

1 POLITICAL EVIL

Witchcraft from the Perspective of the Bewitched

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“*Evil is not anything,*” David Parkin asserts in his introduction to *Anthropology of Evil* (1985b). Evil is an odd-job word, a word with a lot of baggage, but evil is also a word whose analytical value in anthropology is to push researchers beyond conventional categories. Instead of asking what evil is, let us explore where evil takes us.

Depending on route, the concept of evil can take us in two different directions: morality or ontology. In the first direction, evil is part of morality, being oftentimes interchangeable with bad. In Martin Southwold’s words (1985, 131), this is evil in the weak sense. In the second direction, ontology, evil is perceived as a form of extreme wrongdoing. Southwold speaks here of radical evil or evil in the strong sense, this being a realm where the moral discourse of wrongness, wickedness, and immorality seems lacking and displaced. Although Southwold does not deny the continuum between weak and strong forms of evil, he believes that it is important “to keep ‘evil’ in the strong sense, the better to point to the problems that arise” (1985, 132). I concur.

One “problem” that arises when we define evil in the strong sense is that the concepts of good, bad, and evil are no longer equidistant. Neither is the continuum that they define uniform. It is certainly the case that the continuum good-bad-evil is predicated on the setting of boundaries or limits and, therefore, on the possibility of transgression (Clough and Mitchell 2001, 1). To think of good is always to think of bad, which lies on the other side. Evil is no exception. The Old Teutonic form from which the English term *evil* derives, *ubiloz*, means ‘to exceed due measure’ or ‘overstep proper limits’ (Pocock 1985, 42). Yet radical evil differs from immoral acts such as stealing, adultery, and crimes of passion. In his reflections on evil, Aristotle captures this difference by relating

the idea of excess with *ápeiron*, the inexplicable (Hobart 1985, 166). As inexplicable excess, the concept of evil leads one to reflect not only on the boundaries between morality and immorality but also on the “internal constitution and external boundaries” of humanity (Parkin 1985b, 6).

Further developing this train of thought, both Pocock and Hobart note that the term *evil* has an ontic weight. In contemporary usage, Pocock affirms, the term *evil* has “a distinctive ontological weight” (1985, 46)—“hence also the terms favored by the popular press which do echo those that people [in England] actually use: ‘beast,’ ‘wild animal,’ ‘savage’” (1985, 52). Agreeing with Pocock, Hobart states, “[Pocock’s interviewed] majority are more Aristotelian—although it might surprise them!—in seeing evil as inexplicable excess, to the point that it is no more a moral judgment but an ontological assertion: there are truly evil acts which show the perpetrators to be inhuman. If evil is so extreme, then the dubious doings of ordinary humans pale in comparison with such monsters” (1985, 167).

Building on the work of both Pocock and Hobart, specifically their idea of evil as excess with an ontological weight, I argue that the concept of evil takes us to a ghastly realm of destruction and transfiguration where the discourse of morality feels lacking and out of place. This is an ontological realm where humans metamorphose into wild animals, beasts, even monsters, which are “worse than animals.” In addition, now carrying the idea of evil as excess with an ontic weigh in a different direction, I posit that the shift from the moral to the ontic becomes expressed in the form of highly systematic, often ritualized processes of interpersonal predation that lead, if not curbed, to suffering and death.

Atrocities, however, can be committed and endured not only in the visible realm (genocide, serial killings, witch hunts) but also, as I will show momentarily, in the invisible realm (zombification, bewitching). Some scholars may favor visibility over invisibility, reality over belief. But from the standpoint of those who inhabit cultural and cosmological worlds in which interpersonal encounters are likely to occur in both visible and invisible planes of existence, such dualisms as reality versus belief stand in the way of understanding.

