

REVIEW ARTICLE

SCOTLAND YARD IN THE BUSH: MEDICINE
MURDERS, CHILD WITCHES AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF THE OCCULT: A
LITERATURE REVIEW¹

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SCOTLAND YARD AND THE OCCULT

In the Sherlock Holmes stories Scotland Yard famously does not deploy science or make use of all those studies of blood and ash and bone which Holmes himself had pioneered. But the Yard is never so clumsy as when the occult seems to be involved – with suspected vampires, spectral dogs, tribal fetishes. The Yard's combination of ignorance, scepticism and credulity is shown to be the very worst of all attitudes to adopt. How much things have changed in one way and how little in another. Scotland Yard is now incredibly scientific. The assumed ritual murder of 'Adam', the African boy whose torso was found in the Thames, has allowed a dazzling exhibition of what scientific method can now achieve. On the other hand police interpretations of the African occult still combine ignorance, scepticism and credulity.

An article posted on the *National Geographic* website on 7 February 2005 celebrated the science:

When the mutilated remains of a young child were pulled from the River Thames on September 21 2001 one of the most complex, bizarre and high profile murder investigations in criminal history began. All that remained of the tiny boy was a torso. His head, arms and legs had been removed with chilling precision and his body had been drained of blood. Identification seemed almost impossible. The lack of teeth and fingers rendered standard forensic techniques like dental and fingerprint analysis useless. Detective Inspector Will O'Reilly of Scotland Yard was charged with leading the investigation and turned to science to advance his inquiry (Barry 2005).

DNA analysis 'suggested that Adam might be West African', probably Nigerian. Professor Ken Pye, a forensic geologist at Royal Holloway College, 'found that the juvenile torso came from a small area in north-west Africa, probably a rural area near the city of Benin in south-western Nigeria'. A scientist at Kew Gardens found traces of Calabar bean in Adam's gut. 'Richard Hoskins, a UK based expert on African religion and voodoo said that the Calabar bean is a very toxic plant because the poison acts in such a way to bring on total paralysis and an insanely painful death.' A forensic squad disinterred skeletons from a

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cemetery in Benin City to find a match for Adam's bones. Sherlock Holmes would have been impressed.

But the interpretation of the data was much more questionable. The assumed location in Benin offered an instant connection with Vodun, the official religion of the Republic of Benin. 'Two officers in Nigeria' reported the *Observer* on 3 November 2002, 'believe his death may be linked to an extremist element from the Yoruba people, a tribe with voodoo-like rituals.' The *Observer* also reported that:

[i]n the past year police have discovered seven incidences of West Africans conducting religious rituals on the bank of the Thames. They usually involve lighting candles and writing on white sheets that are then thrown into the water. Early in their investigations, police thought seven half-burnt candles wrapped in a sheet near Battersea Power Station could hold the key to the murder. The name Adekoyejo Fola Adoye was written on the sheet and carved in the candles.

Alas, detectives soon found 'that Adoye lived in New York and that his London-based parents had performed a ceremony to celebrate the fact that he was not killed in the 11 September terrorist attacks' – a real example of the globalization of the occult! The same article, which was entitled 'Human Flesh on Sale in London', reported what turned out to be another false trail. Police had been told that there was a trade by West Africans in bush meat and human body parts; detectives from the Adam operation joined a raid by environmental health officers on a north London shop after a tip-off. The paper grudgingly admitted that 'no obvious traces of human flesh' were found but reported that packages of 'unidentifiable meat' had been sent for DNA testing. The testing was negative and Scotland Yard abandoned this theory too.

Inquiries in London were proving abortive so the Yard turned its attention back to Africa. Curiously, though, they focused on South Africa rather than Nigeria. The *National Geographic* reported:

Ritual killing was unfamiliar turf for O'Reilly so he visited a special police unit in Pretoria, South Africa – the only one in the world dedicated to investigating ritual murders. Here police have investigated hundreds of what they call muti murders since the unit opened a little over twenty years ago (Barry 2005).

Colonel Kobus Jonker, the retired head of the ritual murder unit, was happy to show British police officers his 'range of gruesome photographs'.

