RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Eséka train disaster as a witchcraft collective action: a socio-historical perspective on anger

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Abstract

The October 2016 train accident on Cameroon's main railway line remains shrouded in mystery. The announcement of the derailment before it happened, followed by a denial by the Minister of Transport a few hours later, at the very moment of the accident, has given rise to much speculation. According to testimonies collected in Eséka through fieldwork and the media, this tragic event was interpreted as the result of a witchcraft conspiracy. The inhabitants of the Bassa region, who consider the railway crossing their territory as a cultural heritage, had expressed their discontent with attempts to rationalize the line for some time. These accounts reveal that the disaster was triggered by collective action which unfolded through three distinct phases: labelling, whereby words acquire particular power; harbingers of misfortune; and finally, the bewitchment of the train to 'zombify' it, leading to its derailment. In response to these witchcraft imaginaries, the president himself addressed the Bassa's grievances and requested an adjustment of the train stops, thus demonstrating the performativity of witchcraft and its capacity to put grievances on the agenda and to shape public policies. This article puts forward the idea that witchcraft represents a repertoire from which a community draws to express dissent. Bewitching and zombifying the train to make it derail are, for some actors, a way of signalling to the modern African state that it is not always 'master in its own house', that it does not have total control over reality and that it must constantly negotiate its authority.

Résumé

L'accident ferroviaire survenu en octobre 2016 sur la principale ligne de chemin de fer du Cameroun reste entouré de mystères. L'annonce du déraillement avant sa survenue, suivie d'un démenti du ministre des Transports quelques heures plus tard, au moment même de l'accident, a suscité de nombreuses spéculations. Selon les témoignages recueillis à Eséka par des enquêtes de terrain, des interviews radio et la presse, cet événement tragique a été interprété comme le produit d'une conspiration sorcière. Les habitants de la région Bassa, qui considèrent la voie ferrée traversant leur territoire comme un héritage, auraient exprimé

leur mécontentement face aux tentatives de rationalisation de la ligne. Tous ces récits révèlent une action collective dans le déclenchement de la catastrophe, qui se déploie à travers trois phases distinctes: l'étiquetage, où la parole acquiert une puissance d'action; les prophéties de malheur comme dispositif d'emprise; enfin, l'envoutement du train pour le « zombifier » le faire dérailler et sanctionner l'État. Ces imaginaires sorcellaires se soldent par la prise en considération des doléances des Bassa par le président lui-même, qui a alors demandé un ajustement des arrêts du train, mais surtout démontrent-ils la performativité de la sorcellerie et sa capacité de mise sur agenda de problèmes et de fabrique des politiques publiques. Cet article soutient l'idée que la sorcellerie représente un répertoire, duquel puise une communauté pour entrer en dissidence. Ensorceler et zombifier le train pour le faire dérailler sont, pour certains acteurs, une manière de signifier à l'État autoritaire qu'il n'est pas, toujours, « maître dans sa propre maison », qu'il n'a pas une emprise totale sur la réalité et qu'il doit constamment négocier son commandement.

Resumo

O acidente de comboio de 2016 na principal linha ferroviária dos Camarões continua envolto em mistério. O anúncio do descarrilamento antes da sua ocorrência, seguido de uma negação do Ministro dos Transportes algumas horas mais tarde, no próprio momento do acidente, deu origem a muitas especulações. De acordo com os testemunhos recolhidos em Eséka através do trabalho de campo e dos meios de comunicação social, este acontecimento trágico foi interpretado como o resultado de uma conspiração de feiticeiros. Os habitantes da região de Bassa, que consideram o caminho de ferro que atravessa o seu território como um património cultural, manifestaram durante algum tempo o seu descontentamento face às tentativas de racionalização da linha. Estes relatos revelam que a catástrofe foi desencadeada por uma ação colectiva que se desenrolou em três fases distintas: a rotulagem, em que as palavras adquirem um poder particular; os prenúncios de desgraças; e, por fim, o enfeitiçamento do comboio para o 'zombificar', levando ao seu descarrilamento. Em resposta a estes imaginários de feitiçaria, o próprio presidente abordou as queixas dos Bassa e pediu um ajustamento das paragens do comboio, demonstrando assim a performatividade da feitiçaria e a sua capacidade de colocar as queixas na agenda e de moldar políticas públicas. Este artigo propõe a ideia de que a feitiçaria representa um repertório do qual uma comunidade se serve para expressar a sua discordância. Enfeitiçar e zombificar o comboio para o fazer descarrilar são, para alguns actores, uma forma de assinalar ao Estado africano moderno que nem sempre é 'senhor na sua própria casa', que não tem um controlo total sobre a realidade e que tem de negociar constantemente a sua autoridade.

> Mr Divisional Officer … We're angry! The village is angry because you are not helping us … No lights, no [hospital], no police station. We are angry. Even roads for selling cassava and stuff … there aren't [any] … This time … you won't have any goats, any cats, not even an egg, you'll have nothing! You will start your car and return the same way you came, using your fuel. It is when you will deliver the message from the chief, the paramount chief of Nkolmewout village [to the head of state], that he will see if we can give something. This time, you'll have nothing! Thank you! (Les Rigolards de Mbalmayo 2022)

Introduction

Is it possible to imagine the complete bewitchment of a rail convoy stretched over eighteen carriages, preserving its full functionality while giving the appearance of having been derailed, according to external observers and its own passengers, thereby creating a juxtaposition of seemingly irreconcilable appearances? Such a picture seems to emerge from the realm of phantasmagoria, so difficult is it to imagine an object destroyed and out of use yet still functional. It is this ambivalence that led to the decommissioning of the Cameroon Railway Corporation's (CAMRAIL) intercity train in Cameroon, resulting in its replacement by the express train.

