

## Culture



### 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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Volume 17, numéro 1-2, 1997

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084019ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1084019ar>

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#### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA),  
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne  
d'Ethnologie

#### ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

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#### Citer ce document

Lambek, M. (1997). Commentaire/Commentary: Monstrous Desires and Moral Disquiet: Reflections on Jean Comaroff's "Consuming Passions: Child Abuse, Fetishism, and 'The New World Order'". *Culture*, 17(1-2), 19-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1084019ar>

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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

mutual condition of modernity and postmodernity—in order to see clearly. And yet this cannot be a simple inversion since the lessons of the hermeneutic perspective continue to expose the fictional quality of much of what passes for objectivity in social science.

Happily, globalism can never be complete and going to a new locality, any locality, so long as you commit to it for a sufficient length of time, is still a viable strategy. This move to the field is not a move from the global to the local. Our starting position is equally one of a locality of a kind; the deflation of the myths of modernism lies precisely in the recognition that we are no more global than our subjects (although equally that we may enjoy relatively privileged access to global flows). The recognition that we too are entangled in the webs of culture and bent by the forces of history means that we must subject our own terms of inquiry and understanding, our own condition, to the same scrutiny we apply to others. The resulting tacking between localities is both an inevitable condition and one of the critical means of anthropology; a source of power in Comaroff's paper comes precisely from the way in which her reading of abuse in North America is refracted through her understanding of witchcraft in Africa. The return move, rereading witchcraft through the deepening understanding of abuse is not yet, I think, fully realized. But then incompleteness is another condition of our work — and thankfully so, because it is precisely the condition for our creativity, the space from which the historical or anthropological imagination can continue to work.

Two extremely potent words, witchcraft and abuse. I would like to continue to play these off against one another, to think about in what ways they can inform each other. Because in elucidating a witchcraft model of trauma we are also, in effect, suggesting the converse, namely a trauma or abuse model of witchcraft.

Let me start with witchcraft. At first blush we might ask what we are doing still talking about witchcraft. The word seems to epitomize our worst exoticizing tendencies and serves as a sign of anthropology's Dark Continentalism (in the sense analogous to Orientalism). However, witchcraft or sorcery is hardly restricted to Africa; for example, a recent ethnography of Bali (Wikan, 1990) makes much of its presence there and it is, as Comaroff suggests, flourishing in North America.

Second, witchcraft remains of extreme interest theoretically because it is one of the domains in which social processes collide with the collective and individ-

ual imaginary, where nightmares coalesce and standardize the expression of both the primary social conflicts of the age and the ruptures and contradictions that underlie sociality in any age. Moreover, and this is a point I wish Comaroff had pursued a little further, witchcraft scenarios are ones in which the nightmares of the group serve conversely as the desirous fantasies of the individual, directed and projected onto insiders and outsiders, others and selves. Witchcraft demands that we attend seriously to conflict, that we look beneath the idealizing models of social harmony, of progress (now known as development), of personal growth, and so forth, to experiences of aggression, desire, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, guilt and to the ambivalence that lies at the heart of social being.

Comaroff speaks of born-again modernists (in the third person, though I assume she would include herself) returning to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. The absence of the last of the big four dead white males is telling, but Freud surely deserves a place in the analysis of witchcraft.

A curious fact about witchcraft — and by that I mean, of course, the body of collective fantasies and particular accusations that form its social substance — is that its source is often not the poorest, the most marginalized, the obviously materially deprived, but the ostensibly satisfied, the relatively comfortable classes. Witchcraft is as much an expression of diffuse guilt as of focused envy, of internal feelings that are inadmissible and unacceptable rather than easily justified. Hence I would supplement Comaroff's reading with the following points:

1. Witchcraft is not only a critique of modernity, power, consumption, etc. but a guilty admission of their attraction.

2. If we ask why *witchcraft* rather than some other idiom (and of course I am inclined to compare it with spirit possession) we have to consider not only its rationality, but also take seriously the irrational and aggressive. It is here perhaps that a reading of the satanic accusations of our compatriots might help inform our understanding of the African phenomena.

