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YENGO Patrice. — *Les mutations sorcières dans le bassin du Congo. Du ventre et de sa politique*

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- 1 There have been numerous waves of academic interest in the topic of witchcraft and, in particular, in the various dimensions of witchcraft-related violence in African contexts.²³ Though much of this research has been conducted within the discipline of anthropology, researchers from diverse fields are increasingly identifying witchcraft as an important aspect of their work. Disciplines concerned with health,²⁴ social work,²⁵ and law,²⁶ have all offered insight into how witchcraft may be operationalized, more or less successfully, in studies of experiences of change and continuity in African societies and, internationally, in the African diaspora. Despite the current peak of interest in the topic, there remains a deficit in analytical theories or systematic frameworks through which we can approach

witchcraft to build a collective debate, rather than a field of disparate and individual voices. Though some authors, like P. Geschiere (1997)²⁷ and I. Niehaus (2001),²⁸ have offered prolific and profound insights into the nature of witchcraft, other efforts to expand analytical and theoretical discussions struggle with the complexity of witchcraft, offering descriptive summaries of practices and beliefs rather than penetrating dissections of witchcraft.

- 2 It is in this context that these two authors enter into the murky waters of witchcraft and witchcraft-related violence in sub-Saharan Africa. In *Guerres mystiques*, M. Miran-Guyon takes on the immense task of bridging the broad themes and unwieldy concepts of religion, ethnicity, violence, and witchcraft, in order to better understand efforts towards both hostility and mediation the context of post-electoral violence in Côte d'Ivoire. In *Les mutations sorcières dans le bassin du Congo*, P. Yengo dissects the profound transformations of Congolese societies throughout the history of colonization and neocolonialism in order to trace the complex and evolving relationship between witchcraft and lineage. In these works, both authors seek to expand our existing knowledge of well-worn topics in African studies, such as lineage, religion, and institutional violence, through the immensely diverse, complex, resistant, and at times elusive, concept of witchcraft.
- 3 *Guerres mystiques* offers a saturated resource of mid-level and media-based discourses that M. Miran-Guyon encountered during her fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire. Drawing on the rhetorical context of conflict and reconciliation being constructed by religious institutions and key faith leaders, Miran-Guyon provides a snapshot of some of the interpersonal tensions and mediation opportunities that existed before and during the period of post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire. Miran-Guyon's personal attachment to the context and immersed and engaged presence in the field comes through in this work. Her proximity to the context gives the reader the feeling of intrusiveness, as if one is peering into the personal journal of the author as she compiles her dense and detailed notes. Though this feeling of being in the field with the author, surrounded by loud radio announcements and practised public addresses by religious officials, creates a real and affecting engagement with the rhetoric of difference and violence during this period of instability, it also overshadows the analysis and insight into the deeper layers and machinations of the conflict that the author details.
- 4 M. Miran-Guyon's familiarity with the context and history of Côte d'Ivoire leaves the reader relatively adrift, requiring a preexisting knowledge of the political conflict and context, and in particular, the political actors. Importantly, she neglects to provide clear lines of relation between the political actions of key actors, such as Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara, and the religious leaders discussed in depth, leaving much of the underlying tensions of the pre-election context and post-election violence under-explored.²⁹ Though her focus on the role of religious rhetoric is strong and persuasive, witchcraft falls away from the core events of the conflict. As a result of this, the theoretical links between the concepts of witchcraft, religion, and violence remain unclear. A great strength of the work is the author's presentation of an almost archival collection of speeches and journalistic interviews by religious and local leaders. Miran-Guyon references a 2001 Human Rights Report, *Le nouveau racisme: La manipulation politique de l'ethnicité en Cote d'Ivoire*, and her work has a similar quality; it is an extensive record of religious events and discourses, and provides a valuable historical account of the activities of faith-based institutions during this crisis. Unfortunately, Miran-Guyon's immersed perspective and rich data set suffers from a feeling of incompleteness, as

though this is an unfinished work. The phenomenal resources collected by the author offer a clear opportunity for piercing analysis, however this work feels rushed and, at times, lost in detail and time. Though Miran-Guyon attempts to build links with Stephen Ellis' *Masks of Anarchy*,³⁰ but these references are brief and only lightly peppered throughout the work, which leads the reader to question the comparability of these two very different contexts without any in-depth discussion. As a result, Miran-Guyon's efforts to offer insight into the interrelation and interactions between conflict, religion, and witchcraft fail to produce the kind of nascent propositions found in works like Ellis and ter Haar's *Worlds of Power*.

