

Lecture 10 - The Arts of Witching

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This lecture is focused on two types of “crafts” opposed to one another, namely witching (*kuroya* in my native tongue, chidzimbahwe or chiShona) and anti-witching (*kuroyonora*) or healing (*kurapa*). What Adeline Masquelier calls “a host of sorcerers (*mayu*, plural *maye*) who struck people, cattle and trees alike with deadly fire every rainy season, who hid in the clouds and flew through the skies.” She talks about the protective steps (special medicines) the Hausa Mawri people of Arewa, Nigeria, took to protect themselves when they still believed completely in *bori* (spirit possession), before they became Muslims, who believe that lightning is sent by Allah. Yet even those converted have not completely severed their ties to spirits, but now believe that lightning is caused by a family of *bori* spirits. Victims of lightning are therefore deemed offenders, not victims. But even devout Muslims fear the sorcery of lightning.

Witching is therefore a flexible, adaptive craft. It adapts to the coming of Islam, to market forces; *bori* is certainly no shrinking violet; invoking the spirits does not contradict faith in the Koran. The family of noble spirits (*Tooru*) still govern the winds, the clouds, lightning and rain –and indeed the Niger River itself. The *bakin bori* (black spirits) live in the sky from which they control the clouds which bring the rain; those spirits throw lightning on people who have offended them.

The spirituality of the Zarma people of the Zarma-Songhai region of Niger on the one hand builds nicely on the theme of African meteorology that we starting exploring previously. Thus the *watam bakwai* (seventh month) ceremony involves a test to determine if, where, and in what quantity the rain will fall that year. Milk is given to the spirits to prevent them from sending lightning down on the people.

The Zarma spirits are headed by Harakwai, the father and judge, who sends his sons to deliver punishment. His oldest, Kirai, throws no lightning, but is fearful nonetheless; he is Dongo the mad one. His younger brothers actually do the throwing; there’s Moussa, a.k.a. *sarkin gaugawa* (“the king of haste”), fast and fatal. There is Suleymane, potent and harsh. Then there is Bela, the destroyer and the fire controller; Bela’s brother, Hausakwai, decides what and who shall be hit or burnt. He has four eyes, hence, “Dodo.” Then there is Yandu, the blacksmith who kills by continually hitting until he “reaches the brain.”

Their tools are the thunder stones (*kankara*), or neolithic axes recovered by *bori* specialists from the site where lightning has struck; it is claimed they are products of the blacksmith Yandu’s forge. If Bela is involved, the ball is covered with fire, and the spirits’ weapons resemble needles if the target is human. If Kirai, Suleymane, and others are finished, they will leave a sign –three handfuls of grain aside, untouched. If they hit a goat, they put a dead lizard on the animal’s back. The stones can only be dug up by a healer, who claims them as prized exhibitions and markers of his prowess.

The reading I assigned for today, Adeline Masquelier’s “Lightning and the Avenging Spirits,” speaks to a wider phenomenon of the uses of forces that are on the face of it beyond human control, and yet here they are as instruments in humankind’s hands. Last week I retreated to my own research to initiate a conversation to see the larger context within which societies manipulate such forces. I also did this because I would like to land a more experiential perspective as an Africa, where Masquelier and other non-Africans might approach Africa as empirical fodder for Western theory. The reason for this course is to explore the African voices and to see what meanings of technology we might derive from them. As you may notice, around p. 20, Masquelier ends up speculating, with the “I think.”

Let me start my exploration by casting the witch as a pest, a human-spiritual pest, mobilizing forces of

“nature” that we might not consider subject to human manipulation, that is, as technologies for conducting the craft, or art, or witching. These are potent tools *varoyi* (witches) cast upon people, livestock, and crops in the form of *uroyi* (witchcraft). *Vedzimbahwe* (also called the Shona people) say it happened this way. First the witches prayed to their own ancestors, then to those of their intended victims for permission to just pass through their village (Togarepi, 1983)).

They capitalized on any existing ancestral anger towards the living. If *vadzimu* could allow *varoyi* to spray *unyé* (itchy substances) or *nháta* (fleas) on the mortals sleeping in the house, the pain would induce them to brew that beer all the much faster, and the ancestors would quench their thirst. Children who grew up without ever experiencing itches would have no sturdiness. *Varoyi* implored *vadzimu* to step aside and let them through the spiritual fortifications that the *n'anga* had installed during *kupinga musha*, to remind the complacent mortals of their obligations to the ancestors. The night belonged to the witches. That is why no *mudzimbahwe* or Ndebele called anyone at night; his voice would be taken away by witches (Davies and Quinche, 1935).

