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Witchcraft, Shamanism, and Nostalgia. *A Review Essay*

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The Empty Seashell: Witchcraft and Doubt on an Indonesian Island, by Nils Bubandt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), xv + 293 pp.

Tragic Spirits: Shamanism, Memory and Gender in Contemporary Mongolia, by Manduhai Buyandelger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xxi + 314 pp.

Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique: L'imaginaire de la dépossession en pays banda, by Andrea Ceriana Mayneri (Paris: Karthala, 2014), 257 pp.

The study of witchcraft seems to be globalizing in many respects. Not only are witches themselves supposedly globalizing, but the people who try to study them are also adopting a more global outlook.[1] Moreover, witchcraft as a topic is no longer tied to specific areas of the world, but seems to crop up everywhere. For this essay I purposely chose three recent studies, out of a wide array of possible books, which come from very different parts of the world. Reading them comparatively can highlight key trends in this field, and also important differences.

As a start, I should note that the topic, global as it is becoming, follows different tempi and trajectories in various disciplines and areas. Among historians, several of my colleagues tell me, the subject seems to be over its heyday and a certain fatigue is setting in, at least as far as early-modern Europe, once a hotspot for witchcraft studies.[2] But among anthropologists, and certainly those working in Africa, the subject seems to have made a spectacular return. There

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to David Akin, Florence Bernault, and Birgit Meyer for their inspired comments, which challenged me to take things further.

[1] See, for instance, the historian Wolfgang Behringer, who undertook to write "a global history … of witches and witch-hunts" (2004).

[2] But in this field there are also interesting new impulses, for instance a growing attention to the emotions involved, which is a strong point of recent studies like Robisheaux 2009, and of the project recently started by historians Laura Kounine (Max Plancke, Berlin) and Michael Ostling (University of Queensland) around the theme "Emotions in the History of Witchcraft" (see also Kounine 2013). Compare also innovating work on images and witchcraft in Europe (Zika 2007),

was a certain bashfulness about this classical anthropological topic during the 1970s and 1980s, a fear that too much attention to it might confirm anthropology's role as colonialism's handmaiden and its tendency to "primitivize" Africa, but it made a noisy comeback in the 1990s. In Melanesia, another hotbed of anthropological witchcraft studies, it seems never to have been away. But more recently there has emerged a stream of studies of popular preoccupations with occult aggression—sometimes labeled "witchcraft," sometimes by related terms—from other parts of the world, particularly Latin America and various places in Asia.[3]

So, despite all modernizing influences and the spread of new technologies into the most remote places, witchcraft and popular preoccupations with the powers of spirits seem to be alive and kicking all over the world. Indeed, one of my interests in undertaking a global comparison of the different ways in which people imagine and act upon occult aggression—often all the more dangerous since it is supposed to strike from close by—is that doing so might help to *désenclaver l'Afrique* (to quote one of Achille Mbembe's eloquent phrases).[4] That is, I hope to counter the common tendency, and not just in the West, to use the persistence of such "traditional" fears as a sign of "those" people's otherness. Rather than perpetuating the stereotype of Africa, or any other witchcraft-infested part of the world, as "the heart of darkness," these preoccupations offer a vantage point from which to better understand worries and hopes that haunt all human societies.

That said, a quick overview of the three books I focus on here reveals not only similar trends but also striking differences. Italian-French anthropologist Andrea Ceriana Mayneri relates directly to classical anthropological approaches of witchcraft, not only because he worked in the Central African Republic (CAR), quite close to the Zande area where Evans-Pritchard gathered the data for his paradigmatic study, but also as regards his innovative approach. In the CAR, one of the most understudied countries of the continent, *la sorcellerie* has become a major public issue; the majority of people in jail there have been sentenced for occult aggression. Ceriana interprets this general panic as fed by a mounting feeling of *dépossession*—a loss of ancestral knowledge of how to deal with this omnipresent threat. Therefore witchcraft is, he argues, less about relating to new developments than about loss and looking back. This brings him to a fascinating historical study of how the notion of *sorcellerie*

and on positioning the European witch hunts of the long sixteenth century in a longer time perspective (Bailey 2013).

[3] For Latin America, see for instance, Whitehead and Wright 2004, and also the growing attention being paid to the role of occult aggression in African-American religions like Candomble or Santeria (Parés and Sansi 2011; Parés n.d.; Palmié 2011). For Asia, see Kapferer 1997; Siegel 2006; and Pedersen 2011, among many others.

[4] See, for instance, my recent book (2013).

has evolved since colonial times, constantly "provoked" by its coexistence with a scientific discourse propagated by the mission, the schools, modern health care, and other institutions.

Mongolian-American anthropologist Manduhai Buyandelger deals with the return of shamanism in Mongolia. Its complete repression under the socialist regime in the second half of the last century was followed by an even rougher neoliberal "shock therapy" that has brought cruel impoverishment. In this unsettling situation, people feel they have lost contact with the spirits of their ancestors, who avenge themselves by haunting their unfaithful descendants. The only way to appease them is to return to the shamans who, possessed by these spirits, can repair the lost links, or at least this is the hope. Buyandelger emphasizes also that, rather than addressing urgent, present-day problems, shamans are expected to produce history.

Danish anthropologist Nils Bubandt relates again to Evans-Pritchard as the classic model, but only to offer a radical alternative by advocating an anthropology of doubt. Among the Buli on the eastern pattern of Halmaheira (Northern Moluccas, Eastern Indonesia) what people tell about the *gua* (witch) does not help to grasp this enigmatic figure. On the contrary, their stories and images only seem to sow doubt about the *gua*'s identity and profile. Nonetheless, its actions have all-too-real effects. Thus, discourse on *gua* does not offer explanations, as most anthropologists presume that witchcraft talk does, but rather tries to do the impossible by managing doubt and uncertainty. For Bubandt, *gua* is a frightening example (frightening not only for the Buli, but apparently also the anthropologist) of what Derrida meant by *aporia*, or Kristeva by *abjection*: a phenomenon that undermines all fixing parameters of knowledge. Consecutive modern influences (the mission, the state, a mining boom) have over and again evoked Buli hopes for a final closure, yet the unsettling figure of the *gua* has always reappeared. The Buli do not fear modernity; on the contrary they feel they have not gotten enough of it. For Bubandt this means that the Buli are the opposite of "modernity's malcontents," to quote the title of Jean and John Comaroff's influential book (1993). Whether this contrast is really so sharp remains to be seen. The interest of the debate may be that the notion of "malcontents" in relation to "modernity" seems to lend itself to very different explications.

