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Magic and Witchcraft

Implications for Democratization and Poverty-Alleviating Aid in Africa

Dirk Kohnert [1])

Abstract

The belief in occult forces is still deeply rooted in many African societies, regardless of education, religion, and social class of the people concerned. According to many Africans its incidence is even increasing due to social stress and strain caused (among others) by the process of modernization. Most often magic and witchcraft accusations work to the disadvantage of the poor and deprived, but under particular circumstances they become a means of the poor in the struggle against oppression by establishing "cults of counter-violence". Magic and witchcraft beliefs have increasingly been instrumentalized for political purposes. Apparently they lend itself to support any kind of political system, whether despotic or democratic. The belief in occult forces has serious implications for development co-operation, too. Firstly, because projects, constituting arenas of strategic groups in their struggle for power and control over project resources, are likely to add further social stress to an already endangered precarious balance of power, which makes witchcraft accusations flourish. And secondly, because witchcraft accusations may serve as indicators of hidden social conflicts, difficult to detect by other methods.

Keywords: occult belief systems, democratization, poverty alleviation, development aid, Sub-Saharan Africa

JEL-classification: N3, N37, N97, O17, O2, O55, Z12, Z13

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The belief that persons are able to master occult forces is a socio-cultural phenomenon of great importance in Africa south of the Sahara. Particularly in Western Africa, magic and witchcraft have been deeply-rooted for generations, regardless of social strata and urban or rural settings. Magic may be applied for good or bad ends. However, belief in "black" magic, or witchcraft, used to harm other people for selfish purposes, is the most problematic aspect of this belief. Most Africans, that is, peasants, business people or politicians alike, even internationally renowned scientists and leaders of Christian churches, are convinced that witchcraft constitutes a real threat to society in Africa (cf. Geschiere 1995; Raynal, 1994:124-25; Awolalu 1979:81-84; cf. Marwick 1975; Multhaupt 1990).

Based on a review of the literature and on the author's comparative studies in three African societies, this article will answer the following questions: First, what are the general characteristics of occult beliefs in Africa? Second, what are the underlying reasons behind witchcraft accusations, and who are the major targets of such accusations? Third, how widely are occult beliefs instrumentalized for political purposes, and how does this affect the process of democratization? Fourth, do witchcraft accusations have any significance for poverty-alleviating development planning? (1).

1. INCIDENCE AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In spite of widespread assumptions (cf. e.g. Brain 1982:382), the incidence of magic and witchcraft does not necessarily decrease in the course of modernization. According to many Africans, it has rather increased, both in terms of frequency and in terms of effectiveness over recent decades (cf. Drucker-Brown 1993:539; Kohnert, 1983). Generally speaking this may be due to a psycho-social reaction to the African Crisis, as de Jong explains in the case of the *njang-njang* movement in Guinea-Bissau (cf. Jong 1987a). In particular belief in witchcraft may be a reaction to an increasing "conflict-producing potential" caused by processes of social differentiation in the context of the evolution of a market economy and "modernization" of

economy and society (cf. Drucker-Brown, 1993; Geschiere/Fisiy 1994; Jong 1987a; Kohnert 1983; McLeod 1975).

The gradual change from subsistence production to market economy even in rural areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, resulted in the spread of social relationships, typical for the stage of development of a commodity economy, even in the realm of organization and methods of witchcraft accusation. In pre-colonial times occult knowledge was organized and passed on rather in a collective way, at least in the majority of acephaleous African societies. Generally speaking secret societies on the village level were in charge of identification and punishment of witches. Since the beginning of colonial rule the persecution of witches has gradually been taken out of the hands of the village or ethnic community. It is either becoming individualized, being the domain of professional witch-hunters, or appropriated by external (state) agencies, regarded with dismay and distrust by their subjects (e.g. in cases of political witch-hunts, see below). Case studies from Northern Nigeria (cf. Kohnert 1983) or Zaire (cf. Duvieusart 1992:468/69) showed that already in the 1950s many witch-doctors started to pursue their art professionally, like any other business. Dating back to the time of the famous "oil-boom" of the 1970ths, there are reports from Nupeland (Northern Nigeria) of witch-doctors, who claim to be qualified by (more or less obscure) "diplomas", proudly displayed in their office, together with photographs of famous cases of confessed or convicted witches, discovered by them (cf. Kohnert 1983). In Zaire these new *entrepreneurs* were even in possession of "official" credentials issued by the provincial administration. Thus, "witch-doctor" is becoming a profession, similar to that of a trader, lawyer, physician, or a village chemist. Requests for his (or her) service most often come from concerned individuals. More rewarding, however, are calls by family heads or local village chiefs. At times local chiefs - probably "convinced" by higher administrative authorities, eventually collaborating with the sorcerers - are obliged to "purify" their villages from witches (cf. Duvieusart 1992:468 for Zaire; Kohnert 1983 for Northern Nigeria; Drucker-Brown, 1993:539 for Northern Ghana).

