Occult Beliefs, Globalisation and the Quest for Development in African Societies: The Example of South Africa

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In explaining the integral links between witchcraft, modernity and globalization, illustrated by some striking examples of how Africans tried to cope with the occult dangers of globalized economics, the article provides the background for a review of failed approaches of public institutions in South Africa in dealing with the belief in witchcraft. Responsible for this failure is, according to the author, the disregard of the strong emotional and seductive force of witchcraft belief which it derives from two major sources. Firstly, from the thrill of supernatural power and potency, or the unlimited pursuit of selfish passion and greed, ascribed to the witch by the envious believer. Secondly, by explaining in a causal manner the singularity of misfortune which cannot be explained by scientific proof. The striking ambiguity of occult belief systems could be explained in analyzing its articulation with the modes of production and trans-local social spaces in which they are embedded. Finally, implications for future socio economic development and research are outlined.

Globalisation and the Promotion of Occult Belief in Africa

The second wind of change, the democratic renewal in Africa and elsewhere in the early 1990s, was greeted with great enthusiasm. In South Africa it gave rise to additional expectations as it was linked to liberation from the apartheid regime. But as years went by without tangible improvement in the social and economic standing of the majority of the population, those who believed in occult forces such as magic and witchcraft started to view efforts promoted in the name of

"liberation" and "democratisation" rather as the devil's work or simply as witchcraft with a pretext and hidden agenda aimed at exploiting innocent citizens. Democratisation without development, without improvement of people's material well-being, meant next to nothing.

Bewildered peasants, workers and unemployed, and even striving African entrepreneurs nowadays may often trust more in economic development by means of magic, witchcraft or *muti* (the sale of body parts), than in the state or development assistance. Quite often people turn to occult economics, "the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends" (Comaroff et al. 1999: 279). Instrumentalised witchcraft accusations, for example of frustrated migrants against their wives to guarantee their submission (such as in the Tsolo and Qumbu witch craze, Eastern Cape in the 1990s, cf. Kohnert 2001), ritual murder, and even successful participation in doubtful pyramid schemes, seemingly making money from nothing and hedging hitherto unimaginable riches, result in witchcraft accusations and (counter) violence which endanger not just the state monopoly of violence but social peace and stability of the post-apartheid society as well. In the subsequent sections we shall focus on specific aspects of a deep-rooted socio-cultural heritage of African societies, the belief in magic and witchcraft and its articulation within the ongoing process of democratisation and development in South Africa. This focus seems to be justified in view of the gravity of social and political problems caused by the spread of witchcraft-related violence in recent years (cf. Ashforth 1998; Minnaar 1999; Niehaus, 1993; Ritchken 1994; 1998; Comaroff 1999).

"Witchcraft violence", a highly ambiguous expression which will be discussed in more detail later, was in 1999 identified by the government in Pretoria as a national priority crime. This is not to say that occult practices are now the strongest constraint to democratisation and development in South Africa, nor would probably any politician, scientist or judge openly suggest that witchcraft violence constitutes the most important threat to individual security. But here we already arrive at a crossroads: public discourse, private opinion and rumour might differ significantly in this respect. Many, if not most Africans at all levels of society regardless of social strata, religious belief, education or environment, do believe in magic and witchcraft, a belief system deeply ingrained for generations in African societies. And they may act accordingly, provoked by stresses and strains within the reality of their lives. Therefore, not only peasants in the former homelands, but business people and politicians in Johannesburg alike, including internationally renowned scientists and leaders of Christian churches, are convinced that witchcraft constitutes a real threat to society in Africa (Ralushai 1996; Geschiere 1995; Raynal 1994:124-25; Awolalu 1979:81-84; cf. Marwick 1975; Multhaupt 1990). In addition, the meaning of "violence" in relation to witchcraft is highly ambiguous. Western educated politicians, judges and scientists as a rule are mostly concerned with corporal violence committed against

apparently innocent people, often considered to be outcasts of society. Those who believe in the occult may focus instead on the deadly menace (real or conceived, corporal or psychic) of witches.

Various commissions of inquiry, scholarly analyses (cf. bibliography), and the National Conference on Witchcraft Violence, convened by the Commission on Gender Equality (CGE) in Northern Province in September 1998, provided a detailed participative problem analysis as well as divergent proposals for a solution to these problems. This was one of the rare occasions in social science, where the problem analysis was not restricted to the reasoning of academics but also reflected an emic or authentic local view of those who are directly or indirectly affected by occult belief systems. The National Conference on Witchcraft Violence in 1998 stimulated academics, politicians, and representatives from all relevant target groups to share their views on witchcraft, to draft a logical framework of problem analysis and develop recommendations to resolve these problems (CGE 1999: 49-67). In summary, the CGE recommended a comprehensive model for the prevention of witchcraft violence by combined activities in the educational, legal, spiritual, community and mental health sectors (CGE 1999: 49, Table 1).

