



Introduction

Certain historians have studied the European witch hunts of the sixteenth century to show their destructive violence. For them, the witch hunt shows how some individuals and even groups can be placed outside the community, and how therefore they can be slain with the consent and the participation of the community to which they had belonged. By contrast, anthropologists have tended to minimize the violence of witchcraft, instead focusing on social tensions and their resolution through witchcraft accusations. Alternatively, witchcraft beliefs are shown as an effect of the force of beliefs. In the most striking of these cases, the bewitched person wastes away and dies. This, according to W. Lloyd Warner, is the result of the operation of social norms themselves. It displays the strength of society as that strength is directed against one of its members who acquiesces in its judgment. By contrast, one could, as I try to show, see this as an example of the inability of socially determined thinking (not to use the word “reason”) to comprehend certain situations.

In anthropological views, the social itself explains witchcraft. The opposing view looks for sources of violence that serves no social purpose and stem not from social realities but from points where no definition of social reality can take place—where, therefore, phantasms and, often, vio-

lence occur, a violence that does not serve to construct new social forms or restore old ones. I will argue it is a violence that inheres in the social and that turns against it. I begin by looking at the formative anthropological studies of witchcraft, those that took the first point of view, to show that within them there is evidence of the second. My ambition is to contribute to the question of destructive violence and its provenance within anthropological study.

One might grant that witchcraft resolves no issues and still believe that it contributes to the myth of the community. One might think that the murder of the witch, even if another soon takes his or her place, aids, perhaps even founds, the coherence of the community as it bases itself against an enemy—a structural precursor of the enemy as conceived by Carl Schmitt, but only a precursor since it exists before the political as the latter understood it. But I will claim that this is not the case. In the examples we look at, no political hierarchy forms itself against the witch. Were one to do so, one would have to ask if the word “witch” has changed its reference. Instead of referring to something sensed or suspected rather than known, “witch” would have a determined, locatable sense. Perhaps if one looked at witchcraft after reading Heidegger’s *Being and Time* one might be helped to understand its nature, associated as it so often is with death and being as indefinable as the death that Heidegger describes. But the immersion of the community in everyday life as Heidegger describes it, holding onto normality and thus denying the menace of death and of the uncanny, draws a line between life and death that in many cultures is not clearly evident. The witch can be a part of normality, something one anticipates and even accepts. His identification can be the route to his acceptance. Here, however, acceptance, as I understand it, is incomplete and certainly reluctant. It can also happen that the definitions generated of the witch fail, and yet something occurs which seems to deserve the name, leaving “witch” as a concept without a content, producing consternation and instability.

Moreover, an existential approach which sees the division between life and death as fundamental is difficult to apply to societies where the line between the two is fluid. Furthermore, when one approaches witchcraft from a quasi-linguistic point of view, as did Lévi-Strauss when he analyzed witchcraft as an attempt to make expressible something which

ordinarily could only be suspected, what it is that is suspected remains undetermined, or so we shall argue. The menace of death in this context is itself an effect of naming the witch, rather than death being the reality counterposed against normality.

Furthermore, the opposition between “death” and “normality” will not do once one sees, as anthropologists studying Africa in particular have seen, that witchcraft is not necessarily a local matter and thus to be explained in terms of the community against a force that threatens its coherence. When witchcraft is set in the state, in the nation and in the international economy, one needs to account for complex exogenous factors. Still, witchcraft precedes the state and the international economy and has to be first examined in its local settings because it is there that the ideas of witchcraft took shape. I will thus look at the studies where the basic ideas of witchcraft were formulated before I describe a contemporary witch hunt in Indonesia.

I. The Gift, Witches

On what basis can an anthropologist justify a view of witchcraft that within the discipline has been set aside if not exactly disavowed? In the first place because there is evidence for this view in the classic anthropological studies. But also because it is possible to think about the relation between the social and witchcraft by looking at the latter from the perspective of the well-examined idea of the gift as it was formulated by Marcel Mauss and passed through the thinking of Georges Bataille and, most recently, of Jacques Derrida.

For Bataille, in “archaic” societies (we would today call them societies based on gift exchange), exchange had a characteristic lost in later historical evolution. Bataille took Mauss’s description of the potlatch and noted that the economies of the societies who practiced it were based on consumption and therefore on loss. In the potlatch, as Mauss has noted, hierarchy is established through the ostentatious giving of gifts, challenging the receiver to reply in kind. This “nonproductive expenditure” is nonetheless useful since it establishes a social structure. The person who gives is superior to the one who receives. He noted also, again following Mauss, that sometimes, in place of gifts, goods were destroyed. Display of loss alone

was enough to open a form of communication that in bourgeois society in particular has been lost. Eventually, nonproductive expenditure becomes ruled out, to the point that even “the most lucid man” no longer imagines “that a human society can have . . . an *interest* in considerable losses, in catastrophes that, *while conforming to well-defined needs*, provoke tumultuous depressions, crises of dread, and, in the final analysis, a certain orgiastic state.” “But,” Bataille added, “this exclusion is superficial.” He wavered on the question of whether such negativity would always be incorporated into social structure or not.¹

The negativity of the potlatch, the willingness to risk everything, is easily assimilated to the risk of death in the Hegelian duel. The duel is preceded by entities which oscillate, each taking the place of the other, and ends with defined positions, the master and the slave, the master being the one who risks everything and the slave the one who prefers life and who therefore consents to slavery. The destruction of valuables and the risk of death in the Hegelian duel have in common that a negativity, through the risk of oneself as a social being, results in structure.² Bataille understood the potlatch as “a kind of deliriously formed ritual poker. But the players can never retire from the game, their fortunes made; they remain at the mercy of provocation.”³ Without the ever present possibility of provocation, there could be no challenge and hence no response. Somehow, in the moments of giving or destruction there is the opening of a fundamental sort of communication which cannot be ignored. Jean-Luc Nancy characterizes it: “Bataille communicates to me that pain and that pleasure which result from the impossibility of communicating anything at all without touching the limit where all meaning spills out of itself like a simple ink stain on a word.”⁴

Precisely because there is communication, it seems to follow that there is also community. But there remains the possibility of a negativity that not only fails to reach full expression but also produces no community and yet has effects. “What would it take . . . to think the logic of the gift in its most rigorous form? To think a giving so ‘pure’ it would tolerate no return . . . a giving which would exceed every circuit of compensation and challenge every measure of exchange?” asks Rebecca Comay.⁵ Could one still speak of “communication”? If so, socially constructed entities would neither constitute its recipients or its agents, nor would they be its result.

