CFA francs each) and a compensation (25,000 CFA francs each) to the wronged party, Mr Mpoam, the village teacher. These heavy sentences were confirmed by the Cour d’Appel in Bertoua.12

The whole affair began with the confessions of one of the young men, Nkal. He declared in front of several teachers, the village chief, and the president of the party committee that he and three of his friends formed a gang. Their leader was Medoumba, who wanted to transfer the school from K. to M., the village where he was born. That is why they had gone to the house of Mr Mpoam, the teacher, in the night. Medoumba had opened the body of their victim ‘with his nails’ and cut the heart into four pieces. Each member of the gang had eaten one part. Bekolo had announced that the teacher was to die as soon as he was transferred to a post in another village. After his death, the school would be transferred to M. As a result, the teacher’s heart was full of holes. These holes could only be closed, still according to Nkal, if ‘the eaters’ pledged some of their own blood.

On hearing these terrible confessions, the notables of the village had not immediately reacted. But when Mr Mpoam, the teacher, received news that he was indeed to be transferred, he panicked. With the other notables as witnesses, he lodged a complaint with the gendarmes. The tribunal took the complaint and Nkal’s renewed confessions very seriously. The other defendants stubbornly insisted that they were innocent but this clearly did not convince the judge. He pointed out that Nkal had said that, even after his confessions, he had been threatened by Medoumba ‘par voie de sorcellerie’. According to the judge, this indicated that Medoumba had only tried to ‘perdre le Tribunal par ses dénégations vaines et ridicules’. Medoumba objected that this was already the third time that Nkal had tried to involve him in witchcraft rumours by his so-called confessions. But the judge concluded that ‘... the accused, by claiming that Mr Mpoam’s heart is no longer in a normal state due to their witchcraft [...] have damaged his morale and caused him considerable harm’. Mpoam demanded a compensation of 5,000,000 CFA francs but the Court considered this an excessive claim; 100,000 CFA francs in total should be enough.

In this case, three of the accused did not confess anything, but they were convicted nonetheless. The only ‘proof’ against them was Nkal’s confession that he had conspired with them. The Maka have their own form of defense against this kind of allegation, whereby somebody involves ever more people through his own confessions. Normally, one can then appeal to a witch doctor who ‘sees’ if you have left your body; that is if your spirit has flown away as a witch. In the preceding case, Medoumba, the main accused, made such an appeal. But the judges did not react and in the rest of the file there is no further mention of a witch doctor. This is all the more remarkable in view of the central role of the witch doctor in other cases. Apparently, the judges tend to consult the witch doctors only in order to confirm accusations and not to deny them.

At first sight, the contents of Nkal’s confessions may seem equally remarkable, not to say fantastic. To the Maka, however, several traits of his stories correspond to a definite pattern: that of the gbati. This is a new form of witchcraft which the villagers have only known since the end of the sixties and which created a sort of panic, especially in

12. All names of accused persons and witnesses are pseudonyms. However, we retained the witch doctors’ real names because of their central role in our analysis.
the beginning (Geschiere 1980). Its shocking novelty is that it is monopolised by boys. The Maka generally believe that the elders prevail in the realm of the occult forces, but the gbati can in principle only be possessed by boys who have not yet slept with a woman.\(^\text{13}\) The villagers' fear of the gbati seems to reflect the idea that young men will become jealous and therefore dangerous when they have no access to women. In another case before the Bertoua Court, a confession of a bachelor 'gbati-boy' (already in his late thirties!) typically reflected such anger of being without a woman. He told the Court that it was due to his gbati that he had no wife. However, he could leave his body by night and sleep with any woman he wanted who would be barren for ever after. Another recurring element in the stories about the gbati is the boys' craving for meat. Witch doctors often cure the gbati by stuffing the suspects with meat dishes prepared with a lot of palm oil in order to make them vomit the gbati. In general, the gbati is supposed to harm the welfare of the village: women become barren, the fields do not produce anymore, houses collapse and even the water ceases to boil on the fire.

In the first case presented here, the gbati was directed especially against modern elements in the village: the schoolteacher and the school in general. This is a recurring pattern. In another case before the Bertoua Court, the gbati was supposed to have stopped the building of a Protestant church in the village and to have blocked the road so that the Catholic priest could not enter the village anymore. It seems that this anti-modern trend especially makes the judges take the accusations and confessions so seriously.

The gbati may be something new to the Maka, but in many respects it corresponds to general trends in their discourse on the occult forces. This discourse as well focusses on power and inequality, it has a strong levelling impact and can therefore imply a threat to modern forms of authority and wealth. A brief sketch of the Maka witchcraft belief can clarify at least some aspects of the trials.