Usually, witch-doctors are requested to search for persons, who might be held responsible for the calamity that struck some close relative, the family, or the village. The persecution and punishment of witches is increasingly being commercialized, comparable to indulgence practices

(*Ablaß-Handel*) of the catholic church in 16th century Europe (cf. the debate on the European witch-hunts, Ben-Yehuda 1980; Hoak 1983; cf. Elwert's "venality-thesis"; Elwert-Kretschmer, 1995).

Witchcraft belief in Africa is expressed in different forms, according to region, religion, or ethnic affiliation. There are, however, also some essential common grounds. Thus, witchcraft belief *as such* is in general not gender-specific (contrary to the practice of its persecution). Moreover, all over Africa the belief in occult forces is very common at different individual levels of education and various religious confessions. Since the *jihad* of the pre-colonial (19th century) Shonghai empire, for example, Moslem rulers of the Nigerian emirates, have skillfully employed witchcraft beliefs for their own vested interests (cf. Kohnert, 1983). The same is true for Christian traditional leaders in Yorubaland (cf. Awolalu 1979:81-84). By the end of colonial rule, fundamentalist Christian churches and sects, came to the fore which, eager to respond to a popular demand, integrated into their conception of the universe the very same traditional elements condemned by European missionaries as "pagan" (e.g. Chrétiennes Célestes, Pentecostal-Church, Rosarian, and various independent African churches like the Kimbanguists of Zaire). Most of them claim to provide most effective protection against witchcraft to its followers. For this very reason these fundamentalist Christian churches enjoy today a considerable attraction (cf. Meyer, B. 1992, about the combat of Pentecostal groups against *adzetwo* (witches) in south-east Ghana). High representatives of established Christian churches, such as the bishops of Lagos and Kinshasa, believe in witchcraft too. According to the latter, this belief is shared by about 80% of all Africans. Last not least, even African scholars and decision-makers in economy and society, educated in a renowned Western universities, strongly share witchcraft beliefs - according to occasion, more or less openly (cf. Kohnert 1983; Kadya Tall 1995).

2. WITCHCRAFT-ACCUSATIONS, TARGET GROUPS, AND DEVELOPMENT

Depending on the mode of production and living conditions in which witchcraft accusations are rooted, they may have either repressive or emancipatory effects. More often than not the

gradual change over time, of both content and meaning of witchcraft-accusations, happens to appear unnoticed by the population, because it is disguised by continuity in the outward appearance of the cult. Even though the formal framework of specific anti-witchcraft cults (e.g. masks, rituals, and structure of secret societies) like the *ndakó gboyá* of the Nupe remain unchanged, under surface its witchcraft accusations may pursue totally different ends over time (cf. Kohnert 1983). This difference in content can be explained only in the light of the cultural and social setting in which the population concerned is embedded and which stimulates the faith in occult forces. Any analysis and prognosis regarding the influence of these belief-systems on economic and cultural change in Africa would have to pay due consideration to the articulation of witchcraft accusations, its socio-cultural dimension, and modes of production from which it originates. Unfortunately, however, this insight begins to pave its way only gradually. It has been applied up to now just in some isolated field-studies (cf. e.g. Fisiy/Geschiere 1990; Geschiere/Fisiy 1994; Hunter-Wilson 1951; Kohnert 1983; Offiong 1983). There still exists a lot of confusion about the apparently contradicting different political functions of witchcraft accusations and their underlying reasons (cf. controversy between Geschiere 1995 and Buijtenhuijs 1995); much of these contradictions could be solved by referring to the articulation between witchcraft accusations and modes of production as indicated above.

