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# Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and "The New World Order"

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### Article abstract

While our current world — post-colonial, late-capitalist, translocal — might seem uniquely plagued by eroding frontiers and virtual realities, it is still peopled by beings who try to build shelters on what they take as relatively firm cultural ground. This paper explores one African instance of how people live at the juncture of global currents, how they deal with the "beat" of heteroglossia. I focus on the changing figure of the "post-colonial" witch — the witch who trades in commodities and travels by taxi — and I explore his/her characteristic obsessions. How do such figures bespeak late twentieth-century conditions? Why are they increasingly preoccupied with the bodies of the young? Does this bear any relation to what underlies the rising terror, in many Western contexts, of the physical vulnerability of children?

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# Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and “The New World Order”

Jean Comaroff \*

Même si notre monde actuel (post-colonial, capitaliste tardif, translocal) semble être affligé de manière exceptionnelle par l'érosion des frontières et par les réalités virtuelles, il est pourtant peuplé d'êtres qui tentent de construire des abris sur ce qu'ils considèrent être un terrain culturel relativement solide. Dans cet article et à partir d'un exemple africain, nous verrons la manière dont les gens vivent au carrefour des questions d'ordre mondial et font face à « l'agitation » provoquée par un univers hétéroglose. En me penchant particulièrement sur le personnage en pleine évolution du/de la sorcier/ère « post-colonial(e) », sorcier/ère qui joue en bourse et voyage en taxi, j'en explore ses obsessions caractéristiques. Comment de tels personnages témoignent-ils des toutes dernières conditions du vingtième siècle ? Pourquoi sont-ils de plus en plus préoccupés par le corps des jeunes ? Existe-t-il un rapport avec ce qui, dans beaucoup de contextes occidentaux, se cache derrière la terreur croissante liée à la vulnérabilité physique des enfants ?

*While our current world — post-colonial, late-capitalist, translocal — might seem uniquely plagued by eroding frontiers and virtual realities, it is still peopled by beings who try to build shelters on what they take as relatively firm cultural ground. This paper explores one African instance of how people live at the juncture of global currents, how they deal with the “heat” of heteroglossia. I focus on the changing figure of the “post-colonial” witch — the witch who trades in commodities and travels by taxi — and I explore his/her characteristic obsessions. How do such figures bespeak late twentieth-century conditions? Why are they increasingly preoccupied with the bodies of the young? Does this bear any relation to what underlies the rising terror, in many Western contexts, of the physical vulnerability of children?*

## I

Late twentieth-century society has sorely tested the categories of modernist human science. Responses, of course, have been varied. As anthropologist, two fairly common ones perturb me especially. First, despite the fact that there is now much talk about the “new world order,” most of it has been phrased in retrospectively-hyphenated terms: post-nationalism, post-colonialism, post-Fordism, post-modernity, and the like. These constructions frame the present as a negation of the immediate past, and they might well be true to the way we experience it. But, as the basis for social analysis, they have certain limitations. Most significant, perhaps, is the tendency to understand history less as a continuing process than as a telos of cut-offs and contrasts. This leads to my second concern: that the terms through which we perceive our contemporary world often fail to grasp its historical character. Post-colonialism or advanced/late capitalism might well seem to break with earlier epochs in radical ways; yet, in order to uncover the history of the present, it is necessary to explore the processes that have produced it out of the past — out of the forms of colonialism, the nation-state — indeed modernity itself. More than this, we need to explain how world-scale forces, forces of the long-run, shape the particular sites from which the “global” is itself configured and acted on.

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This essay is a modest attempt at one such exercise: it seeks to explore certain nightmares prevalent in our current world—most particularly, those concerning the threat to children and established modes of reproduction — in light of specific transformations that are remaking that world, and us who inhabit it.

## II

Perhaps the greatest virtue of the recent Western preoccupation with post-modernity has been that it has made “modernity” itself seem strange (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993). We have been forced to acknowledge that the “modern” is itself a *particular* historical epoch — not the terminus of all unique histories. We have also come to realize that we know rather less about it than we have often supposed, for the classic social theory on which most of us were raised turns out to have been hopelessly enmeshed in modernity’s own myths. One crucial legacy of modernity, in both its classical and critical form, was its assumption that modernizing forces — be they the market, the commodity, literacy, or the nation-state — would steadily erode cultural difference. The story was not always told as a triumph of reason. Sometimes it was an exile from the sacred garden or an alienation from a state of nature. But, almost always, it was a narrative of progressive abstraction, of the subsuming of local cultures by advanced civilizations and global markets, the erasure of parochial gods and personalized knowledge, and the inexorable loss of face-to-face community. The forms of modern society — the right-bearing subject, citizenship, and economic or bureaucratic rationality — were not merely seen as the common destiny of mankind (Sahlins, 1992). Tautologically, they were also the terms in which all the rest of human history was to be weighed and measured.

Anthropology, in its classical phase, fuelled this modernist discourse by providing its “traditional” counterpoint — a science of simple, small-scale societies, displaced in time and space. The radical otherness of its object permitted a relativism that, at its best, subverted certain European assumptions and values. Yet most classic ethnographies underwrote the ontology of Western social science: they sharpened the gulf between the savage and the civil, and fed a view of Human Progress as an inevitable movement from custom to law, rite to reason, myth to history, tribe to nation.