The central notion in the Maka conceptions of the occult forces is the djambe ('witchcraft'). Some informants described the djambe in concrete terms as a small, grey, and vicious animal. There is a standard story of how man came to know the djambe.

One day, a hunter found the djambe between the roots of a huge tree, deep in the forest. The djambe asked for a little piece of meat and the hunter gave it to him. That day he caught a lot of game. Thus it continued. Every day the hunter gave some meat

\(^\text{13}\) In the case above, the accused were all twenty years or older; therefore, it seems highly unlikely that they had not slept with a woman. In this Court file the term gbati is not used. Yet the case corresponds on several points with the gbati pattern. Probably this is another example of a certain looseness with which the Maka commonly apply their notions on the occult forces. In principle, the four accused should have lost their gbati when they had intercourse with a woman. But apparently they had not lost it. A common conclusion is that they must have a particular trick which has allowed them to retain their gbati force.
to the *djambe* and every day he came home with a big catch. His wife became suspicious and curious as to why he suddenly had such success. She secretly followed him into the forest. She saw the man speak to the *djambe*, then he left. The woman approached the *djambe* in her turn and asked: ‘Who are you?’ The *djambe* replied: ‘Do you want to know? Well, squat down here before me, spread your knees and I’ll show you. I’ll make you rich as well.’ The woman, jealous of her husband’s success, squatted down and the *djambe* hopped straight into her belly. Since that day, the *djambe* in her belly demanded meat to eat. She ate all the meat her man brought home from his hunting, but it was not enough. The *djambe* made her slaughter all the animals in her compound, but still it was not enough. Finally, the *djambe* required the members of her family, even her children, one after the other.

Thus mankind came to know the *djambe*, because of woman’s cupidity. Later, the *djambe* spread among the men as well.

This tale, resembling the story of Adam and Eve (but it is even more male-chauvinist), was told to me by several older informants. Others simply said the *djambe* ‘had always been there’. In any event, the story clearly summarises the main characteristics attributed to this occult force. *Djambe* is closely linked to jealousy and is directed against close kin, it lives in somebody’s belly and gives this person the capacity to transform him- or herself at night into a *djim* (‘ghost’). This ‘ghost’ leaves the body and flies away to the *sjoumbou* (witches’ sabbath). The climax of these nocturnal meetings is a cannibalistic banquet, where each witch has to ‘deliver’ one of his own kin.

However, to the Maka, the *djambe* has many sides. The nocturnal escapades of the witches is only one of them, though it is the most feared. In practice, the Maka are inclined to assume of nearly everyone that he or she has a *djambe* in the belly. But not everyone makes an effort to develop this *djambe*. Only the real *mindjindjambe* (sing. *djindjamb*, ‘witch’) can use it to fly away at night. But they can use their *djambe* in different ways as well. The Maka also know the *djambe* idjouga (‘witchcraft of authority’), which helps the elders to prevail in the large and tumultuous village palavers. Or the *djambe le dombe* (‘witchcraft of war’), which made the war heroes of the epic songs invincible. *Djambe* is certainly not always negative. In the excitatory stories of the Maka on these secret forces, the opposition between good and evil is less central than questions of success or failure. The villagers speculate on how someone has achieved a spectacular success due to the *djambe*, or how he has been ‘ambushed’ and ‘trapped’ in the ruses of the *djambe*.

Against this background, it will be clear that there are indeed problems in translating a notion like *djambe* as ‘witchcraft’ or ‘sorcellerie’, as is done in the modern Courts. The judges’ discourse seems to be based on clear-cut oppositions: ‘la sorcellerie’ is always evil and must be punished. To the Maka, however, *djambe* is a much broader concept and is not always pejorative. It is true that the dark core of the *djambe* conceptions—the witches flying to the *sjoumbou* and eating their own kin—is always present. Even prominent village elders can suddenly be
accused—for instance after a series of deaths in their family—of having flown off to the nocturnal sjoumbou. But this does not preclude that people have respect for their djambe idjouga (‘witchcraft of authority’). The implications of djambe for relations of power are highly ambivalent. Djambe has a strong levelling impact: rumors about djambe manipulations can undermine, for instance, an elder’s prestige. But it can also advance the accumulation of power: people know that it is simply impossible to contradict that very same elder because he possesses the djambe idjouga. The same applies to modern politicians who are supposed—not only by the villagers, but also by their rivals and possibly by themselves—to be heavily ‘armoured’ by the occult forces.

At first sight the Court cases seem mainly to reflect the fear for the levelling side of the djambe. This is not surprising since this levelling side is getting a lot of attention in present-day discussions on witchcraft. Many observers consider witchcraft to be the main barrier to development and progress in the villages. The link between witchcraft and jealousy is supposed to block personal enterprise and to lead to stagnation. This idea is reflected in many of the accusations before the Court. More modern elements in the village seem to feel especially threatened by the jealousy of their co-villagers and, apparently, they do not hesitate to summon them before the Courts.

