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Book review: *Witchcraft, Intimacy & Trust: Africa in Comparison*, written by Geschiere, Peter

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Witchcraft, Intimacy & Trust: Africa in Comparison. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 328 pp., 978-0-226-04761-4, us\$25

During the 2008 u.s. presidential campaign, when Sarah Palin ran as the vice-presidential candidate for the Republican Party, video footage emerged of Kenyan Pentecostal minister Thomas Muthee praying in 2005 for Palin's political success and imploring Jesus to protect Palin from the 'spirit of witchcraft'. The occasion was the culmination of Muthee's two weeks as a guest pastor at the Wasilla Assembly of God, the evangelical Alaskan church that Palin had joined as a teenager, where she retained a loyal following, and where Muthee has spoken on at least two subsequent occasions.

Muthee had apparently earned these invitations to Wasilla through his celebrated claim to have liberated his hometown—Kiamba, Kenya—from a witch and thereby delivered the town from sin and to Jesus, reducing rates of crime and traffic fatalities. Among the greatest enemies in his 'spiritual warfare', he declared, are 'python spirits' corrupting every institution in modern society. The reports of her association with Pastor Muthee contributed to Palin's—and Africa's—reputation for ignorance and detachment from reality. However, to the observer unblinded by the presumption that Westerners are inherently scientific, Pastor Muthee's popularity even in the northernmost reaches of the United States reminds us that visions of the occult inspire people on every continent and inform their understandings of even the most 'modern' spheres of contemporary life.

Peter Geschiere's *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust* (2013) does not address these specific events but begins with the author's own story of how reports of the occult influence in contemporary life took over his research in 1971, as he set out to study the intersections between the national and local government systems in post-independence Cameroon. He quickly discovered that locals perceived those intersections in terms of witchcraft, or, in French, *sorcellerie*. In the once-egalitarian Maka communities that Geschiere studied, the social inequality created by the training and employment of Maka *évolués* as relatively well-paid government bureaucrats provoked numerous accusations of witchcraft/*sorcellerie*, or *djambe*, between envied and envying parties within the same families and communities.

Over the subsequent four decades, Geschiere has studied the effects of political and economic change, or 'modernity'—including increasing personal mobility, growing social inequality, the growth of the state, the neoliberal weakening of the state, the growing influence of NGOs, international labor migration, and the rapid rise of Pentecostalism—on Maka conceptions of where and how *djambe* works. This reflexive account of Geschiere's own discovery also documents the emergence of a major growth industry in the historicized study of the occult in Africa and of its complementarity with modernity.

Yet the foremost motive of the Geschiere's latest, broad-ranging book is to 'disenclave Africa' (he borrows the term from Achille Mbembe) and to demonstrate the full membership of that continent in the "modern" world (xxi). In this effort Geschiere sharply criticizes 'culturalist' generalizations that timelessly contrast a general African ontology with the ontologies of other regions of the world. He also opposes the typological distinctions such as 'witchcraft' vs. 'sorcery' that other authors have drawn in order to distinguish the patterns of accusation on one continent from those on another. Witchcraft emerges in a shifting range of forms with a shifting range of causes. Geschiere even shows that any given actor may, in his or her lifetime or in a particular witchcraft drama, be classified at different times as a victim, as a witch, or as a witch finder and healer.

For Geschiere, witchcraft is broadly instructive because it illustrates the obstacles to interpersonal trust, on which social life depends everywhere in the world. He thus points out the flaws in existing scholarly assumptions about trust. Geschiere states that economists wrongly attribute trust to rational choice in the societies they study, while anthropologists wrongly idealize the family in 'anthropological societies' as a pure haven of peaceful reciprocity and solidarity (29–32). Instead, he draws from Georg Simmel the observation that trust between people derives from an active struggle and from an almost religious leap of faith (32).

Ultimately, Geschiere asks what African visions of the occult—and the ways that those visions flourish and change amid modernity—teach us about human social life generally. In pursuit of an answer, Geschiere highlights some points of African distinctiveness. Among the Maka and in much of Africa, the people suspected of witchcraft are usually intimates, and typically members of the victim's own family. However, Geschiere takes Freud's notion of the uncanny, which Geschiere defines as 'the familiar turned against us' (xvii) and 'repressed memories that come back with a vengeance' (27), as evidence that the more general linkage among intimacy, mistrust, and witchcraft is universal. Freud's theory leads Geschiere toward the understanding that 'closeness breeds fears of hidden aggression' (27). African discourses of witchcraft illustrate the general observation that these threats are often experienced as occult—i.e., hidden, mystical, and uncanny—in nature.

