

# Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip



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## THREE



### Africa

We have already seen in Chapter 1 how in terms of local-level cases of witchcraft accusations we can find similarities between colonial Africa and historical Europe of the seventeenth century. And in Chapter 2 we mentioned how William Arens had uncovered the theme of African suspicions that Europeans were using their colonial subordinates to obtain the blood of Africans, a notion akin to that of cannibalism. Arens has extensively documented the fantasies of cannibalism imputed to “others” in many historical contexts, including those marked by colonialism. He concludes by comparing what he calls the “man-eating myth” to the fantasy of the witches’ sabbath that led, through the imaginings of intellectuals, to witch-hunts in Europe (Arens 1979: 178). (The parallel does not, of course, disprove the existence of cannibalism.)

African ideas about witchcraft mutated from their local-level contexts into ones much more influenced by colonial, and later postcolonial, relations at large, just as, in continental Europe, the idea of linking witchcraft with the Devil was promoted by the authorities of church and state. Presumably, these mutations, representing the impingement of state relations on local levels of society, were already to some degree at work from earlier times, and local-level processes have also continued, intertwined with state relations, as Geschiere’s (1997) work particularly shows for Africa. State-based social change was already affecting the cases studied in the 1940s and 1950s by anthropologists such as Max Marwick and

Victor Turner. Nevertheless, the shift to a preoccupation with rumors of predatory relations between Europeans as a whole and Africans represents a significant transformation of notions and of foci of anxiety, just as the link made between witchcraft and the Devil in a sense threw witchcraft onto a larger canvas of power relations and greatly increased the stigmatization of the witch. Both processes reveal widening gaps in society. The African context shows the rift between class-based groups intersecting with ethnicity and leading to suspicions of the dominated against the dominant; the Europe example shows the opposite, the rise of an elite and their use of witchcraft as a theme against those weaker than themselves.

In this chapter we look at the “new” African context, while not forgetting its background in earlier notions and “witch-hunts” of the past, which could also, in response to rumors, pass from one local area to another. It is indeed striking that the contemporary cycles of rumors tend to fit into a picture of expanded and extended relationships signaled by the term “globalization,” and that they all tend to depict the equivalent of government or business “conspiracies” against the people, themes that we also have seen to be strikingly pervasive in the urban legends or rumors collected by Patricia Turner in the African American context (Turner 1993). This is hardly surprising, given that the African and African American contexts are historically linked.

### **Witch Finding among the Bemba: Mirrors and Medicines**

Many of the themes that can be considered forerunners of the rumors about witchcraft and exploitation today are found in the older literature on witch-hunts of colonial times. Audrey Richards (1935) wrote about a witch-finding movement among the Bemba people of N.E. Rhodesia (Zambia) that swept through her area of study in 1934. The witch finders were called Bamucapi. Richards notes that they were young men who were dressed in European clothing and went around in ones or twos

accompanied by paid local assistants (p. 448). They had a “founding myth” that the originator of their movement was called Kamwende from Nyasaland (Malawi), an area that had entered into “modernization” before the Bemba. Kamwende was said to have received a revelation of his powers in the grave, from which he had risen after two days, partially disabled but with knowledge of the anti-witchcraft *mucapi* medicine. If his followers failed to find all of the witches or sorcerers in a village, they said he would later come, beating his drum, and compel all witches to follow him to the graveyard where they would be revealed.

When the witch-finders arrived in a village, they would, in colonial style, have all the men and women line up before the headman, as for an inspection. They were told to pass by the witch-finder, who caught their image (“spirit”) in a small mirror and was said to be able to tell at once whether they were guilty of witchcraft. Those selected were told to yield up their “horns of medicine,” and these were then collected at a cross-roads outside the village for everyone to inspect. Each person was told to drink the *mucapi* liquid, a name related to the term *kucapa*, for “washing clothes,” and they were then declared free of witchcraft. Anyone who drank the medicine but afterward returned to the ways of witchcraft would die a grisly death and so self-destruct. As a sideline the witch-finders also sold minor protective charms and medicines sewn in small cloth bags (p. 449). By far the most expensive one was “a charm for winning the favour of the local Government officials” (ibid.); it was said that few could afford to pay for it.

Richards examined a heap of 139 horns and charms and found that, according to her interpretation of them, 125 were in fact containers of protective magic. Public opinion, however – for which we may read rumor and gossip – had made of many of these objects the irrefutable signs of the actions of witches and sorcerers. The whole ritual process instituted by the witch-finders therefore acted both as a kind of stimulus to public imagination and as a form of therapy to remove the fear of witchcraft heightened in the campaign against it. It also offered a way

out for those found guilty to return to society after being “washed” by the *mucapi* medicine. The blending of governmental style social procedures with mission-style cultural themes is also striking. The movement claimed the support of the administration but was openly hostile to the Christian missionaries, who instructed their adherents not to participate in the rituals. Like the Christian churches themselves, the witch-finders claimed the power to fight “evil,” the anti-image of society represented by the sorcerer or witch. They did not challenge the indigenous structure of ideas and practices in which misfortunes were mostly attributed to people’s own wrongdoings and were seen as punishment by ancestral spirits, with the permission of the High-God Lesa (p. 456) and the approval of the chiefs. The *nganga*, ritual experts, could determine the causes of disasters and prescribe confession followed by laborious rituals of atonement. But the activities of witches were seen as impervious to this system of justice, and people tried to guard against their powers by purchasing magic charms from the *nganga* themselves. Chiefs in the precolonial past had administered the poison ordeal to those accused of witchcraft, but they were no longer permitted to do so, nor could witches be charged in the colonial courts. Into this gap stepped the witch-finders, taking on themselves the mantle of the *nganga* but operating in the new world of colonial space, outside the powers of chiefs and traditional diviners, as new cultural bricoleurs and entrepreneurs. The people at large regarded their activities as having the blessing of the British colonial power. Richards herself points to the fact that the movement was a part of the commoditization process induced by wage labor and the use of money. To gain security, people were willing to pay for a service that blended old and new elements together in a potent package.

### **Zombies in the Transvaal**

Isak Niehaus, in a detailed study of witch-hunting in the Transvaal, South Africa, from 1930 to 1991, provides a very useful expansion of

the discussion of change by Richards (Niehaus 1993; see also Niehaus et al. 2001). The earlier colonial phase outlined by Niehaus corresponds to Richards's account. "Until 1956 Green Valley [the fieldwork site] was characterized by a high degree of agricultural self-sufficiency, networks of reciprocal co-operation between domestic units, and by stable chiefships. In this context witchcraft was seen as a threat to the whole community" (Niehaus 1993, p. 504).

The chiefs, aided by diviners (*mungoma*), were the ones who identified and punished witches. Although crops had sometimes been destroyed by drought and worms, neighbors helped one another with their work. But in 1948 the area had also received hundreds of families displaced from white-owned farms onto trust lands, reducing the size of farm lots for existing residents; this was followed in 1960 by a so-called betterment scheme that formally reallocated land and reduced holdings of stock. Chiefly rule was weakened in the succeeding years, and by the mid-1980s the power of chiefs was supplanted by that of cross-community youth groups. The chiefs lost their association with witch-hunting and also their control over agricultural activities. They were supplanted by magistrates and white agricultural officers. Parents found it more difficult to socialize and control the younger generation. Neighbors became very suspicious of one another.

Suspicious and accusation fastened on persons with odd patterns of behavior (p. 512). The *mungoma* diviners were still consulted and they would point to such persons as the witches. Youths then burnt down the houses of the accused or drove them out. Because government officials would not prosecute suspected witches, the local people thought they in fact protected them, and this increased people's collective fears. Youth groups stepped in aggressively to accuse and punish witches by whipping them with rawhide thongs. Many of these youths were educated but unemployed at a time of crisis in the South African economy (p. 514). They declared that witches kept baboons as familiars or that they had captured people and kept them as *tokolose* (zombies) to work for them.