In another case before the Bertoua Court a fairly rich planter—he claimed to sell cocoa every year for about 600,000 CFA francs—felt that all his richness were of no avail. His investments remained without profit. He was especially worried by the fact that his children, despite all the tuition fees he paid, never had success at school. Therefore, he went to consult a witch doctor who saw that a poor neighbour (fifty years old) had thrown a spell on him. The planter, supported by the witch doctor, lodged a complaint with the gendarmes and the accused, despite all his denials, was sentenced to five years of jail.

One of the reasons why witchcraft cases are brought before the State Courts seems, therefore, to be a growing fear among more modern elements in the village for the jealousy of their poorer co-villagers. This may be related to a deepening economic differentiation within the villages. The spread of cocoa- and coffee-farming since the fifties has not only created new income differences, but it has also led to a closing of the families. In former days, every elder was keen to adopt young men in order to enlarge his family—to enhance both the strength of his group and the prestige of his name. However, especially since the seventies, people have become more conscious of the values of the cash-crop plantations which now constitute the core of the heritage. Sons of the family tend therefore to oppose themselves to the adoption of outsiders who might want their share of the heritage. Consequently, the number of men from disbanded families who are not integrated into other units—a kind of ‘stray elements’—seems to be on the increase within the villages. It seems to be
especially those people who tend to be accused by richer villagers and summoned before the Courts.

The Witch Doctor as Trojan Horse

The last example above—of the rich planter who invoked the help of a nkong (plu. onkong, ‘witch doctor’)—not only indicates the special role of the new rich in the village, it highlights as well the very important role of these witch doctors. They seem to act as a sort of pivot between the different parties involved, mediating between the suspects, the village elite and the judges. In many cases, the witch doctors are not only called upon by the judges to furnish decisive proof, they also ‘detect’ the witches on their own initiative and drag them before the State Courts. The following case gives a spectacular example of this pattern.

A New Witch-Doctor Purifies the Village

On the 17th of May 1983, the Tribunal of Abong-Mbang sentenced Mentanga from the village of A., born in 1926 and bachelor, to five years in jail, a fine of 30,000 CFA francs, and a compensation of 5,000 CFA francs to the wronged party, the witch doctor Baba from the same village. The accused had been handed over to the gendarmes by the village chief of A. and Baba himself.

Baba (forty years old) explained to the Court that he had returned to his village of birth in 1980 and had then decided to ‘purify’ it. With the support of the local authorities, he had begun to exorcise witches. Eighteen persons had handed over their fetishes to him and were then cleansed. Only Mentanga ‘n’a pas voulu se prononcer’, although everybody knew he possessed secret charms. In May 1982, Baba had therefore ‘armoured’ the whole village by his ‘means’. The next month, Mentanga came at last to give himself up, pursued by a jeering crowd. Overcome by shame, he tried to kill himself by swallowing a small package containing a few panther’s whiskers. But Baba had been too quick: he hit Mentanga and the package fell to the floor. Baba then conducted Mentanga to the village chief, who called the gendarmes.

Mentanga told the court a different story. He did not know whether he was a ‘sorcière’ or not—‘parce que je ne suis pas Dieu’. The package containing the whiskers had been given to him by a friend when they came home, half-drunk, from the plantations. The friend had not told him what the contents were and he had not looked. When he woke up the next day, he could not find the package. He called Baba and asked him to look for it and the witch doctor had indeed found the package in his bedroom. ‘Je ne connais rien de la pratique de la sorcellerie’. But again, the judge paid little attention to this defendant’s denial. He concluded that Mentanga had indeed tried to impede Baba’s work in all sorts of ways. Moreover, he had panther’s whiskers in his possession and ‘everybody’ knew that they are used for lancer le sort.14 Mentanga could not really explain how he came into the possession of this package. Again, the judge concluded that ‘les dénégations vaines du prévenu doublées de ses déclarations contradictoires tendent uniquement a perdre le Tribunal’. And the defendant was convicted.

14. According to the Maka, the panther’s whiskers can be used to poison somebody. They are so strong that if you grind them and mix them in somebody’s food, they will pierce his intestines and make him die. But the whiskers are likewise supposed to be used pour lancer le sort to shoot somebody symbolically, which will eventually cause his death.
Baba, the witch doctor, had asked a compensation of 500,000 CFA francs. The judge was indeed prepared to grant him a certain compensation, with the argument that a witch doctor is ‘provoked’ and ‘morally damaged’ by a witch ‘who hinders him while doing his work’. But again, the judge deemed Baba’s claim excessive. He was only granted a compensation of 5,000 CFA francs. On the 6th of December 1983, the Cour d’Appel in Bertoua confirmed this sentence on all points.

