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Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft, Volume 1, Number 1, Summer 2006, pp.
56-78 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.0.0024>



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State Decline and the Return of Occult Powers

The Case of Prophet Eddy in Nigeria

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Like some other African countries, Nigeria is a candidate for state collapse. At a recent conference sponsored by the National Intelligence Council of the United States, experts were already discussing strategies to deal with the possible eventuality of the country's collapse. In early 1999, when Nigeria returned to democracy, expectations were more optimistic. After fifteen years of military rule, Nigerians hoped that life would again become more secure.¹ But soon after the "democratic" elections, people witnessed an "explosion"² of violence. According to one report, "it is estimated that at least 50,000 people have been killed in various incidents of ethnic, religious and communal violence since the return to civilian rule."³ The federal government proclaimed a ban on ethnic militias and sent military units into some of the worst

1. The decline of state institutions had started before the generals assumed power in 1984. Under military as under "democratic" regimes, "political competition became a kind of warfare": Larry Diamond, "Nigeria: The Uncivic Society and the Descent into Praetorianism," in *Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy*, 2nd ed., ed. Larry Diamond et al. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1995), 416–91, here 465. When I worked at a Nigerian university from 1993 to 1996, the ruling elite no longer invested in state building. A senior lecturer earned the equivalent of \$70 U.S. per month, a teacher got about \$20, and a policeman less than \$10. So the main concern of civil servants was to generate extra money, with the result that policeman were widely perceived as "daylight robbers."

2. Ukoha Ukiwo, "Politics, Ethno-Religious Conflicts and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41 (2003): 115–38, here 115; cf. Osita Agbu, *Ethnic Militias and the Threat to Democracy in Post-Transition Nigeria* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004), 5, 13.

3. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile 2005. Nigeria* (London: EIU, 2005), 13.

Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft (Summer 2006)

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crisis areas. In the former capital, Lagos, joint police and army patrols were given orders to shoot any member of the local OPC (O'odua People's Congress) militia who resisted arrest. But the security forces could not regain control over a city with ten million inhabitants.

Militias in Nigeria typically make use of magic or spiritual powers. The first part of this article will illustrate how armed gangs combine physical and occult violence, using as a case study the Bakassi Boys, who operated from 1998 until 2002 among the Igbo in the southeast of Nigeria. They had been formed by market traders as a private security organization, paid to fight armed bandits in Abia State. As they performed their job very efficiently, the governor gave them official recognition and started co-funding them. Soon after, the parliaments of two other Igbo states, Anambra and Imo, entrusted them with the task of "cleansing" the land of criminals.⁴ Besides hunting down ordinary criminals they also fought sorcerers and witches. The governor of Anambra, Dr. Mbadinuju, who called himself the "commander-in-chief" of the local Bakassi units,⁵ claimed that his boys were reviving an "age-long system of our people taking care of their defences."⁶ The militia operated in a social and political environment in which traditional forms of policing were indeed better suited to maintaining order than bureaucratic institutions borrowed from the West. As we shall see, however, the Bakassi Boys adopted Igbo traditions in an arbitrary (or creative) way.⁷

Many militias or vigilante groups in Nigeria and beyond try to gain legitimacy by reviving precolonial traditions. In South Africa, members of the ANC (African National Congress) youth wing and other young rebels who fought Apartheid pretended to act as traditional custodians of their communities, and in this capacity they instigated witch hunts. "With the unbanning of political parties and release of Nelson Mandela from prison, many people experienced a sense of cultural freedom, including the punishment of witches in a typically African way. This was regarded as reaffirmation of African cul-

4. When visiting Nigeria from January to April 2001 and from January to April 2002 I talked to Bakassi fighters in Anambra State and conducted interviews with businessmen and politicians who funded and patronized them. Cf. Bruce Baker, "When the Bakassi Boys Came: Eastern Nigeria Confronts Vigilantism," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20 (2002): 223–44.

5. *Tell* (Lagos), March 26, 2001, 43.

6. *Tell*, August 28, 2000, 28.

7. When referring to Igbo traditions, I will quote a number of ethnographic accounts. However, my analysis is also informed by personal observations in the mid-1990s. My research in Alor Uno, in northern Igboland, focused on witchcraft and Christian spirit possession.

ture after centuries of colonial and Western suppression.”⁸ The initiative to fight occult forces does not always come from the activists themselves. In a recent study on community policing in Port Elizabeth and Nkomazi (South Africa), Lars Buur and Steffen Jensen observed that vigilante leaders tried to avoid dealing with witchcraft accusations but were dragged into such cases under popular pressure: “To be responsive to the people in whose name they operate, members had to deal with witchcraft because there were no other structures, formal or informal, that would do so.”⁹ Secular institutions like the police or law courts, which lack the backing of spiritual powers, are ill-suited to deal with occult forms of evil. So the fear of uncontrolled invisible forces, which has been rising in many parts of Africa since the 1980s or 1990s, has contributed to the delegitimization of state institutions based on Western law. As scholars have noted, “among its other failings, liberal democracy could not formally encompass spiritual power.”¹⁰