The youths sometimes worked with *mungoma* diviners, bringing suspects to them to be tested. At times, they themselves engaged in overt violence and were arrested by the police. Those accused were often, in classic fashion, relatives who had had quarrels with persons who subsequently died. A mixture of accusations might be made against witches. “They were accused of keeping familiars, sending a *tokolose* to rape young women, killing their relatives . . . and burying a human brain under the gate of [the chief’s house] to stupefy him” (p. 521). Other accusations were that they desecrated tombstones, poisoned their neighbors, or made their in-laws sterile. African National Congress party officials were involved in protecting those accused from crowds and tried to hold rituals of confession and abjuration to calm the feelings against them. Diviners also were called in to authenticate the identification of the witches and to make them confess. Most of the accused were people who were socially peripheral and not very powerful and might be seen as deviant.

Niehaus reports at the beginning of his study cases where many “convicted” witches were reportedly killed by stoning, burning, or “neck-lacing” (killing with a tire set on fire around the neck), sometimes by youth groups fighting against political opponents and including “collaborators” along with “witches” as their targets. These examples, which differ from those Niehaus details at the end of the study, show the lengths to which witchcraft accusations could be joined with politics to produce collective violence in parts of South Africa.

Putting together the papers by Richards and Niehaus, in Table 2 we outline different phases of witchcraft accusations in African colonial and postcolonial history. We may suggest that the role of rumor and gossip escalates through historical time as we move from phase 1 to phase 3 in Table 2. In phase 1, gossip may cause someone to be accused in the chief’s court, but the matter ends there and the witch can be ritually rehabilitated. In phase 2 the process becomes more loose and open-ended and much gossip surrounds the witch-finders themselves as well as the “evidence” they publicly assemble for comment. In phase 3 the whole process is

TABLE 2. Historical Phases in Witchcraft Accusations in Southern Africa (from Niehaus 1993 and Richards 1935), 1930s–1990s

Phase 1	
Witches accused in chief's court Identified by diviners	Punishment by ritual atonement
Phase 2	
Witches identified by witch- finders who acted as diviners; powers of chief in decline	Those found guilty drink "medicine" and are putatively "cleansed"
Phase 3	
Community disintegration; rise of political parties	Punishment/retaliation for supposed offenses by killing
Witches pursued by youth groups and mobs	Diviners may attempt to impose ritual solutions as in Phases 1 and 2
Final identification by diviners	Courts may prosecute witch killers for murder

more volatile again: gossip and rumor escalate and may result in mob killings, even though authorities subsequently prosecute the killers. As the chiefs' control and group cohesion decline, gossip and rumor, with their potential for violence, increase in intensity and scope.

Both Richards and Niehaus report a medley of cultural notions about witches that came into play. We suggest that because Christian missions were ubiquitous in colonial Africa, missionary pronouncements and tracts must have fed into a developing hybrid set of ideas that could be transmitted in particular by trans-local witch-hunts. In particular, Christian notions derived from the historical European context that stressed the diabolical associations of witchcraft could have contributed to the collective demonization of witches that we see in phase 3 in Table 2. It is worthwhile to recall here that in his classic study of witchcraft among the Azande of the Sudan, Evans-Pritchard noted that when a person was accused of witchcraft he was typically expected to take some water in his mouth and blow it out on the wing of a chicken presented to him by a messenger. The chicken was one that had been sacrificed

to an oracle that produced the accused's name. Having blown out the water, the accused would say that he was unaware that his witchcraft had been active and would ask it to be cool inside him. This would ease the situation and the person whose sickness occasioned the oracular divination was said to have gotten better (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 42). Evans-Pritchard noted further that "the position of a witch is in no way analogous to that of a criminal in our society" (p. 54). While these citations do not tell the whole story about Zande ideas or Zande history, they do bring forcefully to attention the point that witchcraft powers were not always everywhere considered diabolically evil and worthy of being punished by death. More congenial solutions were sometimes prevalent.

In the "modern" context, however (phase 3 of Table 2), different processes come to the fore. Niehaus stresses that "witches" might be mildly deviant and in particular might be vulnerable people. Youth groups tended to target people of their parental generation, who in a sense became scapegoats on whom blame for numerous deaths and misfortunes was loaded. This, then, is one pattern. However, another dominant pattern is the dislike and jealousy of the new political elites and people who have become rich through business. If the successful are also younger than those similar to them would have been in former times, this also may lead them to accuse older and less successful people of attacking them out of jealousy. We also saw in Niehaus's work the theme of the *tokolose*, the zombie who acts as a slave worker for the witch who has brought him back to life by necromancy. This clearly reflects a fantasized image of the capitalist labor system mixed with precapitalist images of slavery. If such imaginations surround those who get rich faster than others, the implication is that the successful, themselves, may also be seen as witches. Those who are successful fear the jealousy of those less fortunate than themselves, while the latter think that only by witchcraft and magic could the rich and powerful have attained their position. Witchcraft fears work in a two-way shuttle, keeping suspicion between people at a high

level. Rumor and gossip fill in the blanks in people's knowledge of what "the others" do.

### **Witchcraft, Money, and Social Reproduction: The Ngoni and Other Cases**

Misty Bastian (1993), in a study of contemporary ideas among the Igbo people of Onitsha in Nigeria, points out cogently how suspicions of witchcraft open up between urban- and rural-based members of a given lineage, categories that may correspond to rich and poor in a monetary sense. The prime image of the witch also centers on the notion of an immoral or amoral selfishness or greed. This idea may cut two ways. Rural people may see the urban elites as selfish, while urban people may feel indignant that they are denied the identity of properly belonging to the rural areas from which they have migrated into the town. As we see it, this seems to indicate that either side may suspect the other of making witchcraft to their advantage.

Mark Auslander has studied further dimensions of witchcraft in Eastern Zambia (Auslander 1993). His findings can be compared directly with those of Richards and Niehaus on witch-finding movements. The movements he observed took place in 1988–9, and in them young male witch-finders accused senior men and women of blocking the fertility of their juniors. The witch-finders beat severely those they accused and incised their skin with cuts into which they pressed "anti-witchcraft" medicines. Such rituals appear to have been the violent counterparts of those Richards observed among the Bemba in 1934, but directed against senior people and focused on fertility. The senior people were said to have sent dangerous witchcraft horns through the sky, penetrating the houses of those they targeted and rendering them impotent. Such a form of symbolism clearly indicates tension between the generations, a sense of reproduction gone wrong, with fertility linked to social harmony and sterility linked to conflict. Patterns of thought of this kind underlie rituals

in many parts of the world. The example of the Duna people in Papua New Guinea springs immediately to mind (Stewart and Strathern 2002a). An acknowledgment of intergenerational conflict therefore at once resonates symbolically with fears regarding sexuality and reproduction.

In another regard there is a close parallel between Auslander's materials on the Ngoni people and societies of the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Auslander notes that in a social system characterized by obligations of giving and sharing, there is always the fear of those who are left out in any given event. Those who are excluded and are defined as at the margins of social interaction are liable to be thought of as witches or sorcerers. Ngoni representations of this idea focus on the image of the witch as an old woman who greedily eats alone in her house. The notions of the "excluded other" and the "greedy hoarder" appear to come together in this image. Apparently poor and marginal people may be fantasized as being secretly rich in money and maize corn because of their hidden nightly activities.