The integral links between witchcraft and modernity, promoted by globalisation, by the "odd complicity" (Geschiere) between occult belief systems in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), and recent transformations of the world market have been aptly analysed by others (cf. Comaroff et al. 1999; Geschiere 2000; 1996; Kamphausen 2000; 1998). Here it might be helpful to mention two examples of how citizens from different strata of the society try to cope with the implicit dangers of globalised economics. First, the dramatic rise in occult-economics in South Africa during the transition period are analysed in detail by the Comaroffs (1999). According to them, the major lines of conflict of the apartheid regime, between race and class, have been replaced during the transition period by cleavages between different age groups or generations, still accentuated by gender conflicts. Black male underclass youths and ANC activists, for example, tried to translate their understanding of western ideas of democratisation and socialism into concrete actions. They sought to eradicate the evil of witchcraft accusations against certain elders, usually deviant elderly women, seen as menaces to their communities (cf. Minnnaar 1999; Evans 1992; Mihalik et al. 1992; Niehaus 1992). A second example of the linkage between globalisation and occult economics reminds one of a manifestation of Marxist connotations of alienation by *Verdinglichung*, that is, the camouflaging of social conflicts by the process of commoditisation (cf. Lukàs 1967: 94ff) in the spiritual world. The increasing alienation of producers and consumers from the logic of the globalised economy leads many faithful Christians in Ghana and other African countries to look for comfort and spiritual protection against the diabolic powers of the world market, such as diminishing terms of trade, falling prices of local export products, or increasing unemployment and indebtedness, within the realm of

their religion. New charismatic churches offer ready assistance in coping with this problem. Pentecostals, for example, reveal the dangers inherent in foreign commodities and offer to remove the spell from the fruits of globalisation. According to their understanding, any foreign goods imported from the world market and sold in the local markets of Accra or Kumasi may be infected with evil. However, they do not relate the assumed evil powers of these commodities to alienated relations of production, such as in Marxian analyses, but directly identify them as materializations of demonic forces, as true and real fetishes which require a ritual of "de-fetishization" before being made safe for local consumption (cf. Kamphausen 2000: 91-95).

Thirdly, the globalisation of religious movements during the past two decades, notably the upsurge of mushrooming new charismatic Christian churches such as the Pentecostals aggressively promoted all over sub-Saharan Africa by powerful American, Korean or Indian donor communities, contributed considerably to the new African witch-craze. These new religious movements, equal in importance to the established Christian churches in many African countries (cf. Haynes 2001: 147-48), incorporated vital elements of traditional African religions such as the belief in magic and witchcraft in their message and thus succeeded in attracting an ever-increasing mass of adherents. In South Africa and all over West Africa, most notably in Nigeria and Ghana, "Satanism" has become the explanation for nearly every setback experienced by their followers who translate the language of the Bible by equating Satan with a witch, according to their customary notions of witchcraft (cf. Meyer 1992; 1998).[1] Hence Pentecostals use public "testimonies" of self-confessed former "witches" backed by wide-spread media coverage in newspapers, interviews in local radio stations, or by tele-evangelism, whereby male or female "witches" report their horrible misdeeds (killing of innocent relatives, causing traffic accidents, instigating divorces, etc.), to illustrate how people can be liberated by the Christian church. The implicit assumption is that they, as confessing Pentecostals, could now act as an especially effective protection for their new Christian communities against future attacks of their former sinister comrades because of their intimate knowledge of witchcraft.[2] We may even dare to set forth the hypothesis that for the past two decades new charismatic churches, promoted by globalisation, had a greater impact on the spread and consolidation of occult belief in sub-Saharan Africa than traditional African religions.

Fourthly, the globalisation of universal standards of democratic governance corresponding to Western standards, promoted last but not least by political conditionality of the international donor community, contributed to a questioning of African local custom and its representatives, the traditional leaders and healers.[3] This had direct implications for (re)shifting legitimacy and power relations of public institutions at the local level, where representatives of the post-apartheid state, traditional rulers and religious leaders were competing strategic players in the local political arena. It may well be considered as an answer or

roll-back strategy of traditional authorities against "infringement" on their traditional power base by ANC youth activists in Northern Province in the early 1990s (cf. Niehaus 1993). Thus preparations for the local government elections all over South Africa in November 2000 revealed deep and growing cleavages between the *amkhosi*, as traditional leaders are called in Zulu language, considered as "gatekeepers of the past" by many ANC-leaders, and the Mbeki government. The latter tried to sideline the power of the *amkhosi* by imposition of modern constitutional forms of local government, similar to the structure of municipal governments in Europe, which reduced the function of local chiefs to representative tasks and regulation of local custom. The Provincial and Local Government Minister Sydney Mufamadi apparently deplored even these few elements in the new draft bill on the role of traditional leaders in local government, derived from the "old-order legislation which was preserved by the Constitution".[4] The traditional rulers responded with threats to boycott the elections and attacked the draft of this Municipal Structures' Second Amendment Bill vigorously. They were worried about the intentions of the government and the ruling party, suspecting a desire to "reduce the chief's responsibility to petty matters like co-ordinating rainmaking, gathering of firewood and to attend to matters of witchcraft and divination within communities", in the words of a representative of the traditional leaders.[5]