Not content with this expertise, O'Reilly hired Credo Mutwa, a well-known and powerful sangoma who abhorred the use of dark practices by some of his people, to provide insights on Adam's murder.' Mutwa confirmed that 'Adam' had been the victim of a 'human sacrifice committed by the worst black magicians in West Africa'. So, the *National Geographic* tells us, 'O'Reilly returned to London' from South Africa 'having established that Adam's murder bore all the hallmarks of a West African ritual killing'. The South African pathologist, Dr Hendrik Scholtz, was brought to Britain to carry out a second post-mortem on 'Adam' (BBC Online.bbc.co.uk, 29 January 2002).

By this time the idea of Africa as a single occult culture, with South Africa providing expertise on the rest of the continent, had become dominant. In this spirit Nelson Mandela was asked, and graciously agreed, to invite every household in Africa to report any missing sons. But with all respect to Mandela it needs to be said that this South African fixation was absurd, and

nowhere more strikingly so than in the case of Credo Mutwa. There is no way that this old charlatan is an expert on practices elsewhere in Africa. As David Chidester has recently splendidly confirmed (Chidester 2005) Mutwa is universally regarded as a fraud in South Africa itself. Yet Mutwa's tales of abduction by aliens, his invocations of ecological religion, etcetera, have made him 'globally, if not locally, the supreme bearer of indigenous authenticity. The new religious space opened up by the Internet has been crucial to this development.' Mutwa has been funded as a 'global treasure' by the Ringing Rocks Foundation in the United States. Chidester wryly finds that 'Credo Mutwa has been most authentic when he has been used, claimed, or even abducted by aliens' (pp.1140, 1141, 1145, 1147). The latest aliens seem to have been Scotland Yard!

This conflation of the African occult into one sinister phenomenon reached its climax in the leak of a report to Scotland Yard in June 2005 which combined the case of Adam with the persecution and exorcism of child 'witches' in Congolese churches in London. A positive frenzy of headlines burst out in the popular press – the sandwich board of the *Evening Standard* of 16 June 2005 reading *Children in Voodoo Killings in Hackney Churches*. The *Guardian* of 25 June 2005 carried a special report on 'how media whipped up a racist witch-hunt', noting the way in which the police kept the pot boiling by 'a shocking Scotland Yard report which was said to detail the way in which young African boys "unblemished by circumcision" were being smuggled through ports and airports to be slaughtered during the concoction of powerful spells'. As the *London Review of Books* 'Diary' noted, 'the police are busily reinforcing dangerous delusions . . . with a farrago of contemporary myths about witchcraft, Africans, asylum seekers and paedophiles'.

But the establishment media could not afford to be smug. I have quoted the *Observer* headline on human meat for sale; the *Guardian* itself ran a 'Thames Torso Boy Sacrificed' headline in September 2001, reporting that 'experts on African religion consulted by Scotland Yard believe Adam to have been sacrificed to one of the 400 "Orisa" or ancestor gods of the Yoruba people'. As for the BBC, it has shown a zealous interest in the matter. It was the BBC which leaked the June 2005 report; the BBC which proudly proclaimed its success in having the police arrest a West African pastor 'guilty' of exorcism; the BBC whose Africa service twice recently asked its listeners to write in their views on witchcraft – 'Do you know a witch?' – and on Voodoo. Inevitably the replies conflated almost every supernatural phenomenon from almost every part of Africa, carrying on into the twenty-first century the old missionary condemnation of all African religion as witchcraft.

Any academic Africanist must surely wish to combat the 'farrago of contemporary myths'. We would wish to recommend that Scotland Yard seek the advice of respected academics rather than of Credo Mutwa. Yet, as I go on to show, some of the academic literature too suffers from a combination of admirable 'science' with over-generalization of the occult. The lessons to be drawn from the literature are complicated ones.

ACADEMIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AFRICAN OCCULT

In their introduction to *Witchcraft Dialogues*, Bond and Ciekaway remark that 'in this post-European colonial era, "witchcraft" and "sorcery" have become emotive and provocative terms, shunned by many Africanist scholars'. Politically correct academics fear appearing to imply any special connection between Africa and 'the occult' (Bond and Ciekaway 2001: 1). When I read

this in late 2005 I was surprised because it seemed to me that there had been a positive flood of recent books about witchcraft and the occult in Africa. I agreed rather with Luise White that 'for people who are interested in the occult this is such an exciting time to work in Africa. This is a time to see these local idioms emerge and insert themselves in larger global circuits and concerns, [to appreciate] that there's a certain analytical power in lumping cannibals, men who sell eyeballs, witches and baboons with shopping bags together.' Instead of academic caution and desire to avoid 'the bad old days of Africa and of Africanist scholarship', White writes, there is 'a new-found authority to describe what's happening on the ground [which] has been more than exciting – it's given us a renewed commitment to scholarship and analysis'. (White n.d.: 1)

