Witchcraft and Discourse Genres: From Intimate Stories to Public Rumours

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We cannot thank Jean-Pierre Warnier enough for his poignant critique of the inflation in the amount of works done on witchcraft. I agree with him on the fact that Africanists (including myself) focus a lot and maybe even too much on the subject. There is a risk that this becomes sort of questionable line of business at some point, with the anthropologist looking increasingly more of a popular press journalist hungry for sensationalism or a Pentecostal preacher whose denunciation of sorcerers and other demons serves to justify his ministry of healing. That being said, for debate's sake, I shall play the role of the devil-sorcerer's advocate by putting forward some thoughts inspired by Warnier.

In *Régner au Cameroun*, a previous piece by Warnier, the denunciation of the Magritte effect struck the right chord in highlighting the distinction between practices and representations on the subject of power[1]. It seems to me, however, that the argument is less relevant as regards witchcraft. Warnier compares the "representation of witchcraft" (that he takes to include discourse, rumour, gossip

[1] J.-P. Warnier, *Régner au Cameroun. Le Roi-Pot*, Paris, Karthala, 2009. *The Pot-King, the Body and Technologies of Power*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

and belief) with witchcraft itself, which manifests in the form of "crises" that affect the body and translate into conducts (therapeutic itineraries laden with rituals). But these crises are also matter of discourse specifically: suspicions cast by someone close to the victim; gossip going around in the neighbourhood; diagnoses made by a diviner or a pastor. A witch crisis is based on a myriad of stories that are as many partial accounts of the affair (because one is always a witch in the eyes of another). It is also worth noting that for the three crises that he reported, Warnier did not have access to observable practices himself, but relied on reports by third parties: the parents and colleagues of Anye and Oyono, who gave him an interpretation of their misfortunes in terms of witchcraft. Rather than a distinction between reality and its representation, I propose then to analyse witchcraft in terms of different discourse genres (without denying the importance of body and ritual).

Firstly, common representations. These are generic discourses that are often artificial, typically put out by interlocutors in response to our questions about sorcerers and witchcraft. At the beginning of an investigation, this type of discourse allows for a general idea of the phenomenon. However, to avoid the pitfall of intellectualist approaches (whose ontological or cosmological variants are the latest manifestations), we should be careful not to systematise these common representations and turn them into "indigenous theories".

Secondly, public stories. These are edifying stories that are spread all the more easily as they involve third parties but not directly the persons who peddle them or their relatives. "The radio announced that a man was robbed of his genitalia yesterday by shaking hands with a stranger". "A politician who

died at election time had been cursed by a rival". Beyond the word-of-mouth, the media play a leading role in the proliferation of these stories. There is also a cause-and-effect relationship between the rise of the popular press following the liberalisation of the media sector in the 1990s in many African countries and the proliferation of this kind of discourse: witchcraft has moved into the media age. To spread these stories enables the public to share outrage, to play with fears, or, simply to be entertained by a good story. The public's attitude towards them can be more distanced – at times amused or in disbelief – since not personally involved. It is therefore impossible to study occult stories spread by the media without at the same time focusing on the production of journalistic information and its reception[2].

Thirdly, private and intimate stories. These are the ones that directly involve our informants or their relatives (this corresponds, in Warnier's terms, to "crises"). People do not often speak of these, at least not to strangers. Only the closest will be in on this secret and will find themselves involved in therein too (as Jeanne Favret-Saada has shown about French peasant witchcraft[3]). Contrary to public stories that are easy to collect, private stories are accessible only to an ethnographer close enough to the protagonists so that they will confide in him (or her) their misfortunes, at the cost, however, of finding himself or herself involved in the matter (which shows in the case of Jean, who opens himself up to Warnier through his wife so as to ask for his help while also asking him not to speak of it to his colleagues). This criterion of ethnographic proximity

[2] J. Bonhomme, "La sorcellerie à l'ère des medias", *in* S. Fancello (dir.), *Penser la sorcellerie en Afrique*, Paris, Hermann, 2015, p. 83-116.