In most cases the effects of witchcraft belief work to the disadvantage of the poor and deprived. It serves predominantly as an ideology that legitimates oppression and exploitation. Up to early colonial rule, anti-witchcraft movements, like the *ndakó gboy*á in the hands of the Etsu Nupe (emir of Nupeland, Northern Nigeria), served to exploit their subjects ruthlessly; in the 1920's the annual raids of the *ndakó gboy*á in the Bida-Emirate grew to such dimension that the British colonial administration feared, there might be nothing left to pay its taxes. Thus, the movement was prohibited (cf. Nadel, 1954). Whether this prohibition has ever been really effective, is open to question. Anyway, the *ndakó gboy*á reappeared in revised form by the time of independence (cf. Kohnert 1983). Apart from this there are many examples of despots of modern independent Africa, like Mobutu of Zaire or Eyadéma of Togo, who continue to use magic and witchcraft beliefs for the domination and exploitation of their citizens (cf. Ellis, S.

1993:471/72; Toulabor M. 1986:124-131 for Togo, and Buijtenhuijs 1995:134-35; Schatzberg, 1993:448/49 for Africa in general).

In addition, the use of witchcraft and magic in intra-elite competition for economic or political power is quite common. For example, all over Africa the use of experts in occult forces as high ranking councilors of African heads of state - independent of the latters political orientation - are well known. The senegalesian *marabout* Kébé at the "court" of Mobutu (cf. Nguza, 1982:63), or M. Cissé, the malian *marabou* and minister of Kérékou, the "communist" head of state of the former Peoples Republic of Benin, are just two famous examples. Nguza (1982:29/30), a former minister of foreign affairs of Mobutu, provides other illustrative examples of the use of "black magic" by the wives of the *barons du règime* in the fight against political opponents.

Although women and men alike do take an active part in witchcraft accusations, women most often participate in a rather inferior way. In many secret cults for example, they are excluded as office-holders, and in addition they are more likely to suffer from accusations to employ witchcraft than men. It is not witchcraft belief in general, but rather its *persecution* which often has strong gender-specific, i.e. women discriminating features. Different - sometimes contradicting - reasons have been offered, to explain this apparent gender-bias (cf. Brain 1982:374 for Tanzania; Drucker-Brown, 1993:540, 542-548 for the Manprusi of Northern Ghana; Nadel, S.F. 1952 for four African societies). The concept of "sex-antagonism" developed by S.F. Nadel (ibid.) figures prominently among these explanations which have been reconsidered elsewhere (cf. Kohnert 1983:8-11, 25-27, 29-35). Here it might suffice to say that most of the "pure" one-dimensional theories of witchcraft, be it cognitive, political, or feminist, are likely to be too restrictive in reflecting the reality, although each of them may contain valid arguments.

In particular circumstances witchcraft belief can also be a means of the poor in the struggle against oppression. An example, often mentioned in this respect, are witchcraft accusations against the *nouveaux rich*es, who do not obey African traditional customary laws of the village

community, like the rules of redistribution and solidarity with kinsmen, of sharing wealth and assisting the poorer members of the community. Sanctioning offenders of these rules by means of occult forces is said to be an effective barrier to individual accumulation of wealth, capital formation, and economic development, especially in African societies without strong central authorities, as among the Maka of Cameroon or the Ibibio of Eastern Nigeria (cf. Geschiere 1995:144, 230; Fisiy/Geschiere 1991:252/53, 269; Offiong 1983:81). But even in the highly stratified Northern Nigerian societies, like Bornu Emirate, witchcraft accusations, related to enrichment through development projects, do occur (Tijani 1976:130; cf. Geschiere 1995:10, 255, for other examples of witchcraft accusations related to development projects).