This quick overview highlights clear differences both in context and approach, yet there are also intriguing correspondences. One is that all three anthropologists are very careful not to impose their own terminology or definitions and distinctions on this notoriously marshy field. Thus the endless debates that used to haunt anthropology over distinctions between witchcraft and sorcery or the use or abuse of such Western terms are no longer necessary. Bubandt still uses the opposition between witchcraft and sorcery, but only in passing and only because it seems to apply to Buli distinctions between *gua* (mostly local) and *bodiga* (or *payao*—more rooted in the

wider, Malay-dominated region). Buyandelger pays some attention to the distinction between shamanism and spirit possession, but she sees the two as shading into each other, at least for her topic. In general, these authors are more interested in local classifications, but they see them emphatically as dynamic and shifting. In fact, it seems to be the openness or even fuzziness of the local notions that explains their impressive resilience despite all changes. Ceriana opens up a very interesting alley for research by trying to reconstruct in detail how the French term *sorcellerie* became grafted upon local terms, triggering an ongoing process of articulation within which both the French and local notions were shifting and re-conceptualized. He focuses on a dialogue from the 1930s that was plagued by misunderstandings between a French administrator, a missionary, and their local interpreter.[5]

In all three books, the broader global context is very much present—capitalism, modernity, the impact of the world market, or whatever terms one prefers. But in all three the major focus is elsewhere. For Ceriana, again, what is at stake in people's struggles to remain in control of the occult forces is not a determined fight to gain access to modernity's blessings but rather a feeling of *dépossession*. For Buyandelger, people's dire poverty after the "neoliberal shock experiment" is an important background to the current obsession with shamans and the struggle to reestablish contact with the spirits, but insofar as the shamans can bring a solution it is because they are able to produce a historical vision that satisfies their clients. And for Bubandt the obsession with modernity should not be invoked as some sort of explanation for the resilience of witchcraft; the relation is rather the inverse: people have tried repeatedly to deal with *gua* by pinning their hopes on successive waves of modernity, but always in vain.

These nuanced ways of positioning the analysis means that, fortunately, none of these books is presented as an attempt to counter a supposed "paradigm" of "witchcraft and modernity." In African studies, especially, it has become customary for the increasingly numerous studies of "witchcraft" since roughly 2000 to start with an attack on this so-called paradigm. The critique is then that it is not modernity that is at stake in people's obsession with a proliferation of occult aggression, but other worries (see, for instance, Henry and Tall 2008, or Stroeken 2010). Such attacks are mostly unproductive simply because such a paradigm never existed. Nobody (neither the Comaroffs nor the present author) ever maintained that witchcraft was only about people's struggles with modern changes. It can be about almost anything, of course.

[5] This line of research was developed earlier in the seminal work of Florence Bernault (2009; see also her forthcoming book [n.d]). Following in detail the history of terms like witchcraft—the way they were introduced into Africa and their subsequent trajectories—might be more productive than abstract debates about the relevance and dangerous implications of these Western terms (cf. Crick 1979; Pels 1998).

Neither did anyone maintain that people's positioning in relation to modernity was only in terms of witchcraft—again, the ways people try to conceive of "the" modern mobilizes a much broader spectrum of ideas and discourses.[6] The notion of paradigm does not work here because any linkage of modernity and witchcraft can only highlight how volatile this link is, and how unsatisfactory any effort, whether by anthropologists or the people concerned, to explain the one in terms of the other. But perhaps the retrospective construction of a certain vision as a paradigm—the more fixed and closed it is supposed to be, the better it seems to be—fulfills a certain need in order to make academic debate progress. In the 1990s it was still useful and necessary in academic circles to emphasize that "witchcraft" was more than a "traditional" discourse expressing a refusal of modern changes, and that local discourses about new occult threats were forward-looking and expressed both people's fears of these changes *and* their efforts to get access to them in one way or another (which, of course, mostly lead to disappointment and greater insecurity). The three books under discussion here show that the link between witchcraft and tradition has lost much of its self-evidence, at least in academic discussions (though it remains questionable to what extent anthropologists have succeeded in spreading the message outside the discipline). If we have moved beyond such stereotypes, then the debates of the 1990s have served a purpose. These books show how productive it can be to take the presence of modernity, capitalism, and such broader forces into account since they are much present in people's struggles with hidden aggression. But they also show that the dynamics of these struggles can produce quite different and unexpected things.

To my surprise, what more forcefully emerges from all three books, as a common theme, is *nostalgia*: a longing for another period, a past or a future, when these dangerous forces were, or will be, more under control.[7] For

[6] See further Geschiere, Meyer, and Pels 2008; Geschiere 2013: 7–8. It is also a riddle for me how anyone can deduce from my 1997 book—in which the confusing polymorphism of local images of *djambe/sorcellerie* in the Maka area of East Cameroon recurs on almost every page—that my aim was to show how these images can offer a "symbolic-functionalist" explanation of modernity (Pedersen 2011: 32 and 79, in an otherwise sensitive reading of my book). I completely agree with Appiah's critique (1992: 177–83) that anthropologists tend to use terms like "metaphor" or "symbol" much too easily. These terms refer to a transfer between different fields, and the moot question is always who is distinguishing those fields. This often is the anthropologist, while for the people concerned there is no transfer since the symbol/metaphor is part and parcel of the same field—that is, it is "real" (see also West 2005; 2007; and Akin 2005). This is why I always have tried to avoid these concepts.

[7] I first read the three books reviewed here with the idea that the different ways in which people conceive the link between witchcraft and *intimacy* might be a vantage point to bring out differences and correspondences. In my last book (Geschiere 2013), I used this link—the widely recurrent idea that witchcraft is an attack from close by (which explains why it is so threatening and raises such vital questions about trust)—as a starting point for global comparisons. In these three books intimacy, as a site of both solidarity and terrible danger, emerges constantly and in very different forms. But a focus on nostalgia as a common theme may be more conducive to outlining novel directions for further research and for innovative interpretations that emerge from these books.

Ceriana, people's complaints of being "dispossessed" of ancestral knowledge by egoistic elders who want to keep their knowledge to themselves convey a deep nostalgia for a time when things were more in place. For Buyandelger, people's quest to retrieve their history through the shamans is pervaded by a similar feeling of loss. For Bubandt, the desperate efforts of Buli people to understand and contain their *gua* express a "nostalgia for the future" (the title of Charles Piot's 2010 book on Togo, quoted with much approval by Bubandt), when finally the spell will be broken.

A consequence is that these books, and many of the other recent works referred to in this essay, are very much about uncertainty and lack of control. As I have said, Bubandt insists from the start that his approach is very different from Evans-Pritchard's classic Zande study, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Zande* (1937). Evans-Pritchard tried to show that for the Azande in their everyday life witchcraft worked as an explanatory system, even as adequately as did his own Western approach, and subsequent approaches have tried to explain witchcraft in other ways, in relation to social order, micropolitics, capitalist encroachment, and so forth. But for the Buli, and for Bubandt, witchcraft can never serve as an "explanatory system" because it provides no certainty. As an aporia, it only confronts one with what is unknowable.[8] A common theme in all three books and in many recent studies in this field is people's feeling that nowadays something basic is going wrong and that things are getting out of hand. Witchcraft or shamanism is about a lack of certainty, something that defies explanation, a gap that is difficult or even impossible to fill.[9] This is why these three studies of hidden aggression must be emphatically historical in outlook. Yet equally interesting is that each author historicizes along their own, distinctive path.

