

Witchcraft, Subjectivation and Sovereignty: Foucault in Cameroon

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Article abstract

What does the status of the occult in contemporary African politics have to tell us about the processes of subjectivation and sovereignty described in Foucault's genealogy of Western biopolitics? Ideas about the invisible that have become strikingly popular in African societies undergoing rapid economic transformation may allow African philosophers and anthropologists to situate European forms of subjectivation, sovereignty, knowledge, and visibility with respect to their own "invisible" or occult dimension. My goal is arrive at a better understanding of what philosophers, Northern or Southern, mean by political imagination and to explain how power involves the capture of an individual's or community's imagination as well as their visible, tangible bodies.

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Abstract: What does the status of the occult in contemporary African politics have to tell us about the processes of subjectivation and sovereignty described in Foucault's genealogy of Western biopolitics? Ideas about the invisible that have become strikingly popular in African societies undergoing rapid economic transformation may allow African philosophers and anthropologists to situate European forms of subjectivation, sovereignty, knowledge, and visibility with respect to their own "invisible" or occult dimension. My goal is arrive at a better understanding of what philosophers, Northern or Southern, mean by political imagination and to explain how power involves the capture of an individual's or community's *imagination* as well as their visible, tangible bodies.

Résumé: La place occupée par l'occulte dans la politique africaine contemporaine peut-elle nous apprendre quelque chose sur les processus de subjectivation et de souveraineté décrits dans la généalogie foucauldienne? Les philosophes africains et les africanistes éclairent-ils la généalogie des pratiques biopolitiques occidentales ? Cet article voudrait situer les différents types européens de subjectivation, de souveraineté, de savoir, et de visibilité en relation à leur propre dimension invisible ou occulte, en les comparant avec la notion d'invisible devenue étonnamment populaire dans les sociétés africaines, tout à la fois exposées à une brutale mutation économique et confrontées à d'innombrables conflits.

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What does the status of the occult in contemporary African politics have to tell us about the processes of subjectivation and sovereignty described in Foucault's genealogy of Western biopolitics? Ideas about the invisible that have become strikingly popular in African societies undergoing rapid economic transformation may allow African philosophers and anthropologists to situate European forms of subjectivation, sovereignty, knowledge, and visibility with respect to their own "invisible" or occult dimension. My goal is arrive at a better understanding of what philosophers, Northern or Southern, mean by political imagination and to explain how power involves the capture of an individual's or community's *imagination* as well as their visible, tangible bodies.¹ Because ideas about the occult vary from region to region in Africa, and even between societies in the same political state, my focus is the work of Cameroonian philosophers and anthropologists working in Cameroon or neighboring countries like Gabon.

At the start of decolonization, many Western observers and Western-trained African officials assumed that modernization and urbanization would dry up popular beliefs in occult attacks, traditional healing, and even monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam (Geschiere 1995, 7-12; Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 19-20; Bernault and Tonda 2000, 5). To the contrary, although they may understand healing and witchcraft in different ways, people at all levels of postcolonial African societies still use the language of sorcery to discuss public and private events, especially those involving the unjust, excessive, or destructive use of power. Moreover, evangelical and indigenous Christian churches have attracted an enormous following in recent decades, often because they promise to cut through cycles of occult violence plaguing communities.² Despite a unique history,

¹ Some of the African thinkers who have worked most with Foucault's categories are Achille Mbembe (especially 2000), Valentin Mudimbe, and Joseph Tonda (especially 2005); European Africanists who have used his ideas to understand contemporary African realities include (but are hardly limited to) Jean-François Bayart (1989, 2005), Florence Bernault (2006) and Bogumil Jewsiewski (2002). The literature on witchcraft and politics in all parts of Africa is rapidly expanding; significant authors on Anglophone Africa include Stephen Ellis, Adam Ashforth, and John and Jean Comaroff.

² Cameroon is a country containing many diverse ethnic traditions and ecosystems, with rapidly growing cities as well as a large rural population governed through traditional councils and chiefs. It has a sizeable Christian as well as Muslim population, and was colonized at different times by Germany, France, and Britain before gaining independence in 1960.

it presents an interesting microcosm of phenomena found in other African nations, and its thinkers are in creative dialogue with French political philosophy.

The occult as discourse

What is the occult?³ Most western ontologies, excepting some forms of radical Christianity and new age spiritualism, seem to exclude forces that are inexplicable according to scientific laws. In order to sidestep problems associated with the "ontology" of witchcraft in Africa, many anthropologists and historians have focused on how witchcraft functions as *discourse* (White 2000, Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, Ch. 2; Geschiere 1995, Ch 1). The words used to refer to occult force, such as *djambe*, *evu*, or *sem*, vary in meaning from society to society and can refer to both constructive and destructive uses of invisible force (Geschiere 1995, 19-22, 82-92). Traditional leaders and healers are believed able to make positive, pro-social use of the occult, while others are suspected of using these forces to enrich themselves or to gain power at the expense of others, usually family members. The victims of witches are thought to suffer several fates, depending on the region and era in question ; some victims are handed over to a secret community of witches and eaten; others have their blood drained (White 2000), or are put to work on plantations during exhausting and often fatal out-of-body experiences (Geschiere 1995, 175).⁴

Approaching Cameroonian concern for the occult as a discourse, without reference to whether occult force "exists" or what it is, allows one to identify the the subject positions authorized to speak about it, the places and times of its enunciation, the field of objects and themes which make sense to imbue with occult significance, the other discourses such as medicine, politics, and religion with which it is intertwined, and the media of rumor or magical objects in which it is materialized. In other words, following principles fairly similar to those Foucault outlined in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, anthropologists and historians can analyse the regularity and circulation of statements about the occult as a series of *énoncés* (Foucault 1969, 116-138).

