

CHIEFS AND THE PROBLEM OF WITCHCRAFT VARYING PATTERNS IN SOUTH AND WEST CAMEROON

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An important question raised by many contributions to the conference from which this volume is derived was whether chiefs still had a role to play since the recent political changes on the African continent. Can the chiefs "act as a unique linkage between the contemporary state and civil society..." (Arhin Brempong et al. 1995)? Other contributions raise the question to what extent the chiefs can even form an alternative source of power in the face of the threatened collapse of the state in many countries (van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal in this volume; Ray in this volume). It is clear, as these authors and several others emphasise, that there is no unequivocal answer to such questions (also van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987; van Binsbergen 1987; Bayart 1989). Apparently there are highly varying trajectories in the evolution of chieftaincies and their relations to the colonial and the post-colonial state.

An important issue in understanding the varying performance of traditional authorities in present-day Africa is the degree to which their power is rooted in local societies. At first sight this might seem to be a somewhat strange query: the adjective 'traditional' seems to imply that such authority has per definition 'traditional' roots. However, it is clear that in Africa the 'traditionality' of these authorities is highly variable. If one adopts a stringent historical perspective, the appropriateness of the adjective 'traditional' becomes in many cases a moot point. Many so-called 'customary' or 'traditional' chieftaincies were in reality colonial creations, born from the urgent need to 'pacify' and administer large, newly conquered territories. Where 'real' chiefs who might serve as intermediaries were lacking, all colonial powers - the French, the Germans and the Belgians as much as the British - opted to create such 'traditional institutions' in order to solve their urgent administrative problems (Deschamps 1963; Lombard 1967; Crowder 1964,

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1968, 1978; Crowder and Ikime 1970; Brunshwig 1983; van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1987).

It is obvious that one cannot make a simple opposition here between 'really' traditional chieftaincies, strongly rooted in society, and chiefs whose position was a colonial creation and therefore more ephemeral. There are certainly examples of colonially created chieftaincies which, due to various factors, became crucial to the identity of 'their' people and whose authority at the grassroots level has therefore become all too real. There are also many counter-examples of 'really' traditional chieftaincies who lost much of their authority during colonial and post-colonial times (Geschiere 1993). Clearly, the extent to which 'traditional' chiefs have maintained their authority at the local level (or succeeded in building it up) can differ by region since it depended on highly varying trajectories in the articulation of the new relations of authority, imposed by the colonial and post-colonial state, and local patterns of organisation (van Binsbergen and Geschiere 1985; Geschiere and Konings 1993).

The aim of this article is to show that the degree to which chiefs are still supposed to maintain some sort of control over the occult forces - or, to use more popular terms, over 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery' - is a good indication of how rooted their authority is in local society. This is certainly not an arbitrary choice of topic. In Cameroon, as in many other African countries, the question of how to control witchcraft has become a hot issue, not to say an obsession. People are haunted by the idea that new forms of witchcraft are spreading which are directly associated with the new forms of wealth. The new witches are supposed no longer to eat their victims but to transform them into a kind of zombies who are put to work on 'invisible plantations'. That would be the hidden source of the wealth of many *nouveaux riches* in post-colonial society, with their ostentatious patterns of consumption. Witchcraft conspiracies are now believed to be reproduced on a truly global scale: there are rumours about witches who have their professors in Europe or work together with the mafia.

Such fears have led to a frantic search for new forms of protection. People are turning to the churches: to independent churches like the Pentecostals but also, for instance, to Catholic priests. A new, more modern and often more aggressive type of witch-doctor is emerging who pretends to be able to deal with these new threats. And most importantly, there is heavy popular pressure on the state - on the *gendarmes* and the courts - to intervene. This has led, at least in some parts of Cameroon, to a regular judicial offensive, judges condemning 'witches' to heavy sentences in jail (Fisiy and Geschiere 1990; Geschiere 1995).

An obvious question is to what extent the so-called 'traditional authorities' can play a role in containing this witchcraft craze. If they could still constitute a kind

of alternative to the state, one would certainly expect them to make their mark in this field. The frantic search for new forms of protection against novel threats in the field of the occult forces constitutes a true test-case for the authority of the 'traditional' chiefs. Within Cameroon, there are interesting regional variations in this respect. In some areas - especially in the Grassfields of the West and the Northwest Provinces - the chiefs and their courts still seem to be able to impose their authority in this field, at least up to a certain degree. In other regions - notably in the southern and eastern forest areas - chiefs hardly seem capable of doing so. In these areas as well, the 'customary' chiefs are certainly associated with occult powers. But they are supposed to use these to strengthen their own position rather than to protect their communities. It is also in these areas that there seems to be a general pressure on the state to intervene against the new witchcraft threats.