While it is obvious that the rising concern about occult forces has contributed to the decline of the state, it is not clear in what way state decline may have contributed to renewed concern or obsession with the occult. The second half of this article will examine some consequences of state disintegration that may help to explain the revival of witch scares. I will again refer to examples from Nigeria, and in particular from the Igbo region, but the four distinct trends I identify could also apply to other parts of Africa:

1. Since the state can no longer protect its citizens, they must turn to militia leaders and other local strongmen who monopolize the means of survival. Those seeking patronage cannot protest or rebel when they are treated in a humiliating manner. As their aggression cannot be expressed openly, it tends to turn into resentment, creating an atmosphere in which people suspect each other of using hidden means in order to act out their greed, envy, and hatred.
2. The armed gangs that are replacing the police cannot establish a monopoly on violence. In order to assert themselves against competing

8. R. T. H. Dolamo, “The Escalation of Crime in the Northern Transvaal Province: A Challenge to the Church,” *Ned. Geref. Teologiese Tydskrif* 37 (1996): 345–51, here 347. Cf. P. Delius, *A Lion amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996); Johannes Harnischfeger, “Witchcraft and the State in South Africa,” *Anthropos* 95 (2000): 99–112.

9. Steffen Jensen and Lars Buur, “Everyday Policing and the Occult: Notions of Witchcraft, Crime and ‘the People’,” *African Studies* 63 (2004): 193–211, here 203.

10. Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004), 107.

gangs, they have to intimidate their rivals by celebrating their strength and brutality. Using physical and occult violence thus becomes part of their public image.

3. Power that defies institutional regulations grows out of public control. It becomes unpredictable and appears to be linked to invisible forces that may be manipulated by secret techniques.
4. Decline, which affects all spheres of social life, is experienced as a collective trauma for which people have no explanation. By linking it to witchcraft, evil is personified, making it comprehensible and opening avenues to take countermeasures.

FIGHTING OCCULT CRIMES

On November 8, 2000, demonstrators stormed the governor's residence in Anambra State, Nigeria, took some of his colleagues hostage, and demanded the execution of a sorcerer called Edward Okeke. Prophet Eddy, also known as the "Jesus from Nawgu," owned a church in which miracle cures had been effected for many years. Whoever visited the prophet was greeted at the very entrance of the "healing center" by pious images in the form of an immense statue of Jesus surrounded by statues of Moses, the Prophet Elias, and finally Eddy himself, rising up over a fallen figure of the devil. As people came to learn, however, behind this façade of Christian piety, monstrous crimes were said to have taken place, including a series of ritual murders.¹¹ Some newspapers speculated that the man of God had killed ninety-three men in order to prepare especially effective charms from their body parts, while in the area of Onitsha, Eddy was suspected of having played a role in the theft of sixteen babies from a maternity ward. Because of the enormous power that people assumed he must have had in order to evade all attempts by state authorities to prosecute him, Edward Okeke was suspected of being no ordinary mortal, but a strange hybrid—half man, half spirit.¹² On posters that were for sale in all the large markets in Igboland, he was depicted with a double face, showing human features hiding an animal-like, demonic rascal. Eddy himself confirmed the suspicion that he was a spirit when he was interrogated by the Bakassi Boys, who had invaded the prophet's villa on November 4 and arrested him. What happened in the following days at their headquarters is recorded on an audio cassette that was on sale throughout Igboland, called *The Original True Confession of Prophet Eddy Nawgu*. This tape actually provides a sort of collage stringing together extracts from the

11. *News Guide* (Lagos), vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, 5–6, 8; *Tell*, December 11, 2000, 42.

12. *News Guide*, vol., no. 1, 2000, 3.

interrogation, accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack consisting of police sirens and shots from a machine-gun. In addition, the alleged confessions do not come from Eddy's own mouth, but are read out by a different voice, as in a radio play. However, the staged character of the tape does not necessarily mean that it was simply fabricated. Original recordings obviously did exist, since, as the conflict over Eddy escalated, the Bakassi leaders sent a video cassette to the president in Ajuba, the capital, showing scenes from the interrogation.

While the prophet was interned in the Bakassi headquarters, the president's office demanded that he be handed over to the police. The governor of Anambra State, who was officially overseeing the activities of the militia, also tried to prevent the Bakassi fighters from executing the sorcerer.¹³ Even Ibrahim Babangida, a former president and probably the richest and most powerful man in the country, is said to have exerted pressure behind the scenes to have the prophet released. In conversation with some market traders, whose stands were directly in front of the Bakassi headquarters, I was told that on those November days limousines from various states drove up bringing government officials to negotiate with the Bakassi leadership. I was assured that if ex-General Babangida wanted someone released, he could offer a sum of fifty million Naira without hesitating. But the Bakassi Boys were not to be bribed. On November 9, they led Edward Okeke out of his cell and brought him to a market place, where twenty thousand onlookers sang enthusiastic songs while the young men hacked the sorcerer to pieces with their machetes.¹⁴