On 21 October 2016, strange incidents shook the intercity 152 train, the pride of CAMRAIL. In the early hours of the day, images circulated on the internet claiming that the train had derailed near Eséka, on a dangerous bridge between Yaoundé and Douala. However, the train had not even left the Yaoundé railway station at the time. Later that morning, the Minister of Transport publicly denied this information over national radio. And it was precisely when the ministerial disclaimer was broadcast that the train actually derailed. For many people, the accident seemed to have happened even before the minister's disclaimer. The minister accused the French company that manages the railway of having added carriages to the train, and therefore being responsible for the derailment, even though his disclaimer was a response to rumours of a disaster that had not yet occurred. His clumsy explanation did not convince those I spoke to, especially in the Eséka neighbourhood, home to Bassa people who consider the passage of the train through their country as a heritage, but who were unhappy with the state's discriminatory modernization. To them, the mysterious accident was the outcome of a silent struggle, despite the loss of lives, because it finally forced the government to listen to their demands.

This enigmatic story offers a broader perspective by allowing us to view witchcraft as a repertoire of collective action from which a community can draw upon to act against unpopular public action. These hidden forms of action may remain invisible, for the greater part, but they often operate as 'public secrets', conferring power because they are hidden while at the same time exerting sufficient public pressure. Nonetheless, the story of the Bassa is certainly not unique in the world. It is reminiscent of a protest against Donald Trump in the USA at the start of his term in office.

In February 2017, in the heart of the streets of New York, a group of 'sorcerers' and 'apprentice sorcerers' gathered in front of Trump Tower to conjure up a spell against the newly elected American president. This gathering in front of Donald Trump's imposing building quickly evolved into a mobilization marked by repeated acts of bewitchment and 'binding' on social media. Many activists adopted the hashtag 'magical resistance' on Twitter, believing that it was necessary to use the invisible to influence the political arena, because 'Thought creates belief. Belief creates action. Action creates reality.'[1] If 'magical resistance' in the USA did not produce the desired outcomes for the actors involved, this article seeks to show how, in an authoritarian context, a collective witchcraft movement produced effects through public action claimed by a community. This situation was observed in Eséka during the disaster of

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[1] See the hashtags #bindTrump, #magicalresistance, #nastywitch and specifically the account of Dr Candace A. McCullough of 25 October 2017 on Twitter/X.

21 October 2016, which left around eighty people dead and hundreds injured, according to official sources. I introduce this event through its impact, as relayed in popular culture, by political elites and through the 'word on the street', all of which helped to lend credence to the hypothesis of a disaster 'from elsewhere'.[2] First, through popular culture, a few days after the tragedy, rumours circulated on social media suggesting that the derailment was the result of a witchcraft action orchestrated by the Bassa people, who were unhappy about their marginalization. The hip-hop singer Res K reacted to these rumours by producing a song, from which the extract below reflects the importance of these witchcraft narratives:

> What do you want? You hate the Bassas. Um Nyobe went to the UN, now, even at school, you don't talk about him.[3] What do you want? You hate the Bassas.
>
> Moïse is Bassa, Moïse is Bassa, Moïse is Bassa, the Bassa are angry …
>
> Next time, if you try, I'll even head to the Sanaga and split it up. Even CAMAIRCO, by the way, only has old planes.
>
> Moïse is Bassa, Moïse is Bassa, Moïse is Bassa, the Bassa are angry …
>
> The Bassas are such big sorcerers that they invoked Moses. Moses has become a Bassa. Moses split the bridge at Ma, Ma, Ma … To get to Douala, you now have to go through the West region.[4]

If the hip-hop artist's song, which has had thousands of views on YouTube, presents the disaster in a derisive way, to stakeholders involved in the railway sector and in railway policies, the disaster was an attack of a different kind – a narrative I considered seriously during my fieldwork. In February 2023, I found myself at the Yaoundé railway station, ready to board the train bound for Eséka. Unhappy at the high cost of the ticket for the journey, I expressed my dissatisfaction with the numerous scheduled stops on the way to my destination. The booking clerk, unaware of my status as a sociologist and the purpose of my railway station survey, replied in a confused manner: 'Weren't you those who asked for the train to make stops at your stations? Why complain today?' Pretending not to understand her allusion, and driven by the desire to obtain more information, I replied by asking: 'You who? What and who are you talking about?' Then she revealed: 'It was the Bassa who demanded a rail depot in their locality after the disaster. They were unhappy, that's why the train derailed, it is common knowledge.' Later, during my sojourn in Eséka, an elderly bookseller opposite the station replied when I asked him what had happened on 21 October: 'They did their stuff over there and the train derailed here.' This response

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[2] Interviews, Eséka, February 2023.

[3] Um Nyobe is an eminent figure of nationalism, independence and anti-colonialism in Cameroon and throughout Africa. He played a key role in the struggle for Cameroon's independence from French colonial rule. Assassinated by the colonial authorities on 13 September 1958, he is widely recognized by many historians as the main architect of national consciousness and one of the most important figures in African liberation movements. His legacy and commitment continue to inspire struggles for justice and freedom in Cameroon and beyond (cf. Um Nyobe 1984).