Witchcraft tends to be mentioned as a possible explanation for the surprising good or bad fortune of a community member or public figure. Although Cameroonians and other Africans

³ At a 2005 colloque on the problem of legal responses to public concern about "sorcellerie", one of the first topics of discussion was the difficulty of naming the phenomenon, for the phenomenon itself is at least in part an effect of *naming* (De Rosny 2005, 17). "Witchcraft" implies a deliberate human use of supernatural forces, which can be morally judged like any human act, while the English term "occult" refers to beliefs and activities involving supernatural powers that may or may not be morally beneficial.

⁴ Not all forms of witchcraft are traditional or ancient; many postdate the arrival of Europeans and new technologies and economic activities, like airplanes and development projects, enter reliably into African beliefs about sorcery.

accept modern medical explanations of how sickness defeats the body or how decline in an industry leads to loss of jobs, witchcraft gives these traumas a human *cause* and a human *meaning* (De Rosny 1981). A political figure's sudden loss of popularity, an unexpected family death, or failure at necessary professional exams can all be attributed to witchcraft. But so can the astonishing financial success of a merchant whose marketing secrets are unknown to others, a surprising recovery from illness, or political and romantic success in an uncertain environment where others fail. Any event involving luck which may arouse the envy or anger of others, such as childbirth, marriage, or a national soccer match, is likely to be surrounded by caution concerning the possible use of sorcery.

Peter Geschiere hypothesizes that discourse on the occult expresses people's quite reasonable concern that the exercise of power may give rise to new inequalities or destabilize accepted hierarchies. It enables people to explain their dependence on complex political, economic, and ecological systems and to evaluate them in terms drawn from various family structures, much as George Lakoff (2002) has analysed American political ideologies in terms of their (often unconscious) analogies to the obligations and powers deemed appropriate in family life (Geschiere 1995, 274-276). Witchcraft talk also expresses people's concern that hatred, envy, or disdain can be present in family and village relationships on which people commonly trust for emotional and practical support and for which they feel strong moral responsibilities (18). Especially in the South and Southeast of Cameroon, traditional society values egalitarianism and must grapple morally with the realities of inequality, especially the great inequalities of opportunity and access to medical or consumer goods that have arisen since independence. Once a largely rural economy, Cameroon has adopted a public policy that favors cities and therefore encourages widespread urban migration, while expecting city dwellers to redistribute wealth to the countryside through kin networks (Marie 2000, 146). Relationships between older and younger family groups are plagued by tensions and anxieties about loyalty, care, and obligations to share wealth.⁵ More affluent urban Africans may cut themselves off from elders or villages of origin to avoid being "eaten" by their demands or envy (Geschiere 1995, 130-133, 101-103, Fisiy 1998, 146-47). Whispers about likely

⁵ Tension around new forms of individualization or group definition, associated with advanced education or consumption of imported products, is expressed through accusations of witchcraft or the temptation to learn occult practices. Alain Marie suggests that the sorcerer who "uses" his or her relatives instrumentally and fails to give reciprocal support, but thereby loses all right to group protection, exemplifies the modern individual in the eyes of communitarian traditionalists (2000, 142-143). But youth with little chance of economic success may turn to professions as witch-hunters or Christian and syncretic ministers (Tonda 2002, 39). Youth involved in Africa's many civil wars (though Cameroon is presently free from conflict) also use the language of witchcraft to describe violent activities that bear little resemblance to traditional practices of good or evil (Bernault and Tonda 2000, 15; Ellis 1999, 263-264, 285-290).

victims or perpetrators of witchcraft also function as indirect social control over participants, reminding them what kinds of actions arouse praise or blame, what forms of enjoyment offend others or lose legitimacy if they are not shared.

The fact that the government plays such a disproportionate role in employing citizens, compared to the private economy, and the fact that so many aspects of economic and administrative life are riddled with corruption and favoritism, justifies the Cameroonian's general suspicion that one person's good fortune may have come unjustly at someone else's expense. As gossip, *énoncés* about the occult allow people who find the working of economic and political power is either opaque or appears outrageously unjust to put their consternation into words (Geschiere 1995, 168-171). It does not necessarily matter that the ontological reality of sorcery or the associations, contracts, and nightly meetings in which witches are supposed to eat their victims or buy and sell the profits of zombie labor are uncertain and may be wholly fictitious (See also White 2000 for a comparison to East Africa). The real workings of the ruling Cameroonian party, the ambitions and fears of its bureaucrats, and the ways they make use of special contracts with foreign businesses or banks are just as uncertain and troubling. But the tendency to resort to conspiracy theories is not specifically African; it happens in every democracy or ostensibly egalitarian society in which real inequality reaches unjustifiable levels and the survival of undeserving leaders seems incomprehensible through ordinary means.