At first sight, it might be assumed that the dispute over whether the prophet should be released or executed reflected a conflict between enlightened and traditional forms of thought. Yet this was not a confrontation between legal-minded state representatives and a murderous mob possessed by backward, anachronistic ideas. Everyone in Nigeria knew that the politicians who became mixed up in the case took occult powers as seriously as anyone else. For example, the governor of Anambra, a qualified jurist and former university lecturer, reported to the press that some of his supporters had once stormed a church in which his opponents were preparing magic substances: "The church was stormed and pieces of human flesh . . . were found being used for fetish concoction, all of them targeted at myself and some key politicians in Anambra State."¹⁵ It is not unusual in Nigeria for government func-

13. Ibid., 2, 7–8; *Tell*, December 11, 2000, 42.

14. *News Guide*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, 2–3.

15. *Vanguard* (Lagos), October 15, 2001, 3.

tionaries to be intensely concerned with occult threats. General Abacha, who ruled the country until 1998, kept sorcerers, fortune-tellers, and Islamic marabouts with him in his presidential bunker, while members of his government often had to wait days or weeks for an audience.¹⁶ Against this background, it is hardly surprising that state representatives acted so decisively on behalf of the sorcerer from Nawgu. In the eyes of the people, the alleged ritual murderer was part of the political establishment—indeed he embodied the worst aspects of the Nigerian upper classes. The violent protests in the state capital, which were to lead to the sorcerer's lynching, therefore had aspects of political rebellion or class warfare, at least for Western observers.¹⁷ There could be no doubt that Edward Okeke had close links with the top ranks of society; some of his most influential clients had had themselves photographed with him, photographs that Eddy had hung in his office to advertise his spiritual business. These photographs gave rise to the suspicion that the prophet must have possessed particularly exclusive charms in order to attract such prominent clients. Why else should his visitors have made him presents of luxury limousines?

To Westerners, the accusation that the church owner from Nawgu had enriched himself by means of human sacrifices sounds groundless. In Nigeria, on the other hand, the public is becoming uneasy because ritual murders are in fact taking place. According to official estimates, between 1992 and 1996 alone some six thousand individuals are supposed to have fallen victim to ritual murder.¹⁸ In the popular imagination, such crimes are readily associated with the rich and powerful,¹⁹ and indeed one is often told that they have only been able to acquire riches through occult means. The suspicion therefore rages that members of the upper classes, like

16. *Tell*, March 25, 1996, 8 and June 22, 1998, 18.

17. On this, cf. Daniel Jordan Smith's study of a similar event in Igboland, a revolt by the citizens of Owerri against a syndicate of ritual murderers: Smith, "Ritual Killing, '419,' and Fast Wealth: Inequality and the Popular Imagination in Southeastern Nigeria," *American Ethnologist* 28 (2001): 803–26, here 805.

18. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 2, 1996. Even though the scale may be accurate, this seems to be an arbitrary figure. More reliable figures come from South Africa, where a government commission was set up to examine the many cases of witch persecution and ritual murder: N. V. Ralushai et al., *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province of the Republic of South Africa: Submitted to the MEC for Safety and Security, Northern Province* (1996) [unpublished]; Jeremy Evans, "Muti Murders: Ritual Responses to Stress," *Indicator South Africa* 8 (1991): 46–48, here 46.

19. Daniel Jordan Smith, "'The Arrow of God': Pentecostalism, Inequality, and the Supernatural in South-East Nigeria," *Africa* 71 (2001): 586–613, here 593.

witches, join together in secret societies. Whoever wants to become a member of their “millionaires’ clubs” has to “sell” a close relative. The person to be sacrificed would then be gripped by a mysterious disease and slowly wither away because his tormentors would devour his soul or invisibly destroy his inner organs.

RIVAL FORMS OF JUSTICE

In my analysis, state authorities are hardly in a position to contain fear of occult powers. In a number of African countries, certainly, the state assumes an active role in combating witches and sorcerers. In Cameroon, for example, anthropologists have reconstructed a series of trials with the aid of court files, showing that judges did not hesitate to sentence the accused to long prison sentences, despite the lack of any concrete evidence. Convictions were often based on the statement of a single witch doctor, who established with the help of magical techniques that a defendant was guilty, while in a few cases the accused were persuaded to confess. A twenty-year-old student, for example, professed to have entered the house of a village teacher by means of witchcraft. Together with three other defendants, he operated on the victim, removed his heart, and then ate it. Since then, the teacher had been living without his heart. The three other accused disputed this story, but to no avail. The judge determined that the leader of the group, like his accomplices, was trying to “mislead the tribunal with his vain and ridiculous denials.”²⁰ Therefore all the accused received prison sentences of up to five years, a judgment that was later confirmed by the appellate court in the provincial capital.

