

Witchcraft containment in Cameroon: the dynamics of changing legal strategies

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Abstract

Over the past fifteen years, Cameroon - as many African countries - underwent significant political and legal changes which have affected local strategies of conflict management. While in the 1990s there was a tendency towards confrontational strategies, in the early 2000s actors tended to resort to procedural methods.

In my presentation I will examine the dynamics of changing legal strategies by focusing on matters arising from witchcraft accusations. As we will see, local actors explored a variety of strategies, including customary and state legal methods as well as violent encounters and mediation via non-governmental associations.

Northwest Cameroon (also known as the Western Grassfields) is an area characterised by centralised chiefdoms in which the containment of witchcraft is considered the responsibility of so-called traditional authorities. In the 1990s, however, in the context of Cameroon's political liberalisation and growing social insecurity, 'traditional' methods of witchcraft containment weakened in their efficacy. Conversely, the local population engaged in violent witch-hunts which triggered state intervention and responses from human rights and church activists.

In my presentation I will focus on an anti-witchcraft conference held in 1999 in northwest Cameroon. The event was organised by local human rights and church activists who demanded the fair treatment of individuals suspected of occult aggression. Moreover, they encouraged customary and state legal institutions not to compete but collaborate in the containment of witchcraft.

The intervention of human rights and church organisations could be seen as the precursor of new forms of law or civil society – informed by global rights discourses and customary ways of mediation. In my reading, the recent trend towards procedural methods, involving alternative institutions in the process of conflict management, is as much motivated by external influences, namely international development discourses, as it is a reaction to the malfunction of customary and state legal institutions.

1. Introduction

Over the past fifteen years, the theme of witchcraft, or more generally ‘the occult’, has experienced resurgence in anthropology (e.g. Clough & Mitchell 2001, Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, 2001a, Geschiere 1997, Kapferer 2003, Meyer & Pels 2003, Moore & Sanders 2001a, Stewart & Strathern 2004, Wendl 2004). Many authors have recognised a significant increase of occult activities in Africa and other parts of the world. They agree that contemporary discourses on ‘the occult’ are no simple reiteration of traditional witchcraft beliefs and practices, but constitute new responses to new challenges. Already in 1937, in his analysis of witchcraft beliefs among the Azande, Evans-Pritchard stated, “new situations demand new magic” (1937: 513). The ‘new situations’, Africans and the rest of the world are facing, are characterised by the expansion of the global market and the advent of “millennial capitalism” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999a, 2001b). The ‘new magic’ of this era is innately modern (Geschiere 1997, Moore & Sanders 2001b). It entails novel ways of making sense, and of deploying “a world in which the *possibility* of rapid enrichment, of amassing a fortune by largely invisible methods, is always palpably present.” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999a: 293).

Concurrently with the rise of discourses on ‘the occult’, the demand for effective methods of containing occult aggression has increased. The widespread idea that older ways of protecting oneself are no longer fully effective has led to the emergence of new forms of witchcraft containment, some of which have shocking consequences on their own (Geschiere 1997: 21). For example, self-proclaimed witchfinders, who judge their suspects merely on the grounds of rumours, have proliferated (Auslander 1993). In consequence, the issue of occult aggression has become a two-fold problem, including both the abuse by and of alleged witches/wizards¹.

This paper deals with the multiple responses to the perceived rise of occult activities in the late 1990s in Cameroon.² The regional focus is on northwest Cameroon, an area also known as the Western Grassfields and characterised by a multitude of independent polities. Here the containment of witchcraft is mainly in the hands of the so-called ‘traditional authorities’, meaning the local chief and his

¹ I use both the female and male form to indicate that men and women are suspected of practicing occult activities.

² Research leading to this paper was conducted in 2000-2002 with the support of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. For a more comprehensive analysis of the dynamics of changing political and legal strategies in northwest Cameroon see Pelican (2006).

counsellors. In addition, ‘modern’ agents, such as the state and non-governmental organisations, claim alternative solutions to the two-fold witchcraft problem.³ Yet the position held by government and NGO agents differs significantly from the population’s concern. While Grassfields villagers and traditional authorities are preoccupied with eradicating the sources of occult aggression and disciplining witches/wizards, government and NGO workers aim at controlling acts of self-justice and restoring public order.

