

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Harry G. West *Ethnographic Sorcery*

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Editors' note: Now and again an extraordinary book comes across our desk that speaks to diverse constituencies. We feel that Harry West's *Ethnographic Sorcery* is one of these books. In ninety-two elegantly written pages, it advances, on several levels, ongoing discussions crucial to understanding African societies and the discourses on African society. By considering elements of his field experience, West helps illuminate the nature of research in Africa and the production of "knowledge" on Africa. By framing his inquiry within the broader development of anthropological literature, he provides a review of the conceptual field relating to "sorcery" in African societies. And from his encounters with the people of the Muedan plateau he develops a commentary on the anthropological enterprise itself. The people of northern Mozambique see ethnographic analysis as a hidden process with potentially enormous power over their lives—as an alternative universe outside of their immediate control; within this vision, West argues, ethnography can be seen as a form of sorcery of its own.

With such broad-reaching elements in play, we solicited commentaries from several scholars and share them here.

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It is easy to name virtues of this book. It is lucid, learned, engaging—and short. Reading what it has to say about "sorcery" in contemporary Africa and about the ways contemporary anthropology strives to get to know and understand the phenomenon by confronting it at eye-level is a "must" for novices and a strong "should" for experts.

It is not so easy, however, to fulfill a reviewer's first obligation—to summarize the book's content and the logic behind its structure. Significantly, I think, the fifteen chapters are not numbered; the sequence bears no resemblance to customary divisions of a monograph and their titles are evocative rather than descriptive. To meet the challenge that this represents let me

begin with an observation on genre—that of the “second book,” in which an ethnographer, having already fulfilled the academic obligation to publish his or her dissertation research in monograph form, now feels compelled (and free) to reflect on what that project was really about. West laid the foundations with fieldwork in 1994, 1999, and at least one more recent stay in 2001 among “Muedans,” as he calls them, mainly rural Makonde living on the Mueda plateau in postsocialist northern Mozambique. He was helped by several local researchers, whose contributions he takes care to qualify as that of fellow ethnographers rather than assistants. Initially his project had been to reverse the anthropological gaze on the past—what is called tradition—and study the Muedan conception of a (their) future; as he declared, he was “in search of the forward-looking peasant.”

While indeed he found what he had set out to look for—somewhere in this book he characterizes Muedans as “futurists”—his querying the future landed him in the present. Apparently something else must happen before we are willing and able to recognize the contemporaneity and co-temporaneity of our African objects of study. For many (including myself) this was the discovery of “popular culture”; for West (and others) it seems to have been the “modern” omnipresence of “sorcery.”

While the chapter titles may leave one a bit mystified, it quickly becomes clear that the chapters themselves consist of episodes in a tale of progress or, to invoke an image that may be more appropriate, of a hunt. It is not a simple story to tell if (as is West's ambitious aim) the multiple strands of ethnographic analysis are to be woven into a single narrative: the advancement of research; the accumulation of ethnographic knowledge; the improvement of understanding *and* advances in the trajectory followed by the hunted beast; anthropological theory generally; and witchcraft/sorcery studies in particular. The combination of the multiple levels at which this presentation unfolds makes a heavy demand on the reader's capacities for absorption: necessary background information on the history and politics of postsocialist Mozambique; vivid, often moving, recollections of encounters and events during fieldwork; reported dialogues, self-searching reflections, quotation- and citation-laden disquisitions on classical sources and theoretical positions; and copious (though never boring) notes. It is probably best to consume such food for thought the way it is offered: in small portions.

In his conceptual reflections, West moves from symbolic approaches (often invoking Victor Turner and Roy Wagner) to phenomenological and language-centered explorations tempered with early Marx, to rhetorics (with a critical focus on metaphor), to discourse-and-power analyses (that strike me as Foucauldian even if he never mentions Foucault). And he does this in a way that allows him to maintain a critical stance to all without discarding any.