Is it necessary that a gift beget a return, that there always be a discourse that would make the possibility of a gift without the waking of obligation, hence return, impossible?

The gift demands a return gift, said Mauss in his famous essay on the subject. In certain societies exchange primarily takes the form of gifts. "In theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily."⁶ But, said Jacques Derrida, a true gift must be disinterested. Such a gift is hard to imagine in practice. "For there to be a gift, *it is necessary* [*il faut*] that the donee not give back, . . . and that he never have contracted a debt."⁷ He adds, "A true gift has to be given without thought of recompense. One could go so far as to say that a work as monumental as Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* speaks of everything but the gift."⁸ Mauss, said Derrida, did not understand what a gift is, "*if there is any*."⁹ Not only should the giver not expect a return, he should not even recognize what he gives as a gift. "This simple recognition suffices to annul the gift. Why? Because it gives back, in the place . . . of the thing itself, a symbolic equivalent."¹⁰ Recognizing something as a gift, one thinks of another object which would match it. The conventional gift appears as a gesture, a symbol, addressed to us. And with that there is the possibility of response. Recognizing the object as a gift brings with it gratitude. And thus there is no more gift." Receiving whatever is given destroys the possibility of the gift. Perhaps the most social of objects, one on which, one can argue, the social bond rests, is never achieved in social life.

There may be no pure gift, but there are gifts that seem purer than others. We feel most strongly indebted when a gift comes to us without any previous sense that the donor was obligated to us. The less he was obligated, the more we are grateful. Nothing about ourselves that we are aware of made it necessary that we be given something; we may come to feel that we have previously unknown attractive attributes. The gift that approaches the true gift is thus always a surprise.

It is possible that surprise is present even in the most conventional forms of the gift. There is a well-known passage in Mauss's *The Gift*, in which Mauss cites the ethnographer Elsdon Best quoting a Maori about a concept central to formalized Maori gift exchange, the *hau*.

The *hau* is not the wind that blows—not at all. Let us suppose that you possess a certain article (*taonga*) and that you give me this article. You give it to me with-

out setting a price on it. We strike no bargain about it. Now, I give this article to a third person who, after a certain lapse of time, decides to give me something as payment in return (*utu*). He makes a present to me of something (*taonga*). Now, this *taonga* that he give me is the spirit (*hau*) of the *taonga* that I had received from you and that I had given to *him*. The *taonga* that I received for these *taonga* (which came from you must be returned to you).¹²

The *hau* is the spirit that makes the gift circulate. When a Maori gets “a certain article” as a gift, he knows both who gave it to him and why it circulates if not why he himself received the gift. This, despite the complicated triangular trajectory. You give me something; I do not give back to you. I give to someone else, a third person, and it is another person again who gives something back to me. This last person gives me something in return because the thing is animated by something that also animated the gift I received from you. If it were not for this spirit, there would be no return. The gift, as in other places where gifts circulate, is not dyadic. It owes its power to a force which later Mauss will interpret in a Durkheimian manner: the power to circulate is a social force, an expression of society itself.

No matter where the gift is at any moment, it always comes indirectly from a third party. There is no original giver; the person who first gave me the gift got it from someone else. I did not get the gift because the donor wanted to give it to me. Rather, he was obliged to give it to me. The source of the obligation is seen through the string of third parties. Each time I get a gift, it comes from “elsewhere.” The name of this “elsewhere” is a force that transcends any particular individual, meaning that the gift always embodies something strange. It cannot be reduced to the volition of any particular giver. It rather contains in itself an element foreign to any particular giver and receiver. No one who holds the object can ever claim complete ownership; the foreign element obliges him to put the object back in circulation. This foreignness is given a name, *hau*.

Mauss found this text “of capital importance.” His account of how he came across it is unusual for an author who ordinarily avoids the superfluous. He introduces the text referring to “our much regretted friend Hertz.”¹³ Robert Hertz was one of the group around Durkheim who was killed in World War I. Mauss took on the task of completing the work of his fallen colleagues. The “much regretted Hertz” was, according to Mauss,

aware of the facts of the *taonga*. “With his touching disinterestedness he had noted down ‘For Davy and Mauss,’ on the card recording the following fact.”¹⁴ The fact on the card is merely that Maori had an exchange system. “But Hertz had also noted—and I found it among his records—a text whose importance had escaped the notice of both of us, for I was equally unaware of it.”¹⁵ Mauss here refers to the text quoted above. This text was “capital” because it illustrated the Durkheimian notion of exchange. His lengthy exposition of his indebtedness to Hertz for his understanding of exchange, which starts with this text, is finally ambiguous. He and Hertz both knew of the text, but neither had seen its importance. Even though both had overlooked its importance, somehow without Hertz he would neither have come across it nor understood it.

Mauss feels obligated to Hertz for a gift. One that comes to him only after Hertz’s death. It is this that accounts for the convoluted tracking of Hertz’s influence, which is both acknowledged and denied. Both had missed the significance of the text; nonetheless, Mauss saw it due to Hertz, in his, Mauss’s opinion. The regretted Hertz is still effective. His effects are felt after his death in the stimulation they gave Mauss to look carefully at the Maori passage. What he regarded as his discovery—the nature of gift exchange, its obligatory and voluntary character—he feels came to him from the dead. He is obliged to Hertz and he acknowledges his obligation for something which he got from Hertz but which was not Hertz’s but which somehow is attributed to him after his death. It is now his, Mauss’s, but he is obliged to pass it on to others. We in turn acknowledge our debt to him in elaborating his discovery.