2. Containing occult aggression

Various authors writing on occult activities in Cameroon have differentiated between southern Cameroon and the Grassfields regarding locally established methods of containing witchcraft (e.g. Fisiy & Geschiere 1991, Geschiere 1996, 1997, Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 1998). The peoples of the southern and coastal areas are relatively segmentary; chieftaincy structures have only been introduced in the colonial period. Here the containment of occult activities is mainly in the hands of ritual specialists, so-called ‘witch-doctors’, and occasionally witchcraft cases are tried in court (Geschiere 1997: 169-197). Conversely, the Western Grassfields are characterised by centralised chiefdoms in which the containment of occult aggression is entrusted to the local chief and his counsellors. Over the past two decades, however, the efficacy of so-called ‘traditional’ methods of witchcraft containment has been doubted, and individuals have resorted to alternative strategies, such as violent witch-hunts which, in consequence, have triggered the response of state authorities, and church and human rights activists.

2.1. Traditional methods of witchcraft containment

In the Grassfields local authorities are generally perceived as the main institution to regulate instances of occult aggression. While the royal counsellors are said to possess occult powers, enabling them to identify witches/wizards, the chief is thought to remain outside of the realm of ‘the occult’, and thus holds the final moral authority of handling witchcraft cases in the interest of the local community (Geschiere 1996: 316-320, Goheen 1996: 141-148).

³ The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ are here used as a heuristic device to reflect the emic distinction between customary and state or non-governmental institutions. To simplify the reading of the text I relinquish the use of inverted commas.

The persecution of suspected witches/wizards is a complex procedure that involves a number of steps. At first, it is the victim's relatives who investigate the act of assumed occult aggression with the help of a diviner. Consequently, they confront the suspects identified by the diviner with the accusation of witchcraft. The latter are generally encouraged to confess their deeds so that their occult powers should be tamed by a ritual specialist, which enables their social reintegration. If this procedure fails, the case is reported to the chief and his counsellors who regularly hold court, trying cases of both (alleged) occult and secular transgression. Here again, suspects are first encouraged to confess their deeds. Alternatively, they may be compelled to undergo a poison (*sasswood*) ordeal to disprove the witchcraft accusation. Poison ordeals are performed by drinking a toxic substance prepared with the bark of the *sasswood* tree (*Erythraphleum quineense*).⁴ Notorious witches/wizards are socially sanctioned or ousted from the community. The success of the penalty depends on the consent and cooperation of the culprit's family and on communal backing. In pre-colonial times, recalcitrant witches/wizards occasionally were abducted into slavery or executed. Nowadays, these penalties are no longer feasible as they conflict with state law.

In the view of many Grassfielders, the efficacy of traditional methods of witchcraft containment has weakened over the past two decades. Grassfields chiefs have been suspected of being co-opted by witches/wizards, in particular by members of the external elite (Fisiy & Goheen 1998, Goheen 1996: 161). Furthermore, the veracity of the *sasswood* ordeal has been questioned. While most Grassfielders still believe in the power of *sasswood* as an intelligent substance that is able to distinguish lies from truth and punishes only culprits, there are doubts if *sasswood* could not be tricked, e.g. by vomiting intentionally, or by drinking oil so that the poison should not enter the blood system. Concurrently, accidental deaths of suspected witches/wizards as a result of the *sasswood* ordeal have occurred and are generally frowned upon, as the aim of the ordeal is not to kill the culprits, but to make them confess their deeds and to be purified and re-socialised. Finally, Grassfielders are increasingly concerned about the lack of solidarity among family and community members, which constitutes a vital precondition for the efficacy of social sanctions against witches/wizards. Thus,

⁴ *Sasswood* ordeals were common in many parts of the Western Grassfields. As Geschiere & Nyamnjoh (1998: 78) point out, they were banished in the colonial period but resurfaced in the 1990s.

with growing doubts in traditional procedures of containing occult aggression, the demand for alternative methods has increased.