"... les implications politiques de la sorcellerie en Afrique renferment des parallèles inattendus avec les sentiments de puissance et d'impuissance – l'idée qu'on devrait avoir prise sur le pouvoir, et la conviction que ce n'est guère la cas – qui marquent les conceptions populaires de la politique dans les démocraties occidentales. La sorcellerie offrent des moyens secrets d'accaparer le pouvoir, mais elle reflète en même temps des sentiments aigus d'impuissance; et elle semble surtout servir à cacher les sources du pouvoir. Est-ce que tout cela est si différent des raisons du désenchantement ou même de l'aliénation croissante de la population vis-à-vis de la grande politique en Occident?" (Geschiere 1995, 15)

It is important to keep in mind, however, that elites use witchcraft talk as much as their poorer counterparts in the village. To the extent that an affluent person has decided it is undesirable to share his or her good fortune with family members or impossible to avoid the suspicion of unfairness in some way, he or she may *accept* the accusations of sorcery and either make symbolic gestures of appeasement to the community or hope that people are sufficiently frightened to leave them alone (Geschiere 1995, 127-130). Others consult healers to protect themselves against the envy and possible curses of others. Knowledge about witchcraft, like knowledge about the latest computer viruses and anti-virus programs, is a form of popular

intellectual “capital” or expertise (Tonda 2002, 30; Röschenhaler 2004). Just as Westerners buy insurance and political or business figures may keep an attorney or public relations firm on retainer to ward off the costs of illness, opportunistic lawsuits or damaging slanders, Africans at all levels attempt to protect themselves against the occult and make use of its experts on their own behalf (Geschiere 1995, 159-160; Ellis and Ter Haar 24-26, 74-83). Thus the inequality which is so often explained in terms of witchcraft discourse infiltrates the realm of invisible conflicts; just as they can afford many aspects of fine living denied fellow citizens, the rich also have the newest and best charms or rituals against evil.⁶ When regimes change, new forms of sorcery are felt to be required for political legitimacy and new cultural resources are invented to combat its effects in public and private life (see Ellis 1999, 249-259).

Discourse about occult powers simply reinforces ordinary “visible” and “rational” power of shaming and scapegoating when it turns into accusation – or legal prosecution in some parts of the country. The colonial legal system tried to ignore accusations of witchcraft, treating so-called sorcery and public outrage against it as equally irrational threats to public order and intervening only where “material evidence” of someone’s intent to harm another could be found (poison, or perhaps charms buried in a house that expressed clear malicious intent). But because the public tends to believe strongly in witchcraft, post-colonial court officials who hesitate to prosecute run the risk of being accused of collusion with witches or losing the accused to a lynch mob (Geschiere 1995, 242-243).⁷ Geschiere reports that some witch-hunters or traditional healers have taken advantage of the new climate to encourage patients to press charges and, despite their own knowledge about occult techniques, testify for the prosecution against suspected “witches” (1995, 220-221, 231-236; 2005). This contrasts with traditional legal practices for resolving claims of sorcery through public accusation, negotiation, reconciliation, and ceremony led by prominent villagers with their own “legitimate” share of such powers.

⁶ The current President of Cameroon – notwithstanding the legal ban on sorcery, reinforced his power over each region of the country by joining their most important secret societies and contributing generously to international esoteric organizations such as the Rosicrucians (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 76-77).

⁷ In many places, the problem of “witchcraft” is perceived by authorities primarily as a problem of protecting those *accused* of witchcraft or assessing penalties for those who purport to “find” a community’s witches, without thereby implying official *collusion* with witchcraft. The colonial attitude persists in Anglophone regions where courts employ English common law (but where traditional government has also, in general, treated the occult power of the chief as different *in kind* from that of witches, and accepts his power to condemn or end cycles of occult vengeance). Francophone regions which use the civil law system and where traditional government is less hierarchical suffer from a greater fear of witchcraft. In these areas, judges seem more likely to have called healers as expert consultants in cases of accused witchcraft (Fisiy 1998, 160; Geschiere 1995, 244-245; Geschiere 2005).

Cameroon criminalized witchcraft and other forms of divination in the belief that fear of being accused or perhaps made the victim of sorcery was hindering development and discouraging ambitious individuals from improving their economic situation. As Fisiy notes, this put them in the bizarre position of outlawing not only malevolent acts but also traditional healing practices accepted by most of the population (1998, 144). If we understand witchcraft as a *discourse* for talking about diverse forms of power and suffering, the government is essentially outlawing a form of hate speech. The turn to litigation shows that individual advancement is a contested national value. But it also indicates that traditional authority of elders to protect and reconcile communities suffering from witchcraft has lost legitimacy (Geschiere 1995, 238-239). Finally, it reveals the extent to which the postcolonial administration has failed to satisfy popular needs for justice in other ways.⁸

Observers seem to agree that criminalization is a dubious response even when we understand “witchcraft” not *only* as a discourse, but also as a genuine experience of illness, disempowerment, or efforts to build personal confidence and protection against risk in daily interactions (De Rosny 1981; Bensa 2005). The courts are not the only institutions that risk reinforcing belief in sorcery by consulting professed experts in the occult. The autocratic state in Cameroon, quite apart from the spiritual preferences of its autocrat, achieves “surplus-power” in every aspect of public life through systematic efforts to secure citizens’ fascination, terror, and disempowerment that are easily comparable to witchcraft. Perhaps something like a logic of “doubling” is at work wherever “sovereignties” are constituted.

Power, visibility, and the imaginary

People in every culture experience security, powerlessness, courage in the face of risk and vulnerability to unpredictable events and recognize that these states of mind, which affect their ability to act and initiate projects, have an interpersonal basis. Many Cameroonians believe that the self is a multiplicity and that the visible self/body is matched with one or more “doubles” who can commit or be the victim of occult aggression.⁹ As Geschiere, who studied the Maka people in the Southeast of Cameroon, explains :

⁸ Geschiere fears that far from calming the public and discouraging the treatment of interpersonal resentment through *énoncés* on witchcraft, state involvement will simply reinforce the legitimacy of this discourse at the expense of democratic or scientific speech.