Here, judicial processes that appear to follow Western forms of legal procedure and judgment are revealed to be a farce, or rather a façade concealing all manner of local intrigues. When judges have to try offences that were committed secretly and invisibly, they hardly have a choice but to consult ritual experts who claim to be able to identify witches. In this way, traditional healers, diviners, and witch doctors acquire a crucial role in administering justice. As intermediaries between judges and the local population, they control access to the courts. Only plaintiffs who can gain the backing of an influential witchfinder will have a chance to succeed in bringing their charges of witchcraft. Such backing, however, is not free. Witch doctors sell their services to the highest bidder. It is therefore almost exclusively the local big

20. Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 174.

men, that is, rich farmers, teachers, party functionaries, or businessmen, who make use of witchcraft trials to terrorize their opponents.²¹

Even in normal trials that have nothing to do with magic or witchcraft, the decisions of state courts have little legitimacy. The openness of the proceedings, together with complicated rules of procedure and for establishing evidence, should ensure that, as in European or North American courts, truth emerges. In Nigeria, however, as in other African states, court cases often drag on for years, only to result in apparently arbitrary decisions because decisive arrangements are actually made behind the scenes. Money is often involved, and when high sums are at stake judges do not hesitate to pronounce long prison sentences against defendants whom everyone knows to be innocent.²² Since European-style court systems do not produce justice, it is not difficult to turn one's back on them. Militias like the Bakassi Boys avoided public trials; instead they used spiritual means of determining the truth, including the so-called "lab test." During interrogations, a special chain, or sometimes a tortoise, would be hung around the suspect's neck, making it impossible for him to lie.²³ The Bakassi fighters also possessed a sword that only drew blood when it came into contact with a murderer or a thief.²⁴ For Westerners it is frightening to imagine that decisions of life or death should depend on such methods. For many Igbo, however, it is reassuring to know that judgment is rendered by alien, invisible powers, not by one's fellow humans,²⁵ as human authority is scarcely to be trusted. Such practices have a long history. In the precolonial era it was usual for people to consult poison oracles or to turn to shrine priests and diviners in order to let religious or magical forces decide critical questions.

People have often resorted to the occult because they lacked effective mechanisms to resolve conflicts. Having no access to independent central powers meant that any groups that got involved in a conflict were also bur-

21. Ibid. 114, 170, 172. Diane Ciekawy's case study from Kenya is similar: Ciekawy, "Witchcraft in Statecraft: Five Technologies of Power in Colonial and Postcolonial Kenya," *African Studies Review* 41 (1998): 119–41, here 125.

22. Civil Liberties Organisation, *Justice for Sale: A Report on the Administration of Justice in the Magistrates and Customary Courts of Southern Nigeria* (Surulere, Lagos: Civil Liberties Organisation, 1996).

23. *Tell*, December 18, 2000, 34.

24. *Newswatch* (Lagos), September 18, 2000, 16.

25. Cyril C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo in Nigeria* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1987), 109–10.

dened with the task of resolving that conflict among themselves.²⁶ Under such circumstances, the determination to have an oracle decide matters may have been the best means of keeping or reconstituting the peace. Thus, thousands of people in search of justice once came from all over Igboland to the famous shrine of Arochukwu in order to have their disputes settled there. The priests who managed the cult would lead the accused into a closed-off area of the shrine, and when the stream that emerged from the sacred grove turned red, people knew that the god's decision had been rendered. The British authorities who destroyed the oracle in 1901 could only see it as a fraudulent undertaking. Colonial officers reported that the priests reddened the water of the stream with goat's blood because they were not executing those found guilty, but rather selling them into slavery.²⁷ Yet for the quarrelling parties who made their way to the Aro shrine as pilgrims, it was advantageous to ignore such possible manipulations and to surrender to the illusion that they were subjecting themselves to an impartial deity. The actual content of divine judgment was less important than the fact that unequivocal judgment had been made, ending the conflict before it could escalate into a chain of revenge killings.²⁸

26. Igor Kopytoff, "The Internal African Frontier: The Making of African Political Culture," in *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*, ed. Igor Kopytoff (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3–84, here 18; Robin Horton, "Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa," in *History of West Africa*, 2nd ed., ed. J. F. A. Ajayi and Michael Crowder (Burnt Mill, Harlow Essex: Longman, 1981), 1:72–113, here 85–86.

27. Chukwuma Azuonye, "The Heroic Age of the Ohafia Igbo: Its Evolution and Socio-Cultural Consequences," *Genève-Afrique* 28 (1990): 7–35, here 16; Frank Hives, *Ju-Ju and Justice in Nigeria* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head Limited, 1933), 103ff.

28. René Girard, *Das Heilige und die Gewalt* (Zürich: Benziger, 1987), 28ff. Today people again submit their affairs to the judgment of the spirits, as there is no human authority they can trust. Igbo politicians have little reason to accept the verdicts of law courts or the decisions of party executives and parliamentary meetings. Before the present governor of Anambra State was given a chance to campaign for his office, he had to visit a shrine and swear to his godfather, a wealthy businessman and influential member of the ruling PDP (People's Democratic Party), that he would provide him with government contracts. This secret oath became known only when the police raided the shrine and detected sixty corpses in its vicinity. According to the priests, the dead bodies had been brought to the evil forest surrounding the shrine because the deity residing there had killed these unfortunate people. Whenever a vow sworn at the shrine was broken and the deity felt offended, it would take revenge, so that the guilty party, wherever he or she was, would die within a certain period of time. The corpses of the deceased were not allowed to be buried, but were displayed openly around the shrine as they testified to the deity's determination and strength.