The case illustrates the extent to which the Court is prepared to support a witch doctor in his ‘work’. The argument that a witch doctor is entitled to compensation from every ‘sorcier’ who hinders him in his work is open to a very wide interpretation. In this case as well, denying was of no avail to the defendant. But here there was ‘concrete proof’: the package containing the panther’s whiskers. However, the implications of this evidence were very vague. It was not at all clear whether the whiskers were indeed used as poison. And the idea that they could be used ‘pour lancer le sort’ is hardly to be called empirical evidence—even if this idea is deeply rooted in the witchcraft beliefs of the Maka and other groups from the southern forests. Moreover, Mentanga maintained that Baba had found the package, thus suggesting that the latter might have smuggled it in. In other cases as well, defendants complained that witch doctors produced fetishes from their homes which they themselves had never put there.

In other affairs, the role of the witch doctor is even more spectacular. One of the files contains a dramatic description of how Baba, the same doctor as in the case above, searched the house of a suspect together with his attendants. He placed himself in the middle of the house, with one hand up in the air and in the other hand a flat-iron full of burning charcoal. The deeper significance of the iron is not clear—we have never heard of a nkong (witch doctor) using this utensil—but witch doctors are in general great innovators. In many other respects, this example and the witch role in the trials in general correspond to their usual performance within the villages, although there are a few important innovations as well.

To the Maka, the witch doctor is the main sanction on witchcraft but he (or she) is also the main representative of the djambe (witchcraft). If somebody feels threatened, he will go and consult the witch doctor. These specialists can be men or women, old but also relatively young persons. The doctor will see in his mirror which witches are conspiring against his patient. He can surprise and attack them and force them to lift their spell—of course, only if the patient pays the required fee. But witch doctors are only capable of doing all this

15. In other cases, more substantial amounts were accorded as compensation to the wronged party—in one case, for instance, 40,000 CFA francs.
because they themselves are ‘witches who have beaten all records’. The witch doctor cures only by that very same *djambe* force. Thus he closes the vicious circle of the *djambe* belief.

Each witch doctor has his ‘professor’. Sometimes they have been brought to this professor as a child because they showed signs of an overdeveloped *djambe* that had to be controlled and steered in the right direction. Their professor has taught them all sorts of secrets. But he has also bound them with heavy oaths and interdictions to only use their powers to cure people. Witch doctors always emphasise how much they fear their professor—they can never live in his (or her) vicinity. They stress especially how heavy the rules laid down by their professor are: they can never use their *djambe* for their own gain or to kill because then their professor would immediately ‘fall upon them’. However, many Maka are not so sure about this. After all, the *nkong* knows his way better than anyone in the dark world of the *djambe*. Therefore, one is never sure how he will use his powers. The ruses and tricks of the *djambe* are infinite. The villagers often tell stories of how witch doctors conspired with the witches to embezzle their patients. The *nkong* offers protection, but is at the same time a dangerous or even suspicious figure. He can give help against the witches but only because he is himself a witch. This explains why the Maka can hardly break out of the *djambe* circle. But it also implies that the *nkong* is always an ambivalent figure in Maka society.

To the villagers, there is no breach between the performance of the *onkong* (sing. *nkong*) before the Courts and their usual role. To them, it is evident that a witch doctor can only assume this new role because of his particularly potent *djambe*. Yet, of course, there are new aspects as well. The first being that the *onkong* are no longer suspect persons for the Courts, as in colonial times, but are now invited to come and testify as experts. New also is the fact that at least some *onkong* take the initiative themselves. A specialist like Baba in the case above no longer waited until a client addressed himself to him but decided on his own accord to ‘purify’ the village.

Apparently, these changes correspond to the emergence of a new type of witch doctor. In the early seventies, the *onkong* we knew were real villagers. They hardly spoke French and they had no books. They lived in mud houses mostly somewhat away from the village. They were supposed to be fairly rich but, as my informants said, ‘their wealth cannot stay’. A witch doctor like Baba is of a completely different type. His office is right in the middle of the village and adorned with conspicuous signs: ‘guérisseur traditionnel’ and also ‘Rose-Croix’. The last sign is fairly important. The Rose-Croix has great, albeit somewhat mystical prestige in Cameroon (President Biya is supposed to be closely associated with it). By claiming to belong to this movement, Baba emphasises his relations with the new elite. In other respects as well, he tries to indicate
that he is a modern figure. He boasts about his long experience in the modern world outside the village. He served as a soldier all over Cameroon and everybody knows he has spent some time in jail—there one meets the real ‘marabouts’ (sorcerers). Moreover, he emphasises that he is a member of the new official association of ‘traditional’ healers (which has an office in Yaoundé and distributes formal membership cards). The villagers even assume that the ‘professor’ of such a modern nkong can only be a European. Other witch doctors have similar modern status symbols. We met one who claimed to have done medical studies in Switzerland—however, his calling had made him abandon his studies just before he was to become a ‘médecin’. Onkong of this modern type are mainly men, while among the more ‘traditional’ witch doctors there are at least as many women as men. Especially these modern onkong play an important role before the Courts. Apparently, they are the most interesting partners for the judges in their fight against witchcraft.16