Mauss’s discovery is a gift from beyond, just as Maori gifts come from a distant and inhuman source. In both cases one can name the immediate giver and this does not suffice to account for the obligation one feels. It is necessary to look further; in one case to the *hau*, in the other to death. The gift comes from nowhere. It is truly a gift when one cannot account for its origins; when one knows only that the parties who exchange are not responsible. As in the potlatch, the giver must be possessed by a spirit, with the result that the recipient is also. In the case of Mauss and Hertz, we can substitute “inspired” for “possessed.” A chief involved in the potlatch, says Mauss, “can only preserve his authority over his tribe and village, and even over his family, he can only maintain his rank among the chiefs . . . if he

can prove he is haunted and favoured both by the spirits and by good fortune, that he is possessed, and also possesses it.”¹⁶ Only those haunted by spirits can convert the gift into hierarchical position. In the same way, the value of Mauss’s discovery, the possibility of his being known as the one who understands the gift, is, in his mind, enhanced when it comes to him through the inspiration of Hertz. He made the discovery, but it was not he himself who was responsible. It possesses a value which he did not create but which came from beyond him. He possesses and is possessed by his discovery; he must pass it on to others.

We can understand the naming of this possession as the domestication of the pure gift. It is a way of saying that what I received came from somewhere; that it has an origin, even if that origin is always a third party. It thus claims the gift as social against the possibility that what one receives comes somehow from outside that realm. A pure gift would go unnoticed by the very definition of the gift. Once noticed, the possibility of something having arrived that entirely exceeds recognition is denied. In place of a lack of origin, there is instead, “*hau*,” “death,” “inspiration,” and other crucial ideas as well, which institute the social in the place where otherwise we recognize nothing.

The pure gift would not be recognized as such. Whatever we received “for no reason” would seem to come to us accidentally. The roll of \$50 bills we find on the street comes to us by chance. It is an accident, not a gift, unless we think that luck, a word similar to *hau*, is with us. What happens to us accidentally could be considered a gift, though not necessarily one we enjoy receiving. It is in the accident, in this sense, that the major interpretation of witchcraft, one which still stands in anthropological thinking and practice, was founded. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, explaining the nature of witchcraft among the Azande of the southern Sudan, began with the example of a granary which, one day while people were sitting beneath it, collapsed. We shall treat this famous example at length later. Suffice it to say here that Azande who know about termites gnawing through the supports are not satisfied with this as a reason for the calamity. They ask rather about the particularities of the event. Why did the granary collapse at that moment, and with certain people beneath it. In looking for their answer, they find the witch to whom the event is attributed.

Where ideas of witchcraft prevail, “the notion of witchcraft explains

unfortunate events," said E. E. Evans-Pritchard in a famous phrase. Evans-Pritchard even went further: "The concept of witchcraft . . . provides [Azande] with a natural philosophy . . ." Western philosophical tradition depends on banishing magic and on basing knowledge on what reason can comprehend. Witchcraft makes comprehensible what is beyond reason. Evans-Pritchard's sentence continues, ". . . by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events."¹⁷ This cheerful understanding of the witch follows (or perhaps established) the anthropological tendency to avoid thinking both the violence of witchcraft and the fear it inspires. Witch killings among the Azande were rare at the time Evans-Pritchard lived with them. But Azande believed that death was caused by witches and were accordingly terrified of them. Explanations of the cause of death ameliorated its sting in the assumption of Evans-Pritchard, but as we will see, Azande society was permeated by suspicion. One could equally well argue that belief in witchcraft kept the fear of death more present than otherwise it might have been.

The accident which occurs "for no reason" and affects my life, comes, like the gift that it is, from nowhere. "Witch" names the accident and asserts that it has a source. What happens "for no reason" and therefore proceeds from no place namable is possibly recovered for the social, if only in ambiguously contributing to a myth in which death is extraneous to life. But it is not always possible to establish this myth, with the result that "witch" does not work as an explanation even though the word continues to be used.

The murderers of witches whom I know were certain that they were fully justified in their acts, even when the court found them guilty. Their defense, indeed, was to admit to murder. Doing so en masse hampered the police in finding the individuals who had dealt the fatal blows. They acted, they said, out of necessity. They were obliged to kill the witch in order to protect the community from death. They did not understand why the police did not support them. The witch killers feared their own deaths and acted to prevent it from happening in the next instant. They thought of their violence as restoring normal life. Indirectly, their fear mediated a gift whose content, identical to its source, "death," once named was impossible to make part of social life and which therefore had to be elimi-

nated. Everything depended, for them, on giving this gift a name. Its correct identification and the action that resulted would restore their normal bonds with each other. But their understanding was never accepted by the society in which they lived. They were possessed by something they could not make known to anyone outside their circle and even, it is possible to argue, to themselves.

Precisely this non-meaning would be the indication of something else at work. There would be an effect of the negative which would remain behind any possibility of signification and yet still somehow announce itself. The name they gave to what they knew, "witch," meant to them, "bearer of death." But "death" here was a word arising from the attempt to name something unnamable. One does not dare to say it was only a word. These murderers were obsessed with the communication of nothing at all, Jean-Luc Nancy's "a simple ink stain on a word," a signifier with indefinite, infinite references.

When it concerns writing, we are likely to call this sort of communication "literature," of course. It builds a community in a way that Bataille and many others felt had been lost in bourgeois society. It binds those who read, creating a community in that limited sense, but remains, too often, outside the usefulness of society as we know it today. Yet in societies without the "strange institution" [Derrida's term] of literature, what place is there for such a communication? (Which is not to say that literature guarantees peace in those places where literature exists.) What then occurs? Sometimes witchcraft is itself made into a strange institution, as among the Azande. And sometimes it is not institutionalized. Outside the institution it rages and calls for recognition, but it does not achieve it.