Similarly, interpersonal violence can take place not only in what anthropologists and other thinkers, following Max Weber (1948), often designate as the public domain of politics but also in the more intimate domain of one’s home or village. Anthropologists have shown that power in Africa is oftentimes embedded in religion, a point persuasively argued by Arens and Karp in *Creativity of Power* (1989, xvii). But power in Africa, and elsewhere, also undercuts the conceptual differentiation between politics and society. We are as likely to find “brotherliness” (Weber 1948, 155) in politics as to experience enmity at

home. The social is political through and through. Consequently, and returning now to that ghastly region of absolute violence where the concept of evil has taken us, I reserve the concept of political evil for those interpersonal processes in which one or more individuals mercilessly prey upon others, dehumanizing and depleting them of their vitality, if not their life. Humans are as capable of empathy, identification, love, and solidarity as they are of indifference, condemnation, hate, and discord. In this field of intersubjectivity (Jackson 1998, 1–36), the concept of political evil signals the point in which the interpersonal process of intrusion and predation, unfettered by moral concerns, advances coldly and systematically toward annihilation.

There is something sacred in political evil. Although bad and evil are equally political in the sense of corresponding to interpersonal acts of encroaching and coercion, as suggested, bad morphs when it becomes political evil. In the movement from bad to evil, the process of systematic, ritualized objectification of one by another is unleashed, reducing humans to the conditions of predators and prey (Silva 2013). The movement from morality to ontology is also a movement from morality to absolute violence.

FROM WITCHCRAFT TO BEWITCHING

I now turn to the world of witchcraft in northwest Zambia, witchcraft being often described, to borrow from Parkin, as the “prototype of all evil” in Africa (1985b, 15). It hardly matters, as mentioned, whether you and I see witchcraft as reality or belief, for witchcraft in Africa is experientially real, being widely considered a major cause of lethargy, illness, and death. For many Africans, witchcraft is a “matter-of-life-and-death reality,” writes Gerrie ter Haar (2007, 19). Similarly, it hardly matters that most of us have never, to the best of our knowledge, experienced the dangerous world of witchcraft firsthand. In two years of fieldwork in the Chavuma district of northwest Zambia, I never apprenticed myself to a male or female witch (the term in the Luvale language spoken in Chavuma is *mukandumba*, or person-with-lions), attempted to join a coven, or selected a *mukandumba* as an informant. In fact, except for those witchcraft healers and basket diviners who openly claim to be witches as a way to bolster and broadcast their powers of healing and clairvoyance (Silva 2011), I never knew of anyone, man or woman, who publicly admitted to practicing witchcraft or engaging in acts of bewitchment. My sources of information were therefore of two kinds: those peculiar, self-proclaimed male witches of sorts who nevertheless, being highly respected public figures, do not engage, or admit to engage, in acts of bewitching, and those laymen and women with whom

I struck up conversations that led to the sensitive topic of witchcraft. Notoriously, these laymen and women did not describe themselves as witches; instead, they saw themselves as the potential or actual victims of bewitching.

In what follows, paraphrasing the words of these men and women, I attempt to convey their experience of witchcraft as a form of political evil. Four experiential themes recur in their discourse: dehumanization, intrusion, depletion, and consumption. All my interlocutors dwelled to some degree on the same experiential themes even though the content and tenor of our conversations on the topic of witchcraft changed according to focus. Because their discourse—all discourse—simultaneously reflects and culturally molds the experiences narrated (van Beek 2007, 298), it offers a privileged glimpse into the world of witchcraft and bewitching in northwest Zambia from an experiential perspective.

I start with “witchcraft in general,” a type of account in which the evildoers are typically female. These accounts describe the methods employed for recruiting new members into the society of witches, the social dynamics of the coven, and the witches’ dealings and doings—their *witchcraft*. I was told that recruiting starts with the giving or receiving of food, often salt. A witch will walk through the villages asking for salt, *Nguhaneko mungwa! Nguhaneko mungwa!* Suspicious of the intention behind such a request, particularly if voiced by an elderly woman, the potential giver may opt to excuse herself, saying that she is very poor and has no salt to offer. By refusing to reciprocate she hopes to escape the cycle of indebtedness among witches. But the witch will persevere. Under the cover of darkness, the witch will invade that poor woman in her sleep, “causing her to dream” (*kulotesa*), and then proceed to accuse her of being selfish and greedy: “How dared you refuse a bit of salt to a fellow woman in need?” As punishment for her heartless and ungenerous behavior, the victim will be told to join the society of witches, or else die and be eaten.