To what extent does this focus on nostalgia and lack evoke a new perspective on and approach to a topic that has challenged anthropologists from the beginning of the discipline? Let us have a closer look at these three books and their connections with other recent studies.

UNCERTAINTY AND "DISPOSSESSION" IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

A sense of nostalgia pervades Andrea Ceriana Mayneri's book on *Sorcellerie et prophétisme en Centrafrique*, from its sepia colored cover to the focus on *dépossession* (lit. dispossession) as the dominant theme in people's complaints about witchcraft running wild. Clearly the author has been deeply affected by

[8] In Jim Siegel's powerful 2006 book *Naming the Witch*, about epidemic forms of witch lynching in East Java after the fall of Suharto and his New Order regime in 1998, he launched a similar approach by relating the explosive outbreaks of such witchcraft fears to Freud's notion of the uncanny. See note 16, below, for differences between Siegel's and Bubandt's approaches.

[9] See also van de Port's fascinating analysis of anthropology's problems in dealing with "the rest that there is…" (van de Port 2011).

their feeling of loss. The CAR is one of Africa's most marginalized areas. Until well into the twentieth century it was at the western frontier of the Arab-dominated slave trade toward the Red Sea, and on the other side it remained a kind of frontier for French colonial penetration. After independence in 1960, it was plagued by the exuberant dictatorship of "emperor" Jean-Bédel Bokassa and an endless series of military coups. On the basis of ongoing fieldwork since 2005, Ceriana provides a vivid impression of people's deep worries about witchcraft as a threat that is omnipresent and also out of control. In his analysis, these worries do not so much reflect people's indignation about new inequalities, even though, as in other African countries, these have assumed dimensions that people feel far exceed the bounds of acceptability. These new inequalities are certainly palpable in the popular imaginary about occult threats, but people's complaints are more about greedy ancestors who neglected to pass on their wisdom to their descendants. This is why witchcraft appears to be out of control. Ceriana's effort to understand this idea of *dépossession* takes him back into history, and particularly colonial history; along with fieldwork, the book is also based on Ceriana's meticulous analysis of writings by mostly Catholic missionaries. His driving question is: what is this "witchcraft" about which people talk so much?

The answer, perhaps unexpected to many readers, is that it is a colonial creation, born from a variety of misunderstandings between missionaries and other Westerners, on one hand, and on the other local people (with interpreters and local elites playing a crucial role as intermediaries). The untiring attacks by missionaries on the cult of Ngakola, the spirit of the forest, and *semali*, the more or less secret associations of his initiated followers, as "diabolic" transformed the *semali* into a bunch of dangerous witches, not only for the missionaries themselves but also in the eyes of the population. Thus was born today's conception of "witchcraft" as only a destructive power. In earlier conceptions Ngakola and his *semali* could certainly be dangerous, but they could also provide protection. But this "reversibility" of the occult forces was lost when the locals began to use the term witchcraft (*sorcellerie*) ever more, adapting it but also being affected by its implications.[10] Ceriana follows in detail the tortuous articulation of these local images with colonial influences and how they were constantly "provoked" (a very useful notion) by their coexistence with missionary and scientific discourses. At first sight, the missionary attacks seem to have been completely ineffective, given that the secret powers are still everywhere, yet they had very real effects since they contributed to creating an idea of "witchcraft" in its present shape.[11]

[10] Ceriana borrows the term "reversibility" from Filip de Boeck (2000), who analyzes similar shifts in the relation between the visible and the invisible in Kinshasa.

[11] See also Ceriana (pp. 55 and 133), for a detailed analysis of how the term *sorcellerie* was introduced in the area by missionaries and local interpreters.

Readers familiar with the Francophone literature on Africa will recognize here some basic ideas from the writings of Joseph Tonda, one of the most inspiring academics in Africa today.[12] Since 2002, Tonda has attacked what he calls "The Great Divide" in African studies. For him this divide is summarized in the idea, still current among academics and other observers, of a fundamental opposition between modernity and "African culture." In this view, there are on one side external influences such as the market, the imposition of the modern state, and especially the missionary impact (Tonda calls it *le travail de Dieu*, God's work), and on the other local Africa, *l'esprit sorcellaire*, or whatever term is used. The implicit aim of constructing such an opposition is mostly to then explain the ongoing crisis in Africa as a result of the resilience of "African culture," which over and again undermines the impact of the modern. For Tonda this is a basic misunderstanding. For him it is vital to show that, for instance, *l'esprit sorcellaire* is neither the opposite of God's work nor a traditional remnant. Instead, it is born—just like *le souverain moderne* (Tonda's seminal notion that stands, like some sort of a modern Leviathan, for postcolonial forms of rule in Africa)—from the intricate and chaotic intertwinement of all these influences from both inside and outside. Instead of an opposition, we must think in terms of *magma*, a messy and uncontrollable mass in which all distinctions disappear.[13]

But Ceriana does much more than just follow Tonda's insights. He brings them to life and highlights their unexpected implications through a meticulous and highly creative analysis of how terms and conceptions shifted within the colonial context and subsequently. Of special merit is that he shows how apparently unequivocal tendencies in complex articulations of different elements can acquire surprising or even reversed implications. A striking example is the elusive figure of Ngoutidé, a haunting presence in the book who constantly turns up in people's stories. His short-lived career as an iconoclastic prophet made him a local hero, but he is difficult to grasp, as is the impact of his work. In 1962, this young man seemed to be dying and a passing Catholic priest accepted to baptize him. The priest then went on his way and thus heard only much later about the effects his charitable gesture had. A few

[12] See especially Tonda 2002; 2005; and n.d. (in press). It is highly regrettable that Tonda's texts remain inaccessible in English (although a translation of his *Le souverain moderne* is in progress with Seagull Press). It is true that it is very hard to translate his French, which is visionary and at times dithyrambic. But precisely this very personal style of writing brings across in most vivid terms the explosive force of the imaginary in present-day situations in some parts of the continent pervaded by violence and arbitrariness.

[13] Florence Bernault, who worked closely with Tonda, developed a similar approach (see Bernault 2009). Her forthcoming book (n.d.) highlights the *convergence* rather than the opposition between imaginaries of the French colonizers and the local population in Gabon. See also Marshall (2009), who develops Tonda's ideas in her study of Nigerian Pentecostalism and more generally in her attack on the anthropological tendency to fall back on the idea of a basic continuity when trying to understand local reactions to outside influences.

moments after the young man was baptized, he stood up again, resurrected from death, and walked to a church and started to pray. Over the following years he unleashed an iconoclastic frenzy in the area. Surrounded by numerous followers, he traveled from village to village making people hand over their *ayo* (fetishes—mostly related to the Ngakola cult) and accept their destruction on the spot. Ngoutidé—the name the young prophet assumed—thus seemed to finally complete the task missionaries had set themselves for decades. In 1965 the movement stopped as abruptly as it had started. Ngoutidé started a new career as a cyclist and earned a Ministry of Education medal for his biking accomplishments! But his prophetic frenzy seemed to be over, apart from certain outburst in the private sphere.