The dualistic vision of such approaches has now long been subject to critique (Asad, 1973; Goody, 1977; Fabian, 1983). In the late twentieth century, anthropol-

ogy has struggled to adjust to postcolonial times, times in which it has suffered the fate of other self-appointed champions of the oppressed, drawing greater scorn from native critics than its more unrepentant and conservative fellows. Stung by the charge that they had exoticized difference and commoditized fetishes, anthropologists have worked hard to view non-Western societies on the common ground of World History. Like the brave new worldly modernists in Forster’s *Howards End* (1921), they have sought to “only connect...,” to situate their small islands and unique traditions within the nation-states, global processes, and cultural hegemonies that now seem their proper place.

This, in turn, has raised other problems; “doing ethnography in the world system,” as George Marcus (1986) has pointed out, requires extending the scope of small-scale, qualitative methods to phenomena of a rather different order (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 11). As they left behind the apparent concreteness of primordial societies, some anthropologists moved, in one fell swoop, from the pre- to the post-modern era; they became convinced of the impossibility of ethnography, or of “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). If knowledge was no different from power, or the text from the world, then all representation was potential violence; the tyranny of the sign was no different from the thrust of the sword. Other scholars, resisting immobilization and nihilism, have responded differently. They became born-again modernists, returning to classic social theory, to the grand universal schemes of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. And they tried, with varying degrees of success, to situate the lives of isolated peoples and peripheral cultures within the reach of global Eurocentric processes like commodification, conversion, and rationalization.<sup>1</sup>

For some, this move has raised the challenge of exploring the interplay between Western and non-Western forms and forces. Rather than simply supplant the study of difference with that of European hegemony, such writers have sought to capture the dialogue of local and global, the dialectic that articulates and remakes formerly distinct worlds (see, for example, Tsing, 1993; Ferguson, 1990; Keesing, 1989; Geschiere, 1982). I shall return to this perspective below, for it characterizes much that I find most exciting about anthropology at the current moment.

For many, though, the new era has demanded a more definitive move into mainstream European social science. In recent years, for instance, there has been a rising interest in the anthropology of the West. (Almost

half our incoming graduates in Chicago now hope to do research in Europe or North America, a principled move for the most part, yet one that carries dangers of a new ethnocentrism). Even those who continue to work in the non-European world have shown an overwhelming concern with distinctly modern social processes — with, among other things, the rise of the nation-state, ethnicity, migration, the media, virtual realities and the politics of authenticities and traditions.

I do not disparage this shift. I myself have urged students and colleagues to wean anthropology from its attachment to the bucolic and the marginal (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992). One can only applaud young scholars responsive to the turmoil of their times: to the explosion of identity politics, of struggle and violence, of exile and diaspora. What concerns me, however, is that, in confronting the modern world, we have found it easier to pose problems in familiar terms than to frame revealing new questions; quicker to specify topics than to define distinctive ways of understanding them. It strikes me as remarkable, for instance, that anthropologists have focused so much recent attention, at least, in America, on issues of ethnographic writing — the text, again — and so little on our deeper analytic malaise, on the widening gap between our extending interests and our established methods. All too often, the political and methodological problems of our profession are reduced to a problem of “representation” alone (representation in both of its conventional senses).

Let me be more specific. What worries me is that — in our move toward studying issues of large — scale and long duration — a gulf has opened between the old-style ethnographic cameo and grand synthesizing statements. We frequently make programmatic pleas for the study of global phenomena, but we have a limited sense of how — beyond the level of the anecdotal — to do it.<sup>2</sup> The dense webs of local meaning that made for thick description seem stretched to breaking point across such massive social fields as “the state” or “diaspora,” leaving us with a sense of loss and diminished insight. In American anthropology, the solution has often been to confront the big issues — like nationalism, citizenship, or the public sphere — in rather self-evident, abstract terms, as formal institutions or bundles of signs, devoid of human agency. As Lukács (1971) would have predicted, we treat reified forms in reified terms, rather than exploring the practical social processes that produce them. Too often we have sold our birthright for a potted message, for the conviction that “complex” institutions are imagined and unreal in ways that putatively primitive, primordial realities

were not (cf. Appadurai, 1993). In our worthy concern to pin down such things as state mechanisms, ethnic mobilization, citizenship, or “identity” of various sorts, we either reduce social facts to the formulae of power, or we read them as cultural texts — as the sum of waving flags, portentous monuments, or media spectacles. But in the end, however finely — wrought our analyses of master (or maternal) symbols, these simply do *not* add up to nations or social movements. Megaforges are not merely the sum of their metaphors. In short, we have been tempted to situate our studies at levels of generality that fail to capture lived experience, to grasp the world as produced by ordinary people in everyday activity.