Witches may also adopt the opposite strategy to multiply their numbers and fill their bellies with human meat. Instead of asking for salt, they will donate salt to women in need. Later, the witches will invade the receivers in their sleep, causing them to dream, and asking for the salt back. Every receiver of salt will likely respond, apologetically, that she has already used the salt in her stew (*ifwo*). But the witch will riposte in a cold, threatening tone: “That salt that you used in your stew belonged to my fellow witches. Now, you must join the coven and pay back your debt in the form of one of your relatives.” The most malicious among the witches will demand an infant.

These gifts of human meat that create and sustain the society of witches through ties of mutual indebtedness are known as *jifuka*. To seal her promise of murder, the new witch will be asked to tie a knot in a rope while saying these

words: “I will tie up so-and-so.” There will be no return now. The new witch will attack at night, invading her victim in his or her sleep and causing him or her to dream. The witch will force the victim to work for her every night, tilling the fields, fetching water, collecting firewood, and going on errands. I was once told that some witches force their prey to carry them on their shoulders from Chavuma to Zambezi, a distance of eighty-four kilometers on the gravel road. Having worked like a slave all night, the bewitched will wake up in the morning feeling pains in the legs, arms, and shoulders. Over time, he or she will feel exhausted and depleted. In particularly malicious cases of bewitchment, the victim will see witchcraft familiars such as hyenas and lions during sleep. The witch may also force sexual intercourse or the ingestion of raw meat, clear signs that death is imminent. The victim is said to die twice: to his or her relatives, who will bury the corpse at the cemetery; and to the gluttonous witches, who will butcher and devour their prey at the cemetery.

The process of bewitching is not random and chaotic. Bewitching is a highly systematic and ritualized process in which the four experiential themes of political evil recur each time: dehumanization of the victim as prey, intrusion into his or her sleep as well as body in the form of forced sexual intercourse and ingestion of raw meat, depletion of the victim’s vitality through nocturnal forced labor, and finally, the cannibalistic consumption of the victim’s body at the cemetery.

Listening to these stories at night around a bonfire or maybe a small *mbaula* fire—minuscule circles of light surrounded by a thick wall of darkness—can be an uncanny experience. Significantly more perturbing though is listening to accounts that involve relatives, friends, and neighbors who have been bewitched. I refer to these accounts as “witchcraft in particular.” As Koen Stroeken (2010, 125) also noticed during her research among the Sukuma of northwest Tanzania, these accounts, being more personal, offer a glimpse into the world of witchcraft from the perspective of the bewitched. From this perspective, bewitching acquires an experiential weight in the form of pain, weariness, illness, and fear. I begin with two cases of witchcraft in particular that I vividly remember.

Konde

In April 1996, the village headman who had welcomed me to his village suddenly died. He had been an important regional cadre of UNIP (The United National Independence Party of Zambia), a faithful supporter of President Kenneth Kaunda, and a wise Luvale elder, respected and loved by all. Over seven hundred people attended his funeral. Some of the attendees drove all the way from the cities of the Copperbelt and the capital of Zambia, Lusaka, and oth-

ers flew in from Zimbabwe and Ireland. Konde's funeral was a beautiful and peaceful ceremony. Christians sang church hymns and read passages from the Bible. Respected elders offered memorable eulogies that described in great detail Konde's contributions to UNIP during the liberation struggle and after independence.

During the three nights of vigil that preceded the burial at the cemetery, however, the atmosphere was very different. For the smaller group of relatives and friends who attended the vigil held at Konde's village, the confirmation that Konde had been bewitched, as many suspected, arrived on the first night. Many were napping on woven mats around two large bonfires. Suddenly, one of Konde's daughters, Musami, a well-spoken young woman who attended the regional high school, stood up from her mat and readied herself to report what she had heard and seen on the night prior to her father's death.

