

# changing worlds & signs of the times

**Selected Proceedings**

from the 10th International Conference  
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

*EDITORS*

Eleftheria Deltsou

Maria Papadopoulou

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# Changing Worlds & Signs of the Times

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# 'African modernity': Witchcraft, 'Autochthony', and transformations in the conceptualizations of 'individual' and 'collective identity' in Cameroon<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Drawing on analogies between the experiences/practices of the slave-trade and of forced labor (as embodied – and transmitted – social memory), the first part of the paper argues that witchcraft discourses in postcolonial Cameroon Grassfields are a part of modernity and about modernity. This top down approach which uses modernity as an explanatory gloss is complemented in the second part of the paper with one which focuses on local concerns and attempts to understand witchcraft discourses as an arena of conflicting conceptualizations of 'personhood', situating both in the broader (regional) context of a 'Grassfields ethos' of production, consumption and exchange.*

## Keywords

witchcraft, Atlantic slave-trade, colonialism, modernity, personhood,  
sub-Saharan Africa, Cameroon Grassfields



## Introduction

“Where there is electric light, witchcraft will disappear” (Geschiere 1997, p.2). Such were the words of a missionary to one of the informants of Peter Geschiere, an Africanist scholar renowned for his studies in witchcraft, who began his fieldwork among the Maka of eastern Cameroon in 1971.<sup>2</sup> In the subsequent decades witchcraft discourses increased in an unprecedented way, and in contemporary Cameroon (and for that matter in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa) beliefs in the ‘occult’ are rampant, pervading everyday life. Modernization therefore obviously did not lead to the disappearance of witchcraft. Quite the contrary: witchcraft rumors and practices have spread and intensified along with ‘globalization’. This is probably the reason why Peter Geschiere aptly entitled his influential book: *The Modernity of Witchcraft* (1997).

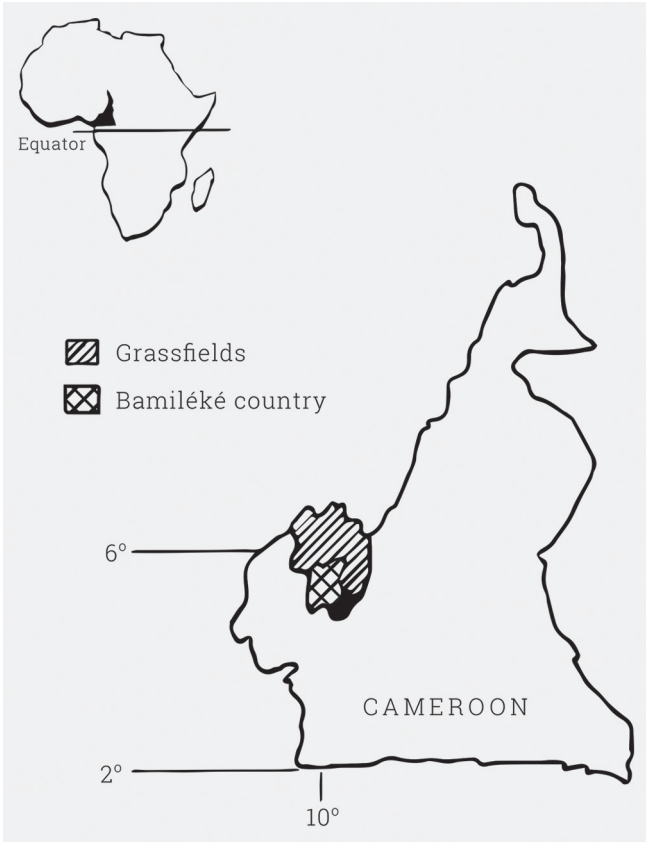
One objective of this presentation is precisely to illustrate this argument already largely documented by Africanist scholarship: namely, that witchcraft discourses are both a part of modernity and about modernity (Bonhomme 2012, p. 210; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993, p. xxix; Moore & Sanders 2001, pp. 10-15; Sanders 2003, p. 339). To do this, I have chosen the two major traumatic experiences to which the inhabitants of the African continent were subjected and which resulted in the violent incorporation of the African continent into the world-economy: slavery and forced labor. Drawing on analogies between the experience/practices of the Atlantic slave-trade and forced labor (as embodied – and transmitted – social memory; Argenti 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011) under German colonial rule on the one hand, and specific forms of witchcraft discourses on the other hand I will argue that the latter are both a product of ‘modernity’ and a comment on modernity expressed in a local, comprehensible language.