Neither have our problems been eased by the sense, among some of our colleagues, that “late” capitalism is radically transforming the modern world — and, therefore, the terms in which we must understand it. Ironically, hardly had some of us put our money on such things as the nation-state and its apparatuses, than others claimed to discern the dawn of a “post-national” age (Appadurai, 1993; see J. L. Comaroff, n.d.), one in which global politics, economy, and media make displaced persons of us all. AIDS, drug capitalism, or nuclear fall-out seem to mock national boundaries. And a universal labor market turns some nations into the working classes of others, permitting many Westerners to believe that they can live by shopping alone. Hence the recent stress, in the social sciences and humanities, on capitalism-as-consumption — as if objects spring forth fully-formed, and do not themselves have to be produced. Ephemeral and increasingly international images *seem* to ensure that we all feed from the same satellite dish and suffer the same “unbearable lightness of being.” We do not, of course. Nonetheless, taken at face value, this feeling makes even yesterday’s abstractions — like the nation-state — seem substantial in hindsight. We now appear as exiles from a modernist Eden, adrift in an endless wilderness of virtual communities and shifting signs. Where, on such terrain, can the ethnographer pitch her tent?

### III

At this point, a radical change of voice. The South African cultural critic, Njabulo Ndebele (1991) urges us to resist the appeal of heroic history — bred, he suggests, of worlds that thrive on dramatic spectacles — and to “rediscover the ordinary.” In like spirit, I wish to return to my own assertion that the anthropologist’s vocation remains the observation of social phenomena grounded in human activity. It is here, rather than “out there,” that we will get at the big issues of our day.

This need not confine us to presentist, face-to-face observation; the building of, say, states and empires, or the extension of markets and diasporas, are always rooted in tangible practices. I shall take as an instance a case that might seem typical of an old, insular anthropology, one far removed, at first glance, from the forces currently remaking our planet: ideas of witchcraft in contemporary Africa and beyond. Witchcraft remains a vital idiom of anxiety in many places on the African continent, a pungent and topical discourse. Indeed, if we wish to get beyond banal generalizations and formal abstractions to a richer sense of the lived conundrums of late African modernity — of the shifting engagement of local and global, the paradoxical role of the state, the effects of “structural adjustment” and large-scale unemployment, or the taunting lure of commodities — one could do little better than explore the practical poetics of witchcraft.

In speaking thus of “witchcraft” as a generic category, of the witch as personification of superhuman — but interpersonal — evil, I run the risk of reification. But I would argue that it is the tension between the general sign and the particular instance that produces insight here. Witches (and I make no distinction between those who wield innate power and those who use material means) have long been the hostages, in our scholarship, of premodern “tradition,” of an anthropology bent on showing how their perverse logic preserved closed local worlds.

Yet, a wealth of research in Sub-Saharan Africa has long attested to the modernity of such enchantment — and the concomitant enchantment of modernity. The civilizing missions of the colonial era evoked, among other things, an efflorescence of ideas about witchcraft and magic, and their vitality has been further nourished by the contradictions of the postcolonial world (cf. Geschiere, 1988; Fields, 1985; van Binsbergen, 1982). Modern witches use electric power and (quite literally) make money (Weiss, n.d.; Bastian, n.d.); they are widely discussed in nationally — syndicated advice columns (Bastian, 1993), and are detected by means of “thermometers,” “photographs” (Auslander, 1993) and “1-800,” dial-in diviners.<sup>3</sup> Always in step with current concerns, they are anything but “new-age” marginals. They often invoke central political interests and incite acts of violence and homicide. They occur widely as the corollaries of development initiatives (Smith, 1996). Their enduring liveliness typifies the process through which local practice retools more global forces, inserting them into the diverse cultural configurations, the contested realities, the multiple subjectivities of particular worlds

(Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993). Witches animate an alternative, “mystical” modernism. But, lest we conclude that this is a peculiar, peripheral response, I hope to persuade you that very similar processes occur in ordinary American communities, where actors also try to press a human likeness on dilemmas posed by the so-called “New World Order.”

In fact, as Andrew Apter (1993) has noted, it is precisely where local communities and regional economies collide with state structures and global forces that witchcraft most readily springs to life, both in contemporary Africa and beyond. In his account of the Atinga witch finding movement in Nigeria in the early, 1950s, for example, he shows how market women were identified as destroyers of local prosperity; how they were accused of consuming their own children and kin, and were forced to make public confession in large numbers. In communities long ambivalent about female trade, they became icons of the unsettling impact on the local economy (and, especially, on new male entrepreneurs) of changing international cocoa prices and expanding state controls. The rites aimed at purifying their bodies were collective attempts to work these dangers out of the social corpus. But they were also efforts, at a time of great uncertainty, to review moral assumptions, to redraw the contours of person, gender, kinship, and community, to redirect the production and distribution of wealth.

This case — unique only in its detail — confirms Austen’s (1993) general observation that discourses of witchcraft frame totalizing moral economies; that they often focus on the troublesome articulation of local means of production with more distant (often international) sources of power and value. Indeed, the language of witchcraft in Africa has been integral to the experience of colonialism and commodities, money and migration, literacy and local inequality. Above all else, witchcraft seeks to pin down seemingly random, ramifying, and impersonal forces, to give them visible faces and human motives (Ferguson, 1993). Contrary to common Western assumptions, witches represent an attempt to demystify modernity and its charms — its perverse inequities, its mysterious currencies, its political pieties, its threat to the viability of known social worlds. And, while suspects do sometimes suffer the drama of accusation and exorcism, they are less the subject of the “crazes” and “witch-hunts” of the European imagination (cf. Cardozo, 1990) than they are figures of everyday speculation, of moral consciousness in the making.