[3] J. Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in Bocage*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

seems to me more pertinent than the distinction, among ethnographic methods, between observation (access to practices) and interview (access to discourse) that Warnier relates to the distinction between witchcraft and its representation. Intimate stories still relate to discourse, even if they belong to a different genre from that of public rumour. We should however keep from radically contrasting public and private stories. A private story can be elevated to the dimension of a public one when the media seizes it. Conversely, any public story hides a private one that could be studied ethnographically by collecting the protagonists' testimonies.

Despite these distinctions, there is no reason to assume that intimate stories alone would constitute real witchcraft, against which public stories would then be false manifestations thereof, and therefore, not meaningful ones. The latter are part and parcel of this protean phenomenon that is witchcraft. This means that they ought to be understood in their own terms: one must study how they circulate, how they are told, and how the public relates to them, in contrast to intimate stories. I hope that, by bringing to the fore rumours about sex thieves, killer mobile phone numbers and deadly alms[4], I have helped prove the interest that there could be in studying these kinds of stories. They shed new light on some of the dynamics of contemporary African societies, whether in relation to urban sociality, cosmopolitanism, xenophobia, gender relations, the appropriation of communication technologies, or violence and the so-called popular justice.

[4] J. Bonhomme, *The Sex Thieves. The Anthropology of a Rumor,* Chicago: HAU Books, 2016; J. Bonhomme, "Les numéros de téléphone portable qui tuent. Épidémiologie culturelle d'une rumeur transnationale", *Tracés*, n° 21, 2011, p. 125-150; J. Bonhomme and J. Bondaz, *L'offrande de la mort. Une rumeur au Sénégal*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2017.

According to Warnier, paying too much attention to the discourses on witchcraft would imply neglect of its practices and the empirical observation thereof. The critique may not always hold true, even if it is necessary to recognise the weakness in certain works dedicated to social imaginaries, which ignore the "pragmatic seriousness" in and of ordinary activities. For example, when Émilie Guitard reports on rumours of witchcraft associated with garbage in Northern Cameroon[5], it is an original way of addressing more concrete issues. What must be done of nail clippings and menstrual waste? How must we handle the garbage that invades the public space? To talk about witchcraft is not to speculate on a metaphysical otherworld; it is a way to study more prosaic realities. Far from being confined along the lines of representation, rumours of witchcraft may rest, as do private stories, on "identified, dated and circumstantial events", and therefore, allow for the observation of sensori-motor conducts involving bodies and affects. Many of these are not limited to the propagation of abstract and fleeting narratives but have concrete repercussions, for example, when one man, out of fear, publicly accuses another of having robbed him of his genitalia after shaking his hand, causing the latter to be lynched by an angry mob. By reifying the distinction between reality and its representation, between words and things, we risk neglecting both the discursive dimension of crises (intimate stories) and the concrete manifestation of rumours (public incidents).

Another idea in Warnier's piece, which I think deserves to be commented on, is that of the rarity of witchcraft. It is true

[5] E. Guitard, "Between Municipal Management and Sorcery Uses of Waste. Cameroonian Institutions Faced with 'Sorcerers Covered with Refuse' (Garoua and Maroua)", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, n°231-232, 2018.

that events pertaining to this are rare occurrence and it is glad that it is so! Thenceforth, whether it is sporadic accusations of penis snatching or Jean's misfortunes as narrated by Warnier, we are really dealing with crises, that is to say, with events that disturb the fabric of everyday life. Likewise, if it is common to bring up the latest occult rumours in ordinary conversations, it is to a much lesser extent than people discuss the price of rice at the market, electricity cuts or the next elections. It is important to be reminded of this so as to avoid thinking that people are obsessed with witchcraft to the point of seeming slightly paranoid. Warnier's proposal to develop indicators to measure this rarity is welcome, even if it would be complicated to implement. The police and judicial archives seem lacking to me, for example, because only a small fraction of the witchcraft affairs reach the police station or the court.