[4] See Res K's video for 'Moïse est Bassa' (2016) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBQa7IAi CRU>.

suggested that the disaster was the result of a conspiracy from a world that ordinary people could not fully grasp but that they had much to say about.

These interactions with the CAMRAIL employee and the bookseller at the Eséka station prompted a reflection on how a seemingly imperceptible action can be performative, becoming a widespread discourse on reality, a shared explanatory framework for an accident and the motivation for post-disaster public action. This article reveals the mechanisms by which the disaster was produced, from the announcement by the people of Eséka and the 'powers of expression' (Chateauraynaud 2011) on social media, to the confirmation after a disclaimer by the authorities. Each stage is examined in detail to understand how these events influenced the collective perception of a disaster that seems to have been desired and orchestrated, revealing some underlying anger in Eséka, which until then had not manifested itself violently.[5] This particular event trajectory leads to the formulation of a hypothesis of witchcraft as a repertoire of collective action, and it allows us to 'shift our gaze from the most public arenas to more discrete spaces' of policymaking (Gilbert and Henry 2012: 53). Using the concept of the repertoire of collective action, which designates the means of common action around shared interests (Tilly 1986), this study enriches the existing literature by associating witchcraft with both misfortune and catastrophe, but also with the happiness of the community as the purpose of this misfortune. This makes it a ritual instrument of both confrontation and negotiation, moving from the expression of a problem to its solution.

Through a combination of interviews and observation around Eséka and an analysis of newspaper articles, I distinguish three phases in the attack on the train by imaginary witchcraft agents. The first phase consists of naming the train as an object in order to deprive the state and CAMRAIL of control over it. According to the concepts of Austin (1970) and Favret-Saada (1977), this underlines the special power of words in contexts where ideas of witchcraft play a predominant role. The second phase is marked by the proliferation, through word on the street, of strange events heralding disaster. Finally, the third phase explores the engineering of the disaster and the moment when the intercity 152 train became the victim of an act of control that zombified it and precipitated its crash.

The Bassa railroad: a brief history of anger

The singular relationship between the Bassa and the railway has its roots in the colonial era, a period marked by the German domination of Kamerun (1884–1916). At that time, the German colonial rulers built a railway linking Douala, the main port, to the River Nyong. This link enabled goods, mainly rubber, to be transported along the river. Construction work on the central line was interrupted at Eséka in 1914 due to World War One. In the 1920s, following the French conquest of this part of the German protectorate, the French authorities decided to extend the railway to Yaoundé, their new capital. However, this venture remained one of the darkest pages in colonial history, marked by the use of forced labour through which many locals lost their lives. Despite these dark events, once the central line was completed in July 1927, the railway and the train became vital arteries for the Bassa villages along the line. They

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[5] On anger that does not manifest itself, see Bonnecase (2023).

offered a multitude of commercial and trade opportunities, becoming an essential lever for local development. This railway connection helped shape the social and economic dynamics of the Bassa people, creating a tangible link between their history and the development brought about by the colonial railway (Abé 2006).

The recent evolution of the National Railway Company of Cameroon (REGIFERCAM), initially under colonial and then postcolonial state management, reflects a transition marked by the privatization policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund. This transition materialized with the sale of the central railway to Vincent Bolloré, an increasingly influential French businessman and a pillar of Françafrique due to his investments in many former French colonies. In 1999, REGIFERCAM was transformed into CAMRAIL, marking the beginning of an unpopular commercial policy that favoured freight transport over passenger transport. This change had significant consequences for the Bassa people. Passenger transport, suffering from lack of investment, faced gradual decline, even leading to the closure of some railway stations in Bassa territory. The introduction of the new intercity train, although unusually fast, caused divisions and frustration, particularly because it refused to stop at certain stations, which were seen as useless and excluded from national development. The perceived exclusion thus metamorphosed into a complex of covetousness, with the train becoming the emblem of a progress perceived as being reserved for other national communities. This perception gave rise to a process of delegitimization, sparking a struggle about the railway, over which it is necessary to reassert the authority of the Bassa community. On the other side are the state and CAMRAIL, who exercise control over the train, thus depriving the Bassa of participation in its management.

This frustration ties into another one, linked to a history of the war of independence, where the lack of official reparations reinforced the feeling of abandonment by public authorities. Faced with the ineffectiveness of conventional political channels, the failures of the patriarchs and traditional chiefs led to the emergence of recourse to forms of action such as witchcraft, to vent anger, express demands to the state and reaffirm the Nyong and Kelle division's position on the political agenda.

This recourse to so-called traditional practices reflects a mobilization strategy aimed at asserting the demands of the Bassa in a context where conventional means prove their limits. In this context, as elsewhere in Africa, witchcraft is presented as a shared 'language', a 'reservoir' and a 'way of doing things', the effectiveness of which is recognized by all players (cf. Mbembe 1991; Bernault 1999; Geschiere 2005). This language is all the more shared because it is justified by legitimate anger. Anger plays a crucial role in the process of legitimizing or nuancing witchcraft, which would otherwise be considered unacceptable or contrary to social norms. As a result of the historical circumstances that have entrenched frustrations to the point of making them objects of shared anger, the practice of witchcraft is legitimized by justifying its consequences, such as the deaths that ensue, as being necessary for the good of the entire community. Witchcraft thus acts as a transition from anger and emotion to action.

