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Modernity through the Eyes of Witchcraft: A Radical Critique of Categorisation

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The Enlightenment has come to dominate global discourse. In so many ways it has disseminated, often through imperial/colonial actions, a knowledge system which has prioritised objectivity and rationality and excluded as superfluous or vacuous entire cultures of knowing and perceiving. That most important of Enlightenment concepts, progress, is, itself, built on replacing indigenous knowledge systems with sound scientific thinking – of transforming from traditional to modern. However, this progress has stuttered. Modernity has not replaced all tradition, and traditional ways of knowing and perceiving and the place of humans in it continue to be the basis of human experience. Many core Enlightenment tenets have faced stern opposition both, within Western society, by a plethora of anti-foundationalist philosophers, and, beyond Western society, by, for example, the East Asian contributors to the Asian values debate. The universality of rights, the objectivity of science and the merits of modern technology have all faced intense academic and popular scrutiny. However, there are examples of cultural opposition to such tenets which have been often overlooked and which, if given suitable attention, would enable us to explain and understand the distinctive ways in which Enlightenment has the potential to injure human beings. In this essay, I shall seek to illustrate the rich way in which a particular cultural tradition can articulate key deficits in the Enlightenment project. The tradition to which I refer is witchcraft in Africa.

While my focus in this essay lies in the African incarnation, belief in witchcraft, as a power which operates within an occult or spiritual dimension on reality, is not limited to the continent. It exists, or has existed, in most parts of the world (Moore and Sanders 2001: 11). In its African form, it has developed a series of important responses to modernity which, as I shall argue, highlight some core internal contradictions within Enlightenment. I come to dissect and explain the ways in which witchcraft highlights these contradictions in the following manner. First, I discuss some of the most explicit issues with modernity in (without wishing to appear tautological) the contemporary period. I then introduce the response of witchcraft to these issues. Finally, I employ the civilisational categorisations of Cox (2000) to explain the foundations of the critical response of witchcraft traditions to modernity. I argue that divergent notions of time and space, the tension between the individual and community, and contradictory understandings of matter and spirit in spirituality and cosmology, enable people operating within the paradigm of witchcraft in Africa to produce a distinctive critique of modernity. I begin by discussing some explicit issues with modernity and the strident and uncritical way in which these are reproduced in the African context.

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Socially, modernity is about hope and guilt; psychologically, it is about identity (Bauman 1998: 23). In an extremely unequal world, modernity is characterised by the hope of individuals achieving material wealth and social autonomy in peaceful circumstances. It is also characterised by the guilt that arises from achieving those goods – especially so when the victory arises from imperialism or colonialism. This is apparent in the concern of many Westerners for impoverished African people. For many, identity can form around attempts to overcome guilt and promote hope – perhaps through charity giving. However, the discourse on the means by which to overcome guilt and improve the world remains firmly embedded within a Western framework which may actually perpetuate, uncritically, the deficits of modernity. While the concepts of development and progress have faced stern challenges in the West from communitarians, it seems that, in engagements between the West and Africa, they are accepted as objective and unequivocally positive concepts. They rely for their promotion upon the belief in the growth of reason to control our environment so that it fulfils human purposes and increases our collective well-being (Griffiths 2007: 9) and that weak and ‘failed’ or failing states are in need of guidance and intervention by the winners of the system to develop reason. In this, the means by which the failures became failures and the winners became winners is conveniently ignored or forgotten. Thus, the Enlightenment concepts of development and progress are abstracted from their oppressive past and distanced from the harmful effects that they engender. This is particularly apparent in the field of peacebuilding, which Paris (2000: 638) regards as a contemporary incarnation of the *mission civilatrice*. In both 19th and 20th century European colonialism, and contemporary peacebuilding, there is an uncritical faith in the benefit of Westerners inflicting norms acceptable of civilised behaviour into the domestic affairs of ‘less developed’ states. The problem is that the empirical basis upon which belief in these norms is built is extremely unsteady.