Leaving aside for a moment the question of where this 'new-found authority' comes from, it surely is the case that the past few years have been a boom time for academic study of the occult in Africa. The bibliography attached to this article lists 28 works on witchcraft and the occult published since 1999 (five of them appearing in 2005) and this is based only on material I have read myself. If further West African, especially Francophone material were to be included there would surely be many more.² Among the books and articles I have read there have been studies of medicine murder (Murray and Sanders 2005); of lion men (West 2005); of child witches (De Boeck 2005); of zombies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999 and 2002; Niehaus 2005); of witchcraft panic (Ashforth 2005); of the combat against evil as a constant theme in African history (Crais 2002); of the occult as a response to neo-liberal economics (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002), and of the occult as a form of popular resistance to and critique of elite corruption and oppression (Isichei 2002). There have been volumes on the occult as a source of political power in Africa (Niehaus 2001; Ellis and Ter Haar 2004); as a source of resistance and civil war (Niccolini 2006); as an expression of sexuality (*Journal of Religion in Africa* 2002). And there have been four major comparative collections (Bond and Ciekaway 2001; Kiernan forthcoming; Meyer and Pels 2003; Moore and Sanders 2001). One almost gets the impression – to use White's term – that occult phenomena are the only thing that is 'happening on the ground'.

AFRICA AS THE HOME OF THE OCCULT

There must surely be something here, one would have thought, to enlighten Scotland Yard. Yet there are two ways in which this academic work lends unwitting support to its assumptions. The first is that its sheer bulk seems to validate the notion that 'Africa' and 'the occult' go together. The second is that some at least of the academic work lumps occult phenomena together almost as promiscuously as the British police and popular newspapers. As my summary of their contents will suggest – and as a detailed reading makes abundantly clear – these monographs, articles and collections take very different lines and are in debate with each other.

Some of them go elaborately out of their way to deny that there is anything especially African about 'the occult' or occult about 'Africa'. But I think these protestations are largely in vain.

² In an undated paper by Florence Bernault, 'Magic and politics in Equatorial Africa', which is available on the Internet, an extensive bibliography of relevant work in French is provided, none of which, alas, have I read.

Thus Ellis and Ter Haar set their study within the context of ‘the blooming of religious movements’ all over the world, and constantly remind us that uses of the occult by African politicians are not all that different from what goes on in Washington DC. ‘The insights presented in this book’, they claim, ‘are relevant to other parts of the world. Rather than struggling to catch up with the other continents . . . Africa may be in the vanguard when it comes to understanding the close inter-relationship between religion and politics’ (2004: 3). Yet they also assert that Africans, and especially African politicians, believe with peculiar intensity that power comes from ‘the spirit world’. And the commendations printed on the back of the book don’t praise it for its global insight but as ‘required reading for anyone concerned with Africa today’.

Ellis and Ter Haar lay much emphasis not only on religion in Africa but particularly on the occult. If I may quote my own review of their book in *International Affairs*, October 2004:

They define ‘religion’ in its widest sense – as ‘a belief in the existence of an invisible world, often thought to be inhabited by spirits that are believed to affect people’s lives in the material world’ (p. 3). This allows them, for instance, to include belief in witchcraft which they describe as ‘just another of the spiritual beliefs that many Africans share’ (p. 27). It also allows them to include human sacrifice, trade in body parts, secret societies, satanic cults and so on. [Yet] an account of African religion which has too much to say about witchcraft, or about human sacrifice, or trade in body parts or satanism cannot help but be an un-representative and distorting account.

As I point out, there is little in the book about African religions as a source of individual and collective healing; about rain making and peace making; about environmental protection. Though very differently presented and evaluated, this is essentially the occult Africa of the BBC and of the British popular press.