The Role of the State Elite and its ‘Unholy Alliance’ with the Witch Doctor

This finally brings us to the involvement of the State elite: why do the judges feel that they need the support of these witch doctors? Why are they prepared to work together with them?

Ever since Independence ‘la sorcellerie’ seems to have been one of the main worries of the new State elite. The idea, referred to above, that these dark forces are the main barrier to development became a recurring theme in the campaigns of the national government. In the village where one of us lived, for instance, the sous-préfet, on the occasion of his visits, was almost every time fulminating against subversive elements who thought they could secretly sabotage official projects by their sorcellerie’. He often threatened that he, however, ‘would know where to find them and teach them a lesson’. In the political propaganda of the single party, ‘la sorcellerie’ was branded as a very dangerous form of ‘subversion’. This was a very loaded term under the authoritarian regime of Ahidjo, who constantly admonished the people to remain

16. In the files we consulted, two witch doctors of this modern type stand out: Baba, mentioned above, and Aliguena (he is not a Maka but an Eton, only thirty years old). Together they account for seven witchcraft cases (on our total sample of twenty-two); none of the accused at these cases was acquitted. They both worked in the same area, the region between Angossas and Nguelemendouka on the western border of the East Province. This area is of special importance. In economic respect, it is considered to be the most ‘developed’ part of the East (cash-cropping, for instance, started here earlier and expanded more rapidly than in other parts of the Province). It is interesting that it is precisely in this area that the role of the modern type of onkong is most clearly marked. In cases from elsewhere, onkong played a role, but they remained more in the background.
‘vigilant’ against the omnipresent ‘subversive’ elements. The French political scientist Bayart characterised Ahidjo’s regime as a ‘hegemonical project’ with totalitarian pretensions. The regime tried to establish its hegemony over all spheres of social life; control over the hidden domain of the occult forces was of special importance in this project. Precisely because they were so elusive and so hard to control, the occult forces seemed to be an obvious channel for ‘popular modes of political action’ against the regime (Bayart 1979, 1989). According to Rowlands and Warnier (1988), the struggle for control over sorcery is ‘at the heart of the process of State formation’ in a country like Cameroon.

In this perspective, the witchcraft trials by the Courts in the East Province seem only a new phase in the government’s campaign to establish its hegemony over this occult domain as well. However, from the available evidence, it is not clear that this new way of persecuting witchcraft was the result of a concerted initiative from above. We have no indication that around 1980 new guidelines were given on how to deal with witchcraft accusations. The judges in the East based their convictions mostly on section 251 of the 1967 Penal Code, which is a reformulation of an article from the earlier French code. It is also not quite clear that government officials were actively involved in bringing the accused before the courts. In one of the Court cases, a witch doctor emphasised that the commander of the gendarmes had told him not to punish exposed witches but to hand them over to him. And according to several informants in the villages, there had been an official announcement in the beginning of the eighties, both in the newspapers and on the radio, that a new article had been added to the ‘Constitution nationale’ allowing the Courts to take more direct action against the witches. But we could get no confirmation of this rumor (which in itself seems to be inexact since no new article has been added). In practice, it seems that the affairs are triggered by accusations from within the village—by the village elite or the witch doctor. It is only at their request, that the gendarmes and other officials have intervened.

It is difficult, therefore, to directly relate the new trials in the East Province to a concerted offensive by government officials against local witchcraft. Rather, the State seems to work indirectly, through the witch doctors; and it is with their collaboration that the witches are brought before the Courts and are convicted. Thus the question as to why the judges are prepared to accept these local specialists as allies becomes all the more important.