Ceriana's analysis of this fragmented story focuses on the ambivalent memory of this regional hero. Ngoutidé is recalled as the ultimate iconoclast and thus as radically Christian, but at the same time he assumes the contours of a powerful *nganga* (healer). Thus, he seems to epitomize people's nostalgia: a longing for a final solution to witchcraft that failed (i.e., despite Ngoutidé's iconoclastic frenzy witchcraft is still everywhere), but also their feeling of loss since they attribute to him the kind of lost knowledge that could have helped to contain these threats. Ceriana closes his last chapter most appropriately with a reference to Kierkegard's "the scandal of conversion." Yet, for his informants, the scandal rather is that conversion did not bring an end to "witchcraft" but instead a loss of the knowledge needed to contain it, leaving people without protection.

This powerful conclusion raises questions. Is conversion really such a radical choice? We are reminded here of elements in Ceriana's powerful ethnography that bring out people's inventiveness in combining seemingly antagonistic propositions. And, was the missionary influence truly so effective in erasing the reversibility of local forces, leaving an image of witchcraft as unequivocally destructive? Think, for instance, of Tonda's ethnography and its many examples of prophets appropriating local ideas for purposes of healing or protection; clearly these ideas can still have also a more positive charge. But anthropologists will always raise these sorts of questions in reaction to a splendid analytical construct, and Ceriana's interpretations do have great force. He is especially effective in showing how precarious it is to appropriate a notion of "witchcraft" as used by local people without understanding how deeply it has been shaped by a colonial intertwinement of influences that are all too easily viewed as opposites while, in everyday practice, they allow for surprising articulations.

THE RETURN OF SHAMANISM IN NEOLIBERAL MONGOLIA

In her *Tragic Spirits*, about the return of shamanism among the Buryat in a faraway part of northeastern Mongolia, Manduhai Buyandelger goes back in history as well, even further back. One of her shamans, a man, is possessed

by the spirit of a woman shaman from the time of Catherine the Great. This shaman is still fondly remembered for having outwitted the formidable Russian *tzarina* in the eighteenth century. Her return in today's shamanic sessions, more than two hundred years later, actualizes the painful memory of the long historical sufferings of the Buryat group, from being chased out of Siberia by the Russians and then only partly accepted in Mongolia, to being specially targeted by the terror under twentieth-century socialist rule. On top of this, "the storm of the market"—as the Buryat call the subsequent neoliberal "shock therapy"—had particularly dramatic consequences in this area. It made people desperate to understand why all their efforts to profit from new opportunities seemed to fail and plunge them even deeper into poverty. For them, socialist collectivism is becoming, in retrospect, a haven of security. It is in this setting that shamanism made a spectacular comeback from its draconic suppression under socialist rule. People attribute their failures to vengeful spirits of their ancestors who are angry because they feel completely neglected. The only way to contact them is through shamans, although, like the Central Africans in Ceriana's book, Buryat people are worried about all of their knowledge lost, obliterated by the socialist terror.[14] But at least among the Buryat shamans have recently had a spectacular renaissance and people are urgently requesting their services again. Yet, both shamans and clients seem beset by nagging uncertainty: are they recognizing the right spirits to be atoned and are they still able to become possessed by them?

As said, Buyandelger's rich ethnography of clients searching for the right shaman and the shamans' efforts to make the right spirit descend upon them is set against the background of neoliberal devastation. But, like Ceriana, she emphasizes that clients are not expecting their shamans to deal with these unsettling developments. What the shamans have to do is to produce history by putting people again in contact with the neglected spirits that are pursuing them. Then things will be all right again. Techniques of remembering, and their counterpart techniques of forgetting, have a central place in the book. Once possessed, the shamans hardly speak about contemporary misfortunes. The stage is set for the spirit to descend by monotonous drumming and the shaman twirling around ever more rapidly. It is in the beginning often unclear what spirit is speaking through the shaman's mouth. Wild poetic phrases of anger, loss, and claims often add to the lack of clarity. But once the shaman's interpreter recognizes the spirit, a link is repaired. The shamans

[14] A no doubt legitimate question is whether one can juxtapose studies about witchcraft and shamanism. Buyandelger opts for a very open delimitation of what the term "shamanism" stands for. Moreover, witchcraft and sorcery are everywhere in her descriptions (see pp. 7 and 144, about the "presumption of malice," and p. 84ff about the *uheer*, forgotten spirits who can become malicious). Morton Pederson's 1911 book on shamans in another part of Mongolia, where witchcraft/sorcery is again omnipresent, will be discussed later.

construe history, but it is a very different history from that imposed by either the socialist or neoliberal states.

A central theme in Buyandelger's analysis of these rapid changes concerns shifts in the gender balance. In her beautiful fourth chapter she follows the traces left by two female shamans from the socialist period and shows that it was these courageous women that kept shamanism alive despite harsh persecution. But in her later chapters on the current situation it is men who perform the front role. Still, the most moving chapter (five) is about a gifted female shaman who became the author's friend and who is shown to be engaged in a constant struggle to protect her reputation against slander (about her being divorced, etc.). Apparently, now that shamanism is in the open again men have certain advantages. But even these very successful shamans—one makes trips to Europe and attracts clients from all over the world—all too often fail to lift people's uncertainty or even bewilderment about the misfortunes of everyday life. Buyandelger shows most convincingly how people's quests to gain certainty from a shaman—that the right spirits have been addressed and the right reconciliation payments have been made—only lead to consulting ever-new shamans. In her last chapter, tellingly called "Incomplete Lives," Buyandelger follows another friend in her search to piece together her family's history and especially the causes of her brother's sudden death. Going from shaman to shaman, the friend unearths unknown stories through confrontations with unexpected spirits. But she finds no satisfaction, all the more so since shamans blame each other for mistakes. Shamans may be experts on memory/history—for the author it does not work to distinguish the two in this context—but they hardly ever bring certainty. The present is haunted by nostalgia for a past when people knew their spirits and how to reconcile them.

Interesting contrasts are presented by an earlier, equally vivid and inspired study, Morton Pedersen's *Not Quite Shamans* (2011), about the return of shamanism in another part of Mongolia (Shishged, northwest of Ulaanbataar but also far out). Pedersen sketches a similar context of the neoliberal turn bringing disconcerting poverty and worries about vengeful spirits. But in his study shamanism is not so much about history; it is rather about the recent transition and its uncertainties. Indeed, one of Pedersen's conclusions is that shamanism as such is about transition, at present but also in earlier days.[15] As in Buyandelger's study, people do not turn to shamanism in order to get an explanation for the miseries of the transition. The link has to be studied the other way round: it is as "an emergent assemblage of … self-scaling practices, discourses and materialities … and by virtue of its multiplicity, indeterminacy, and

[15] Buyandelger sees, indeed, this propensity for history as special to Buryat shamans; elsewhere shamans relate rather to forces of nature (p. 20). She suggests also that Buryat suffering during their long historical gyrations may explain this particular focus on ancestral spirits and history.

plasticity—its capacity for endless deferral … and infinite self-extension—that shamanism is imbued with such a potent efficacy in northern Mongolia after socialism" (ibid.: 40). From these quotes from Pedersen's book the reader will have already recognized the "ontological turn" that has made so many converts among anthropologists in and around Cambridge. Pedersen proposes to study shamanism following Marilyn Strathern's advice to take "more seriously … in a new way—concepts brought about through ethnographic fieldwork" (ibid.: 221).