Naming the Boko Haram train as a prelude to an act of witchcraft

To study the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between risk and disaster, we need to look at the language and discourse that best express these

representations. The discourses that precede and accompany disasters, and which are produced by the actors themselves, are valuable sources for studying what is not obvious at first sight. From an Austinian perspective known as 'linguistic phenomenology', I argue that one of the best ways of grasping reality and facts is to penetrate them through language and discourse (Austin 1970). In every disaster that occurs in Cameroon, there is an ecosystem of language that is inseparable from it (Molo 2020; 2023). Penetrating this ecosystem always means going 'beyond words' to grasp not just the idea, as Toulabor (1981: 57) recommended, but also the intention and, in a way, its performativity – that is, its power. This is because, on the one hand, nicknaming is a political act, while, on the other, in the Centre–South communities of Cameroon (and elsewhere), the paradigm of witchcraft links speech to action. The sorcerer who says he is going to do something is already doing it by the simple act of saying it, and the simple act of speaking is the very essence of witchcraft ('I'll show you', 'You'll see', etc. are routine phrases that precede an attack of witchcraft). Favret-Saada (1977: 21–2), who has produced works of rare knowledge on what sorcerers do, says that 'the act is the word', the sorcerer's word is 'power', 'it is war'.

Applied to our study, the first stage of the Eséka disaster is manifested in the banality of speech, which constitutes the 'intentional structure of action' (Quéré 1990). The first aim was to give the train a new name, and therefore a new identity, in order to separate it from the contested entities (the state, CAMRAIL). The name chosen was 'Boko Haram'. Boko Haram is an Islamist sect that commits acts of violence in northern Cameroon and the Sahel region. Boko Haram in Hausa means 'Western education is a sin'.[6] This sect presents itself as a paragon of anti-Westernism and anti-modernism, two dynamics that are also revealed in this act of naming.

Anti-Westernism is expressed in the Boko Haram title attributed to the train by confusing the enemy, naming it, and giving it a face. It is also a position favoured by local authorities who want to shift the focus and target of the people's anger from the state to a Western multinational. This scapegoating continued even after the disaster, when the time came to apportion blame. A Cameroonian commentator wrote that 'President Biya has found his ideal scapegoat: Vincent Bolloré'. Bolloré, as the symbol of 'French imperialism in Africa, will have to clear the president of his lethargy' (Gwet 2016b). The choice of the name Boko Haram has a double anti-Western meaning. For the local population, it represents a way of anchoring their demands in an indisputable source of legitimacy, linked as they are to the struggle against colonialism, which, according to Mbembe (1991), laid the foundation for a world of the dark and the invisible as a daily form of disobedience. After unsuccessful encounters with the authorities, witchcraft emerged as the only effective means of obtaining gains and making oneself heard. In the novel about the Eséka disaster written by Renaud Eboto, comments attributed to a local patriarch clearly emphasize that causing misfortune is the way to make oneself heard, thus implying a form of implicit apology for witchcraft, since the ability to cause misfortune can be achieved in these places only through witchcraft-like actions. The patriarch in Eboto's work declares:

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[6] 'Plus de 260 morts dans les combats entre police et "talibans"', *Jeune Afrique*, 28 July 2009, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/158991/societe/plus-de-260-morts-dans-les-combats-entre-police-et-talibans/>.

I say, with a tragedy, Mallore [Bolloré] will understand that the people living beside this railway must benefit from it. The Bassa people are not happy! This train runs right through our villages, without us benefiting from it. Let the management of the railway [corporation] return to the norm! I speak as a Mbom Mbock who has seen a lot. You have to give credit where credit is due. Don't come crying to me afterwards. If you have desecrated everything in this country, know that there are still things that belong to the sacred. The blood of our ancestors cries out for vengeance. We don't fool around. A word to the wise is sufficient! (Eboto 2022: 170)

The tragedy conjured up is more of a good act than an evil one. It is not a question of responding to evil with evil, but rather of righting wrongs for the benefit of the community. Other versions of this statement encountered during my fieldwork differ slightly from this extract. At a medical centre in Eséka, an official who took part in local meetings on this train said that 'the patriarch was not threatening, he was simply reminding us that to make ourselves heard, we must spare no effort … For you it's witchcraft, but for us, at the time, it was legitimate.'[7] This patriarch became a sort of herald of the Bassa cause in the region, a figure of dissidence, and the very antonomasia of anti-imperialism and therefore of the anathema of 'Boko Haram'.

In his analysis of witchcraft conspiracies, Dozon (2017) points out that anti-Westernism is a form of African victimization in the face of global problems. He identifies a dynamic where anti-Westernism is concretized by making Africa the victim of a conspiracy of Western technoscience. At Eséka, however, it is Western technoscience itself that becomes the target of an African takeover, questioning two fundamental ideas: that of a systematic and exclusive victimization of Africa, and that of a modern system (the same system that facilitated Europe's domination of Africa) under exclusively Western control. Finally, anti-Westernism is an attempt to frame the many problems raised by the Bassa representatives in terms of an issue that is limited to railway policy, and thus is the 'exclusive' responsibility of CAMRAIL. The local administrative authorities are responsible for this framing, which is in line with the scapegoating attitude mentioned above.