17. Fisy 1990a. One might wonder to what extent the new type of convictions were the result of a personal initiative of a few judges. In the files, the names of two judges—one at the Cour d’Appel of Bertoua, the other at the Tribunal de Première instance at Abong Mbang—occur quite frequently. Nevertheless, at least four other judges have pronounced similar convictions. Therefore, it seems that too many judges are involved to explain the new convictions only as an individual initiative.
As said before, one can mention practical reasons for this. Of course, demonstrating the guilt of the accused is very difficult in these mysterious cases, especially when they deny the charges. One of the judges in the East felt compelled, for instance, to use the argument that in witchcraft affairs, proof has to follow ultimately from the judges’ ‘intimate conviction’ that witchcraft does exist. In such precarious circumstances, the witch doctor’s declarations are most useful. Often, only he seems to be capable of furnishing decisive proof.

However, it seems that this collaboration has to be viewed in a broader perspective. In general, the alliance between witch doctors and the new State elite is nothing new. The witch doctors may have had difficult times under colonial rule, but ever since Independence, their relations with the State elite have been rapidly changing. In the seventies, Geschiere regularly saw big, black Mercedes cars parked in front of the simple mud house of his friend, Mrs Mendouga, who was a nkong of regional fame. It meant that once again, an éminence—she had préfets and top politicians among her customers—had come for her protection and help. The villagers related excitatory stories about nearly every politician or official: how he had tried to outwit his rivals in the murderous competition within the State elite by invoking the help of a particularly valiant nkong. And members of the new elite dropped emphatic hints about their hidden support, maybe to frighten off potential attackers, maybe because they did feel the need for such protection. It was emphasised above that, to the Maka, djambe (witchcraft) has an ambivalent impact on power relations: it is not only a levelling force, but it can also confirm the accumulation of power and wealth. In this respect, the new elite seems to follow in the footsteps of the old leaders. The new elite’s success, just like the invincibility of the old war heroes, seems to be closely related to the support of the occult forces. To the elite, djambe is not only a dangerous levelling force, it can also protect and confirm the newly acquired positions of power.

The recent, more or less formalised role of the witch doctor in the Courts can therefore be seen as the confirmation of already existing forms of cooperation with the State elite. The above-mentioned case against

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18 Geschiere 1988a, an English version of this article also appeared in Critique of Anthropology, 8 (1988), pp. 35-63.
19 In a seminal comment J.-P. Dozon suggests that the direct involvement of the Cameroonian State in the struggle against witchcraft is quite remarkable. He contrasts this with other countries where the State elite rather enters into alliances with religious movements who act as some sort of intermediary in the anti-witchcraft offensive (a good example is the alliance of the State elite in Ivory Coast with the prophet Atcho). In contrast, the Cameroonian State collaborates directly with important figures from within the witchcraft world (the witch doctors) and thus becomes enmeshed in this treacherous domain. The comparison is highly interesting. In some respects, the Cameroonian case may be exceptional (for instance because of the limited extent to which independent religious and anti-witchcraft movements developed here). However, it might be that in other countries with a strong tradition of State authoritarianism (Zaire of the former Marxist-Leninist regimes in Benin or Congo-Brazza) there are similar tendencies of the State getting directly involved with the occult forces. Further comparative research on the dealings of African judicial apparatuses with the occult forces might be important.
the old Mentanga shows how close this collaboration can be. The whole affair was brought to Court by the witch doctor Baba, because Mentanga was said to have obstructed his attempts to ‘purify’ the village. The judge deemed this ‘work’ so important that he felt it his duty to punish any sorcerer hindering the witch doctor. Apparently, the villagers are well aware of how close this collaboration has become. They say it only makes sense to bring a witchcraft affair before the Court if you have the support of a well-known nkong. Without a nkong’s testimony that certain accusations are indeed justified, the Court will not even listen to your complaint. The nkong already controls the access to the Courts!

Yet, although there seem to be cogent reasons for the collaboration between the onkong and the new elite, one can wonder how the involvement of these witch doctors affects the judges’ offensive against witchcraft. As stressed above, the nkong is a highly ambivalent figure to the villagers. He offers protection, but he can only do so because he is ‘the champion of all witches’. The Courts’ use of the onkong as a new kind of expert seems to imply, therefore, official recognition of witchcraft as such. One can wonder whether the new persecutions do not confirm the belief in witchcraft instead of eradicating it.

The witch doctors seem to play a pivotal role indeed in the new witchcraft trials. In many cases, they are allied to the modern elements within the village who start the accusations and it is again the witch doctors who take things to the Courts. There, their expertise is indispensable to the judges who need ‘proof’ of the mystical forms of attack. This collaboration fits in with a broader alliance between the new elite and the witch doctors which has been developing since Independence.