Such variations do not coincide with the dividing line between the former British and French regions. The old debate on the contrast between French 'assimilation' and British Indirect Rule is of limited value to an understanding of these differences. They rather should be analysed in a longer historical perspective (Deschamps 1963; Crowder 1964; Geschiere 1993). In the West Province (formerly French) and in the Northwest (formerly British), chieftaincy has a long history; moreover, the chiefs here succeeded in consolidating their position during colonial times. In the segmentary societies of the forest area (both in the former British and French parts), chieftaincy was less strongly institutionalised.¹ The colonial authorities tried, in different ways, to enhance the powers of these 'customary chiefs' who were in fact largely created by them. Under certain circumstances colonial rule did indeed provide the chiefs with opportunities to root their new powers in local society, at least to a certain degree. But in many other cases these chiefs failed to become more than auxiliaries of the colonial and post-colonial state or to build up a broader moral authority. It is in these areas that

¹ In North Cameroon yet another pattern emerged in the evolution of chieftaincy. Here developments were deeply affected by the Fulani *djihad* of the 19th century and the concomitant process of Islamisation. This led to the emergence of chiefs of a Fulani type (*ardo* and even *lamibe*) within the local societies or to the transformation of pre-existing local chieftaincies. The impact of Islam deeply affected the relation of these chiefs to the occult, creating very different patterns compared to the south or the west of the country. One has to add, however, that the abrupt slow-down of Islamisation in this area after the fall of the Ahidjo regime (1982-4) was of direct consequence to the further evolution of chieftaincy in non-Fulani (or not completely Fulanised) societies (Schilder 1994). In this article I limit myself to a comparison of the role of chiefs in the southern and western parts of the country.

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rumours about new forms of witchcraft create true panic and the pressure on the state itself to intervene is the strongest.

Chiefs in the Forest Societies of South and East Cameroon: The Vicious Circle of Witchcraft and Power

For the forest area of Cameroon it is important to emphasise the colonial roots of most so-called 'customary' chieftaincies. Up to the colonial conquest these societies were highly 'segmentary' in character. In most areas no central authority existed above the village level. Relations between the villages were mainly expressed in an idiom of kinship and affinity, linking patrilineal segments which were in principle autonomous. Local leaders, often elders, were 'big men' rather than 'chiefs'. There was no ritually institutionalised 'office'. Leadership rather depended on an elder's personal achievement, notably his success in exchanges of prestige goods and women with other groups and his ability to increase the number of his followers.

In these areas successive colonial authorities - first the Germans, later the British in the western and the French in the eastern part - rather desperately sought official leaders, who could act as reliable auxiliaries in maintaining order and executing the new governments' measures. In the French parts of the forest area, the artificial character of the new 'customary chiefs' was most manifest. The French looked mainly for candidates *qui comprenaient les choses des Blancs*, as my informants put it - that is, who spoke French or at least had some experience in working with Europeans. Consequently, the first generation of chiefs in the French area was recruited mainly among young men who had worked in the colonial armies as soldiers, cooks or porters.

These auxiliaries had to execute a wide array of highly coercive measures. During the German period, the forest area experienced a brief but chaotic boom period due to the exploitation of wild rubber. But as early as 1913 the demand for this product collapsed, because of the competition of plantation rubber from Southeast Asia, which was of a higher quality. After that the *mise en valeur* of the area was a great problem. All through the interbellum period, French reports abound in complaints about the laziness of these *primitifs imprévoyants* and their insensitivity to the Law of Supply and Demand. Indeed, in these thinly populated areas, often of difficult access, the French had great trouble in making the local population produce regular surpluses for the market. The only solution was, according to nearly all civil servants, direct government coercion to make the villagers work harder. The consequence was a highly coercive regime of forced labour levies, *cultures forcées* and constant pressure on the villagers to pay their taxes. It was in this context that the 'customary chiefs' had to play their role (Geschiere 1982;

Guyer 1978, 1985).

The French had no illusions about the legitimacy of the chiefs they had imposed on the population. Therefore, they were prepared to back up their authority with harsh sanctions: constant support of the white *Commandant* and his *gendarmes*, the threat of the jail at the government post. It was only due to this backing that the chiefs could execute all the unpopular official measures. The consequence was that these chiefs became highly disciplinarian figures, strongly associated with the new forms of authority introduced by the Whites.

In the Maka area of eastern Cameroon - where I did my main field-work - all sorts of jokes circulated, still in the seventies, about the old chiefs expressing people's hatred. One chief had retained the nickname of 'the old cleaver' because of his violent behaviour in recruiting labourers for the Whites. Another chief was reputed to have told the white *Commandant* that the Maka were apes without tails. Indeed, the same chief exclaimed to me in an interview (when I asked him whether he had ever worn the adornments of the war-heroes from former days, which he described so graphically to me): *Comment, moi je suis né entre les mains des Blancs!* (What is this? I was born in the hands of the Whites!)