2.2. State legal containment of occult aggression

One of the main alternatives to traditional procedures of witchcraft containment is the state legal prosecution of alleged witches/wizards. The Cameroonian government claims the responsibility to control any transgression of state law, including secular and occult aggression. In the view of state representatives, witchcraft is a socially negative force that impedes progress and development in the rural areas and thus has to be eliminated. In the mid-1980s, for example, the Cameroonian government commissioned a team of researchers from the Institute of Human Studies in Yaoundé to investigate the extent to which local witchcraft beliefs affected the success of development programmes, and to find solutions to this problem.⁵

The sincerity of the government's attempts to gain control over occult aggression has been doubted, as the economic and political power of state agents themselves may also be attributed to occult means. In addition, individual politicians and elite members have endorsed the dissemination of witchcraft rumours via the press and public discourse as a way of supporting the fragile basis of their authority (Fisiy & Rowlands 1990: 82-83). Moreover, many Cameroonians are convinced that the state is more inclined to protect alleged witches/wizards against false accusations than to assist the victims of witchcraft assaults.

The ways in which witchcraft has been dealt with in the political and legal domain have changed significantly since the advent of colonialism. Different regimes followed different approaches, ranging from the denial of its existence to the manipulation of witchcraft rumours for political purposes. During the colonial period, there was no scope for legal prosecution of occult activities (Fisiy & Rowlands 1990: 67-69). While the British refused to acknowledge the existence of witchcraft, the French focused on the fraudulent dealings of ritual specialists (so-called witch-

⁵ Among the researchers was Cyprian Fisiy, a Cameroonian legal anthropologist, who was charged with the examination of the Cameroonian legislation in respect to witchcraft offences (Fisiy & Geschiere 2001). My explanations of state legal prosecution of witchcraft are largely based on his work (Fisiy 1990, 1998, Fisiy & Geschiere 1990, 1996, 2001, Fisiy & Rowlands 1990).

doctors).⁶ Colonial judges were perceived as allies of witches/wizards who were regularly set free for lack of substantive proof. Only after independence the Cameroonian government acknowledged the existence of witchcraft. With the introduction of section 251 of the Cameroonian Penal Code in 1967 acts of witchcraft as well as anti-witchcraft became punishable:

Whoever commits any act of witchcraft, magic or divination liable to disturb public order or tranquillity, or to harm another in his person, property or substance, whether by the taking of a reward or otherwise, shall be punished with imprisonment for from two to ten years, and with a fine of from five thousand to one hundred thousand francs. (Section 251, Penal Code of 1967)⁷

As Fisiy and Geschiere (1990, 2001: 230-235) argue, section 251 was introduced as an extension of state control over local communities, since any alternative source of power, not mediated by state institutions, was seen as potentially dangerous. This interpretation has to be seen against the background of the autocratic regime of the former President Ahidjo, which nurtured a socio-political climate of distrust and vigilance. Consequently, the population largely refrained from legal prosecution of witchcraft, as they perceived state institutions as a threat rather than an aid to orderly life (Rowlands & Warnier 1988: 127). It is only in the 1980s that the legal prosecution of witchcraft cases increased, most prominently in eastern and southern Cameroon (Geschiere 1997: 169-197, Geschiere & Fisiy 1994). This development has been interpreted as a long-term effect of labour migration and urbanisation; i.e. with the expansion of social networks in the urban context, the control of deviant behaviour by traditional institutions has become more difficult and recourse to state authorities more immediate (Fisiy & Rowlands 1990: 70).

Moreover, section 251 does not provide the court with clear guidelines, but leaves ample room for the judge's discretion. As Fisiy and Geschiere (1990 1996, 2001) point out, most often the proof of witchcraft assaults is based on the defendant's confession or on witch-doctors' testimonies. Both measures distort the meaning of confession as understood in the traditional context, where it is seen as the initial step to neutralising maleficent powers and to witches'/wizards' subsequent re-socialisation. Conversely, in contemporary jurisprudence, confession leads to imprisonment and social alienation (Fisiy 1990). Furthermore, the most dangerous

⁶ Cameroon has a triple colonial legacy. Initially administered by the Germans, it was split in 1919 and placed under the mandate of the French and British colonial powers. Contemporary northwest and southwest Cameroon were part of the British mandate area.