⁹ Michael Taussig (1993) offers an important analysis of the logic of “doubles” in his study of the Cuna society of Panama. See also Tonda 2005, 77-84; Marie 2000, 143-144 (footnotes).

“Une idée de base dans le discours du *djambe* est qu’en principe tout être humain incorpore son propre double et peut apprendre à se dédoubler. Cette notion de dédoublement – *wos*, “sortir”, en *maka* – est fondamentale. Tant que le *djambe* reste dans le ventre de son détenteur, il peut renforcer celui-ci. [...] Alors, on a accès à des puissances spéciales, mais on se rend aussi extrêmement vulnérable. Le double (*njim*) de quelqu’un peut sortir pour attaquer d’autres *minjim* (fantômes), ou même des victimes innocentes. Mais, dès qu’il est sorti, ce double est exposé à des dangers inédits: il peut toujours tomber lui-même dans les embuscades. [...] Cette notion selon laquelle chacun peut avoir un double, et surtout l’accent porté sur cette possibilité de se dédoubler comme un moment clé, semble donner une dimension supplémentaire à l’action humaine. Le *djambe* est l’occasion d’un discours qui accorde une place centrale aux actions humaines.” (Geshiere 2005, 57)

Unexplained diseases, repeated and debilitating bad luck, or depression are often attributed to “possession” or a witch’s capture of one’s double as a sacrifice or slave; a condition which can only be reversed if a healer “armors” the victim or brings family members together to air grievances and destroy tokens of envy or hatred.

Many Westerners readily agree that a person’s abilities do not end at the boundaries of his or her physical body, but extend to the financial, social, and symbolic capital on which he or she can draw. Love, psychoanalytic transference, trust in spiritual authorities, and mass psychology demonstrate that individuals can alienate or represent important aspects of their own personality and abilities in terms of another person or movement. In other words, the emotional and social self is “transindividual” or imperfectly separate from other beings, despite the great epistemological and legal privilege given to visible, physical bodily boundaries in modern Western culture.¹⁰ It has an invisible dimension and relationships with invisible entities; indeed, *relationships* may determine someone’s selfhood – and their flourishing or sickness – more than their *visible, tangible body*.

In African societies, some of these relationships, themselves invisible, join visible people to one another as well as to invisible entities of the spirit world. As Ellis and Ter Haar explain:

“The individual spirits that are held to govern relationships between people and objects in the material world are considered by believers to be real, even though invisible... A helpful analogy is the idea suggested by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, who describes the imaginary as ‘not the unreal, but the realm where the real and the unreal become indistinguishable from one another. Situated at this

¹⁰ The notion of “transindividuality” has been elaborated by Simondon (1989) and used by E. Balibar and P. Virno in the political context. In the psychoanalytic context, similar phenomena have been analysed using different terminology by Bion, Loewald, and Teresa Brennan.

same point is another couple as difficult to disentangle as real and unreal, namely true and false. The imaginary, we suggest, is where facts merge into non-facts; it is where perceptions of truth are formed. That which people imagine changes over time; but certain products of the imagination recur in societies and show continuity over many generations. Even the most determinedly materialistic societies make constant use of entities that are imaginary in this sense, such as capital, the market, and the economy" (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004, 23)

In other words, people speculate on the invisible relationships between people that may be hidden from public view but affect their social, medical, economic, and political well-being by talking about the occult. It is in discussing sorcery, rather than "visible" events, that people decide what kinds of statements and phenomena might be true or false and which are merely senseless. In such conversations and rumors, existing but indeterminate relations of power between members of a community are extended or refused. This means that occult practices and speech by healers or witches do not exhaust the overall network of informal power and knowledge-formation mediated by talk of spirits or doubles. What makes speech about spirits different from speech about relationships mediated by "western" phenomena like the State or economy is that these entities belong to a language game in which only individual humans, defined by their bare physical presence in the last instance, have agency and intentionality, while relationships consist of strictly physical or statistical causes and effects. However, as Foucault (2004) and Agamben (1998) have argued, this way of desacralizing political and economic phenomena has a specific history and is neither a metaphysical given nor a description of the ahistorical "European mentality" (see also Bernault 2006, 228).

In principle, the word "witchcraft" is no more mysterious than other forms of "power," which Foucault defined as "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions; an action upon an action, on possible or actual future or present actions" (Foucault, DE v. 4, 236). Unlike violence, which involves someone directly (and visibly) moving or altering the victim's body, power relations are invisible and give the impression that the directed party chooses actions freely. For Foucault, being caught in relations of power is ultimately indistinguishable from freedom; power can only operate where the subordinate can respond inventively to his or her constraints, discovering agency and individuality in the process of being governed. In many cases, power is built into the technology of an activity or the architecture in which it takes place. However, this is not to say that every "invisible" power relation gives its subjects the same latitude or feeling of potential movement and creativity. They may still be frustrated or dispirited by the limited responses they imagine. If actors withhold assent or resist identification with the goals superiors encourage them to imagine and realize, they may feel divided against themselves, rather than outraged by the person(s) who designed the situation in

which they are caught. They may feel “possessed,” and seek to externalize a pain whose causes are invisible.¹¹