Where does it get him? First, because sorcery is approached from many angles, it is here presented not as a single-minded exotic practice but as a

mode of thought and action that may encompass Muedan life but is anything but a closed system. It works on the basic premise that there is a visible and an invisible world: the two realms interact and—another basic premise—they can be made to interact. From then on the story is a familiar one: there are specialists in matters of arranging interaction—both directing as well as preventing it by means of words, material substances, and agents (foremost among them killer-lions). West builds up suspense by focusing our attention on complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions. Sorcery “works” and it doesn’t; it can be destructive as well as constructive; sorcerers and healers are two of a kind. In short, everything that can be posited can be negated by those involved—and by the ethnographer trying to make sense of it all.

For West, the “denouement” of the story comes as the realization that sorcery and ethnography are two sides of a single coin. This may be hard to accept at first glance; yet it has precedents. (For instance, more than thirty years ago in the study of religious movements we recognized prophets and anthropologists as both being in the business of making sense of a changing world). Such a stance is fully in line with the progressive epistemological subversion of the “scientific” ascendancy—a position which our discipline used to claim over its objects of study. There has been talk of “the ethnographer’s magic” before; yet few have gone as far as West in pulling the rug from under any “metaphorical” meaning, first of sorcery and then of ethnography as sorcery. This makes him an epistemological daredevil, albeit ethically of the prudent sort: toward the end of the book he expresses hope that his work, though sorcery it may be, “will be seen as . . . sorcery of construction” (84).

West’s very argument—with ethnographic analysis as a type of sorcery—invites us to consider limitations, and specifically the limits, of his own approach. So here I offer a few of the questions to emerge from the text. Does elegant formulation justify the conclusion that ethnography is a “transcendent maneuver” (xi): can transcendence be maneuvered? Does elegant expression equate envisioning a world with remaking it (xi): does vision equal action? Yes and no, but it is the “no” that allows us to move on from striking pronouncement to critical discussion. He has our sympathies when he confesses that it was a mistake to think of Muedans’ understanding of the world in which they lived (above all by means of a discourse of sorcery) as a form of “false consciousness” (38). Does this mean that there was no false consciousness in this case, or that the possibility of false consciousness should not even be considered by anthropologists? Similarly, should embracing Cassirer’s view that reality only exists through its apprehension make us dismiss “reality” altogether (47)? Given the prominent role of “lions” in his story, one critical observation relates to West’s neglect of the vast body of ethnographic research on the political role of lion- and leopard-“societies” in colonial and postcolonial Africa. (What may seem a minor point at first glance may turn out major upon further inquiry.)

Let me end with a major question we ethnographers must face. Does not our very success in understanding other societies, in and on their own terms (especially in identifying the modes of thought and practices we designate as “sorcery”), also put us in danger of losing the distinctions between representation and interpretation, and between understanding and critique? The traps of identity-thinking (also called reifying and essentializing) are always set. Showing that we haven’t been caught (or showing how we may avoid the traps in the future) is part of our work as ethnographers.

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As a self-reflexive complement to his earlier monograph on sorcery on the Mueda Plateau in northern Mozambique, Harry West’s *Ethnographic Sorcery* focuses on questions that have plagued anthropologists ever since they started to study the shadowy topic of witchcraft/sorcery. In his fieldwork West was constantly confronted with the question of whether he believed in the “reality” of the terrible forces he was studying. Similar questions have inspired vast numbers of authors to nuanced (and some not-so-nuanced) answers: from Evans-Pritchard’s straightforward denial of witchcraft as “impossible” (in contrast to “sorcery”), to explanations of witchcraft as a screen for something else, and more recent protests against such “reductionism,” which attributes a type of “false consciousness” to informants. West seeks to transcend this stalemate by a subtle analysis of his changing perceptions of his own role in his ongoing discussions of sorcery with Muedans.

The short book has an elegant and evocative set-up. It is built around a series of vivid vignettes from West’s fieldwork, interspersed with theoretical discussions based on impressively wide reading. Two vignettes seem central to his argument. In the first chapter West evokes a somewhat unsettling response to a lecture he presented to a local research center, in which he proposed to “analyze” Muedans’ obsession with man-eating “sorcery-lions” (were-animals) from a symbolic approach; these “lions” he saw as “standing for” people’s ambivalence toward power. Whereupon Lazaro, a good friend of his, was moved to comment: “Andiliki [West’s local name], you don’t understand. . . . These lions . . . aren’t symbols—they’re real” (5). In a most evocative way, this sets the tone for the whole book.