⁷ Cited in Fisiy & Geschiere (2001: 234).

secrets are said to be taught in jail where witches/wizards meet up with criminals from all over the country (Geschiere 1997: 196). Detention, hence, is deemed to increase rather than contain the menace of witchcraft. In addition, witch-doctors' partaking in the verification of witchcraft accusations casts doubt on the court's impartiality. Witch-doctors are perceived as part of the occult world and thus lack credibility and moral authority (Fisiy & Geschiere 1990: 146-147, Geschiere 1997: 196-197).

Against the background of these discrepancies and misgivings, it is understandable that for many Cameroonians state legal prosecution constitutes no valid alternative to traditional methods of witchcraft containment. Even among state agents, opinions about the effective containment of occult aggression differ. This will be illustrated by the following discussion of the divergent approaches of two consecutive administrators.

2.3. 'Traditional' versus 'modern' attempts in containing witchcraft in Misaje⁸

The Divisional Officer (DO) serving at the time of my arrival in Misaje was a man from Nso, one of the major chiefdoms of the Western Grassfields. His proclaimed objectives included the resolution of inter-chiefdom disputes, cattle theft and farmer-herder problems, while the containment of witchcraft figured only secondarily.

Two years later, his successor who originated from southwest Cameroon, took over and proclaimed an end to occult aggression in his area of jurisdiction. In his view, witchcraft constituted a serious obstacle to rural development and had to be counteracted effectively. He deemed the methods pursued by traditional Grassfields authorities as inefficient and contrary to state law and modern values. When in 2002 two elderly women accused of witchcraft died as a result of undergoing the *sasswood* ordeal, he issued a prefectorial order banning poison ordeals in the Misaje Sub-Division.

The different positions held by the two consecutive Divisional Officers are best understood by taking into account their regional backgrounds. The previous DO belonged to one of the largest and most influential chiefdoms in the Western Grassfields, where the containment of occult aggression lies exclusively in the hands of the chief and his counsellors. His indifference towards witchcraft, thus, can be read

⁸ Misaje is the primary fieldsite of my research. It is a small town with about 7'000 inhabitants and is located at the northern fringes of the Western Grassfields. It is the head-quarters of the Misaje Sub-Division which is part of the Donga-Mantung Division (Pelican 2006: 38-68)

as entrenched in his experience and conviction that witchcraft cases are best handled by traditional authorities. By contrast, the successive DO's focus on the eradication of witchcraft is arguably rooted in his southwestern background. In the popular media as well as in anthropological reports (e.g. Ardener 1970, Geschiere 2001) southern Cameroon features as an area where witchcraft rumours are most prevalent. Due to the absence of efficient local institutions, occult aggression is experienced as a predicament that threatens to dissolve the society from within and requires external mechanisms of resolution (Fisiy 1998, Fisiy & Geschiere 1990, 1996).

Against this background the successive DO's focus on the eradication of witchcraft is understandable, as well as his conviction that traditional methods were inadequate. However, his radical attempt of banning the poison ordeal and replacing it by legal prosecution did not meet the desired response from the population. Witchcraft accusations were still reported to the palace, and *sasswood* ordeals continued to take place. Even the Mayor of Misaje, who was supposed to serve as a leading example for his community, ignored the DO's prefectorial order, since he considered the *sasswood* ordeal the most effective method of defending himself against witchcraft attacks. Unfortunately, the Mayor died about a year after the ordeal and most villagers were convinced that he was killed by his relatives' witchcraft.

Taking into account the population's disappointment with traditional and legal methods of containing occult aggression, it is not surprising to hear of acts of self-justice and violence against suspected witches/wizards. In northwest Cameroon, such incidents occurred mainly in the 1990s and triggered a reaction not only from traditional and state authorities, but also from Christian and human rights activists.

2.4. Christian and human rights perspectives on witchcraft containment

In the course of Cameroon's democratisation in the 1990s, global discourses on human, minority and cultural rights gained prominence (Pelican 2006). As a result, a vast number of non-governmental organisations with a focus on human rights emerged. Some of these associations originated from a religious background and combined Christian doctrine with a human rights perspective. Their main concern was the decline of moral and social values and the inviolability of human beings in the face of witchcraft and its violent ramifications.