So eventually the ancestors relented to protect their own interests, and the witches entered the village to remind the living of their obligations to their spiritual forebears. To enter the village was one step, getting into the individual homestead was quite another, for besides the *makona* (medicines) of the village, each homestead had its own *hoko* (medicine pegs). Upon getting to the entrance of each homestead, *varoyi* sought permission from the family ancestor asking him “to remove the fences, make the homestead wide open, that we may do our work.” The witches were only here to punish, to give them rash to scratch, so as to see another side of life. They craved to see tears, to wake their victims up, so that they can open their eyes (Togarepi, 1983).

This, then, was the general theory (not myth) of human and animal health and pestilence among *vedzimbahwe* and their neighbors. The witch commanded both spiritual and herbal powers, just like the diviner (the only person qualified to diagnose a case (*kushopera*) and dispense with the necessary *muti*). Both were practitioners of medicine, one deploying it to cause illness and take life, the other to save and prolong it. Sickness was therefore believed to result from witchcraft, with *muroyi* spraying or hiding it in the huts, courtyard, and cattle pens, in the footpaths leading to the river, well, or fields, or under the trees where people did their daily work. The witch also cast *mamhepo* (“airs,” or hallucinogens) or *zvitsinga* (disease-causing implants) on their victims. Only the *n'anga* (healer) could remove *mamhepo* by burning herbs and ordering the *mweya yakaipa* (“bad airs,” *mamhepo*) to leave the stricken body, and the *chitsinga* by biting the spot where it is buried in the flesh and pulling it out. To ward off *mamhepo* and *zvitsinga*, a *zango* or *dumwa* (amulet) was hung around a newly-born child’s neck or waist (Posselt 1935, Junod 1906).

Kuroya is neither a function of personal volition nor supernatural means, but “an act...intimately connected with natural agencies which [the witch] commands” (Posselt). There is the *muti* or medicine that *muroyi* administers to the intended victim through unconscious ingestion, inhalation, and skin contact. There is nothing cuckoo about that at all. Then there is the witch’s carrier that includes such animals as the hyena, baboon, and fish otter (Ibid.). It is not outside the realm of material possibility that the witch is in fact an expert in taming forest animals to become organic vehicles. For long-distance sorties, witches have also been known to ride on *rusero* or *tsero* (winnowing basket), *vedzimbahwe*’s own version of a flying saucer. Their mission: to bewitch the living and the healthy into sickness or to feast on rancid human flesh (“Holy Spirit”, 2012).

From “This is Cuckoo” Towards “The Logics and Science of African Witchcraft”

Every year in Zimbabwe, there are women found nude outside a relative’s house, far away from their own homes. The police arrest them for public indecency; when questioned, they will say they were on a witching mission, something went horribly wrong, and the sun set on them, and the witch-spirit deserted them.

They will confess that they usually undertake expeditions as far as South Africa, Botswana, Zambia –anywhere there is a relative to be bewitched. They will reveal that they fly in winnowing baskets, nocturnally taking off from and landing in graveyards, and completing their return journey the same night. Nobody not privy to their nocturnal shenanigans will know, until a mission goes horribly wrong, the sun sets while they are still in a graveyard, in the house of a relative, and so on. They are totally naked, with all their wares –the winnowing basket among others –and are arrested for loitering around *vari musvo* (naked). Usually the courts will call “witchcraft experts” (or *n’anga*) to testify, and once these experts confirm it is witchcraft, the indecency case is dismissed (“Naked Basket Flight”, “Woman ‘Flew’ in Basket”, “Zimbabwe ‘Witches’” 2012).