LUMPING TOGETHER THE AFRICAN OCCULT

The idea of Africa’s special involvement in the occult is one of the controlling perceptions of the current British debate. The other is that it is possible to aggregate all manifestations of the African occult, muti murders, child witches and exorcisms alike. Scotland Yard would find some support for this in the academic work on the African occult. Let us return to Luise White for a moment. You will remember that she speaks of ‘the analytical power in lumping cannibals, men who sell eye-balls, witches and baboons with shopping bags together’. Her footnote here is to the Comaroffs’ brilliant and influential article, ‘Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African post-colony’ (1999 and 2002). The Comaroffs’ summary asserts that ‘post-colonial South Africa, like other post-revolutionary societies, appears to have witnessed a dramatic rise in occult economies: in the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends. These embrace a wide range of phenomena, from ritual murder, the sale of body parts, and the putative production of zombies to pyramid schemes to other financial scams’. The answer to why this is happening now, say the Comaroffs, lies ‘in the encounter of rural South Africa with the contradictory effects of millennial capitalism and the culture of neo-liberalism. This encounter . . . brings the global and the local . . . into a dialectical interplay’. More than ever wealth seems to be the product of ‘magic’ rather than work or skill.

It is assumed that a 'broad general key' can be applied to unlock the mystery of muti murders in South and West Africa and also to the riddle of the child witches of Kinshasa. Thus Filip De Boeck discusses child witches as part of the 'frenetic construction of local modernities' which 'goes hand in hand with the expectations and promises of millennial capitalism that finds its – sometimes fanatical – expressions in the thousands of independent churches... The diabolization of children by adults may thus be understood as a dark allegory which tells us something about a deeply rooted anxiety that accompanies a broader social transformation, which is itself linked to a generalised crisis of modernity' (De Boeck 2005: 190, 203, 205).

If a sophisticated British police officer were to read De Boeck he might be reassured that black churches and their exorcisms do after all form part of an aggregated African occult – even if De Boeck stresses that 'the link between children and witchcraft' occurs in 'other places around the globe, whether it is in terms of child abuse, child prostitution, Satanism and child sacrifice, paedophilia, organ trading or death squads hunting down street kids' (De Boeck 2005: 205).

DISAGGREGATING THE AFRICAN OCCULT

The time has come, I am sure, to make explicit what has hitherto been implicit. I am by nature a splitter rather than a lumpner. I believe that occult phenomena need, like all others, to be studied in their own particularity. I am suspicious also of the idea of the 'modernity' of witchcraft and of the idea of what Max Gluckman called more than fifty years ago 'the magic of despair':

The ancestral cult cannot cater for the new multifarious activities in which people deal with strangers. African religions are helpless to aid people challenged by urbanization, by labour migration, by increased competition, by European over-lordship... To meet the threat to their way of life and to cope with new strains Africans turned in several directions for supernatural aid. One trend was increasing reliance on another side of their beliefs – those in magic, oracles and witchcraft... Throughout Africa, while ancient religious rituals have faded, fears of witchcraft have burgeoned and magic has blossomed... medicine and fetish cults multiply. (Max Gluckman 1963: 141–3)

Gluckman's explanation of Mau Mau then was much the same as De Boeck's explanation of child witches now. In my view an explanation which can be made to serve for so many different times and places has a suspicious bagginess about it. In short, we need to disaggregate and to historicize. Creeping modernity won't do in itself. Of course I am not alone in holding these positions. I have already quoted Luise White's essay twice. Let me quote it again and this time to bring out its main thrust:

The more subtle and specific we can be about Africans' concepts of evil and the invisible world, the more complicated our vision of Africa. If we label heart-thieves and witches and vampires as belonging to this specialized realm we may have reproduced African modes of thought but I suspect we have also levelled any number of subtle and crucial distinctions between the heart thieves and witches and vampires... We [must] try and disaggregate the ogres and the witches and the vampires and all the different kinds of cannibals we might meet – they might well all be supernatural to us but the

use of that term should alert us to how ill-equipped we are to interrogate it. Supernatural is the category for the things our informants can't naturalise. I'm not at all sure it means a realm where all these things belong.

We need to discover how and when phenomena are allocated to the category of evil and the realm of the occult. White calls for 'careful chronologies of occult beliefs' similar to those produced by Europeanists using trial and inquisition records (White n.d.: 2, 11).