Musami started by informing her audience that Konde had felt an excruciating pain on his right hip in the morning prior to his death (*vakandumba* are sometimes said to manipulate substances and injure from afar, much like sorcerers, or *vakakupanda*, typically do). Konde had fallen to the ground, crying and screaming, "I'm dying! I'm dying!" Then, he had returned to bed, leaving his relatives suspended in a state of apprehension and deep concern. But the situation became clearer that night, Musami added. She had woken up in the middle of the night feeling a heavy weight on her legs below the knees. She had heard "the spirits" (her words) urging, "go, go outside and look," so she had jumped to her feet and run outside as fast she could. "I will never forget what I saw that night," she told her audience at the vigil: three *vakandumba* standing in the village plaza and holding large chunks of raw, blood-dripping meat; her father's body on top of the large anthill; and a hyena. She had screamed, waking her relatives. Having identified the witches as their neighbors, she had started off in the direction where they lived. Had her mother and half-sister failed to stop her, she would have hit them.

By dawn, Konde lay moribund in bed. He told his relatives that one of his three predators, a man, was troubling him too much (in accounts of witchcraft in particular, *vakandumba* are not always women). Musami asked her relatives to summon Kazuzu, a renowned expert in witchcraft-related conditions, but Kazuzu was away. Around 9 AM, Konde said to Musami: "They are really troubling me now. I'm leaving, my daughter. Be a good girl." He lifted his hand in her direction. Then he folded his arms over his chest, letting out the sound of a hyena from his mouth.

I have no words to describe the growing tension on the vigil grounds as Musami told her story. Had a group of devout Christians not started to fervently

sing church hymns, effectively muffling Musami's hateful words, Musami and others would have likely chased the alleged predators who had chosen not to join the wake. However, not even the Christian hymns erased the grisly images of witches holding chunks of raw meat and Konde lying on his bed, his arms crossed on his chest and his mouth open to let out the sound of the hyena.

On the second day of the vigil, Musami and I sat next to each other. After we chatted a little about this and that, politely avoiding the topic of witchcraft, I asked her about the "spirits" that she had heard. Those spirits, she said, first visited her in dreams during her time in the Western Province of Zambia. The spirits wanted her to become a healer like Kazuzu, but first she wanted to finish her studies and become an engineer. She was only seventeen. Now that her father had passed away, she worried about her future. Who was going to support her studies? Then she steered the conversation in a different direction. Her father and she had been laughing and singing together two nights before he died. They loved to sing Christian songs even though they were not strong believers; they were sort of Christians with no congregation. Herself, she never went to church.

Mary

In July 1996, I accompanied healer Kazuzu to a village in Chavuma where he was to conduct a Kanenga ritual. Kanenga are nightlong rituals performed to free the bewitched from the grip of their predators. In this case, the one bewitched was Mary, a Chewa woman from eastern Zambia.

Mary and her husband, a Luvale man named Kayombo, lived many years in Lusaka and the Copperbelt. Kayombo worked as a driver (a "land-pilot") for the Zambian army. When he retired in 1995, they decided to move to Chavuma, Kayombo's homeland, and settle in the village of his matrilineal relatives.

In Chavuma, it took Kayombo less than a year to build a big house, furnish all five rooms, acquire several goats and chickens, and start a small local business selling groceries. Then, the trouble started. In the span of what seemed only a few weeks, Mary became very thin. Kayombo took her to the regional hospital, but the doctor offered no conclusive diagnosis; all he did, Kayombo said, was to prescribe a handful of aspirin pills. As Mary became ever more emaciated, weary, and thin, Kayombo began to wonder whether she had been attacked by malicious witches who were causing his wife to dream and forcing her to work for them every night. This would explain her rapid loss of weight and vitality. He also reasoned that the witches were likely among his older relatives living in the village, some of whom were envious of his accomplishments. "How could I, such a young chap, own so many things? They wanted me to

have a small little house like theirs, and suffer like they do.” Their envy (*lwiso*) had hardened their hearts and driven them to attack Mary. Kayombo told me that basket diviner Sakutemba, whose basket they had recently consulted, had reached the same conclusion. And so had healer Kazuzu. On his first examination of Mary prior to the Kanenga ritual, Kazuzu had told Kayombo, “Yes, this thinness and inactivity of hers are the work of witches living among you. We must hurry.”