If witchcraft crises remain rare, I nevertheless feel that Warnier underestimates their prevalence by mentioning only three cases in forty-five years of field work. My own field work conducted between 2000 and 2008 in Gabon with urban and rural *nganga* brought me to a different conclusion. The prolonged immersion among these witchdoctors allowed me to be the direct witness of dozens of crises like those of Anye, Oyono and Jean. I collected the intimate stories of the "victims" whose misfortunes were most often associated with family troubles and to the hatred that broods within them. I took part in the rituals destined to deliver them from their affliction by soothing their troubles and by purifying their bodies (Warnier is therefore right, witchcraft is a matter of body and affects)[6]. But it would be expected to hear much about the occult when working with the *nganga*. Their

[6] J. Bonhomme, *Le miroir et le crâne. Parcours initiatique du Bwete Misoko (Gabon)*, Paris, CNRS éditions/Éditions de la MSH, 2006.

divinatory sessions represent a scene where any minor trouble can be turned into witchcraft. If I had instead conducted fieldwork in medical clinics, I would have come across more ordinary patients rather than victims of witchcraft. In witchcraft, as it is the case more often than not, it is all a matter of ethnographic point of view. But beyond the biases of investigation, could there not be other distinctions between Cameroon and Gabon, to explain this divergence of conclusions? Or between the 1970s and 2000s? Drawing on his own field work experience, Peter Geschiere notes that witchcraft has now become an ordinary subject of discussion whilst people were reluctant to talk about it in the first decades after independence[7].

Let us add a comparative dimension to these considerations: it has been a few years since I left Gabon for Senegal (Dakar, and to a lesser extent, the Serer region). There, I was not much confronted with intimate stories on witchcraft even if occult rumours circulate profusely in the local press. From the 1960s onwards, the Ortigues evoked a decline of witchcraft in urban areas, stating that it was at the cost of increased "maraboutage" (evil magic): fewer witches (*dëmm* in Wolof), but more sorcery (*liggéey*)[8]. That being said, the observation about the unequal prevalence of witchcraft in Gabon and in Senegal comes, likely, from different ethnographic points of view. In Senegal, I did not conduct extensive fieldwork among the "marabouts" (the local equivalent of Gabonese nganga), even though I was led to meet several of them during my investigation on Senegalese

[7] P. Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in Comparison*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 182.

[8] M.-C. Ortigues and E. Ortigues, *OEdipe africain*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1984 [1966], p. 195.

wrestling. Beside their physical training, wrestlers devote a significant part of their time and resources to "mystical preparation". For this purpose, they consult marabouts, sometimes several dozens. But wrestling magic is rarely associated with witchcraft as it is deemed a legitimate practice: wrestlers have the right to use their resources as they see fit so as to win. As an integral part of the wrestling show, the mystical dimension of combat is carefully staged during the preliminary rituals performed within the arena.[9]

That being said, I was unintentionally witness to two witchcraft crises that occurred in my neighbourhood in Senegal. In the first case, Falou, a strong body-builder, fell ill all of a sudden and was on bed rest for months without medical examinations being able to fix the cause of his illness. According to him, he was a victim of witchcraft as a result of a family dispute over inheritance. To be cured, he went to see various witchdoctors in Dakar and in "the village". In the second case, Assane, young and ambitious entrepreneur, found himself paralysed from the bottom half of the body for an entire day, as a result, he said, of mystical attacks by jealous competitors. Since then, prior to each of his important business dealings, he "shields" himself. From my point of view (which is ethnographically situated), if witchcraft crises are uncommon, they are not so rare as to be almost non-existent.

The debate certainly deserves to be pursued. But we can already be grateful toward Jean-Pierre Warnier for helping us put witchcraft back to its rightful place in social life, to remain conscious of ethnographic biases when we want to measure its prevalence, and to distinguish more clearly the regimes of

[9] J. Bonhomme and L. Gabail, "Lutte mystique. Sport, magie et sorcellerie au Sénégal", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, à paraître.

discourse that it presupposes and the types of empirical observation to which it can give rise.