The state, and its development, has long been at the heart of peacebuilding efforts as the most effective and rational means of organising political communities. However, Boege (2006: 3) argues that we have to acknowledge that the modern western style Westphalian state hardly exists beyond the OECD world. Those calling for the reconstruction of failed states never ask why they failed in the first place, because of their unshakable belief in the merits of state institutions and their importance to development and progress. However, there is good reason to question these merits in light of the powerful costs associated with membership of a modern state society. Clapham (cited in Boege et al. 2007: 5), for example, has highlighted the costs of statehood as progress, which often “include the sacrifice of identities and structures that are inimical to the hierarchies of control that states seek to impose”. Perhaps sub-consciously, those proponents of state-based peacebuilding seem to retain the colonial mindset that all other civilisations, as Cox (2000: 218) eloquently stated, will “ultimately be included within the embrace of the one civilisation, their own, which had a universal vocation”.

As Africa, and other parts of the world, is increasingly characterised by internal conflicts, there is a need for understanding the impacts of such prescriptions. Increasingly, we need to regard modernity, not simply as a culturally and environmentally specific attempt to resolve a series of equally culturally and environmentally specific problems but, also, as a problem in and of itself. In the case of Africa, this is evident in the way in which it is experienced, not as being inclusive,

but as an exclusive and exclusionary phenomenon. In many cases, people experience modernity as something from which they are excluded and alienated at a most fundamental level (Moore and Sanders 2001: 16). This alienation is not simply an experience of poverty or unemployment, “it is the inability to imagine your society and therefore imagine yourself in it. No quantity of commonsensical, ethical or rational activity, no matter how well-intentioned, can lessen the alienation of being unable to imagine yourself” (Saul 2001: 123). In contemporary Africa, development is presented as the way to salvation, promising concrete and visible results, but the more it is pursued the more alienated people become (Nyamnjoh 2001: 32). Modernity’s focus on individual rights, freedoms and aspirations often clash with local understandings of the importance of community and social harmony. Life in the western state might be compartmentalised into different spheres of economics, politics, culture and religion but, for many traditional societies, this is unimaginable. Social harmony and control was, and is, dependent upon the interconnectedness of these spheres. Traditionally, the role of witchcraft lay in maintaining this harmony. In the new social landscape, as inequalities increase, it is being employed as a means of explaining and tackling human misfortune.

The term witchcraft is a historical one, and its meanings, deriving from a particular period and culture, cannot be meaningfully transferred to another (Crick cited in Moore and Sanders 2001: 4). It is impossible to say that witchcraft is the same in every society, but for the purpose of this essay witchcraft encompasses the belief in supernatural sources of power, including ancestral spirits which provide meaning and a basis for personal and communal reflection, decision, and action. I am less concerned, here, with the practice of witchcraft and more concerned with witchcraft as a discourse insofar as it amounts to a critical response to modernity. Witchcraft discourses represent local perceptions of the global economy, free market economics and privatisation (Rasmussen 2001: 138), which are closely connected to the modern state and its forms of power and wealth (Moore and Sanders 2001: 17, 18). Witchcraft is, essentially, an explanation of power, both, visible and invisible.

Traditionally, witchcraft has been seen as a levelling mechanism preventing social inequalities from developing beyond community control (Moore and Sanders 2001: 18). Many sub-Saharan African peoples believe that there is another dimension of reality – the spiritual. Unlike in Western societies, this is closely connected to the material through belief in the power of ancestors over the living. This belief was a form of social control as the ancestors were believed to demand social harmony in order to continue to protect, and bring good fortune on, the community. Offiong (1997: 423) argues that “the belief in ancestor spirits, the political importance of the elders and their crucial role as the intermediaries between the ancestors and the living, and the belief in the supernatural powers of oath promote conflict resolution and social control in general”. Traditionally, each member of society, through witchcraft narratives, accepted implicitly that departure from socially approved norms was likely to incur the displeasure and vengeance of ancestors (Offiong 1997: 425). These narratives emphasised, through the threat of curses and spells to induce bad fortune, the need to resolve conflicts in a conciliatory manner. This emphasis on harmony is evident in opposition to social inequalities and poverty on the grounds that they engender jealousy and bitterness (Stoller 1995: 158). Thus, witchcraft operated, simultaneously, as a moral narrative and means of behavioural enforcement which facilitated social control, and maintained and restored damaged social orders.