In the late morning following Kanenga, Kayombo invited healer Kazuzu, my research assistant Cedric, and I for lunch in the comfort of his living room. Mary joined us later. She sat on the larger couch in the room and placed her baby boy beside her. Her boy, however, was not a baby, as I had surmised; he was instead a two-year-old boy. Mary explained that her illness had dried up her milk. Her boy had not grown and could not walk because they had no means to purchase nutritious food. We also chattered about her older children who lived in the Copperbelt and Lusaka.

I asked Mary how she felt now that she had been through Kanenga. “I feel lighter and healthier,” she said, “even though it wasn’t easy to stay awake all night and be splashed with medicinal water on my naked torso in the cold of the night. Now, yes, I feel lighter and healthier.” In the weeks to follow, Mary would on occasion walk the long sandy path on the way to my house in Chavuma, her son tied to her back, for a chat with me over a cup of tea. Behind the image of a sick woman with warm eyes, beautifully braided hair, and impeccable clothing, I could see glimpses of her past self. Her son died in October 1996. Mary died one month later.

A missionary nurse at the mission hospital informed me that Mary and her son had died of AIDS. Her husband as well as diviner Sakalwiji and healer Kazuzu reported that Mary had been bewitched. Others agreed with the latter but combined interpretations and diagnoses. In their opinion, Mary had definitely been bewitched, but the witches had hidden behind AIDS to protect themselves from future accusations.

I heard many accounts of bewitching in which the experiential themes of dehumanization, intrusion, and depletion surfaced. Cedric, my research assistant, for example, once explained the general feeling of frailty that he had recently experienced thus: “I was waking up in the morning with an overwhelming feeling of weakness, as if I had not slept all night. I could not understand what was causing these pains in my legs, arms and shoulders. One day my wife asked me, ‘Are you feeling tired every morning?’ I said, ‘Yes, you’re right.’ Then, she told me what was happening. ‘No wonder,’ she said, ‘you’re being overworked by those two women [meaning two elderly women who lived in an ad-

jacent village].” In these accounts of witchcraft in particular, the main theme is not the witches’ recruiting strategies and their shady dealings; instead, it is the gradual, systematic depletion of the victim’s vitality by the ruthless evildoers. In extreme cases, as mentioned, the bewitched see hyenas and other witchcraft familiars in their sleep and are forced to eat raw meat and engage in sexual intercourse. These are horrific experiences. Quick to identify the signs of bewitching, others in the community will encapsulate the victim’s sheer powerlessness and sense of doom in one dreaded statement: *vanamukase lyehi* (he or she has been tied up). Understandably, the bewitched being alive, no mention is made of the last form that political evil takes on in witchcraft: cannibalism.

Should the relatives of the bewitched act quickly by taking the case of their dying relative to a basket diviner, there might be room for hope. The diviner will identify witchcraft as the cause of suffering and prescribe the conduction of a Kanenga ritual. I attended three of these rituals in 1996, including Mary’s. Much like happens in ancestor-related healing rituals (*mahamba*), the objective in Kanenga is to release the patient from the grip of the aggressor, here the *mukandumba*. In addition to copiously splashing medicated water on the patient’s torso to the sound of singing and drumming, the Kanenga doctor will identify the perpetrator by name and encourage the ritual participants to discuss the reasons that led to bewitching (typically, feelings of envy or personal grudges about things said or done). Finally, he will walk into the darkness surrounding the bonfire carrying a container of blood from the sacrificed goat. He hopes to persuade the *mukandumba* to release the patient (untie the knot) and take the animal blood in his or her stead.