The vignette in the last chapter is as vivid but has a quite different purport. Toward the end of his fieldwork West meets again with Chomo, the “President” of the local branch of the Mozambican “association of traditional healers.” Chomo is in a boisterous mood and proposes to “vaccinate” (initiate?) West; this means rubbing dangerous substances (such as battery acid) into a razor cut. Understandably, West panics a little. Yet he

feels that his fieldwork would fail if he estranged “the most respected” of all Muedan healers by refusing treatment. So he engages in a long dialogue with Chomo about how he has accumulated knowledge through his long conversations with him and others. In the end Chomo acknowledges this: “Andiliki, you know”—and accepts this knowledge as equivalent to vaccination (93). Other healers also increasingly respect his knowledge and imply that they came to see him as “a fellow sorcerer” (76). Indeed, a central line in the book is a growing emphasis on words, knowledge, and especially “articulated visions” as crucial in the “constitution of sorcery” (60). For West the ethnography of sorcery gradually shaded into sorcery itself: the ethnographer became a “sorcerer.”

With all respect for West’s elegant analysis I have questions on several points. One concerns West’s emphasis on an ontological distinction between “the visible” and the “invisible.” In my experience, there is at the most a distinction of access (only the initiated have access to the invisible) while the two domains are intricately intertwined in everyday life. I doubt also whether the distinction of these domains justifies maintaining the idea of sorcery as a metaphor: doesn’t this always imply an idea of “false consciousness?” But for reasons of space I want to focus on another point—the shift in West’s argument from acts (such as Lazaro’s statement that “these lions eat people”) to words and “articulated visions” as “constitutive of sorcery” (60). Do words, indeed, suffice to summarize people’s image of what is going on in witchcraft/sorcery? Certainly West is not alone in approaching sorcery in terms of discourse and words. Yet one of the few general traits of witchcraft discourse may be that it refers to human agency as the explanation behind many events. While these acts may often be hidden, and anthropologists will mostly know them only through words/discourse, yet to the people concerned such acts remain concrete. How does this relate to West’s elegant image of the ethnographer (marked by words) as sorcerer (marked by deeds, supposed but spectacular)?

In southern Cameroon, where I did my main fieldwork, initiation as healer (or as witch) requires a protocol of quite specific steps—thresholds to be taken with great difficulty. Healers must acquire “the second pair of eyes” which will enable them to “see” in the invisible world. Then they must acquire the ability to “leave” one’s body (to transform oneself into a ghost, an animal, or whatever)—a basic act in witchcraft. The healer’s primary question before treating a patient will always be “did you go out?”—for therapy, it is crucial to know whether the client has engaged in witchcraft or not. And the healer himself will also be supposed to “go out” in order to combat the witches and “bring back” the patient’s “soul.” Of course, the people I know in Cameroon refer also to “la sorcellerie des Blancs.” I was supposed to have my own kind of *djambe* (witchcraft) with made me drive my old car without accidents. But I only had a *djambe* in a very broad sense of the term. I was certainly not supposed to leave my body at night. Therefore, people would come to me to have their wounds dressed, but definitely not when they thought witch-

craft was involved. What could I do? I could not even see the witches (since I had refused to take the second pair of eyes). My knowledge was certainly respected—especially the idea that one might write a book—but being recognized as a healer/sorcerer requires at least the claim that one has undertaken certain actions and crossed decisive thresholds. Even if many of such “acts” remain known only through discourse, it would be a mistake to suppose that to the people all this is just words.