When one finds events magically linked together, it is partly because the conventions of magic allow one to do so. But sometimes it is because no conventions account for such linkage and yet one makes them anyway. One must somehow be prepared to do so. This preparation occurs in conditions which are historically given. Yet the description of historical circumstances cannot account for accusations of witchcraft; the same conditions produce accusations in some and not in others. Witchcraft brings people to the limit of their understanding of others in regard to themselves. One wants to describe these circumstances without using them to explain away the negative. To do so, one must change perspective in or-

der to hold accident and the strange sort of communication that occurs in some cases of witchcraft in view. One needs to undo explanation by the description of naming the witch itself. The second half of this book describes a case of witchcraft using this double perspective. The first half looks at early anthropological studies which did so much to indicate the nature of witchcraft, out of which comes the problems and the outlook that govern the second half.

II. Studying Witchcraft

The British social anthropologist Lucy Mair, in a book written in 1969 that summed up the state of the study, defined “witch” in a way that anthropologists today still find acceptable:

In many parts of the world people believe that it is possible for human beings to cause harm to their fellows by the exercise of powers not possessed by ordinary folk, powers which operate in a manner that cannot be detected, so that the cause can only be recognized when the damage comes to light. The persons who are supposed to have these powers are commonly called witches.¹⁸

One notes the “supposed” in this definition. Witchcraft is assumed by Mair to be fantasy because it tries to answer questions that have no answer: “The question always remains, ‘Why me? Why just then?’”¹⁹ That witchcraft is phantasmatic does not make it necessarily violent. And that it is violent does not necessarily mean that its violence is socially useless. But it seems as if from the time it began to be analyzed the power associated with witchcraft has been suspected of lying outside ordinary categories of power, not merely because it is “mystical,” to use the term Mair used, but also because it is a sort of violence that exceeds legitimacy. Jean Bodin, for instance, the inventor of the idea of sovereignty, wrote a long treatise on witchcraft in 1580 in order to deny that it had an autonomous source of power which would have conflicted with that of the sovereign. The power of both was from God. Bodin believed in witches, but witchcraft has few defenders, though it does have some, as we will see. It is usually considered to be a source, if not “the” source, of trouble and is therefore if possible eliminated but certainly opposed and its force attributed to extraordinary sources.

The malevolence of witchcraft makes it from time to time the object of study of those who want to know about the extreme events of the twentieth century. Is there such a thing as a power which cannot be assimilated to social structure, which is socially useless and, worse, merely destructive? This question, of course, was forced on us again by Nazism. The historian H. R. Trevor-Roper studied the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to explain the extraordinary violence of the Nazi period. He concluded that at a certain moment some groups were unassimilable for reasons that had to do with the state of the society in which they lived.²⁰ Unbeknownst to Trevor-Roper, the sources he used were forgeries, and his findings were dismissed. But the idea that witchcraft depends on unassimilability, or at least on the refusal to accept "the other" remains. The questions of how the other is formed and the generation of power that issues in their elimination still press.²¹

Anthropologists, especially those working in Africa, have been less concerned with its violence than with its social functions. At the same time, the formative studies of witchcraft in particular did not neglect violence. They found its origins in local social structures. Today, anthropological investigations have taken a new direction. The global economy and the state, rather than, or, sometimes, as much as, local considerations are seen as the setting for witchcraft. In Cameroon people accused of witchcraft can be brought before the courts and judged. Usually they are convicted on the evidence of an expert considered to have supernatural powers, not at all the same powers that, for instance, authorize the judge.²² The state recognizes the power of witchcraft, leading to further complications. The crux of the problem was formulated in the eighteenth century. The citizen of a civil state, according to Rousseau, was obliged to rise above private interests and instinctual behavior:

The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct in his conduct, and giving his actions the morality they formerly lacked. Then only, when the voice of duty takes the place of physical impulses and right of appetite, does man, who so far had considered only himself, find that he is forced to act on different principles, and to consult his reason before listening to his inclinations.²³

Witchcraft, following this formulation, might be considered instinctual or natural, a giving in to spontaneous feelings of hatred. The defenders of

witchcraft, however, do not necessarily defend hatred. Steve Biko of the African National Congress, said this:

We [the black consciousness movement] do not reject it [witchcraft]. We regard it as part of the mystery of our cultural heritage. . . . Whites are not superstitious; whites do not have witches and witch doctors. We are the people who have this.²⁴

Biko defends witchcraft as superstition. But this particular superstition is traditional. This changes its nature. It is not natural but cultural, an inherited form which is valuable enough to defend. Biko understands that whites reject superstition. They cannot assimilate it into their thinking. Africans have done so. Whites are incapable of doing so so long as they cling to reason, which is the opposite of superstition and incompatible with it. For a white to do so would alienate him from himself and his kind. That is not the case for Africans. Africans, defending witchcraft, defend something they have in common. If, then, an African state endorses witchcraft, it is understandable.²⁵

Understandable, but still not acceptable to those outside the tradition, if for no other reason than justice. "Witch hunt," in English, is used metaphorically as a label for the persecution of innocent people charged with crimes they did not commit and prosecuted with evidence either insufficient or manufactured. For Rousseau, accession to the state implies also accession to reason, which assures proper procedures. The state, as Rousseau understood it, would be opposed to witchcraft as incompatible with the conduct of public life.

Biko implicitly answers Rousseau. Witchcraft can and even should form a part of public life, at least in Africa. In his defense of sorcery he speaks not only of witches but also of witch doctors. By the latter, I take it he means curers and those who protect against witchcraft. Witchcraft should be part of public life in order to defend against the fears that it brings. To whites, superstition brings fear; to eliminate it is to eliminate fear. To Biko, "witchcraft," as superstition and as an element of tradition, means bringing fear to light. Not to acknowledge witchcraft would be not to acknowledge secret activities that one would have to deal with in private ways or without established procedures. He implies not that he advocates witchcraft, but rather the recognition of its "mystery," a possibility not open to those who refuse to recognize the irrational as having a part

in public life. With its recognition comes the possibility of defense against what issues from enigmatic traditional belief.