HUMANITY AND ANIMALITY

According to Parkin, not only is witchcraft the prototype of all evil, but the “archetype of evil is ambivalent power” (1985b, 14). The idea of ambivalent power is familiar to anthropologists working in Africa, bringing to mind such exemplary public figures as healers and political leaders. In northwest Zambia, basket diviners and other renowned male healers are often referred to by a term that evokes the very idea of ambivalent power: *vanganga*. Some *vanganga* go so far as boasting their knowledge of the occult, describing themselves in public as *vakandumba* (witches) or, more broadly, *vakauloji* (occult specialists), though not without a grin (Silva 2011, 79). Luvale male and female chiefs (*myangana*) are sometimes described as *vakandumba* (witches) and *vakauhole* (abductors who turn their victims into zombies). In the end, because people need their chiefs, healers, and diviners, they see covert doings and dealings of the chiefs,

healers, and diviners as both evil and necessary. Parkin (1985a, 229) drew the same conclusion for his work on the Vaya, the secret society of elders of the Mijikenda of coastal Kenya, and so did countless other anthropologists for their subjects of study elsewhere in Africa (e.g., Jackson and Karp 1990, 20; and Geschiere 1997, 219).

This said, let us not crystallize witchcraft in Africa as an ambivalent power, and the powerful in Africa as semiotic icons of ambivalence, as if their only role and purpose in office or as professionals were to embody and reveal to their subjects and to themselves the true nature of power. The powerful will do or attempt to do all manner of good and evil things, particularly from the viewpoint of their subjects. Consequently, without implying that “politics” is essentially a realm of violence and domination, and much less dismissing or minimizing the good deeds of particular officeholders, the concept of evil in the strong sense of political evil serves as a reminder that rulers can, and sometimes will, unleash their might on their subjects. In those situations in which chiefs—any rulers—prey on their subjects, ambivalence temporarily dissipates, leaving in its wake a stark environment of suffering and destruction. Absolute violence is definite and crystal clear.

In northwest Zambia, the relatives of the bewitched may opt to consult a basket diviner who is willing to identify the witch by name. However, should the witch be a chief, male or female, it will not be possible to halt, undo, divert, or avenge an attack. This sense of powerlessness at the hands of a chief who acts with impunity is reflected in the divinatory speech and procedure. Should the diviner look inside his basket and see that a chief is to be blame for the death, he will lower his oracle and utter a formulaic expression: *Ngombo yinayi mwilu* (the oracle has gone into the air). That will be all. The consultants will understand the diviner’s words and ready themselves to leave.

And yet chiefs have no monopoly over violence. In theory if not in practice, anyone can be a witch. As Parkin shows in his work on the Vaya elders, “[the Vaya are] merely what other Mijikenda are but to a greater degree” (1985a, 229). Witches are everywhere, and everyone is or can become a witch. The world of witchcraft is predicated on the recognition of a sociopolitical continuum that extends across what scholars often distinguish as the social and the political, a continuum along which the possibility of being dehumanized, violated, depleted, and consumed by another, ruler or relative, is real. You only need to be human in order to dehumanize others as prey, invade them in their sleep, force them to eat raw meat and engage in sexual intercourse, put them to work like slaves and rob them of their vitality, and eat them up. Witches reduce their victims to the condition of prey whose sole purpose or function in life is to be

drained and eaten. In the process of bewitching others, witches also reduce themselves to callous predators whose immediate goal is to drain and eat, to diminish and destroy (Akrong 2007, 59).

Although trespassing and intrusion are ubiquitous in human interaction—think not only of stealing, adultery, and crimes of passion, but also of love, friendship, and the workplace—only political evil takes us to absolute violence. Evil is not an extreme form of bad or, together with bad, the opposite of good. When bad mutates into political evil, losing its moral resonance, evil becomes the opposite of the virtuous. Interestingly, though, virtue and vice have a lot in common besides the well-known truism that virtues are usually vices in disguise. In both cases, the ordinary changes into the extraordinary not by falling into chaos or disorder but by ascending to an eerie plane where everything is ordered, perfect, methodical, and predictable. In this sense, saints and witches resemble one another.

It is also noticeable that, outside the realm of Christianity and Islam, Africa south of the Sahara boasts no saints or other fully virtuous personae. The African High God is a creator and maker—not the final yardstick of morality. Not coincidentally, I think, many Africans associate the unambiguously positive with colors, substances, and material objects, instead of humans, whom they often see as inescapably ambivalent.