In the following I will present the case study of a conference entitled “Battling witchcraft in our society” that was organised by three Christian human rights NGOs in 1999 and held in Nkambe, the head-quarters of the Donga-Mantung Division in northwest Cameroon.⁹ The three Christian human rights NGOs were ACAT, EYPIC and the Peace and Justice Committee of the Kumbo Diocese. ACAT (Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture) is an ecumenical human rights NGO, represented in various parts of Cameroon and other countries. It bases its goals on article 5 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights that focuses on the abolition of torture and all forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. The northwestern branch of ACAT was founded in 1993 and its projects include public education and prison work. EYPIC (Ecumenical Youth Peace Initiative Committee) is also an ecumenical human rights NGO, based in northwest Cameroon. Its activities are concentrated on conflict mediation between local communities. The third organisation, the Peace and Justice Committee of the Kumbo Diocese, is part of the Catholic Church in Donga-Mantung. Members of the three associations shared their understanding of the Church as a secular institution with the social responsibility of educating its members on the inviolability of human beings, as proclaimed by the Christian faith. They saw it as their duty to bring to public attention the atrocities that had been committed against individuals suspected of witchcraft in the Donga-Mantung Division.

According to the ACAT statistics of 1999, six individuals had been executed by enraged mobs during the previous two years. The most severe cases occurred in Binshua village where a group of youths had been installed as an anti-witchcraft force by the local chief and had set up its own laws and procedures of prosecuting suspected witches/wizards.¹⁰ Victims were threatened, beaten or confined under house arrest, some banished from the village, and others publicly executed. Confronted with a large, vicious mob, neither government nor traditional authorities intervened. As argued by the conference organisers, the general increase in violence and lawlessness in the recent years was linked to the country’s political transition of the 1990s. As a consequence, many communities put up their own vigilante groups to protect villagers

⁹ The following account is based on three reports by Akuma & Kwai (1999) and Akuma (2000, 2001), documenting the progress of the joint ‘witchcraft-programme’ of the three NGOs. My thanks go to Joseph Akuma who made these documents available to me.

¹⁰ A similar case has been described by Auslander (1993) for Zambia. Comaroff & Comaroff (1999b) draw a clear link between the formation of youths squads preoccupied with witch-finding and the rise of unemployment in South Africa.

and their property against both physical and occult assaults. These village defence groups, however, had the propensity of turning into a socially destructive force, such as in the case of the Binshua anti-witchcraft force.

The conference was attended by approximately 700 participants.¹¹ These included the traditional authorities of more than 60 polities in Donga-Mantung, representatives of the administration, the judiciary and the forces of law and order (gendarmerie, police, and army), church and human rights activists, and the general public. The aims of the organisers were to educate the general public on the adverse effects of illegal sanctions against suspected witches/wizards, and to promote dialogue and cooperation between the various institutions of witchcraft containment. For this purpose they invited resource persons to present Christian and human rights perspectives and to clarify traditional and state legal procedures of witchcraft containment.

Organisers and speakers generally acknowledged the existence of witchcraft and interpreted it as a feature of social relations that flourished in the context of poverty, disease and ignorance. Speakers presenting a Christian and human rights perspective argued against the maltreatment of suspected witches/wizards. They appealed for forgiveness, neighbourliness, love and reconciliation as values promoted in the Bible. Furthermore, they emphasised the inviolability of human beings who were modelled after the image of God. Resource persons clarifying the state legal approach to witchcraft explained that, although section 251 of the Penal Code does not define witchcraft, it provides sanctions for both those who practiced witchcraft and those who illegally punish suspected witches/wizards. As they explained, unlawful punishment includes defamation, forceful displacement, physical harm and depredation of property. Although these are part of traditional methods of witchcraft containment, they have to be prosecuted under state law.