The rationale behind this kind of reasoning of the unusually successful, the *évolués*, is different according to individual circumstances: either they are afraid of being killed by envious local witches, or they fear being accused and harassed as witches themselves, because the villagers hold they could have acquired their wealth only by occult powers at the expense of their fellows. But the result seems to be always the same: negative incentives for the development of individual achievement motivation and capital formation. The other side of this coin is the fear of the better-off and go-getters concerning "exploitation" by their family or kinship group. Therefore many newly rich African migrate and hesitate to return to their families or home villages. A case study from the Giriama of Kenya even reports of rich traders who preferred to convert from their traditional animist religion to Islam, because they saw no other way to evade customary rules of greeting, which might involve poisoning in case the traders are accused of witchcraft (Parkin 1979:223).

In summing up, there seems to exist surprising parallels concerning the function of African witchcraft beliefs, based on communal modes of production with similar beliefs in other parts of the world. Concerning Tudor England of the 17th century for example, witchcraft prosecution has been described as a means of effecting decisive social change from the egalitarian mutually dependent village community to a more individualistic and stratified social structure; the old values of mutual aid were in fact undermined, while on the surface, they were maintained by witchcraft-accusations (cf. Macfarlane, 1970:302-03), an explanation which seems to fit quite well into the present conditions in Africa (as summarized above).

Still another form of social conflict resolution are messianic grass-root movements "from below" which use magic and witchcraft accusations as a means to fight the "evil" in this world by establishing "cults of counter-violence" (cf. Wilson 1992; Buijtenhuijs 1995:136-37). Such cults are more often than not dependent on charismatic leaders, as shown in the battle of the *Naprama* under Manuel António against the terrorism of the "devils" of the RENAMO in Northern Mozambique in 1990/91 (cf. Wilson, K.B. 1992:582). The RENAMO too, tried effectively to legitimize its violence by rituals performed in collaboration with their *feticeiros*. The fight of the Holy-Spirit-movement of the Acholi against the government army in Uganda in 1987 (cf. Behrend, H. 1992), and the contested use of witchcraft accusations against their enemy by militants of the guerrilla army of Amilcar Cabral in the early stages of the Guinean liberation war, are similar examples. The latter may have had in mind to follow the example of the Fulbe of Portuguese-Guinea, who revolted against their colonial emperors in the beginning of this century. Their revolt, again, was to a large extent initiated and lead by the *jambacos* (fetish priests) who applied its magic with considerable success (cf. Nogueira 1947:716). Thus witchcraft movements directed against colonial domination were quite common in other parts of Africa too. An interesting case to study are the *Ijov-*, *Haakaa-*, and *Inyambuan* movements of the Tiv in Northern Nigeria analyzed by Tseayo (1975:57-74). Also witch-hunting of war-mongers, and (alleged) brains behind disasters like epidemics, starvation etc. occurs fairly often, e.g. in Burundi 1993 (cf. *Afrique Express*, 12.10.93).

Finally, even frustrated efforts of social groups which took an active part in liberation movements did result in systematic witchcraft accusations "from below". The *njang-njang*-movement in Guinea-Bissau in the 1980's may serve as convenient example in this respect. The hopes of some Balante women, who during their active participation in the liberation struggle of Guinea-Bissau succeeded in shaking off the yoke of paternalistic domination, are supposed to be the driving force behind this movement. After independence had been achieved and the PAIGC took control, some women grew disappointed when they realized that mainly their male counterparts harvested the fruits of their common victory. The grudges of the *njang-njang*

women against the alleged dominance of the *homens grande* took the form of witchcraft accusations. Later-on such accusations launched by village-youth (male and female) in general against those who had betrayed the ideals of the liberation war (and also their ideals based on a somewhat fundamentalist Christian ethic) posed a real threat to Government which tried to legitimate its rule with similar egalitarian socialist ideals. The *njang-njang* became forbidden, many of its followers imprisoned, and some of the able-bodied men were coerced into forced labor in state development projects, where they had to assist the villagers in the reconstruction of dikes in rice polders (cf. Kohnert, 1988; Cardoso 1990; Jong 1987).

In the beginning even some progressive missionaries of the region saw these witchcraft-accusations as a dynamic element in the process of development rather than a barrier (personal communication, Padre Lino, Bissau, June 22, 1986). In the cases mentioned above, however, witchcraft beliefs have just limited "emancipatory" effects - if any at all - and even those are outweighed by negative side-effects. Therefore we strongly advice against any form of utilization of witchcraft beliefs in promoting development.