There are several different ways of breaking the 'occult economy' consensus and they are all represented in the literature. One is to study the contemporary occult on the ground in detail and in one particular case and to come to different conclusions about it. This is Isak Niehaus's way (*Journal of Religion in Africa* 2002; Niehaus 2005). Another is to study everything on the ground and arrive at a perspective of the importance of the occult within the whole. One might claim this to be the method adopted by Jocelyn Alexander, JoAnn McGregor and myself in our study of memory and violence in northern Matabeleland, which gave witchcraft fear a significant but not dominant role (Alexander, McGregor and Ranger 2000). Another is to study in great detail one particular occult practice as Murray and Sanders have done for medicine murder in Lesotho and thus to show how distinct it is (2005). Yet another is to seek to establish 'chronologies of witchcraft belief' by employing historical data, as in their very different ways Clifton Crais (2002), Maia Green (2003) and Tom McCaskie (2000, 2004) have done. In combination these approaches demonstrate that witchcraft and the occult are only 'modern' in the sense that they still exist and respond, as they have always done, to the tensions of African society.

Niehaus has drawn on field data from the Bushbuckridge area of the South African lowveld to assess both witchcraft and belief in zombies. 'Anthropological studies generally', he writes, 'interpret [these] discourses as critical commentary on the emergence of new forms of wealth'. He points 'to the limitations of these arguments. . . While generic discourses highlight the use of zombies as a means of accumulating wealth, those accused of witchcraft are nearly always subordinate and impoverished persons who allegedly keep zombies as a means of survival. At the same time, these beliefs are connected to powerful psychological motivations, such as emotionally overwhelming experiences of bereavement, loss and mourning' (Niehaus 2005, abstract).

In his contribution to the special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Africa* on the 'Passions of Religion, Witchcraft and Sex' (2002), Niehaus has an article which offers a horrifying picture of sexual violence and an equally horrifying account of its expression in witchcraft belief. What it does not do is to show that this sexual violence is 'new' or linked with globalization. Some of his examples, particularly those relating to homosexuality, arise from labour migration and could have arisen at any time in the last few decades. Niehaus himself writes:

Recent anthropological studies have explored the manner in which discourses of witchcraft are embedded in contemporary political economic processes. These studies offer an important advance over attempts to view witchcraft as a mechanism for the maintenance of social order. However, there is a definite danger that in our attempts to recast witchcraft as a political discourse about modernity, 'modernity' might assume the form of a 'meta-narrative' – a sort of explanatory gloss that is imported and put upon ethnographic observations. At worst this meta-narrative might discourage the building of theory that is rooted in ethnographic practice and lead us to de-emphasise

other crucial aspects of witchcraft such as the micro-politics of sexuality, morality and kinship. (Niehaus 2002: 27)

Murray and Sanders, in their huge and hugely thorough study of medicine murder in Lesotho, are of course working on the colonial period when the excesses of neo-liberal economics hardly impacted on the protectorate. Their discussion of medicine murders covers a hundred years of reported cases; their book ends with an appendix of 122 pages summarizing every suspect medicine murder between 1895 and 1966. They emphasize the need to set medicine murder wherever it occurs – and they compare Lesotho with Swaziland in the 1970s, with Venda in the late 1980s, with Ghana and Nigeria – ‘only within local systems of belief’. In Lesotho medicine murder was endemic as a means of strengthening chiefs. It became epidemic in a time of ‘moral crisis’ when there was acute tension and uncertainty between the chiefs and the colonial administration.

They certainly don’t buy the meta-narrative of modernity nor the aggregation of the occult. They explicitly reject the Comaroffs’ idea of an occult economy, finding ‘little justification for the way in which they indiscriminately aggregated such diverse phenomena . . . or indeed for the speculative flourishes by which they sought to explain them’. Murray and Sanders insist that the rationale, method and procedure of medicine murder and witchcraft accusations ‘must be clearly distinguished’. In Lesotho medicine murder is a weapon of the powerful; witchcraft accusation is directed against the weak (Murray and Sanders 2005: 295).

HISTORICISING THE AFRICAN OCCULT

Tom McCaskie remarks that ‘in recent years, ethnographies that have busily rediscovered African witchcraft in its latest, present-day incarnations have mushroomed. I have learned much from reading these works, but often come away from them wishing they would account for the history of African witchcraft prior to its current efflorescence. Many of these studies are ahistorical, with the present unconnected to the past in any meaningfully documented way.’ In his own work on the Akan he has ‘tried to impart a sense of historicity, to document a past endlessly and complexly revisited, resurrected and reconfigured. It would be pleasing as well as instructive to see more of this historicising impulse at work in studies of witchcraft in other African cultures’ (McCaskie 2004: 133).