Believing in sorcery may seem to “personalize” or irrationally attribute human agency to relationships and crises that cannot be attributed to any specific person, and often opens the door to outrageous scapegoating of innocent community members (in Africa just like Europe or colonial America). But it also suggests that many of the situations Europeans or Americans would accept as natural, accidental, or inevitable are the result of active power relations between individuals, as well as individuals and institutions, and can be renegotiated as such. Although a witch-hunter might not ask who designed the panopticon rather than internalizing the gaze, he or she would be acutely aware that “debt” or “obedience” of any kind is an internalized relationship. In this sense, traditional belief in witchcraft aims, with more or less success, at a profound *demystification* of the natural and political world. The function of genealogy, ideology critique, and psychoanalysis in European culture is to identify the real or logically plausible *interpersonal* conditions behind feelings of isolation, disempowerment, depression or impotent anger, and internal conflict - and then to project possible imaginative scenarios for their transformation. Discourse about witchcraft isolates similar phenomena and potentials for healing. The pressure of economic scarcity in contemporary Cameroon, gross inequality in rewards for the successful and the marginal, and moral obligations toward kin and community create a situation in which fantasies of selfishness and violence are more likely, and powerful, than actual opportunities for anti-social behavior. Such fantasies find an outlet in talk of witchcraft. But because these conditions also produce genuine suffering, confusion, and feelings of internal struggle or division, people turn to aggressive and defensive occult practices.

Belief in witchcraft is compatible with materialism if we recognize that the *materiality* of power relations, like the materiality of Foucault’s *enoncés*, involves their ability to undergo transformations or recontextualization, as well as limits on their malleability. As Michael Rowlands explains, the fact that bodies, charms, places, and foods or medicines consumed by initiates are concrete does not prevent bodies from being “literally transformed in the process of acquiring a new status” (2005). Some bodies, laden with more meanings or the ability to make sense in more contexts, are more material than others. Promotion in a village hierarchy materializes a body differently than economic success and access to education or consumer goods; these kinds of “spiritual status” are inseparable from the bodies they imaginatively reconfigure..

¹¹ This is so even when the cause of pain seems self-evident; Elaine Scarry (1985) explains that torture victims in the extremity of suffering feel betrayed by their own bodies, rather than (or in addition to) being betrayed by their captors. Torture is an unfortunately familiar case in which someone’s “doubles” are used against them -- not only the victim’s body but the torturer’s *image* of who they are to deserve such treatment.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the change of status undergone by the modern convict in terms that resemble undergoing an initiation, falling victim to a witchcraft, or engaging a healer to provide occult protection. The experience is of having one's imaginative, emotional, and pragmatic options transformed as a result of moving from one status to another in the minds of others.

"Des mains de la justice, il [le juge] reçoit bien un condamné; mais ce sur quoi il doit s'appliquer, ce n'est pas l'infraction bien sur, ni même exactement l'infracteur, mais un objet peu différent... le *délinquant*" (SP 292).

The delinquent is a "double" for the offender, one who makes sense or exists only when and where we find people looking for a criminological type, a biographical development, a story of moral decline and potential rehabilitation. Elsewhere in the same work, Foucault speaks about the "soul" as the "present correlative of a technique of power over the body."

"Bien qu'elle [l'âme] existe, qu'elle a une réalité, qu'elle est produite en permanence, autour, à la surface, à l'intérieur du corps par le fonctionnement d'un pouvoir qui s'exerce sur ceux qu'on punit – d'une façon plus générale sur ceux qu'on surveille, qu'on dresse et corrige..." (SP, 38).

This soul "le porte à l'existence" (38). How can it bring him to existence, if it is by guiding the body that the soul appears at all? The soul must be an imaginary point of identification by which supervisors encourage the delinquent to envision some actions and not others, increasing his materiality in some ways and decreasing it in others. The soul is "une pièce dans la maîtrise que le pouvoir exerce sur un corps;" or, more famously, "prison du corps" (38).

Subjectification and sovereignty

All of this suggests that for the European as well as the Cameroonian, individuals are imperfectly distinct from each other and capable of materializing differently – more or less happily, with more or less surprise and idiosyncrasy – in different situations according to the way their souls are conceived and influenced or inhibited by the physical environment. Foucault's studies of Blanchot, Klossowski, and Magritte explored the implications of an ontology of "doubles."¹² At one point he also undertook a study of "heterotopias" – cultural spaces in which it was commonly accepted that an individual might have more than one identity or be capable of changing his or her identity in

¹² "La pensée du dehors," DE vol 1, 518-539, esp 534-537; "La prose d'Actéon," DE 326-337; "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," DE 635-650.

materially significant ways. Prisons, cemeteries, trains, and gardens were among the liminal spaces in this category. In the essay "Of Other Spaces," he pointed out that many heterotopias are "heterochronies," places or events that bring together the perspectives of several temporalities or historical periods (Foucault, DE v. 4, 759-760). But Foucault applied this ontology to institutions and social frameworks as well as to individuals. This final section addresses relationships between forms of subjectivity available in a context where individuals are explicitly believed to possess "doubles," such as we find in witchcraft or traditional medicine, and the potential multiplicity or "doubling" of states and sovereignties.