Debates on How Public Institutions Should Deal with Witchcraft

Since 1994, the advent of a new democratic government of South Africa, political parties and trade unions have been under increasing pressure to take account of witchcraft beliefs, not just to prevent further loss of life and property, but in order to combat the loss of their legitimacy as well. In actual practice, however, government leaders, community leaders, representatives of civil society and people directly concerned by witchcraft accusations, differ widely on how to deal with witchcraft. In September 1998 the Commission on Gender Equality in the Northern Province, pushed the government to change its attitude towards witchcraft. Its representatives agreed on the urgent need for developing new strategies which should not simply deny the existence of witchcraft, an approach which has utterly failed to work in the past. Besides educational and legal tasks, namely educational programs and the revision of the anti-witchcraft act, the experts favoured, spiritual alternatives, substitution of witchcraft violence by spiritual healing, and "activities to treat the communities' psychosocial needs" (CGE, 1999:49).

The problem analysis formulated by representatives of the South African Human Rights Commission (HRC), already quoted above, acknowledged that the "belief in witchcraft has the capacity to paralyse people" and identified witchcraft violence as "a sign of a pathology in a community". Representatives of the Department of Constitutional Development declared witchcraft violence

as "the number-one enemy of our society", and the Department of Justice representatives deplored among other things its "negative effects on the economy of the country" (CGE 1999: 55). However, in the past, neither the state nor liberation movements, political parties nor trade unions seem to have cared very much about it. They delegate the search for solutions to traditional and religious leaders at grassroots levels. Only when social and political conflict boiled over into a veritable witch craze, as has happened in the past decade in Northern Province, KwaZulu-Natal, and Eastern Cape (cf. Ralushai 1996; Niehaus 1993; 1995; Minaar et al. 1991; Delius 1997; Evans 1992; Kessel 1993; Kohnert 2001), or in overcrowded townships like Soweto (cf. Ashforth 1998), was it deemed necessary to take official notice. There is a growing awareness that current legislation, such as the Witchcraft Act of 1957, still reflecting colonial or western "rational" reasoning, is unable to cope with the problem. With its Solomonic phrasing it punishes both the accused, that is, the alleged witch, *and* the plaintiff, the allegedly bewitched, or those who express their fears by pointing out a person as a witch. In reality, the existing decree thus protects the real culprits, at least from the perspective of distressed people believing in the existence of witchcraft, as nobody would dare legally to accuse somebody of being a witch.

Left on their own, the accusers and the accused themselves look for help in the informal sector, customary courts,[6] or engage in self-justice. The ambiguous attitudes of police staff members who often believe in witchcraft themselves (cf. Peltzer et al. 2000: 8), further complicate the situation. This has contributed to a rapid erosion of the state's monopoly on force, and a simultaneous encroachment on the legitimacy of public institutions. Even traditional authorities, formerly considered to be the guardians of customary law, are now at pains to cope with the situation because of considerable changes in the incidence, content, and form of witchcraft accusations over time in general, and the compromising attitude of traditional authorities during the apartheid period, in particular.

Therefore, the state is being challenged by both independent bodies of the civil society and political parties alike to "review the legal system from being Eurocentric to reflecting the reality of a multicultural nation" (ANC-representative in CGE 1999: 55). Responding to this demand, the CGE, the Department of Justice, and the Law Commission of South Africa have formed a committee to draw up proposals for a new law. In February 2000 it presented Parliament with a first draft of the "Regulation of *Baloyi* Practices Act", *baloyi* being the more precise Venda term for those socio-cultural practices which could be translated loosely by the English word "witchcraft" (cf. ANC-news 14.02.00; Phaswana 2000).

As mentioned above, the new charismatic churches, traditional healers, especially those with perceived visionary powers (*sangomas*), and "modern" witchfinders, as leaders of politically motivated ANC-youth organisations, profited from the generation-long delegitimisation of the state in this regard. They, rather than either the state or the traditional leaders, emphatically offered to cater more

effectively to the felt needs of the people. But it is open to question whether institutions or personalities belonging to the informal sector are always likely to act in the best interest of society.

Certainly, modern and traditional rulers alike need to be aware of and understand the language of ritual violence, and act accordingly if they want to guarantee anything near a state-monopoly on violence as a precondition for legitimate rule and democratisation. The call by grassroots organisations, politicians and academics for an indigenization of national laws and regulations, for adaptation to the African socio-cultural setting in general, and the official recognition of the existence of witchcraft in particular, might be justified, but only in so far as basic human rights are respected. Any attempt at a "domestication" of witch-belief, for example by an opportunistic indigenization of legislation, notably by the repeal of the anti-witchcraft laws of 1957 by an official recognition of the reality of witchcraft which could see *sangomas* as plaintiffs or even as informal public prosecutors, without due regard to universal concepts of human rights is hardly to be considered sustainable. It could perhaps help in regaining credibility and legitimacy of the state in the short term. However, it would foreseeably promote the witch craze, accentuate social cleavages, or lead to the despotism of charismatic rulers in the long run.