The relation he makes between fear and traditional forms makes one ask about the nature of these forms. Can there be an institution established on the basis of fear which is not merely the defense against that fear but also the assertion, and many would say, the production of it? Lévi-Strauss, for instance, in an article I shall deal with at length, describes a Zuni man who, accused of sorcery, Lévi-Strauss claims, was pardoned. Admitting he was a sorcerer, he displayed truth and this was more important than justice. This is akin to the widespread African practice in which the admission of witchcraft is also its neutralization. But it is more than that, and Biko's statement also goes beyond the assertion that to admit to witchcraft is to tame it. Witchcraft is a fact in his statement, and therefore to acknowledge it is necessary. One cannot help but assert that there are witches when they exist. "We" have always done so. Thus the witch comes into being: nothing is proof against him, he is never entirely eliminated, and he becomes part of African traditions.

Witchcraft moreover displays a violence which remains socially untamed. Isak Neuhaus shows how during the battle against apartheid in South Africa there were many accusations of witchcraft accompanied not by pardon but by execution of those accused of witchcraft who supported the regime. But it was impossible to keep witchcraft accusations and political affiliations aligned. Similarly, in Cameroon analysts first asserted that the recognition of witchcraft by the state, the bringing to trial of accused witches, was a tactic of new elites who saw accusations of witchcraft against them as political maneuvers. These elites, it was said, were trying to eliminate witchcraft. Peter Geschiere, however, has shown that witchcraft in Cameroon is more ambiguous than that. Those who make accusations of witchcraft attribute occult power to others who succeed where they do not; they are jealous. But this power, for which Geschiere cannot find an adequate adjective in French or English, exceeds even malevolence. What we call witchcraft makes for success and success is itself ambivalent. There is more than jealousy involved; to perceive witchcraft at work is to become excited at being close to power. This power, however, remains outside the constitution of state institutions. But instead of the political class acting to eliminate witchcraft, witchcraft becomes built into the understanding of the operations of politics and commerce. However, as I understand Ge-

schiere, it does not furnish the authority by which a policeman arrests you. It may be that the policeman came across you, however, because you were cursed.

The African state is not Rousseau's. In its recognition of irrational factors, it might be considered by some as in advance of the liberal West. But even were the African state to be Rousseauist and still, by some magic, able to recognize witchcraft, we would have to know whether or not it is at the cost of obscuring its nature. Its genesis in accident remains. We would be faced with either generating a mystery of another sort or of overlooking the way in which accident produces effects while at the same time concealing its nature as accident and therefore as singularity. The problem is to describe the nexus of singular events, their effects on thinking and the violence that accompanies them, while at the same time seeing the complex role of political, social, and cultural factors in any given incident.

But before we can begin to do so we are faced with the difficulty of knowing whether we are studying anything at all. Witchcraft has articulate defenders whose criticism of anthropologists is that they leave out the essential of witchcraft and do not allow those who believe in witchcraft to reply to anthropological descriptions of their beliefs.²⁶ Steve Biko's comments were recorded in the 1970s. He emphasized the difference between Africans and whites. Some today defend witchcraft from another standpoint. They contend that anthropological explanations, and even Evans-Pritchard's in particular, a founder of modern anthropological study, leave them out by emphasizing the difference between Africans and Westerners.²⁷ Viewed from the outside, from a post-Enlightenment perspective, witchcraft is delusion, even if it has its uses, as anthropologists show it to have. Viewed from the inside, by its believers, witchcraft has a reality whose denial puts them at peril. The discourse of anthropologists reinforces that denial by reducing witchcraft to causes located in social tensions, for instance, thus missing what its victims are saying.

And what do they say? A statement frequently reported, not merely in Cameroon but elsewhere in Africa, is, "The colonial state [which prohibited the prosecution of witches] did not protect us," with the implication that the independent state ought to do so.²⁸ They mean by this that colonial states often forbade the prosecution of witches and thus left sorcerers free to do their work. The Cameroon state recognizes witchcraft be-

cause citizens of Cameroon demand protection from witches by the state. The very formulation of a demand by “the people,” the subjects of the state, and its response enters witchcraft into a discourse of modernity. But what makes its modernity questionable is that it does not accept the line between public and private which regulates the relation of the liberal state to its subjects. It is not that witchcraft is unthinkable, but that it is understandable only as the subjective beliefs and fears which the liberal state can regulate merely in their external manifestations. Thus, a zoning law might say where a church can be located, but the state cannot say what the worshippers in that church should believe. There are self-proclaimed witches in America, Britain, France, and other places today. Their practices are tolerated by the state as the personal beliefs of individuals. But the liberal state does not and cannot recognize a power intrinsic to witchcraft itself. When accusations of witchcraft broke out recently in the United States, certain people were convicted of child abuse, but no one was convicted of witchcraft. How could they be? Nowadays in the United States one cannot convict people of believing in the devil (not at all a necessary part of witchcraft, particularly outside Europe and America), only of causing harm while carrying out their beliefs. Today, in the West, the power thought intrinsic to sorcery by its believers is unintelligible in a court of law. There is no such power in the eyes of the law; there is only the behavior of individuals, each comparable with the other by the same standards.

If the state acts otherwise, it recognizes as a reality what is unrecognizable as such by the canons of evidence, both legal and philosophical, current in the West.²⁹ Furthermore, were it to do so, liberal ideas of toleration which depend on leaving unjudged the beliefs of others are put into question. In Cameroon, a person can be sentenced to ten years in jail on the testimony of experts who see signs of witchcraft by virtue of powers unique to themselves and who assess the qualities of the person—“He is a witch.”³⁰

The anthropology of colonial times saw the positive functions of witchcraft; the conflict that went with it was benign and even helped to maintain social structures. The content of beliefs might also be described, as it is today. To do so meant to decode what was said in an idiom that was strange but whose content could be accepted as the beliefs of others—beliefs which responded to social tensions and ambiguities. But as I have said,

some Africans today feel they exist only as subjects of a discourse which does not allow them the possibility of reply.³¹ Faced with this, contemporary anthropologists assert, "We must listen to what they are saying," and showing that they have listened, they explicate the categories through which the phenomenon called "witchcraft" is conceptualized, and show at the same time that such thinking is compatible with the life of a modern state. There is nothing incompatible for most anthropologists, or, for that matter, historians, in analyzing the substantive ideas of witchcraft while also treating the political contexts in which it is found. This still, however, leaves those who claim the validity of witchcraft on the other side of a divide. "They" are left out of our discourse and "we" are left out of theirs. The editors of an anthology that takes up this question find the solution by considering witchcraft as part of a "generalized form of thought" which takes different shapes in different places but is found everywhere.³² This, it seems to me, makes witchcraft seem more easily retrievable than it is. As we will see, no matter how eager we may be to close it, the gap between anthropological investigator and subject remains, and even structures the study, as it must if we accept Biko's formulation that witchcraft is a "mystery," belief in which marks the difference between cultural traditions.

