
It is hard to imagine that one could publish a book about witchcraft in Africa in 2012 and have something refreshing to say on a topic that has been the subject of many monographs. Yet Norman Miller succeeds in doing just that. In this memoir about living in and travelling through East Africa, Miller presents us with a narrative of his pursuit of ‘the language of witchcraft’. Having been initially befuddled by reading about the murder of a young British mineral prospector and the alleged connection to witchcraft in a newspaper in Mombasa, Miller sets off to acquaint himself with witchcraft and its impact on African life. While most of the book focuses on his experiences in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, we are also treated to brief excursions into belief systems in Malawi, Zambia and DR Congo. Miller brings to light not only the differences but also the links between conceptions of witchcraft in these locations.

Apart from the geographical differences, the reader is given a variety of perspectives that are made possible by the author’s own transformational journey – as an adventurer, a student, then an academic – a process that certainly adds to the complexity of the narrative that he weaves. Whether they are new to his subject or experts, Miller invites his readers to share in his intellectual growth as he navigates his way through the hazy language and world of witchcraft. His first-person account of its impact on various facets of African life over the course of forty-five years is revealing and refreshing, providing a rich intimacy that is rare in the anthropological and historical literature on witchcraft. His interactions and conversations with Africans and foreigners, aristocrats and non-aristocrats, rich and poor, help to enrich the complexity and nuance of his story. Miller raises a number of important questions about witchcraft that have still to be properly answered: for example, why is it that witchcraft seems to be prevalent among settled pastoralist groups and not nomadic ones?

Confronted with witchcraft in East Africa, British colonial officials struggled to come to terms with its perceived immorality. If there was one thing about which the British were in agreement with their African subjects, it was that witchcraft was antisocial and harmful to the society. However, they disagreed over was what to be done about the menace. The colonial implementation of laws with the goal of suppressing the activities of so-called ‘witchdoctors’ encountered the practical concerns of Africans who saw these individuals as performing a ‘public service’ (p. 21). The futility of outlawing witchcraft, a fact that was not lost on the colonial officials, attests to the difficulty of dealing with it. Miller’s adventures also point to the weakness of the now disproved modernization theory that Christianity and education would lead to the elimination of witchcraft in Africa. Here Miller’s work is in agreement with scholars such as the Comaroffs and Peter Geschiere who have championed the discourse on the ‘modernity of witchcraft’.

Miller’s ten chronological chapters make it evident that witchcraft is not some relic of the African past but a quotidian part of life, so much so that ‘like sex and soccer, witchcraft was often on the “street radios”’ (p. 166). One of the obvious strengths of the book is Miller’s application of the phenomenological epoché (or bracketing) that enables him to suspend judgement and give voice to his informants and subjects, allowing them to come alive. Although Miller’s own perceptions about witchcraft are discernible, the book’s characters speak for themselves, thereby adding additional layers of insight on the subject. As a result, Miller is able to tackle a very controversial and touchy subject in African studies without denigrating the thought processes that ‘produce’ witchcraft.
This book is a worthwhile addition to the numerous books on witchcraft in Africa and would serve as a good introduction to general readers interested in witchcraft in modern Africa. Although its genre makes it less academic and less theoretical, it should also interest scholars in anthropology, religious studies and history because it raises some key, but often overlooked, questions. One of the weaknesses of this fine memoir is that the author touches on too many aspects of witchcraft, and is thus unable to fully develop all his interesting ideas. For example, I would have liked him to develop the apparent porous gap between witchcraft and insanity, as it pertained to Mohammadi (pp. 51–75). In all fairness however, this perceived shortfall is the inherent result of the genre of writing and the author’s aim, rather than any omission on his part.