The British paid, at least officially, somewhat more attention to 'traditional' criteria in recruiting chiefs in their part of the forest area. Moreover, for various reasons - an important one being that this part of their colony was of very little economic interest to them - their regime was in general less coercive. The consequence was that here the chiefs had more leeway to build up a power base of their own. Yet, since in these areas as well there had been 'traditionally' no clearly outlined chieftaincies above the village level, the chiefs the British appointed were new figures. This seems to have been a general pattern throughout the forest area.²

² But even for this limited region one has to be wary of undue generalisations. The Duala on the coast, for instance, did know more or less clearly institutionalised chieftaincies, known as *kingues*, long before colonial conquest. The emergence of these *kingues* was closely connected to the impact of the European trade from the 16th century. These *kingues* were, however, of a different type from the territorial chiefs from the West and the Northwest, to be discussed below. The Duala 'kingdoms' rather resembled the city-states of the Calabar coast (Austen 1977, 1992; Eckert n.d.). There are other variations as well. It seems, for instance, that among the Bakweri (Southwest Province,

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But even though these 'customary' chiefs were new figures, they soon tried to express their new powers, derived from the state and its *gendarmes*, in traditional terms. Interestingly enough, since their new powers clearly surpassed the traditional bounds, this led to a kind of exaggeration of 'tradition'. While in pre-colonial times a very important elder among the Maka might have ten women, the colonial chiefs soon accumulated dozens of women and among the neighbouring Beti even hundreds. Guyer (1978, 1985) gives examples of colonial Beti chiefs with more than four hundred wives. The same applied to the domain of the occult forces. In the village a dangerous man might have the reputation of 'having a panther' (that is, the panther was supposed to be his were-animal with which he could attack others). But Kamanda, one of the great Maka *chefs supérieurs* during the colonial period, was reputed to have not one but several panthers (which in the 70s were still supposed to roam the forest).

An old Maka friend, Mr. Medoumba Moise, once explained to me why he had not become *chef de groupement* instead of Mr. Mballa: "At the time, the White Man wanted to appoint me. But then the elders explained to him that I would not do as a candidate, since I was too honest. To be a chief, you need to have 'the hunters of men' (*bagul babud*), like that one over there". And with his last words he accusingly pointed to Mr. Mballa's compound (who, at the time, was still *chef de groupement*). In this quotation it is again the exaggeration which is quite striking: the chief is apparently supposed to have a whole battalion of witches at his disposal.

It is not amazing that these new chiefs were rapidly associated with witchcraft. To the Maka, and to the forest groups in general, power is always associated with *djambe* or *evu* terms which indicate the occult.³ This certainly applies to the

formerly British), chieftaincy, at least on the village level, was more clearly developed than among groups like the Beti or the Maka in former French Cameroon (Ardener 1956, 1996; Geschiere 1993).

³ A note on the use of the term 'witchcraft' is required here. In many respects this western term is an unfortunate translation of local terms like *djambe* (Maka) or *evu* (Beti). One problem is that this term is much too pejorative, while the local notions are fairly ambivalent: *djambe* like *evu* is evil but can also be used constructively (see below). In this respect a more general translation, like 'occult forces', might be more appropriate. However, western terms like *sorcellerie*, sorcery or witchcraft are now generally used throughout Africa as translations of these local notions. And it is in these terms that current debates on the role of the

modern forms of power also. In this respect, there is a striking continuity between the war-heroes of pre-colonial days, the colonial chiefs, the great *lessje kaande* (the notables who still dominate the village palaver), and even the modern politico-administrative elite. To the people it is self-evident that all these leaders, whatever the differences between them, were (and are) armed with powerful occult forces in one way or another. How else would they dare to defy the jealousy of their fellow men? How else could they succeed in accumulating so much power and wealth? One must add that these leaders themselves refer in no uncertain terms to such occult empowerment. The inevitable equation of power with 'witchcraft' seems to be a fixed corollary of the strong, egalitarian ideology which marks these segmentary societies (Laburthe-Tolra 1977; Mallart 1981; Geschiere 1995).

The witchcraft discourses of the forest societies have many basic traits in common: the *djambe* (Maka), *evu* (Beti), *ewusu* (Duala) or *liemba* (Bakweri) is supposed to live in someone's belly. In principle everybody can have a *djambe* in his or her belly. But only some take the trouble to develop it (for instance, by associating themselves with more experienced *djambe* people). A crucial step is that someone uses the *djambe* to 'leave' his body. Then he or she will fly away at night 'along the threads of witchcraft' to the meetings of the witches. There the witch has to deliver a close relative who is eaten by the fellow witches. This basic image of the witches meeting at night and betraying their own kin is a true obsession for most people. In this sense *djambe*, like *evu*, is certainly evil. But it can also be used constructively: the old war-heroes used the *djambe le doomb* (of war) to make themselves invincible. The great *lessje kaande* (speakers in the council) have the *djamb idjuga* (of authority) so that nobody can contradict them. And the *nganga* (witch-doctors) can only cure the victims of the witches because their own *djambe* is so strongly developed.