Foucault's writings and lecture courses of the 1970s sketch a tentative genealogy of the forms of power relating modern citizens to state, economy, and administrative-therapeutic institutions. In *History of Sexuality* (1976), he describes the transition from a form of government legitimated through law and the permission/prohibition of a royal sovereign to one legitimated by its ability to foster the biological health of the population (1976, 177-191). This transition roughly parallels the one leading from a very public exercise of power through the excessive visual display of Damiens' suppliance to the secret work of bureaucrats on the penitentiary convict's soul. In *Sécurité, Territoire, Population* (2004a), Foucault outlines the relationship between a form of governance (raison d'état) focused on "population" as a natural object with behaviors that must be observed and protected and an exercise of "pastoral" power, whose techniques were drawn from Catholic religious practice and applied with increasing detail to the sexual, economic, medical, and educational lives of royal subjects (2004a, 267-280, 69-80, 196-120). *Naissance de la Biopolitique*, his next year's lecture course (2004b), dealt with the rise of liberalism as a governmental technology seeking to *refrain* from too much direct guidance or interference with the lives of citizens, preferring to cultivate the *legal* and *social security* environment under which these citizens could trade and flourish as free subjects of *interest* and *desire* (2004b, 40-48). All of these political forms or *dispositifs* involve particular configurations of action on the imagined or feared actions of others.

Foucault takes pains to remind his audience that although each of these studies makes heuristic use of periodization and contrasts between earlier and later discourses or practices, he is not offering a history in which one regime "replaces" another, still less represents an "advance" over its predecessor. He is laying out a series of problems, and performing a genealogy of solutions to those problems, but the timeline differs from problem to problem. Above all, these are not histories in which some one thing called "the State" "power," or "the market" achieves its current form (2004a, 4-7; 2004b, 32-33, 169-70). They are accounts of the choices between alternate practices of "statification" (étatisation) and "capitalization" or "economization," which could have been substituted for others and frequently coexisted in tension with alternate practices for long periods of time.

Foucault's nominalism with respect to universals like "state," "sovereignty," and "market economy" is absolutely crucial in the African context because, as many analysts agree, the confusion engulfing many aspects of contemporary African governmentality results in part from their apparent conformity with ideals of statehood and sovereignty drawn from the European context but presented to the leaders of postcolonial independence, and revered by current western financial and diplomatic discourses, as transhistorical, transcultural essences (Davidson 1992, 188-196). The fact that Europeans conceived sovereignty in legal terms, in terms of a pastoral power, and finally as the ability to create a secure space for economic competition – if not some combination of these at many times and places, is a salutary reminder that the sovereignty of African nations will be equally specific and have their own genealogies (Mbembe 2000a, 20-21; Bayart 2005).

In *Homo Sacer* (1998), the Italian phenomenologist Giorgio Agamben investigates the religious or mystical sources of early modern and late twentieth-century forms of European political sovereignty. Focusing on rituals and myths concerning the king's "double" in Roman antiquity and medieval France and Germany, he tries to show that the modern Western equation of human individuality with the bare biological body, usually taken to be the most obvious thing in the world, indicates a very specific cultural identification between the "sovereign" citizen of liberalism and the king's "sovereign" but incorporeal double (see also Ransom 1997). In other words, the body of the king, like the body of the classed, sexed, and otherwise socially marked body, was a body with irrevocable social meanings and contours. The king represented the power of his office and his kingdom only in an artificially "unmarked" form, a double which was tended in wax effigy after his death. The modern citizen-subject, deprived of concrete connections to others through blood, land and position, but freed thereby for economic and political autonomy, is the "naked" or "unmarked" sovereign, the one whose strangeness also represents a threat to the rooted community and who is easiest to uproot or enclose in concentration camps, where his or her vulnerability is fatally apparent.

Agamben conjectures that the concentration camp was the artificial space within which Europe most clearly and destructively followed out the logic of stripping modern citizenship to its bare, therefore profoundly disturbing, biological life. While I think his contribution to the genealogy of European sovereignty and biopower is fascinating, I think the structural importance he gives to Nazi death camps is disingenuous and troubling. The European techniques and justifications for incarceration, forced labor, and racial alienation practiced in the camps were first tried out in African colonies (Foucault 1997, 229; Mills 1999, 102-106; Arendt 1973, 185-186). The production of "bare life" on the surface of the otherwise ethnically, linguistically, and culturally embedded African body was a crucial moment in the construction of liberal and (now) neoliberal governmentality. This presents an obvious problem for any African who hopes that establishing a nation-state will

enable him or her to assume the subject position of the citizen qualified as legally and biologically “normal.” It is not simply that the form of sovereignty Africans thought they were adopting in order to be comprehensible as independent political entities to their former colonial masters was a form of sovereignty historically rooted in the practices and circumstances of the European peoples, but it may have relied on a very specific, if obscure and forgotten, imaginary relating the king’s double to the subject/citizen’s double.

As Cameroonian philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe has pointed out, Africa occupies a very specific niche in the neoliberal imaginary governing Europeans, Americans, and other “developed” countries. The continent remains the paradigmatic example of an (undesirable) state of nature whose institutions must be privatized in the name of social and economic health, whose lack of (European) sovereignty is blamed on continual unwillingness to open itself to market penetration, when almost everything has already been put on sale. But what is the positive reality of African, or in this case, Cameroonian sovereignty, and what are some forms of subjectivity corresponding to that positivity? Let us consider two images put forth by Mbembe and by the Gabonese political scientist Joseph Tonda.