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Theodore Trefon, who has emerged over the past 20 years as one of the keenest students of Congolese society and politics, has recently given us a superb analysis of the failure of international aid to stimulate development in Congo. The work is beautifully distilled, and accessible to an audience with only a modest familiarity with Congo’s history and politics. Trefon writes with refreshing directness and clarity, and his work is unmarred by the infelicities of social science jargon. The list of citations is relatively short, but it includes almost all of the best studies of Congo under the two Kabilas (Laurent and Joseph, father and son) and of the failures of the aid establishment. His careful reading and first-hand knowledge of Congo allow Trefon to sprinkle the text with vivid illustrations of his points.

Mostvaluably of all, Trefon has identified political culture as the chief culprit in the failure of reform in Congo, and made an excellent case for it as the root of Congo’s perpetual ‘failure to launch’. He draws upon his extensive knowledge of colonial and post-colonial Congolese history with confidence, picking out ideal examples to illustrate some of the continuities of the country’s political practices, and hinting at the origins of its culture. Through a well-chosen case study of reform areas, he shows clearly how elements of Congo’s political culture have thwarted the (mostly) good intentions of the international community. In so doing, he also provides trenchant insights into the culture of the international ‘aid machine’ as well.

Indeed, various members of the international community have been active participants in the illusion of reform and concealment of failure in Congo since the demise of the country’s former dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, in 1997. In fairness to the outside world, little meaningful assistance was possible under the dreadful reign of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, Mobutu’s successor, assassinated in January 2001. After his son Joseph succeeded him in power, however, Congo has been fulsomely engaged by a range of international actors. Alas, virtually all have come with their hidden agendas, institutional preoccupations and interests, illusions, and naïve hopes. The increasingly large United Nations peacekeeping
Extensive witch-hunting movements occurred across central Africa, including southern Tanzania between 1910-1960s. Witch, a living person believed to have an innate power to do evil. Again, witches are typically seen as particularly active after dusk, when law-abiding mortals are asleep. According to traditional Navajo belief, when a witch travels at night, he wears the skin of a dead animal in order to effect a transformation into that animal. These skinwalkers hold nighttime meetings at which they wear nothing except a mask, sit among baskets of corpses, and have intercourse with dead women. In some African cultures witches are believed to assemble in cannibal covens, often. The same dichotomy between sorcery and witchcraft exists (sometimes more ambiguously) in the beliefs of many peoples throughout the world. Again, witches are typically seen as particularly active after dusk, when law-abiding mortals are asleep. Most Africans need no special orientation to believe that witchcraft exists, which means that witchcraft cannot be separated from the life of an African. This is evident by the fact that even though a significant percentage of the population of Africa has been exposed to Western scientific knowledge, witchcraft tendencies have remained a phenomenon among them even in urban settings (Drucker-Brown 1993:539; Behringer 2004:14; Donkor 2011:38; Kohnert 1996:1347; ter Haar 2007:10; Van Dyk 2001). Traditional Context of Mijikenda. Because witchcraft is viewed as an ontological reality, different African traditions use different magic to protect themselves from the evil powers exercised through witchcraft (Parrinder 1969:64, 65). Miller, Norman N., 1933-Encounters with witchcraft : field notes from Africa / Norman N. Miller. p. cm. Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978-1-4384-4358-4 (pbk. : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-4384-4357-7 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. Witchcraft--Social aspects--Africa, Sub-Saharan. I. Title. BF1584.A53M55 2012 133.4'30967--dc23. y first experience with witchcraft in Africa occurred in March 1960 in Mombasa, Kenya, just as I stepped off the gangway of the MS Inchanga following a voyage from India. Next to the ship in a dockside kiosk I saw a newspaper with the headline, "European Geologist Attacked in Gogo-land: Witchcraft Suspected." The glorification of witches and condemnation of witchcraft victims in Busoga society disproves previous theoretical conceptions of witchcraft in several African societies. This paper, therefore, addresses the specific ways in which Busoga society conceives witchcraft with specific interest in those aspects that make the Basoga glorify witches and condemn their victims. Scholars largely agree that witchcraft beliefs in sub-Saharan Africa remain virulent. The modernity of witchcraft is said to thrive on friction between the local moral economy and new socio-economic realities. Redding notes that compliance with tax laws was the norm during most of the period under study.