As soon as the charismatic leaders of these grass-root movements die, the hopes for a life free from conflict and violence that once motivated the movement, are usually disappointed. In fact, it is difficult to transmit occult power, particularly if it is linked with specific personal charisma, which has not yet been replaced by recognition of institutionalized spiritual powers of a secret cult. Successors of charismatic leaders often become victims of the temptation that lies in the possession and execution of power which then is mainly used for their own selfish purpose.

All these examples demonstrate the crucial importance of occult power in the social control of violence in Africa. Modern and traditional rulers alike have to understand and speak the language of ritual violence if they want to guarantee anything near to a state-monopoly of violence which has been considered as a necessary, but not sufficient, pre-condition of advanced stages of civilization (cf. Elias, 1976:444-447; Ellis, 1995).

3. INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF THE BELIEF IN OCCULT FORCES AND ITS MEANING FOR DEMOCRATISATION

Since the end of colonial rule magic and witchcraft beliefs have been instrumentalized in various ways for political purposes. Thus, occult forces become a weapon in the battle for supremacy over rival politicians. Even newly democratized states like Benin are no exception from this rule. For reasons of convenience we suggest a categorization of this instrumentalization in three different types:

First, legitimization of political power by means of occult beliefs. Thus politicians document their power also in the spiritual realm by attributing personal magic powers to themselves. This is a common practice which can be found in the bulwarks of "traditionalism", like the Northern Nigerian emirates, as well as in young African democracies. The case of the present head of State of Benin, Nicéphore Soglo may serve as a useful example. Educated at western universities and employed by the World Bank as one of its directors in Paris, he contested the place of Kérékou as president of the Benin Republic in 1991. At the end of the campaign for the presidential elections Soglo fell seriously ill. He had to be flown out for treatment at the military hospital of Val-de-Grace in Paris. For every Benin citizen it was clear beyond doubt that Soglo had been "bewitched" by his adversary Kérékou. Later on Soglo was at pains to invoke the backing of renowned *vodounon* to demonstrate his superior power even in the realm of occult forces. With the organization of an international *vodoun*-festival "*Ouidah 92*" he became known among the population as a leading figure in the combat against witchcraft (cf. Kadya Tall 1995:199-207; Mayrargue 1995). In January 1996 *vodoun* became finally recognized officially by the Head of State as one of the great religions of Benin, beside Islam and Christianism. Many voters believed that the timing of this recognition had been chosen in a bid to enhance Soglos chances of reelection in the presidential elections two months later. Typical of this and similar cases is that rulers use witchcraft beliefs in a defensive manner, both as deterrent *vis à vis* their adversaries and to impress or assure their followers.

On the other hand there are autocratic rulers who use magic and witchcraft beliefs in a rather offensive ways, either by attacking rivals directly by means of "black magic" (e.g. poisoning, psycho-terror) or in using psychological warfare, by threatening potential voters and political opponents under the pretext of being able to see who is voting for them, and the subsequent

threat of reacting accordingly. Examples of this aggressive form of instrumentalization of witchcraft belief abound all over Africa. They range from more or less veiled threats up to the assassination of political adversaries (for examples cf. Schatzberg, 1993:448-450; Toulabor 1986:124-131; Ellis, 1993:471/72). During the Togolese National Conference of August 1991, for example, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) exposed a number of cases of political opponents of the Eyadéma-Regime which were imprisoned, tortured, and executed because of alleged "witchcraft" against the Head of State. In some cases mere accusation of opponents by district officers was regarded as sufficient proof that they were witches which had to be imprisoned secretly in the concentration camp of Mantouri or elsewhere (cf. Kaboré, 1991:25; Africa Confidential, 13/09/91:3).