In the case of the Bakassi Boys, too, belief in occult powers made it easier for people to accept the excessive force they used. According to the estimates of the Civil Liberties Organisation, in Anambra State alone the Bakassi Boys are supposed to have killed three thousand people within a period of eighteen months.²⁹ Despite such brutality, however, they enjoyed enormous popularity for a variety of reasons. A decisive factor was that they did not act as arbitrarily or corruptly as the police, who “routinely” torture suspected law-breakers while simultaneously working together with criminal bands.³⁰ After the government gave the Bakassi Boys authority to pursue criminals, the rate of violent crimes fell dramatically, to such an extent that a commission of independent journalists determined that Anambra was the most secure state in Nigeria.³¹ Naturally there were indications that the militia mistreated the innocent and intimidated political opposition on behalf of the governor. Nevertheless the population persevered in the belief that, thanks to its spiritual superiority, the most powerful and most dreaded militia in Igboland did not spill innocent blood. Competence in matters of the occult was regarded as an essential advantage for the Bakassi fighters, and when rival Bakassi factions emerged, it became a crucial criterion for determining the authenticity of the group. When the parliament of Imo State set up an autonomous Bakassi unit, for example, suspicion arose that it was not genuine, but an instrument of corrupt politicians. What puzzled people was the fact that the militiamen obviously did not know how to handle occult techniques. According to one report: “Whereas the original Bakassi Boys in Abia and the ones in Anambra use magical powers to fish out criminals, the ones in Imo relied on information supplied by members of the public to arrest their suspects. Soon, it became public knowledge that people were supplying Bakassi Boys with names of their enemies to settle personal scores. Imo indigenes concluded that Bakassi Boys without magical powers must be fake ones.”³²

Clients visiting the oracle would gain the impression that there was no counter-magic strong enough to save the guilty party and that nobody had a chance of manipulating the verdict, as one would do in a secular court when bribing the judge (*Newswatch*, August 23, 2004, 14–26, and October 11, 2004, 18–19).

29. *News Service* (Enugu), February 2002, 31–32.

30. Civil Liberties Organisation, *Above the Law: A Report on Torture and Extra-judicial Killings by the Police in Lagos State, Nigeria*. (Surulere, Lagos: Civil Liberties Organisation, 1994), 22; Human Rights Watch, *Political Shari'a?: Human Rights and Islamic Law in Northern Nigeria*, http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/21/nigeri9364_txt.htm, May 18, 2005, 3, 6.

31. *Newswatch*, May 14, 2001, 42.

32. *Crystal* (Abuja), August 2001, 42–43.

The most convincing means the Bakassi group in Anambra had of demonstrating its superiority in the realm of the occult was to execute Edward Okeke. While the police could not harm the “false prophet” because he had bewitched them,³³ the Bakassi fighters were well equipped to do battle with him. Because the “great spiritualist” possessed the capacity to make himself invisible, however, even the Bakassi Boys required two attempts before they were said to have succeeded in capturing him at his villa. Further problems arose during the subsequent interrogation. It would hardly have been possible to force Eddy to confess to his crimes if the juju man who was aiding the Bakassi Boys in their search for the truth had not developed an unusual method. In order to break the prophet’s magic, his long, bushy hair, which had helped give him a strange, wild appearance, was cut off.³⁴ The militia then celebrated the final triumph over their opponent with his public execution, when they played football with the prophet’s head. Through this act of contempt, they were able to show that they did not even fear the ghost of the deceased.³⁵

RESENTMENT AND FEAR OF WITCHES

Other examples could be adduced to demonstrate how the state is losing legitimacy in Nigeria because it cannot meet new occult challenges. More interesting, however, is the question of whether the decline of the state has itself contributed to people feeling increasingly threatened by occult powers. The essential problem is simply why fear of witches and sorcerers has revived since the end of the twentieth century. Anthropologists who studied witchcraft during the colonial period assumed that obsession with the occult would disappear through urbanization and the dissolution of traditional family groups,³⁶ given that witchcraft, at that time, was considered to be the dark

33. *Guardian* (Lagos), January 14, 2001.

34. This scene is shown on one of the Bakassi posters that could be bought in the markets.

35. In Igboland, it was a widespread tradition to cut off the heads of slaughtered enemies, but the headhunters of the precolonial period dealt with their trophies quite differently. The skull of the murdered victim was treated with care, sometimes being colorfully decorated and kept in the ancestral shrine, while fighters who had been stained with blood went through elaborate rites of purification (N. Uka, “A Note on the ‘Abam’ Warriors of Igbo Land,” *Ikenga* 1 [1972]: 76–82, here 80–81; Emefie Ikenga-Metuh, “Ritual Dirt and Purification Rites among the Igbo,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 15 [1985]: 3–24, here 16).