Various contributors expressed criticism on existing methods of witchcraft containment. They criticised local Grassfields authorities for encouraging mob-action and imposing sanctions that conflicted with state law and human rights. Moreover, they considered the state legal approach not specific enough in defining witchcraft, and thus unable to efficiently deal with its manifestations. Finally, they also laid

¹¹ The conference was funded by international organisations, namely Helvetas and the Swiss Catholic Leten fund (Akuma & Kwai 1999).

blame on the administration for failing to eradicate the factors that promoted witchcraft, namely poverty, illness, rural-to-urban migration and lack of development.

As possible strategies to resolve the two-fold witchcraft problem, the conference organisers proposed that traditional and state institutions of witchcraft containment should collaborate more closely. Since the authority of local chiefs and their counsellors was highly respected among Grassfielders, the organisers advised the chiefs to alert their subjects to the adverse effects of mob-action and violence against suspected witches/wizards, and to encourage legal prosecution. Moreover, they proposed educational visits to selected polities in order to assist the chiefs in this duty.

The efforts of the conference organisers to provide solutions to the two-fold witchcraft problem were received with positive response by most conference participants. As part of the assessment procedure, selected conference attendants were asked to fill in a questionnaire handed out at the end of the meeting. When asked for their opinion regarding mob-action against suspected witches/wizards, 29 out of 35 respondents denied its validity, while the remaining six respondents were either supportive or ambivalent. Concerning their assessment of different methods of witchcraft containment, ten respondents preferred traditional methods, eight favoured legal procedures and three proposed joint efforts. Finally, participants were asked to identify the weaknesses of the conference. Two major criticisms emerged; the first concerned the priority given to state representatives over local Grassfields authorities. Secondly, conference participants expressed their disappointment with the organisers' focus on assaults against suspected witches/wizards rather than the protection of potential victims of occult aggression.

As a result of the conference, 62 chiefs of Donga-Mantung came together a week later in an official meeting and resolved to educate their subjects on the Penal Code section 251 on witchcraft prosecution. Furthermore, the Binshua anti-witchcraft force was dissolved and violent action against suspected witches/wizards reduced. In the subsequent two years, members of ACAT and EYPIC held educational meetings in 15 chiefdoms in Donga-Mantung which were attended by a total of approximately 7000 people. The majority of attendants were local chiefs, notables, and ritual specialists, but also members of the general public. The chiefs generally promised to educate their subjects on the negative effects of mob-action, and to abolish the poison ordeal and the exiling and killing of alleged witches/wizards. They decreed that witchcraft accusations should first and foremost be resolved within the family. Only

complicated cases should be reported to the traditional authorities. If no resolution was achieved, the case should be handed over to state legal prosecution. The chiefs also recommended that the divisional administration should encourage members of the external elite to return home and partake in rural development.

Despite the resolutions adopted by most chiefs, the poison ordeal and the exiling of recalcitrant witches/wizards continued to be practiced. A particular example occurred in Misaje in 2002 when (as mentioned above) two elderly women died as a result of undergoing the *sasswood* ordeal. Ironically, during the visit of ACAT representatives in 1999 the chief and his counsellors had publicly refuted the use of *sasswood* in witchcraft trials.

As this case study has shown, the approach of Christian human rights activists to witchcraft and its containment corresponds closely to the state legal approach. Both are concerned with public order and the physical ramifications of witchcraft. However, the detection of occult aggression and the identification of its perpetrators remains the prerogative of customary institutions. Moreover, Christian human rights activists and state agents look to traditional authorities to implement their strategies of containing occult aggression and securing public order.

3. Conclusion

As the preceding elaborations have shown the issue of containing occult aggression is a serious one that has triggered differing and competing responses by local Grassfields authorities, state agents, non-governmental organisations and the general population. While Grassfielders and their local authorities have been primarily interested in effective methods of containing occult aggression, Christian human rights activists and state representatives have been more concerned with public order and the physical ramifications of witchcraft.

As compared to the violent witch-hunts of the 1990s, actors now tend to resort to procedural methods, as exemplified by the anti-witchcraft conference. However, none of the methods proposed by the different institutions have been fully efficient in preventing further deaths both of perceived victims and suspects of occult aggression. While witchcraft and its containment has remained a field of contention, traditional

methods are most trusted by the Grassfields population and are tacitly tolerated by state agents, as long as they do not cause further deaths.

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