In addition, the Boko Haram nomenclature reveals a logic of protestation of modernism denounced in Eséka for its perverse effects: it is discriminatory and inegalitarian, setting up new systems of clientelism and new logics of local political markets within which local activists find it difficult to fit. It is the failure of social cadets (less dominant groups) to assert themselves in this modernity that forces them to oppose it and mobilize witchcraft to prove that they too can have a hold on matter and nature, in their own ways, to give meaning to the collective concerns that they bring to the fore. It is important here to highlight how this protest takes shape (witchcraft), its technology (the anathema) and its weapon (the spoken word).

In Eséka, much more than a simple banality is at play in the nomenclature of the intercity train that becomes Boko Haram. The old locomotive, called Mbombo ('granny' in the local language), was slower and regularly broke down but served the local community more efficiently by stopping at the many stations in the Nyong and Kelle division, something that the new and more modern train did not do. In this

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[7] Interviews, September 2021.

Figure 1. At the junction at Ngoumou, passengers on the Mbombo (red train) wait for the Train Express (green and white train) to pass before continuing their journey. The wait can often last up to an hour. Source: Photograph by the author, March 2023.

respect, Mbombo was a metonym that also expressed an emotional bond. For this reason, Mbombo's repeated breakdowns could be tolerated because it had given so much to the community. This was in stark contrast to Boko Haram, which was anathematized by a derailment at the 'viaduct' (a suspension bridge two kilometres from the entrance to the town of Eséka) and predicted a fatal fate: disaster and death. The frustrations were not limited to the symbolism of segregation represented by the intercity train. There was also the preference given to the latter, creating queues for other users, such as users of Mbombo, who were forced to wait at the Ngoumou intersection when travelling from Yaoundé to Eséka. They had to let the modern train pass at Eséka on the single track before they could continue their journey with the old locomotive. Sometimes, this wait could last for an hour, as priority was given to the faster train (Figure 1).

Naming things means saying what they are, how we perceive them and how we represent them to ourselves. This translates the relationship to the said things. However, the power of binding also begins with the ability to give a name, insofar as the right to name is a linguistic expression of the right to appropriate (Calvet 1974). This implies that the use of Boko Haram here is not a simple enunciation; it is a desire to domesticate, to have a hold on the thing. In this sense, speech in general and the act of naming in particular are eminently political. They are acts of questioning, dissent and defiance. Political leaders are being made to realize the fact that Boko Haram, the sect they are fighting, is not confined to northern Cameroon. Rather, it reflects all the daily frustrations of those at the bottom of the social ladder, in particular the failures of the Eséka subdivision to integrate into a more egalitarian modernity. Boko Haram is a political challenge to the fact that unsatisfied social demands create challenges and 'fields' of force.

In this register of dissidence and opposition, the action of naming gives new life: the train, which is named, refers to an act of control, and he who gives life also has the power to take it away. The designation of the intercity train as Boko Haram appears to be a kind of bewitchment of the train that subjects it to the will and agenda of those who have the power to say what it is. The bewitchment of Boko Haram was a way of putting it on the agenda – that of its end, its replacement – and therefore was a redefinition of the railway policy that was more inclusive and consensual. But since this protest could not be made through direct visible intervention on the train, the scriptwriters of the cause under study intervened by mobilizing a repertoire that they mastered and in which the banality of speech was a weapon; speech, when uttered, is powerful and subsequently acts because it is already acted upon by the intention and will of the person or persons uttering it. Through the disaster, discourses, rumours and witchcraft conspiracies, theories were conveyed and operationalized by local political actors who tried to build a common understanding of their world and public infrastructures, which later enabled them to be invited to the discussions preceding the commissioning of the new train that replaced Boko Haram.

Warning and heralding tragedy

To understand the second stage of the protest, the emphasis is on the event that occurs and gives meaning to the words spoken earlier. This is what is known as the 'catastrophe in the making' (Freudenburg *et al.* 2009). The words spoken about the train and the anathema they conveyed engineered the disaster by giving substance to an intention that could be read in the witchcraft rumours that preceded the derailment and spread further after it occurred. At this stage, the claim goes beyond simply denouncing the actions of CAMRAIL and its partner, the state, through the prism of naming. Its intention is no longer to simply caution them but to punish them.

For several weeks in the second half of 2016, people in the town of Eséka claimed to be encountering animals that heralded misfortune. Gorillas, for example, were spotted several times in the town's meadows, and locals around Eséka said they encountered them in areas of heavy population density, which was unusual. In some quarters, the animals were said to be ancestors who came to herald future misfortune. In others, they were said to be envoys of these same ancestors, who came to announce misfortune if the living did not comply with the will of the dead. This will involved respect for the sacrifices incurred by forced labour during the colonial era: to these ancestors, the railway was a territorial identity, a legacy and a reference (Abé 2006). But, in Eséka, people were fully conscious that, while the railway was built on their land, thanks to the work of their ancestors (even though workers were not recruited from the area), the train did not belong to them. So, the railway was the link between the train and them, the object through which the locals could claim any intervention in the invention and 'creation of the other', the train. If the state and Bolloré's CAMRAIL had control over the train, the locals of Eséka could claim control over *Nlon machine* ('railway' in the Bassa language).