Because of their Enlightenment ontology and epistemology many people, particularly within the peacebuilding and development field, are drawn to neglect this important aspect of indigenous thought. Witchcraft in Africa has been dismissed as an example of the primitive, prelogical other (Levy-Bruhl cited in Moore and Sanders 2001: 2). It is still believed that modernity will eliminate such “superstition” as the distinction between fact and fiction, objective truth and subjective falsehood becomes clearer through state-based development (Moore and Sanders 2001: 2). However, as experience shows, modernity does not, and perhaps can not, destroy all tradition. Belief in witchcraft has proved resilient to change and, instead of disappearing, it has, as I shall illustrate later, been creatively refashioned to suit new situations (Moore and Sanders 2001: 11). The reality here is that, despite the fact that most African societies have undergone major structural changes generating convergence toward the liberal model, the fear of witchcraft in Africa is actually increasing in the contemporary period (Ashforth 2001: 89; Geschiere 2006: 220; Hagen 2004; Moore and Sanders 2001: 9; Niehaus, Mohlala and Shokane 2001: 42, 43).

The perpetuation of the belief in witchcraft among African peoples severely undermines belief in the logical and linear progression of societies from traditional to modern. In this, the dominant Western way of knowing and perceiving of reality has also proven of limited value in understanding the, in this case African, other. Here, Hollis’ (1994: 245) emphasis on the importance of local cultural constitution to conceptions of rationality and reality is instructive. Very often, the western way of comprehending experience is to organise experiences into categories, such as cultural, religious, spiritual, economic and material. However, as Hollis (1994: 237) argues, this compartmentalisational approach, and the subsequent categories, is not universal. In many cultures, in this case in the African context, categorisation is rejected with, as already suggested, various powers, agents and forces interacting with one another under the eyes of the ancestors.

While recognising my own retreat to an approach of categorisation, I suggest that there are certain universal dimensions, axes and categories of cultural thought which may help to explain and distinguish the African from the Western approach. In this, I suggest there is significant heuristic merit in following Cox’s (2000: 220) assertion that there are three dimensions of thought that help distinguish among civilisations: time and space, individual and community, and spirituality and cosmology. Here, Cox suggests that each civilisation has its own distinctive approach to these categories, often being influenced by their decision to prioritise time (as with the Aztecs) or space (as in contemporary, expansionist, Western society) and by the continual tension between individual and community. The deficits of societies lie in the obsessive and excessive pursuit of one side of the category (time over space, individual over community) and the internal contradictions that such pursuits engender. While I again recognise that these categories are developed within Western thought, I believe that, for the purposes of this essay, they enable a deep insight into local African understandings of the internal contradictions of modernity. Contemporary witchcraft is, in a significant sense, a means of comprehending, and adapting to, new realities in which the relations between time and space, individual and community, and spirituality and cosmology have been altered in ways which contradict traditional cultural forms.

According to Cox (2000: 221), “eighteenth century Enlightenment marked a transition point which gave more emphasis to space through a science based on universal laws”. The belief that there is an objective reality which can be studied

through proper scientific methods has come to define truth. The real is the rational, the natural, and the scientific; the unreal is the irrational, the supernatural and the subjective (Nyamnjoh 2001: 29). The problem (not that Enlightenment proponents recognise it as such) of operating within these dichotomies of what is real and what is not is that science becomes a way of exerting control over people's realities. Cox's famous dictum that theory is always for someone and some purpose, suggests that science is not simply a means of predicting but, also, of controlling the world. The timeless wisdom of scientific knowledge, through its greater focus on space than time, removes itself from both history and context. The result is an abstraction of reality with claims to universality and absolutism which deny as subjective and 'unfalsifiable' criticism from beyond the paradigm.