36. Max Marwick, “The Decline of Witch-Beliefs in Differentiated Societies,” in *Witchcraft and Sorcery: Selected Readings*, ed. Max Marwick (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1975), 379–82, here 380.

side of kinship. Accusations usually circulated among members of the same family or village community, that is, between people who could not avoid one another because they were closely tied together in fixed living conditions. From foreigners, those who were not part of one's own moral universe, one expected not hidden forms of violence, but open aggression, which might manifest in theft, slave raids, or blood revenge.³⁷ Among kin or neighbors, on the other hand, hatred that threatened the whole group should not be expressed openly. To survive in a precarious world, the inhabitants of a compound or a small settlement were obliged to stand united against external enemies. Yet significant tensions and aversions arose precisely among those people who saw each other daily, indeed who were forced to live together without ever choosing such a relationship. People enter family groups by the chance of birth, and even women who married into families, and who usually came from outside villages, had often not sought their new home themselves. The mutual aggression that was bottled up in the narrow circle of daily contact often mutated into resentment that could not easily be dispelled, since the inhabitants of a farmstead could not simply turn their backs on one another and separate. Where else would they find protection if not within their own kinship group?

In a country in which a large portion of the population consisted of slaves, leaving one's home settlement and seeking one's luck among strangers was more than just risky. The fear of armed bands lying in wait outside the village was so great that women were often hesitant to collect water or firewood unless they went out in large groups or were accompanied by armed fighters.³⁸ Only with the public peace enforced by colonial authorities could peo-

37. T. O. Beidelman, *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 147; E. H. Winter, "The Enemy Within: Amba Witchcraft and Sociological Theory," in *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, ed. John Middleton and E. H. Winter (London, Henley, and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 277–99, here 294.

38. G. T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 2nd ed. (Lagos: University Publishing, 1982), 94. In the north of present-day Nigeria, where the Muslim preacher Usman dan Fodio proclaimed a holy war against nonbelievers in 1804, millions of people were enslaved during the jihad. When the British conquered this region, 25–50 percent of the population of the emirates were slaves (Paul E. Lovejoy, "Problems of Slave Control in the Sokoto Caliphate," in *Africans in Bondage: Studies in Slavery and the Slave Trade*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986], 235–72, here 240). In Igboland, which never fell under Muslim rule, the proportion of slaves was apparently lower, though here, too, "the slave trade overshadowed every aspect of life." "One could not go to another town's sector of the market without being led by an armed elder. Any lapse in this protection might lead to a person's enslavement. . . . Movement during the slave trade period was limited to the survival

ple penetrate into remote areas and settle among strangers. Protected by the state, they could leave the shelter of their family group and determine for themselves where and with whom they would live. Given this increase in individual autonomy, the prediction that witch-beliefs would wither away seemed reasonable. As Max Marwick has noted, “in the towns, a preponderance of strangers not linked intimately or emotionally makes it possible for hostility and opposition to be expressed openly rather than supernaturally,”³⁹ and “beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery began to decline . . . when small-scale, intimate communities began to be displaced by large, impersonal, urban complexes.”⁴⁰ My impression is that state-centred modernization indeed went hand in hand with a process of disenchantment. Yet in the last decades of the twentieth century, major achievements of modernization were lost. Life has become so insecure, even in rural areas, that people must submit to the patronage of more powerful groups or individuals. Without protection by local politicians or militias, by secret cults or religious communities, individuals would be largely without rights, since rights only exist if they can be defended by force.

In Igboland, as in other parts of Nigeria, no effective protection can be expected from the police and the judicial system. Quite the contrary, the agents of a disintegrating state have themselves grown out of control, to the extent that they often increase the pervading sense of insecurity: “People are permanently under siege and the fear of illegal detention.”⁴¹ In order to supplement their modest incomes, the police often arrest ordinary citizens under any pretext and incarcerate them in overflowing cells until their families come and purchase their freedom. Nor do such victims always succeed in escaping the clutches of the state’s security forces. According to a government commission that visited the overfilled prisons, more than half the inmates had never been legally sentenced. Many prisoners had been in their cells for up to ten years without ever having seen a judge.⁴² People cannot rebel openly against such arbitrary actions by state officials. Most have to endure this ha-

of the fittest”: Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People*, 2nd ed. (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), 48; Elizabeth Isichei, *Igbo Worlds: An Anthology of Oral Histories and Historical Descriptions* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), 76–77.

39. Marwick, “Decline of Witch-Beliefs,” 380.

40. M. G. Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting: A Study of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 295.

41. *The News* (Lagos), August 10, 1998, 17.

42. *Guardian*, January 31, 1995, and February 12, 1996; *Tell*, January 5, 2004, 46, and October 11, 2004, 30–31; Human Rights Watch, *Political Shari’a?*, 6.

rassment with impotent rage and behave submissively in order not to provoke further violence.