Consequently, if they wanted to act on this train, they first had to break down the barriers. Once the first step (breaking the barrier of the name to penetrate the object) had been achieved, they now had to take control of the matter and the natural environment in order to act. This is where witchcraft becomes a 'critical skill', the aim

Figure 2. The rupture of the Manyai culvert, which forced people to head for the passenger station to get to Douala. Source: Copyright LCCLC/Facebook.com.

of which is to develop 'the means to act on a process or to forge an adequate representation of it' (Chateauraynaud 2011: 21). The mere fact that the train was running on 'their track' gave them the required knowledge and the power to influence it, or even derail it. In this regard, elements of nature, such as gorillas, convey a message and herald misfortune and death. And given that cautioning and prevention must always be given through channels that are common to their recipients (Chateauraynaud and Torny 1999), the mobilization of elements of nature such as the gorilla is a cultural code both in the Bassa universe and in all communities of Central–South Cameroon – a code that refers to the prophecy of doom. This phase lasted right up to the day of the disaster, the derailment being preceded, if not caused, by the collapse of culverts in the small village of Manyai, forcing users to rush to the passenger station to catch the train – the only way to get to Douala from Yaoundé (Figure 2).

In effect, at dawn on 21 October, national road number 3, the main route linking the capital cities of Yaoundé and Douala, was physically cut off in the Nyong and Kelle division in the small village of Manyai. Faced with the impossibility of linking the two towns by road, the authorities decided to increase the capacity of the intercity train, commonly known as Boko Haram by the people of Eséka, in order to carry as many passengers as possible. The event at Manyai thus played a central role in triggering the disaster, revealing a combination of factors involving science, technology and the environment that fuelled the perception of a witchcraft conspiracy.

This event-based approach to nature aims to summon elements of the environment that are equally affected and threatened by the modernity of the train and the state, in order to turn them against the latter. It is a manoeuvre designed to pit nature, which is said to be bruised, against those who make unequal investments. In this case, the sorcerer is playing tricks on nature by summoning some kind of *eco-witchcraft*. Road construction and development, which many lay claim to, had weakened nature. But in the absence of such investments in the division, nature became an ally to confound the state and punish it.

After the gorillas appeared repeatedly and were noticed by the local population, word was put on paper to mark the enactment of the anathema in forms of reception that the addressees and recipients seemed to have in common, a way of tracing the warning. The effect of this was to move dissidence to another phase, temporarily moving it from the invisible to the visible sphere. About two weeks before the disaster, a CAMRAIL railway worker said he had found a letter entitled 'The infuriated Bassas' beneath the door of his office at the Eséka station.[8] From what he confided to me, this letter appeared to be a kind of memorandum listing the demands of its authors – that is, those who claimed to be the spokesmen for the 'entire Bassa people' and the owners of a common cause. The letter called for more roads in Bassa land, more hospitals and schools, and for local demands regarding the train to be taken into account – in short, for the area to be given greater consideration in the modernization drive by disenclaving it. The railway worker told me that he had taken the letter to his superiors and the local authorities, but in the end the matter was dropped. A few weeks later, the derailment occurred, giving meaning to the letter, as the railway worker recalled. He felt that he had not only alerted his superiors, but had also been alerted by the Bassa that 'they were actually going to do something'.[9] In his opinion, fulfilling his duty of vigilance was not limited to inspecting the conformity of the visible material aspects of the station and the train. He also deemed it essential to have 'a watchful eye on the town by day and by night'.[10] It is easy to affirm that reference to this letter favoured CAMRAIL, by offering it the possibility of attributing other internal causes to the disaster rather than acknowledging its own negligence, which was the subject of criticism from a cross-section of both national and international opinion. Nevertheless, referring to the letter highlights the way in which, for all those involved, especially those at CAMRAIL, witchcraft rumours were the preferred causal system to explain this singular disaster.

From speech to action: zombifying the train, punishing the state

This stage of the protest goes beyond the warning because it leads to the derailment, which provides meaning to the stages that preceded it. These stages can be summed up by the naming of the train Boko Haram – the name having a suggestive power. Its utterance created the reality to which it referred – that of a train acted upon by the powers of action in Eséka. These powers also had an effect on nature by causing strange events to occur, heralding doom. At the time of the disaster, the collapse of

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[8] Interviews, Eséka, September 2022.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

the culverts at Manyai prompted an alarm raiser, Boris Bertolt, to publish on his Facebook account that such a causal chain certainly augured events of greater magnitude.[11] This theory prompted him to lend credence to the rumours that the derailment had already occurred. These theories, which were first spread on social media before being picked up by the radio, created an interweaving of events that acted as a plausible structure for the disaster as a witchcraft conspiracy.

The train that was supposed to leave Yaoundé at 10 a.m. was said to have derailed at 9 a.m., even though it was still on the platform at Yaoundé station at the time. Information about the derailment was already circulating on social media, ironically described as 'sorcerers' media' by the Cameroonian comedian Moustik le Karismatik on his Facebook page, even though the misfortune had already been predicted for several weeks in Eséka. The disclaimer from Cameroon's Minister of Transport was broadcast at 1.30 p.m. over national radio, describing the rumours as untrue. This denial turned Boko Haram into a 'zombie train', or an 'undead train', because of the superimposed states of the train and the opposition between two contradictory accounts of its status: that of social media and the word on the street announcing it as dead, and the formal pronouncement of the minister affirming that it was alive. After the derailment was confirmed, the minister backtracked to acknowledge the bizarre and extraordinary interweaving of events.