Context and history, including the network of carefully crafted narratives, are important constituents of the means by which people perceive their identity and the world. Context and history are thus closely connected to time. Cox (2000: 220) argues that "a focus on time imagines a common past and projects a common future, myths of origin that shape people's character and vocation, and eschatology of destiny". The Enlightenment rejection of time, because of the belief that knowledge is objective and, therefore, timeless, is the central factor preventing peoples within Africa to imagine themselves within Western frameworks, employing Western concepts. In the contemporary period, imagination is stunted with reason and scientific rationality presented as the pinnacles of reality. Furthermore, the market, a space supposedly regulated solely by the scientific laws of supply and demand, creates a liberal monopoly on the imaginings of modernity. This liberal modernity is the most significant practical means by which the current push towards civilising homogeneity is effected (Gouldberg 1993: 1), with the market and its essential individual rights and freedoms seen as the best way to ensure progress and development. Here, progress and development amount to the rejection of tradition, with an extremely narrow and culturally constituted form of critical thinking and rational persuasion promoted as essential to the realisation of peace (Rappa 2002: 9). The problem remains that such critical thinking and rational thought impairs understanding of the interconnectedness of people, cultures and societies (Werbner cited in Nyamnjoh 2000: 30).

Implicit in Cox' second category - the tension between individual and community - is the belief that individual freedom is in conflict with the expectations of the community. Thus, liberal democracy is believed to be the best, and only legitimate, way of organising political communities to ensure the freedom of the individual. However, as Moore and Sanders (2001: 17) recognise, many states in the Global South are failing precisely because of the illiberal inheritance of colonialism, which has engendered oppressive, demagogic orders, riddled with corruption which deprives local people of the very means to engage in consumerism. In Africa, and elsewhere, neoliberal policies and new relations of production, consumption and accumulation have served simply to enrich the postcolonial elite and to exclude the vast majority of the populace. It is within this context that witchcraft comes to articulate a significant critique of the internal contradictions of modernity.

Firstly, the focus on individualism in the liberal imagination severely contradicts "African traditional beliefs which see the individual as a child of the community, as someone allowed to pursue their own needs, but not greed" (Nyamnjoh 2001: 29). In a system where the workings of the economy have contributed to increased polarisation and social differentiation, people come to believe that there are malevolent forces at work. Given the mystifyingly arbitrary and

dictatorial nature of the global economy, traditional beliefs in the influence of spirit over matter, and the inability of individuals to imagine themselves within modernity, it is not unreasonable to expect such conclusions to be drawn. Witchcraft as a discourse raises questions of how wealth is produced through the exercise of illegitimate and illicit power. It needs to be understood in terms of its response to state power, actual political processes, and local political institutions (Moore and Sanders 2001: 17, 18).

This brings me over to Cox's last category, spirituality and cosmology. According to Nyamnjoh (2001: 29) the epistemological order of Africa does not subscribe to the same dichotomies that characterise the western civilisation. It has equal space for all the senses, visible and invisible. Western frameworks of reality, based on clear dichotomies, tend to prevent comprehension of these alternative perspectives. The spiritual is of absolute importance to traditional African understandings of the world and the place of people within it (Beek 2000: 31; Cox 2000: 222). As such, it is central to the decisions that such people make, meaning that the dichotomy between the secular and sacred is flawed, at least in the African context. Science and modernity follow a linear logic, illustrated by the extra-human determinism of cause and effect. As humans gained knowledge of such causes and effects, instrumental rationality would increase and with the triumph of a secular worldview would come peace and prosperity for all (Moore and Sanders 2001: 2). However, as the perpetuation of witchcraft demonstrates, this view of progress is far from certain. Instead contemporary scholars of witchcraft cast occult beliefs and practices as fundamentally interlinked with modernity (Moore and Sanders 2001: 11).