3. We need to pursue Comaroff's initial point about history. That is to say, we need histories of witchcraft in specific locales in Africa, noting the continuities as well as the changes which both the idiom and its invocation in specific instances have undergone. Relatively closed societies, as Douglas noted, often had a high incidence of witchcraft fears and accusations. Moreover, witchcraft was intrinsic to the con-

stitution and local understanding of many precolonial social systems. Tiv elders who provided blessing and protection from witchcraft were the very people whom their juniors had to fear as witches. In many African societies the power of the chief was achieved as a result of his destructive and consumptive — witchcraft — practices. People in Mayotte see witchcraft or sorcery as the power implicit in *any* form of restricted knowledge (Lambek, 1993). Further, as Rosalind Shaw (1997) has asked, how was the imagery shaped during the period of the slave trade? Under colonialism? In Mayotte during the 1970's the image of the witch still drew upon past experiences of forced labour on colonial plantations more than on a contemporary commodity logic; victims would wake with sore muscles as though they had been ridden like beasts of burden all night long. As Solway suggests (personal communication), in doing the requisite historical work one would want to attend closely to the changing fates and relative weights given to alternate moral idioms, explanations of misfortune or expressions of unease; for example, in the Tswana case, to whether witchcraft has expanded at the expense of ideas about legitimate anger (*dikgaba*) on the part of elders. To what degree were these expressions of competing disciplines and experts, and as the Comaroffs themselves explore, how were such competitions in turn reshaped by missionary and colonial policy and practice? This would be a way to establish particular links between witchcraft and aspects of social life that are specific to modernity. The question would arise whether witchcraft expands to fill the gap left by other theodicies more vulnerable to social change.

In sum, I am in complete agreement with Comaroff's conclusion that witchcraft is a form of moral commentary. I think she is right to insist that it remains central to thought and practice in Africa, not as a survival but as an extremely relevant and vital component of the contemporary scene. She puts it very well that witchcraft both "raises pertinent questions about the limits of formal authority in African life" and "dwell[s] on the extraction of value from African persons and communities." But I add the caution that its connection to modernity need not be a uniquely privileged one. The fact that witchcraft employs the signifiers of modernity — surely signs of power — need not imply that modernity exhausts its referents. To keep up to date on experience — and what else can one do? — is neither necessarily to modernize nor to resist or reject modernity *per se*. I believe witchcraft is not only about the experience of modernity or expanding horizons but about the experience of sociality in any form, that is, that it bears a more general relation to social

life. There need not be a direct relationship between image and context; moreover images help to shape contexts as much as the reverse. As Comaroff says, witch beliefs are equally "ways of *producing* a consciousness of history."

I turn now to abuse. If I have too much to say here it is because Comaroff's paper overlaps closely with some of the directions taken in a book which Paul Antze and I have just edited (Antze and Lambek, 1996). In this book we ask why there is so much interest in memory now and why so many battles are fought over memory. Clearly, abuse, or victimization more generally, is one of the subjects, if not the central subject, of the memory discourses.

Regarding abuse in contemporary North America and Europe we may distinguish four inter-related processes:

1. An increasing *recognition* of the prevalence of the mistreatment and especially the sexual molestation of children.
2. Following Hacking and Foucault, the construction of the above *as abuse*, conjoining the sexual with physical and emotional violence and indeed seeing in sexual predation a uniquely deleterious form of physical and emotional harm, one for which state and professional intervention is enjoined.

Here we must ask how the new construction affects our recognition of the prevalence of sex with minors. It is difficult to get at the facts though Glynis George (1996) shows for a region of economically depressed eastern Canada how the recognition of sexual predation was always there, yet the construction put upon it, what is made of it, has changed radically with the arrival of the global media and then of state agencies.

3. The actual *rate* of sexual acts between adults and children. Is it rising? Does this represent the end of the incest taboo? I am no more able than Comaroff to provide figures. One can assume rates vary with time and place; possibly they rise with the isolation and vulnerability of the family household.
4. The rise in fear, attributions, and accusations of abuse, indeed, as Comaroff says, the *obsession* with abuse. This is clearly related to the other processes mentioned. I suspect that notwithstanding the many accurate reports of incest and the indubitable importance of intervening in order to protect children, there is also a rise both in less solidly founded retroactive accusations in which the vivid imagery of the memo-

ries does not correspond directly to what transpired in childhood as well as in more diffuse imaginary constructions around 'missing children.'