It is very easy to read such stories and simply say, “This is cuckoo!” and move on. Without recourse to Western scientific reasoning, anybody who does not believe in witchcraft or spiritual forces will simply say: “Short of digging the whole grave up to get to the corpse, it is impossible for witches to get to and start eating the flesh.” Also: “A reed basket is simply too fragile to carry a human body through the air. In any case, how does it even take off and fly without propulsion?” A Western physics perspective would be: “It has to have a force that allows it to defy the force of gravity and achieve self-propulsion once in motion.” Could there be an African –or *chidzimbahwe* –theory and law of forces at play that Western physics cannot explain? Or is that physics common to all, and that commentators have simply not bothered to investigate further in order not to be found justifying the scientificity of witchcraft, which colonial commentators have marked as a symbol of the Africans’ primitiveness before Europe gave them the gift of civilization?

This was the brave challenge that the retired Zimbabwean journalist Saul Gwakuba Ndlovu posed in the wake of a spate of witchcraft incidents involving winnowing baskets, even though nobody has actually seen one in action flying through the sky and captured it visually:

“If it is indeed true, and there is no doubt that it is, there is a need to investigate the Gokwe witchcraft story to find out whether or not it has a potential for the economic and/or social development of Zimbabwe. Taking the Gokwe-Budiriro incident as an example of what Zimbabwean witchcraft can offer the aviation industry, a research centre could be established with some witches playing major roles for which they would be duly paid. The Government could play a facilitator’s role, leaving the field to private individuals and companies to research, invest, produce and market the products and services. If winnowing baskets (*njiselo*) can actually transport people from Gokwe to Harare (and at night at that) it means that shorn of its negative aspects, this particular type of Zimbabwean witchcraft can be turned into a most useful and usable technological wizardry. This is an obvious challenge to the country’s universities and ought to be treated as an opportunity towards technological progress and advancement in modern methods of travelling. Investigative journalists should now develop this story from its very start up to its logical conclusion. Its very start is the society in which the alleged witches live and practise their secretive science. The logical conclusion is effect (or effects) of witchcraft on its victims.” (Ndlovu 2013)

For Ndlovu, treating these reputed competences of witches as cuckoo, crime, or hearsay not only fails to get at the science of this advanced winnowing basket aviation. Treating witchcraft in general as such forecloses our access into many forms of secret skills and knowledge that can, he says, “help make this world a better place for its people, flora and fauna” (Ndlovu 2013). In a very lighthearted way, Ndlovu ends by saying that winnowing basket incidents should inspired Zimbabwe to establish an academy for:

“the manufacturing of modern witchcraft products that can be exported with the passage of time and as technological enlightenment removes the black shroud of secretiveness from Zimbabwean traditional technological wizardry. Young people with a vision will not fail to see an advantage in opening taxi and bus companies at Gokwe, and be ready to enter what we may call “the Winnowing Basket Transport Age.” Meanwhile, the first Zimbabwean university to take part in the first public “Winnowing Basket Demonstration Flight” will go down in the country’s technological history annal as the country’s educational institution of destiny.” (Ndlovu 2013).

Ndlovu's humor and ambitions should not distract us from the point he is making: that ignorance and *a priori* dismissal of witchcraft beliefs risk foreclosing a productive discovery and engagement with its logics and operations –materially and on the mind. In general, the task he sets before us is different from the ethnophilosophy, ethnomusicology, ethnolinguistics, anthropological, and ethnohistory projects, which sought to understand the aesthetics, structure, and functions of African culture for academic or colonizing purposes. The scholars involved in that project were outsiders for whom Africa presented as “*fascinating* fieldwork” space to engage in “participant observation” with the “native informants” giving their “information” to the expatriate “ethnographer.” These researchers were there to put the “ethno” into the “graph.” These ethno-studies by Africanists were so obsessed with witchcraft to reveal the savagery of the “native.” They merely described witchcraft in such minute detail to explain why Africa was so messed up; witchcraft became the anti-thesis of the technological, the scientific, the civilized, and the Judeo-Christian (Junod 1927).

I see witchcraft as a craft, a domain of secret knowledge, and a technological space that must be understood, not in a judgmental, moralistic, or pejorative “us” versus “them” way.

Anti-Witchcraft: African Pest Management Technologies

In part to protect against witchcraft, when a family or community was migrating to a new homestead or village, the choice of settlement in or migration from a given area could not be made without the consultation, approval, and instruction of *vadzimu*. In fact, they were requested to guide the journey, to keep the home secure from pests, along with *minda* (fields) and *pfuma* (livestock wealth) (Nyevera 1983). At the commencement of the migration, the father of the household would kneel down in the house and recite a prayer asking for guidance.