Witches have enduring appeal in modern Africa, for they are versatile and dynamic, ever sensitive to shifting intersections of the “village” and the world. Their changing qualities over the past hundred years both reflect and recast the forms of society as lived — the forms of colonial and postcolonial relations. Indeed, witches have often personified the quixotic control that external forces wield over local communities: the ability to govern movement, collapse space, and determine the flow of people and value. In this, they are much like colonial agents and (less tangible) market forces. But witches do more than merely wield these threatening powers; they may also hijack them for particular human ends. Notwithstanding older stereotypes, they are seldom confined to society’s fringes, having long followed migrant labor routes, travelled state highways, and crossed international borders. Thus, for example, Evans-Pritchard’s classic study of Zande witchcraft does more than describe a self-perpetuating, local “tradition.” It also gives evidence of the vital witch-finding movements that were sweeping Sudan and the Belgian Congo at the time, movements which both invoked and subverted the authority of the colonial state (1937: 511f). In fact, witches have long been associated, in much of Africa, with the dangers of freeways, motorized transport, and illicit smuggling across state boundaries (Auslander, 1993; Masquelier, 1993; Bastian, n.d.). Frequently, successful traders are held to divert foreign wealth by nefarious means; witchcraft often epitomizes the volatile informal economy that has burgeoned on the continent in the late — twentieth century — often itself associated with the spread of afflictions like AIDS (Auslander, 1993). But established business may also be understood as traffic in magic, as many successful entrepreneurs have learned to their cost (Solway, 1990). Often the flow of translocal exchange appears as an alien extractive force, and here the poetics of witchcraft meet the politics of difference. Southern Tswana are not alone in suspecting thriving Indian merchants of a distinctive brand of international sorcery, for instance, seeing particular ethnic evil in the power of capital to prize value from its immediate context.

In the post-colonial world, witches seem increasingly to signify the banality of bureaucratic evil. West African civil servants and development workers are widely characterized as making their fortunes by (again, quite literally) feeding off those they “process” by clerical means — a pithy image of the power of letters and numbers to efface personhood. For similar reasons, many regional capitals and government offices are thought to be rife with sophisticated sorcer-

ers (Schmoll, 1993; Geschiere, 1988). At the local level, meanwhile, entrepreneurs put such modern magic to work. Foreign witch finders in eastern Zambia, Auslander (1993) notes, operate with rubber stamps, ID. cards, and ostensibly superior means to scan truths hidden in humble bodies — practices that bring to light the problematic intersection of rural production with external techniques of extraction and control.

Such intersections are widely experienced as seams that chafe. Thus rural Hausa in South Central Niger are preoccupied by the growing threat of “soul eaters” (*maye*) in their community (Schmoll, 1993). They associate the danger with the impact of colonialism and all that has followed it. It was the French, they say, who taught Africans to love material goods, bequeathing them a world in which money came to rule more and more aspects of existence, changing local values and modes of producing wealth. Yet currency has remained scarce here, and access to it is limited to very few avenues, like competitive government jobs beyond the village. Soul eaters epitomize this predicament: utterly consumed by material desire, they embody the cannibalism that seems to threaten local heritage and futures. To satisfy their unnatural appetites, they “eat” the soul, or the life force, of their fellow citizens — especially of infants, who are unable to speak and identify them (Schmoll, 1993:201). The word for such consumption is *ci*, a metaphor for sexual intercourse (p. 205); the predation of soul eaters on the young and innocent is a hideous inversion of social and moral reproduction. It is also a major source of modern pathology in the Hausa view. Soul eating destroys essential personhood, its victims wasting away and losing all sense of reason. The “seeds” of this destructive passion lie deep in the belly, and in the past were inherited; now they are bought and sold, and the rate of attack has greatly increased. Those, like civil servants, who mediate between rural life and the sources of riches beyond it, are most open to this corruption (p. 215). Soul-eater and victim, then, personify the conflicts of late twentieth-century, the ways in which foreign forces seem to invade local worlds, turning ordinary people into monsters, and eroding established life-ways — themselves idealized by a sense of impending loss, or a promise that is never realized.

These general observations highlight two significant points: one is that witches both mark and mock existing structures of power. Indeed, talk of witchcraft is often itself an argument about the distribution of power, an argument that tentatively seeks to reconfigure moral space. Bastian (1993) has shown that, in Nigeria, as the country and the city reconstruct each

other, witches anchor a debate about the bounds of moral community. As accusations flash back and forth between urban dwellers and their rural kin, witchcraft is the prism through which each views the exploitation of the other. From the town perspective, rapacious rural relatives “eat” the patrimony of those compelled to travel abroad to work. And from the vantage of the village, witches are the city incarnate, feeding off the countryside by consuming people, produce, and money, so that rural survival itself is threatened. In southeast Cameroon, Geschiere (1988) reports, similar suspicions color relations between villagers and new regional elites; and as a new South Africa struggles to be born, rumors rebound on the streets of Khayelitsha and Korsten of children snatched and sent to rural homelands, where their bodies yield the magic that fuels new distributions of wealth and power (Anne Jellema, personal communication). These arguments evaluate political economy as a lived reality. And they do so well beyond the reach of official discourse. The capacity of witches to operate outside government control — both below and above the level of the state — raises pertinent questions about the limits of formal authority in African life. Such beliefs measure the failure of rulers and their rhetoric (be it democratic or authoritarian) to engage the dynamic forces that seem to drive and disconcert everyday existence.