This ambivalence of notions like *djambe* or *evu* is crucial to understanding their close relation to power. *Djambe* is evil but it is also essential to the functioning of society: without the *djambe*, the war-hero cannot prevail in war, the elder cannot control the palaver and the *nganga* can offer no protection. The relation to power is equally ambivalent. *Djambe* or *evu* are closely connected to jealousy. In this sense, they are supposed to be the weapon of the weak against the strong. This is

occult are expressed. Therefore, I prefer to retain terms like 'witchcraft' or 'sorcery' despite their problematic aspects. Furthermore I do not follow the distinction proposed by Evans-Pritchard and followed by some anthropologists, between 'witchcraft' (as an innate quality, unconsciously activated) and 'sorcery' (as the use of acquired techniques), since this does not apply well to the societies studied here.

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the levelling side of these notions. In many respects they seem to reflect the strong egalitarian drive dominating these societies. The threat of *djambe/evu* will remind a rich man that he has to share with his relatives; and it can serve to keep ambitious leaders - war-heroes and village notables, just as much as colonial chiefs or modern politicians - within bounds.

But, even though these societies are dominated by strong levelling tendencies - or maybe because of it - they are at the same time marked by an ostentatious display of individual ambition. It is in this respect that the other, 'accumulative' side of *djambe/evu* comes to the fore. Precisely because personal achievement is necessary for every leader to maintain his position, it has to be displayed again and again (Laburthe-Tolra 1977; Geschiere 1982). In a very apt phrase, Guyer (1993) characterises the societies of the equatorial forest area as dominated by a "drive to multiple self-realization". The war-heroes constantly had to prove their worth against their opponents; the notables have to show time and again in the village council that they can prevail over people who try to contradict them and undermine their prestige; and the same principles seem to apply in the murderous competition for posts in modern politics. *Djambe/evu* is seen as an indispensable support in this display of personal valour. As my informants repeated time and again: "How would a man dare to rise above his fellow-villagers and thus evoke their jealousy and witchcraft, unless he himself is 'armoured' by the *djambe*?"

All this gives the *djambe/evu* discourse a strikingly circular character. The main protection against witchcraft is to be found in the world of witchcraft itself, that is with the *nganga* who can only cure because he or she is a 'super-witch'. This makes the *nganga* a highly suspect figure. *Nganga* will always emphasise that their 'professor' has bound them with heavy interdictions to use their secret powers only to heal and not to kill. But people are never sure of this. There is also a widespread belief that in order to be initiated as a *nganga*, one has to sacrifice a close relative. It seems that the *nganga* can only heal because he or she has killed. People also suspect *nganga* of working in league with the witches in order to raise their revenues. The consequence is that the *djambe/evu* discourse seems to draw endless circles: to be healed from witchcraft, one has to get the help of a *nganga*, who is himself a witch; if one really wants to be protected against witchcraft, one has to venture into that dangerous world oneself, but then one is exposed to new dangers against which stronger forms of protection are required and so on. *Djambe/evu* is a vicious circle from which it is very difficult to escape.

It is precisely because of this ambivalence and circularity that *djambe/evu* becomes such an all-pervasive notion: it is destructive but also constructive, it is a weapon for the weak to attack inequalities but also for the strong to enhance their position. No wonder it still seems to be the obvious idiom with which to interpret

modern developments, marked by new and shocking inequalities. It is a discourse which can serve to explain and even legitimate the astonishing wealth and the shocking accumulation of power by the new elite; but it can also serve to undermine their position. No wonder again, that the new powers of the state's 'customary chiefs' were also incorporated into the *djambe/evu* discourse.

What is striking, however, is that these chiefs had no particular role to play in the containment of witchcraft. Their new means of power, provided by the state and expressed in an exaggeration of 'traditional' status-symbols, apparently did not confer on them the moral power to intervene against the witches. Up till today, sanctions within these societies against witchcraft remain characterised by the circularity of the witchcraft discourse. If one feels threatened by witchcraft one can appeal to the witch-doctor or one can convene the village palaver, where the elders will try to canalise the avalanche of accusations which is usually triggered by such occasions. In former days, this could lead to a fission of the village, the fierceness of witchcraft accusations being an indication of the depth of the internal cleavages. At some occasions, notably at funerals, people accused of witchcraft - especially the widows, if the deceased was a man - could be summarily executed.

Village fission and the execution of witches are no longer permitted, since the state has established its control.⁴ But the 'customary chiefs', the novel power-holders instituted by the state in these societies, have not provided new ways of dealing with witchcraft rumours and fears. These chiefs were incorporated into the old *djambe/evu* discourse. They were and are generally supposed to use magical means, both old and new, to fortify their position and overcome their rivals. As said before, the novel dimensions of their power position - the fact that they could control far more frightening sanctions (the *gendarmes*, the support of the state) than any leader before them - is reflected in an exaggeration of the occult means they were supposed to have at their disposal. But none of this placed them beyond the circularity, and therefore the undermining impact, of the witchcraft discourse. The chiefs became figures as ambivalent as the old war-heroes, who were admired for their prowess but were at the same time highly dangerous persons, or the *nganga* about whom one is never sure that they will use their frightening powers only to heal. Precisely because these chiefs were believed to use occult means for their own self-realisation (Guyer 1993), they were unable to break out of the circularity and ambivalences of the *djambe/evu* discourse, nor