McCaskie himself has offered the most impressively documented account of an Akan ‘witch-finder’, Sie Kwaku, tracing his whole career from his birth in the 1840s through to his role in the new witch-finding power, *Sakrobundi* in the 1860s to 1880s, to the spread of that movement in the 1880s and 1890s, to the colonial conquest in 1901, to his discovery of a new and more powerful ‘medicine’, *Aberewa*, which spread very rapidly in the 1900s. He remarks that the ideas of the British colonial authorities about Sie Kwaku’s movement were ‘an ideological but unreflective bundling together of stereotypes about “native” cupidity and superstition’ and reflected no ‘serious interest in or knowledge of Sie Kwaku’s beliefs and motives’. The British tried to suppress *Aberewa* and to imprison its practitioners. But McCaskie admires the ‘wise resignation’ of one official who came to recognize that ‘these people have [n]ever been without some Fetish witch finding medicine or other. . . I have little doubt that an attempt will soon be made to introduce some substitute for *Aberewa*’ (McCaskie 2004: 130).

McCaskie writes of, describes and seeks to explain ‘cyclical upsurges in witchcraft accusations’, often amounting to ‘crises of belief and morality’

involving the whole political order. He writes of, and describes, ‘the endless cycle of new solutions to the intractable problem of witchcraft’. The rich detail of McCaskie’s biographical case study, impossible to summarize here, suggests several lessons for students of the occult. One, of course, is the need to focus and to seek hard evidence. Another is the need to question the idea that the present is a moment of unprecedented witchcraft fear – it is hard to imagine polities and societies more obsessed with witches than the late nineteenth century Akan. Above all it suggests the need to study ‘new solutions’ as modifications of older ones. McCaskie is certainly not suggesting a basic ‘traditional’ witchcraft belief which has continued for a hundred and fifty years. Historicity for him means ‘a past endlessly and complexly revisited, resurrected and reconfigured’. The present is a moment in such a past, not cut off from it by modernization or globalization (McCaskie 2004).

Maia Green’s study of Central Tanzania (2003), set as it is in an area with a famously long sequence of witchcraft eradication movements, achieves something of the same effect, although in her case ‘the endless cycle of new solutions to the intractable problem of witchcraft’ can only be documented from the beginning of the British colonial period. She is more inclined than McCaskie to stress a basic continuity in ritual forms. She is less inclined than he to accept the idea of ‘upsurges’ of fear at time of moral crisis – indeed she sternly asserts that apparent ‘mass’ eradication movements are the product of local political mobilization. ‘Public anti-witchcraft practices are not simply a response to an increased incidence of witchcraft or anxieties about it but, on the contrary, create the context in which such allegations are likely to be made’ (Green 2003: 133). But she has enough historical data to allow her to challenge a modernist interpretation:

Anthropologists and historians have tended to regard such movements as essentially ‘modern’ phenomena because, if studied in isolation, they appear to have origins external to the societies affected by them, their emergence often coincides with periods of great upheaval and change, and their ritual practice incorporates elements of Christian and bureaucratic practice... [But] they cannot be understood simply as modern innovations. On the contrary, their anti-witchcraft practices only appear modern and innovative when movements are considered solely in terms of themselves, divorced from the social context in which they operate... The basic practice of these movements conforms to the sequence and structure of indigenous purification procedures routinely performed at life crisis rituals. (Green 2003: 121)

The movements are not merely repetitions of a tradition or a sequence. They are essentially political challenges to failed authority, mobilized by local elders who make use of entrepreneurial modifications of life crisis rites.

McCaskie and Green both focus on witchcraft. But there have been recent studies which attempt to historicize the ‘occult’ as a whole. One is Harry West’s wonderfully accessible study of the idiom of *kupililuka* in northern Mozambique (West 2005), with its subtitle, *Governance and the Invisible Realm*. West reconstructs an indigenous discourse of good and evil, which includes witches and lion-men and healers and diviners. If I may quote from the speech I made at its launch on 14 October 2005:

Much of the literature on globalization and its disrupting effects on African reciprocity reads very much like an updating of the old functionalist explanations in terms of commercial capitalism disrupting closed corporate societies.