The second issue of note is that twentieth-century witch iconographies dwell on the extraction of value from African persons and communities, extraction both by distant forces and local accomplices. The experience of colonialism and its aftermath was often captured in the vulnerability of black bodies — increasingly of children’s bodies — to uncontrolled forces of consumption, forces abetted by the power of money. Luise White (1990) notes that, in colonial East Africa, urban prostitutes were thought to draw the blood of unsuspecting migrants to sell to government agents. They were assisted, in this grisly business, by municipal fire fighters — that is, by state-provided protectors of the property in which new elites had begun to invest. Such scenarios alert us to the involvement of colonial governments in producing local inequalities, in processes through which some people profited by alienating the substance of others, and seemed to threaten established forms of social reproduction. Similarly, as Weiss (n.d.) notes, for rural Tanzania, electrified hospitals are widely suspected of extracting blood from the local populace, a sober comment on the postcolony as vampire state (cf. Rowlands and Warnier, 1988). Yet witch beliefs focus less on the magic of the state than on the consuming passions of its private beneficiaries. In the Ivory Coast, notwithstanding moves made toward democratism before his

death, the all-powerful ruler Felix Houphouët-Boigny was widely suspected of sustaining his stamina on the flesh of his followers; rumors told of the corpses of children found floating in the swimming pools of senior state officials, those who fed off the fat of the state (Maureen Anderson, personal communication; cf. Bayart, 1993). Bastian (n.d.) draws our attention to the comparable Nigerian association of elite profiteering with body parts. “The business of head hunting,” reported *Topmagazine* in 1990, “comes in cycles.” Its proceeds, we are told, are used to make medicines for “budding politicians” with national ambitions, and for their wealthy associates. Here, again, it is *young* bodies that are held to be most productive, and most at risk.

Such stories, often rejected as too fanciful or pejorative for serious analysis, are the products of a fertile moral imagination (cf. Beidelman, 1986). They thrive where there has been visceral experience of exploding social horizons — like the relatively sudden articulation of local worlds with more global systems of transaction (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Taussig, 1980; Loewe, 1992; Tsing, 1993). Under such conditions, accounts often centre on the commodification of bodies: bodies that have lost their integrity, as it wereñ bodies made to yield up their parts to a rather literal black market (cf. Matory, 1993). The impact of commodification is often linked to the capacity of money to reduce local resources — people, land, cattle — to alienable form (blood, meat, labor power), so that their essential value may be siphoned off by forces from distant centres (J. Comaroff, 1985). The African experience of incorporation into imperial economies and cultures has been overwhelming yet elusive, immediate yet abstract. Witchcraft reverses such abstraction, making large-scale processes concrete in the logic of local motives, identities, and physiques. And while, from our perspective, it might not adequately demystify the large-scale workings of power and exploitation, it does express deep disenchantment with the effects of alienation. While fuelled by an impatient urge to act, to objectify and exorcise evil, the quest for witches goes beyond this. It is also an ethical exploration. For, in rumors retold and tropes retooled, it permits argument about the causes and consequences, costs and benefits of particular forms of modernity.

Witches, then, are full-bodied images of the ebbs and flows of value — of perverse processes of extraction and accumulation. They satisfy their insatiable hunger for wealth and power by consuming their fellows — especially those in whom the future is vested (Apter, 1993; Matory, 1993; Schmall, 1993). Witches have taken on the qualities of the commodity form itself. Their vitality is fuelled by the life-force of others,

a process made possible by their innate ability to convert people into market currency or objects of desire. Under their spell, humans are in constant danger of resolving into alienable parts, of becoming mere bundles of goods or consumable flesh — the stuff of unnatural reproduction. Rather than inverting commodity fetishism, contemporary witchcraft tends to mimic its logic.<sup>4</sup> But it also makes that logic disturbingly visible. Indeed, the fetish seems often to be more revealing of modernity's magic than are the discourses of practical reason!

Let me summarize: as global processes play ever more pervasively into African worlds, they engage in complex, evanescent ways with local social forms, crystallizing in distinctive institutions and modes of practice. Witchcraft cuts across the fault-lines of these junctures. At the everyday level, where the impact of large-scale processes comes to rest on human shoulders, the work of limiting chaos, of producing moral persons and contexts, goes on unabated. Witches spring to life to motivate and moralize reified, abstract forces; they confront contradictory experience not adequately addressed by modern institutions and ideologies — by the nation-state, post-enlightenment religion, civil society, secular economics, and the like. Above all else, African witchcraft conjures a space for moral debate within a rapidly expanding social horizon, one that radically resituates local life. However various their incarnations, witch beliefs humanize the scale of forces that threaten existing modes of reproduction (cf. Austen, 1993; Ferguson, 1993). And such threats are increasingly epitomized in a demonic lust for children's flesh, in the perverse appetites of those who would profit by drinking the life-blood of the community. Monica Wilson (1951) long ago called witchcraft the "standardized nightmare" of social groups. In contemporary Africa, this nightmare is experienced as an epic battle between monstrous desire and the embryonic bearers of future moral worlds.