Noteworthy is the fact that, before 8 a.m., rumours of a derailment spread across social media, supported by photographs of the 2009 derailment.

> At the time I was holding my crisis meeting in my office at 11 a.m., the CAMRAIL manager who was present told me about this rumour, and as I was due to intervene live on CRTV's national station and the meeting was due to end with a press release, they wanted me to deny this unfounded rumour. I asked them if they had done a round-up of all their trains, and they affirmed that all their trains were operating normally. According to them there had been no derailment at that time of day. As a result, when I went live on the 1 p.m. news broadcast, I reported on the measures that had been taken and denied the rumours. But by a fortuitous and unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, it was precisely at 1 p.m. that the train actually derailed at Eséka.[12]

The minister's report suggests that the train had undergone a double zombification: first, with the rumour that it was dead at 9 o'clock while it was still alive; and second, when the government later announced that it was alive when it was already dead. But this idea of zombification is magnified by other assumptions about this train, whose derailment is officially considered to be a maintenance error – in other words, a form of zombification that the Bassa in the diaspora and Cameroonian civil society actors

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[11] 'Alarm raiser' (instead of 'whistleblower') is more faithful to the French concept of 'lanceur d'alerte' developed by the sociologist Francis Chateauraynaud. For details on the use of this concept, see Chateauraynaud and Torny (2005).

[12] Intervention of Edgard Alain Mebe Ngo'o during the 1 p.m. CRTV news broadcast on 21 November 2016; see also Mebe Ngo'o (2016).

denounced when they presented the train as 'second-hand' and 'outdated'.[13] It was suspected that the train had not been newly bought but was second-hand – manufactured and dead elsewhere, then recycled in Cameroon, where it enjoyed a second life enabling it to enter the national market. This stage of the zombifying protest is less centred on the derailment than the first. It is shaped by recourse to prophetic and messianic suppositions. The Bassa people are believed to be 'God's chosen people' who will give Cameroon the president who will 'finally liberate' the country and take it out of underdevelopment.[14] As prophecies are omnipresent in the Cameroonian political universe, the disaster serves as an arena for disseminating them (Molo 2020). Cameroon's largest private daily newspaper, *Mutations*, published a text by Jean Blaise Gwet, a Bassa intellectual, who, attesting to the hypothesis of the catastrophe, considered that:

> Because they have been marginalized, sidelined and forgotten, the Bassa people, and above all the ancestors, can use signs to vent their anger and their right to claim power, according to historical and ancestral agreements and premonitions, in view of the third president of the Republic of Cameroon, who must be a Bassa. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing today is the gesticulation of all and sundry except the Bassa. (Gwet 2016a)

Ultimately, what underpins this protest, culminating in the catastrophe, is the failure to publicize a 'Bassa problem in Cameroon', a problem that has instead been met with persistent disregard on the part of the authorities. This problem envisages an essentialization of the country's endemic underdevelopment, taking specific forms in each region, each one trying to present it as an exclusive issue of the locality. In this context, several of the disasters that have occurred are interpreted through the prism of a battered identity, or as revealing the identity-related facets of a problem that can be described as national.[15] When the disaster struck on 21 October, the Bassa identity

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[13] This rhetoric has been widely taken up by activists of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) and other Cameroonian internet users, who denounce the incompetence and corruption of the authorities, which can be seen in the misappropriation of funds allocated to infrastructure in favour of a culture of tinkering and 'definitively temporary' solutions. This rhetoric denounces the obsolescence of CAMRAIL's trains and the fact that they have already been used in countries of the global North, and are therefore completely outdated for today's society. See the comments under the Cameroonian television channel Canal 2 International's video at <https://www.facebook.com/Canal2International/videos/320427546281201/?app=fbl>.

[14] These prophecies were widely disseminated on the eve of the 2018 presidential elections, when Cabral Libii, a young Bassa intellectual, declared himself a candidate. The disaster was thus an early opportunity to announce the advent of a Bassa president of the republic. Later in the text, there is an extract from a quote by a Bassa intellectual who politicizes the disaster, which he believes should be the moment for the Bassa to take power or become more involved in politics. For accounts on Cabral Libii, see Molo (2021).

[15] Recurrent flooding in the town of Douala is often presented as a consequence of investment in the town by people of Bamiléké origin. As a result, certain discourses often accuse this community of occupying the low-lying areas and flood valleys, deliberately or otherwise masking the failure of land-use planning policies that have been flawed since the colonial period. The same was true of the Ngouache disaster in the town of Bafoussam, in West Cameroon, where an accusing finger was pointed at a 'certain community' developing a particular appetite for investing in areas that were being integrated into the urban zone and at high risk. On this last point, sociologist Claude Abé was at the centre of a controversy for having analysed the Bafoussam disaster from this angle.

became the focus of attention, both internally and externally. This was reflected in the emergence of discourses evoking 'a Bassa affair', 'a Bassa problem' or 'a problem between Bassas', highlighting the spatialization of events according to the places where they occurred, the imagination of local actors and the concerns they sought to bring to the fore by associating them with the issue at hand. This triptych formed the core of the authorities' response, encouraging them to orientate railway policies in line with the witchcraft narratives that associated the disaster with Bassa demands, thus conferring a performative dimension on these discourses and making the witchcraft act a means of political participation.