The second part of the paper shifts the scale of analysis to the region focusing on local concerns and concepts so as to complement the top down approach which uses ‘modernity’ as an explanatory gloss. It argues that witchcraft discourses constitute the arena of conflicting conceptualizations of ‘personhood’ and situates both in a regional and historical context of a ‘Grassfields *ethos*’ of production, exchange and consumption.

## The Atlantic slave-trade, forced labor and the modernity of witchcraft

### *Cannibal-witches and the Atlantic slave-trade*

The Cameroon Grassfields area roughly corresponds to the present North West and South West provinces of Cameroon (Maps 1 and 2). The region is characterized by a common political institution referred to as ‘chieftaincy’ or ‘chiefdom’ in the anthropological, historical and sociological literature. The degree of political centralization depended upon regional specialization and correlated positively with the degree of integration of local economies onto long-distance trade networks (Warnier 1985). Specialization was unequal and iron-producing polities accumulated wealth at the expense of peripheral communities which produced and exported palm oil.



**Map 1.** Cameroon and the Cameroon Grassfields



**Map 2.** The Cameroon Grassfields

The southern Grassfields fed the Atlantic slave-trade first *via* Duala (from 1614 to 1670) then *via* Calabar (1820-1830 up to the early twentieth century) by the beginning of the seventeenth century (Warnier, 1985, p. 151; 1989, p.9). The majority of the slaves sold out of the Grassfields in the precolonial era were not captured as prisoners of war. Rather, slaves were abducted for sale by elders from their own kin (Warnier, 1989).<sup>3</sup> Hence, the name given by Warnier to this figure: the Judas.

Cannibal witchcraft is widespread in contemporary Cameroon Grassfields. It is called *sue* in Bangwa (Pradelles de Latour, 1991, pp. 75-77); *nzo* in Bangangté (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999, p. 109); *tvu'* in the Grassfields village Wimbum of Tabenken (Pool, 1994, pp. 150-67); *kəvuŋ* (sing.) or *əbvunŋ* (pl.) in Oku (Argenti, 2007, p. 109). Cannibal-witches are said to band together into *njangi* associations. They offer their family members to be 'eaten' by the group.<sup>4</sup> The victims were traded in exchange for goods imported by the Europeans (guns, gunpowder, beads, etc. during the precolonial era; and all sorts of European consumption goods that flooded into the sub-continent during the colonial era and in the subsequent decades). This trade of human flesh is said to generally occur in the forest. The eaten person does not die outright but rather weakens gradually, becoming frail, confused, and sickly. Cannibal-witch discourse is a metaphor of the slave-trade and at the same time the cannibal-witch becomes a metaphoric figure of the Judas:

Atlantic slave-trade	Cannibal-witchcraft
The Judas sold his own kin into slavery in exchange for European prestige goods (rifles, beads, gunpowder, etc.)	The cannibal-witch sells his kin to his co-members in exchange for European consumption goods
The victim continued to live in the compound for a time after being sold, unaware that arrangements were being made for his abduction	The victim still roams for a time about the village after being feasted upon unaware of his/her tragic fate

### Famla, colonialism and forced labour

In the first decade of the 20th century a new form of witchcraft discourse known as *nyongo* emerged among the coastal people of Cameroon (Ardener, 1970). According to Bakweri beliefs *nyongo* adepts were believed to sell their close kin to (*nyongo*) associations in exchange for goods. Those sold were believed to be dead but were actually being spirited away (eg. 'zombified') by the other members of the coven to work on an invisible plantation (Argenti, 2007, p. 105; Warnier, 1989). These witches were said to carry their zombie victims in lorries to Mount Kupe.<sup>5</sup> The Bakweri apparently invented this (then) new form of witchcraft belief to accommodate their (then) changing economic environment (eg. the introduction of plantation economy by the Germans; the exactions of forced labour of the colonial era under German rule, followed by the British and the French who replaced them after the First World War). These discourses later spread into the Hinterlands, reaching the Southern Grassfields toward the end of the

colonial period (c.a. 1950's) (Geschiere, 1994, p. 78). Adepts of these new associations in the Southern Grassfields were said to gather in *Fepla*, a residential quarter of Bafoussam that suffered rapid urbanization in the early 1950's.<sup>6</sup> Hence, *famla*, the term which designates this kind of witch association. In the subsequent decades, *famla* spread into the main urban centers of the country and especially in Douala and Yaoundé. As with the Bakweri *nyongo*, *famla* adepts are believed to sell their close kin to these associations in exchange for great wealth. Again, as with *nyongo*, those sold appear to die but in fact have been spirited away by the other members of the coven to work on an invisible plantation in the Manenguba mountains (de Rosny, 1981, pp. 87-111; Warnier, 1989, p. 26).