⁴ In actual practice serious violence against accused witches was, to my knowledge, indeed rare (at least until quite recently). People who have repeatedly been accused of witchcraft were at most chased out of the village but this, again, was exceptional.

to attain a position of moral authority beyond this discourse.⁵ The consequence seems to be that there was and is no special role for them in the containment of witchcraft and in the protection of the community against the proliferation of novel occult threats in recent times.⁶ No wonder that it is especially in these regions that people engage in a somewhat desperate search for outside agencies, such as the state and the Churches, to protect them against such threats.

Chiefs in the Grassfields: The Containment of Witchcraft

In the Grassfields of the Bamenda and Bamileke areas (respectively the Northwest Province and the West Province), 'traditional authorities' have a very different profile. Here chiefs and the associations around their courts can boast of a long history - and do so whenever an occasion presents itself. There are of course great variations within this area as well. The larger chiefdoms like Nso, Bamun or Bandjun, each in the order of more than 100,000 people, can hardly be compared to the many tiny chiefdoms of a few thousand people. Yet there is a common model at the basis of all these chieftaincies. The *fon* or *fo* is the centre of social life in all respects. Around his court are organised a number of more or less secret societies, the most important being a kind of police society often called *kwifoyn*; and there is a complex system of graded titles controlled by the *fon*. Warnier (1985) emphasises the importance of long-distance trade and the accumulation of wealth in these societies. It was the strict control by the *fon* of outside relations and wealth which constituted the basis of his authority.

⁵ The same seems to apply to the new politico-administrative elite which emerged from these societies after Independence.

⁶ Again one has to take into account all sorts of variations within the forest zone. Among the Bakweri, for instance, it seems that in pre-colonial days village leaders like Kuva of Buea did hang witches (Ardener 1956, 1996). One might, therefore, speak here of some sort of chieftaincy, at least at the village level, with the moral authority to intervene against witchcraft. Yet Kuva's direct successors, the Endeley chiefs of Buea, installed by the colonial authorities as some sort of paramount chiefs over the whole area, never played a special role in the containment of witchcraft rumours (Ardener 1970; Fisiy and Geschiere 1993). It is as striking that even the relatively well institutionalised 'kingues' of the Duala - who certainly can boast of a long pedigree in precolonial times - neither seemed to have played a clearly outlined role in the control over witchcraft in colonial and post-colonial times. Nowadays, they hardly seem to have retained any effective power, certainly not in witchcraft affairs (cf. de Rosny 1981, Austen 1992, Eckert n.d.).

This might be one of the reasons why most chieftaincies succeeded in incorporating fairly easily the new politico-economic changes following the colonial conquest (Rohde 1990). Especially in the Northwest, the chiefs have retained much of their power. Both the Northwest and the West are densely populated areas. Under British and French rule there soon developed a strong emigration to other parts of Cameroon. Migrants from these areas succeeded in appropriating an important role in the commercial sector throughout the country. Especially since Independence, a new bourgeoisie has emerged from among the Bamileke, and to a lesser degree from the Bamenda area, which is supposed to play a dominant role in the national economy. However, even to these successful emigrants, the chief of their hometown remains a true beacon. We shall see that his moral authority is vital for legitimising their success and their new forms of wealth. The chiefs from their side seem to be eager to incorporate their successful 'sons' into the structures of the chieftaincy. They create all sorts of pseudo-traditional titles which can be bought by the new rich. An important side-effect is, of course, that the chiefs thus share in the wealth of their subjects abroad (Goheen 1996). The consequence in any case is that, despite drastic changes, the chieftaincy has remained of vital importance to its subjects.

The witchcraft discourse in these societies exhibits similar traits to that of the forest area. Witchcraft is often said to be situated in the belly, or sometimes in the liver; it enables its possessor to leave his or her body; there is again the frightening image of the nocturnal meetings of witches who offer their close relatives to be eaten by their fellow witches; and the victims of witchcraft must, again, appeal to witch-doctors who can heal them only because they themselves are deeply involved with the occult forces.⁷

An important difference is, however, that here the witchcraft discourse seems to be more compartmentalised. There seems to be a conscious effort to overcome the ambivalence and the circularity of this discourse and to institutionalise especially a clear-cut separation between a-social and social uses of the occult forces. As is to be expected, the *fon* play a crucial role in this. As in the forest areas, the chiefs themselves are closely associated with the occult. However, there are all sorts of institutional boundaries between the chief and evil expressions of occult power. In

⁷ An overview of the vast literature on the Grassfields shows that the discourse on the occult forces is surprisingly fragmented in this region. There is no overarching concept like *evu* in the forest area. On the contrary, the various authors refer to different terms and different classifications. See for a rapid comparative overview of this literature Geschiere 1995: 88, 166. See further Hurault 1962; Brain 1970; Nkwi 1976; de Rosny 1981; den Ouden 1987; Pradelles de Latour 1991; Pool 1994.