Witchcraft related violence, however, is just the tip of the iceberg, an indicator of social stresses and strains of ambiguous qualities, as we shall explain in detail below. In order to avoid ethnocentric misconceptions at the outset we want to stress that many aspects of occult belief systems and their rationalities are not restricted to South Africa or other African countries, despite indisputable regional particularities in incidence, character and relevance. Even in the United States belief in witchcraft was officially recognised as a religion by the Supreme Court in 1982 under the heading of *Wicca*. The latter too, as in the case with contemporary anti-witchcraft cults in Africa, is far from being a traditional backward belief system. It propagates its objectives with the help of modern concepts and technology, and even hosts its own website. The revival of occult belief systems around the world has different, hitherto unexplored sources which call for comparative in-depth investigations by ongoing research.

Witchcraft as an Integral Part of Daily Life in Most African Societies

The international discourse on the meaning of magic and witchcraft in Africa is highly controversial, not just between Western and African experts, or between scientists and non-academic stakeholders, but also between antagonistic schools of thought within western social science. The latter is already indicated by the changes in European conceptions of African magic (cf. Pels 1998). Even the academic debate is at least as much about facts and figures as about truth, values,

the question of legitimacy and appropriateness of objectives and concepts (cf. Geschiere 1997; Dettmar 1999). Quite often, hidden agendas behind research ethics hardly veil political motives or missionary zeal of ethnocentric researchers *vis 'a vis* those who believe in witchcraft, without due respect to indigenous knowledge. On the other hand, basic rules of methodology demand a defense of scientific objectivity against cultural relativism (cf. Popper 1972). This too applies very much to the discussion of magic and witchcraft in South Africa.

Despite differences in detail, experts agree on several important points: the belief in magic and witchcraft has been widespread in Africa since time immemorial. It did not vanish with the advent of "European civilisation", introduced by the colonial powers under the cover of "moral education of the native" to justify their ruthless exploitation. Missionary zeal and development aid, meant to push the process of modernisation, did not have a great effect either. According to many Africans who believe in magic, both the incidence and virility of black magic or witchcraft have significantly increased throughout sub-Saharan Africa in the past decades, in rural and urban areas alike. International social scientific researchers agree that these occult belief systems are by no means an exotic phenomenon, restricted to a few remote places, but constitute an integral part of day to day life in most African societies (for a review of literature cf. Geschiere 1997; Nadel 1952; Kohnert 1997). Regardless of religious orientation, education, gender or social status, the belief in witchcraft has a profound impact on daily decision-making of many Africans in general, and on politics and the moral economy of African societies in particular (cf. Geschiere 1997: 1-25; Comaroff et al. 1993; 1998; Ritchken 1994). Quite often witchcraft accusations are promoted not just by individual kinship conflicts, but by social stress and strain, caused by the modernisation process in general, and accentuated by the commodification of social relations and its "fetishization" during the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of production in particular (cf. Kamphausen 2000; Kohnert 1983).

To the believer, witchcraft provides a universe of deep emotions: a safeguard in the troubled waters of general insecurity, enhanced by a depressed African economy and lack of transparency and accountability on all levels of economy and society. It offers comfort and excitement, superior knowledge and power, but equally triggers a deadly fear, anguish, fury or outraged revenge, depending on the situation. Even in the emic view, positive sensations are by far outnumbered by negative ones, at least concerning its importance. Although witchcraft belief is deeply rooted in African traditions and custom, *baloyi* has been overwhelmingly characterised by the believers as destructive, destabilising and evil, even by traditional leaders in South Africa (CGE 1999: 49-55; Phaswana 2000).

Its seductive force is derived from two major sources: firstly, from the thrill of supernatural power and potency, or the unlimited pursuit of selfish passion and greed ascribed to the witch by the envious believer, confronting him at the same

time with his own impotency *vis à vis* these occult forces. Secondly, by explaining in a causal manner the singularity of accidental events which cannot be explained scientifically. In fact, by its very nature the occult, like any other religion, evades inter-subjective control on the part of the believer. Thus witchcraft beliefs satisfy a deep-seated desire for certainty that the world (or a superior being) is concerned with us and our fate, and nothing happens just by chance (cf. Nadel 1952; Kohnert 1983). The admission of a province of life where malevolent forces can be personalised, discovered and attacked, makes it possible to cope in a universe devoid of design. Apparently this holds true even for a great part of the African elite, including quite a number of decision-makers in politics, economics, and society at large (cf. Geschiere 1997; 1996; Kohnert 1996; Ralushai 1996).

However, in order to challenge the negative effects of occult belief systems, one may have to concentrate more on an investigation into the question of emotions than on rationality. In general, western-educated experts, European and African alike, consider witchcraft as an "illogic and mistaken belief" which should be eradicated by education and critical assessment (CGE 1999: 49, 53). Methodologically, however, the difference in the rationality of African witchcraft beliefs and western forms of reasoning lies more with the degree of its "reduction of complexity", to borrow an expression of Nicolas Luhman, than with the degree of rationality, as Evans-Pritchard remarked in his classic case study on the Zande in 1937: "Zande belief in witchcraft in no way contradicts empirical knowledge of cause and effect. The world known to the senses is just as real to them as it is to us .... They are foreshortening the chain of events, and in a particular social situation are selecting the cause that is socially relevant and neglecting the rest. [Thus] witchcraft explains *why* events are harmful to man and not *how* they happen" (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 24-25; italics of the author).