What then is it to be human? Where do we place political evil—within humanity or beyond its external boundaries? Where do we place bewitchment? Witches are most certainly human. What is more, they are seen as persons who are known by name, gender, kinship group, and other social attributes. Yet witches are also described as animals that prey on their own kin. In Pocock's words, witches "are and are not human beings" (1985, 48). But do witches ever cross over from humanity to animality?

Several ethnographic facts suggest that witches never exit the human: first, the lions mentioned in "person with lions" (the literal translation of *mukandumba*, meaning witch) consist of witchcraft familiars. They are "people lions" (*vandumba javatu*), as any Luvale speaker will tell you. Second, the witches' predatory attacks as well as their collective feastings are strangely human-like. The savanna lions and hyenas do not force their prey to work for them or eat human meat with bodkins, as witches are said to do. Lastly, witches live in a social world bound by the laws of contract and reciprocity; they do not live in nature. Among the Amba of western Uganda, witches may stand on their heads, rest hanging upside down, quench their thirst with salt, be active at night, go naked, turn into leopards, and eat people; yet they live in villages and are fully human (Winter 1963). In a nutshell, witches are best perceived not as the abso-

lute other but as humans in reverse. Witches are not the enemy out there; they are the enemy within.

We know from Durkheim that the moral is social; but is the social coterminous with the moral? Witchcraft shows us that it is possible to have a social world where morality has no place. Rather than being “at once within and beyond the limits of humanity” (Pocock 1985, 48), witches are at once within and beyond the limits of morality. Witches are persons who have exited morality and become human predators. Hence the shock and perplexity that political evil always generates. Try as we may to distinguish and distance ourselves from predators by continually patching and reinforcing a thick wall of morality all around us, predators are never far away. Predators, however, do not come from the wilderness far out; they come from the social within. Those animals are human.

Faced with atrocities that defy understanding, people will respond differently. Adopting an extremist position, some people will claim that the perpetrators, being beastly, should be treated accordingly. This is most certainly the view of Pocock’s English interviewees, according to whom “hanging is too good for them” (Pocock 1985, 52). Other people, more moderate, will attempt to salvage the human by making sense of animality in human terms. They will, for example, invoke brooding negative emotions (the envy and greed of the witch) or the inscrutable depths of psychopathology (the distorted psyches of dictators and serial killers). Or they might justify the evildoer’s complicity and participation in predatory regimes by invoking, as did the Nazi Lieutenant Colonel Eichmann during his trial in Jerusalem, the need to fulfill one’s duty and follow orders and directives from above—the “man on the job” rational. In Chavuma, I had a memorable conversation with a middle-aged man who made it a point to underscore what he considered a universal truth: no person on the face of the earth will willingly become a witch. People are forced into the coven by the witches’ treachery and wickedness, and, as novices, they have no choice but to sacrifice their own relatives lest they will be killed and eaten instead. It could happen to anyone. Although, during our conversation, this man never advocated for the unconditional forgiveness of all acts of bewitching, he showed the willingness to recognize, if only momentarily, that witches are persons (see Silva 2009).

I wondered what this man had done decades before when an agitated group of individuals accused a local elderly woman of being a witch. Had he joined in when the others chased the woman trying to escape? Had he participate in the killing? I did not ask. I knew that moderation in discourse does not preclude animality in practice—much in the same way that extremism in discourse does

not necessarily reflect readiness to kill. Many moderates around the world seem satisfied with the idea that the animals, being human, be ostracized, sent into exile, prosecuted in court, cleansed, or saved. Some extremists defend that the perpetrators should be sent to the death row—a compromise that enables them to achieve what they want without exiting the human.

Extremist or moderate, no one is left untouched by what Parkin calls “the unthinkable that nevertheless happens” (1985a, 241). Try as we may to come up with a reasonable explanation, even a scientific explanation, evil in the strong sense of political evil remains what it has always been—inexplicable excess, a true mystery.

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