Such considerations have general implications. One is that while these notions lend themselves to wide applications, there are always certain core elements marking the “real thing” within the broader use of the term. In most parts of Africa (and also Europe) witchcraft still refers to special capacities and acts: getting a “second pair of eyes,” the ability to “leave one’s body,” to fly, to transform oneself. It is this idea of hidden forms of agency (to which only some have access) that makes this whole discourse so frightening. For anthropologists our discipline’s self-reflexivity, and our desire to understand more acutely what we are doing, risks steering us away from such harsh truths. Indeed, the elegant image of the ethnographer as sorcerer seems to distance West’s book from the harsh struggle people are waging to contain witchcraft even while becoming enmeshed in it ever more. I addressed similar issues elsewhere (“Sorcellerie et modernité: Retour sur une étrange complicité,” *Politique africaine* 79 [October 2000]: 17–32), advocating a historical approach to highlight the great fluctuations in people’s preoccupation with witchcraft. An interesting alternative is also the more pragmatic approach recently proposed by the Comaroffs (“Criminal Justice, Cultural Justice: The Limits of Liberalism and the Pragmatics of Difference in the New South Africa,” *American Ethnologist* 31, 2 [2004]: 188–204). However, even if I am inclined to pursue other directions, this does not preclude my appreciation of West’s book. It is impressive that such a short book raises so many important questions. Clearly in this case the constant interaction between powerful ethnography and sophisticated theorizing “works”—and it is on purpose that I use here another dangerous term in sorcery talk.

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The title of this new short book by Harry West, which builds on his original fieldwork in northern Mozambique, is intriguing, especially for a scholar of religion, like myself. It reveals a preoccupation in contemporary Western anthropology with what is called “sorcery” or “witchcraft,” but what I consider is better described as a part of the religious dimension of life in Africa. As I have argued in my own work, religion in Africa is best understood as a belief in an invisible world inhabited by spiritual forces deemed

to have effective power over the material world. It is precisely this interaction between two realms of life—the visible world of human beings, and the invisible world of spirits—that West grapples with in this book.

In Africa, as in many other parts of the globe, the spirit world is generally seen as a world of power. In this perspective, spiritual power is real power—it can transform people and change their lives. Whoever studies the religious traditions of Africa (whether these be indigenous or imported) can hardly avoid seeing how crucial the element of personal transformation is in all cases. Such a capacity of individuals to transform themselves occupies a central place in West's book.

The fact that certain people are deemed able to transform themselves into lions has triggered his interest in what may lie behind such a belief. Early in the book, West gives us a fascinating account of the epistemological confusion that results from a misunderstanding between himself, as a well-informed researcher of local beliefs and practices, and an audience of local researchers with intimate knowledge of the spirit world and its workings. It is to his credit that the intellectual challenges emerging from his initial state of confusion impel him to set out on an exploratory journey. It is unfortunate, however, that he places his investigation in the context of "sorcery," as this unnecessarily restricts the scope of his inquiry. Although the term is not defined, the book suggests that "sorcery" should be seen as synonymous with "witchcraft." Both terms are problematic—as are other terms frequently used in Africanist anthropology, such as "magic," the "occult," and similar expressions usually employed in reference to practices that in other parts of the world are normally considered within the sphere of religion. Such beliefs and practices as those described by West in terms of "sorcery" are characterized by their mystical nature. Yet analogous beliefs and practices form features of religious beliefs around the world. This being so, West's description of the mystical power that originates in the spirit world of the Muedans is handicapped by the conceptual framework he uses. Were the discussion to have been couched in terms of religion, it would have avoided any tendency toward African exceptionalism; such an approach would also have broadened considerably the scope of the argument.

There is a great need in general, in my opinion, for academics to reflect on the terminology they use in describing the reality of other people and for them to be fully aware of the connotations of the terms they use. By referring to certain people's beliefs as "magical," we imply that our own beliefs are "rational"; by referring to their religious practices as "sorcery" a similar message is implied, even if not intended. The colonial legacy has left us with a mental frame of reference intent on emphasizing the differences, rather than the similarities and parallels, between "us" and "them."

Taking religious ideas seriously, I have argued elsewhere, challenges the academic disciplines in which the study of contemporary Africa is most often conceived, notably anthropology. Africanists seem to have an aversion to writing about religion as a form of *belief*. When they do so, they prefer to

call it by other names, such as “sorcery” and “witchcraft.” Is religious belief a metaphor, as many anthropologists continue to suggest, and as West also originally thought? What else can one think when people claim that certain persons can (and do) turn themselves into lions, as West recounts?