Upon arrival, right after informing the ancestors of their gratitude for the new home they had been guided to, the elders proceeded to invite a *n'anna* to conduct a ritual called *kupinga mush* (medically securing the homestead or village against pests). The rationale was that *musha unoda kupfekedzwa* (the homestead or village needs to be clothed), so that people from outside could respect it, “*kwete kuita sedambiro remadzvinyu* (not to be like a playground for lizards).” The procedure involved the use of many tree species. It entailed, for instance, planting *mishenjere* or locating the homestead near trees like *mubvumira* and *mutandangozi* that refracted *ngozi* (avenging spirits) and those like *mukonde* (euphorbia) that refracted *mheni* (lightning). *Mutarara* was used to protect the village against witches, pegs made from wood of the *mutarara* tree, and “dipped into medicine [and] driven it all around the village by a medicine man” (NADA 1945). For that reason, *mutarara* could not be brought into the village for use as *huni* (firewood) under any circumstances (NADA 1945).

The *hoko* that the *n'anga* drove into the ground still required the sanctification of the ancestors for it to work. So when he was gone, the elders offered the final prayer, asking the ancestors to now come and look after the homestead, to arm the *hoko*. We can now see why witches prayed to the ancestors to disarm the *hoko* and let them in.

The association of pests and pestilence with the night is also interesting for two reasons relating to human-animal relations. In the first instance, night was an aid to pest control: it was the time when some deadly insects would be ‘sleeping,’ and people could, like witches, move through the insect’s habitat without being seen or molested. Tsetse is one example of such a pest. In the second, however, the night (especially the dark night) is generally associated with pestilence. That is when the witches come out and patrol. Whether anyone has actually seen them in action is open to conjecture. I haven’t. However, naked women are found at a victim’s home or inside a cemetery at dawn. A *n'anga* called in to cleanse the village smells out a witch –who confesses to eating someone’s child, husband, wife, or mother. In their sleep, people see witches bewitching them. Owls perch on rooftops at night in their dozens, and are interpreted as accompaniments of the witch busy down below, bewitching the sleeping occupants (and not looking for the big rats running across the yard from their barrows in one grass-thatched roof to the next). In the morning, at the crossroads,

people see *muti* placed there as *zvitsinga* to afflict the intended target when he or she steps upon it. Most afflictions among *vedzimbahwe* are usually believed to start at night.

These beliefs, which have governed people's conduct but are never questioned or dared, go beyond witchcraft precisely because infractions are believed to cause pestilence or harm to the infringer, his family, or the entire community. Among the Ndebele and *vedzimbahwe*, burning *intwala* or *inda* (lice) or *inwele/vhudzi* (hair) was taboo; one would suffer from epilepsy (Davies and Quinche 1935). Anyone who sat in the doorway or in his father's place or seat would never grow. Anyone who drank water while standing would be struck by lightning. Nobody was allowed to sit *pamapfihwa* or *isikuni* (on the hearthstone). Sitting on the hearthstones, throwing sand into the pool, or burning *imizizi* (a rush used in basket and mat making) also induced cold, windy weather. Playing with the tail of a slaughtered cow or ox brought stomachache to all who ate the meat. Jumping over wood-ashes was forbidden; any who did it would pass bloody stool or urine. Any who sat on the road would get boils. If anyone spilled milk into the fire, the cows would develop cracked teats. The lambs and kids would die if anyone killed a turtledove. Nobody was supposed to cross a field in which *nyimo* (Bambara nuts) had been sown, lest they all wither. Any who held a dog's or cat's tail would develop sore eyes. Anyone who treaded on a grave would have aching feet. And if one poked the fire with a knife, his mother would develop sore breasts. Eating the spinal cord of animals was taboo; the person would easily feel cold. Any boy or man who put a piece of wood that had *isikukuku* or *chikukuku* (a swelling on a tree stem due to parasitic activity) into the fire would develop swollen testicles. No storytelling was to happen during summer, otherwise the crops would suffer pest infestation and fail. Hitting cattle dung was entirely forbidden: the cattle would develop constipation. When working in the fields, eating while standing was forbidden; the birds would finish all the corn. Pointing to the gathering rain clouds with one's fingers would make the rains go away (Davies and Quinche 1935).

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