

NORTHERN GOTHIC: WITCHES, GHOSTS AND WEREWOLVES IN THE SAVANNA HINTERLAND OF THE GOLD COAST, 1900s–1950s

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All things are always changing,
But nothing dies. The spirit comes and goes,
Is housed wherever it wills, shifts residence
From beasts to men, from men to beasts, but always
It keeps on living.

– Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.¹

In July 1939, government anthropologist Margaret Field composed a memorandum on the anti-witchcraft cults that over the past decade had repeatedly swept through the southern forest region of the British colony of the Gold Coast (now Ghana).² Field's investigations into these movements had been focused on the Akan kingdoms of Akyem Abuakwa and Akyem Kotoku, but in 1939 her attention switched to the Anlo-Ewe region across the Volta River to the south-east, where the followers of a powerful new witch-finding deity named Kunde were believed to be responsible for widespread extortion, murder and political disorder. 'In the last twenty years there has been in the forest country an enormous increase in preoccupation with witchcraft', she wrote, explaining that this was due to the myriad transformations, tensions and anxieties engendered by the Gold Coast's lucrative cocoa export economy (Field 1940: 141). If rising anxiety about witches had gripped the booming cocoa farms and trading towns of Asante and the Gold Coast Colony, it was striking that ritual protection from their destructive activities was sought mainly from the impoverished savanna backwater of the Northern Territories Protectorate. In a formulation that would be repeated in many subsequent analyses, Field outlined the process of ritual osmosis that drew savanna gods like Kunde across the ecological and cultural divide to the Akan forest:

Cocoa also brought to the forest-country numbers of casual labourers from the Northern Territories. The Gold Coast imagination peoples these

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¹ Warner 2002: 1–2. Thanks to Jim Brennan and the two readers for their perceptive and thought-provoking suggestions for the revision of a first draft of this article.

² Regional Archives of Ghana, Koforidua [RAG/K] AMD/KD 29/6/69 Fetishes and Charms, 'Some New Shrines of the Gold Coast and their Significance', by M. J. Field, dd. Osudoku, 25 July 1939, subsequently published under the same title in *Africa* (Field 1940).

unknown territories with potent mysteries. The strangers reported that in their country witchcraft was unknown and that they themselves had no fear of it, for their gods protected them from evil. To the Northern Territories therefore went various private practitioners of native medicine from Akim [Akyem], searching for powerful protective and curative magic. What they actually found there were merely the old, simple, tribal deities . . . concerned with making the crops grow, families and cattle to increase, peace and prosperity to reign and demanding in return truth and goodness. However, it is noticeable that supplicants always endow their gods with the attributes which they themselves are seeking . . . and these were the gods of whom the seekers asked aid. (Field 1940: 142–3)

The irony, she concluded, was that ‘in the Northern Territories witchcraft is unknown, yet in the Gold Coast the Northern Territory [sic] gods usually specialize in witchcraft’ (Field 1940: 145).³

The claim that witchcraft was unknown in the savanna, however, was a matter of some debate. A. W. Cardinall, an experienced official in the Northern Territories and then District Commissioner of Kwawu in the Gold Coast Colony, wrote in the margins of one copy of Field’s memorandum: ‘Very widely known. In Dagomba, Mamprussi and Nanumba and to some extent in Gonja, separate villages are set apart for the use of witches. In Gonja confessed or “convicted” witches become the slaves of the sub-divisional chief’.⁴ Field subsequently travelled to the Northern Territories in order to investigate the original shrines of two of the most prominent ‘new gods’: Senyakupo in the Gonja Kingdom and Nana Tongo in the so-called ‘Frafra’ region on the far north-eastern frontier of the protectorate. In reiterating her argument she drew on the (then unpublished) observations of Meyer Fortes, who between 1934 and 1937 conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork among the Talensi people, the guardians of Tongnaab or ‘Nana Tongo’: ‘Witchcraft, Dr Fortes assures me, is unknown in that district’ (Field 1948: 180). Despite Cardinall’s alternative reading, the dominant picture of the Gold Coast’s transregional ritual landscape produced by colonial-era ethnographers was of an economically dynamic but neurotic, witchcraft-ridden south drawing on the migrant labour and the beneficent ritual resources of an impoverished, ‘tribal’ but psychologically well-balanced north.

This article explores one aspect of the historical relationship between Ghana’s forest and savanna by contrasting what Field called the ‘Gold Coast imagination’ of the north with the reality of witchcraft belief and practice on the frontier of the Northern Territories in the first half of the twentieth century. It arises from a broader project conducted in collaboration with Jean Allman on the history of Tongnaab, the god whose expansive ritual network was centred on the Talensi ancestor

³ For further elaborations, see RAG/K ADM/KD 29/6/106 Fetishes – Prohibition of, ‘Memorandum on “The Fetish Kundi”’, by M. J. Field, 12 Jan. 1940; Field 1948: 171–97; Field 1960; Ward 1956; Debrunner 1959; McLeod 1975; McCaskie 1981.

⁴ RAG/K ADM/KD 29/6/69, ‘Some New Shrines’, marginalia.

shrines of the Tong Hills. One of the central issues that arose from our attempt to reconstruct the historical trajectory of Tongnaab and its transformation into Nana Tongo was that of how the Gold Coast imagination – meaning by and large that of the peoples of Asante and the other Akan forest kingdoms – viewed the inhabitants of the grasslands of the middle Volta Basin to their north (Allman and Parker 2005; Parker 2004; Allman 2004). If discussions about the landscape of witchcraft were confined to the ranks of British officials and ethnographers, they would remain a matter only of the nuanced elaborations of colonial discourse. But they were not: by the inter-war period – and especially in the 1930s – the meanings of ‘witchcraft’ (in the Twi language of the Akan, *bayi*) and the relative efficacy of ritual solutions to the problem of occult malevolence were being widely debated within Gold Coast society. Intersecting with and shaping these debates was the way in which the Akan peoples historically perceived the savanna world, especially the remote, stateless ‘tribes’ on the fringes of the Northern Territories from whose countries emanated the most powerful of the new witch-finding oracles: Kunde, Nana Tongo, Tigare and others. That perception was characterized by a fundamental ambivalence: while the so-called ‘Gurunsi’ and ‘Frafra’ peoples of the northern frontier were generally regarded as primitive rustics, fit only to be exploited as slaves or, in the twentieth century, as menial migrant labourers, they were also seen to have access to a potent array of exotic supernatural powers.⁵ Akan moral topography therefore broadly accorded with the analysis of pioneering ethnographers such as Margaret Field and Meyer Fortes; that is, that the savanna peoples were somehow free from the ravages of witchcraft. I suggest here that these perceptions of the north were misconstrued. Far from being too remote, too ‘primitive’ or too in awe of ancestors to contemplate the existence of witchcraft, it is argued, the Talensi and their savanna neighbours inhabited a cognitive universe saturated with anxieties about maleficent humans and threatening supernatural forces.

In its effort to encapsulate the way in which perceptions of exotic strangers informed readings of the self, the title ‘Northern Gothic’ is far from flippant. Just as the European gothic novel turned on unsettled imaginings of shadowy, threatening ‘Others’, so too did Akan ambivalence towards the savanna netherworld beyond the civilized order of their forest kingdoms. Indeed, it has been shown that the rise of gothic as a literary genre from the late eighteenth century was directly fertilized by imperial encounter, with its eerie host of revenants, shape-shifters, unstable souls and zombies migrating from the creolized Caribbean to the European supernatural imagination. Such fertilization was merely a continuation of the process by which West African concepts such as

⁵ A number of anthropological studies have explored the differing perceptions of ‘strangers’ in the Akan forest kingdoms, on the one hand, and acephalous savanna societies like the Talensi, on the other: Fortes 1975; Schildkrout 1979; Werbner 1989: 223–44; Kramer 1993: 1–48; see also two recent studies from neighbouring Togo: Rosenthal 1998; Piot 1999.

bayi and *vodun* had been reconfigured in the Americas as ‘obeah’ and ‘voodoo’, as well as that by which Atlantic slavery’s brutal annihilation of personhood gave rise to the soulless bodily husk of the zombie (Warner 2002). While not suggesting a simplistic linear process stretching from the slave-raiding frontier of the Sudanic savannas to the plantations of the Caribbean, I argue here that such supernatural imaginings, far from being the preserve of the European colonial encounter, also characterized cross-cultural transactions between the powerful and the disempowered within Africa itself.

The argument is structured in four parts. The first outlines the main contours of the historical relationship between the Asante and other Akan peoples, on the one hand, and the states and societies of the middle Volta savanna, on the other. I then turn to the question of witchcraft in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast in the early colonial period. The Akan may have imagined or been led to believe that witchcraft was ‘unknown’ in the north, but was that indeed the case? With regard to the Talensi, Meyer Fortes suggested that it was. But by looking again at his arguments, by considering evidence from neighbouring Gur-speaking peoples with whom the Talensi shared many elements of an underlying Voltaic culture, and by considering the possibility of historical change, this interpretation can be questioned. The third part examines the one aspect of occult power associated with witchcraft that was perhaps the most widely recognized by the Akan as being a particular characteristic of ‘northerners’; that is, their ability to transmogrify into animals, particularly into hyenas or ‘werewolves’. Finally, I consider the brief efflorescence of an Akan-style anti-witchcraft movement in the Dagbon region of the Northern Territories in the terminal phase of colonial rule in the mid-1950s. This episode further suggests not only that anxieties about malevolent witchcraft were indeed a feature of the savanna world, but that those anxieties were being heightened by the same forces of colonialism and capitalist modernity that had so dramatically transformed the societies of Asante and the Gold Coast.