In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe argues that contemporary African politics can only be understood in light of the sovereignty asserted by European companies and state officials in the colonial context.¹³ Mbembe and others have noted that the arbitrariness and authoritarianism of many post-colonial African governments reflect the violence of the European regimes under which the ruling elite was formed. In several cases, including Cameroon, the government with whom the French negotiated independence was chosen from the elite most threatened by grassroots demands for redistribution of wealth and most likely to be friendly to the former colonizers’ economic and diplomatic interests (Geschiere 1995, 148-151; Mbembe 2000a, 167-168). But doing a genealogy of the (multiple) forms of actual sovereignty found on the African continent would also have to include a great variety of traditional political structures, ranging from empires to acephalous villages, and associated with religious institutions including secret societies as well as the great monotheistic faiths. Research on this political history is still very much in progress.

Mbembe argues that governmentality in contemporary Cameroon is best described as “private indirect government” (2000a, 115-118). This form of governmentality is difficult to describe as

¹³ Colonial “commandement” involved 3 elements: a founding violence of conquest, conviction that only Europeans were qualified to assess the justice and efficacy of colonial law, and constant harassment and reinforcement of authority through petty rituals (2000a, 42-43). Commandement, like the space of Agamben’s camps, was developed through conscious exceptions to common or civil law, characterized by quasi-feudal relations between metropolitan governments and concessionaires, a confusion between “ruling” and “civilizing” analogous to no modern domestic policy in Europe, a “humanitarian” goal in whose pursuit any means, even the most savage, were acceptable (47-54).

“sovereignty” in the European sense (for reasons related to its role in creating European-style sovereignty, especially its economic dependence on the demands of international banks and companies and the way it incorporates illegality into everyday transactions. Its “authoritarian imaginary” is characterized by violence, private transfers of wealth within families rather than through employment (giving rise to tensions of sorcery) and creation of political loyalty through direct allocations of jobs, cash, and preferential contracting. But Mbembe adds that one does not so much see a stand-off between oppressors and oppressed as a kind of astonished “conviviality” at the obscene use made of public power by the nation’s elites (152). He offers dramatic examples of the hyperbolic praise which national media and community groups are expected to pour over the President’s or his party’s slightest deeds. The public regards state behavior as both entertaining and oppressive; but it is only one of many dangers in an everyday climate of immense practical and economic uncertainty. According to Mbembe, it is this uncertainty and the coexistence of governmental modes which were (more explicitly) *successive* in the European context – in short, its *heterchronic* character -- that characterizes modern African subjectivity in its positive rather than negative description (Mbembe 2000a, 20, 33-39).¹⁴

Joseph Tonda acknowledges the phenomenon of heterochrony, but stresses the role of European religious missions, schools, and bureaucracies in organizing a political imaginary that allows contemporary Africans to negotiate its tensions, one he refers to as the “modern sovereign” (*le souverain moderne*) (2002, 24-25; 2005, 14). This assemblage of power relations and forms of knowledge, or “structures de causalité” is correlate of a set of subject positions and *techniques de soi* borrowed from the colonial “civilizing” and Christianizing mission as well as traditional religious practices. Like Mbembe, Tonda stresses that practices drawn from different historical periods co-exist – specifically, in the kinds of power relations they employ, their differential meaning for age classes (old and young), and in their bringing together of religion, state functions, and capital (2002, 25; 2005, 50-57, 273-274). Tonda draws his genealogy of modern sovereignty from the fact that many recent prophets and healers draw their power from an imaginary centered on the written word, if not the Bible itself, and on the kind of “exams” or “offices” required for advancement in schools or bureaucracies (2005, 136).¹⁵ Occult skills and secular technical skills alike are

¹⁴ Mbembe warns that the juxtaposition of cultural practices that seem to belong to incompatible historical periods or which organize time in seemingly incompatible ways must not be confused with simple *chaos*. See also Bidima 1997, 74-75.

¹⁵ Sometimes, as in the case of Ugandan rebel leader and prophet Alice Lakwena, the causality of spiritual power draws on familiar structures and gestures of military command (Tonda 2002, 26). Sometimes this imaginary reflects the youth and economic aspirations of contemporary healers who draw on Christianity and select traditional beliefs in order to challenge traditional village institutions and leaders, since they see no other way to succeed psychically and economically (the situation of some witch-hunters and “expert

subject to apprenticeship and “inscribe miracles and civilizing colonial rationality in causal structures of a unique power whose economic, military, political, religious, medical, cultural and social bear the name of modern Sovereign” (2002, 31) For Tonda, young peoples’ fear of being unable to secure a good living in commerce (including commerce with God) using the knowledge of the previous generations is one of the most important affective supports for the modern Sovereign, and may lead the young to oppose the State when it protects the rights of traditional religion (2002, 40-41).

When Foucault speaks of the penitentiary as substituting the delinquent, whom one may medically classify and morally exhort, for the offender who has simply been accused or caught in the act of breaking a law, we can see a European example of the power of the “double.” Westerners do not think of prisons, criminological discourse or other expressions of sovereignty as “witchcraft.” Perhaps this is because they regard it as legitimate to subject each citizen to this doubling, perhaps because they have such faith that our self-understanding derives from the inner bodily experience of agency rather than from the discursive practices which tell “us” how to claim selfhood and responsibility. Perhaps, finally, because those of us from Western countries all know how the process of being booked, indicted, tried, and sentenced is supposed to go – whether or not each case obeys the rules – as surely as we know how electricity flows from the power station to our apartments. In Cameroon, there may be official rules for such processes, but primarily as an armature for improvisation. But in *On the Postcolony* and elsewhere, Mbembe is clear that uncertainty does not have to mean chaos or unpredictability.