We await a Durkheim to chart the epidemiology of both abuse and of accusations. My own highly impressionistic view is that the latter appear more prevalent in Protestant northern Europe than in the Catholic south; among Protestants than other denominations in North America; and more among fundamentalist Protestants. This suggests unresolved issues around sexuality, guilt and redemption. There are intimations of Weber's Protestant ethic; where signs of blessing are found in worldly success, worldly frustration must seek its source in the inverse of blessing, in the parent's curse.

Certainly, as Comaroff says, these concerns express the feeling that the "established mode of social reproduction" is under threat. They also reflect the increasing primacy of identity issues in North America; the ways in which personal history and sexuality have come to be understood as fundamental to identity; and to the way trauma, especially sexual trauma, is seen as foundational. If witchcraft explains unfortunate events (or the good fortune of others), sexual abuse, as Kenny (1996) puts it, explains spoiled lives. We can call this the witchcraft model of abuse — one in which diffuse unease, persistent unhappiness or misfortune is connected to a primary and very specific, clearly demarcated causal event or harmful action performed by potentially identifiable discrete individuals.

In fact, I think we know surprisingly little about either the incidence or level of sexual contact between adults and children or what the cause and effect relationship is between such contacts — for which we surely need some measures — and subsequent unhappiness. Nor do we know how this may shift with context, including here both the public and private meanings placed on sexual contacts and the degree to which they become articulated in speech of various kinds.

Abuse is also like witchcraft in being an immensely potent, taboo, and contagious subject. Merely to raise the questions I just did is to tread on very dangerous ground. Abuse comes to stand for what appears to be for many Americans the moral collapse of the world — the destruction of the family, ostensibly linked to premarital sexual activity, to the rise of feminism, the gay movement, new medical technologies, and the like, and in fact underpinned by the sheer amorality of capitalism and the slickness and moral superficiality of the ideology of endless consumption.

Two ironies here — abuse discourse forms a meeting ground for certain feminists and anti-feminists and secondly in many instances the invocation of abuse discourse in placing the blame within the family appears to enhance the very destruction of the family it fears. Let me be very clear — this is not to deny either the prevalence or harmfulness of abuse or the fact that a particular invocation may be the symptom of an underlying problem within a given family. My point is that the evident importance of children's welfare cannot begin to explain the heat to which the subject gives rise or the displacement from issues such as poverty or anomie.

Not surprisingly, American culture currently derives great satisfaction from uncovering hypocritical villains. Academics, as we all know from departmental politics or the case of Paul de Man, are hardly immune from this pleasure. Curiously, the greatest ostensible villain is long deceased. Whether as subject of the relentlessly argued and exhaustively foot-noted essays of Frederick Crews or as object of shrill dismissal by fundamentalists of various stripes, Freud gets it from all sides. The ironies of the case are well phrased by Jonathan Lear (1995) and needn't detain us here.

One of the effects of Freud, long noted, albeit not an intrinsic part of his theory, has been to place the responsibility for the well-being of their offspring firmly on parents, and especially the tendency to blame 'Mom.' There is a whole literature of American momism. Abuse discourse at least has the effect of balancing this out somewhat. Dad is more likely now to be the serious villain and his interventions are a lot less subtle than Mom's ever were. But the overall point is that responsibility for an ever greater range and depth of features is placed within an ever narrowing circle — the nuclear family or simply the parents — and all the while social support for the family is decreasing. Marilyn Ivy makes this point in a remarkable essay, "Have You Seen Me? Recovering the Inner Child in Late Twentieth-Century America" (1993). Meanwhile parents and their physically but not emotionally mature offspring are fighting over which of them are at fault for the emptiness of the late industrial bourgeois subject. It is because he is seen to intervene on this very intimate turf, whether by having anticipated the scenarios or by having denied their existence, that Freud is the displaced object of everybody's rage.