SAREM: AKAN VISIONS OF THE SAVANNA WORLD

Akan imaginings of the savanna world must be located within the historical relationship forged from the eighteenth century between the expansionist Asante imperial system and the diverse peoples of the middle Volta Basin. The broad parameters of this process are well known. In the half-century following the consolidation of the metropolitan forest kingdom by 1700, Asante armies armed with muskets acquired from European traders on the Gold Coast mounted a series of victorious campaigns against the cavalry states to the north, resulting in the imposition of tributary status on the rulers of Gonja and Dagbon. A rising demand for slaves in turn drew the non-centralized savanna peoples into the ambit of Asante power, as marauding horsemen periodically raided the ‘Gurunsi’ and other independent communities in search of captives destined for servitude in the forest or beyond

in the Americas. The resulting Asante perceptions of the ‘Sarem’ (from the Twi *saremu*, grasslands; cf. *kwaem*, the forest) were deeply ambivalent (Allman and Parker 2005: 29–37; Parker 2004). With the exception of the small and highly respected community of Muslim traders, scholars and diviners allowed to settle in the imperial capital of Kumase, inhabitants of the Sarem for the vast majority of Asante subjects meant foreign-born slaves acquired through purchase, warfare or as tribute payments. These people – whose numbers increased significantly following the decline of the Atlantic slave trade in the early nineteenth century – were known as *nnonkofoo* (sing. *odonko*), a term, like Gurunsi, carrying suggestions of servility, primitiveness and abject barbarity. Physically identified by facial scarification, unable to speak Twi and without recognizable (that is, matrilineal) social structure, *nnonkofoo* were seen to be on the very fringe of humanity itself. As *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin said in a much-quoted exchange with a visiting missionary in 1841:

The small tribes in the interior fight with each other, take prisoners and sell them for slaves; and as I know nothing about them, I allow my people to buy them as they please: they are of no use for any thing but slaves; they are stupid, and little better than beasts. (Freeman 1968: 132; see further, Rattray 1929: 33–46; McCaskie 1995: 95–101)

On the one hand, then, the Sarem and its enslaved, relocated denizens were regarded as profoundly alien and primitive. On the other hand, both place and people were seen to possess ritual resources of a potency matching or even exceeding that accessible to the Akan. There is nothing especially unusual about this – wariness of the savage, servile Other and his vengeful occult powers has been identified as a feature of many slave-owning societies. In the case of the Akan forest kingdoms, this ambivalence was sharpened by the constant threat to human culture perceived to emanate from the disordered and aggressive spiritual forces of nature. It was further heightened by the notion that the most effective ritual protection against the ravages of *bayi* – the most pervasive eruption of those malevolent forces into the fragile civilized order – also originated from outside culture. As contact between metropolitan Asante and the tributary ‘northern provinces’ of the empire increased, accelerating further as a result of colonial conquest in the early twentieth century, the savanna wilderness came to represent the extreme fringes of the spiritually hazardous yet potent domain outside culture. In Kramer’s formulation, there emerged a ‘structural equivalence between the forests as a counterworld to the settlement, and the grasslands as a counterworld to the forest regions of Asante’ (Kramer 1993: 43). Yet those grasslands remained a far-off, indeed, almost other-worldly place. As late as 1931, in a rare newspaper article on the Northern Territories, the *West African Times* admonished its elite coastal readership for its woeful ignorance of the inhabitants of the protectorate, admitting that ‘the only person in the Colony who is supposed to know all about these people is the Secretary for Native

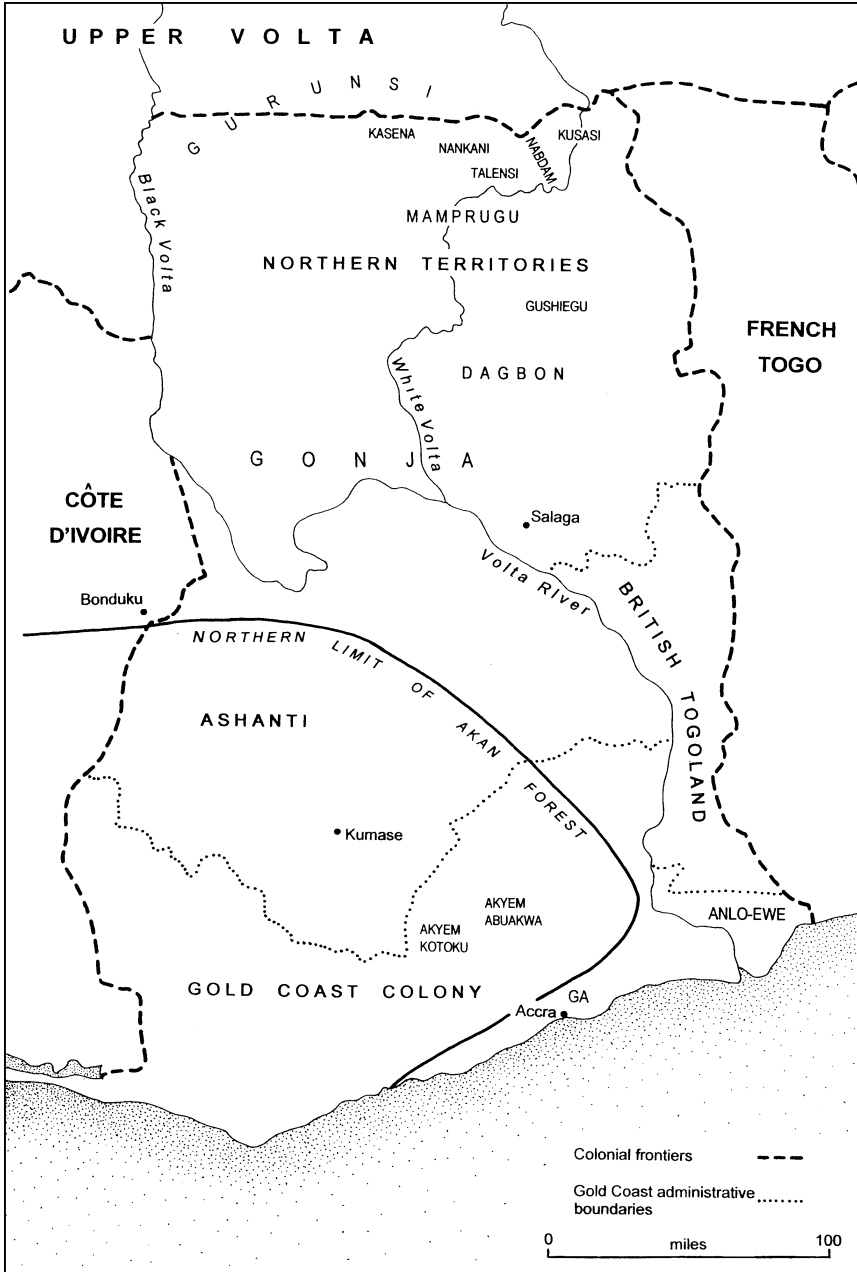


FIGURE The Gold Coast, 1930s.

Affairs'.⁶ In short, it was its very remoteness and 'otherness' that for the forest-dwelling peoples lent the savanna such supernatural allure.

In the pre-colonial period, the descendants of *nnonkofoo* could, over the space of generations, gradually be assimilated into Akan matrilineages. Although remaining slaves and carrying the stigma of *odonko* origins, they were often able to acquire some degree of jurat corporateness and with it recognition as a person. A marked upsurge in slave raiding and related forms of organized violence on the Gurunsi frontier in the 1880s–90s, however, meant that foreign-born *nnonkofoo* continued to be highly visible in the Akan forest well into the twentieth century. Although the British outlawed the legal status of slavery in Asante in 1908 (having done so in the Gold Coast Colony in 1875), the process of assimilation continued for many decades. By the 1920s, the growth of the colonial economy and the transition from northern slave labour to migrant wage labour provided the catalyst for the emergence of the new forms of ritual dialogue between savanna and forest described by Margaret Field. Ex-slaves were joined by a new generation of migrant workers from the stateless societies who travelled south in order, as they put it, to 'sell their hoes' on the cocoa farms and public works projects of Asante and the Gold Coast. Although these new strangers continued to be despised as primitive *nnonkofoo*, their identity appears to have become more complex as their Akan hosts experienced mounting social tensions expressed in the established idioms of *bayi*. As Kramer argues, 'the people of the grasslands appeared no longer primarily as uncivilized savages . . . but rather as vigorous tribes who successfully withstood the break-up of culture, along with the social conflicts and psychic burdens of modern existence' (Kramer 1993: 44).