Finally, opposition against the belief in witchcraft may be used as a cover or convenient means to discredit other political opinions or opponents and the socio-cultural setting in which they are embedded. Advocates of modernization theories for example, use to discard African belief- and value-systems which incorporate the belief in magic and witchcraft summarily as "traditionally minded"; they want it to be eradicated and replaced as soon as possible by Western standards of democratization. The usual argument being that African belief systems are based on irrational attitudes (cf. chap. 4) or "false consciousness". Left and right wing doctrinism is especially liable to favor this kind of simplistic reasoning. The struggle of the Marxist regime of M. Kérékou against traditional rulers and "relics of feudalism" in Benin (from Dec. 1975 onwards) may serve as an example (cf. Kadya Tall, 1995:196-99; Elwert-Kretschmer, 1995; Multhaupt 1990:231-32): Apparently its campaign against "obscurantism, witchcraft, and fetishism" was based on the pseudo-Marxist thesis that the belief in occult forces is a manifestation of "false consciousness" which ought to be eliminated as soon as possible in the interest of the people. Although the way of these political anti-witchcraft campaigns was certainly paved with good intentions, its final results were counter-productive. For example, local party leaders and the population of Southern Benin misunderstood the campaign of the communist party against the "relics of feudalism", backed by the state owned radio and newspaper "*Ehuzu*", as an official call to open up the hunt for witches, i.e. political and other "enemies" of the socialist state, namely traditional chiefs and *vodoun*-priests. The

mass of the population regarded witch-hunting in politics, press and radio rather as a confrontation of old and new masters, i.e. a competition about political supremacy. Under prevailing socio-cultural structures of clientelism and the prebend economy in African states like Benin, the one who displays the most effective power (including occult power) is more often than not considered to be the legitimate ruler.

Since about two decades, we can observe the revival of the recognition of witchcraft within the African judiciary for similar reasons. This recognition had been refused for almost a century due to the influence of colonial law, which ruled that a defense founded on the belief in witchcraft should be rejected, at least as far as "modern" formal law is concerned (in contrast to customary law; for different case studies cf. Fisiy 1990, on Cameroon; Chavunduka 1980, on Zimbabwe; Kohnert 1983 on Nigeria). But by now there are African judges who seriously consider even the training of judges in matters of supernatural powers in order to assure a more effective legal prosecution of witches. Thus a judge at the court of appeal at Daloa, Côte d'Ivoire, at the occasion of his installation (in Nov. 1993), made an appeal for the initiation of judges into the art of witchcraft (cf. *Fraternité Matin, 16.11.93)*. Already in the early 1980's a staff member of the faculty of law at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, one of the renowned Nigerian Universities, called publicly for a change in the attitudes of Nigerian courts towards witchcraft too, with a similar reasoning (cf. Chukkol 1981:30-34).

Apparently the belief in occult forces thus lends itself to support any kind of political system, whether despotic or democratic. This is not as surprising as it might seem at first sight. In fact most supernatural, e.g. religious beliefs have been used at one time or another exactly for the same purpose. Just remind the political position of Christian churches from the time of the crusades up to the First and Second World War. Similar to any other system of belief, there are no scientific methods of falsification of African magic and witchcraft belief. By its very nature it evades inter-subjective control on the part of the faithful.

However, believers in occult forces everywhere (not just in Africa) are particularly exposed to the danger of domination and exploitation by their cult leaders because of the atmosphere of

secrecy which surrounds these cults, combined with gender- and age-specific access restrictions (secret cults in Africa are often women-discriminating), hierarchical systems of knowledge (according to different levels of initiation etc.), and last not least, the threat of severe punishment (ultimately the death penalty) in case of treason. I should dare to formulate as working hypothesis that the degree of secrecy and its rigidity of enforcement for a given religious cult closely correlate with the degree of exploitation of its followers. Of course this should not be regarded as an iron rule, and one may argue that any religious cult, and any political system supported by it, depends on at least some degree of secrecy. However it is obvious to me that this is not just a question of degree, but of qualitative differences: anti-witchcraft cults for example are detrimental to equality, transparency, and accountability, three basic conditions of both the development of democratic attitudes and poverty-alleviating development projects.

On the other hand, the promotion of transparency and the democratization of decision-making processes, on all levels, in politics as well as in society and economy, would not just favor the process of democratization and development in general; it would most likely contribute to the gradual eradication of witchcraft beliefs too. Where there is transparency, insight into the motives of your neighbor, relative, or political rival, and more equal access to resources, there is less need to look for scapegoats which could be blamed for individual misfortune.