If particular methods for the reduction of complexity, not different rationalities, form the major distinction between African magic and western reasoning, then western-educated scientists, experts, and politicians should be especially careful not to cultivate the hybris of rationality in their dialogue with African believers in the occult. "Irrational behaviour" because of methodologically unsound reduction of complexity is also common in western societies. It may suffice to quote just one example. Increasing privatisation and commercialisation of social relations as characteristic features of globalised capitalism favoured the intrusion into the privacy of individual consumers or employees. The delusion of being able to discover the essence of human beings, the *homunculus* of the true self, by simply reducing its complexity to qualifications and needs which could be detected by technical means and then be used for commercial exploitation, for example by polygraphic analyses and closed circuit television monitoring of individual employees or by user-profiles of consumers, a sustained attack on privacy by the private sector, has lead to serious distortions in individual and

social rationality (cf. Duclos 1999). The obsession to isolate and fix the "true" ideas and emotions of human beings by technical investigation must, however, inevitably fail, as it is based on a methodological fallacy. Our conception of both human nature and scientific objectivity in general can not be isolated and fixed by science once and for all, as both depend on the unremitting evolution of knowledge, the possibility of mutual exchange and critique, and finally, on actual social conventions and social structures encouraging or averting critical reflection of our present knowledge (cf. Popper 1972: 112). The latter is decisive in setting the limits between legitimate critical discourse on the one hand and a dogmatic pursuit of "enemies to society" or witch-hunts on the other. Thus, we revert to the central theme of our argument, the open society and its enemies, to borrow a phrase from Karl R. Popper, the Nestor of neo-positivist philosophy. The given socio-cultural setting and social structure have become the cornerstones of western delimitation of objectivity and rationality, just as the denunciation of persons as witches by their fellow citizens depends finally, at least according to the classical interpretation of African witchcraft by Evans-Pritchard, on the social recognition of certain worldviews on cause and effect.

Although Evans-Pritchard was right in confronting common western prejudices of the 1920s on "primitive" African thinking with the intrinsic logic of the belief in magic and witchcraft, this was just the half of the truth. As illustrated by recent research in neuro-physiology (cf Damasio 1994), he was probably wrong in underestimating the profound structural links between emotion and rational reasoning in human beings in general. Rational behaviour is influenced by deep-seated emotions at least as much as by empirical knowledge. In fact, humans cannot act rationally without access to emotions. In contrast to the Cartesian postulate on the fundamental separation of body and soul, human decision-making, by its very biological structure, is never determined by reasoning alone, but guided by emotions sustained and deeply embedded in the respective culture of the actor (Damasio 1994: 325-328). One may go even one step further in discussing the relevance of Gerald Edelman's hypothesis (1992: 232-236) that the biological self, at least vital parts of the human brain, has been conditioned and structured in the course of human genesis by basic values needed for survival. Thus, our evolution provided for the acceptance of basic human value-systems guiding its actions. Edelman's thesis sheds new light on the controversy concerning the existence of universal human rights. According to recent neuro-physiological theories on cognition, the perception of the world in the human brain is directed through the filter of positive and negative sentiments from birth on. There exists a close neuro-biological link between feeling and thinking, which makes the existence of emotions (based on the respective socio-cultural setting) a precondition for any rational action, for Africans or for Europeans. But what would be even more important in this context is to clarify the link between rationality and emotions which are nurtured within specific socio-

cultural settings (cf. Damasio 1994: 327), with a view to engaging with the pressing social and political problems mentioned above, such as the need for education or the propensity toward violent mob action against witches.

Occult belief systems, as religions in general, induce not just a certain vision of the world and of human relations, but they provide for strong emotions as well. This concerns not just individual hate, fear, or other emotions directly linked to witchcraft, but to the whole fabric of the human emotional system. The state, NGOs or other progressive institutions of civil society would literally deprive the believers in the occult of their capability for survival, if at the same time not providing jointly within the framework of educational programs and a gradual scientific dismantling of witchcraft belief (as advocated by the CGE and other institutions), a convincing source of equally strong alternative "development-enhancing" emotions. It is little wonder that most educational programs that concentrate on rationality have utterly failed since the beginning of colonial rule, be they by missionaries, schools or the state.