The savanna dwellers' recognized intimacy with the supernatural realm in turn fuelled the widespread perception that they possessed the inherent power to transmogrify at will into animals. 'We have to protect ourselves against, and use when we can, the spirits of all things in the Sky and upon Earth,' an Asante *okomfo* (or 'priest') told R. S. Rattray in the early 1920s. 'You go to the forest, see some wild animal, fire at it, kill it, and find you have killed a man. . . . There are people who can transform themselves into leopards; "the grass-land people" are especially good at turning into hyenas' (Rattray 1923: 150). For the Akan, such shape-shifting was explicitly associated with *bayi*, the metaphorical 'eating' of souls by witches (*abayifoo*, sing. *obayifo*). 'It accounts', Cardinall reported in the same decade, 'for the general idea that the Grunshi are cannibals, eaters of men – a statement one is always hearing on the coast. It really means that these wilder people are possessed with much magical power' (Cardinall 1927: 217). Whether the shape-shifting proclivities of the grassland people were due mainly to the Asante perception of their brutishness – the notion that they were 'little better than beasts' to start with – or was a skill that *nnonkofoo* slaves and later migrant workers actively propagated as a form of occult

⁶ National Archives of Ghana, Accra [NAG] NP 14/3, *West Africa Times*, 7 July 1931.

empowerment is a key question. To begin to formulate an answer, we need to turn our attention from the Akan forest to the grasslands of the Sarem. Far from simply being the stuff of folklore or lurid fantasy on the part of the Akan, the belief in were-hyenas and other forms of shape-shifting was pervasive in the savanna world itself, where it was also tangled with the idioms of witchcraft.

WITCHCRAFT AMONG THE TALENSI AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

In terms of Akan perceptions, there can be little doubt that the notion that the primitive ‘Gurunsi’ and other *nnonkofoo* were free from the ravages of witchcraft was widespread and pervasive by the early twentieth century. In the savanna world itself, however, the reality appears to have been somewhat different. It is certainly the case that documentary sources relating to witchcraft belief and practice in the Northern Territories are few and far between compared to the voluminous colonial files detailing the succession of anti-witchcraft movements in Asante and the Gold Coast throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Yet there is enough fugitive evidence to show that unease about the threatening power of witches was also a feature of Voltaic societies. In its broad lineaments, savanna witchcraft belief was strikingly similar to that of the forest and coastal peoples. In common with Akan *abayifoo* – and with witchcraft belief in many other parts of the African continent – witches were believed to possess a destructive spiritual force that could be projected either consciously or subconsciously in order to consume the essence or ‘soul’ of the victim, leading to the latter’s death. Although in normative terms this consumption was metaphorical, popular belief accorded witches the ability to engage in nocturnal flying, to metamorphose at will into animals, to gather in trees in order to share out the ‘flesh’ of their victims, and all the rest. As southerners began to seek out more effective protective powers from distant savanna shrines in the colonial period, moreover, there are indications that regional divergences in anti-witchcraft practices also became less pronounced. Let us consider the early twentieth-century evidence relating to the Talensi and their immediate neighbours on the north-eastern frontier of the Northern Territories.

In *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*, the second of his two famous monographs based on fieldwork in the vicinity of the Tong Hills in the mid-1930s, Meyer Fortes argued that witchcraft occupied a ‘minor place in Tale mystical thought and ritual action’ (Fortes 1949: 32, and see 32–5, 131–3). Although Fortes did identify the potential of being a witch (*soi*; pl. *soob*) as the ‘critical spiritual attribute’ of the maternal line (*soog*), the fact that this line was ‘suppressed’ in a strongly patrilineal social structure meant that witchcraft remained ‘something on the fringe’ of Talensi belief (Fortes 1949: 33). *Soob* were recognized as possessing the ability to fly about at night in the guise of a ball of fire, to ‘see’ (*nye*) hidden things and to have prophetic powers. They

could be beneficent, able to impart luck, or maleficent, prone to killing people by consuming their *sii* ('soul'). But 'these qualities make up what is mainly an imaginary stereotype', Fortes argued, 'a mixture of superstition and folklore, and not part of the system of mystical and ritual values that really matters for the conduct of life' (Fortes 1949: 33). In line with the structural functionalist paradigm of the time, he insisted that:

The main reason why witchcraft is of minor significance in Tale mystical thought is because the elaborate ancestor cult and the Earth cult deal adequately with most social and psychological tensions in terms consistent with the total social structure. The idea of witchcraft is not easily reconcilable with the structure of Tale society, dominated as it is by the patrilineal principle. As we know, the residential unit is based on the agnatic lineage and the local community as a whole is based on lineage grouping. Most corporate and co-operative activities depend on lineage ties. The notion of maleficent secret malice involved in the idea of witchcraft is incompatible with the structure of the localized lineage. The occurrence of witchcraft within a lineage would poison the mutual confidence of the agnates, disrupt their corporate relations, and so throw social life into confusion. (Fortes 1949: 34–5)

Misfortune was attributed not to malign humans, he argued, but to capricious ancestors (*yaanam*, sing. *yaab*) who could inflict illness and death in punishment for disregard of kinship duties, for breach of taboo, or for ritual neglect of their own memory (Fortes and Mayer 1966: 13).

Like much of Fortes's monumental elaboration of Talensi social structure, ethnographically this seems to make perfect sense. But it makes perhaps too much sense. The problem is that the same argument could be made about Akan society, or indeed any other society throughout history where a fear of witchcraft – no matter how vague in terms of formal mystical explanation – lurked as a dark underbelly to social life. Witches both north and south of the savanna–forest divide were usually (although by no means always) identified as women, who were able either by conscious choice or unconscious biological inheritance to pass the 'germ' of witchcraft to their children. The fact that the Akan are a matrilineal people, for whom *bayi* was inherited along with blood (*mogya*) through the female line, may well have resulted in a threatening confluence of kinship organization and the potential for anti-social maleficence.⁷ Yet simply to dismiss witchcraft amongst the Talensi as 'an imaginary stereotype' made up of 'a mixture of superstition and folklore' appears to be missing the point. That witchcraft *did not* sit comfortably with social norms – indeed, was actively perceived as a dangerous inversion of those norms; in one evocative formulation, as the 'dark side of kinship' – is the key to understanding its dynamics in any of its historical manifestations (Geschiere 1997). We need to look no further than the Akan's Ga and

⁷ Fortes develops the Asante–Talensi comparison in the essay 'Custom and Conscience' in Fortes 1987: 211–17.

Ewe neighbours on the south-eastern Gold Coast to see that patrilineal kinship organization was not in itself enough to neutralize the perceived menace of witches at times of rising social tensions (see Field 1937).

Witchcraft may well have been extraneous to the elevated 'mystical thought' of some of Fortes's elderly male informants who served as guardians of the earth and ancestor shrines, but his own evidence suggests the existence of speculation, interpretation and disquiet regarding the activities of *soi* and other malign forces beyond the formal structures of Talensi religion. 'Superstition and folklore are not wholly negligible', he conceded, going on to note specific instances when people indeed did 'fall back on the idea of a witch's occult aggression in order to cope with anxieties and frustrations' (Fortes 1949: 33).⁸ As amongst both the matrilineal Akan and the patrilineal Ga and Ewe of the south, Talensi witchcraft accusations when they did arise were often made by women against co-wives – a situation that when it arose bred 'chronic friction' and 'endless discord' within family groups (Fortes 1949: 132). Fortes's assertion that the Talensi had no institutionalized means of identifying or combating witchcraft is also somewhat misleading. As was the case amongst the pre-colonial Akan, suspected witches were often subjected to the established method of judicial ordeal, that is, the *kuh so-peema* or 'poison arrow ordeal', and were considered guilty if their self-inflicted wounds proved fatal.⁹ As for the argument that the ultimate cause of all Talensi misfortune was the ancestors, that too could be said for the Akan. Returning to the theme in a later paper co-authored with his wife, Doris Mayer (but still referring to the ethnographic present of the mid-1930s), Fortes appears to qualify his earlier analysis with the suggestion that the ancestors 'may act also by withdrawing their protection and leaving the way open to other occult agents of misfortune'. The most dangerous of these occult forces were 'magically "evil" animals, "evil" trees and "evil" stones – not, be it noted, evil people' (Fortes and Mayer 1966: 13). The historic importance of evil trees in the intricately mapped moral landscape of the Talensi countryside was confirmed by a present-day informant, Lambazaa Naoh, a prominent *bakoldaana*, or soothsayer, of Tengzug, the community in the heart of the Tong Hills. Naoh added, however, that certain trees were regarded as evil precisely because *soob* would gather in them at night to share out their grisly spoils.¹⁰ The distinction between evil animals and evil people, moreover, was far from clear-cut – a point to which I shall return.

⁸ Cf. Douglas 1966: 128–9, on the prevalence of witchcraft fears among disempowered or 'inarticulate' sectors of societies.

⁹ A fact acknowledged by Fortes (1949: 33); see also Rattray 1932: 298–9; NAG ADM 56/1/227 Native Customs, 'The Frafra Custom of Arrow Stabbing', by W. R. Rainsford, DC Zuarungu, 28 June 1929. The equivalent judicial ordeal in the forest and on the coast involved the ingestion of a draught containing the poison bark of the *odom* or sassafras tree.