In this book, West describes his personal search into the “real” meaning of such beliefs, thereby continuing the self-reflective and introspective trend that can be discerned in much of modern anthropology. His journey to discover the “true nature” of what he had hitherto considered in terms of metaphors leads him into a soul-searching exercise that raises many questions concerning the nature of knowledge. Although the journey is exciting—for himself and also for the reader—the end result is disappointing in my view. Rather than laying bare the fundamental nature of religious knowledge in Africa—in this case northern Mozambique—West’s ultimate conclusion is that anthropologists, too, can be considered as “sorcerers,” since both African “sorcerers” and Western anthropologists are ethnographers of sorts, and therefore fellow-sorcerers, equally engaged in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing the world in which they live.

This final observation does not take us any further in understanding the religious realities of many Africans. It does scant justice to Africans’ experiences concerning the invisible world. It ignores the fact that power emanating from the spirit world—that is, spiritual power—influences their lives in a way that many Western anthropologists are unable fully to comprehend. Anthropologists are no different in that respect from politicians, journalists, or others who deconstruct and reconstruct the world in seemingly magical ways. They all have power. But they lack the ability to bring about the type of personal transformation that people ascribe to the spirit world, which is so crucial to West’s argument.

Harry West’s objective in this book is to understand “sorcery.” His quest would have been more productive, in my view, if it had been to understand “religion.” If that were so, he would have discovered the essentially ambiguous character of religion (rather than of sorcery) as a human resource that people employ to keep their lives on course. He might also have discovered that by learning the language of religion, rather than that of sorcery, his final observations would not only have been more profound, but might also have reached well beyond the self-referential world of anthropology to include all those who share his interest in understanding unfamiliar peoples.

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In the first sentence of this book, Harry West is told by one of his informants that he “misunderstands” the culture associated with sorcery—namely that

sorcery lions are not symbols but real (5). In one of the book's last lines, another informant tells him: "You know" (about the power of occult knowledge). Between these two comments the reader is drawn into a thoughtful and carefully crafted personal reflection on the nature of the occult, but above all on the nature of anthropological knowledge and the identity of the anthropologist as a sorcerer's apprentice when it comes to demiurgic moves of making and unmaking worlds in ethnographic writing and thinking.

What is it, then, that Harry West—and the reader with him—comes to know about sorcery, ethnography and their (dis)similarities? The key question of the book is not only whether, in West's words, "Muedan sorcerers' imaginings (among them sorcery lions) are metaphors but rather whether metaphors (for that matter, all forms of discourse through which we conceive our worlds) constitute means of sorcery" (64).

The first question goes straight to the heart of what is, in my view, key to understanding the (African) worlds we endeavor to give meaning to in our anthropological exegeses. Increasingly, it seems, the only way to capture and interpret forms of local life (although far from exclusively in Africa) is by taking the notion of the shadow and of the invisible quite literally. More than ever, perhaps, local reality *is* the *occultus*, in its double sense: the processes that structure local lives are often clandestine and therefore remain hidden; and local reality itself has become impossible without a "knowledge of the hidden" and of the spiritual worlds beyond the physical reality of everyday life. Throughout Africa daily life has always used processes of mirroring these two realities to make sense of itself. The obverse and the reverse of the world went hand in hand, united through links of similarity, according to a principle of what Achille Mbembe has called "simultaneous multiplicities."

Today, however, a change seems to have appeared in the mechanisms operating this simultaneous multiplicity of the two different worlds (or "domains" as West calls them) that exist in and through each other. In many urban and rural sites throughout the African continent, something seems to have changed in the slippage between visible and invisible, in the folds of local life, between the diurnal and the nocturnal, between reality and what we call, for lack of a better word, its double, its shadow, its reflection or image. Within the local experiential frame, the double that lurks underneath the surface of the visible world somehow seems to have taken the upper hand. The seen and the unseen, it thus seems, no longer reflect, balance, and produce each other in equal and equally *real* ways. Somehow the reverse seems to have become more ontological than the obverse. The world of shadows is no longer experienced as a similar but parallel reality. On the contrary, it has come to inhabit and overgrow the known paths of its opposite, thereby making the physical world more incomprehensible every day, not only for anthropologists but also for many who inhabit these worlds on a daily basis.