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essence, it is the chief who decides whether these powers are being used in an acceptable or an unacceptable way. If someone is suspected of having access to sources of occult power without the blessing of the *fon*, this is automatically seen as asocial and therefore as witchcraft. And the *kwifoyn*, the esoteric association which acts as the *fon*'s police, is supposed to deal with this in its own secret ways.

Goheen's recent study (1996) of Nso offers good examples of how the chief and his notables can break the circularity of the discourse on occult forces. A central notion in Nso discourse is *sem*, occult power. But the Nso do not simply translate this term as witchcraft (or sorcery). For them, *sem* is much broader. There is certainly a danger that *sem* will degenerate into witchcraft (that is, into the eating of kin, *sem arin*). But *sem* can have also highly positive connotations: it is crucial for accumulating wealth and power. However, it always remains a dangerous force which has to be controlled or as Goheen puts it 'domesticated'. The great difference with the forest societies is that it is explicitly the role of the *fon* to do this, and he is credited with the requisite moral authority.

The *fon* may or may not have *sem* himself, but the notables of the *ngwerong* (the Nso equivalent of the *kwifoyn*, the police society mentioned above), who surround him, certainly must have it. Without it the *fon* could not rule. However, it is unthinkable that the *fon* would be associated with bad *sem*. On the contrary, it is the *fon* who decides whether a subject uses *sem* for legitimate or for illegitimate aims. Bad *sem*, or witchcraft, is by definition directed against him and therefore he has the right to punish its perpetrator. The Nso belief in the moral authority of the *fon* is, in Goheen's book, expressed in a powerful image. At night the *fon* is supposed to transform himself into a lion and to ride the country accompanied by his leopards (his notables) in order to protect the land against witches (see also Aletum and Fisiy 1987; Chilver 1990; Kaberry 1952).

In this respect as well there seem to be considerable variations within the Grassfields, as well as in the interpretations of the authors writing on the area. Rowlands suggests a difference between the *fon* of the Bamenda area and the Bamileke *fo*. The first are more or less separated from their *kwifoyn*, their police society. Thus the *fon* can represent the bright side of power while the *kwifoyn* has to enact its secret, dark side (nocturnal executions of witches and criminals). For the Bamileke *fo*, there is no such institutionalised division of tasks, and the *fo* are rather associated with both the bright and the dark sides of power (Rowlands 1987).⁸

⁸ There is a clear contradiction here with Pradelles de Latour's (1991) emphasis that, among the eastern Bangwa (also Bamileke), the *fo* - like the witch-doctor - is strictly separated from any form of witchcraft. However, Pradelles de Latour's

The role of the chiefs and their associations in controlling the use of occult forces by their subjects, is also highly relevant to the ways in which the fear of new forms of witchcraft is dealt with in these areas. As noted already, it is mainly from these societies that a small but very wealthy bourgeoisie of businessmen has emerged. One would therefore expect that rumours about the hidden backgrounds of the new forms of wealth will be especially strong in these areas. Indeed, Warnier remarks that most of the wealthy businessmen from the Grasslands are rumoured to be associated with *famla* covens (Warnier 1993: 74). *Famla* is the Bamileke term for that new form of witchcraft by which the witches transform their victims into zombies who are compelled to work for them on 'invisible plantations'. The same argument is stock in trade in the ethnic propaganda into which the recent political debate on democratisation is rapidly degenerating in Cameroon. The Beti supporters of the Biya regime often imply that the considerable economic power of the Bamileke and Bamenda businessmen, associated with the opposition, is due only to *famla*.

It is, however, characteristic that, according to Warnier, the *famla* rumours hardly seem to affect the position of these businessmen. Apparently the new forms of wealth are as suspect in the Grasslands as in the forest societies: people do make a direct link with *famla*. However, the difference is that the new wealth can nonetheless be integrated in local societies. As one might expect, the chiefs play a crucial role in this. After all, as we have seen, they always tried to exercise strict control over long-distance trade and the enrichment of their subjects abroad (see also Warnier 1985).

In this context a series of case-studies from the Northwest, presented by Fisiy and Mbunwe-Samba, are of great interest (Mbunwe-Samba 1989; Fisiy and Geschiere 1991, n.d.). The general trend of these examples is to show that the chiefs and their associations intervene most drastically against *famla* when it is supposed to be active within the village itself. Suspected *famla* witches are chased out of the

analysis seems to be highly normative. Elsewhere in his study there is a suggestion that among the Bangwa as well the witch-doctor is seen as a highly ambivalent person (Pradelles de Latour 1991: 114). Den Ouden states blandly: "... all important men in Bamileke society are in fact supposed to be 'complicated', to be sorcerers" and he concludes that "a Bamileke big man" will encourage suspicions of sorcery: "...he manages terror in order to be feared" (den Ouden 1987: 6). This last characterisation reminds us of the close link between witchcraft and power in the forest societies. Apparently, one must be careful not to make too clear-cut oppositions. Nonetheless it is clear that in Bamileke societies, as in the Bamenda region, the chief's control over witchcraft or sorcery is elaborately institutionalised, in contrast to the forest societies.