In this context, it is important to emphasise that the witch doctors’ alliance with the village authorities seems to be more uncertain that the one with the State elite. In the area where the witchcraft affairs discussed above took place, we know also of several cases where village chiefs and other notables protested vehemently against the intentions of onkong who proposed to ‘purify the village’—as the witch doctor Baba did in one of the cases above. In some cases, the village chief even had a witch doctor chased from the village because ‘he would only sow discord’. The reason why village authorities often seem to be diffident of the onkong is quite clear: there is a good chance that they might be accused themselves, especially if the nkong is working for one of their rivals. Within the village, no one is safe in the whirlpool of witchcraft rumours and accusations.
The urban elite is less vulnerable—if only because they can retain a physical distance from the village. Their alliance with the witch doctors can serve precisely to emphasise that their new positions of power and wealth are outside the traditional bounds—that they have definitely distanced themselves from the villagers. The modern world of sorcery has highly mercenary aspects: charms are literally for sale on the market and the onkong sell their services to the highest bidder. Because of their new wealth, members of the elite can buy the support of the best onkong. This is supposed to make them not only invulnerable to the villagers’ witchcraft, but also put them out of reach of the kind of accusations brought before the Courts (Geschiere 1988a). A striking aspect of the Court files is that only accusations against a levelling type of witchcraft are brought before the tribunals; that is, accusations against people who are suspected to have used their occult forces against the progress of the village as a whole, or against more prosperous co-villagers in particular. The villagers tell long stories of more ‘accumulative’ uses of djambe as well—about powerful people using the occult forces to strengthen their position and their wealth. But these rumours do not lead to Court cases.

This summary leaves of course many questions unanswered. By way of a conclusion, we would like to discuss two of them. First of all, the question as to why, since the end of the seventies, local witch doctors were inclined to take witchcraft affairs to Court? Is this something particular to the East, and can this explain why especially in this area, the Courts regularly convict witches?

It seems clear that, in particular, ‘modern’ witch doctors, like Baba in one of the above cases, expect that the collaboration with the Court will enhance their status not only in the eyes of the urban elite, but also among the villagers. Their emphasis on their membership in the new official association of ‘traditional healers’ seems to have similar reasoning. Apparently, they expect that recognition by the State will raise their general reputation of being able to cure. There are reasons to doubt this and to suppose that, at least in some respects, their collaboration with the Courts is difficult to combine with their role as healers. But we shall return to this point.

For the time being, this collaboration of witch doctors and judges seems to be especially close in the East Province. This might be

20. However, witchcraft trials are not restricted to the East only. There are also some examples from the Central and Southern Provinces (especially from the Beti and Bulu area) where local patterns of organisation are similar to those of the Maka (Fisy 1990b). Further to the west—in the Provinces of the Southwest and the Northwest—cases as those discussed above are still unknown. This can be related to the fact that at least some of these societies are more hierarchical (chiefs still dealing with witchcraft accusations in their own way) or to the contrast between the more centralising role of the State in francophone Africa versus the more distanced State in anglophone areas (cf. supra fn. 5).
related to the attitude of government officials, who feel more threatened in there, due to its gloomy reputation of witchcraft, and therefore seem to be all the more inclined to collaborate with local specialists in this Province. But it is also related to specific aspects of local conceptions and patterns of organization, notably to the loose structure of the *djambé* world among the Maka. In the seventies, there were hardly any formally institutionalised sanctions against witchcraft in the Maka villages. Of course, there was the *nkong*, but his cures and protection were staged at night, within the mysterious *djambé* world itself. Hardly any action was taken in the daylight world and the role of the *nkong* was not embedded in a wider framework of formalised institutions.21 In this respect, there is, for instance, a clear contrast with the more hierarchical societies in the West (Bamiléké) and the Northwest (Grassfields) of Cameroon. There, witchcraft accusations are hardly ever taken to the State Courts. But in these areas there is a whole network of institutions and associations around the central figure of the *fon* (‘chief’), who still have their own ways of dealing with mystical forms of aggression. More interesting is perhaps the comparison with societies from the Southwest—for instance the Bakweri—since they are marked by the same kind of levelling tendencies as prevailing in Maka society, and their witchcraft beliefs are as diffuse. However, in the fifties, the Bakweri imported a strong *juju* (‘fetish’) from Nigeria, Obassi Njom, who had his own cult and organizational framework, to eradicate witchcraft from the villages (Ardener 1970, Geschiere 1988b). In this area as well, people still think it highly improper to take witchcraft accusations to the State Courts. When, in 1988, just after the beginning of the period of austerity, there was a renewed fear of witchcraft in some villages, people did not turn to the State but again to Obassi Njom whose cult had a sudden and highly spectacular renaissance. In the *djambé* conceptions of the Maka, such fixed, institutionalised points seem to be lacking. This may be one of the reasons why witch doctors, village elites and State officials feel free to take such matters to Court.