In general the commandments of magic-religious belief systems such as the *vodoun* are meant to conserve traditional social and ethnic structures from which they originate. But there are exemptions. First, we showed already above that the overall impact of those belief systems does not necessarily correspond with the intended results and aims. The long-term effect of the witchcraft accusations based on the communal mode of production for example, might very well result in the unintended weakening of communal structures of mutual aid, and the individualization and commercialization of social relationships. Second, under certain favorable circumstances, enlightened progressive leaders may be able to effect a gradual change in the meaning of their cults. They may even try to adapt it to the requirements of democratization

and the construction of civil society. For example by mediating basic ethical values (e.g. solidarity, integrity, courage, respect towards authorities) which may be favorable to the creation of civil society and consolidation of the state (e.g. monopolization of violence) as well, if the point of reference will be no longer the clan or the patronage network but the nation.

However, the experience of past five years of democratization in Africa tells us that it is extremely difficult to effect such a change in the short run, even under favorable conditions, like in Benin. In case of conflict between local *versus* national or international value systems, customary rules and the clientelistic network of traditional rulers rather support the *status quo* of existing power relations, with all its negative consequences on nation building and the quality of state-government. This is exactly one reason, why it is so difficult to translate the political conditionality of the international donor community into public policy. Even western educated, well-meaning high-ranking African politicians with excellent international reputation are sometimes helpless with regard to the struggle against corruption and nepotism. They might dispose over sufficient resources to be independent in material and financial matters, but could nevertheless feel at the same time a pressing need for protection against imminent menaces by occult powers. By painful personal experience quite a number of African politicians realized that in case of conflict nobody could protect them against threats of the super-natural universe but their traditional rulers. In this case they would still have to pay allegiance to the spiritual overlords of their local setting which are more often than not rather traditionally minded, i.e. they would have to serve the interests of patronage and local solidarity first. Recent attempts in Benin to upgrade *vodoun* as officially recognized national religion, have been successful, last not least because of the active support of the Head of State himself. This has been interpreted by many Benin citizen as the paying of "old debts" on the part of the Soglo family. Whether this constitutes at the same time a point of departure for the creation of a new authentic African ethic to promote economic and social development of the Nation, similar to the function of the Protestant ethic in the course of capitalist development in Europe, remains to be seen.

4. ON THE MEANING OF OCCULT BELIEF FOR PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Development projects - especially poverty-alleviating ones - usually intervene into existing social structures of a target population, overloaded with conflicts between different strata, ethnic or religious groups, young and old, male and female. As a rule, the benefit of the project is not distributed equally between these conflicting groups. Therefore it is likely to add further social stress which endangers the already precarious balance of power. By now it has been recognized that even the most sophisticated planning methods can not prevent vested interests and hidden agendas of all parties involved to exercise a decisive but incalculable influence on the implementation of development projects. From this point of view projects create new arenas for strategic groups in their struggle for power and control over project resources (cf. Bierschenk et al 1993:97-106). In view of what has been said above about the close relationship between social stress, witchcraft accusations, and development it is only reasonable to expect that the belief in occult forces exerts a strong influence on the implementation of development project in Africa too. Examples of interference of witchcraft belief with project planning and execution in Africa abound for those who want to see (2). But unfortunately most Western development experts, the majority of which is still rather interested in technology transfer than in improved human relations, do not want to recognize this problem, at least not officially, and not as problem which should be tackled professionally. At informal occasions, at the hotel bar for example, many of them readily admit to know of such strange incidences. But as they consider it as the mere outcrop of irrational (i.e. "primitive") behavior, they see no point in solving these problems professionally, that is by the means of proven scientific methods. They might think that the process of modernization, investment in human capital and education, as well as exposure to the "advanced" European culture embedded in development aid, would automatically eliminate this kind of problems. This, however, is a fallacy as shown above. Eradication of magic- and witchcraft belief is not a question of intelligence or education, but of modes of production, social relations, and the openness of society.