Ngoni witchcraft could as well be described as sorcery, for the witch is said to collect the *chisambe*, or life force, of people, present in footprints, hair, or soil they have urinated on, and to mix such residues with "medicines" taken from the organs of dead people. The witch addresses the mixture, explaining how the intended victim has done harm and denied reciprocity, for example, by refusing to share soap. Sometimes the medicine is thought to be in the witchcraft horn that the witch projects through the sky. Such a horn may be said to be purchased with a cow, in a kind of anti-image of the symbolism of bridewealth payments. The horn stands for the denial of the achievement of reproductive status, resulting in the confinement of young men to clientage roles. It represents the supposed jealousy of the old for the young and their supposed incessant demands, as well as the fear that their power must itself have been gained by witchcraft. Female witches are imaged as turning themselves into lionsesses who pitilessly attack their prey. The imagery partly derives from Ngoni history in which the incoming Ngoni males married local Ceŵa

and Nsenga wives, leaving a sense that women have a special relationship with the landscape. But younger women also suspect the malevolence of older women, such as a classificatory mother-in-law (wife of husband's father).

By contrast, the older people themselves fear the junior generation, seeing them as caught up in cash cropping and as willing to sell cows for cash, destroying proper social hierarchy. Young men desire autonomy and resent their elders' reluctance to sell cattle for cash in order to fund, for example, transport businesses that link rural to urban areas. Roads are a focus for both ambition and anxiety. Young men like to experience the freedom to travel on them, but they fear the passage of AIDs and the movement of women who elude their control.

A classic avoidance of ostentation goes with the fear of witchcraft. Chemical fertilizers, greatly valued because of their power to produce crops but also feared as a kind of "poison," are kept in secret; gifts of oil or soap are made discreetly; also, adulterous affairs, if discovered, are felt to arouse the vengeful witchcraft of betrayed spouses. People buy "medicines" to protect themselves and hire *ng'anga* to conduct divinations and identify witches. Identified witches are sometimes expelled and migrate to "witch villages." At deaths "proper" Christian burial is held to protect the corpse from consumption by witches, and fine displays of mourning songs and dances are thought to soothe the anger of the living and the dead and ward off jealous witchcraft. Witches themselves are thought to gather in cemeteries to unearth the dead and engage in liberal sexual practices.

In the past, male elders were buried in a central cattle barn in the settlement, and groves of trees that grew in the sites of abandoned barns were thought to be the home of the ancestral shades. Christian missions from the end of the nineteenth century altered this pattern, creating a separation between settlement and graveyard. Cemeteries became places that people would not ordinarily enter. At the same time all neighbors are required to attend a funeral if they are within earshot of the funeral drums.

Funerals express community, but witches are said to enter cemeteries at night, apart from funeral occasions, and use them to express their anti-communal values. Funeral rituals expressly guard against the incursion of witches by the burning of fires. They also seal off the dead from the village rather than, as before, reincorporating them into it. Women have a special responsibility for wailing over the corpse and settling it in the cemetery. Witches, in turn, are said to subvert the proper effects of the funeral and thus the relations between living and dead kin. For example, they are supposed to steal the body parts of the dead, especially the genitals. Orators at funerals work hard to cool hard feelings and so to reduce the likelihood of such attacks on the grave by witches.

The evidence here suggests that Christian practices have themselves contributed not to the abolition of witch beliefs but to their transformation. Christian graveyards, separated from the community of the living, have become places where witches are imagined to gather. Communication with the dead themselves has been disrupted. This in itself could lead to intergenerational tensions among the living. Graveyards have become secret, taboo places, the kind of places around which rumor and gossip can accrete.

While Ngoni elders fear the “poison” of the junior generation, expressed in the notion of dangerous chemical fertilizer, Auslander documents an actual accusation by a young male witch-finder against a senior woman, accusing her of blocking the wombs of younger women. The witch-finder’s henchmen violently searched her house and that of other senior women, beat them, and rubbed anti-witchcraft medicines into incisions in their skin. The witch-finder proclaimed that now witchcraft would be eliminated and people could “make money” safely (Auslander 1993: 167). Here the pathways of fertility and exchange were linked together and the elders were accused of blocking them. The womb stood for all the capacities for reproduction seen as secretly closed off by the elders.

The generalized image of fertility as “flow” is reminiscent of Christopher Taylor’s analysis of Tutsi ideology in Rwanda (Taylor 1992,

1999). Such an image is also an image of power, and Auslander indicates that the witch-finders' aim during their campaign in 1987–8 was to overturn the power of their seniors and appropriate it for themselves (p. 179). Auslander followed an itinerant witch-finder called Doctor Moses through eleven witch-finding rituals in one district (Chipata) during 1988. This man was clearly an entrepreneur who was adept at capturing people's imaginations. He was affiliated with the Zionist version of Christianity, in which bodily rituals are emphasized. Zionist prophets are highly mobile and are condemned by priests of mainstream churches for engaging in Satanic practices. In turn, they declare that Church ministers themselves covertly practice witchcraft. Witch-finding is thus embroiled in disputes between churches. It is also a business. Young males helped to collect considerable "donations" as fees for Doctor Moses (p. 176).

At the same time, the witch-finders in 1988 targeted senior people who, they said, were profiting from stealing maize and turning people into slave laborers as zombies. They were also, they said, stopping wealth from coming into the communities. The witch-finders lined up people in the village, with the old people at one end and the children at the other. (This action is directly comparable to that described by Audrey Richards in the 1930s among the Bemba.) They used medicines said to have been obtained from "Europeans" to restore vitality to people's bodies. They employed mirrors said to operate like televisions or computers and also to take people's "temperature." Their actions mimicked those of colonial health patrols to eliminate yaws and syphilis. They washed people's feet in an action similar to cattle-dipping, a procedure used to remove infection from cattle as they move across pastures. And they offered protection to bodies by rubbing medicines into cuts in the skin.

Doctor Moses declared that he was doing God's work, and that God would heal people of witchcraft; he further declared that the biblical figure of Moses had revealed this work to him in dreams. And he wore a white, clinical-style, robe marked with red crosses, making multiple evocations of the state, biomedicine, international agencies, and God, all in one. He

staged in the middle of the village a kind of authoritative “roadblock” through which “patients” passed, as he “straightened out” the crooked pathways of witchcraft (p. 184). He himself exhibited his powers to track down the erratic movements of witches by racing up and down and behaving in an unpredictable way as the Spirit of Moses supposedly took him. He brought the high-speed world of the road, the tarmac, to the village (*ibid.*). But he concentrated his attentions on the villagers’ own houses, purporting to discover the secret horns they harbored in the houses and breaking them open to do so, with particular emphasis on their enclosing roofs that were held to conceal secret powers. The mirror that he used was spoken of as magical, like an x-ray, or like the pieces of mirrors sometimes embedded in figurines to see witches and the land of the dead. His mirror was seen as a “modern” device used to overcome the “ancient” power of the medicine horn and to constitute young males as a political force. Gradually, chiefs and senior men allied themselves with the witch-finders and partially regained powers for themselves (p. 186).

Auslander’s account vividly portrays how the witch-finding movement’s progress across the countryside was preceded by a wave of rumor, bringing with it a mass of jumbled information. By the time the movement actually reached a place, the rumor wave had already washed over it and saturated it with its own particles. While witch-finders declared that they were there to “cleanse” the communities of pollution by witchcraft, it is clear that they set up a force field of propaganda that itself might be seen as redirecting people’s perceptions of “reality.”

Another feature of these materials is how closely they parallel the account by Richards of the 1934 Bamucapi movement among the Bemba. Traditions of witch-finding must have accreted in Zambia and have swirled backward and forward over time, creating a kind of semantic network of associations that could quickly be funneled and channeled into a particular stream of rumor once a new movement began.