Geschiere therefore defines witchcraft as 'the danger inside'. He pays closest attention to those African cases that conform to this definition, and seeks non-African examples whose partial conformity has typically been overlooked. He explores the literature on occult aggression in early-modern Europe, Melanesia, Java, and the Candomblé religion of Bahia, Brazil, for evidence—contrary to some of that literature, especially concerning Europe and Melanesia—that occult aggression in those places is also attributed mostly or at least partially to perpetrators who are close to the victim, be they consanguineal relatives, affines, neighbors, local geographical spirits, or members of the same village community, church, or temple. In every one of these settings, he argues, there are some

cases where there is some kind of proximity between the witch and the victim. Despite the universality of the fear generated by social proximity, Geschiere emphasizes that each such region is internally heterogeneous, that each subregional setting changes over time with respect to who tends to suspect whom of occult aggression, and that there is great variation in the ways that trust is established between people who have to live and work together. Hence, the upshot of the comparison is that Africa as a whole is not 'culturally' opposite any other region as a whole with respect to the social proximity between the witch and the victim, African occult ontologies are themselves heterogeneous, and, in each specific African setting, those ontologies are hybrid, changing, and subject to strategic manipulation by local actors.

Thus Geschiere explains diversity in the social configuration and the resolution of mistrust—across regions and over time—'in historical rather than in cultural terms' (xxvi). For example, he attributes the distinctive strength of the connection between family and witchcraft in Africa to what Jack Goody describes as the 'wealth-in-people' system, in contrast to Eurasia's system of 'wealth-in-things'. According to Goody, because most of Eurasia has historically suffered from a shortage of land, land has typically been the limiting resource in elites' accumulation of wealth. On the other hand, most of Africa has historically suffered from a surfeit of land and a shortage of people to work it. Therefore access to people—through appeals to kinship ties, for example—rather than control over land has typically been the limiting resource in the accumulation of wealth. For this reason, Geschiere argues, African definitions of family have tended to be far more elastic than European definitions, at least since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the consolidation of family wealth-in-things prompted the closure of European families (130-132). Moreover, Geschiere observes, the failure of contemporary African states and other institutions to provide for their citizens' needs has tended to make the family the only institution on which people can rely. The tension between growing economic inequality within families and the increasing dependency of poor Africans on their successful or itinerant relatives has been fertile ground for witchcraft suspicions and accusations. Through African and non-African comparisons as well, Geschiere shows how political instability (in Java), changing religious ideologies and patterns of nationalism (in Brazil and Ghana), structural adjustment programs and other neoliberal development policies (in Africa), and the relative authority of states over their peasantries and the rise of scientific discourse (in Europe) contribute to the emergence or dissipation of witch scares.

Geschiere also observes the irony that Pentecostalism—the contemporary religious movement most determined to eradicate witchcraft from African communities—actually reinforces the image of witchcraft's realness and modernizes this image by assimilating it to the Christian image of the Devil and assigning the alleged witches a prominent role in a global battle of good against evil. Moreover, the Pentecostalism-driven proliferation of public and mass-mediated talk about witches and the confessions of witches in Pentecostal churches, as well as university conferences about witchcraft, have actually homogenized the discourse about witches across larger territories (194). According to Geschiere, these developments have decreased the level of skepticism that Africans in the village setting tend to feel about any given witchcraft accusation or, possibly, about witchcraft in general (183-186, 201-211). Geschiere observes that, in an effort to defend themselves against mystical attack, some people insinuate that they possess occult powers, but these defensive moves sometimes backfire, placing such people at increased risk of later accusations. With their forced or voluntary

confessions, the accused fill a gap in their contemporaries' understanding of mysterious events that trouble them all. Ultimately, however, the alleged witch's confession leaves many questions unanswered and leaves him or her vulnerable to ostracism and, sometimes, murder.

The ultimate lesson that Geschiere draws from this prodigious and enriching comparative study of 'the danger inside' is that interpersonal aggression flowing from jealousy is inherent in intimate relationships. He offers the possibility that, if everyone recognized this reality, people would be less likely to explain such feelings in terms of witchcraft discourse and more likely to address jealousy-based aggression in 'pragmatic' ways (213). Two pages before this conclusion, Geschiere identifies the 'increasing power' of 'scientific discourse... in the functioning of [European] society' (211), alongside the marginalization of the Devil, as the closest thing to a death blow that witchcraft has received in any of his these cases. However, this casual reference to the 'pragmatic' persuades me that the idea of 'culture' retains some heuristic advantage, reminding us, as does the work of both Marshall Sahlins and Bruno Latour, that there is much that is culture-specific in European science and conceptions of the pragmatic. There is nothing self-evidently objective, universally positive, or trans-historically preferable about these European conceptions. Countless are the horrors that have flowed from post-Enlightenment discourses of the pragmatic and the scientific. Nazism and its 'final solution' were perhaps the greatest European 'witch-hunt' of them all.

Nonetheless, Geschiere's argument packs a strong and memorable punch. His project to 'disenclave Africa' is unprecedentedly bold and broad ranging. It legitimately sets its sights on cultural approaches that attribute a single, homogeneous, and unchanging ontology to the thinking of any given region, neglecting the forms of change and hybridity that occur in any given population's discourses and overlooking the ability of any given person to move situationally and strategically between ontological premises (170, 256n8). This much is clear in the popularity of Pastor Muthee in the Wasilla Assembly of God; it is also clear in African witchcraft's domestication of the European Devil.