There is strong evidence that, from precolonial times to the postcolonial present, African witches have been the focus of a continuous recasting of received signs and practices. Ordinary activity, here as elsewhere, reforms prior meanings as they confront new objects and forces. But what characterizes innovators — creative figures like prophets, witch finders, even rumor mongers — is that they *experiment* with ideas and images; that they try to make universal signs and forces, money and markets, books and bureaucracy, electricity and automobiles responsive to local realities and moral panics. But witch beliefs are also ways of

*producing* a consciousness of history (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1989: 290; 1993: xxii). They seek, with terrifying force, to shape murky new experience into the terms of collective representation and empowerment.

Only in Africa? Certainly not. The moral apprehensions of ordinary Africans have uncanny parallels in our own world at the present moment. We seem, for instance, to be similarly unnerved by the increasing "marketing of human life" (Callahan, 1993). In "The Human Body Shop" (Kimbrell, 1993), polemicists declare, the modern person is desecrated and divided. Blood, organs, fetal tissue, sperm, and embryos are for sale; wombs are for rent. And, as the substance and labor of reproduction have been increasingly commercialized, there has been a rising terror among us about the physical vulnerability of children. Let me dwell on this issue for a moment. It is a moral dis-ease that reveals — perhaps uniquely — contradictions in the consciousness of the late twentieth-century West.

In Britain and North America, we have become obsessed with child abuse, especially abuse at the hands of parents or close kin. The enemy has become ever more intimate (Jenkins, 1992). Experts in the United States have declared it a "National Emergency" (Hacking, 1991a: 257); and therapists and social workers are so driven to expose this endemic evil that, in Britain, some have claimed that one child in ten is at risk (Hacking, 1991a).<sup>5</sup> Child abuse (particularly sexual abuse) is increasingly being defined as the prime source of psychological breakdown and, as in Hausaland, of social pathology (Hacking, 1991b). In the media, titillating talk shows and earnest documentaries feed an insatiable fascination with the topic. Quality newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic carry front page features declaring that we are "Killing our Children," and alerting us to the need to detect the violation of "victims who can only cry".<sup>6</sup> Hausa parallels again! The recent accusations against public figures like Woody Allen, Michael Jackson, or Cardinal Bernardin follow a string of only slightly less sensational cases against parents and professional childminders.<sup>7</sup> They reinforce what had long been legible in dispersed domains of our culture: child abuse is the quintessential crime of the late twentieth century, the nightmare threat to our established way of life.

It is indisputable that many children *are* at risk in our society; enduring inequities of gender, age, wealth, and power suggest that this has long been the case, although debate rages as to whether the rate has risen dramatically in recent years. What counts as "evidence" in such dispute is highly problematic, and I am



unable, here, to shed much light on the conundrum. But we do appear ever more ready, these days, to make children the romantic embodiments of all that adult life has lost, creating a mythic (and contradictory) terrain of childhood — the primitive brought home? — on which we seek utopias we are more reluctant to pursue in a world of flawed, adulterated realities. In other words, as twentieth-century citizens, we have increasingly fetishized children, enhancing the likelihood of their being the objects of the consuming fantasies and actual predations of the most disturbed and deprived among us. In this sense, our nightmares are neither true nor false, for our ideas and actions are closely, if complexly related.<sup>8</sup> One thing seems clear: as Hacking (1991a) has argued, our current understanding of “child abuse” is a relatively recent construction, the product of particular historical conditions. Neither is it uncontentious: in the search for simple certainties, opinion ranges from the fear that undetected domestic violence is rampant in our midst (Gil, 1978; see Hacking, 1991a) to the view that the search for abusers has become a modern witch-hunt. Such concerns often eclipse perceptions of other sorts of childhood risks that result from poverty, neglect, and alienation.

Among the more disturbing recent interventions in the matter is a remarkable account — “Remembering Satan” — first written by Lawrence Wright in the *New Yorker* of May, 1993.<sup>9</sup> With unusual sensitivity to context, Wright describes how a respected family in a small town in Washington state was shattered by bizarre accounts of satanic sexual abuse. The case seems strikingly emblematic of conservative, middle America. The family was a model of lower middle-class rectitude: the father a police officer, the mother a home-maker, both Protestant fundamentalists. But the mother had become a professional childminder (a matter of resentment among her children, it would appear). Amidst established proprieties, other forces had taken root. The town had become home to a wealthy New Age “channeller” (or medium) of national repute, whose clientele included famous film stars. And, ironically it turns out, a coven of self-professed “witches” from elsewhere had established a local herb shop. The story centres on charges of sexual abuse brought by the distressed, almost — adult daughters of the family, first against their father, then against their mother, and then against close family friends who were also officers of the law.

The daughters’ testimony was assiduously pursued by county police. So convinced were they that evil lurked behind the beguiling surface of local domestic life that they brought in a host of “experts,” legal and medical, local and national. As the cost of the

investigation escalated, so did the accusations. With the help of a fundamentalist pastor, one son also began to “recall” instances of abuse, his memories rising from the depths as do images of evil-doing in an African diviner’s bowl (Turner, 1967: 386). The son’s story contradicted those of his sisters, themselves in conflict over significant facts. While the details multiplied wildly, they were not unpredictable. Accounts of lurid satanic rites moved from the rape of children to the drinking of babies’ blood. Public anxiety also ran high. One talk-show evangelist claimed that there was an “epidemic of Satanism” in this community. Despite strong initial denials of guilt, the father was subsequently persuaded by therapist, pastor, and police to “confess” and “recover” deeply suppressed memories — both of his own abuse as a child and of his ritual assaults on his offspring. In his account, Wright rehearses the clamor of conflicting constructions placed upon the case, arguing that its reality emerged from a confluence of cultural forces: of fundamentalist fears, psychic theories of repression, and a public culture all-too-ready to translate diffuse angst into the idiom of the violated child. At one point in the frantic quest for evidence, county commissioners were shown a video in which a professor of medicine tells of secret cults of child abuse that “have come over from Europe,” and that — in line with current neo-Nazi fears — had “roots in the SS and death-camp squads.” A member of the faculty at the University of Utah, this “expert” also maintained that ritualists used techniques developed by German scientists captured by the C.I.A. with the help of Hasidic Jewish collaborators (p. 72-73).