This sophisticated approach works so well in Pedersen's book precisely because shamanism is a kind of absent presence in the region where he did his research. Somewhat surprisingly, here the return of shamanism did not bring a return of shamans. People in Shisghed rather complain that all they are left with are "not quite shamans": younger men who go often into a trance-like rage (*agsan*), but do not follow this up with a proper initiation as shaman. How unsettling this half-way stage can become is clear in the ethnographic climax of the book when the author has to run for his life—"Morteeen, where are you? I am going to kill you"—pursued by a neighbor in an *agsan* trance and brandishing a Kalashnikov. In neighboring areas such wild characters may still be initiated to become full-fledged shamans, but in Shisghed they never get beyond the stage of "not quite shamans." Yet, precisely because of this apparent lack, shamanism as an uncertain "assemblage," in the Deleuzian sense, is all the more present. Just as Buyandelger found in Buryat, its return does not bring reconciliation but rather nagging uncertainty; in Pederson's examples, moreover, with a strong violent twist. Nostalgia takes on different shapes in Pedersen's book, but as in Buyandelger's study it produces great uncertainty that paradoxically only makes people more preoccupied with shamanism.

WITCHCRAFT IN THE MOLUCCAS: TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF DOUBT

Nils Bubandt explores *gua*, the elusive form of witchcraft that haunts the Buli people on East Halmaheira, the largest of the Moluccan islands of eastern Indonesia. Like the other authors discussed so far, Bubandt reaches far back in history. His first chapters deal with the local impact of the seaborne empires of Ternate and Tidore that for centuries exercised shifting forms of suzerainty from Sulawesi to western New Guinea. Buli, a conglomerate of some six small villages, depended on Tidore, which like Ternate became a toy between the Portuguese, English, and Dutch in their struggles over the spice trade, beginning in the sixteenth century. But for Bubandt, *gua* itself remains more or less outside this tormented history, or at least it remained itself, elusive and undefined, yet omnipresent. Successive waves of modernity raised people's hopes that finally it would be eradicated, but these hopes were always dashed as *gua* would manifest itself anew, lurking from the shades and treacherously killing

innocent people. Nostalgia is again a recurrent theme here, but nostalgia directed toward the future: the Buli long for a future modernity that will finally succeed in dissolving *gua*.

What is this mysterious *gua*? Bubandt opens his book with a description of his own confrontation with this mystery. The experience was incisive and deeply frightening, yet all he is left with is a vague memory of a sensation of a horrible presence at night that raised terrible fears—vague contours, a sound of a dog gnawing on a bone. *Gua* remains a mystery also to his friends, who can only offer descriptions of some appearance sitting on their chest choking them, or the sudden experience of being knocked unconscious and then "emptied." Central on the front cover of the book is a beautiful nautilus shell, which for the Buli is the very icon of the *gua*, precisely because it is always empty whether it is found on the beach or at sea. But one never knows—one day someone might find it inhabited with its mysterious creature still inside, and this is how one gets the *gua*. Despite the cover's beautiful pastel colors—soft blue for the sea with equally soft yellow and brown for the shell—it has a frightening impact, maybe precisely because the soft colors accentuate an eerie quality of the landscape.

It is this maddening elusiveness of the *gua* that makes Bubandt equate it to "aporia" in Derrida's version of this notion, or to Kristeva's "abjection." This has important consequences for his approach. He argues that anthropologists should take much more seriously these "aporetic" qualities of notions like *gua*, as something that cannot be "placed within a meaningful order," as a presence before which "understanding and the will to know fail" (p. 6). Many of his predecessors and colleagues instead seem to try to explain them away. This is why Bubandt takes clear distance from many witchcraft studies as inspired by Evans-Pritchard's classic Zande work. With all due respect (and Bubandt is most civilized and nuanced in his criticisms), he feels that Evans-Pritchard put most of us on the wrong track. For the Buli, *gua* cannot work as an explanatory system, since *gua* cannot explain anything: it is so unsettling because it brings a confrontation with what is unknowable. Hence our task is not to try and impose an explanation on the Buli stories about *gua.* We need instead an "anthropology of doubt" in order to understand how the Buli try to live with this constant aporia.[16]

[16] Bubandt refers here to James Siegel's *Naming the Witch* (2006), quoted earlier. Siegel's interpretation of the violent mob against witches in East Java in 1998–1999 in terms of Freud's notion of *das Unheimliche* ("the uncanny") prefigures Bubandt's analysis of Buli *gua* as aporia. For Siegel, the fall of Suharto and the collapse of his "New Order" created a general uncertainty, an experience of "the uncanny," that people tried in vain to cope with by "naming the witch." He sees the very notion of "witch" as a failed attempt at signification that cannot bring a solution to "uncanny" experiences (2006: 21ff). Bubandt uses the notion of aporia in a similar vein but he sees also a difference. In Siegel's study the sudden experience of "the uncanny" seems to be triggered by a specific event, the collapse of the Suharto regime. For the Buli the aporia of *gua* is not related to

Bubandt tries to show that the Buli are not exceptional in this respect by his inspiring forays into the very early history of Western thinking. A beacon for him is notably Plato's famous rendering of a dispute between Socrates and Menon, set in classical Athens in the fifth century B.C. Upset by Socrates' style of arguing through apparently innocent questions, Menon (himself from Thessaly, at the time known as the land of the witches) accuses Socrates of wizardry and confronts him with a paradox of his own: how can one enquire into things of which one does not know anything? Different from Plato, Bubandt concludes that it was Menon, not Socrates, who prevailed in the consecutive debate since he voiced so well the aporia such as Bubandt's Buli informants expressed it when talking about *gua*: "Witchcraft is aporetic because it is an impossible experience without the comfort of meaning" (p. 60). For Bubandt, this excursion into classical Greece serves to demystify—in line with both Derrida and Latour—the "Great Divide" idea (the West against the rest) that is basic to so much anthropological work, and so much Western thinking. The aporia of witchcraft dilutes the distinction between West and non-West: such aporia is not a particularity of "their" way of thinking; no, it is present at the very cusp of Western thought. This is why the Buli struggle with *gua* has much wider relevance as a starting point for a general anthropology of doubt.