¹⁰ Interview with Lambazaa Naoh (born c. 1925), Tengzug, 6 July 2002; also interview with *Yikpemdaan* Wakbazaa, Gorogo, 3 July 2002.

This is not to argue that Fortes either got it wrong or chose to downplay the role of witchcraft because it did not sit comfortably with his intricately constructed vision of Talensi kinship. Rather, it is to suggest that the idiom of witchcraft *could* be mobilized to explain infertility, illness, death or other misfortune in much the same way as in the Akan forest kingdoms. Moreover, if we move away from a narrow focus on the Talensi to consider neighbouring peoples of the stateless ‘Gurunsi’ belt, there is every indication that maleficent witchcraft was far from unknown. Important evidence is scattered throughout the accounts of early colonial officials struggling to impose a semblance of order over the mosaic of ‘tribes’ on both sides of the frontier between the Gold Coast and what would become French Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). In a detailed survey of the various Gurunsi peoples undertaken in the opening years of French rule, the pioneering administrator-ethnographer Louis Tauxier states repeatedly that ‘sorciers’ or ‘mangeurs d’âmes’ (‘soul eaters’) were widely feared and held directly responsible for many deaths (Tauxier 1912).¹¹ Deep-seated apprehension concerning the consumption of ‘souls’ by witchcraft is also noted by A. W. Cardinall, who was first posted to the Northern Territories in 1916 and, like Tauxier, took a keen interest in local belief. In 1918, Cardinall was appointed Commissioner of the Navarro [Navrongo]-Zuarungu District, a densely populated swathe of open grasslands studded with defensible rocky outcrops located between the Mamprugu Kingdom to the south and the frontier with French territory to the north. The District extended from the country of the Kasena and Builsa peoples in the west to that of the Nankani, Talensi and Nabdam in the east, fiercely independent, non-centralized agriculturalists long regarded by African and European state builders alike as the wildest, most primitive and most recalcitrant of the Gurunsi ‘pagan tribes’. Collectively dubbed by outsiders as ‘Frafra’, the Nankani, Talensi and Nabdam were subdued only in 1911, when a British military expedition finally occupied the sacred stronghold of the Tong Hills and set out to destroy the ritual influence of the Tongnaab ancestor shrines at its summit (Allman and Parker 2005: 54–71).¹²

Like Fortes, Cardinall noted the belief in the ability of evil trees and evil animals to cause harm to humans, but added that ‘an evil man

¹¹ Interestingly, the copy of this important work as well as that of Tauxier’s later book on the region of Bonduku (1921) held in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London contains extensive marginalia by Meyer Fortes, often drawing attention to material on the ‘spirit world’, witchcraft belief and anti-witchcraft practices: see, for example, 180–1, 195 and 230–1. Fortes acknowledges consulting *Le Noir du Soudan* at Fortes 1945: 6.

¹² A note on these ethnonyms: Fortes followed Rattray in using ‘Tallensi’ (which Rattray spelled ‘Talense’), noting that it was the term used by the neighbouring Nankani for people who called themselves Talis (sing. Taleng). Likewise, the term ‘Nankani’ (sometimes Nankanse) was used by the Kasena to the west for people who collectively called themselves Gorisi (i.e. ‘Gurunsi’). The Kasena were in turn known by the former as ‘Yulisi’ (or ‘Woolisi’), and so on. As the form Talensi remains widely recognized both locally and in the scholarly literature, it has been retained, albeit with what Fortes (1945: 14) acknowledged as the ‘artificial spelling’ of the double ‘l’ corrected.

can capture the soul and so bring about the body's death' (Cardinall 1920: 44). He wrote that the eating of souls by witches was often reported in the region, with accusations escalating markedly as a result of the devastating influenza epidemic of 1918–19. In early 1919, one woman from the Nankani settlement of Bongo admitted to having 'caught many souls in this manner', although in her own defence she insisted that 'she could not control the evil actions of her own soul in doing so' (Cardinall 1920: 44).¹³ In Asante and the Gold Coast to the south, the rapidly soaring and apparently inexplicable mortality level was widely regarded as arising from *bayi*, an interpretation that fuelled the rise of the Hwemeso anti-witchcraft movement. Cardinall's records indicate that this interpretation extended across into the savanna, where the similarity with Akan idioms of witchcraft at a time of heightened insecurity and perceived moral crisis is striking.

Now, some care is obviously needed when drawing comparisons between the spiritual realm of the Talensi, as observed by Fortes in 1934–7, and that of surrounding ethnic groups. Yet the strong cultural similarity that characterized the Gur-speaking peoples of the middle Volta savanna suggests that it could be far more dangerous to reify these communities into self-contained 'tribes' each with its own world-view labelled 'Talensi belief', 'Kasena belief', et cetera. Indeed, subtle variations are as apparent within ethnic groups as between them – a situation readily acknowledged by Rattray, Fortes and the French administrator-ethnographers. 'The cultural uniformity of the Voltaic region is ... strikingly shown in forms of social and economic organization, in custom, belief, and material culture', Fortes wrote, adding that 'the people of Taleland are typical in every respect of the tribes of the central Volta region' (Fortes 1945: 6–7). Overlapping cultural forms and belief systems – and indeed, formal ritual linkages such as the Tongnaab cult – were particularly apparent in the case of immediate neighbours such as the Talensi and Nankani (or Gorisi), between which existed 'no precise linguistic or structural boundaries' (Fortes 1945: 16, and see 29, 116–20, 231; Rattray 1932: 239). Neither should the distinction between regions of state formation such as Dagbon and Gonja on the one hand and those of 'statelessness' be overemphasized in terms of underlying patterns of popular religious belief and practice (Allman and Parker: 27–8). In short, there is no evidence to suggest that the issues of witchcraft and shape-shifting should be treated as any different from other aspects of Voltaic culture – that is, characterized by nuanced variation between and within ethnic clusters, but in their essentials spanning the entire region.

The observations of Tauxier and Cardinall concerning witchcraft belief and practice in the frontier 'Gurunsi' belt were confirmed by

¹³ See also Cardinall 1927: 217; NAG ADM 68/5/1 Zouaragu [Zuarungu] Informal Diary, 20 Sept. 1920; and on witchcraft amongst the Kasena of the Navrongo region, NAG ADM 56/1/133, 'A Digest of the Religion and System of Land Tenure of the Kasena Tribe', dd. Oct. 1929.

R. S. Rattray in the late 1920s. As the culmination of his tenure as first head of the Gold Coast Anthropology Department, Rattray journeyed north in 1928 to begin research amongst the peoples of the Zuarungu District. There he was fortunate to acquire the services of Victor Aboya, who as a young boy in the turmoil of the 1890s had been sold down to Asante as a slave. Emancipated and educated by the Basel Mission, Aboya had subsequently returned home to Winkogo, a settlement five miles west of the Tong Hills on the frontier between Nankani and Talensi country. Aboya made an enormous contribution to Rattray's understanding of local society, acting as the latter's host, guide and translator and writing a sequence of twelve chapters in *Tribes of the Ashanti Hinterland*. As a rare indigenous voice, unmediated by European colonial officials, his observations on the local spiritual realm are of critical importance. In contrast with those of Fortes, they suggest that death, the absence of fertility or other serious misfortune was often seen to be caused by malevolent witchcraft rather than directly by the ancestors. Aboya's descriptions of Nankani funeral customs indicate that, unless otherwise demonstrated, elderly women in particular were suspected of consuming the souls of children. 'Mother', a deceased woman's eldest son would call from the flat roof of her house as part of her funeral rites, 'if formerly when you were alive, you were catching people and were a bitter-bellied witch, killing people . . . because you did not want your neighbour to have anything, if it is on account of such things that *Yimi* (the Sky-God) killed you, come hither quickly' (Rattray 1932: 187, and see also 195 and 210). 'Witches of different sections will meet and share their victims, but a witch cannot kill a person to whom she is unrelated', Aboya explained (the quotation is unattributed but clearly is his).

When a witch wishes to eat some one, she causes that person's soul to enter an animal – a sheep, goat, cow, or even a wild animal. When such an animal is killed and eaten, the 'black' people know that they are eating a human being, but to ordinary people, the witches seem to be eating out of an empty plate. The person so eaten sickens and dies. Witches, when they die, become *kogero*, 'ghost' (s. *koko*). (Rattray 1932: 298–9)

Research among related peoples further afield in the Northern Territories also records anxiety about the anti-social powers of witches in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ There is also some indication that these beliefs, far from hovering in a timeless ethnographic present, were – like those to the south – being reshaped by the forces of social and economic change instigated by the imposition of colonial rule.

¹⁴ On the 'witch-slaves' (*bagbenye*) in Gonja noted by Cardinall, see Goody 1970; and the witch community in Gambaga in Mamprugu, Drucker-Brown 1993. For the Kasena, see Howell 1997: 73 and 130; and for studies of witchcraft belief in stateless societies in the Northern Territories, but from a later period (1950–2), see Goody 1962: 421–2; and Tait 1967. Understanding of these issues in the Talensi area has benefited from the insights provided by Lambazaa Naoh, interview, 6 July 2002.