When local worlds feel the thrust of ever more pervasive, large-scale forces — as they do in many current American contexts — accommodations are shaken, and reality readily reduces to a now familiar nightmare of threatened innocents and preying, praying perverts. The vulnerable child becomes an alibi for idealized “family values,” for a threatened livelihood, heritage and future (cf. Taylor, 1992). Once again, the enemy is the monster citizen, a soul-eater, corrupted by footloose foreign devils who would gladly devour the essence of intrinsic America. These are the fetishes that animate a local sense of loss and give meaning to forces inadequately addressed by orthodox explanations, to terrors unmet by existing institutions.

Hacking (1991a: 263), a cogent commentator on the rhetoric of child abuse, finds the witch-hunt analogy “nonsensical.” And so it is, if one reduces a complex process to what is often associated with Salem — hysterical crazes and baseless victimization. I press the analogy with a different intent and a different under-

standing of witchcraft, one that emerges from modern African discourses read without functionalist glasses. These discourses, I have argued, are moral commentaries on contemporary experience, ways of phrasing local interventions in global histories. Witches are products of moral perplexity, of the sense that evil lurks about the home, inspired by forces that endanger "normal" domesticity and an established mode of social reproduction (cf. Hacking, 1991a: 286).

Here as elsewhere, children, the embodiment of the future-in-the-present, are archetypal victims. For us in the West, they have become *the* plausible innocents in whose name moral claims can be made. The child, born or unborn, is the pristine right-bearing citizen of the new world order. As icon of our utopias, s/he is ostensibly colorless, genderless, and beyond history. But as the focus of particular projects (of anti-abortion imagery, for instance, or genetic engineering) the child is all too often white and male. His vulnerability is not seen as the product of complex social forces, but of sick appetites and selfish desires: of aborting mothers, incestuous fathers, perverted child-minders, insatiable homosexuals, salacious satanists, feckless foreigners. The category of "abuse" — of violating juvenile flesh — is expansive and imprecise. It collapses, into one carnal sign, diverse sources of angst about an endangered mode of domestic reproduction; about the breakdown of the nuclear family and the commercialization of bodies, procreation, and child care; about sharp shifts in a gendered division of labor. And behind this sense of loss, loss of material entitlement and a moral home in the world, lie more profound crises that we lack the language to address. At issue are the very terms — the "promise" — of Western modernism itself, among them, the secure contrasts of male and female, gifts and commodities, public and private, white and black, West and other, local and global.

#### IV

These, then, are transcripts from particular moral worlds, evidence of the endless job of remaking subjects and contexts as transnational forces redraw the frontiers of our lives. The truth, here, resides in the details (cf. Wilson, 1993: 26): in the ways in which ordinary human beings seize ever more universal signs and texts to render experience meaningful, manageable, mundane. In this sense, none of us are citizens of the world. We all live in local communities, in virtual villages that bound and buttress social-moral space. Here lies the everyday work of making society and culture. And while, in the late twentieth century, it is

often done in the name of traditions threatened or values lost, such practice is always profoundly historical, responding to changing conditions by rebuilding lifeworlds in novel and experimental ways. Social transformation, as Sahlins (1981) would have it, often comes of the desire for reproduction, from the inevitable innovations that occur as people re-enact cultural scripts on a shifting stage. It is the transformation of such mundane values, Ndebele (1991:53) insists, that forms the "essential drama" of the lives of people everywhere.

Witchcraft, I have argued, makes sense as a trope of just such history-in-the-making. Less a medieval anachronism than an integral aspect of a contradictory modernity, the figure of the witch reveals the throbbing underside of bland and bloodless stories about the rise of "reason," "progress," and "development." While they assume specific local guises, witches are a standardized nightmare of modernity: immoral persons in an ostensibly impersonal, value-free world, they translate the mysteries of commodification and inequality into flesh, blood, and lust. Human fetishes, they ironically reveal fetishism's inhumanity. They are rude reminders of what happens when human motivation and agency are ignored in our visions of history, be they embedded in practical philosophies, political creeds, or scholarly disquisitions. Witches feed off our contemporary conceits, off our myths of disenchantment and technical mastery, of self-regulating markets and an expanding common good. Witches gather in the great gap between the promises and privations of modernity, between the poles of desire and (im)possibility (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993: xxx). Here they seek access to the forces that seem to direct the flow of human capital and global wealth. In the process, they reveal the diabolical costs of conniving with the minions of Mammon.