For Bubandt, such an anthropology of doubt must bring an interpretative reversal. Witchcraft is not to be seen as an effect that has to be explained with reference to something else; it should rather be the starting point of our analysis as a basic doubt. This makes him also distance himself from recent studies, especially from Africa, that link popular preoccupations with witchcraft to the impact of modern changes. Again, the relation should be reversed. For the Buli, *gua* does not express their discontent with modernity: their problem is not with modernity, but rather with the lack of it. Bubandt's chapters 4, 6, and 8 describe how the Buli initially embraced consecutive waves of modernity with great enthusiasm, hoping it would bring an end to *gua.* However, disappointment set in every time since *gua* kept reemerging despite all changes.

A telling example is provided by Bubandt's analysis of a sudden wave of conversions to Christianity among the Buli in 1900 after a long period of reticence. Even some missionaries at the time distrusted the motives of many young men who suddenly abandoned the old symbols of warlike masculinity like their long hair and headdress. And indeed, disappointment soon set in: the same young men turned again into bitter enemies when their expectations of an end of *gua* due to a return of the ancestors—their interpretation of the Christian message—were not materializing. The missionaries were now even

an exceptional happening but is an everyday and long-term phenomenon. For them the collapse of Suharto's New Order brought the umpteenth proof that modernity failed to eradicate *gua* (p. 54).

suspected of working together with the *gua.* At the end of the last century a similar pattern developed in reaction to Suharto's New Order, which raised hopes by its determined condemnation of "witchcraft" as a sign of local backwardness. Bubandt's chapter 6 opens with a 1993 case of a woman who from her sickbed cries out because she feels the *gua* upon her and implies in no uncertain terms that the state's authorities are allowing this to happen.

Another wave of modernity followed 2000 when the launching of a tin mine in the area turned Buli into a boomtown. The sudden inflow of money had concrete effects, such as an increasing availability of radios, amplifiers, and the like, which created a new soundscape of cacophonic proportions that made the anthropologist deeply nostalgic for the former peace and quiet. But there are signs that even this deafening invasion cannot block the reemergence of *gua*. It is the recurrent disappointments that make Bubandt speak of a Buli nostalgia, but one that is forward-looking. Buli pine for a future when modernity will at last reach so deeply that it can stop *gua*.[17] Yet, the practical consequences of such nostalgia for the future are the same as those described in the other monographs: a deep uncertainty and the conviction that things are out of hand.

One can wonder whether developments in Buli are as different from what recent literature on Africa describes as Bubandt suggests they are. For example, seminal monographs on Pentecostals in various parts of contemporary Africa describe them as equally insistent in their search for a form of modernity that will put an end to witchcraft.[18] And especially more educated Africans often express their confusion that modernity elsewhere appears to have made witchcraft irrelevant while in Africa it only seems to be reinforced.[19] A deeper difference might be the emphasis on the unknowability of *gua*, as an aporia before which "the will to know fails." Witchcraft (or whatever term is used) in Africa is certainly an enigma, but this does not preclude persistent efforts to know it. The very notion of "a second pair of eyes," so widespread on the continent as the first condition for an initiation into the occult, expresses a deep will to see

[17] There is a parallel here with Adam Ashforth's pioneering study of witchcraft and democracy in the Johannesburg township of Soweto (2005). That study similarly highlights Sowetans' disappointment that the end of Apartheid and entry of democracy did not bring an end to witchcraft but rather brought it out into the open.

[18] See, for instance, Birgit Meyer 1999; and 2015; Ruth Marshall 2009; and Katrien Pype 2012. Inversely, Bubandt's Buli can well be described as "modernity's malcontents," to quote again the Comaroffs' book title. Bubandt's criticism of this catchy title seems to be based on a special reading (apparently for him these malcontents are people who refuse modernity). I always understood these "malcontents" as people who feel they did not get their share of modernity, and in this sense many Africans are on the same register as Bubandt's Buli.

[19] See Geschiere 2013: xxvii. It may be useful to repeat here that much of the literature that is subsumed under the label "Witchcraft and Modernity" stresses the ambivalence of the link: witchcraft notions can be invoked as a critique of the new inequalities but also in order to perceive certain ways of accessing the new opportunities. Such ambivalence reinforces Bubandt's plea for an anthropology of doubt.

and to know what is going on in this invisible world.[20] But such differences may also be related to the strict separation Bubandt sees for the Buli between *gua* ("witchcraft") as a local category and *payao* ("sorcery") as a more dynamic and open notion that is part of a broader Malay imaginary. Bubandt's seminal focus on *gua* as a continuing riddle, despite all waves of change, certainly drives home the dangers of the manifold anthropological and historical approaches that have tried to offer more or less closed explanations for what defies all explanation for the people involved. An anthropology that takes seriously doubt—lack of knowledge and certainty—rather than trying to explain it away can do better justice to the deep uncertainties produced by people's nostalgia for times when witchcraft was under control, or will be definitively eradicated.

HISTORY VERSUS BINARY OPPOSITIONS

My introduction to this essay emphasized that one commonality shared by all three of these books is an emphatically historical approach to witchcraft, a given with the common emphasis on nostalgia. Moreover, in all of these cases such a historicizing approach goes together with determined efforts to transcend the kinds of binary oppositions—West versus the rest, rationality versus magic, religion versus witchcraft—that explicitly or implicitly marked so many older studies. Equally interesting is that the three books accomplish this in quite different ways.

For Ceriana, the notion of witchcraft that plays such a central role in the Central African Republic today clearly must be analyzed as a historical product of a complex intertwinement. The very idea of "dispossession"—his informants' complaints about a loss of ancestral knowledge—reflects a development in which local ideas about the occult are transformed from the inside by their articulation with external influences. Like for Joseph Tonda, in Ceriana's approach it is a fundamental mistake to oppose, as so many academics and other observers still do, witchcraft as African "tradition" to Western influences, whether colonial or postcolonial. Such misconceptions, which start from the aforementioned idea of a "Great Divide," block the understanding of contemporary problems. The popular obsession with the proliferation of new forms of "witchcraft" that seem out of control can only be understood by following in detail how the very notion of *sorcellerie* (witchcraft) emerged in colonial times from interactions between officials, missionaries, chiefs, translators, and local experts. These interactions transformed local notions about occult

[20] Such an urge to see and to know is certainly not restricted to Africa. See, for example, the exciting stories people in New Britain (Melanesia) told the anthropologist Andrew Lattas about what is going on in the underworld of the ancestors, stories that are typical for a long succession of "cargo cults" in that part of the world (2010).

forces, and twisted interventions, most notably those of missionaries, to produce unexpected results.[21]

Ceriana refers regularly to another recent study that develops a similar approach in a quite different setting: Heike Behrend's pioneering *Resurrecting Cannibals: The Catholic Church, Witch-Hunts and the Production of Pagans in Western Uganda* (2011). Behrend, a German anthropologist, writes in this book about the "Uganda Martyrs Guild," an anti-witchcraft movement in Toro, western Uganda. Since the 1990s, it has intervened especially against "cannibal witches" who are supposed to exhume the dead to eat them; hence the title with its double meaning. The cannibals are said to undertake a macabre resurrection of the dead before eating them again. But the Martyrs Guild is resurrecting these cannibals in a different sense. (Or does the title refer to the author herself resurrecting them? Probably we are free to choose.) The book's great merit is that Behrend places this quite specific imaginary in a longer historical perspective involving the particular history of the Toro "kingdom" and its extravagant "kings," but also the impact of the Catholic mission, and especially locals' changing understandings of the Eucharist. The vision of the evil combated by the Guild shares general characteristics with zombie representations prevalent in many parts of Africa and elsewhere, in which witches turn people into living dead in order to put them to work for their new masters. In Toro this work element is present as well, but what stands out here is the overriding emphasis on cannibalism. Witches in Toro are supposed to kill their victims twice, first by turning them into a corpse and then by disinterring the corpse after the funeral in order to eat it. But for Behrend, this macabre obsession with cannibalism may be locally inspired, yet it is also saturated with Christian elements.