There is no such over-simplification in *Kupilikula*, partly because the book is so aware that in northern Mozambique neo-liberalism goes hand in hand with the re-invention of would-be 'traditional' corporate societies, but mainly because it is a work of history as much as of anthropology. . . . This is a book which describes how the *mwavi* idea interacted with the pre-colonial peopling of the plateau, with the violent rivalries of its people, with the Portuguese conquest, with the coming of the Catholic missionaries, with Frelimo's mobilizing war and anti-obscurantist peace – and only coming out of that do we read about neo-liberal transformations. What emerges is a picture of plateau societies which far from being remote have long been exposed to influences from the outer world; so far from being static have undergone, it is suggested, more transformation than European societies over a similar period of time.

Finally a very different way of historicizing the occult is proposed by Clifton Crais in his *The Politics of Evil* (2002). As the blurb claims, Crais 'explores state formation as a cultural and political process and as a moral problem, and he looks at indigenous concepts of power, authority and evil: how they shaped cross-cultural encounters and the making of the colonial order'. Debate about his book has come to focus particularly on his interpretation of the murder of the magistrate, Hamilton Hope, in October 1880 at an assembly of the army of the Mpondomise paramount chief, Mhlontlo. Previous historians have interpreted this simply as an act of anti-colonial resistance aimed at seizing the modern weapons which Hope had brought with him. Crais sets the drama differently. Hope had previously interfered in Mhlontlo's judgements in witchcraft cases. In his bureaucratic collection of information Hope himself was seen to be acting like a witch.

Africans believed that . . . bureaucrats used malevolent magic, in short that officials were witches, or more precisely witch-chiefs. Much of the insidious power of witches stems from their panoptic surveillance of the victims. . . . Witches, and of course the modern state as well, depend on the accumulation of detailed and often intimate information. The very political technologies Hope so energetically deployed awakened in Africans the spectre of witchcraft. (Crais 2003: 12)

Hope was thus seen as possessing great occult power; the colonial state was seen as evil. The six men who seized and killed him were 'ritual specialists'. Crais concludes that 'Hope was not only killed but ritually murdered, or should I say sacrificed, "a great bull" killed to renew society and polity' (Crais 2003: 11).

Crais's conclusions have outraged the historian Jeff Peires and led to an unusually brutal exchange between the two of them in the pages of the *South African Historical Journal*. But these ideas seem to connect with a recent book about contemporary South Africa, Adam Ashforth's *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa* (2005). Ashforth argues that the legitimacy of the South African state is imperilled because it refuses to acknowledge and therefore provide protection against witches. The state is again in danger of being seen as evil. In this perspective 'the politics of evil' underlie South African history from at least the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.³

³ Florence Bernault, in her essay on 'Magic and Politics in Equatorial Africa', also demands 'grounded, comparative and historical explanations of the multiple layers of political beliefs in contemporary Equatorial Africa' and calls for 'an in-depth, grass-root history of magical practices'. See footnote 2.

CONCLUSION

What could a Scotland Yard officer learn from all this literature? (He/she would not presumably be worried that so much of it is South African.) I hope he/she would learn the crucial importance of context; the crucial need to disaggregate; the significance of history. There is, of course, an important debate to be held about which history is relevant – that of particular African societies, of Britain, of colonialism, of the diaspora, or a combination of all four. But as an Africanist I would argue that the key things for Scotland Yard, or anyone else, to learn lie in Africa itself. A particularly telling example, which in many ways brings together everything I have been arguing, is David Pratten's *The Man-Leopard Murders: history and society in colonial Nigeria* (Pratten 2007). Pratten's wonderful title might well be that of a Sherlock Holmes murder mystery. His historical case study ought perhaps to be compulsory reading for the British police. It is in fact about a police investigation into a series of deaths set in colonial Nigeria rather than in contemporary Britain. Pratten brilliantly reconstructs the changing thinking behind the massive police operation and shows how, despite their initial premises and almost despite themselves, the Nigerian colonial police came to believe that the murders were ritual killings, performed by man-leopards. The power of the African occult over the investigative imagination is not only, if at all, a product of globalization.

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