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village by all sorts of threats, varying from the 'Great Mask' to accusations against them to the administrative authorities. However, when a successful entrepreneur returns to the village and dedicates his wealth to the *fon*, by offering him a present or by buying a title at his court, he is accepted. In some cases this even happens with persons who only a few years before were chased out of the village. In Fisiy's words, the chief still has the power to 'whitewash' the suspected wealth of the new rich. He can still act as a crystallisation point for re-integrating his successful 'sons' abroad into the structures of the chieftaincy. Or, to put it differently, he is still credited with the power to neutralise the dangerous forces of the new rich and thus allay the fears about the proliferation of witchcraft.

It is an open question whether the Grassfields chiefs will retain enough moral authority to play such a role in the future. The eagerness with which many chiefs try to share in the wealth of their successful subjects, by selling all sorts of invented titles, but also by manipulating their rights in land, makes people wonder whether the chief is still controlling the new elite or whether the roles are reversed (also Fisiy 1992). Warnier (1993) characterises the Bamileke chieftaincy as a shell which is emptied and refilled by the new elite. And Goheen (1996) quotes in this context again the powerful metaphor of the Nso, already referred to above. She says that nowadays the Nso people wonder whether the new elite, co-opted by the chief, will really be the leopards (like the notables of olden days) with whom the chief in his royal transformation as a lion can ride at night to protect the country. Or will they turn out to be 'sorcerers of the night' who will corrupt the chief's court from the inside?

Conclusions

These variations in the role of the chiefs are of direct consequence to present-day developments in Cameroon. As mentioned above, in the forest area heavy popular pressure on the state to intervene against the proliferation of witchcraft has led to a true witch-hunt by the state courts, especially in the East Province. In the Provinces of the Centre and the South the judges seem to be more circumspect. Yet it is clear that in these Provinces as well the state courts are becoming more and more involved in witchcraft affairs (Geschiere 1995). It is striking that this is much less the case in the Provinces of the West and the Northwest. Informants from these areas - who in any case scorn the forest people 'who do not even have chiefs' - express amazement at the very idea of involving the state courts in such affairs. They doubt whether the state is at all able to deal with such matters, ask

what is the use of sending witches to jail,⁹ and stress that their societies still have their own ways of handling such problems. In the Grassfields societies the new inequalities do pose a problem just as elsewhere. The wealth of the new elite is here also associated with highly suspect forms of witchcraft. But the moral authority of the chiefs is still sufficiently strong to 'whitewash' this suspect wealth and re-integrate the new rich into society. In the forest areas, the chiefs clearly cannot act as such a crystallisation point.¹⁰ Here the new forms of wealth remain an unresolved problem, giving raise to such strong fears about the proliferation of witchcraft that people feel obliged to invoke the protection of outside agencies like the state.

The close but ambiguous link between witchcraft and power indicates to what extent power as such constitutes a problem in the forest societies. From this perspective it is small wonder that, especially in these societies, the new inequalities create such tensions. Yet there is a tragic paradox here. Historically it was these segmentary forest societies who most fiercely resisted the imposition of state power, so very different from their own forms of organisation, by the colonial conquerors. It took the Germans, for instance, more than five years to 'pacify' the relatively small Maka group. This stubborn resistance earned the Maka a reputation for fierceness and love of freedom which has continued to the present day. The so-called 'customary' chiefs installed by the colonial regime did not succeed, despite the impressive array of sanctions put at their disposal by the

⁹ Indeed, one of the problems in the East, where state Courts have been convicting 'witches' since the end of the '70s, is that on their return from jail convicted persons are even more suspected and feared. In jail people are supposed to meet really dangerous 'marabouts' and learn all sorts of new secrets. Clearly, the state is able only to punish 'witches', not to cure them. That is, the state cannot neutralise their powers, as the *nganga* of earlier times were supposed to do.

¹⁰ Van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal's article on *sorcellerie* and *justice coutumière* in Togo (1989) offers an interesting comparison with the differences sketched above between forest and Grassfields societies in Cameroon. Van Rouveroy describes how chiefs in Togo, like their counterparts in the Cameroonian Grassfields, still succeed in dealing with witchcraft accusations in their own way, thus keeping the state courts (who hardly know how to deal with these cases) at bay. However, the circularity of the witchcraft discourse, which is so strong in the Cameroonian forest societies, lurks in the background in Togo as well. Togolese chiefs can have the reputation of being involved in *sorcellerie* themselves, and there is an intriguing suggestion in van Rouveroy's article that this might affect their credibility in dealing with witchcraft cases.