Without the frisson that comes to the anthropologist, and that, in my experience, is one of the pleasures of ethnography, when one has to take seriously that which one cannot accept, anthropology, as the study of the other, would change its nature. It may already have done so, but without, in my opinion, studying the consequences. There is no question that an analysis of the idioms of witchcraft is possible but whether this makes it part of a "generalized form of thought" that allows the sort of communication between its believers and its analysts rather than simply making the gap apparent is not clear. I should add that it is not only in situations of cultural difference, but of difference of any kind, that this gap occurs.

The anthropological predilection, which I share, to explain in local terms risks losing sight of certain aspects of witchcraft. The contextualizing of it risks its denaturing. One glides over the killings that often enough accompany witch hunts and the extreme fear they can produce as one unravels the logic of the beliefs and the reasons one might have to murder. Furthermore, this logic, unacceptable to the anthropologist himself or herself—we do not ordinarily end up practicing witchcraft or protecting our-

selves against it—becomes merely the beliefs of others in a place where everyone, it seems, believes in witches.

On the other hand, for historians of the West, the injustice of witchcraft accusations and the violence that followed has often prompted its study. The developments in witchcraft, on the one hand, and the interesting recent analyses of witchcraft by historians make it seem, at least to me, more important than ever to understand its violence. Studies of historians of Europe, for instance, indicate that witch hunts were instigated from outside the village and that they were part of the movement by which the state established itself. Christina Lerner, for instance, in her important work on witch hunts in Scotland, located the persecution of witches in the breakdown of the feudal order and the beginning of the centralized state. There were witches before, but they were contained within the village. The notion of the witch was reformulated. Instead of a village figure from whom one could demand restitution for harm suffered, the witch now seen by jurists and theologians was in league with the devil.³³ In effect, witchcraft was seen as a power not only alternative to that of the state, but one which menaced it, with the result that instead of sporadic individual persecutions, there was the continuous routing of witches on a large scale.

In studies of witchcraft on the continent, Robert Muchembled showed how witch hunts were the attempt of the state, in the process of its formation, to do away with the authority that passed from women to their children in favor of the authority of schools. He thus explains why European witches were mainly women, which is not the case in most other places. Lerner saw Christianity as the first ideology of the state. It became important to peasants of Scotland, whereas it had not been before, and it became a means to try to enforce obedience to the state. Muchembled's explanation runs on similar lines. He, too, sees the witch hunts as a way to form the subject of the state. The violence involved in doing so indicates the resistance encountered as well as the fears of the interrogators.³⁴

The explanations of European witchcraft posit a complex interaction between village and state. The educated persons of the nascent state feared the witches that they invented. Indeed, if they did not, there would probably have been no witch hunts. They thus reflected the attitudes of villagers, but they also inflected the latter. The question of the fear, without which witchcraft as we know it does not exist, is located in

a certain contagion which begins in the village, even as the witch is reformulated by those connected to the state. One then has to ask what instigates this fear. The explanations of historians rest on the unsettled political situation. However correct such explanations might be, they do not account for the fact that fear expressed itself through witchcraft accusations.

The idea that fear of witches was an effect of the workings of power was formulated by Michel Foucault. Foucault would have disagreed with Trevor-Roper. One cannot account for social exclusion by the qualities of the excluded or the temporary state of a society. In twice discussing the book of the psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz which linked the witch of earlier times with the psychoanalytic patient of today, Foucault accepted the connection, but not because the two had qualities in common. One should look instead at the genealogy of exclusion that runs through European history. Foucault remarks:

The book of Szasz does not say . . . the mad person was the sorcerer of another era, or that the sorcerer from another time is the mad person of today. It says something else, historically and politically more important: the practices by which one marks a certain number of people, and through which one suspects them, isolates them, interrogates them and by which one "recognizes" them as witches are techniques of power, begun under the Inquisition which one finds today (after being transformed) as psychiatric practice.³⁵

Foucault's view of witchcraft is thus a version of his view of madness. The advantage of his approach is that it does not assume a constant meaning of madness which merely takes different forms. Rather, it thinks of madness and its equivalents as produced by the thinking of those in power, which changes through time. Here is a theory of social exclusion which does not take for granted the qualities of the excluded as the cause of their exclusion.

The African case, however, casts doubt on Foucault's suggestion, as it exemplifies a historical trend quite different from that which prevailed in Europe. It is clear that Cameroon, for instance, is not the Rousseauist state. In the latter, the rationality posited as necessary to belong to the state is implicitly directed against traditional feudal social relations. The formation of the Western state at the time of the breakup of the feudal order contrasts with the genesis of many African and Asian states formed by

colonial authorities and which, responding to the demands of their inhabitants after independence, embody elements of traditional beliefs, adapting them to current situations. It is true that an argument has been made which would make them comparable. It has been claimed that African witchcraft was a threat to the centralizing tendencies of the state, as has been said also of Europe, and that the courts were interested in eradicating it for that reason.³⁶ But Fisiy and Geschiere point out that the Cameroon court's use of mystical experts implies official recognition of witchcraft. "One can wonder whether the new persecutions do not confirm the belief in witchcraft instead of eradicating it."³⁷ The state tries witches, but not in order to banish alternative sources of power incompatible with those of the state. Rather the opposite. Witches are tried because of popular demand. (In some African states, such as South Africa, where the same demand has been made, the state has refused to do so.)