The link between the occult and modernity can be detected through changes in the witchcraft discourse in response to modernity. Local understandings of witchcraft have moved historically from a mechanism of levelling to a means of pursuing accumulation (Ashforth 2001: 206; Geschiere 1997: 35; Moore and Sanders 2001: 11). Accumulation lies at the heart of liberal modernity, with agency and motivation closely connected to purchasing power. These changes in the witchcraft discourse coincide with the structural developments experienced by most African societies as a result of, first, colonisation and, then, liberal policies promoted by the West through development programs and peacebuilding initiatives. There is now a dynamic relationship between witchcraft and the idiom of the market (Parish 2001: 119), as witchdoctors and healers sell their services to the highest bidder. This creates a situation of uncertainty for those who cannot afford their services, reinforcing the experience of many that modernity is something from which they are excluded. Smith's 'invisible hand' adopts a new and unintended meaning in this context.

The occult economy raises several questions regarding the interaction between, and the inherent interconnectedness of, economic, political, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions in African societies. Thus, at least in the case of African witchcraft, it is not possible to define or conceptualise the other through the separation of Cox' categories. They are interlinked with all aspects of life interconnected as part of an organic whole. In societies which prioritise one of the categories, or one of the concepts within the categories, over the other, imbalance will develop. Witchcraft is identifying this imbalance and disharmony and reacting in a distinctive way to the Western prioritisation of space over time, individual over community, and secular cosmology over spirituality. There are witchcraft shrines in Ghana which symbolise the good and bad powers which operate within the world. At present, many bemused African people assume that the success of the privileged few is due to their invocation

of malign powers. The shrine suggests that the problems posed by the inextricable connection between the wealth of some and the poverty of others (Parish 2001: 122) have to be resolved holistically – by enabling people to imagine a balance of forces through the re-integration of categories. At present, Western thought is incapable of making such a concession. However, this is facile, as the understanding of modernity through witchcraft suggests that the boundaries between past and present and traditional and modern are often blurred despite the protestations of Enlightenment proponents (Moore and Sanders 2001: 11). This is apparent in the most visceral of contexts.

Masquelier (cited in Moore and Sanders 2001:15), for example, argues that stories of cannibalism and headhunting are a part of Nigerian peasants' experience of migrancy, smuggling and marketing. They are connected to their understanding of how capitalism, globalisation, and international relations work. Cannibalism refers to kinsfolk who trade their relatives and consume their life-force in order to get rich (Moore and Sanders 2001: 15). The change from a subsistence agricultural economy to an economy based on wage labour resulted in increased tensions among kin and neighbours over inequalities. These generated envy (Niehaus, Mohlala and Shokane 2001: 42) which led to witchcraft accusations and, perhaps, witchcraft activities. Here, the individualistic economic order has changed perceptions of survival, which is no longer dependent on neighbourliness and the solidarity of large domestic groups (Niehaus, Mohlala and Shokane 2001: 42, 43). In modernity, well-being and human motivation are assessed only through individual freedom and rights in the market place, constituted by rational, utility-maximising, actors pursuing their own individual happiness through the world of production and consumption. This modern identity, based on inwardness, freedom, and individuality, is seen to encompass what it means to be a human agent (Esteva and Prakash 1998: 51). But if this is to have any universal validity, Enlightenment proponents must respond more effectively to the inability of people to find meaning and purpose in the modern world. Without radically altering their compartmentalisation of society and engaging with the understandings of modernity evident in witchcraft, they will be unable to do so. No practicable or foreseeable amount of democratic state building will enable African people to imagine themselves effectively within modernity.

Witchcraft as a discourse provides a critique of modernity and the inherently inegalitarian relations of production and consumption which accompany it. It is a metacommentary on the ill-doings of capitalism and globalisation (Moore and Sanders 2001: 14). The moral underpinning of witchcraft is that “success attainable only at the expense of other's humanity is not considered worth pursuing” (Nyamnjoh 2001: 33). Maybe we can all learn something fundamental about the nature of Enlightenment through this radical critique. To conclude, I will quote the Japanese novelist, Soseki Natsume, (cited in Saul 2001: 67). Here, his hero, a highly domesticated cat, comments on his owners and their fellow humans:

Consider human eyes. They are embedded in pairs within a flat surface, yet their owners cannot simultaneously see to both left and right...Being thus incapable of seeing in the round even in the daily happenings of life in his own society, it is perhaps not surprising that man should get excited about certain one-sided aspects of his limited view of reality...

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