### Witchcraft discourses as a 'glocal' idiom

Zombie and cannibal-witch discourses coexist in contemporary Cameroon Grassfields. But while the former remain a local/regional idiom, the latter appear in both urban and rural settings.<sup>7</sup> One can thus perceive both continuities and discontinuities in witchcraft discourses.

Indeed, *famla* discourses build on cannibal-witch discourses and at the same time they encapsulate Bakweri features (*nyongo*) taking into account (and addressing) the introduction of plantation economy and the traumatic experience of forced labour. These discourses reveal the fact that the experiences of slavery and forced labour are perceived by Grassfields inhabitants in similar terms. Or, as Argenti aptly puts it: "(...) the peoples of the Grassfields assimilated their experience of plantation (forced) labour to their previous experience of transatlantic slavery." (Argenti, 2007, note 27, p. 288; see also Geschiere, 1994, p. 78; Warnier, 1989, pp. 26-27; see also Shaw, 2002 for a similar interpretation in the case of Sierra Leone). In postcolonial Cameroon, Grassfielders often compare the hardships of fosterage with the traumatic experience of forced labour (Argenti, 2010, pp. 249-50).

At the same time however, witchcraft discourses account for historical contingencies: *famla* as a metamorphosis of cannibal witchcraft had to account for the fact that unlike victims of cannibal witches *famla's* 'zombies' did not disappear ('eaten' by the cannibal witches) but eventually returned back to their villages (as many of them did, even though they were perceived as zombies by their co-villagers and kin). Hence, *famla's* victims are said to work as zombies on invisible plantations keeping alive the possibility of their coming back. *Famla* beliefs also account for rapid urbanization and the spread of market capitalism in urban settings. Contemporary Grassfields imaginary has therefore expanded beyond the mysterious and mystical world of the forest – the conventional *topos* of witchcraft – to the cities (Argenti, 2001, 84; Pradelles de Latour, 1991, p. 76). Thus, although in the popular imagination zombies are said to be silent, they definitely "speak" of a particular time and place (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999, p. 289).

Turning persons into working zombies as *femla* adepts do: "(...) conjures with one of the fundamental laws of capitalism: namely, that rates of profit are inversely related to

labour costs” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 286). Likewise, the discourses according to which the zombified victims are transported with lorries to invisible plantations apparently refer to the mobility of labour force – still another fundamental law of market capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 289). Last, worth noticing is the discourse – introduced recently – according to which *famla* associations possess otherworld bank accounts into which their members deposit the embezzled salaries of their victims, as the latter toil for them on the otherworld plantations. All these transformations reveal the ability of witchcraft to accommodate changes. Hence, as the Comaroffs have stressed: “(...) whatever their putative powers, witches cannot escape history.” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 286; see also Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998, p. 72).

### **Witchcraft, ‘personhood’, ‘individual’ and the ‘Grassfields ethos’ of exchange**

The interpretation of witchcraft discourses as a product *of*, and a comment *on* modernity is undoubtedly illuminating but as Isak Niehaus rightly notices, if one limits oneself to this, one runs the risk of turning ‘modernity’ into a kind of explanatory gloss imported and imposed upon ethnographic observation (Niehaus, 2002, p. 269). Such top down approaches should be complemented with the study of ideas that local people regard as important (Sanders, 2003). Personhood, I contend, belongs to such ideas. Because one of my concern is to show that witchcraft is the arena of conflicting conceptualizations of personhood, I must first specify what I mean by ‘personhood’ and then briefly outline how it is conceptualized in the Cameroon Grassfields.

### **‘Modernity’, personhood, ‘individual’: definitions**

I take ‘individualism’ as defined by Louis Dumont to be the cornerstone of modernity. Individualism is a historically and culturally determined configuration of values.<sup>8</sup> In other words there is not only one kind of individualism as much as there is no such thing as one modernity (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1993a; Fischer, 1999, p.459; Moore & Sanders, 2001, pp. 10-13; Taylor, 1999, pp. 162-165). I will give a brief definition of what Dumont calls ‘individualism’ drawing on Mauss’s essay on the concept of the person (1950 [1938]), Dumont’s *Essays on individualism* (1983) and his book on the cast system: *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966).