In other words, this is not really about children. "In the rhetoric of child abuse and recovery," writes Ivy, "the child becomes the signifier of the certainty of knowledge, because innocent (and because innocent,

therefore truthful...); sexuality, in timeworn fashion, becomes the idiom in which dangerous questions about knowledge, identity, and the social are framed within late industrial contexts corrosive of the bounded stabilities of family" (Ivy, 1993: 232-3).

Sex with children. Sexual abuse. The very ideas of abuse and trauma, as documented by Hacking (1995, 1996) and Allan Young (1996), migrate from the merely physical to incorporate the emotional. Nothing is more potent in our society as a sign of the inversion of good, and not merely the inversion but something that absolutely prevents good, cuts it off at the root, spoils a life forever. It is, indeed, soul murder. And what else is soul murder if not the most heinous witchcraft?

And so we respond to the suspicion of its presence with fear akin to what has been described for societies in the midst of witchcraft epidemics, and with passionate and largely unfalsifiable attempts to uncover and punish the perpetrator, often without due process or by such elaborate means that the result is over determined. Think of the sheriff in Washington State mentioned by Comaroff (Wright, 1993); accusations of sexual abuse rapidly escalated to wild stories of satanic cults. The sheriff was subject to interview and confession not merely through one discursive channel, but as Paul Antze (1996) has pointed out, by the multiple and mutually reinforcing disciplinary practices of the church, the police, therapy, and ultimately journalism. Like the Pueblo boy described by Lévi-Strauss (1963), in the end the Sheriff could hardly do anything else than confess and reconstitute a threatened and subsequently shattered identity around that of the penitent. Eventually even his wife came to believe in first his and then her own guilt.

In sum, we have a highly potent key scenario of contemporary society in which abuser and abused have become summarizing symbols and vehicles for a diffuse rage. They represent lost innocence and also missed connections, the involution and dissolution of the social in a process which, incidentally, is entirely predictable from Lévi-Strauss's theory of the incest taboo once the order of kinship and marriage is historically replaced by that of capitalism.

In North America the witchcraft/abuse scenario is made more salient by the hope we pin on our highly individuated and often single children, even as we sense a loss of control over their and our future; on the kind of property that children have become, the kind of investment they are. Indeed, our children are the symbols and projections of ourselves. The ground is one of possessive individualism — ultimately what

each of us possesses is our personal history, our childhood and formative experiences and our memories of these. The scenario reaches ever inward, resonating with the sense of one's own body as property, as means of self production, and as the very basis of who one is, and of fears of its inadequacy and irremediable spoilage. *The abused children of our nightmares are ourselves as children*; this is explicit in the discourses of recovered memory and the inner child, discourses in which abuse is always taken literally. Abuse is closely connected to the primacy put on individuality, uniqueness, autonomy and boundedness and the denial of their radical subversion by the market. To quote Ivy, on whose analysis I have relied rather heavily, once again, "The integrity, purity, and self-sameness of the child—even if...hidden in the adult—assure a reserve that is outside the depredations of uncontrolled capitalist desire" (1993: 246).

Here we may find an interesting difference with Africa where relational aspects are explicitly more central to sound self or personhood and where witchcraft may be an expression of excessive withdrawal on the part of close kin rather than excessive encroachment. Moreover while witchcraft may make use of children's bodies, it is often explicitly not directed at them (Solway, n.d.); in African witchcraft children often serve as a means, not as an end.

Further, where moral order is grounded symbolically in certain people or certain kinds of people, i.e., when their identity is overdetermined and they come to stand metonymically for society — as Boddy (1988, in press) shows is the case for women in northern Sudan — then any perceived change in their behaviour is perceived as more threatening than changes in the behaviour of others. Thus as women frequently ground a patriarchal order, substantiating it in their bodies, it is transgressions by women and of women's bodies that are perceived as most threatening. Today in North America this is more true of children.

In the end I want to bring the discussion back to what I identified as the Comaroffs' main conceptual issue, namely consciousness. Is witchcraft false consciousness? What would this mean? Could we argue that the consciousness is less false in Africa than in North America and, if so, in what sense? What is the relationship of historical consciousness to the social construction of 'witchcraft' there and 'abuse' here? If consciousness itself relies on social constructions how can it become conscious of them? As Evans-Pritchard (1937) asked of the Azande, how can we become conscious of the very tools we use to think with?