Ambiguity of Occult Belief Systems in their Articulation with Modes of Production and Trans-local Social Spaces

Although the outward appearance of witchcraft accusations might appear to be the same over time, the underlying causes of witch-belief, its historical roots, its character as well as its effects, may differ significantly according to the social strata, trans-local social space and modes of production in which it is embedded.[7] Recent studies by Jeff Haynes (2001: 147-48) and others demonstrate the profound impact of transnational religious actors of established western Christian churches on the transition process in different phases of the liberation struggle in Africa. In addition, there are apparently considerable differences in the character of occult belief systems and the handling of witchcraft accusations according to ethnic, religious, social, and trans-regional affiliation (cf. Kohnert 2001). Nevertheless, many African scientists, religious leaders and healers, as well as politicians (cf. CGE 1999: 59) and a great part of the population, maintain that Africans share certain "basics" of this belief, notably that witchcraft is a reality to be considered as an integral part of African culture, and they act accordingly.[8]

Quite often witchcraft belief has been instrumentalized by both conservative and radical African leaders (e.g. Eyadéma, Moboutu, Kérékou, or liberation movements in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, etc.), to consolidate or defend their political and economic power by mystifying exploitation or by eliminating opponents, usually without any regard to the disintegrating long-term effects on society of such activity (for a bibliography on this aspect, cf. Kohnert 1996). Furthermore, grass-roots liberation movements throughout Africa have been seen to use witchcraft accusations as "cults of counterviolence" (Wilson 1992) against political enemies. Often "comrades" encouraged the witch

craze under the pretext of combating "the relics of feudalism" [9] in the fight against colonialism or apartheid, or they tried to enhance their own legitimacy *vis-à-vis* traditional authorities, as leaders of youth organisations in Southern KwaZulu have done (cf. Evans 1992) or Lebowa, South Africa (Kessel 1993; Niehaus 1993; Ritchken 1988). For its part, the population might see in these witch-hunters heroes who cleanse their areas of evil, rather than the evil itself. Thus, under certain historical conditions, notably during transition periods, witch-hunts constitute what Peter Geschiere (1996; 1997; quoting D. C. Martin), called a "popular mode of political action", directed to promote the dawn of a new democratic order, to equalise the income and wealth distribution, or to defend the ideal of solidarity within acephalous village communities.

There is still a lot of confusion in international academic discussion about the apparently contradictory political functions of occult belief systems and their underlying rationale. Therefore, causes and effects of witchcraft movements are difficult to predict. A thorough empirical investigation into the articulation of witchcraft beliefs with the different modes of productions and pluri-local social spaces in which they might be embedded, might clarify their impact on the process of democratisation and economic development, and could probably clarify the debate over some of these contradictions as well. A first attempt in this direction has been made in another context (cf. Kohnert 2001).

Implications for Future Socio-economic Development and Research

In general, the most vulnerable, the poor and deprived, elderly women and the disabled, suffer most from witchcraft accusations (Ralushai 1996; CGE 1999: 49-60). This may have far-reaching implications for the process of democratisation, empowerment by decentralisation, or the promotion of poverty alleviation programs (CGE 1999:49). These programs usually intervene in existing social structures of a target population, hampered by conflicts between different strata, ethnic or religious groups, young and old, male and female. As a rule, the benefits of modernisation will not be distributed equally, but instead favour some while disfavouring others. Development projects, constituting arenas of strategic groups struggle for power and control over project resources, are likely to add further social stress to an already precarious balance of power, providing an ideal background against which witchcraft accusations may flourish (cf. Bierschenk et al. 1993:97-106). Examples for the interference of witchcraft belief with democratisation or development planning in Africa are abundant (cf. Geschiere 1997: 4-6; 1996; Kohnert 1996: 1351-54).[10] But unfortunately many development experts and politicians are still more interested in the transfer of capital, technology or western concepts than in improved human relations, which should be considered the ultimate aim of development co-operation. One of the reasons may be that they are reluctant to recognise the problem. In addition it is difficult

to prove empirically an increase in occult practices, not to mention the belief in it, because there are so many different interrelated factors at play. The same holds true for generalisations on the basis of sound empirical but nevertheless limited evidence.[11] I stress that these synthetic generalisations are just working hypotheses which have to undergo the test of falsification.

Directives or public extension and training programs "from above" aimed at eradicating witchcraft belief are hardly convincing for those who believe in occult phenomena. They might on the contrary even reinforce the already existing emotional resentment against the state or other public or "foreign" political institutions. What would be required are new participatory structures of communication and decision-making between the state and its citizens, between the political and economic elite and the deprived, between research project personnel and the stakeholders, in order to establish a dialogue based on mutual trust and understanding. The latter is considered to be a necessary (but insufficient) condition for an effective promotion of alternative worldviews, values and emotions compatible with universal human rights and social dimensions of structural adjustment programs. The technical dialogue on rationality would have to be accompanied and supported by a dialogue on values, emotions and human relations. Obviously, state administration on its own would be totally overextended with this task. Instead, this would be the genuine task of non-governmental and civil-society organisations (NGOs, and "civics") backed by sound scientific research. Promising methods of dialogue have been developed recently within the field of development co-operation in Western Africa, such as local drama performance, transfer of extension "messages" by *griots* and traditional dancing masques. Such communicative strategies could be tested and adapted to the specific requirements of participatory analysis in close collaboration with the stakeholders in South Africa as well.