In this seminal essay Marcel Mauss (Mauss, 1950 [1938]) underlines the fact that the category of the self (e.g. the western variety of the concept/notion of the person/self) is not innate or natural but is linked to the way a specific society, in specific periods, defines what it is to be a human being. In other words, when Mauss speaks of the category of the self he refers to the western variety of the notion/concept of the person/self, that is: the human being as bearer of the ultimate value. Dumont substitutes the concept of the ‘individual’ to Mauss’s category of the self as a western transformation and ultimate product of the concept of the person. He distinguishes the ‘individual’ as: a) “(...) the in-

dependent, autonomous, and thus essentially non-social moral being, who carries our paramount values (...)" (Dumont, 1983, p. 37) as found in our modern ideology of man and society (this is Mauss's category of the self) from b) the "(...) empirical subject of speech, thought, and will (...) as found in all societies (...)" (Dumont, 1983, p. 37). He thus differentiates between two kinds of societies: societies where the 'individual' is a paramount value are 'individualistic' whereas societies that *ideologically* emphasize society as a (conceptual) whole and subordinate the 'individual' are identified as 'holistic'. Although the 'individual' in the first sense is non-social *ideologically*, it is social in *practice*: "(...) he lives in society, 'in the world.'" (Dumont, 1983, p. 304; see also Dumont, 1966, p. 31). In other words, and as the Comaroffs put it: "(...) the autonomous person (...) describes an *imaginaire*, an ensemble of signs and values, a hegemonic formation (...)" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 267). Whereas the idea of the autonomous person (the 'individual') is dominant in western representations/discourse, in India (as well as other cultures in space and time) there is an emphasis on the relational person, primarily defined through its relations to other persons and/or other living entities and objects. This does not imply the absence of individualistic ideas and practices in holistic societies but, rather, that such ideas/practices will be relatively subordinated to a dominant value which stresses the relational person (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, pp. 276-277). Conversely, individualistic societies do not lack ideas/practices akin to the relational person, but these are given lesser value in the overall value system (see also Carsten, 2004, p. 97). In other words, the opposition between 'individualistic' and 'holistic' societies is relative, not absolute.

### **Personhood and the history of the Cameroon Grassfields**

Persons in the Grassfields are perceived as the outcome of culinary and trading practices, either in a mundane (Feldman-Savelsberg, 1999, chapter 3) or a ritual context (Pradelles de Latour, 1991, chapter 4; Tsékénis, 2015).<sup>9</sup> Thus, parents are seen as 'cooking' (*'producing'*) children, newborns are incorporated into their father's compound by being 'eaten' (*'consumed'*) (Pradelles de Latour, 1991, p. 59; Tsékénis 2015, 337) and throughout their lives persons *exchange* food and in so doing constitute (and de-constitute) others revealing at the same time the nature of their relations (Tsékénis, 2015). Likewise, witchcraft in the Grassfields is considered anti-production, anti-consumption and anti-exchange (Pradelles de Latour, 1991, 77) in both the literal and metaphorical (sexuality, procreation) senses of the terms. Personhood and witchcraft therefore share a common vocabulary which emphasizes concepts such as production, exchange and consumption.

The fact that men use a 'trading idiom' and that women use a 'culinary idiom' imbued with 'economic' connotations when talking about persons must be put in relation to the history of the region. Indeed, the Grassfields are renowned for the relentless migration

of the populations composing the polities extending over centuries and very probably millennia (Warnier, 1985, 2012), the chiefdom's heterogeneous composition, and the constant fluctuation of the boundaries separating neighboring chiefdoms (Tsékénis, 2010a). These dynamics were triggered by both endogenous and exogenous factors – of which the Atlantic slave-trade and colonialism were the most dramatic (Tsékénis, 2010b, 14-15). But entropy in the Grassfields is a state that existed prior to the advent of the Atlantic slave-trade for it is the result of trading patterns – a strong indicator of the mobility of people and things – and these patterns extend well beyond the era of the slave-trade (Warnier, 1985, 2012; also Austen, 2012, p. 74; Inikori, 2012, pp. 82-83; Rowlands, 2008 [1987], p.61).

### **Witchcraft and conflicting conceptualizations of personhood**

In what follows I will give a brief outline of these trading patterns as well as the underlying *ethos* drawing on an influential article written by Michael Rowlands (2008 [1987]). Precolonial regional exchange in the Grassfields was organized into two major hierarchized spheres: one formalised and ritualised which aimed at establishing a regional moral unity of social relations, and the other directed to personal wealth accumulation through trading for profit. The benefits accumulated through regional trade could be converted into commercial capital and used to acquire long-distance trade items (guns, gun powder, camwood, glass beads, ivory, cowries and of course slaves). In contrast to regional trade, long distance trade conformed to the principles of gift economy. Notables and *fons* ('chiefs') exchanged gift items and in this way created and maintained reciprocal relations as well as relations of dependence (Rowlands, 2008 [1987]). In other words the conversion of things (and persons as things – e.g. slaves) into persons/relations was possible only in the superior sphere of gift-exchange. But the selling of persons as things – slaves – inverted the logic of gift-exchange (see also Piot, 1996: 38 on the Kabre of Togo). Hence, the sale of persons as alienated objects, except under very exceptional conditions, was considered an extremely polluting act (Rowlands, 2008 [1987], p. 61). Last, the accumulation of wealth for personal gain was (and still is) interpreted as counter to moral order and likely to promote envy and witchcraft accusations. These features of precolonial Grassfields exchange practices index the superiority of the relational person over the 'individual' (acting in the sphere of regional exchange) as defined above. As Rowlands put it: "(...) formalised exchange served to *dominate* and constrain the affects of trading for gain." (Rowlands, 2008 [1987], p. 62).