What compels people to seek protection are not just the threats presented by state authorities, police, and other armed bands, but also the precarious economic situation. Seventy percent of Nigeria's population lives below the poverty line, without much prospect of finding a way out of their misery.⁴³ Hardly any work can be found in large cities, where many industries have collapsed. Yet few of the unemployed can go back to their home villages because they no longer have any land to cultivate. Scarcity of land is especially problematic for the Igbo, who since precolonial times have had to live "in some of the heaviest population concentrations in all Africa."⁴⁴ Today southeast Nigeria is hopelessly overpopulated, and the exhausted, eroded soil does not yield enough food for the local population. Rural areas have thus become net importers of food; their inhabitants can no longer ensure their own sustenance without the cash remittances sent to them by family members in Lagos, Hamburg, or New York.⁴⁵ For subsistence farmers, used to earning their living with a hoe and a piece of land, to see their means of survival slip out of their hands is a traumatic experience. In desperation, they cling to those family members who are a little better off than they are, and above all they take their concerns to the lobbies of the big men and patiently wait to be admitted. In the past, the local elites were eager to have such clients and readily exchanged their wealth for prestige. Today, as they are besieged by people seeking help, elites are more inclined to distance themselves from the mass of the poor.⁴⁶ In any case, they cannot fulfil the expectations of all those in need; instead they put off, stall, or simply eject tiresome petitioners. As a result, those they reject regard the lavish wealth of the upper

43. Economist Intelligence Unit, *Country Profile 2005: Nigeria*, 16.

44. Richard N. Henderson, *The King in Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), 23. "Igbo communities were almost constantly at war," and as an Igbo elder remembered, "wars were fought mostly over land issues": Isichei, *History of the Igbo People*, 78–79.

45. See the case study by Gilbert Malchau, *Einkommensstruktur kleinbäuerlicher Haushalte und gesamtwirtschaftlicher Strukturwandel in Südost-Nigeria: Untersuchungen im Rahmen eines erweiterten Tragfähigkeitsansatzes im dichtbesiedelten Hinterland von Uyo* (Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 1998), 110, 147–48.

46. Peter Lewis, "From Prebendalism to Predation: The Political Economy of Decline in Nigeria," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36 (1996): 79–103; Elizabeth Isichei, *Voices of the Poor in Africa* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 248.

class with resentment and envy, and indeed suspect that the nouveau riche have acquired their privileges in an illegitimate and obscure manner. One Igbo newspaper, for example, claimed that most businessmen in Anambra State owed their success to the demonic arts of Edward Okeke.⁴⁷

The violent protest against Eddy and his allies was one of the few occasions when popular anger against the arrogance of the ruling circles exploded. In more typical interactions, when people come to the villas of the rich asking for jobs, small favors, or help against an enemy, they are compelled to hide their bitterness. It would be fatal to rebel against those one needs. Impoverished Nigerians (who are, as a rule, neither exploited by modern factory work nor forced to pay traditional tribute) do not claim any collective rights, but instead demonstrate their servility as they request individual favors. Locked in competition with everyone else lacking means, they are desperate to find influential supporters who will incorporate them into a network of patronage and thus provide them with some security. For everyone knows that, if difficulties arise, the solidarity of the poor will help less than the generosity of the rich.

Since people cannot openly rebel, most of them have no alternative but to fantasize revenge in secret. With growing resentment, the fear of invisible forms of aggression also increases. As social anthropologists have observed with regard to premodern, small-scale societies: “people accuse one another of witchcraft when they are prohibited from expressing their aggression in other ways.”⁴⁸ In order to defend themselves against attacks by their fellow citizens, impoverished farmers take what little money they have to so-called “native doctors” or “herbalists.” Even Catholic priests stuff jujus behind their pictures of the Virgin in order to be equipped against any kind of trouble. The outraged citizens who became so indignant about Edward Okeke’s magic skills thus knew what they were talking about. They were themselves deeply involved in occult practices so that their opponents would have reason to fear them. Accusations of pursuing witchcraft or black magic therefore fly in all directions. No one is free from suspicion, whether rich or poor.⁴⁹ Indeed, many people make no secret of the fact that they are equipped with

47. *News Guide*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2000, 7.

48. Philip Mayer, *Witches: Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Rhodes University* (Grahamstown: Rhodes University, 1954), 13.

49. Misty L. Bastian, “‘Bloodhounds Who Have no Friends’: Witchcraft and Locality in the Nigerian Popular Press,” in *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1993), 129–66, here 142.

hidden weapons and occult powers. Those who can afford to consult the most expensive sorcerers let this be known so that potential opponents might be dissuaded from making any kind of spiritual or physical attacks against them.

THE OCCULT DIMENSION OF POWER

Such spiritual mobilization might in some ways reproduce social conditions that prevailed in precolonial times. Before Europeans introduced their model of a secular state, it was self-evident to the Igbo that every sort of power was linked with invisible forces. Every clan, family, or village community gathered around a shrine in order to derive strength from their ancestors or local deities. When competing groups were drawn into feuds, they needed to mobilize all possible resources, so they did not hesitate to call on very violent supernatural agents. Deities that had proven their strength by killing many people were regarded as valuable allies.⁵⁰ In Alor Uno, where I conducted field research, villagers possessed a particularly dastardly goddess who killed people for miles around. Thanks to the brutality of Adoro, who lived in the wild bush on the edge of town, the inhabitants felt protected everywhere they went. They could move about in astonishing safety, as far as the goddess's reputation reached, because the whole world feared to harm one of "Adoro's children."