A very general theme that underlies studies of witchcraft and modernity is the effect of monetization on the conditions under which such

rumors circulate. We almost invariably learn that monetization creates an expanded market both in lethal forms of witchcraft or sorcery and in charms against it. We also learn that monetization exacerbates people's frustrations and desires by placing many commodities theoretically in accessibility but in practice making them unattainable: the basic circumstance of capitalist consumerism. This theme firmly links together the historical experiences of people in Africa and Papua New Guinea (see for example the studies in Akin and Robbins 1999, and for an earlier cross-cultural overview, Parry and Bloch 1989; also numerous pertinent studies in Moore and Sanders 2001b).

Monetization perhaps also tends to increase the range of differences of wealth between people in village communities because of their different life opportunities. And it may enable people to withdraw from or deny the kinds of "leveling" obligations of reciprocity and redistribution entailed by the norms of village life. Or if they try to maintain such obligations, they soon find that they cannot meet their ends and that others are still unsatisfied. A pervasive aura and fear of jealousy is thus set up.

Pamela Schmoll's study of soul-eaters among Hausa speakers in Niger well exemplifies these processes. Soul-eaters are held to have special stones in their stomach, and when these move their desire is activated. Soul-eaters are said to transform themselves into uncanny versions of animals and to startle people so that their souls jump out of their bodies and can be snapped up (Schmoll 1993: 201). The soul-eater may store the soul and later cut its throat, roast it, and eat it. The soul-eater is motivated by jealousy of those who are prosperous and have good luck. The victims suffer total debilitation as their life is drained from them. In short the soul-eater is a classic form of the cannibalistic witch.

The propensities to eat souls can, it is thought, be inherited from either father's semen or mother's milk (Schmoll, p. 204). But nowadays, Schmoll was told, such powers can be purchased with money. A soul-eater vomits up a male and female stone and the purchaser swallows these. They reproduce in the person's stomach and the person becomes

a soul-eater. Buyers are said to be motivated by greed and jealousy of others whom they wish to harm. Once they have the power, they cannot control it. Instead, it controls them. (Highly comparable ideas regarding *kum* stones are found in the Mount Hagen area of Papua New Guinea; see Strathern 1982; Stewart and Strathern 1999a.)

It is in the stomach that jealousy as well as happiness or unhappiness are said to reside. Emotions in general have to be controlled. The head is supposed to rule the stomach, and children are socialized to control the expression of, for example, hunger. "Eating" is a general term for gratification of desire, but also suffering. It can refer to sexual intercourse as well as consumption of food, and also to the effects of pain. Soul-eaters are said to express desire by licking at the souls of victims. The mouth is also thought of as the source of dangerous talk that can travel out and harm people (see Weiner 1984 and Strathern and Stewart 1999b for Pacific parallels).

Treatment of sickness caused by soul-eating is thought to depend on catching the soul-eater and naming him, then making him jump naked over the victim, thus releasing the captured soul: a procedure not easy to accomplish since an accusation against the soul-eater may land the accuser in court charged with false rumor. People take preventive "medicine" to protect themselves. Possession of the soul-eating stones is thought to be dangerous: the stones demand to be satisfied and act as though they will kill their owner, causing him pain and driving him to seek victims.

Schmoll interprets these materials as reflecting the monetarization of relationships that has taken place among these Hausa people, seeing soul-eating as "a framework for a sophisticated and nuanced commentary on the problem of uncontrolled desire for power and wealth and the use of immoral means to achieve them" (p. 205). The concept of "eating" draws on fundamental bodily processes and uses these to stand for social processes of exploitation that "have been profoundly affected by colonialism and capitalism" (p. 206). The same image is used by Hagen people in

Papua New Guinea when they describe outsiders as coming and “eating” their land (*tininga möi nonomen*). The idea that soul-eaters particularly target children, the future of the society, is in accordance with the idea that cannibalism is seen as threatening society itself.

Schmoll’s analysis is not imported into her data just as a corollary of a particular theoretical approach. It echoes what the people themselves said to her, since they blame the French for having incited new desires for goods, and the jealousies and greed that go with these. The commoditization of soul-eating (p. 212) is both an example of social change and a major perceived multiplier of it. If people can buy these powers, many more people, it is thought, must have them, thus increasing people’s fears. Supplementary thoughts are added, for instance, that men nowadays travel more widely and marry beautiful young girls from other places without knowing that they are soul-eaters, so bringing the practice into their own families. We heard similar notions expressed about incautious acts of marriage nowadays among the Duna people in Papua New Guinea. Those most caught up in the pressures of “modernity” brought about by education, travel, and urban salaries see themselves as most sharply threatened by the “epidemic” of soul-eating. Interestingly, Schmoll suggests in passing (p. 214) that “the increasing appeal of Islam is perhaps, in fact, born of this conflict.” The suggestion she makes appears to be that Islam may be held to provide a counterideology to the ideology of capitalism and/or perhaps a religious form of protective power against soul-eaters. Given the spread of Islam in the north of Africa, this might be a productive idea to pursue.

What seems to be involved in the forms of condensed symbols that people make is a kind of search for identification or certainty, a way to pinpoint the causes of a feeling of malaise or confusion. Rumor plays its part here in its guise of a “search for the truth,” as Jean-Noël Kapferer (1990) suggested (see Chapter 2). In their introduction to the volume in which Auslander’s and Schmoll’s chapters appear, Jean and John Comaroff argue that what contemporary rituals such as witch-finding illustrate is

“less about giving voice to shared values than about opening fields of argument” (1993: xxiii). If this is so, we perhaps should nevertheless note that contemporary rituals and ideas represent a search for closure on, and solutions to, the pressingly fragmented problems of existence that people experience. Expressing social complexities in terms of body imagery is a way of trying to cope with those complexities and to develop some defenses against them. As the Comaroffs themselves note, bodies are thus made to speak powerfully about social problems and ultimate values. Indeed, we should not regard contemporary witchcraft notions as simply metaphors or ways of referring to social processes. Since they are grounded in the body and the emotions, they directly recognize that it is people’s bodily energies and their mental faculties that are used up or “consumed” in the stresses of life. The Comaroffs also point out that it is not by chance that ideas of witchcraft are quite often attached to women, since women sometimes gain more economic freedom in circumstances of change. Here, however, we meet again the bifurcated character of witchcraft suspicions. Some are directed against persons newly empowered, often those of a younger generation. But suspicions are often also aimed at older persons, who may appear to be jealous of or threatened by the activities of the young. Witches, both female and male, thus “are modernity’s prototypical malcontents,” and they “embody all the contradictions of the experience of modernity itself” (p. xxix). Since accusations of witchcraft represent projections of aggression, we would have also to say that the accusers of putative witches share in the “malcontent” to which the Comaroffs refer.

### **Witchcraft and Modernity in Cameroon**

The connections between modernity and witchcraft have been pursued in depth by Peter Geschiere (1997). Geschiere’s work focuses on southern and western Cameroon in Africa. He traces two contradictory themes: the idea that people accumulate power and wealth through witchcraft,

and the notion that the fear of witchcraft levels inequalities between people by motivating people to share their resources. In the first idea, the implication is that witchcraft powers increase inequality; in the second, it is that fear of such powers that acts to decrease inequality. Of course, these two implications can perfectly well be seen as counterbalancing forms of interpretation held by people.

Significantly, Geschiere stresses that the contexts in which such contemporary notions flourish are ones in which secrecy is prevalent. Powerful politicians tend to keep their activities and deliberations secret, reinforcing the popular impression that they have magical or witchcraft powers. Newspapers and radio programs contribute to such impressions by reporting spectacular stories about witchcraft among the elite (Geschiere 1997: 2). The media draw on urban rumors or legends as their sources and multiply their circulation. Modern technological items are often cited as intertwined with witchcraft ideas, for example, in references to a witch's x-ray eyes or claims that people are forced as zombies to "drive planes" at night. Geschiere reports the anecdote of a woman in which she declared to her Baptist church minister that she drove a plane at night, bringing in food to her own people, adding that "all planes are in the world of witchcraft and when the white man gets it from the black man he then interprets it into real life" (p. 3).