Research in democratisation "from below" could favour not just transparency, democracy, and development, but the "domestication" of witchcraft belief as well. In view of the importance of an open society as a precondition of democratisation in general, and rational handling of the witchcraft problem in particular (cf. above), isolated measures, however, would hardly deliver tangible results in allying the growing fear of witchcraft within the population. This applies to the realms of legislation and jurisdiction (cf. above) and to state or party sponsored public education campaigns on human rights as well. Attempts by the ANC in Lebowa in the late 1980s to combat witchcraft belief amongst its followers by crash courses in scientific socialism utterly failed, which was not surprising in view of decades of similar, failed, "top-down" modernisation campaigns of extension services elsewhere in Africa. Therefore, we should investigate new participatory forms of dialogue which are better adapted to the socio-cultural setting. The present discussion on African forms of democracy and the concept of African Renaissance, relying more on common values and com-

munal structures of African societies as well as on different perceptions of public participation in the political process (cf. Thiel et al. 2000) may contribute to solving the problem. In particular, this could help identify and further develop alternatives to western-style participation in party politics which promote competitive and often conflictual relations with fellow citizens, one of the major sources of witchcraft accusations.

Developing grass-roots democracy and transparency might prove to be a difficult task. It certainly cannot be done in the short run, in view of predominant structures of patronage and clientelism all over Africa (cf. Bayart 1993). This also holds true for combating witchcraft violence. First, general fear, suspicion and insecurity surrounding the discussion of occult belief systems, but also certain aspects of professional ethics of the craft of traditional healers, *sangomas*, not to forget many Africa anti-witchcraft cults surrounded by a veil of secrecy, are detrimental to equality, transparency and accountability, three basic conditions for both a rewarding dialogue and the development of democratic attitudes. But in the long run, the promotion of transparency and the democratisation of decision-making processes, on all levels, in politics as well as in society and economy, might be rewarding. This is not just because they would favour the process of democratisation and development in general, but they would most likely contribute to the gradual eradication of witchcraft accusations as well. Where there is transparency, a measure of insight into the motives of one's neighbours, relatives, or political rivals, and where social structures provide for more equal access to resources, there is less need to blame scapegoats for individual misfortune.

However, in view of the apparent contradictions between competing witchcraft theories (cf. Geschiere 2000; 1997 for a detailed analysis), more research is required into the specific roots of actual witchcraft accusations and their relation with the social, economic and political environment in the transition process. Backed by corresponding research, concerted actions of the state, political parties, the "civics" and those who believe in witchcraft could be developed to gain insight into underlying causes of witchcraft accusations as well as its alternatives in reconciliation, democratisation and development "from below".

Participatory analyses of the rich potential of African cultures might help to adapt structures of communication to the requirements of conflict resolution and development. Social science could contribute significantly to this common aim by a participatory analysis of the problems caused by witchcraft belief, as well as of the potentials which a rich and vivid African culture may offer for their resolution. Thus current hypotheses offered by some African politicians during the National Witchcraft Conference in the Northern Province in 1998 for the safeguarding of witchcraft-beliefs by "purification" and transformation should be tested for their empirical viability as well (although to the author, this does not seem to be a sustainable solution). Scientific research into the rich body of local oral histories may help uncover new channels of communication, modes of reconciliation, heal-

ing, and reintegration of victims of witchcraft accusations. Finally, research could clarify the apparent contradictions between different ambiguous aspects and effects of occult belief systems as indicated above.

Notes

[1] The same holds for South Africa. The representatives of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) and the Presbyterian Church, participating in the National Conference on Witchcraft Violence in September 1998, summarised the relationship between devil and witch as follows. Rev. Kutwane, ZCC: "Witchcraft is described by the Reverend as the exercise of supernatural powers possessed by a person in league with the devil or evil spirits. The ZCC's view of witchcraft is based on the Bible, Exodus, Chapter 22, verse 18: 'Thou shall not suffer a witch to live'." Rev. Raphesu, Presbyterian Church: " ... witchcraft is pagan magic invented by the devil to lead away from Christianity". Rev. Khumalo of the Lutheran Church stated "that the church has always ridiculed the African culture, and therefore contributed to the problem of witchcraft and witchcraft violence." Traditional African religious leaders from different ethnic communities (Venda, Xhosa, North-Sotho, Ndebele) present at the conference maintained that witchcraft, as one form of evil, exists in reality, and "witchcraft practices can only be minimised but not eradicated" (Xhosa, Mr. Rajuli; CGE 1999: 56). However, this particular view of "Satanism" propagated by charismatic churches should not be confused with the self-styled "Satanist"-movement, the occult secret societies, worshipping the devil in exchange for assumed supernatural power, spreading from the United States and other western countries to Africa. These groups experienced a considerable African revival in the past decade, most notably in schools and universities and among the children of wealthy Afrikaans families in South Africa. In the Pretoria, Bloemfontein, East London, Port Elisabeth or Grahamstown in Eastern Cape province for example, several self-confessed Satanists were convicted of ritual murder, rape and other criminal offences during the past ten years (cf. *Daily Dispatch*, 14.03.1998; 11.11.97; 08.07.95; 26.05.95; 21.04.95; 07.09.94). "Satanism" in itself is not a crime in South Africa and participants in the cult can only be charged with specific criminal offences.