Aboya's consideration of this point is brief but emphatic: throughout the 'Frafra' region, he concluded, witches 'are much more numerous than formerly' (Rattray 1932: 299). The perception that nocturnal 'soul eaters' were increasingly abroad in the land was also conveyed to Tauxier by Kulango informants in the late 1910s across the border in the Cercle de Bondoukou in northern Côte d'Ivoire. 'That is for the good reason that now, since the French occupation, they are no longer killed, while formerly they were fervently sought out when someone had died' (Tauxier 1921: 195). The monopolization of the power of capital punishment coupled with the outlawing of judicial ordeals by the colonial state has been identified as one reason for the apparent increase in the fear of witchcraft and the development of innovative forms of anti-witchcraft in many parts of the continent, and there is no reason to suspect that this was not the case in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast (Parker 2004). 'The memory of the not distant days when witches were cruelly killed is . . . still quite green', Cardinall noted of Dagbon, and 'the belief in their existence and the awful evil that they make and do is almost without exception as strong as ever' (Cardinall 1931: 174). Amongst stateless peoples such as the Talensi, those identified as witches could also be treated with severity. The poison arrow ordeal often resulted in death (and therefore posthumous guilt) and even after it had gone into decline, the fate of those accused of being *soob* could be grim. Fortes himself details one case involving an old woman in the 1930s:

'Wherever she goes', my informants said, 'men, women and children will look askance at her and jeer at her for being a witch. Shame and grief will dog her, and she will pine away and die'. It was for fear of this kind of public ostracism that anyone accused of being a witch in the old days insisted on undergoing the arrow ordeal. (Fortes 1949: 34)¹⁵

'To "see" is a bad thing', Rattray was told by an informant from the neighbouring region of Kusasi to the east. 'In old days if we found a witch we wanted to tie him up and beat him until he died. You cannot leave a person who is eating people; he will spoil the world' (Rattray 1932: 375).

SHAPE-SHIFTING AND WERE-HYENAS IN THE NORTHERN SAVANNA

Victor Aboya's comments on the ability of malevolent *soob* to make their victims' soul enter an animal suggest that in this part of west Africa the ontological boundary between people and animals was highly porous. As McCaskie (1992) has shown in an analysis of Asante perceptions of forest animals and Jackson (1990) in an account of shape-shifting among the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, this boundary was not only

¹⁵ See also the similar account of an old woman suspected of being a werewolf being hounded out of Tamale and into the bush: Martin 1913–14.

ambiguous and unstable, but also crucial in fashioning notions of self and personhood. In the Voltaic savanna too, the relationship between people and animals was represented, interrogated and elaborated in a complex variety of ways. The most obvious of these was the role of totemic animals in defining the boundaries of individual, lineage, clan and cult identities. The importance of animals in establishing notions of identity amongst the Gur-speaking peoples and throughout the Sudanic zone is well documented by colonial-era ethnographers (Delafosse 1912; Tauxier 1912; Rattray 1932; Fortes 1945: 121–46; Fortes 1987: 110–44 and 247–86).¹⁶ Like neighbouring cultures, the Talensi categorized animals (*duu*) according to discernible ecological or phenomenological traits: creatures of the earth, water, air, et cetera. Although ritual dietary prohibitions or taboos (*kiher*, pl. *kiha*) for some clans extended to domestic animals (such as the fowl), totemic animals tended to be creatures of the wild (*yeog duus*), from particular insects, birds, fish and small amphibians through to pythons, crocodiles and the great bush mammals. One important category was *nyindem* or ‘teeth-bearers’, the large reptiles and carnivores that attacked other animals and sometimes even humans. Like the ancestors, *nyindem* were restless, unpredictable and potentially dangerous, a clear symbolic link that, according to Fortes, made them the most respected of totems (Fortes 1945: 145). Totemic taboos were validated by myths, invariably turning on the assistance given by a particular animal to an ancestor facing a life-threatening crisis. The ancestor of the community of Sawaleg, for example, was saved from marauding enemies (‘Perhaps . . . Mamprusi who came to raid for slaves’, Fortes’s informant speculated) by the timely intervention of a squirrel (*sinsereg*). He vowed that neither he nor his descendants would eat the *sinsereg* again (Fortes 1945: 129). Similarly, the avoidance of the tortoise (*pakur*) and the water tortoise (*mieng*) by the autochthonous clans of the Tong Hills had its origins during a time of severe drought, when a tortoise led a parched ancestor to a spring. Although these dietary prohibitions were observed by Fortes to be ‘clear cut and categorical’, he stressed that totemic animals were not in and of themselves regarded with any particular reverence or awe. In their typically practical way, the Talensi viewed their own totem as ‘an ordinary, commonplace creature devoid of . . . a halo of sacredness’ (Fortes 1945: 125).

Intersecting with the ordering of the animal world along readily observable phenomenological lines and the apparently prosaic realities of totemic taboos, however, were two further categories of creatures that addressed the issue of – and raised certain interpretative problems for – the boundary between humanity and nature. The first was ‘earth animals’ (*tengen duus*) such as the crocodile (*bang*) and python

¹⁶ It should be noted that unlike other Gur-speaking cultures to the north and west famed for their wood carving, the use of zoomorphic masks as a dramatic device to symbolize and to mediate the relationship between culture and the wild was not practised by the Talensi and their neighbours in northern Ghana.

(*wa'akpem*), which, when physically within the precincts of particular earth shrines (*tongban*) rather than in the bush, were endowed with sacred significance and with human attributes. Such animals were regarded as incarnations of ancestors and referred to as 'people of the earth' (*tengen niriba*). A well-known example was the pool of sacred crocodiles at the Talensi settlement of Zubiung. To kill one within the realm of culture 'was murder of the most heinous kind and it would bring disaster on the whole clan' (Fortes 1987: 249; see also Fortes 1945: 143; and cf. Tauxier 1912: 193 and 138–9). If found dead, *tengen niriba* were accorded funeral rites and solemnly buried. Fortes has less to say about the second category. That was so-called 'black animals' (*sabela duus*), those regarded as magically dangerous and which if killed in the hunt required careful ritual propitiation in order to lay their *sii* or 'soul' to rest. As with *sasa mmoa* in the Akan forest, the category of *sabela duus* was dominated not by those creatures who posed a physical danger to humans but by various types of antelopes, including two species of the tiny duiker (cf. McCaskie 1992).¹⁷ There is some suggestion that leopards and lions fell somewhere between the two categories. In a number of clans, *tengdaanas* ('earth priests') and other distinguished male elders were believed to 'rise up' (*ihigereme*) after death as leopards, which were therefore also treated with the greatest reverence (Rattray 1932: 234; Fortes 1945: 143; Fortes 1987: 255).

Talensi notions of personhood, therefore, were complex, spatially fluid and open to some degree of interpretation. Rather than being a clearly bounded concept, human identity occupied part of a broader spectrum of living forces that extended to animals, malicious bush sprites (*kolkpaares*; sing. *kolkpaareg*), shrines, ancestors and the ancestor-deity Tongnaab.¹⁸ With regard to the fundamental biological distinction between people, *niriba*, and animals, *duu*, Fortes admitted that it 'was difficult to elicit definite statements as to where the critical difference lies' (Fortes 1987: 255). Totemic animals were seen as ancestral kin, certain animals in certain locations were regarded as *niriba*, 'people', and clan ancestors could 'rise up' to be embodied as sacred animals. Moreover, animals possessed *sii*, often translated as 'soul' but perhaps more accurately conceptualized as the spiritual double of a living being. Thus, it was the *sii* of witches that left their bodies at night, the *sii* of their victims that was 'eaten', and the *sii* of sleepers that had nocturnal encounters as played out in dreams. It was also the *sii* that departed the deceased body and

¹⁷ In his account of Nankani hunting customs, Rattray (1932: 171) lists seven animals regarded as '*dun sabela*': *najo* (buffalo – widely regarded as the most physically hazardous large mammal), *koo* (hartebeest), *sebega* (roan antelope), *molifo* (bush buck), *isiga* (duiker), *gambua* (an unidentified small antelope) and *yoka* (unidentified). Also useful is Cardinall 1931: 97–124, 'Hunters and some of their lore'.

¹⁸ There is also the theoretical debate within Africanist anthropology over the relative importance of 'individual' versus 'relational' identity, i.e. an idea of self thoroughly penetrated by, and therefore in essence shaped by its relationship with, other forces. For a brief critique of Fortes's allegedly too 'individualist' reading of Talensi identity, see Piot 1999: 17–19.