The basic idea here again shows a remarkable parallel with "cargo" notions in New Guinea, which involved a basic belief in the power of magic and a notion that the wealth possessed by outsiders originally came from the ancestors of the New Guineans themselves, thus reversing the relationship of superiority between outsiders and insiders.

Geschiere stresses the intensity with which rumors of this kind circulate and mutate, especially in the more wealthy urban sectors of society (p. 3). State authorities suspect villagers of subverting plans for development, thus reiterating the colonial notion that villagers' conservative customs stand in the way of modernization, but attributing agency and emotions of jealousy to the villagers rather than viewing them as passive resisters.

In one case when a deposed dictator in Cameroon was brought to trial, his sorcerer “openly threatened the judges with his occult powers” (p. 7). Geschiere comments that “as soon as a new political space is opened, it is overrun by rumors about the use of sorcery and witchcraft” (ibid.).

The basic concept of magical power involved here among the Maka people whom Geschiere studied is called *djambe*, which he translates as “occult force,” noting that the Maka now gloss this in French as *sorcellerie*. *Djambe* is a generalized power that can be used both to benefit and to harm people, and it is exercised by the *nganga*, ritual specialists who act as healers, witch-finders, and also manipulators of witchcraft power, according to their reputation. *Nganga* are said to work on behalf of politicians, so that their intervention, even in democratic regimes, appears “to remove power from the people” (p. 9), thereby making people take witchcraft the more seriously. Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Garnier (1988) drew attention in this context to the complex and ambivalent concomitants of witchcraft and power in the Cameroon state.

Geschiere brings out a number of general points. One is that ideas of witchcraft play an ambiguous or double role in society. Villagers see witchcraft as a tool used by elites to gain their own ends, while the elites see it “as a weapon of the weak against the state” (p. 10). Occult force can be seen as both reinforcing and undermining power. A second point Geschiere makes is that there is a connection between witchcraft and the kinship relations that hold within the household. Jealousy and aggression are held to exist not just between classes or political opponents but between members of the same household.

Among the Maka the *djambe* was sometimes said to be like a gray mouse living in a person’s stomach or “a small ferocious beast with mean teeth” (p. 38). The possessor of such a *djambe* is said to have an insatiable drive to take part in nocturnal cannibalistic feasts with other witches and has to sacrifice his or her parents to the witches in doing so. The witch’s double can also go out and attack others, but it too can be ambushed and killed unless aid is sought from a healer with greater powers. Witches who

cannot or will not hand over their kin to be eaten have to sacrifice themselves instead to pay their cannibal debts. These dilemmas of witchcraft power, according to Geschiere, seem “to express the fundamental doubts of the Maka with respect to power as such” (p. 43). Power, in fact, appears to be seen as the product of battles between opposing occult forces. The Maka household itself can easily be understood as subject to various structural tensions. In one case Geschiere discusses tensions between the cowives of a man that led to suspicions that one of them had “handed over” another wife to the witches out of hatred and jealousy. When the accused wife herself became sick, this was at first seen as confirmation of her guilt, but when she died her brothers in turn accused the husband of being the one who had given his wives over to the witches, and they refused to give up her body to be buried in the husband’s compound, provoking a brawl. Later the husband accused another woman who had come to live in his household. The incidence of sickness and death in households thus automatically generates accusations of witchcraft within it (p. 46). Anderson (2002) further stresses the importance of conflicts within kinship networks in Murambinda, Zimbabwe, as a source of accusations of witchcraft, pointing out the significance of mobility and translocal relations in weakening kin solidarities. Anderson’s approach returns us to the earlier sociological analyses by writers such as Marwick (1965). Strikingly, Anderson links witchcraft accusations to the spread of AIDS and also quotes a Murambinda saying that ties witchcraft to gossip: “we bewitch each other, we gossip about each other, that makes us kill each other, that’s why we are poor!” (2002: 425).

A system of this kind is relatively impervious to any falsification, as Evans-Pritchard (1976 [1937]) long ago observed. But it is not just a system for providing explanations of misfortune. It itself generates conflict between people or brings to a head conflicts that exist already. In their daily lives the Maka coexist with fears of witchcraft among their own kin, which makes it more likely that they would also project such ideas onto the broader political scene. With the village notables and elders,

who hold their positions partly through kinship and partly through their own abilities, suspicions may develop against them that their *djambe* powers, which enable them to overcome opposition in debates, have become overdeveloped, causing them to kill others (p. 94). Society cannot function without the power of *djambe*, but this power can also lead to wrongdoing. Geschiere refers here to the “constant tension between an egalitarian ideology and highly inegalitarian practices” (p. 97).

In the case of the new educated Maka elites who are city-based, this tension is further exacerbated. These elites are liable to be accused of neglecting their own village kin, and they are expected to obtain benefits for their kin at home. The perceived sanction involved is witchcraft. When one politician became ill, villagers gossiped that witches had put a mixture of herbs and saliva on the pathway behind his house, and his own magic had not been strong enough to protect him against this. The reason his magic failed, they said, was that his own kin must have broken its powers, possibly his jealous cousins who had recently been refused access to a banquet the politician had sponsored. Geschiere notes that “it was almost impossible to deduce from the flows of rumors who the true instigators of the attack might have been” (p. 111). Several candidates’ names were mentioned. So no actual accusations emerged.

The rumors worked, however, to sustain people’s feelings against the politician and to reinforce the “leveling” effect of witchcraft ideas against the accumulation of wealth by political figures. *Djambe* thus becomes an element of popular political action. And on the other hand the rich are said to use their wealth to buy powerful magic to protect themselves, using their urban connections to do so. The rich themselves may contribute to such ideas, in order to make others less likely to attack them. Geschiere points out that in authoritarian states, villagers are largely shut out of politics, so they create rumors about events such as a fatal car accident that they declare to have been the result of the witchcraft of political rivals. In this way they effect a reentry into political processes (p. 123). Again, similar processes occur in Papua New Guinea today in which car accidents that

result in deaths of politicians become the focus of accusations of sorcery that can result in major confrontations and disruptions of community life, erupting further into national politics. It is important to note that it is the rumors themselves, attached to other rumors regarding jealousies among people, which are responsible for causing such disruptions. The idiom of witchcraft provides the necessary driving force in people's minds to turn rumors into actions.

### Speaking with Vampires

This is the title of Luise White's book on "rumor and history in colonial Africa" (White 2000). As we have seen, witchcraft ideas typically assert that the witch is a cannibal who consumes the life-force of victims, and accusations of witchcraft arise from incidents of sickness and death. Such accusations feed on a much wider spectrum of rumors and notions that circulate in urban and rural contexts. White's work concentrates on this world of rumor in colonial contexts of the kind that preceded the postcolonial politics discussed by Geschiere. In colonial times, rumors tended to fix on allegations that the European colonialists used indigenous minions to collect blood from Africans, which they then consumed to augment their own life-force. Europeans in this image were therefore seen as similar to vampires. The clusters of rumors that formed around this theme fall under the category of urban legends. A central feature in these legends is that firemen in Nairobi, who traveled in red trucks, were ordered by their superiors to catch victims and bring them to fire stations where they were suspended over pits and drained of their blood. This practice was called *mumiani*. In its emphasis on the terrifying image of draining blood from people as if they were carcasses of meat, the legend resembles the images of assault sorcery that we find in Australia and New Guinea (see Stewart and Strathern 1998a).