“There *are* things that are predictable in the midst of uncertainty. You know very well that if you take the road from Douala to Yaoundé, you have to pay at a certain number of roadblocks. You can predict it. There is a kind of public knowledge of certainties that is constituted... What happens is part of the domain of public knowledge, so situations will institute a prosaic and routine set of improvisations, lived as such by people. In this sense, they belong to the domain of the obvious, the self evident, and therefore, of the predictable. Which leads me to say that uncertainty does not necessarily lead to unpredictability” (2000b)

This much-discussed *incertitude* of everyday existence is complemented by a *lack of standardization* across subject positions and individual experiences – the very real possibility, due to rampant corruption, that citizens will be treated in unique and arbitrary ways by administrators, and will interpret this experience in very different ways due to the diversity of their cultural backgrounds.¹⁶ Where there is no common frame within which repeat experiences can be

witnesses” mentioned above) (2002, 36-37, 39; Marie 2000, 154).

compared and the relative role of individuals' imagination, agency, and constraint can be sorted out, even experiences involving no conscious "witchcraft" will be unpleasantly surreal.

Foucault identified a transition from the *ancien regime*, organized around law and excessive display of the power vested in the sovereign's body, to a pastoral regime in which a culpable subjectivity was solicited in each subject and monitored as a potential threat to the population as a whole. His paradigmatic example of a power which assures that forbidden acts are repressed rather than cultivating the population in a "simultaneously individualizing and totalizing" manner is the execution of Damiens for attempted regicide in 1757. This brutal display, which characterized pre-revolutionary and revolutionary penal practice, had the tendency to arouse sympathy and outrage among the audience as often as it provoked appreciative identification with royal violence/justice. Ambivalence in the response to royal displays of judicial power, displays which seemed to mock the principle of law justifying punishment in the first place, encouraged a transition to individualized private correction, which sought to unify the soul in relation to a socio-medical norm.

By contrast, arbitrary and excessive displays of state power seem to go hand in hand with pastoral interference in local Cameroonian communities. The legal prosecution of witches is part of a centralized effort to encourage economic development, ensure that the beneficiaries of development remain beholden to the state in arbitrary ways, and discourage "disunity" – which it interprets broadly as local criticism of the central government. But this effort at pastoral intervention does not mean that the state has dedicated itself to creating a proto-liberal space of security for citizens. Writing in response to Mbembe, Geschiere suggests that the discourse of witchcraft is inadequate to describe the positive reality of power in Africa, rather than the ways in which it fails to be European (1995, 265-267). By equating power with untrustworthiness and exploitation, popular discourse on the occult reinforces the cynicism of elites and masses alike. The poor expect the worst from their political leaders and affluent co-citizens; the rich have little incentive to interpret their activity as anything other than predation, and to reinforce their gains with magical "armor" where ideology fails.

The current president makes use of ethnic tensions to place blame for the lesser economic development of some regions on the shoulders of migrants or entrepreneurs from other regions. Witchcraft accusations, and beliefs about how witchcraft functions to advance or hold back the economic development of different groups, play a part in this somewhat manufactured conflict (Geschiere 1995, 17, 215-217). It is interesting to note that while Europeans invested ethnic dif-

¹⁶ Such clashes between reality, imagination, and unreality are familiar to persons of color in the United States and Europe who know that their interactions with police and administrators will be uncertain and that their rational responses to arbitrary treatment may be received as "angry" and "irrational" by authorities.

ference with new and pernicious significance to create disdain and mistrust of non-whites as a potential biological danger to national health, ethnic violence in Africa is more concerned with the potential threat other groups pose to the conditions in which regions, villages and individuals can act autonomously within given relations of power rather than being "possessed" (here in the metaphorical sense). It is not that ethnic conflict is about witchcraft, but that both ethnic conflict and fears of witchcraft are about the possibility of losing control over, or being victimized by, one's existence and appearance in the imagination of others; ie one's spiritual dimension. In this context, it might be helpful to suggest that one meaning of sovereignty, more abstract than the description of specific historical forms offered by Foucault, Agamben, Mbembe, or Tonda, is the ability to control one's doubles and to free oneself from capture *by* the imagination of others – without, in the process, losing hold *over* the imagination of others.

African lives are shaped and threatened by the international structures of neoliberalism, whose roots are in European biopolitics, but it is not at all clear from the above-cited authors that Cameroon or many other African states actually practice biopolitics as their own mode of governmentality (Tonda seems to agree: 2005, 231). This does not mean they are free from war, disease, or other undesirable political circumstances exacerbated by neoliberalism in the rest of the world, but it is also a point of potential interest to those in the West seeking other models of governmentality. It also suggests that some of the relations Africans view as "occult" continue to operate in the European and American neoliberal imaginary and *rely* on secularization for their power and seeming facticity or inevitability. Rather than forcing everyone to identify or disidentify with the ethnically and economically disenfranchised *homo sacer*, "bare life" with no shadow, there are strands of Cameroonian political tradition that take pains to limit people's ability to opportunistically capture one another in imagination and thereby limit their actions. Witchcraft is the "shadow" side of family and bureaucratic relationships. The dictator's portrait on the wall is only a picture, but too often it is the common experience uniting subject positions that are so unequal as to seem half-magical to each other, charged with envy, hope, and dread.

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