FIGURE A leopard (Talen: *yeogbaa*), one of the great *nyindem* or 'teeth-bearers', disarmed and brought into the *teng*, the realm of human culture. Unpublished photograph by Meyer Fortes labelled 'The leopard killed by a Sii man & brought to Tongo on a handle. Nov. 1936'. Courtesy of the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Cambridge.

journeyed to *kpeem*, the world of the dead. Cardinall reported the belief amongst the peoples of the Navarro-Zuarungu District that *kpeem* lay at the end of shadowy 'ghost roads' either in Salaga, the great nineteenth-century slave market in Gonja to the south, or at the hill of 'Pilimpiku' in Mossi country to the north. Here we can detect a parallel between the cosmology of death and the historical landscape of insecurity and enslavement – both involving the disappearance of 'souls' to the predatory cavalry states north and south of the Gurunsi frontier. It was a sign of the increase in colonial mobility that this belief was dying out, 'since many nowadays make the journey to Salaga; some, however, who have been there claim to have seen the souls of their ancestors and to have been entertained by them' (Cardinall 1920: 44; also Cardinall 1931: 33–5; and cf. Shaw 2002: 70–102).

But could humans, either living or dead, physically and/or spiritually transmogrify into animals? Fortes argued that amongst the Talensi this was believed not to be the case, applying a strictly semiotic or 'intellectualist' reading to *tengen niriba* such as the sacred crocodiles at Zubiung. 'Tallensi deny that this is a belief in reincarnation or in the transmigration of souls', he insisted. His own interpretation was that the crocodiles were simply symbolic of the ancestors 'as a living mystical force' (Fortes 145: 143). As with the broader notion of witchcraft, however, evidence concerning shape-shifting in the Voltaic savanna does not sit comfortably with Fortes's conclusions. In an analysis of the Talensi attitude to strangers, Fortes acknowledges in passing the ubiquity of the belief that other 'living' forces could transmogrify (*ngalem*) into human form:

For it is not impossible that a person presenting himself as an unknown stranger might in fact be a Being of the Wild [*kolkpaareg?*] or an evil tree or stone which has *ngalem* transformed itself into human shape to test and tempt one. To refuse hospitality in such a case lays one open to the mystical attack that might result in madness. (Fortes 1975: 232)¹⁹

It is undeniably the case that some of Fortes's informants were sceptical of such metamorphoses. But a wider range of local interpretations begins to emerge when the animals in question were malevolent creatures of the wild rather than beneficent *tengen niriba* co-inhabiting the realm of culture. Again, Tauxier's ethnographic surveys of the peoples of Upper Volta and of the Bonduku region of northern Côte d'Ivoire are crucial sources, recording the widespread and deep-seated perception that witches were indeed able to transmogrify at will into animals.²⁰ The large carnivores occupied an ambiguous position here: usually treated with great reverence as 'embodying' the authority of the ancestors, but regarded as deviant, anti-social and malevolent if they ever attacked humans. This was the case at Tauxier's headquarters at Léo in 1909, when a man-eating lion that accounted for seventeen locals was seen to be no ordinary lion but as a transmogrified witch ('*un lion sorcier*') (Tauxier 1912: 292–3; see also Cardinall 1927: 205). The creature most commonly associated with the shape-changing proclivities of witches, however, was the hyena – often appearing in sources, assimilated to European folkloric sensibilities, as the 'werewolf' or, in French, '*loup-garou*'. Cardinall stated the case emphatically in 1927: 'In the north the commonest type of wer-wolf is the wer-hyena. I know of no man of the Northern Territories who is not absolutely convinced that men do change quite often into hyenas' (Cardinall 1927: 205; see too Cardinall 1920: 37).

¹⁹ Present-day informants stress that *kolkpaares* can also 'possess' certain individuals called *ba'arnaab*, who have the gift to turn their capricious power to good: interview with Gbeog *tengdaana* Zienbazaa (a prominent *ba'arnaab* born c. 1910), Gbeog, Tongo, 1 July 2002.

²⁰ See Tauxier 1912: 181 (on the Nounouma), 231 (on the 'Kassounas-Fras', one branch of the Kasena; and see here Fortes's marginal note: 'werwolves'), 292–3 (on the 'Boura'), and 317–18 (on the 'Kassounas-Bouras'); Tauxier 1921: 197 (on the Kulango).

The anomalous position of the hyena in the taxonomy of the animal world has been noted with regard to a number of west African societies (see, for example, Calame-Griaule and Ligers 1961; Jackson 1982: 90–122; Gottlieb 1992: 98–118). Widely seen as anti-social, deviant, depraved, unclean and monstrous, the hyena has also been regarded with a certain ambivalence: clownish, clumsy and foolish on the one hand, but feared as a hostile, nocturnal marauder on the other. These complex readings clearly arose from the striking appearance and habits of the Spotted Hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), the most common of the four members of the *Hyaenidae* family (Kruuk 1972). Traditionally widespread throughout the ecological zones of west Africa – but particularly ubiquitous in the savanna grasslands – the Spotted Hyena possessed a range of extraordinary attributes that made it highly susceptible both to folkloric anthropomorphic resemblances and to more threatening supernatural associations. The former ridiculed the hyena's apparently clumsy, awkward gait, well captured in its Akan names: correctly *opataku* or *obonukyerefo*, but commonly known by its sobriquets such as *kuntung* ('clumsy') or *sebe kwasea* ('pardon me, the fool') (Christaller 1933: 379; Rattray 1927: 43–4). The latter dwelt on a range of traits from its maniacal 'laughter', ability to stand upright on its stunted hind legs and nocturnal forays into areas of human settlement, on to its reputation as an eater of carrion, propensity to dig up and to devour in their entirety freshly buried human corpses and its ghostly white faeces. All of these had obvious parallels with the deviant activities of human witches. But the hyena's most singular attribute and the one that perhaps cemented its association with shape-shifting was its perceived hermaphroditism. That is, female *Crocuta crocuta* possess a pseudo-penis identical in appearance to that of the male and their labia are often fused together to form a pseudo-scrotum. This gave rise to the popular belief that they could change sex at will. Here, comparisons with the sexually charged, violent and predatory figure of the werewolf in European lycanthropic traditions dating back to antiquity are obvious and instructive.²¹

The received relationship between people and hyenas in west Africa therefore tended to be significantly different to that between people and other animals. For the Talensi and surrounding savanna societies, the hyena (Talen: *gbingber*) rarely featured as a clan totem and was not classed as a magical 'black animal'.²² In the Akan forest, *opataku*, despite its aura of mystical danger, also lay beyond the classification

²¹ See especially the famous Jungian analysis by Robert Eisler (1978) of the werewolf as an 'archetype' of sexual violence rooted in the ancestral and the 'collective unconscious'; also useful is Otten 1986. Despite its ferocity, it appears that in rare cases the hyena could be tamed: for a description of a man who wandered the length and breadth of the Gold Coast accompanied by a hyena, see NAG ADM 68/5/1 Zouaragu Informal Diary, 18 July 1920.

²² Of the hundreds of clans recorded by Rattray amongst the various peoples along the northern frontier of the protectorate, the hyena featured as a totem for only three: the Sase clan of the Nankani, the Gunguro clan of the Sisala and the Puig clan of the Builsa: Rattray 1932: 236, 399 and 467.

of *sasa aboa*. Rather, the Asante and other Akan identified the hyena specifically with ‘the grassland people’ of the Sarem – its complex identity becoming entangled with the reputation of the latter as the possessors of exotic occult power and with their established role in the forest kingdoms as slaves. This association was not peculiar to the Akan. As Iliffe (2005: 124) has recently pointed out, west African folktales often represented slaves as hyenas: ‘greedy, untrustworthy, and shameful’. But it had particular historical resonance in Asante, where by the nineteenth century at least the ideology of slavery was underpinned by the other-worldliness of the northern savannas and the dubious humanity of its *mmonkofoo* inhabitants.

As Cardinall indicates, however, it was not simply Akan imaginings of the primitive Other that peopled the northern savannas with a host of eerie shape-shifters. Three discreet incidents from the colonial archive provide further indication of the deep-seated belief amongst the ‘Frafra’ peoples themselves in witches’ nocturnal forays. Two are cases of reported animal metamorphosis recorded by Captain S. D. Nash, the first Commissioner of the Zuarungu District and, like Tauxier and Cardinall, for his time a perceptive and sympathetic observer of local culture. The first occurred in 1913:

Late last night a great shout arose from all the compounds in the neighbourhood of Zouaragu. At first I thought a riot had started. These people however never move at night, and we were eventually assured that only a ‘devil’ had been seen in the form of an old woman with a donkey’s head, and the people had shouted to drive it away. The noise was taken up by the whole countryside and travelled from compound to compound for miles. In conversation today . . . I find that they believe like Milton that ‘Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth; Unseen both when we wake and when we sleep’. . . . The fetish men foster these beliefs and are doubtless able to explain why the spirit has returned, and what would . . . appease it. It is peculiar that nearly always old women assume these forms of evil spirits.²³

This episode reminded Nash of an earlier incident in nearby Nabdham country, one that had ended tragically:

Trying a case at Sekoti [in c. 1909] . . . a young boy killed his mother with an arrow in the middle of the night. The evidence went to show that the boy got on top of his compound during the night. He saw a small fire near the fetish [the household ancestor shrine] outside the compound, and standing by it was a woman with a wolf’s [i.e. hyena’s] head. He seized his bow and fired and ran into the house. Next day he saw he had killed his mother. During

