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## **Witchcraft, Intimacy & Trust: Africa in comparison by Peter Geschiere (review)**

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The book is therefore valuable for people interested in race and ethnicity in Southern Africa. Its greatest value in this respect may be in the merciless analysis of British racism in the Eastern Cape: 'The reasons for the prejudice of the Britons went beyond the inherent racism of their nineteenth century compatriots throughout the world ... They believed or at least wanted to believe, both that the black race would melt away in the face of the white and that Britons had been brought to the Cape, in particular the Eastern Cape, by divine providence' (p. 134). To this reader, the book documents particularly well how racism is rooted in jealousy and resentment. British settlers were not particularly successful farmers and therefore jealous of the land occupied by the Khoekhoe. There was more immediate financial gain for them in supplying British troops and therefore they had an interest in war.

The force of jealousy emerges powerfully in the account of T. J. Biddulph, who was appointed superintendent of the Kat River Settlement in 1847. He was a bankrupt farmer and depicted the settlement as a messy agricultural failure due to the Khoekhoes' laziness and indolence. Yet the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. The new governor, Sir Harry Smith, exclaimed in 1847 while visiting the settlement and seeing the first harvest after the War of the Axe: 'If this is a failure then the whole world is a failure!' (p. 172). Biddulph was sacked, but this did not lead to an improvement in the situation. Racism triumphed when the Khoekhoe were given no time to recover after war had destroyed their livelihoods and driven them into commando duties serving the settlers. The result was that many turned against the British government and most of them joined the Xhosa in a rebellion that meant the end for the settlement.

This review unavoidably simplifies the complications in this very nuanced book. I have, however, tried to bring out how the book may be a major inspiration for historians as well as social scientists to look at Southern Africa. Robert Ross has a sharp eye for agency. We meet in the book a number of figures, such as Herman Matroos, James Read and Sir Andries Stockenstrom, who defy easy categorization, and they reveal the intricate patterns involved in the social construction of reality. Such considerations are, however, secondary in recommending this book: it is a masterpiece and a good read.

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PETER GESCHIERE, *Witchcraft, Intimacy & Trust: Africa in comparison*.

Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press (hb \$75 – 978 0 22604 758 4; pb \$25 – 978 0 22604 761 4). 2013, 312 pp.

The latest book by Geschiere, an authority on witchcraft studies since his 1997 classic *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, is commendable as a unique work of comparison. He manages to encompass three continents under one theme: the changing relationship between witchcraft, intimacy and trust. In six engaging chapters, relying mostly on historical evidence, the author contrasts the gruesome suspicions of present-day witchcraft in the intimacy of the household in Cameroon and Nigeria with, on the one hand, the carnal, liberating possession cults of Candomblé in Brazil and, on the other, the state-oriented, sexually disciplining witch-hunts of medieval Europe. The chapters are interlaced with further

cross-cultural comparisons such as an interlude on Siegel's account of witch-hunts in Indonesia.

One of the book's main tenets posits that colonization and subsequent decolonization have made witchcraft-related practices in Africa illicit and have de-territorialized these uncanny forces, which are now bewitching the African diaspora in Europe, while the opposite course has been observed in Latin America. There, the once forbidden fetish cults have grown into respected, territorially established or 'emplaced' religions such as Candomblé, which claims authenticity through purity of belief and (African) origin. Key to this process, Geschiere suggests, is that the cults provide a basis for trust after the loss of family during the Middle Passage of the Atlantic slave trade. The book holds the promise of a sequel, in which the author describes how both sides of the Atlantic have been equally affected by the current Pentecostal wave that centres on monopolizing people's trust by undermining their allegiance to traditional spiritual practices, equating these with the work of the devil.

A brief review such as this can never do justice to the wide span of insights and statements in this book. But all-encompassing as the study is—as well as polemically phrased in its discussion of relevant, 'competing' literature—it invites thorough scrutiny. For one thing, this reader was left pondering what Geschiere's cross-cultural comparison would have looked like had it considered medico-anthropological accounts of how healers and their patients talk about witchcraft, and how, in the intimacy of the home, these accounts give rise to the figure of the witch and to the development of protective medicine to counter black magic. If ethnography on healing cults in Africa has revealed anything, it is that there exist intricate relationships between witchcraft suspicions, oracles, spirit possessions, state formation and collective witch-hunts, reproducing within any one community the aforementioned contrast between carnally liberating and sexually disciplining experiences.