Conclusion: identity and the witchcraft state in Eséka

Having reached this point, I would like to make a few final remarks. In the first place, certain unfortunate events – such as disasters – which materialize during the day, in full view of everyone, have already happened in many respects, at least in the eyes of certain actors. However, these events begin during the day and/or continue over the night. Disasters that occur during the day have already been worked on at night, and they cannot be fully understood without reference to the imaginary configurations through which those who experience them describe them and construct a system of meanings around them. It is this system of meaning that presents the disaster in Eséka on 21 October 2016 as the product of a masked will and a discreet social mobilization, thus challenging the idea of a Cameroonian society where 'nothing happens' (Tobner 2010). This discreet social mobilization calls for a review of the epistemic standpoints that enable us to observe society in the throes of upheaval, first in the methods of action, then in the discourse of those who claim to be taking action, and finally in the effects that this cycle produces. This makes it possible to qualify the idea of 'collective demobilization in Cameroon' (Pommerolle 2008), or at least to see in this demobilization original forms of action that deserve to be described in detail for what they are. In Eséka, the community associated with the train claims an authentic connection with the railway because of its unique historical roots in the locality, a characteristic absent elsewhere in Cameroon. This authenticity helps to shape a local identity that cannot be considered in isolation from this railway connection. To understand this integration between a community's identity and the authenticity of its mode of action, I suggest the concept of identity or *identicité*. Witchcraft can thus be a part of a community's identity, through which it dissents and promotes a way of seeing and doing things that leads decision makers to act in accordance with its demands. This concept is important to clarify the interpretation of witchcraft. It helps us to move away from examining how the disaster occurred, a question that is meaningless in the context of witchcraft beliefs (Fisiy 1998). Instead, it allows us to focus on the ways in which certain actors react to the question of why the disaster occurred in Eséka. From the moment the event is studied from this angle, we become part of the system of causality and rationality shared in the area under study.

The second observation concerns whether the influence of witchcraft contributed to the derailment of the train. This question becomes secondary once the actors who propagated the imaginary images described in this article exerted a political influence that was as significant, if not more so, than the more open forms of mobilization

Figure 3. The new train itinerary displayed at Eséka station. Source: Photograph by the author, January 2023.

observed in other contexts. The recommendations made by the president of the Republic of Cameroon in response to the survey report stipulated the need to take local dynamics into account when defining railway policy, and this was reflected in the introduction of the new train, which replaced the intercity 152, and its change of name to 'express train'. This train has new timetables and a special itinerary: departing from Yaoundé, it now makes two-minute stops to pick up or drop off passengers at Ngoumou, Makak, Eséka, Messondo and Edéa stations, before arriving at Douala (Figure 3). This decision was taken in agreement with the patriarchs of the town of Eséka, who were consulted before the new train was introduced onto the rail network. This manoeuvre validates the hypothesis that the train's agenda was set by witchcraft rumours. It reveals that, at the very top of the state apparatus, accounts that see the disaster as the product of a collective protest action, with witchcraft as a means of that action, have been given serious consideration, prompting the president

of the republic to issue directives aimed at responding favourably to local demands at Eséka regarding railway policies.

In the same vein, the deportation of the organization Boko Haram from northern Cameroon, where it was active on the battlefield, to the forest region, thanks in particular to the use of the train, is closely linked to an important recommendation by the president of the republic. This recommendation followed the derailment at Eséka and aimed to integrate the terrorist threat into Cameroon's disaster management system. This dimension had not been taken into account by the authorities in charge of risks and disasters, despite President Paul Biya's declaration of war against this Islamist sect in May 2014. The issue of framing terrorism had until then been strictly reserved for the army and defence policies. With the Eséka disaster, the framing of terrorism is now opening up to embrace a global defence scheme involving civilian protection. As a result, the disaster acted as a catalyst for the decision-making process, while witchcraft appears to have been a space for deliberation and a register of popular participation in local governance. This case study thus provides an opportunity to revisit a categorization of Cameroon that has been abandoned by political sociology and anthropology since the 1990s – namely, that of a witchcraft state. As this article points out, this mode of action makes it possible to answer the following reasoning: 'State, reveal to me the methods of contesting and sanctioning your power, and I will tell you who you are' (Molo 2023: 450).

Third, the derailment of 21 October reveals an aspect linked to the tectonics of disasters. Although, in the case of Eséka, the braking system was officially identified as the main cause by international experts, we are dealing with a malfunction that no one can see because of the complexity of the system and the location of the brakes outside the passengers' field of vision. This is also what the witchcraft tale and discourse about this disaster say: the ordinary observer is neither in a position nor has the predisposition to see what the sorcerers are doing. The only way to study their actions is by representations given to material realities (Moore and Sanders 2001). It is also important to note that recourse to the invisible as a plausible way of explaining everyday difficulties and phenomena, or even the workings of the state, and of setting the agenda, as posited in this article, is not unique to Africa. The impact of Masonic lodges (and other cult groups) in recent French politics, the power attributed – rightly or wrongly – to certain lobbies in political decision making in the USA, or to the Mafia in Italy, are all references to covert intervention in the political arena (cf. Puccio-Den 2021). The study of witchcraft here, while posing obvious epistemological problems for the understanding of certain phenomena and even the essentialization of Cameroonian society, could convey the impression of an epistemic exceptionalism. However, bridges can be built between cultural areas, elucidating changes taking place on the African continent and the ways in which those who experience them describe them. This endeavour constitutes an essential anchor point for both cultural history and the pragmatic socio-history of power.

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