²³ NAG ADM 68/5/1 Zouaragu Informal Diary, 3 Nov. 1913. Nash’s quote is from *Paradise Lost*, Book 4, 677–8. His observation concerning the association of shape-shifting with elderly women is confirmed by Martin 1913–14, and Cardinall 1931: 213–14, who notes that ‘although as a rule women change into hyenas and men into hawks, the hyena can change itself into either man or woman as it may please’.

the trial it came out that this . . . woman had the reputation of being a very bad witch.²⁴

It would be easy to dismiss these fleeting nocturnal encounters as phantasmagoric – half-glimpsed, shadowy forms of either persons or animals mistaken by those steeped from childhood in tales of shape-shifting for a bodily combination of the two. The danger here, however, is thereby imposing a Western rationality on how Voltiac peoples interpreted what they thought they saw. As Jackson (1990: 60) argues with regard to the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, such beliefs should not be reduced to fugitive images and haphazard observations: they are ‘conditioned by a complex of shared assumptions and ideas which required careful ethnographic [and, I would add, historical] elucidation’. Thus, the ‘devil’ in the 1913 incident was probably what Aboya explains above as a *koko* (pl. *kogero*), the ghost of a deceased witch, the shape-shifting powers of which seem to be able to survive the grave. A similar account of *kogero* (*kogro*) abroad at night in nearby Bolgatanga is recorded in the diary of the newly opened Whites Fathers’ outstation in 1925. ‘The natives . . . fear these ghosts very much’, the diary notes. ‘If they touch the natives, they become all white and die’ (Apolala n.d.).²⁵ The 1909 episode, in contrast, involved shape-shifting not by revenant *kogero* but by a living person – until, that is, the inadvertent matricide. Here too we see, in the very opening phase of British rule, the intersection between the world of local belief and that of colonial power in the newly constituted arena of a District Commissioner’s court of law. The ever-practical Cardinal would later reflect on the legal problem posed by notions of shifting personhood with regard to the nocturnal perambulations of an individual’s *sii*: ‘in dreams it can wander about and perform all sorts of deeds, which, after the lapse of time, come to be regarded by the dreamer as deeds really performed – at times rather a complication in court cases’ (Cardinal 1920: 43; cf. Jedrej and Shaw 1992).

The third incident occurred in Talensi country some two decades later in 1934, the year that Fortes began his fieldwork at Tongo:

A woman was brought to the dispensary suffering from a terrible scalp wound which showed that she had been severely mauled by some animal. The marks of the claws were plainly to be seen. Some few hours afterwards she was followed by a crowd of people carrying the body of a man. There, they said to the Commissioner, is the body of the animal which attacked the woman . . . [and] the people gave the following account of the occurrence. The woman . . . had gone to her farm with her younger sister. There she was attacked by an animal with the hindquarters of a donkey and a head not unlike that of a lion. It breathed fire from its nostrils. When she screamed,

²⁴ NAG ADM 68/5/1, 3 Nov. 1913.

²⁵ Cf. Tait 1967. Fortes (1987: 260–1) acknowledged the Talensi belief in ghosts (*kok*), but because they could be classified neither as *niriba*, living persons, nor the dead, *kpeem*, dismissed them as ‘figments of overheated imagination’.

the people from the adjacent compounds ran to her aid and surrounded the animal, gradually closing in on it and pelting it with stones. The animal gradually became exhausted . . . and just when it was about to die it vomited a frog and turned into a man. This story they repeated at the inquest, the woman also confirming the description of the animal. Were-wolfs still roam among the Talansi [sic] and the disbelief of the Commissioner in their existence merely aroused their sympathetic pity at his ignorance.²⁶

It is perhaps best to allow this bizarre incident to speak for itself. Beyond the fact that fiery nostrils were associated explicitly with witches, its detailed animal imagery – most intriguingly that of the vomited frog – does not yield to any obvious ontological reading. As in the 1909 episode at Sekoti – that also resulted in a dead body – it is likely that the investigating British Commissioner concluded that an elaborate subterfuge had been concocted by locals in order to explain away what the colonial state regarded as a homicide. Yet by acknowledging that werewolves still roamed the land, even the author of the annual report for the Northern Territories in 1934 was astute enough to locate the incident in the nuanced context of local beliefs rather than simply in terms of colonial law.

THE 'NANA' CULT, 1955

Despite the weight of evidence suggesting that shape-shifting, soul-eating and other forms of occult practice were very much a part of colonial savanna societies, the Northern Territories did not experience the succession of popular anti-witchcraft movements that arose in Asante and the Gold Coast in the first half of the twentieth century. Ancient deities like Tongnaab metamorphosed into powerful witch-finding oracles, but only when carried south into the Akan forest where they were diligently marketed by ritual entrepreneurs. In the terminal phase of colonial rule in the mid-1950s, however, the Northern Territories experienced a belated outbreak of mass witch-finding associated with a distinctively southern-style healing cult named 'Nana'. There is every indication that Nana was a savanna god who in the early twentieth century travelled south to the forests, acquired all the mimetic attributes of an exotic Sarem witch-finder, and then returned in this new manifestation back to the north. This trajectory represented a startling inversion of the established direction of ritual movement, providing further evidence that the dynamics of witchcraft and anti-witchcraft in the savanna were undergoing historical change.

Colonial authorities were first alerted to the existence of Nana in July 1955 by reports of truckloads of elderly women travelling to a healing centre in the Gushiegu District of northern Dagbon.²⁷ The

²⁶ Regional Archives of Ghana, Tamale [RAG/T] NRG 8/3/49, Report on the Northern Territories, 1934–1935.

²⁷ Nana is documented in files RAG/T NRG 8/19/18 Fetish in the Northern Region; RAG/T NRG 3/21/4 Fetish Witchcraft 1955; and RAG/T NRG 8/4/110 Dagomba District Diaries 1951–57.

use of the Akan honorific for a chief or respected elder, as in the case of 'Nana Tongo', is telling. Nana had apparently spread to Gushiegu from a shrine in nearby Cherepong, a region straddling the frontier with French Togoland. But it emerged that the deity had only recently been installed there by a migrant worker turned ritual entrepreneur named Ndaka Chakosi, who had acquired it in Asante. Nana seems to have been a protean offshoot of Tigare, which in the post-war period had succeeded Nana Tongo as the most prominent witch-finder in the Gold Coast after an extended passage from its original home in Yipala on the north-western frontier of the Northern Territories.²⁸ David Tait's analysis of the movement suggests that its rise can be located in the context of the shifting historical relationship between Asante and its savanna hinterland. He argues that the looming independence of Ghana as well as increasing flows of migrant workers journeying to the south explained the startling appearance of Akan-style anti-witchcraft practice amongst the Dagomba. 'There are signs in Dagomba of fear of the coming changes in the Gold Coast', he reported.

[P]olitical leaders fear some kind of exploitation by the south. The ancient hostility of the north to Ashanti has not died. Specifically, many non-literate Dagomba fear what they regard as the departure of the European. A return to the old ways when 'people were killing each other' is expected. . . . What this adds up to is a generalized insecurity and anxiety about the future. (Tait 1963: 144)

Tait also observed that a recurring theme running through the Nana witch-hunt was 'concerned with the departure of young men for the South' (Tait 1963:145). In the past, few Dagomba had joined the procession of migrant workers to the cocoa farms and trading towns of the south, an exodus dominated by the stateless 'Grunsi' and 'Frafra' peoples of the northern frontier. 'But now the genealogies record a high percentage . . . as "Gone to the Coast"; that is, their locations are not precisely known, in sharp contrast with the contact kept as a rule by Dagomba' (Tait 1963: 145). The result was not only anxiety about the lack of manpower in the subsistence economy, but growing alarm over rumours that the those missing had been either killed or driven away by local witches. As we have seen in other savanna societies, Dagomba accusations were directed mainly at elderly women, thousands of whom began to make the lorry-ride to Nana in order to prove their innocence or to cleanse themselves of the curse of witchcraft. It is unclear from Tait's account whether these factors were actually articulated during the mass healing and 'immunization' processes taking place at the rapidly multiplying Nana shrines, or whether they were his own sociological gloss. Whatever underlying social and political tensions did exist, it seems that they were expressed in the established local idioms of bodily

²⁸ See RAG/T NRG 8/19/18, Government Agent, Dagomba–Yendi, to Chief Regional Officer, 2 Aug. 1955; and 'A sorcery hunt in Dagomba', by David Tait, typescript, 1955, 26, a version of which was published posthumously in *Africa* (Tait 1963).

metamorphosis. Witches were abroad, Tait was informed, because of repeated sightings of the ‘sorcerer’s fire’ – the terrifying ball of flame into which malevolent humans transformed themselves for their nocturnal aerial forays (Tait 1963: 136).