Witches are contentious subjects. Whatever else they do, they challenge us to give alternative — equally subtle and compelling — accounts of the magic of modernity. And to situate conflicted consciousness in the moral and material contexts, the fields of practice, that produce it. Signs may shift and subjects splinter, but the quest to fix meaning and morality goes on, now as always. Only when we acknowledge this will we foster a *human* science of modernity, morality, and history, refusing to take the great abstractions and the floating texts of our time at face-value. Only then can we give back to these abstractions the human means and ends that have always made and remade social worlds — and begin to grasp them in creative and coherent ways.

## Notes

1. This shift has been so great that citing particular examples must needs seem arbitrary. For an influential development of the global Marxist perspective, see Wolf (1982); on commodification, see Ferguson (1985) and Gregory (1982). The growing literature on nationalism as "imagined" community recuperates core Durkheimian themes (see Foster, 1991 for an overview), as does some of the debate about ritual and history (Combs-Schilling, 1989; Bloch, 1986). The influence of Weber is writ large in efforts to explore how universal forces act upon particular social contexts, especially in respect of rationalization, conversion, and modernity (see Tambiah, 1985; Faubion, 1988; Hefner, 1993; Bowen, 1991; Keyes, 1991; cf. Kelly and Kaplan, 1990).
2. Among the calls to recognize the salience of the global, those of Hannerz (1989) and Appadurai (1990) have been especially cogent; such an agenda is also entailed in moves to problematize the diaspora (see Scott, 1991; Apter, 1991). There have, of course, been efforts to explore specific global phenomena in empirical terms, the anthropology of colonialism, (Cooper and Stoler, 1989) being an obvious instance. (See also MacAloon, 1981 on the Olympic Games.) It seems fair to conclude, however, that thus far these studies have been only partially successful in solving the methodological problems that concern me here.
3. See the illustrated advertisement for "Sangoma Says" ("Hear me throw the bones and tell you everything about your future"); in *You* (South Africa), 4 June, 1992, p. 68.
4. Ferguson (1993: 9) makes the same point in respect of the classic Zande case.
5. Janan Hanna, "Infant Abuse Hard to Detect When Victims Only Cry." *Chicago Tribune*, 8 September, 1993, p. 1.
6. See Debbie Nathan, "Victimizer or Victim?" *The Village Voice*, 2 August, 1988; Dorothy Rabinowitz, "From the Mouths of Babes to a Jail Cell: Child Abuse and the Abuse of Justice. A Case Study," *Harper's Magazine* 290 (May, 1990): 52-53.
7. Carol Tavris, who recently cautioned us in the *New York Times Book Review* (3 January, 1993) to "Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine," evoked floods of heated correspondence (14 February, 1993, pp. 3, 27).
8. I am not suggesting that child abuse is a groundless terror, as certain recent commentators might be taken to imply (see Best, 1990; Jenkins, 1992). I do suggest, however, that our collective sense of outrage is no simple reflection of physical practice — that it expresses more encompassing dislocations of experience for which it has become the primal cause. I suspect that, like many ideologies, it elaborates on what is plausibly rooted in current experience, but that it also triggers novel practice in its own image.

9. Lawrence Wright, "Remembering Satan," *The New Yorker*, (17 May, 1993: 60-81; 24 May, 1993: 54-76). I wish to thank Janelle Taylor for first drawing my attention to this piece. Accounts of recovered memories of incest or abuse by other adult intimates (often recalled with psychiatric assistance) now appear frequently in the media. For one somewhat sceptical opinion, see Laura Shapiro's review of the book *Take the Long Way Home: Memoirs of a Survivor* (by Susan Gordon Lydon) in the *New York Times Book Review* (24 October, 1993, p. 20).

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## Commentaire / Commentary

### Monstrous Desires and Moral Disquiet: Reflections on Jean Comaroff's "Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and 'The New World Order'"

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A central issue in the work of Jean and John Comaroff is historical consciousness or, as the title of one of their books puts it, "ethnography and the historical imagination." Such consciousness is, as Jean Comaroff summarizes her tour de force analysis of traditional Tswana order and its transformations, "the product of a 'dialectic in a double sense': on the one hand, the structural interplay of sociocultural order and human practice; on the other, the historical articulation of systems dominant and subordinate" (1985: 252). This double dialectic is evident in her paper at hand. The Comaroffs brilliantly cut through the opposition dominant in Western thought since Plato between contemplative reason and poetic mimesis, between excessively abstract objectification and excessively embodied subjectification respectively, to write about a "chain of consciousness.... Between the conscious

and the unconscious lies the most critical domain of all for historical anthropology and especially for the analysis of colonialism and resistance. It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and sometimes, of creative tension" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 29). This is a very important point to keep in mind in appreciating the present paper.

In the preface of her paper Comaroff worries about whether our current theoretical language enables us to stand back enough from our experience to grasp its historical nature. If the modernists could not realize the prejudice inherent in their own meta-narratives of inexorable globalization, how can we? And from what position, she asks, are we able to begin? Where are we to pitch our tents in order to study the global as intensively as we have the local?

In a sense the effects of globalism and our increased awareness of the problems we face attempting to theorize about the very world in which we too are caught up have changed the central problematic of fieldwork. The question is no longer how to become an insider but how to become an outsider. Where the problem used to be how to get closer to our subjects, in order to appreciate the world as they see it, the issue now is how we gain sufficient distance — from our