The idea that Europeans are cannibals also finds its parallels in New Guinea, along with the idea that they are not humans but spirits. White

recognizes that these elements of the story form a “transnational genre” in Africa, and the elements take on particular local meanings (White 2000: 9). They also show transpositions from Europe to Africa. White cites a Swahili-French dictionary from Zanzibar published in 1941 in which *mumiani* is defined as a “mummy” (i.e., a body drained of blood) “and a medicine Africans believed was made from dried blood. Jews . . . were in charge of getting the blood from people” (p. 11). The term for “firemen” in Swahili is *wazimamoto*, but it was applied in Uganda before actual fire services were instituted and given to surveyors and health department personnel in charge of yellow fever control, and it carried the connotation of blood-extractor or vampire (p. 14). In an expansion of the rumor it was said that prostitutes dug pits in their toilets in which to trap customers and give them to the *wazimamoto*. Sometimes police stations were also said to have such pits, cleverly hidden (p. 17).

White recognizes that these rumors had their origins partly in witchcraft ideas and partly in other currents of historical transition, but she sees them as “a fairly obvious metaphor for state-sponsored extractions” (p. 18). This is probably true, but Geschiere’s study shows us the parallel, contemporary significance of witchcraft beliefs that are also ways of talking about inequality and extraction, and not only ways of talking about events but also ways of influencing them. The studies by Niehaus, Auslander, and Schmoll all argue that the redeployment of witchcraft accusations and their intensification in modern times is a spin-off from the pressures of monetarization coupled with social dislocation of people. The contexts from colonial times that White describes are likely to have contained comparable elements, since she stresses that the *wazimamoto* were supposed to do their work primarily to get money. Informants said that the work was a kind of secret service, sponsored by the government and well paid (p. 29). In other words, it was associated with the impersonal, bureaucratic, and hierarchical forms of power of colonial times. Vampires were “seen to be internationalized, professionalized, supervised, and commodifying” (ibid.). The image of the vampire also

“straddles the connection between medicine and violence” and between indigenous ideas of the supernatural and introduced kinds of scientific technology such as those dealing with public health and hospital procedures of taking blood donations (ibid.). Vampire rumors purported to unmask the true malevolent intent behind colonial public services. (We note there that White uses the term “vampire” broadly; neither Europeans nor their supposed minions were thought directly to suck blood or other bodily fluids, hence the emphasis on the professionalized image of the *wazimamoto*, as vampires in uniform.)

While the specific dynamics of vampire stories represent a special twist on witchcraft beliefs, the functions of rumor are the same in all of these cases. White points out, for example, that people “construct and repeat stories that carry the values and meanings that most forcibly get their points across” (p. 30). Stories help people understand incomprehensible events, such as the disappearance of people. Continuous talk makes a story “true.” “Hearsay is a kind of fact when people believe it” (p. 34). Rumors therefore resolve the confusions that result from experience. People were puzzled by the institutions of police and firemen and interpreted these as a new kind of secret society in which blood-sucking practices were the focus of secrecy. Rumors of this kind were ambiguous sources of “news,” we might say, following the usage of Shibutani (1966). They are, as White puts it, poised between an explanation and an assertion. Gossip and rumor “occupy the interstices of respectability” (p. 62), giving us particular access to local concerns. White also recognizes, following Gluckman’s original formulation, that gossiping creates intimacy, as well as disclosing “the boundaries of attack and subversion” (p. 63). Here again we may compare gossip directly to assault sorcery. It is a form of assault on people’s reputations just as sorcery attacks their bodies. A kind of verbal sorcery that accuses others of bodily sorcery is thus likely to carry a powerful charge.

White’s book is replete with detailed examples. We take just a few points here. One point she makes (p. 81) is that the specific Europeans who were

mentioned in rumors as vampires were ones who were actually quite close to Africans and knew aspects of African culture. This seems like an important observation, and one that modifies her argument regarding the “professionalization” of vampires and their removal from indigenous contexts of witchcraft. Europeans who were relatively close to Africans were in colonial times likely to have been looked at ambiguously and ambivalently by both their fellow-colonialists and Africans. Africans’ perceptions of them might be compared to the reactions Papua New Guinea people had to plain-clothes police personnel. In an ingenious, if probably unintended twist, they interpreted the term “plain clothes” as “*pren-kros*” in the lingua franca Tok Pisin, the vocabulary of which is largely based on English. These police, they said, behaved as “friends” (*pren*) but underneath they were out to incriminate people: they were “cross” (*kros*). A profound distrust of apparently mediating categories of people is shown here.

As to why police and firemen were generally targeted by the rumors, the same considerations probably apply. Police and firemen might be interpreted as the friends or protectors of the people, but they could also be seen as enemies who infiltrated under a guise of goodwill. Symbolism and serendipity came into play. The red color of fire engines was reminiscent of blood. The police and fire departments were often the only ones that had vehicles and could carry blood donors to hospitals. The yellow fever departments had to use the fire brigade’s vehicles. People feared the Europeans’ vehicles and their ability to transport people away (p. 133). The police and firemen had to be ready for service at night, when witches are about, so this increased fear of them. Malaria control trucks in Tanganyika (Tanzania) in the 1950s were also said to carry people whose blood would be drained (an exaggerated version perhaps of the fact that blood samples were taken for identifying malaria parasites).

Cars themselves were said to have special straps (seat-belts?) that restrained victims and seats that could drain blood as people sat on them. Hospitals were said to sell corpses to criminals who filled them with gold

and used them to smuggle it into the Congo: if challenged, the drivers said they were taking sick relatives for treatment across the border. Africans were said to be captured, turned into pigs, and canned as meat on Sabena aircraft. The use of curtains to veil the windows of vehicles and aircraft contributed to the ease with which such stories about the interior spaces of “extractive power” were constructed (pp. 128–36). Anthropologists were not immune from such rumors, and they clearly fell into the category of Europeans who were relatively close to Africans. White cites a story about John Middleton, who studied the Lugbara in Northern Uganda. He had a bright red van closed at the back, and people said he used to steal and eat babies, using their blood to touch up its paintwork. Middleton had a mechanic install rear windows so that people could look inside the vehicle, and the rumor was dispelled (p. 136).

Similar confused rumors surrounded missionaries, and these were sometimes fed by accusations among rival missionary groups themselves. White reports that the Watchtower people accused the Catholics of cannibalism. Fat priests and ones with long beards particularly came under suspicion (p. 182). The locale here was Northern Rhodesia and the Catholics were the French-speaking White Fathers, so named because of robes they wore. In one rumor they were said to mark their victims with the sign of the cross, causing them later to rush to a parked truck where they would be drained of their blood or turned into meat (p. 183). The message of the Eucharist was interpreted by some as a form of cannibalism; if Europeans ate their revered deity, there was certainly nothing to stop them from eating Africans (p. 190). Conflict after 1935 between Protestant churches and the Catholics probably produced or exacerbated rumors of this kind, and there was surely some carry-over from European history. White does not stress the idea that European missionaries, and Europeans generally, probably made a contribution to the gossip mills as well as being their object. But we may plausibly surmise that rumor was as much a political tool for the expatriates as for the indigenous people.

Blood was not the only focus of Africans' fears. They also feared that Europeans took people's internal organs to cure European diseases, and the illness of a European was accordingly enough to cause a panic (p. 195). It caused not only panic, we suggest, but also hostility against Europeans generally. While White sees the rumors as reflective of the perceived extractive activities of the colonialists, it seems evident that these stories were capable of being used as political tools by those who told them and could have played a part in generating anti-colonial movements. At the least, they clearly reveal hostility in addition to fear. The theme of organ stealing, however, relates to the globalized circulation of such stories that has caught the attention of anthropologists. The postcolonial world in Africa also continues to produce vampire rumors. Two newspaper reports from the *New York Times* detail a new wave of such suspicions in Malawi. Vampires are said to carry syringes and to draw blood from victims they have drugged with sleeping gas. Men patrol at night carrying axes and clubs to combat these marauders. Three priests and the governor of Blantyre were physically attacked after being accused of harboring vampires. And the rumors claim that the country's government colludes with vampires to obtain blood in return for food (*New York Times*, December 29, 2002, and January 14, 2003).