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government, in really breaking the basic autonomy of these societies. But now it seems that these same societies have so much trouble controlling their internal tensions that they are willing to invoke the state to intervene even in private matters like witchcraft and kinship conflicts. There is a striking difference between them and the old chieftaincies of the West and the Northwest, who in many respects still seem to be succeeding in keeping the state at bay.

These are significant differences in relation to the question raised at the beginning of this article: to what extent do the chiefs still constitute an alternative form of power, now that the state is weakened by all sorts of economic and political developments? The general fear in the forest societies that witchcraft is running wild seems to be related to the lack of moral authority of the chiefs in this area. Indeed, in the '80s chieftaincy seemed to be a dying institution here. In those years the state seemed disinclined to appoint new chiefs; especially in the forest areas many positions remained vacant for long periods of time. This was a consequence of a general distrust on the part of the new President Biya and his men *vis-à-vis* 'traditional authorities'.¹¹ It is striking that in most of these cases the continuous postponement of new appointments hardly seemed to bother the population. In the Maka *canton* where I did my main field-work, the position of *chef de groupement* remained empty until the end of the '80s but the only people who complained about this were potential candidates for the post. The population did not seem to see this as a serious issue.

At the end of the eighties, however, the government policy was suddenly reversed: there followed a series of appointments of chiefs in different parts of the forest. Apparently this was directly related to the fact that the Biya regime was at that time forced to accept a multi-party system. In the new constellation the chiefs, appointed and paid by the government, had suddenly once more a political role: they could serve as an alternative channel, by-passing the turmoil of party politics, for the *encadrement* of the population and the fixing of votes. Of course, all chiefs appointed were staunch followers of Biya's party. It is noteworthy that the renaissance of chieftaincy in these areas was dictated by reasons of state and not by any pressure from below. The one-sided and pronounced dependence of the chiefs on the state in these areas makes it impossible for them to act as independent intermediaries between the state and civil society.

¹¹ Biya, himself from the 'segmentary South', explicitly stated his reservations towards chiefs in his book *Pour le libéralisme communautaire* (1986). In this respect, there was a strong difference from his predecessor Ahidjo who, as a Northerner, was intent on protecting the position of chiefs; indeed the Fulani *lamibé* of the North were one of Ahidjo's main power-bases.

The situation is very different in the Grassfields. Here the chiefs have retained up to the present day at least some moral authority of their own. This is illustrated not only by their continuing capacity to re-integrate the new elite into the structures of their courts and thus contain, at least to some degree, the fear of new forms of witchcraft which seems to be an inevitable corollary of the new riches. Their moral authority extends also to other fields. For instance, now that the state is no longer capable of guaranteeing the basic physical security of its subjects in many regions - indeed the state's own 'forces of order' are at the root of the prevailing insecurity - the chiefs in many parts of the Grassfields seem to be re-appropriating this role. They are again punishing criminal elements arrested by their own people. There are indeed indications that the balance of power between the chiefs and the regional representatives of the state, the D.O.'s and other *fonctionnaires*, is tilting again in favour of the chiefs. Clearly the Grassfields chiefs are still capable of acting as more or less independent intermediaries between state and society.

However, as said before, this rapid comparison should not suggest that we have to do here with a simple binary opposition between, on the one hand, 'real' traditional chiefs who still have retained enough moral authority to control witchcraft and other forms of insecurity, and, on the other, colonially invented chiefs who cannot exercise such control. Clearly there are many other scenarios possible. An extreme and therefore highly interesting instance in this respect is that of the Tiv in Central Nigeria. Their discourse on *tsav* ('witchcraft' but also translated as 'power') shows striking parallels to the *djambe/evu* discourse of the Cameroonian forest societies, as sketched above. Indeed, the social organisation of the Tiv was as strongly segmentary in character. But there these notions apparently expressed such a deep distrust of power that in colonial times notions of *tsav* inspired true witch-hunts against the Warrant Chiefs imposed by the British (Bohannon and Bohannon 1953: 35; Bohannon 1958). To the Tiv these chiefs themselves were witches who had to be cleansed or chased out. Even the fiercely segmentary groups of the Cameroonian forest area did not go this far.

The studies by Lan (1985) and Ranger (1985) on more recent developments among the Shona in Zimbabwe highlight a completely different scenario. They show that even chiefs with a long and truly 'traditional' history could rapidly lose their power over spirit mediums and regional cults, in this case because of the chiefs' collaboration with the neocolonial regime of UDI. This freed the way for new types of witch-hunts by ZANU guerilla groups, who more or less replaced the chiefs.

It might be worthwhile to extend the rapid comparison above, and explore other possible scenarios in the evolution of chieftaincy, focusing on the control of chiefs over witchcraft. The broader interest of such a comparison may be clear from the

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preceding. Issues of witchcraft, especially since they have become such a major preoccupation throughout the African continent, can offer a good starting point for analysing variations and oscillations in the moral authority of chiefs; that is, in the degree to which they succeed in maintaining an independent moral stature in between state and society.

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