African systems of occult belief are anything else but "irrational" as has been demonstrated already by a classic of ethnographic literature (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1937). Although its inherent

logic can hardly be grasped in thought patterns of natural science, yet its methodological structure is no less rational than the impulse-giving ethics of the Protestant spirit of capitalism in 19th century Europe or Confucianism in the case of newly industrialized Asian countries. The relevant distinction in this respect is that each adheres to a different rationality with different degrees of achievement- and development orientation.

Even though we might not want to accept this kind of occult rationality, we are in a position to comprehend it. We are able to analyze its internal logical fabric as well as its impact on economy, society, and politics in Africa in general, and on target groups, project policy and implementation in particular.

Due to long experience of blind missionary zeal or arrogant attitudes of Colonialists and educated Westerners, Africans (beneficiaries and local experts alike) tend to think that Western development experts are principally unable to understand the peculiarities of African magic. Due to lack of information and concern, Western attitudes towards this issue have been characterized by ignorance and intolerance. For these reasons it is difficult to arrive at an open discussion on the topics in question with African counterparts or decision makers. It is quite surprising that although there exist innumerable case-studies and a long-dating discussion among anthropologists and sociologists on the meaning of witchcraft in the African socio-cultural context, neither the so-called "applied" social science nor development experts recognize how important the consideration of magic- and witchcraft beliefs is relative to their actual work. Social research regarding the phenomenon of occult beliefs with a implementation-oriented approach is still in its initial stage, and so far was practically limited to the area of psychiatry and social psychology (cf. Jong 1987a). It would be especially desirable to strengthen the systematic analysis of the impact of these beliefs on the socio-structural and socio-cultural changes in Africa in general (for first examples cf. Aguessy 1993; Brain 1982), and on the process of democratization and development co-operation in particular (cf. Kadya Tall 1995; Mayrargue 1995). In the domain of conflict research, witchcraft accusations could serve as social strains gauge (cf. Marwick 1964) and indicators of deep yet latent conflicts.

Although we are at pains to demonstrate that the belief in occult powers is already a serious constraint on ordinary development co-operation, it is even more relevant in the context of the political dialogue and democratization projects which are presently favored by the international donor community in Africa. The quest for "good government", accountability and transparency, human rights projects, and the constant underlining of poverty-alleviation puts an increasing stress on the political and social elite of recipient states of development assistance. In this social climate witchcraft-accusations flourish because of the search for scapegoats to explain individual misfortune; and this poses additional threats to the requested openness of dialogue. All this needs to be taken into account if we really want to promote participatory planning and implementation of projects under adverse socio-cultural conditions, on whatever level: Whether during bilateral government negotiations, or during the cozy atmosphere of project planning workshops, guided by the philosophy of the logical framework approach, or in the course of "exposure programs" with the target groups, we have to stress over and over again that development is a question of improving human relations, self-help capacities, i.e. of social, and not so much of technical assistance.

Notes:

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(2) cf. Tijani, 1976:130; Geschiere, 1995:10, 255 for examples of witchcraft related social conflicts in development projects. - However, in general the documentation of such cases proves to be quite difficult. Not just because of neglect of such cases by conventional development experts, but also, because this constitutes a highly sensitive subject. Let me illustrate the complexity of the documentation-problem by just one example: In 1995 I participated in an impact study of church development projects in Zimbabwe. Although I was told by one country expert before my departure that - unlike Western Africa - occult belief systems did not constitute a major problem in Zimbabwe, I came to realize that out of five rural development projects three of them, at one stage or another, run into serious problems because of witchcraft accusations. In one irrigation project implementation had been delayed for several years because of "land tenure conflicts" as the project officer told me. Later on I realized that it was rather the traditional chief of a neighboring village who was opposed to the construction of the irrigation dam at the planned site, because he wanted to have the project in his home village. Quite understandably he did not forward his real interest, but warned the neighboring villagers that if they would proceed with their project, they would run into serious problems because the land of the construction site had to be regarded as sacred land of their ancestors. After some years the dispute was solved with the help of a local priest and the dam was constructed at the original site. However, short afterwards the priest died suddenly; actually he committed suicide (out of reasons which do not interest here), but the villagers thought he got bewitched and killed; this incidence again put at risk the whole project.

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