Inspiring in Behrend's approach is her starting point, formulated at the end of her Introduction: "Contrary to the definition of anthropology as a discipline that creates difference … I am more interested in what is shared by 'them' and 'us'" (ibid.: 14). Her chapter 3 offers a fascinating history of the omnipresence of cannibalism in Western thought, focusing on the Eucharist as an enigmatic and uncomfortable centerpiece of the Christian cult. Western believers may have learnt to neutralize the basic cannibal element in the Lord's Supper—a form of "theophagy" with long precedents in antiquity—and European

[21] See several studies quoted above: Joseph Tonda's vision of a "magma"—in Castoriadis' sense—resulting from an inextricable mixture of outside and local influences (2002; 2005), and also Florence Bernault on the convergences of colonial and local imaginaries in Gabon (2009; and n.d. [forthcoming]). See the recent collection by Sandra Fancello on the same region (2015). See further Kate Luongo (2011) on state intervention and local dynamics around witchcraft in colonial Kenya; Diane Ciekawy (1998; 2001) on coastal Kenya; and André Mary (2009) on the proliferation of prophets in West and Central Africa. Isak Niehaus presents a moving micro-historical study along the same lines: the central character of his book always refused to see witchcraft as the cause of his misfortunes, but his biography shows in chilling detail how he gradually is overtaken by the notion, not as a given but as a product of circumstances (2013).

missionaries in Africa were instructed to downplay this potentially shocking element in the new faith. Yet, Behrend pleads for more attention to the image Africans must have formed of this complex transformation of the Lord's body to be eaten by believers. All the more so since it was complemented by other confusing aspects of Westerners' behavior such as explorers digging up bodies (for scientific research?), colonial doctors conducting large-scale medical tests, and other experiments with bodies. Like Ceriana's study of witchcraft's emergence from the colonial encounter, Behrend's analysis of occult cannibalism shows it to be a hybrid form resulting from distorting reflections between inputs from very different backgrounds.

This is very different from Bubandt's study of *gua* among the Buli. There, *gua* as a basic form of aporia seems rather to remain untouched by—out of reach of?—consecutive waves of modernity.[22] Nonetheless, Bubandt is just as keen to surpass any idea of a West/non-West divide. He does so rather at a theoretical level: *gua* as an extreme form of aporia highlights the urgent need for an anthropology of doubt for not only Buli and other witchcraft-ridden societies but human society in general. Such white spots that "make the will to know fail" are central everywhere. Since Menon's paradox was not really refuted by Socrates, Bubandt concludes, in line with Derrida and many others, that such aporia is not specific to the Buli but already present in Western thinking at its very origin. Of course, he is deeply influenced by his experiences of *gua* among the Buli, but he draws from this general lessons. The futility of any attempt to explain *gua* as it manifests itself among the Buli highlights the need for a different reading of the history of Western thought. This might be a good example of practicing "theory from the South" (to quote another arrow from the Comaroffs' quiver), one that drastically reshuffles the normal hierarchy in knowledge production in academia between West and rest.

Buyandelger similarly tries to de-exoticize her vivid stories of shamans and their practices on a theoretical level by fitting them in an original way into Chakrabarty's ambitious scheme of two disks of history: History 1 that tells the rational-secular narrative of modern capitalism; and History 2 that is about gods and spirits (pp. 13–15). This helps her to understand how her Buryat informants try to combine different forms of history. They attempt to become part of an overall world history (this would be Chakrabarty's History 1, now no longer socialist but capitalist), yet they refuse to accept that this might force them to forget their History 2 of ancestral spirits and shamans. This upholding of History 2 highlights an interesting contrast with the hybridization of the very core of the imaginary of the occult in the

[22] Here as well, the radical separation with *bodiga* (or *payao*—Bubandt translates both as "sorcery") might play a role since these notions seem to be much more affected by broader regional developments (see pp. 2–5).

African examples. Buyandelger's shamans certainly do not ignore current issues—their clients' failures caused by History 1—yet their rituals seem hardly affected by these external influences. It is true that when, for instance, Pedersen finally visits a real shaman in a neighboring district (a woman who is quite different from the "not quite shamans" he knows from his own area) he observes with some surprise, almost shock, that her shrine is mostly obscured by big posters from her political party stuck against the walls. This seems to be a general phenomenon (Buyandelger refers to it as well), so there is mixing. Yet this still is a far cry from, for instance, the posters of white pin up girls that were the very icons said to empower the shrines of La Mère, an occult association in Gabon in the 1960s and 1970s.[23] Like the *nganga* in West-Central Africa, the Mongolian shamans convince by means of their invisible mobility, yet they are not thought to travel nightly on planes or lorries as their African counterparts are.

This resistance of Mongolian shamanism, at least as concerns the conserving of an "authentic" form in the midst of drastic changes, might be related to the central role that "traditional" attributes—more or less fixed things, the materiality of which is heavily emphasized—are supposed to play in shamanic rituals. For example, both Pedersen and Buyandelger stress the crucial role of the shaman's gown. Without a gown a shaman is powerless since the spirits cannot enter him or her. It is precisely because they do not have a gown that Pedersen's "not quite shamans" remain in this unfulfilled state, despite all of their pent-up energy that makes them so dangerous.[24] It may be that it is this heavy accent on concrete and visible things that makes ontology such a convincing approach in the Mongolian context, just as the emphasis on hybridity in studies from Africa might relate to the alacrity with which people there introduce modern technology and parallel elements into the very heart of their imaginations of the occult.[25] Of course, objects also play a crucial role in the dynamics of African people's imaginary of the occult, but striking, again, is

[23] See Georges Dupré 1982; and Pierre-Philippe Rey 1971. Dupré describes the cult of La Mère as an outgrowth of the Njobi that is supposed to still be active (both former President Omar Bongo and his son and successor Ali Bongo are believed deeply involved in this association). See also Tonda 2002, about the Njobi but also about a related cult Mademoiselle (probably the same as Dupré's La Mère). Tonda relates this cult to Mammywata—the image of a dangerous white woman who brings riches but also death—that emerges in many parts of Africa, and elsewhere.