Besides being a 'glocal' idiom reflecting upon global processes witchcraft discourses can also be perceived as a comment on local anxieties, fear of the emergence of the 'individual' as a paramount value and its corollaries: the confusion of people and things. During the period of the slave-trade this fear was expressed through the metaphor of the cannibal-witch who by selling people in exchange for goods inverted the logic of gift-exchange, which converts goods into persons/relations; might it be an exaggeration to say that the

cannibal-witch was (and still is) a metaphor of the ‘individual’? Likewise, zombie discourses which arose in the late 1950’s express the same fear: indeed, the victims of *famla* are actually turned into *tools* (things) (see Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999, p. 290 and Niehaus, 2005, p. 200 for similar beliefs in South Africa). But there is no reason to believe that such anxieties and preoccupations were triggered only by the Atlantic slave-trade, colonialism and market capitalism for this would amount to say (implicitly) that Grassfielders did not have such preoccupations and did not reflect upon the ‘human condition’ before the era of the slave-trade. Moreover it would appear to overplay the contrast between past and present, then and now, static and active, bounded, and unbounded thus reasserting the very dichotomies anthropologists have worked so hard to call into question (Apparurai, 1995, p. 207; Moore & Sanders, 2001, p.14; Piot 1999, p. 22).

## Endnotes

1. I am grateful to Jean-Pierre Warnier and Peter Geschiere who have commented earlier drafts of this paper.
2. Some remarks on terminology. First, I do not follow the classical (and already largely criticized) distinction made by Evan-Pritchard between witchcraft (as an inborn quality) and sorcery (which presupposes the use of tools) because it does not apply to the case of the Grassfields. Second, following other scholars working in Cameroon I use the term ‘witchcraft’ (or ‘sorcellerie’ in Francophone Grassfields) because it has generally been appropriated by local people themselves (Malaquais 2002, note 60, p.121; Geschiere & Nyamnjoh, 1998, note 2, p. 90).
3. Warnier (1989, p. 10) estimates that 0.5 per cent of the Grassfields total population – three hundred thousand – left its homeland in caravans which represents no less than fifteen thousand individuals per year.
4. These cannibal-witch associations replicate the ordinary saving associations common throughout the littoral and the Hinterland known as *njangi* in pidgin, tontines in francophone Cameroon Grassfields; but while the members of the later contribute in money or gift in kind, *famla* adepts contribute in kin.
5. 100 km to the north of Douala, Cameroon’s major city and economic center.
6. A chiefdom in the Southern Grassfields and nowadays capital of the West Province.
7. According to Argenti, the reason of the prevalence of cannibal-witch discourse is due to the fact that they focus on the experience of slavery which marked Grassfielders as these “*produced*” slaves while communities to the south of the Grassfields and along the coast were middleman societies, *buying and selling slaves* (Argenti, 2007, p. 114).
8. Dumont explores the western origins of individualism in a collection of essays (Dumont, 1983) and in a subsequent book studies German individualism in contrast to French individualism (Dumont, 1991). MacFarlane has written a book on English individualism (MacFarlane, 1978).
9. Although men and women alike share the cooking idiom, men when talking about marriage also use terms referring to commerce. Thus, the word *don* “price/cost” can refer to both a woman and a commodity: “bride price” is *don məjwiε*, lit. “price/cost [of the] woman”). Moreover, Batié men say that they “exchange” *kwiapnyə* women, a slightly different term from the one referring to the exchange of goods *kwiap*. However, there exists a specific and exclusive expression for “paying the bride price”: *ηku məjwiε*. Therefore, marriage can by no means be equated with a commercial transaction and this for multiple reasons. Rather than suggesting an equation of marriage with a commercial transaction (and of women with commodities) the “trading idiom” used by men must be seen as a means of differentiating men’s from women’s perspectives on marriage, expressing gender complementarity.



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