Evans-Pritchard is included in the objections of Africans who find themselves mere subjects of his study. Evans-Pritchard's first studies of magic were devoted to showing that one need not posit a difference in mentality, as had Lévy-Bruhl, to see the reasonableness of magic. Looking at its logic, once one sees its premises, and looking at its practice, one can understand it. His contemporary critics, however, say, somewhat bewilderingly to me, that the premise of the argument of Lévy-Bruhl continues in the minds of readers of Evans-Pritchard's major book on witchcraft, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*.³⁸ But if one reads Evans-Pritchard's study in a certain way, it may be that we can approach what those Africans who asked for the protection of the state are trying to express. We might pay more attention not merely to the misfortune but to the trajectory which leads from an accident to an accusation of witchcraft. The difficulty comes when we see that between accident and misfortune there is a gap. Accident, as Evans-Pritchard explained it, is singular. It happens once, "to me." The problem in explanation is not to account for the collapse of the granary physically, as the work of termites, for instance, but to explain "Why was I there just at that moment?" Between the singularity of the event and the explanation there is necessarily a discrepancy. One can say, "It was the work of a witch," but in effect this means, "There is no explanation." One has recourse to an account of events which can not be validated by ordinary means. African insistence on protection from witches

and anthropological insistence on explaining the “real” cause of their fears are necessarily at odds since the latter reduce the fears of the bewitched to more general categories, whereas Africans who insist on the word “witch” say, in effect, that singularity has its own category, a category that cannot be transformed into others. Not to be able to transform a category of knowledge into another is a way of saying, “We agree that the event contained within this category is unknowable.” If we hold on to this quality of witchcraft, I contend, we will see something Lévi-Strauss later postulated, namely that it is not explanation that is at stake but rather the possibility of bringing to expression something otherwise only suspected and incapable of being signified in the normal way. As Lévi-Strauss expressed it, and as this problem has been taken up by others, it is scarcely one limited to Africa, rooted as it is in the nature of signification itself. The question is to account for the effects of this failed attempt at signification.

The difficulty of studying witchcraft, then, is that it remains inaccessible, not only to the anthropologist, but, it often seems, to those who believe in it. Peter Geschiere, author of *The Modernity of Witchcraft*, the excellent study of Cameroon from which I have drawn much of my material about that place, wrote that he began to take witchcraft seriously when he realized that, interested as he was in the modernity of life in Cameroon, he had to understand that witchcraft was linked to power and that “discourses on sorcery or witchcraft are intertwined, often in surprising ways, with modern changes.”³⁹ Consequently, he had to find the ideas that governed witchcraft. Indeed, without trying to explain the other in his own terms, anthropology would not exist. The question is how to do so. The preface to the English-language edition, by a colleague of Geschiere, Wyatt MacGaffey, points out that educated and influential Africans are now disregarding Western opinions. “It is time we listened to them [Africans], but to do so it is first necessary to be able to hear in indigenous languages, to liberate ourselves from what Geschiere calls the ‘moralizing terminology’ of ‘witchcraft’ and ‘sorcery,’ so that we may begin to understand [their] concepts.”⁴⁰ Because, after all, there may be no such thing as witchcraft, only a series of local practices which Westerners perhaps wrongly group together.

Perhaps it is always important to understand what people say, but especially so in the study of witchcraft since the latter depends so much

on what is said, unlike, for instance, a study of the economy. In order to understand witchcraft, it is necessary to listen, not only to be sure that we have an integral object of study, but, in the first place, to comprehend the attempt to signify. This rests on the ability to hear tonality as opposed to content. And, indeed, it is through a question of tonality that Geschiere himself says he began to take witchcraft seriously. He reports how his car broke down in the forest. Geschiere felt “ill at ease,” but his assistant, Meke, felt excited. Geschiere, the perfect field worker, since he recorded the statement of his assistant at this random moment, quotes Meke:

“Oh, if Mendonga was with us. We are like innocent kids. But she would see the witches that fly around here. She has the second sight. She can see what mischief they are plotting.”⁴¹

Mendonga was a woman from a neighboring village, the greatest witch doctor of the area. Hearing this, Geschiere realized that, whereas he felt anxious, his assistant felt excited to be close to power. When he saw this, he began to investigate witchcraft as the explanation of the success of people in the national arena.

Geschiere’s study begins, then, by taking seriously what he had not paid sufficient attention to earlier. He had not seen how a certain notion of power, one to which he had no direct access, could explain events to the point where witchcraft and modernity, at least by certain definitions, could go together. Not that Geschiere became a believer, or even that he approved of what he saw. He says of his study, that

it stems from an effort to take distance from the vicious circles of witchcraft and sorcery: from the hope, no doubt naïve, that showing how these discourses are linked to specific historical and cultural contexts might relativize their self-evidence and weaken their hold over people’s minds.⁴²

It apparently is not enough to know in advance that one must understand the other in his own terms and his own language and that one should study the concepts that govern witchcraft wherever it is to be found. It takes something more. In this case, it is a matter of Geschiere seeing that his assistant knows there is something present which he, the assistant, cannot see but which someone else could:

I was . . . struck by the clear note of excitement and regret in his voice. Apparently, he regretted—at least at this moment—that he was an “innocent” without special

powers. For the first time I understood that *la sorcellerie* (witchcraft/sorcery) was not just something evil to the people among whom I lived but that it also meant thrill, excitement, and the possibility of access to unknown powers.⁴³

Geschiere describes a critical moment in his study, but it is also a strange one. He understands something about sorcery precisely when he hears his assistant say that he, Meke, does not have access to sorcery. He does not learn about sorcery as such. He learns, instead, that something inaccessible excites people in ways he had not suspected before. His understanding of the subjects of his study depends on a moment when they reveal that they have no access to what he wants to study. At that moment, he finds himself on the track to understanding. The next sentence continues, "I realized also that I risked overlooking an essential dimension of my research if I continued to neglect the close conceptual link for these people between witchcraft and power."⁴⁴

Geschiere turns to sorcery at the moment when he sees that it captivates people. But that captivation seems to have something to do with not being able to grasp it ("If only . . ."). Geschiere himself feels at the same time an imperative need to understand. He says, "One must listen to them." He finds himself listening and still not understanding. He knows he is in the presence of something. The imperative is to bring that "thing," in whose presence he feels and in which he does not believe, to the understanding of himself and of others. Just at the moment he feels excluded from something and that something is unbelievable, he finds a gap between himself and . . . The rest of the sentence is hard to fill in. Is it Africans, Cameroonians, the people of the area, his friend and assistant? He sees that he does not understand, and he must have known that he was not understood. How can he be when he does not believe in what they believe, even if he can speak of the "modernity of witchcraft." He can take the stance of the ethnologist, but if he does, he simply consolidates the criticism of Africans: they are excluded. And he is excluded, at least by himself, from their point of view.