### **Organ-Stealing as a Globalized Witchcraft Theme**

The idea that witches steal people's organs and use them for curative medicines is not new but a part of the traditional repertoire of notions about the powers of the body and powers over the body, in Africa and elsewhere. However, rumors about international traffic in stolen organs, as well as documented discussions of illicit trade in them and studies of organ donation in legal contexts have become a major arena of comment and debate.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes came across organ-stealing rumors in the shantytown Alto do Cruzeiro in Northeast Brazil (Scheper-Hughes

1996: 3). The people she worked with there told stories of American and Japanese agents driving around in large blue and yellow vans searching for stray youngsters in poor neighborhoods. The agents were said to snatch children, remove various organs such as heart, lungs, liver, kidney, and eyes, and then dump their bodies. The detail about the vans is highly reminiscent of the vampire stories from Africa reviewed above. Afraid of the stories, parents kept small children locked in at home while they themselves were out working. Scheper-Hughes refers to the work of White and Niehaus on Africa as a part of a globalized genre of such stories. In stories from Italy, for example, a black ambulance is featured as the kidnap vehicle. Scheper-Hughes links the stories to shadowy practices of international adoption and to actual traffic in organs from poor to rich countries. She suggests connections with rumors of Satanic child abuse in the United States and Britain (La Fontaine 1994, 1998) and with notions circulating in New Age circles in which the body is seen as vulnerable to threats from anarchy and assault (“terrorism” would be the contemporary term). And she mentions that the rumors constitute a genre of urban legends. But her specific interest is to show how these rumors relate to the lived, daily bodily experiences of people, in which they encounter hospitals, morgues, and cemetery sites for the poor. She found that poor people’s bodies are “mishandled, disrespected, and abused in mundane medical encounters” (p. 5). The bodies of their dead are sometimes mixed up or lost and are claimed by the state if they died in hospital: hence the people fear hospitalization. They also fear that their organs will be cut out and used. Doctors “over-medicate the poor with useless or contraindicated drugs . . . and perform unnecessary surgery and amputations for otherwise treatable conditions” (p. 6). Patients are left scarred and disabled. This treatment of the poor goes on while the wealthy indulge in the “most sophisticated forms of clinical medicine, body sculpting and plastic surgery” (ibid.). Only the rich can afford to buy body parts they need, and the poor fear that the organs removed from them go to the rich. The rumor thus exactly reproduces the form of cargo rumors in New

Guinea, witchcraft and technology rumors in Africa, and *mumiani* rumors in particular. In a zero-sum view of the world, the rich are pictured as gaining not only their wealth but their health, procured in body parts, from the poor. The poor in turn are pictured, as in classic Marxist theory, as having only their bodies as a resource: “labor power” transmuted into “body parts” in a latter-day medical update. (See also the further critical discussion in Scheper-Hughes 2000.)

Scheper-Hughes notes that poor Brazilians do sell their body parts, or offer to do so, in spite of denials by Brazilian transplant surgeons that such a covert trade exists (p. 7). One poor man suggested that if he could sell an eye or a kidney he could invest the money in the stock market and so never have to work again. The idea of a trade in “spare” body parts goes further along with the putative trade in “spare” children for international adoption.

Scheper-Hughes notes that abduction stories tend to occur in societies that have experienced dictatorship, military regimes, police states, and “dirty” internal wars in which people do regularly disappear. This is certainly a vital observation and ought to apply in principle to at least some of the contexts discussed by Luise White for colonial Africa. Certainly in postcolonial African contexts such scenarios have been frequent, including in the countries from which White drew her stories from colonial times, such as Uganda and the Congo. In Brazil itself, Scheper-Hughes asserts that paramilitary death squads have been known to operate in shantytowns, and in cities generally unwanted street children are murdered (p. 8). Rumors of abduction and the stealing of body parts thus serve to alert the poor to the “states of emergency” in which they live (p. 9). Their fears were probably increased by the Brazilian Senate’s decision to establish a norm of “presumed consent” to organ donation. The step from such a presumption to killing someone in order to “harvest” their organs is not so great, as news reports of the harvesting of the organs of executed criminals in the People’s Republic of China might suggest.

Scheper-Hughes's discussion of organ-stealing rumors makes significant points. First, she relates the rumors to actual conditions of life among the poor, in which bodies are maltreated in medical settings. Second, she remarks on the social class background to the rumors, in which the poor fear that the rich prey on them. And third, she notes that people's fears also rest on the ambiguity of rules and laws regarding organ donation at death generally, here extending her analysis to "developed" countries such as the United States. Her major perspective is one that is applicable across the board: witchcraft ideas and urban legends are not simply metaphors that express ideas of exploitation and trickery; rather, they grow out of people's bodily experiences in daily life – and in their regular encounters with death.

### **Occult Economies**

The Comaroffs, who instituted the study of "modernity and its malcontents" in Africa with their 1993 edited book, have more recently returned to the wide range of themes we have been exploring here. They refer to the present as the Age of Futillitarianism (1999: 279) and speak of pyramid schemes that put the "con" in economics (p. 281), pointing to the trickeries and frustrations of "modernity" in which many become rich but more stay poor. They highlight the return of ideas of the Devil and senses of "an epidemic of mystical evil" (p. 282). And they bring together, in text and footnotes, a great many examples from around the world, suggesting that the underlying determination of these rests with "millennial capitalism," an era of volatile swings in fortunes that generates frustrations among the young and impels them to accuse and in some cases kill the old, whom they see as blocking their own advancement.

Their argument provides an interesting blend of description and explanation, including data on witch-finding and witch-killings of the kind that we have earlier quoted from Auslander's study among the Ngoni. Economic recessions and the difficulty of finding jobs help to explain

the frustrations of young males in South Africa who express themselves violently at times. It is not so easy to understand why this violence should be directed against the old, especially older women, and why its idioms should include the cursing of old people's genitalia and claims that they kill people by lightning or keep zombie workers in drums (p. 289). Perhaps the youths feel threatened by the sense that their elders have powerful knowledge, gained by experience in life, but are unwilling to hand it over; while the elders may feel that youths are impatient and unwilling to listen respectfully. In any case, it is curious, if in some ways predictable, that aggression should be turned inward against community members, rather than outward to the less easily targeted forces of government and company interests that presumably do influence the economic scene. Perhaps this point also tells us that the economic influence of capitalism is not the only or determining factor at work. A historical context suffused by successive waves of dislocation, exploitation, and struggle, combined with a pervasive and malleable emphasis on the importance of magical power akin to the Maka concept of *djambe* as discussed by Geschiere, would seem to contain within itself the multiple seeds of violence that we find portrayed in witch-killings.

In her comment on the Comaroffs' lecture, Sally Falk Moore remarks that it is the epidemic of violence associated with the occult rather than the occult itself that calls for explanation (1999: 306). "Millennial capitalism" and economic distress may provide a general context, she notes, but not a particular explanation, and she asks for another look at history in this regard (cf. Larner 1981 on explanations for witch-hunts in Scotland). In their response the Comaroffs acknowledge the importance of history but also pose the question of why there are so many similarities among "occult economies" today.