- 5 For any author, the pitfalls of witchcraft are many. Witchcraft, and the many concepts bound to this mercurial topic, such as religion, culture, mysticism, and violence, draws one into a minefield of vague categories and shifting understandings. Miran-Guyon's effort to speak about spiritual power, whether as a reality, discourse, rhetoric, practice, or symbol, is weakened, in this instance, by the work's limited definition of religion. Throughout *Guerres mystiques*, it is unclear what religion is, how it operates, and how we are to understand the role of belief that is both juxtaposed and married to the opaque presence of witchcraft. In the discursively dense quotes that are skillfully selected by Miran-Guyon, the reader is introduced to layered statements that are untethered from a broader theoretical grounding. It remains unclear whether or how these statements might correlate to belief and practice; whether they reflect the intersection and operation of religion and identity, or whether witchcraft and religion are syncretic. Ultimately, we wonder whether witchcraft is to be considered religious or not.
- 6 These questions cascade as the work progresses, underlining opportunities to engage with political complexities such as the role of Pentecostalism in the conflict, and undermining central political and social concepts. As a political scientist, my own interests and biases tended towards questions about nationalism, the nature of nation-building, and the challenges of multiculturalism that are raised only in the conclusion. The concluding remarks about these tensions point to a potentially novel focus on witchcraft and the difficulties of multiculturalism, such as the effort to build a nation of sameness and suppress difference in a post-conflict context where the state is faced with the task of reconstructing a sense of unity. Though *Guerres mystiques* does not offer analytical depth or breadth, the building blocks of Miran-Guyon's highly relevant analysis in, for example, "Islam In & Out" and "Islam autorité religieuse et sphère publique en Côte d'Ivoire"³¹ are evident. By taking politics and witchcraft seriously, Miran-Guyon ventures into treacherous terrain armed with the resources needed to craft a precise and targeted analysis of witchcraft discourses in the context of inflamed religious and ethnic tensions. Having read what I hope is a prelude to this work, I am eagerly awaiting the companion piece to *Guerres mystiques*.
- 7 Where Miran-Guyon's work suggests a work in progress, Yengo's *Les mutations sorcières* reads like an opus, offering a bounty of theoretical arguments and analysis, as though the two works were in an intended counterbalance. Miran-Guyon's rich empirical grounding is counterpoised with Yengo's provocative hypotheses that span and employ numerous concepts and issues such as globalization, modernity, neo/colonialism, capitalism, evangelism, and psychoanalysis, in order to demonstrate the forces underlying shifting notions of lineage in the Congo basin. Yengo takes on an immense breadth of issues in his discussions of lineage, leaving the thin threads of sorcery and witchcraft in the background. Throughout the forking trajectories that emerge from a strong and

promising introduction, the body of *Les mutations sorcières* wanders into arguments regarding Christianity and monogamy, child soldiers, and street children. Though witchcraft and sorcery appear in these sections, these concepts are undefined and disconnected from the broader topic of lineage, which is the most engaging and detailed facet of this work.

- 8 As with Miran-Guyon's work, *Les mutations sorcières* gives one the impression that the personal attachment of the author to the context being discussed impedes reflection, thereby leading the author to curtail the provision of evidence that would demonstrate the accuracy or even the underlying logic of the arguments and correlations being made. Overwhelmingly, Yengo's positionality seems to be employed as the empirical foundation of this work, closing much of the analysis around male experiences of family and society in Congo-Brazzaville. The author's insights from the field are also somewhat dated, as the original research was conducted in the late 1980s. These elements overlies problematic tendencies that appear throughout the work, such as the homogenization of experiences, peoples, and places across space and time; the deepening of African exceptionalism; and an over-reliance on psychoanalytical concepts that undermines the analysis. Yengo's liberal application of anal fixation, coprophilia, and phallic preoccupation sabotage rather than strengthen numerous lines of inquiry and reduce important gender issues, such as sexual violence as an expression of patriarchy and a weapon of war, to explanations based on the Freudian Oedipal complex.
- 9 Though there are fascinating and novel connections between witchcraft and the lines of inquiry that Yengo engages, his work is ultimately burdened by a competing interest in lineage, which proves to be a cumbersome and limiting analytical tool. Equally problematic is that much of the work is riddled with assumptions that are biased towards male experiences, treating women as a residual category, and weakened by psychoanalytical theories that further enmesh the arguments in unaddressed concerns regarding the applicability of psychoanalysis to African psychologies.³² Though this approach does lead many arguments back to Yengo's most promising line of inquiry regarding the individualization of society, the relationship of the individual to society and witchcraft remain unclear. Though Yengo establishes a strong foundation for addressing the inter-generational impacts of colonization on the family and the structure of power in society, much of the analysis regarding witchcraft and sorcery is tenuous and detracts from, rather than adds to, this engaging discussion.
- 10 Both *Guerres mystiques* and *Les mutations sorcières* fall into difficult territory in attempting to address witchcraft. Both authors have undertaken innovative approaches to this complex terrain that lead each towards varying disconnections between analysis and evidence. Where Miran-Guyon fails to fully engage with key political complexities, stunting her analysis, Yengo provides a wealth of analysis that is dislocated in time and space. Though both authors are building on previous research that was well-grounded, succinct, and persuasive, tackling witchcraft as a central focus seems to lead each towards a landscape fraught with pitfalls. This is perhaps the cursed nature of witchcraft. Both authors struggle with the dearth of tools, language, and frameworks available to deal with this immense and unwieldy topic. Though these works do not provide clear or concrete conclusions, they nevertheless offer essential contributions to the task of building a broader foundation of witchcraft studies. Miran-Guyon's documentation of religious discourses and Yengo's deep theories of lineage test the waters of witchcraft

analysis push the boundaries of our knowledge of this elusive and obscure aspect of the world.

NOTES

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