This argument might be reframed. From the point of view of its practice, belief in witches can be seen as a form of the sublime. Kant spoke of the sublime as a feature of a reaction to nature. In nature there exists an objective quality which we cannot cognize, or at least have not yet ever done so. Faced with such, we feel overcome. Our mental powers fail us.

But we recuperate ourselves because even if we cannot define whatever it is that is in front of us, in taking in its objectivity we realize that we do in fact have powers of cognition; we understand the objectivity of something that before did not exist for us. To recognize the limitation of our powers of cognition is thus to confirm that we really do have certain capacities. We find ourselves again apart from this objectivity, separating ourselves from it as we escape its influence over us by separating out what belongs to us and what to it. After having felt fragmented by our experience, we thus consolidate ourselves. We then better understand the difference between it and our powers of knowing. To feel fragmented and overwhelmed in confronting what we do not know thus ends in a strengthened definition of ourselves.

A condition for the sublime to operate is that we do not try to say what it is that is beyond our cognitive powers to determine. To do so would, no doubt, be called superstition. Whoever saw something unidentifiable at night in the middle of the jungle and called that "a witch" would be guilty of superstition from this point of view. But whoever said it was impossible to say what it was that frightened would be strengthened in his mental powers by his restraint. These, I believe, are the positions of those arguing about African witchcraft.

This impasse is defined by an eighteenth-century idea which still has considerable relevance for life today both in the West and elsewhere. But it is possible today to see that such an experience has other possible outcomes, not foreseen earlier. The sublime is something known in retrospect. After the event we see what we went through using our powers of memory and analysis. But suppose that we had not recovered such abilities. If so, the experience would still work through us. We would then suspect, rather than know, that something was affecting us. Would the result not be fear? And would we not call that fear the fear of the uncanny? That is, fear of something whose source we cannot account for; something whose source was definitively neither subjective nor objective. For Kant this seems not to have been a possibility. The sublime was a moral category. He spoke of soldiers in battle, for instance, who stood up to danger. One could, and should, be educated to have the possibility of sublime experience. Not to have it would be a moral or a cultural failure. But we know from at least the time that trauma became a topic after the First World War that such

recovery may not be possible, regardless of one's preparation. For any one at all, it seems, it is possible to have an experience that brings one close to death, to be able to recount it, and yet not to have this recounting reestablish one's own capacities. One relives the event as one retells it, leaving one's powers conflated with one's experience.

It is in the face of the uncanny that Geschiere's friend had another sort of reaction. He called up witches rather than assuming that he was *en face* of something he could not explain. The belief in witches might seem to make the uncanny explicable and therefore no longer uncanny. But the excitement of Geschiere's friend does not indicate that the uncanny has been put to rest. This points to the ambiguous nature of witchcraft beliefs in Cameroon. They are said to explain, but what they explain can also be thought to be inexplicable and potent. Such beliefs, then, are not reasonable; they insist on the continued presence of an unknown that ideas of the sublime would seal off. It is for this reason that witchcraft beliefs both depend on suspicion—one suspects a power is at work—and at the same time keep suspicion alive by introducing a term—"witch"—that is incapable of doing more than designating that something is at work which is not understood, which is identified only to the extent that it remains not only unknown, but also continues to have unpredictable consequences. In the face of this situation Geschiere's friend turned to someone else, an expert who, were she only present, would have understood. Someone understands somewhere, but it is not me. I was overwhelmed and I remain so.

The sublime did not operate and the unreasonable was at large, a judgment that might have been shared in the eighteenth century. But today we give a place to the unreasonable nonetheless. Phantasms occur not necessarily out of a moral or cultural failure to separate oneself with one's rational powers from what it is that cannot be known, but rather when such separation cannot be made. Witchcraft accusations can be one example among others.

Beyond that, we can postulate from within gift exchange the possibility of exchange which never takes place. This would be the indescribable experience of the pure gift, the non-event which, though it never happens, leaves a trace. Geschiere eventually could explain the interest in the power of witchcraft, but he could not explain the experience of his friend. It is not his fault. The trace of the pure gift would not be identifiable as such. It

would not be knowable, but it could be hypothesized from certain states, such as a fear which would have no verifiable explanation. No historical account could lead to the basis of such fear. It would only be in the baring of a situation in which the identification of something fails and it remains unknown that we might be *en face* of the pure gift. We would still have to account for the “objectivity,” as Kant had it, of what we failed to recognize. We will explain the logic of such identification in the final chapter. For the moment, we say only that it is not the objectivity that already exists in nature, but a construction that occurs with the uncanny.

The questions that follow are how uncanny moments arise, a historical question as well as a cultural matter, and what paths of reaction follows. Accounts of the circumstances of witch accusations are necessary, but they do not by themselves explain how the accusations are made. In the places where people believe in witches some people call them up and others in the same circumstances do not. Thus, belief in witches and determination of the uncanny are separate questions. We follow the trail of the uncanny rather than that of beliefs in hypothesizing the process that follows from experience of it. A certain trajectory ensues; at its end the witch is named. Our discussion of cases of witchcraft will give us the materials for such an account. But it will stand apart from historical description to a certain degree. Precisely in this gap we will see the contingency of witchcraft accusations.