We offer two comments here. One we have already remarked on. Violence is often born out of violent traditions in history. If there are similarities in witch beliefs and cargo thinking between, for example, New Guinea and parts of Africa, but the violence of witch-killings is greater in

some areas than in others, we must attribute this to the overall violence of historical experience in those areas. South Africa provides an obvious case. Furthermore, in South Africa, as in so many other cases around the world, the AIDS crisis does objectively threaten reproductive powers, and it is quite possible that anxieties over this problem become deflected onto the senior generation and women in particular, who are the guardians of fertility. Second, the similarity of ideas and phenomena is perhaps simply explained by the speed with which information is captured and transmitted (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 297, note 24). The concept of the “global village” is oversimplified, but it points to the fact that cultural images are available for mimetic appropriation on an extraordinarily rapid basis. The media have magnified the powers of rumor and gossip to the *n*th degree. In this way rumor can become not just a quest for “truth” but a method of fabricating it. Rumor also, like witchcraft itself, thus enters into the multiple worlds of modernity not only as a factor “contiguous” with social changes but also as “constitutive of modernity” itself (Moore and Sanders 2001a: 12).

## Conclusion

In Table 3 we summarize aspects of rumor that are highlighted in some of the main studies we have looked at in this chapter. These materials lend themselves to some further reflections on the historical conditions under which notions of witchcraft flourish. The first is the point stressed for Africa in particular by the Comaroffs: that “modernity,” far from eclipsing witchcraft notions, itself becomes a vehicle for them, a source of new and potent forms of imaginative nightmares in which electricity, battery acid, and other industrial substances and processes become the very stuff out of which nightmares are built. As a further commentary here, it is important to note that these nightmares are by no means limited to Africa or the Third World. A whole genre of vampire films designed for viewing by people in Europe and America taps into the same concerns

TABLE 3. The Significance of Rumor in Contemporary Witchcraft Contexts

Author	Focus of Study	Significance of Rumor
M. Auslander	Intergenerational suspicions	Spreading of gossip can lead to individual suspicions and these into support for witch-finding movements.
P. Geschiere	The ambiguity of magical power; witchcraft of the house; ambivalence toward politicians	Rumor provides a flow of information on people's wealth and conflicts between them. In contexts of sickness or death, these translate into witchcraft accusations.
L. White	Vampire notions in parts of Africa; traffic in blood and organs for "medicine"	Rumor occupies an interstitial place between colonial outsiders and indigenous Africans. It blends together fact and fantasy.
N. Scheper-Hughes	The global traffic in body parts and the life experiences of poor people	In authoritarian regimes, rumor and gossip reflect terrorist actions against the poor, alerting them to perceived dangers.

as are exhibited in African contexts today. In general, these phenomena force us to recognize the final demise of the myth that modernity is based on the "triumph of rationality" in human affairs. Witchcraft ideas are themselves rational if we view them as logics of explanation. At the same time they draw their power from fantasies of guilt and desire that arise from sources that could be labeled as "irrational." The debate about rationality is not very helpful in this context, and is something of a red herring when we try to understand how people's ideas translate into moral practice (see Lambek 1997, commenting on Comaroff 1997; also studies in Kapferer 2002, and for a long-term folkloric set of studies, see Davidson and Chaudhri 2001.).

In her paper reviewing studies of the modern occult in Africa and elsewhere as a form of moral commentary on the world, Jean Comaroff identifies the figure of the witch as one who embodies the contradictions

to be found at the intersection of the global and the local (Comaroff 1997). This is a reformulation of the earlier “modernity and its malcontents” argument. It is worthwhile to note here that the same argument can equally be applied to earlier phases of “modern” history in Europe. In these too persons were accused who were seen as threatening the moral order of society, and the order itself had been breached by forces of religious and political change.

Contradictions of one kind or another are also not confined to societies undergoing putative historical processes of “modernity.” Modernity is simply a term for people’s experiences of change in which the present comes to appear sharply different from the past. Ambivalent attitudes toward the power and privileges of leaders appear in many societies in which a generalized force or magical capacity is seen as belonging to leaders, who may use it either to benefit or to harm others. Morality is a dimension separate from power. Such notions are well dramatized in Elenore Smith Bowen’s classic rendition of Tiv themes (Bowen 1964, e.g., pp. 190–1). Tiv elders exhibited a classic combination of beneficent and malevolent mystical powers. Such ambiguity of power helps to explain how, in changed circumstances, leaders may be perceived as dangerous or evil. The kinds of circumstances that may be involved are well outlined by Taussig (1980), who shows how ideas of the Devil, production, nature, and the landscape were all altered by the Spanish conquest and the development of tin mines in Bolivia. Taussig notes that “the landscape of symbols came to include the Indians’ experience of Spanish greed, mastery, and violence” (p. 182). This experience was also encapsulated in a changing picture of gender relations in which “the male god is often seen as the embodiment of alien forces,” whereas the female is seen as nourishing and protecting (p. 209).

Lucy Mair (1969: 161–79) makes some insightful remarks about situations of change in Africa and elsewhere. She notes that Africans themselves may claim that with modern changes witchcraft is increasing “because the government will not let us punish it” (p. 161). She cautions that this

may be rhetoric rather than supported by quantitative evidence, recalling that “when in 1559 Bishop Jewel preached before Elizabeth I [of England] and urged her to introduce stricter laws against witchcraft, he too said the evil was increasing” (p. 161). Still, the fact that people *think* witchcraft is increasing has its own effects in the search for new shrines and talismans and the growth of witch-hunts and the activities of itinerant witch-finding prophets (p. 164). Mair further points to the incorporation of Christian symbolism into witch-finding rituals. She cites the case of the John Maranke Apostles movement in Rhodesia in 1938. Officials of this church acted like diviners in identifying witches and also in detecting unconfessed sins in general. Before an annual communion event, worshipers had to enter an enclosure through gates guarded by officials acting as “prophets” in this way, and all whom these prophets denounced were taken to a further tribunal held by church elders (p. 178). We see here the blending of indigenous and Christian ideas that appears to occur universally in such contexts, as people struggle to make sense out of their past and present. Mair’s empirical examples point to this patchy process of acculturation, as we may call it, without appealing to the concept of globalization or the spread of capitalism. Generalizing her discussion, we may suggest that many elements may feed into people’s attempts to restructure their lives and to exercise moral judgments over themselves and others. The same process occurred in the post-Reformation witch-hunts in Scotland, as Larner (1981) has persuasively argued.

Jean Comaroff broaches another comparison that is in line with our insistence that rumor and gossip provide a link between classic witchcraft scenarios and their transformations in contemporary affairs. She sees parallels between concerns over witchcraft and those over child abuse as a modern theme. The fear that evil things are being done to children is one such link, and the basic idea that social reproduction is threatened is the underlying form of this fear. Michael Lambek has further drawn out the implications of this parallel, noting that the theme of abuse has to do with ideas about “the moral collapse of the world” (Lambek

1997: 22) – as witchcraft may do, and increasingly does, in contemporary Africa. At a broader level again Lambek sees the abuse theme as linked to that of memory, in its guise of uncovering the secret, hidden source of ongoing misfortune in a person's life (Antze and Lambek 1996). We have only to think of the challenge to the Catholic Church caused by the allegations of abuse of children and young adults by priests that have emerged in recent years to understand the force of this point. Uncovering the source of evil is like exposing the witch, with the added point that evil, as sometimes happens, is identified at the heart of what is supposed to be sacred and good, thus threatening the very basis of order and requiring a thorough purgation of the perceived evil for the reestablishment of the cosmos.

Returning to our theme of rumor and gossip here, it is quite evident that accusations of Satanic abuse against child-minders reflect both people's anxieties about handing over their small children to others to look after them and their possible guilt about doing so, generated from their choice to pursue paid jobs outside the family setting rather than the job of child caring. It is also evident that this anxiety and guilt is mediated by participating in gossip networks and feeds on incoming rumors. Leaders in these networks may accuse others of abuse as a form of witchcraft, only to be exposed and driven out as witches if their accusations are proved baseless. Alternatively, the stigma of an accusation may persist even if an accused person is found innocent in law. The powerful need to externalize and attach blame is shown in all these examples. Rumor and gossip are the prime ways in which this is achieved.