A term currently used in Lingala (the lingua franca in one of my own

anthropological worlds, that of Kinshasa) to describe this new quality of mounting *Unheimlichkeit*, of the uncanny and elusive character of the local world that one inhabits, is *mystique*. For most in (urban) Congo this is the increasingly widespread designation for people, things, and situations: as “mystique,” meaning difficult to place, interpret, and understand. (A Mozambican counterpart of this might be the notion of *confusao*.) For many, it has indeed become difficult to fathom and assign meaning to the local realities in which they live. In this sense sorcerers’ “imagnations” are certainly not metaphors, at least not metaphors that “blaze a trail,” as Victor Turner would have said (through a reification of the Ndembu term *chijiki-jilu*), connecting the unknown to the known or the abstract to the concrete by predicating order onto what was previously inchoate.

And that is where, it seems to me, West’s analogy between sorcerers and ethnographers ends. The metaphors used by both are “sorcery” in the sense that in each case they can indeed be understood as acts of world-making. But whereas the anthropologist discursively makes a world in order to translate it and render it less incomprehensible, the nature of the sorcerers’ world-making is less unidirectional, far more fractal, and therefore ambivalent and complex. On one level, West’s book once more raises, though without transcending it, the old question of whether the extrapolation of “our” concepts of metaphor to other cultures (or, I would add, the translation of vernacular terms into our metaconcepts, as in Turner’s Ndembu example above, or as in West’s own use of the Muedan notion of *kupilikula*) remains valid at all, and whether our understanding of processes of meaning generation and representation should not be carried “beyond metaphor,” to draw on James Fernandez’s phrasing.

If anything, the realities of “sorcery” basically surpass the level of the discursive generation of metaphorical meaning. The essence of sorcery situates itself beyond metaphor (or even performance) precisely because it is ontological. Here “knowing” is not only “doing” but basically becomes “being.” Rather than metaphorically generating, symbolically representing, or performatively actualizing, the world of the sorcerer just “is.” In this, it will always be more powerful than the ethnographer’s sorcery, because we will never be able, I suspect, to fully capture it in a conscious, rational, logocentric, reflectionist, and discursive way. Harry West, of course, is clever enough to “know” this too, as indicated by the reference to the Borges story that opens his preface. In that respect, the last lines of the book are revealing as well, and indeed redeem the whole enterprise. Describing how he refuses to be “vaccinated” by a healer/sorcerer (i.e., to have the latter’s knowledge literally inscribed upon his own body and burned into his own flesh), West unmakes his own analogy between sorcerer and ethnographer in a brilliant move that indeed indicates he “knows” the real difference between ethnographic metaphors and the “embodied metaphor” of the sorcerer’s knowledge.

In conclusion, I found West's book both disappointing and refreshing, and for the same reason. Disappointing in the sense that we do not "know" more than we did in the beginning, namely that sorcery lions "aren't symbols—they're real." Refreshing (beyond the fact that it is always a treat to read someone who writes well) precisely because of the circularity of the argument and the realization that the mysteries of cultures' meaning-making remain intact, provoking anthropologists to continue to reinvent themselves, pushing the discipline beyond the borders of its own theory-building, and experimenting with its form beyond the standard ethnographic genre. Refreshing also because the book thereby illustrates once again anthropology's capacity to question itself and its own relevance in today's world.

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"But you aren't sorcerers, are you?" I asked, rhetorically hoping to alleviate the tension produced by my secondhand accusation.

To my surprise, Chofer looked at me pensively, although apparently unperturbed and unoffended. "I don't know," he answered, earnestly.