In common with many of the heterodox anti-witchcraft cults that emerged in southern Ghana during the first half of the twentieth century, Nana enjoyed a spectacular moment of efflorescence before fading away into relative obscurity. Highly attenuated from its Tigare origins and lacking a hallowed sacred centre such as the Tong Hills to which pilgrims could journey to renew their ritual vows, it is unlikely to have left more than a residual trace in the present-day sacred landscape of Dagbon. But its appearance does suggest that half a century of accelerating transregional interaction and ritual commerce had further blurred any distinction in the respective ‘witch-scapes’ of savanna and forest. Unfortunately, a decline in archival sources from the 1950s means that these issues fade from historical view, leaving it difficult to trace lines of continuity and change over the post-colonial period. Nevertheless, fieldwork conducted by Allman and myself in the Tong Hills and the surrounding Talensi area in 1998–2002 indicates that the problem of *soob*, ‘witches’, is central to the concerns of outside pilgrims *and* local supplicants at the great Tongnaab shrines. It is likely that Tongnaab was involved in the healing of witches before the dramatic expansion of its ritual hinterland into the Akan forest in the 1920s. There is no explicit reference to this aspect of the cult in colonial sources. However, one common feature of the earliest written descriptions of the Tongnaab oracle is the emphasis on the shreds of cloth crammed between rocks and hanging from trees around the vicinity of the shrines – within which the wearing of woven cloth is strictly prohibited. This can still be seen today at the Yanii shrine and is said to have been left by *soi* who have been sent to be healed of their affliction.²⁹ It is problematic comparing archival sources with the testimony of present-day informants, but our impression is that witchcraft figures far more prominently in contemporary local discourse about Tongnaab than in the documentary record for the early colonial period. ‘Everywhere in this vast land there are witches’, *bakoldaana* Lambazaa Naoh, a thoughtful and knowledgeable observer of the spiritual world, said of Ghana in 2002. ‘People say different things, but my own opinion is that, the way witches harm people nowadays, there are many more than before.’³⁰ In allowing for the presence of scepticism, for an element of historical change and for divergences in local interpretations of the spiritual realm, this peasant intellectual offers a somewhat different interpretation of Talensi witchcraft belief from that adumbrated by Meyer Fortes two generations before.

²⁹ Interviews with Isaac Tetteh-Nartey and John Bawa Zuure, Tengzug, 7 November 1999; and with *Yikpemdään* Wakbazaa, 3 July 2002; fieldnote on a visit to Tongnaab, 6 July 2002.

³⁰ Interview with Lambazaa Naoh, 6 July 2002.

CONCLUSION

‘The supernatural is difficult terrain; of its very nature, it resists discourse’, Marina Warner acknowledges in her erudite study of the role of metamorphosis in Western perceptions of self and other.

The languages – and images – it uses can only remain in flux, constituting the reality of what they claim to describe or evoke, and are consequently shape-shifting themselves. Zombies are not within grasp, that is part of their allure – and now, of their retaliatory power. The concept does not only describe a vacancy, it threatens it; in a recursive move characteristic of post-colonial strategies, the zombie has been claimed as a figure not of servitude, but of occult and diffuse potency for the very regions where the concept arose in its reduced, subjugated, and even annihilated character. (Warner 2002: 159)

I would argue that this holds true for the evanescent supernatural terrain of the savanna of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast during the period of British colonial rule. Some Africanist scholars may object to the use of terms such as ‘supernatural’ and ‘the occult’; that is, to a distinction between an observed world based on laws of nature and a range of phenomena seen to be a product of mysterious forces operating from beyond those laws. But by subsuming revenants, witches and other shape-shifters into a seamless spectrum of ‘belief’, we risk assuming that African peoples such as those of the Voltaic grasslands somehow regarded these unsettling entities as a ‘normal’ part of existence. Likewise, by dismissing them as mere imaginary stereotypes or folklore, we run an equal risk of locking the Talensi and their neighbours into a rigid straightjacket of rationality. I am not suggesting that by identifying an apparent lack of concern about witchcraft amongst the Talensi in the 1930s, Meyer Fortes imposed a bourgeois Western rationality on – to borrow a phrase from Marshall Sahlins – ‘how “natives” think’ (Sahlins 1995; and cf. Obeyesekere 1997). From the few historical sources pertaining to the spiritual realm that do exist for these remote frontier societies, however, it is evident that unease about the activities of maleficent shape-shifters, if not central to structured ‘mystical thought’, was nevertheless very much a part of lived experience. There can be no doubt that anxiety about witchcraft on the frontiers of the Northern Territories never reached the feverish heights witnessed in Asante and the Gold Coast, where the inter-war ritual landscape was dominated by waves of exotic healing cults. Yet local belief concerning shape-shifting – which was thoroughly imbricated in notions of ‘witchcraft’ – was prominent enough to be carried across the cultural divide from savanna to forest, where it came to encapsulate Akan ambivalence towards the primitive, subservient but spiritually dangerous Gurunsi *nnonkofoo*.

Warner’s remarks also speak to the central role of the supernatural realm in the historical relationship between Asante and the other Akan kingdoms on the one hand and the acephalous peoples of the middle Volta Basin on the other. Unlike some regions of west and

west-central Africa, there is no evidence that zombies – soulless husks whose selfhood has been consumed by the ‘witchcraft’ of Atlantic slavery – featured in the occult imagination of the Akan forests or their savanna hinterland. But the widespread belief amongst the Asante in the early twentieth century that ‘Gurunsi’, ‘Frafra’ and other degraded *nnonkofoo* were shape-shifters *par excellence* is striking. Like zombies, were-hyenas too are barely within our grasp; their narratives stubbornly defiant of ‘logical’ reasoning. Historically, *nnonkofoo* were seen by their Akan masters as only ambiguously ‘human’ – brutish denizens of the wilderness either too primitive to worry about *bayi* or with direct access to its ritual powers. But did marginalized northerners actively play on their reputation as shape-shifters as a form of retaliatory ritual empowerment? The historical record is silent on this matter. But the well-recorded methods by which northern workers ‘sold’ the ritual resources and esoteric knowledge of their distant homelands to the Akan is certainly suggestive of their willingness and ability to manipulate the escalating psychological anxieties of their hosts. Moreover, it is evident that the central marketing ploy of transregional ritual commerce in the Gold Coast in the colonial period, that is, the notion that the savanna, unlike the forest, was free of the curse of witchcraft, was far from the truth. The point of this paper is not to show that Akan ambivalence about the Sarem was based on a false premise – although this does appear to have been the case. It is to argue that witchcraft and other ‘occult’ belief amongst the decentralized societies of the remote savanna frontier needs to be removed both from the timeless functionalism of Western ethnography and from the ethnocentric stereotype of northern primitivism engrained in the Akan worldview, and reinserted into a process of historical change.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines witchcraft, shape-shifting and other supernatural beliefs among the Talensi and neighbouring Gur-speaking peoples on the frontier of the Northern Territories Protectorate of the Gold Coast (Ghana) in the first half of the twentieth century. Its starting point is the succession of religious movements dedicated to the eradication of witchcraft that swept through the southern forest region of the Gold Coast in the inter-war period. Most of these

movements were animated by exotic deities originating in the savanna zone, a cross-cultural passage in part propelled by the ambivalence with which the Akan peoples of the forests viewed the so-called Gurunsi of the remote north. While the 'Gurunsi' were generally regarded as primitive barbarians, they were also seen to have an intimate relationship with the spiritual realm and therefore to be free from the ravages of malevolent witchcraft. This intimacy with dangerous spiritual forces was most clearly manifested in the widely reported ability of 'the grassland people' to transmogrify into animals. Evidence suggests, however, that far from being free from witchcraft, stateless savanna societies had their own problems with malevolent occult powers. Moreover, their reputation for shape-shifting was not simply a lurid, fantastic stereotype of northern brutishness on the part of the Akan. Animal metamorphosis – and especially the ubiquity of were-hyenas – was widely reported in the northern savanna, where it was imbricated with 'witchcraft' and with notions of personhood and collective identities.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la sorcellerie, la métamorphose et d'autres croyances surnaturelles chez les Talensis et les peuples voisins de langue gour à la frontière du protectorat des Territoires du Nord de la Côte de l'Or (Ghana) dans la première moitié du vingtième siècle. Il prend comme point de départ la succession de mouvements religieux consacrés à l'éradication de la sorcellerie qui s'est propagée rapidement dans la région forestière du sud de la Côte de l'Or pendant la période d'entre deux guerres. La plupart de ces mouvements étaient animés par des déités exotiques originaires de la savane, un passage interculturel en partie poussé par l'ambivalence avec laquelle les peuples akans des forêts considéraient ceux qu'ils appelaient les Gourounsis des régions reculées du nord. Si les " Gourounsis " étaient certes généralement considérés comme des barbares primitifs, on les croyait également intimement liés au royaume spirituel et par conséquent à l'abri des ravages de la sorcellerie malveillante. Cette intimité avec des forces spirituelles dangereuses se manifestait le plus nettement dans la capacité souvent rapportée des " peuples des prairies " à se métamorphoser en animaux. Les faits suggèrent, en revanche, que loin d'être à l'abri de la sorcellerie, les sociétés apatrides de la savane avaient leurs propres problèmes avec les pouvoirs occultes malveillants. De plus, la réputation qu'ils avaient de pouvoir se métamorphoser n'était pas un simple stéréotype de la bestialité du nord, fait de fantasme et d'épouvante, de la part des Akans. La métamorphose animale (notamment le pouvoir d'ubiquité de la hyène-garou) a souvent été rapportée dans la savane du nord, où on la mêlait à la " sorcellerie " et à des notions de personne et d'identités collectives.