As the subtitle indicates, this book intends to be comparative. Yet, it does not specify the grounds on which a locally rooted occult practice could be likened to one in some other community. The author's constant emphasis on the fluidity of ideas only begs the question of how comparisons can be made. On what basis can he characterize 'the' healer in Africa (pp. 73, 88)? Why should he locate Candomblé's origins in Africa's fetishes and occult practices, rather than in Africa's spirit cults, which it always resembled (pp. 144–63)? The author rejects the common Africanist distinction between healer and witch since the healer uses black magic too and is in some cases known to sacrifice kin in return for magical power (*passim*). But can the two be compared? True, a user of white magic and a user of black magic are comparable. They can be interchangeable, as in the author's discussion of Favret-Saada's study in France (pp. 124–30). But African informants talking about their witches seem to experience a different (third) figure, one that inhabits their imaginary before identification processes such as divination transform this figure into yet another user of (black or white) magic. In fact, Favret-Saada's informants also experienced 'the witch' quite differently at first (as Geschiere himself remarks), before local healers made them focus their suspicions on neighbours instead of kin. It seems to me that anthropologists would be inadvertently performing a similar manipulative act if they took into account only this social construction of witchcraft that has been agreed upon publicly or after divination. The experiential process undergone by the bewitched should be part of the cultural comparison.

Since the 1990s, a number of psychoanalytically inspired Africanists such as Devisch (in Congo) and Pradelles de Latour (in Cameroon) and gift theorists such as Godbout and Godelier have begun to integrate experiential processes

by literally bringing home the bewitching ‘danger within’ of kinship. Some have related witchcraft to the ‘uncanny’ in Freud’s sense of the familiar turned against itself. That line of study precedes Geschiere’s work but is missing in this book. The suggestion by some of their followers (including this reviewer) is that experiential shifts go beyond the functionalist characterizations of the witch by Marwick, Middleton and the like. Instead, such shifts shed light on existential issues including social exchange, indebtedness and certain kinship positions, which capture the experience of bewitchment through a structure that represents the aforementioned ‘danger within’.

Even so, the main merit of *Witchcraft, Intimacy & Trust* lies in the fact that it does what anthropology was meant for and what no qualitative sociology of non-Western societies would dare embark on: the exercise of cultural comparison. Geschiere has to be applauded for resuscitating, along the way, just about every debate our discipline has tried to bury. Personally, the book confronted me again with the need for ethnography to be a tool that experientially grounds social anthropology. Such experiential anthropology could help us see witchcraft beliefs not primarily as independent variables causing social havoc, or as engrained ideas that no religious or educational crusade could stamp out (p. 211), but as a cultural system that arises time and again from situated experiences and thus expresses human relations, cultural changes or social problems. For some readers, the book’s consideration of a *didactique contre la sorcellerie* in the final pages, which blames people’s beliefs, may therefore be missing the point – shooting the messenger – because constructs of ‘the witch’ actually communicate experienced problems. But most readers will greatly appreciate Geschiere’s comparative exercise for underlining the challenge that lies ahead for anthropology.

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JULIE LIVINGSTON, *Improvising Medicine: an African oncology ward in an emerging cancer epidemic*. Durham NC and London: Duke University Press (hb £64 – 978 0 82235 327 0; pb £15.99 – 978 0 82235 342 3). 2012, 248 pp.

The starkly visible interplay between infectious and non-communicable disease is a hallmark of a range of emerging threats to human health in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. The recent prominence of cancers as an object of epidemiological and social concern warrants precisely the keen, detailed scholarly focus offered in this remarkable book, skilfully blending historical and ethnographic modes of enquiry and presentation. Julie Livingston reflects on the experience of carers, clinicians, communities and patients grappling with cancer at a hospital in Botswana’s capital, Gaborone, in the wake of the country’s destabilizing HIV epidemic and the consequent resource crisis in universal healthcare provision.

Livingston reminds us that ill and debilitated Batswana, at home and as migrants, inhabit a curious juncture amid southern African histories of state racism and the post-independence promises of the Botswana state, centred on universal rights vested in citizenship. This juncture conditions both the phenomenology of pain and the expectation of palliation, which converge in the hospital locus of Livingston’s ethnographic work. The oncology ward of Gaborone’s principal referral hospital draws together clinical and nursing expertise from across the globe in a new techno-scientific venture. German, Egyptian, Batswana,