One example from a South African township may suffice: "Residents - mainly teenagers - of Soshanguve, north of Pretoria, who were drawn into Satanism for several years, have revealed how they were bewitched and ordered to kill. Talking on the second biggest community radio station in Gauteng, Soshanguve Community Radio, the former Satanists recounted in detail how they were ordered to cause vehicle accidents, miscarriages of unborn babies, disruptions in schools and conflicts in marriages and churches .... Our research found Satanism in Soshanguve was spreading like cancer .... The devil worshippers who were saved from their ordeal by a spiritual healer, ... told the thousands of listeners how they were involved in murder, sodomy, bestiality, drug abuse, the kidnapping of people whom they cruelly tortured and sacrificed to Satan .... Traditional healers in the area confirmed that Satanism existed in black communities, although it was known as witchcraft." (*City Press*, Pretoria/Soshanguve, Sept. 2000, p. 7). Such public "confessions" are by no means uncommon in South Africa or in other African countries. The author himself ob-

served similar incidences in Cotonou and Porto Novo, Benin Republic, during the collapse of the Marxist regime of M. Kérékou, which was replaced by a new era of the "*renouveau démocratique*" in 1989/90. In Burkina Faso he assisted at the public testifying of five self-confessed "witches" during a mass meeting of the Rosicrucian Church in the stadium of the provincial capital Bobo Dioulassou in 1990.

3 Cf. Ballard / Schwella 2000; cf. also Jon Jeter´s article "Tribal ways vs. Modern Government" (*The Washington Post*, December 18, 2000, p. A01) on "the clash between tradition and modern values (which) is particularly profound in South Africa". He maintains that "more than a third of South Africa's 44 million people live under the jurisdiction of one or another of the nation's eight-hundred tribal chiefs, or *amakhosi* as they are referred to in the Zulu language. Traditional leaders here have endured colonialism, war and nearly fifty years of oppressive white-minority rule, only to face extinction at the hands of the black-majority government that vanished apartheid six years ago and installed democracy." He quotes Petekile Holomisa, an *inkhosi* (pl. *amakhosi*) and head of the Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (CONTRALESA), as saying: "Africans are above all else devoted to their ancestors, and they do not want to betray that by becoming something that they are not."

4 Cf. "@Cabinet-Amakhosi", anc-news, 08.11.00

5 Mwelo Nonkonyana, chairperson of the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders, in: "@Election-Ecape", anc-news, 10.11.00.

6 The powers of which have been limited by the amendment of the Anti-Witchcraft Act in 1970; and since then witchcraft complaints were not acknowledged in the formal courts (cf. Peltzer et al. 2000: 2).

7 On the articulation of witchcraft accusations and modes of production in Nupe society, Northern Nigeria, and the concept of *l' articulation des modes des production* in social science cf. Kohnert 1983; on the ambiguity of witchcraft belief cf. Austen 1993; Ardener 1970; Geschiere 1997: 146-151; Hunter-Wilson 1951; and on the concept of trans-local or trans-national social spaces of Ludger Pries et al, its relevance for religious studies in general and the interpretation of witchcraft accusations in particular cf. Haynes 2001 and Kohnert 2001 respectively.

8 Just to quote two African sources: according to the Nigerian theologian J. Omosade Awolalu "no belief (is) more profoundly ingrained than that of the existence of witches .... To the Yorùbá as well as other ethnic groups in Africa, witchcraft is a reality. It is a belief very prevalent among literates and illiterates, among the high and the low in the society." (Awolalu 1979: 81). The Ralushai-Commission, composed of a interdisciplinary team of scientists, government officials and representatives of religious denominations, and investigating at the request of the government of the Northern Province of South Africa incidences of witchcraft violence in the former homelands (1987-1994), arrived at the conclusion: "From the above statements, it becomes very clear that no one can now argue that witchcraft is a myth which can only exist in the minds of the ignorant .... The continued frequency of witchcraft murders, if not their increase, deserves special mention. Moreover belief in witchcraft remains as prevalent as ever. Belief in witchcraft and related practices form part of a basic cultural, traditional and customary principle of Africans in South Africa, and Africa as a whole." (Ralushai et al. 1996: 56-57).

9 For example, the "comrades" in Gogoza, in the border region of Transkei/Natal (cf.

Evans 1992: 56), or politically motivated witch-hunt in Marxist-Leninist Bénin under Kérékou. Cf. the witchcraft accusations against leaders of the National Party in SA (See Chidester 1992: 43-66, 151-52).

[10] Thus the drive on the part of the donor community to establish - in close collaboration with its African counterparts - programs and projects for conflict and crisis prevention as a means to combat increasing insecurity and the collapse of state structures in many African countries, also requires basic scientific research into the complicated socio-cultural fabric of occult belief and conflict. The "Peace and Development Project" in South Africa, backed by German technical co-operation, in the *townships* of (Soshanguve/Pretoria, and Nyanga/Kapstadt) provides a good example for the relevance of occult belief and its significance for conflict resolution in the project area (cf. fn 1).

[11] Cf. Geschiere 1997: note 11 and 31 to chapter one, as well as the final chapter for a detailed review of the methodological questions related to this problem.

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