[24] Pedersen is particularly fascinated by the power of the gown: "As her indispensable 'armor,' the gown protects the shaman by 'absorbing' … the 'souls' … of both people and spirits into its many 'layers.' … At the same time, however, donning the gown also exposes the shaman to the potentially lethal risk of becoming lost in the world of spirits…. [It] is a sort of hyper-surface, which, far from patrolling the shaman's bodily and existentially boundaries, invites maximum intervention" (2011: 163, see also 179).

[25] But what then about Melanesia and Amazonia, often mentioned next to Mongolia in a striking triad as hotbeds for ontology studies (see, for instance, Pedersen 2011: 62)? There is no lack of hybridization in these two areas (see again Lattas 2010 on New Britain, and also the vast literature on cargo cults in Melanesia).

the ease with which, in material respects too, borrowings from outside are intertwined, hybridized, with local objects.[26]

For me, the most promising lead in these recent studies is the research line proposed by Ceriana, and before him by Bernault, Tonda, and others: historicizing notions of witchcraft, sorcery, magic, *mystique*, and so on by detailed studies of how these Western notions were introduced in the region concerned, how they dovetailed with local notions, and how this intertwinement acquired a dynamic of its own. But probably this is a comment from Africa, where the population appropriated these Western notions on a large scale. This is, as I have said, an important difference from the other regions I have discussed here, where such Western terms have not acquired "emic" status. But even this difference has general implications. If the researcher starts from the local notions, as all these books do, it is unwise to place these notions on a Procrustean bed of academic notions, which in practice means mostly Western notions. That said, neither should we discard popular translations of local notions into terms that have wider use as merely inauthentic distortions. The solution might rather be to follow the notions used through their historically circumscribed trajectories and interactions. All these books offer fascinating examples of how this can be done.

It is time to return to our central point, nostalgia. Is it possible to generalize about this? One temptation of this notion is of course that it seems to invite debunking. Nostalgia easily leads to romanticizing, evoking the image of a rosy past, for this topic a past when witchcraft was under control.[27] In all of these studies such an image of the past does play a role, but none of the authors succumbs to such romanticizing. More urgent than the question of romanticizing, following from nostalgia's retrospective viewpoint, might be to turn the notion around and ask what nostalgia *produces* in these different cases.[28] If we do this,

[26] For a striking example of such hybridizing in material respects, see Peter Lambertz's recent Ph.D. thesis (2015) on the flowering of a spiritual movement from Japan in present-day Kinshasa.

[27] In 1970, Mary Douglas famously noted the gulf that, even then, separated papers that historians and anthropologists presented at a joint conference on witchcraft. "The anthropologists of the 1950s developed insights into the functioning of witch beliefs which seemed about as relevant to the European experience as if they came from another planet. Dangerous in Europe, the same beliefs in Melanesia or Africa appeared to be tame, even domesticated; they served useful functions and were not expected to run amuck" (1970: xiii). It is ironic that in subsequent years anthropologists could no longer deny that these beliefs were "running amuck" in many parts of Africa and Melanesia, while in contrast some historians adopted ideas of a supposed "magical equilibrium" for the relations in Europe before the ecclesiastical and secular courts unleashed epidemic witch-hunts (see Robert Muchembled 1978: 107).

[28] See Paul Mepschen (n.d., forthcoming), who makes this point in the completely different setting of struggles over urban neighborhoods and belonging between migrants and "autochthons." A question is to what extent further theorizing our central notion of nostalgia can open up new perspectives. In their seminal *Georges Woke Up Laughing*, about long-distance nationalism of Haiti emigrants and their search for home, Nina Glick-Schiller and Georges Eugene Fouron juxtapose "nostalgia" with, on one hand, "memory" and, on the other, "ongoing experience" (2001: 1). In the pain of resettling in a new country Haitian migrants at first tended to erase the memory of

a clear answer presents itself: it produces in all these cases a grueling uncertainty. The very longing for a time in which the occult was (or will be) under control reinforces panicky feelings that things are running wild and that matters are out of hand. These studies suggest also that the ways in which feelings of nostalgia produce uncertainty can follow quite different historical trajectories, which produce distinct forms of uncertainty. Each of these authors highlights specific factors, or dimensions, that can orient research into why such feelings become so terribly urgent in certain times and certain settings.

So it is possible to take our comparison further than just emphasizing the contingency of historical trajectories: in fact these studies taken together do suggest more substantial points—beacons for further research. One is that the authors' focus on nostalgia—people's longing for a better time—puts people's own ways of voicing and living these emotions center stage in the ethnography (see also van de Port 2011). This guarantees that in none of these studies do pressures to offer cutting edge interpretations—which are ever stronger in the discipline of anthropology—divert the ethnographer's attention away from people's deep anxieties. In all of these monographs, people's sufferings and the ways they voice them are given central place. This alone is something valuable in view of the discipline's increasing theoretical slant. But there is more. The focus on nostalgia and the basic uncertainty this creates obliges the ethnographers to follow people in their efforts to make such uncertainty livable. This makes one realize that it is not only the anthropologist who has the urge to look for an explanation. The people under study do so, too, just as they try to discern or even forge some degree of continuity in what seems to be complete chaos. Explanation and continuity are not just anthropological hobbyhorses. In the endless village palavers I followed in East Cameroon about mesmerizing witchcraft suspicions, speakers confronted each other with various, lengthy explanations, full of skepticism, but at the same time trying to develop a logical chain of arguments.

Let me end, therefore, with an artisanal remark about ethnography and how to do it. The emphasis in anthropology today on things and their agency is most welcome, and so is the warning not to come up with causal explanations for forces that are so resilient precisely because they cannot be known. But this

the misery they left behind by a general nostalgia (roughly around the middle of the last century). But when later in that century they started to rebuild their contacts with "home," this nostalgia was replaced by a more realistic, ongoing experience. One could think here of nostalgia as verging toward Freud's conception of melancholia that blocks coping with loss. But both tracks point in the same direction regarding what nostalgia seems to produce in the books discussed here: a basic uncertainty about the present that risks becoming paralyzing. This makes the frenetic struggle of the people involved in overcoming this threatening paralysis all the more admirable, and all the more impressive in that they seem to succeed at least to a certain degree. Thus the frenzied rituals of the Buryat shamans do at least sometimes offer relief, Central Africans' quests for healing are sometimes rewarded, and the Buli succeed in keeping *gua* at bay throughout much of their lives.

can never be an excuse to take the interpretations voiced by the people involved less seriously. This implies also that it remains vital to indicate clearly in the text who is speaking: which passages are about how the people involved formulate their insights, and when the voice of the anthropologist is taking over with all sorts of theoretical finesse. Especially when a topic is mostly invisible and shrouded in mystery, it is vital to be meticulously clear as to who is speaking, or who is "seeing." Such simple rules are easily forgotten in times of theoretical excitement. Or, to put it differently, these are more than ever times that call for a certain humility from ethnographers, to be good listeners and resist the temptation to drown out what people tell us by ambitious theorizing. One secret of the power of all of these monographs lies there.

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