Suffice it to note a general difference between the abuse panic here and witchcraft in Africa. The abuse discourse seeks and demands clarity. The real battle, as Lear sees it, "is over our culture's image of the human soul. Are we to see humans as having depth — as complex psychological organisms who generate layers of meaning which lie beneath the surface of their own understanding? Or are we to take ourselves as transparent to ourselves?" (1995: 24). Much of the abuse discourse is aligned with the second, simplifying alternative. Whereas the witchcraft and sorcery discourses with which I am familiar from Africa are closer to the former position. Witchcraft is imagined as dark, cloudy, mysterious to a degree, and suggests that we cannot know what is in the hearts of men and women. To be sure, Evans-Pritchard emphasizes its matter of fact quality among the Azande; yet the Zande witch may not even be aware of his or her own guilt when first confronted by the oracle. It seems to me that in much African thought and representation there is an understanding that not all meaning or motivation lies on the surface and that the human condition is a deeply ambivalent one. Indeed, it is often the case that the power to provide life or do good is vested in the very people who are also suspected of doing evil. Witchcraft is often franker than popular discourse about abuse in recognizing the irrational, the conflictual, the ambiguous, and the contradictory in human experience.

It follows that a diagnosis of 'witchcraft' in an African context may be less totalizing than one of 'abuse' in North America. In being, in effect, less powerful, it forecloses fewer alternative options to the sufferer. It is not so total an evacuation of self responsibility and hence it leaves greater room for subsequent agency. Similarly, the implications for the accused may not always be as severe. At the same time, it is clear that all this is itself historically contingent, in Africa as much as in Europe or North America; witchcraft panics have been noted from all three continents and Comaroff may have sighted a moment of change in Africa.

Finally, I mentioned that the Comaroffs' approach to consciousness evades the Platonic antinomies. It is a mistake to ask whether abuse or witchcraft talk is closer to detached thought about abstract universals or to the emotional immediacy of participation in particulars. In the paper at hand these alternatives correspond to the rigid dichotomy between the modern and premodern which Comaroff rightly rejects. Moreover, as Tambiah noted in his critique of Horton (1990: 131), African concerns with witchcraft have to

do less with abstraction than with understanding particulars. But this does not make them irrational or unable to achieve a degree of contemplative detachment.

If there is another way to conceptualize reason we might begin with Aristotle. In speaking of "the practical poetics of witchcraft" Comaroff combines two Aristotelian concepts, namely praxis and poiesis. In Aristotle doing, making, and thinking inform one another. But they can also be relatively distinguished (Lambek in press, n.d.). Comaroff is surely right about the imaginative qualities and moral aims of witchcraft talk. Yet while we get a rich account of the moral imagination in her paper, we get less insight into moral practice.

That consciousness and practice are closely linked is one of the key points of *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (1985). As Comaroff argued there, practice is not just instrumental but simultaneously symbolic. It can also be moral. Here Aristotle's concept of phronesis, moral judgment of particular circumstances whose end is human flourishing, happiness and well-being, is apposite (cf. Lambek, 1996, 1997). In an earlier exchange Comaroff has suggested to Ian Hacking that Aristotle is a suspect choice for a model of human nature that escapes the prejudices of the age. But if we follow Aristotle here we see people in their talk of witchcraft or abuse struggling with immediate moral issues. They do a more or less good job of it, to be sure, their practice possibly retreating from the moral when the finger is pointed unequivocally at individual perpetrators. Practical judgment is also superseded when disciplinary machinery steps in to co-opt and manage the situation. Nonetheless the attempt is there to know and do the right thing in a manifestly less than perfect world.

Why is judgment encased in such a florid idiom as witchcraft? Why not rational critique? Why not talk simply about theft or corruption or neglect? Here perhaps is where Aristotle is insufficient. In witchcraft moral exploration is pervaded by a deep disquiet, a disquiet in which, I have suggested earlier, conflict, ambivalence, and desire also find their place.

### *Acknowledgements*

This essay was written while the author was under the support of a SSHRC research grant. Jean Comaroff provided inspiration and enthusiasm, to which Paul Antze, Ian Hacking, and Jackie Solway added their share.

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