A second issue is what kind of effects the collaboration between the witch doctor and judges has on both the performance of these witch doctors, and the State’s interventions in the world of the occult forces? As indicated above, there is reason to doubt whether this collaboration will really advance the *nkong*’s performance as a healer. When we discussed the witchcraft trials in the East with people from other parts of Cameroon,

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21. Of course, there were examples of suspected witches being chased out of the village. But these were very exceptional. And there were regularly large village palavers about witchcraft accusations. However, on these occasions, the elders hardly took any action themselves. They contented themselves to warn everybody or, if things became really difficult, to invoke the help of a *nkong*. After this, the matter became a private affair between the *nkong*, the victims and the guilty ones. In principle, the scores were set within the world of the *djambé*. 
a common reaction was that imprisonment was certainly not the way to cure witches. A witch doctor is supposed to render someone’s witchcraft harmless. But how can he do so when he has the suspect convicted to jail? This is precisely the place where people are supposed to learn new secrets from other prisoners. Hence, when they are released, they will probably be even more dangerous witches than before. Even within the terms of the witchcraft belief itself, the sanctions imposed by the judges seem hardly effective.

This means that the involvement of the witch doctors must also affect the efficacy of the judges’ interventions. It was emphasised above that, to the population, the nkong is a highly ambivalent figure. He can only ‘see’ witchcraft because he is a witch himself—he is the representative par excellence of the djambe. His role as a key witness before the Courts is therefore clear proof that the forces of the djambe are recognised by the Court. The language of the Court files clearly illustrates the kind of confusion that arises. In the judges’ discourse, the notion of ‘sorcier’ is unambiguously associated with evil. When an accused admits to be a ‘sorcier’, he is sure to be convicted. However, in several cases the witch doctor begins his testimony by saying: ‘Je suis sorcier’. Surprisingly enough, this is no reason for the judges to disqualify this witness. On the contrary, they base their conviction expressly on the expertise of this ‘sorcerer’. Such confusion of speech illustrates the tension between, on the one hand, the local discourse about djambe as something diffuse and polyinterpretable and, on the other, the official discourse of the judges who see sorcery as something unequivocally evil that has to be eradicated completely. It also illustrates how local conceptions penetrate and corrupt the official discourse of the judges. And it is again the involvement of the witch doctors that creates this confusion.

State officials sometimes try to justify their collaboration with the witch doctors by saying that one must make a sharp distinction between ‘bona fide’ and ‘mala fide’ specialists. The Government should, of course, only work with the former. The aim of the national association of traditional healers is precisely to bring together trustworthy specialists and to separate them from imposters. From the villagers’ perspective, this seems to underrate the pervasiveness of djambe. As said before, the nkong is the personification of the djambe, and one is never sure how he will use this dangerous force. Djambe can be used constructively, but there is always the danger that its basic destructive tendency will get the upperhand.

22 In one case, for instance, one of the accused confessed that he was a ‘sorcier’ but he insisted that his ‘sorcellerie’ only served for hunting and not for killing people. The Maka generally suppose that every successful hunter has to use special djambe powers—how else could he have success? To the judge however, this confession was a clear proof of guilt (the suspect was accused of having killed and ‘eaten’ a child) and the man was convicted.
The problem seems to be that the State elite itself has hardly taken its distance from the djambe or similar beliefs. The national ideology may officially brand ‘la sorcellerie’ as one of the main evils in the country and judges may unambiguously condemn any form of witchcraft, but personally many members of the State elite are still deeply involved with these occult forces. They imply that they cannot do without these special kinds of protection, that they need to have access to these special powers in order to fight off potential rivals or that they have to make clear to the villagers that they are invulnerable. Whatever the reasons, the State elite still feels the needs to maintain contact with the witch doctors.

Under such circumstances, the effects of the new State offensive against witchcraft become highly ambiguous. In certain respects, the judges introduce modern elements. This applies especially to the punishments they are imposing—jail sentences and fines. However, according to local conceptions, these are hardly conducive to cure the witches and they seem to interfere with the witch doctor’s proper role as healer. In other respects, the judges seem to be caught within local conceptions. Their collaboration with the onkong automatically implies an official recognition of the djambe with all its ambiguities. Thus, it seems that the State strengthens the very forces it is trying to combat.

Anthropologists often view the resilience of local representations, such as those about the djambe among the Maka, with certain sympathy. This shows that local cultures have retained some coherence, despite the modern changes. Of course, the djambe belief does evoke terrible fears among the Maka, but it offers at least some possibilities for a cure as well. In contrast, the half-hearted interventions by the government in this occult domain, its collaboration with witch doctors and the abortive application of concepts borrowed from a Western context create a mixture of State authoritarianism and vulgarised local beliefs, which can only have gruesome effects. The ‘witches’ of Bertoua—some sentenced to ten years in jail—are a shocking example of this.

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