In Harry G. West's new and interestingly hybrid text, *Ethnographic Sorcery*, there are many conundrums like the exchange above. The puzzlement of the young Mozambican man who has just performed a dance that graphically detailed the actions of sorcerers is, metaphorically speaking, West's own puzzlement as an anthropologist studying sorcery instead of the peasant rationality that initially sent him to the field. Does performing the actions of a sorcerer in a dance lead inevitably to sorcery? Is studying sorcery admitting to sorcery's reality—not just for the people with whom the anthropologist works, but for the anthropologist himself? How can the anthropologist learn what other people know, if they admit to having thought carefully about, and been confounded by, aspects of their own social practice? When Malinowski cautioned us about the "ethnographer's magic" in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, could he have been speaking more literally and less playfully than most of us in academic anthropology would like to believe?

To West's great credit, *Ethnographic Sorcery* attempts no simple answers to the questions above. Instead, in an engaging and sometimes highly personal style, he brings the readers into these nesting conundrums, giving them a sense of how the experiences of his fieldwork led him to query our anthropological mode of inquiry along with the tenets of Muedan sorcery. While this project could have led to another bout of anthropological navel gazing such as the discipline has endured all too frequently since the 1980s, West manages instead to make us care about how Mozambican people find

meaning in their discourse about sorcery—as well as in their sorcerous and anti-sorcerous activities—while never taking the intellectually lazy path of turning “Andiliki” (his field-self) into a wide-eyed naïf whose narrative job it is to be constantly astonished and exhilarated by the strange goings-on in northern Mozambique.

The text begins with West being challenged—after giving a serious academic analysis of local sorcery based on Turnerian symbolic anthropology—by Mozambican scholars who are frankly a little embarrassed for him. His insistence on symbols and metaphors misses the mark, Andiliki is told; sorcery-fabricated lions are *real*, indeed, as real as any other “bush” lion. Acknowledging the authentic experiences of Muedans with lions (wherever those lions come from), as West learns, is crucial for understanding their equally authentic experiences of sorcery, since encounters with sorcery are arguably more common than close encounters with the big cats. After all, at one point in his fieldwork Andiliki is told the sad Muedan truth by a local healer that just about everybody is a sorcerer, and people are a good deal more numerous on the Mozambican ground than are lions. The anthropologist West therefore finds himself in an epistemological bind in his fieldwork: Can he learn about sorcery, in Muedan terms, without agreeing that sorcery is real or without becoming a sorcerer himself in the process?

Evans-Pritchard’s comfortable assertion that Zande witchcraft is based upon the faulty first premise that witches exist, even while the Zande system is otherwise logical, is not for Harry West. In a world where sorcerous knowledge leads to well-recognized human consequences—where lions will attack or people fall suddenly and mortally ill—how can the anthropologist, whose work it manifestly *is* to “know something” (a local euphemism for being a sorcerer), not be implicated in, rather than stand objectively outside of, the system? In the attempt to “know something” about Muedan society, the anthropologist steps on a philosophical version of the *lipande* (anti-sorcery mine) used by healers to combat sorcerers’ intentions. By learning and knowing about Muedan sorcery, one inevitably becomes a sorcerer; there is no such thing as an innocent inquiry at the level of such deep and potentially troubling knowledge. Zande witches had plausible deniability in Evans-Pritchard’s day, because who truly knows the state of his own, interior body? Even much of Western diagnostic medicine is based upon educated guesses about what is revealed about those interior bodies by our increasingly sophisticated laboratory tests and image technologies. West’s work in *Ethnographic Sorcery* requires us to ponder what—in asking so many questions about witchcraft, and studying its effects and remedies so carefully—Azande really thought was going on in the interior of Evans-Pritchard.

Harry West, looking back upon the Muedan education of Andiliki, refuses to follow Evans-Pritchard’s lead in magisterially not caring what the people in his fieldsite thought of his personal condition. Instead, he gives the reader a clear understanding that Muedans knew him, at last, to have

that “certain characteristic” that marks a sorcerer: Andiliki had learned enough to “know something.” However, we should not think this was considered a bad thing, so long as he used his dangerous knowledge for people’s benefit (including his own—no Muedan believes healers are entirely altruistic). The “ethnographic sorcery” of the book’s title can ultimately be a healing sorcery for our discipline, the anthropologist West argues, in the right hands and with the right attitude. Reading along and being educated with Andiliki, I found this to be sorcery of a compelling ethnographic nature: we can all learn something from West’s short but potent text.