Apart from seeking the protection of religious powers, the inhabitants of a village or town might also arm themselves with magic weapons, amulets, and other "war medicine." Such treasures, which they acquired at enormous cost, were not hidden away, but displayed openly to intimidate enemies.⁵¹ Magical substances could, of course, also be used for personal ends, to provide fertility in the fields and to protect the harvest from theft, or in more sinister ways to harm one's neighbors. Because of this ambivalence, the profession of sorcerer, who provided jujus for all conceivable purposes, was always rather notorious. Witchcraft, however, was especially threatening. In contrast to the cultic magic of elders or the services of male sorcerers, this most secretive form of occult aggression was almost invariably considered illegitimate and harmful. Not coincidentally, it was mostly women who, while their bodies lay motionless in bed, would allegedly change into animals at night and enter the houses of their victims in order to consume them almost imperceptibly from the inside while they slept defenceless. Women had little opportunity

50. Henderson, *King in Every Man*, 115–23.

51. Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Exhibition Catalogue* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, 1984), 133–34.

to manipulate religious or magical powers in publicly recognized ways. As outsiders coming from other clans and developing at best a broken form of loyalty to their new place of residence, they were excluded from ancestral cults and many other religious activities.⁵² People therefore suspected that they acted out their envy and dissatisfaction by hidden means.

While in the past witchcraft accusations focused on marginal persons, today people in ruling circles are also implicated. All the stories that circulate about blood money, secret human sacrifices, and exclusive millionaire clubs attest to the perceived loss of legitimate authority among the upper classes. What provokes so much moral indignation, however, is not occult violence per se. Power, wealth, and the deployment of spiritual forces are regarded as entirely legitimate when they serve one's own group. While in the precolonial period people never thought of purchasing spiritual protection, the gods they venerated could still demand a high price: "Nri deity was one of the few in Igboland that abhorred human sacrifice."⁵³ Ritual killings to win favor from the gods were accepted for other purposes as well. In some purification ceremonies, a slave was tied to a rope and dragged through every nook and corner of a village in order to take up into his dying body all the pollution that the community had accumulated.⁵⁴ Slaves were often buried with their masters, and they also served the more profane purpose of title taking: "In the central districts of the Ibo country probably the most honorable title is that of Obu Madu, i.e. the one who has killed (his) man. . . . The victim was securely bound to a tree and a young lad, armed with a machete, hacked off the man's head . . . throughout the task he was urged on by the cheers of the assembled company."⁵⁵ Today, popular imagination is again preoccupied with

52. "[W]omen are . . . prohibited from making juju": Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 235; and "[w]omen are generally excluded from inner parts of shrines": Francis A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), 23. Among the Igbo, the exclusion of females was not as strict as among the Jukun and other Nigerian peoples. In a study of northern Igboland, Nwando Achebe describes how in the early twentieth century, a woman could become high priest of a deity: Achebe, *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and King: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900–1960* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2005), 85–87.

53. Oliver A. Onwubiko, *Facing the Osu Issue in the African Synod (A Personal Response)*, 2nd ed. (Enugu: Snaap Press, 1993), 59; cf. Ogbu U. Kalu, *The Embattled Gods: Christianization of Igboland, 1841–1991* (Lagos and London: Minaj Publishers, 1996), 100.

54. Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *African Religions in Western Conceptual Schemes: The Problem of Interpretation (Studies in Igbo Religion)*, 2nd ed. (Jos, Nigeria: Imico Press, 1991), 97; Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 231–33.

55. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, 256.

acts of ritual murder allegedly committed by the rich and mighty, but attitudes have changed. When the mass of the population is becoming impoverished while the elite of politicians and businessmen openly display its wealth, the power of ruling elites becomes demonized.

If there is any sense of legitimate authority at all, it lies rather in the vengeful mission of groups such as the Bakassi Boys, who gave the impression that they did not pursue self-seeking ends but protected the whole land. They could not, however, expect to establish a monopoly of power as the colonial administration had done. The Bakassi Boys had to share their operational space with other violent actors, marauding soldiers and policemen, private security forces and street gangs, militias and ethnic “liberation movements.” Since such groups were allied with rival politicians, clashes between them were unavoidable.⁵⁶ The competition between armed groups, which is slowly turning politicians into warlords, is altering the character of political rule. The sovereign power of the state, which used to control the use of force, did not have to fear rival powers in its territory, whereas the new armed gangs that are gradually replacing the crumbling state must constantly assert themselves against each other. Thus, they have to appear intimidating. For the Bakassi Boys, as for their rivals, it was important to show that they would not shrink from any bloody act. Like a cult of violence that feeds off human sacrifice, they used the punishment of lawbreakers to celebrate their overwhelming might through an endless series of executions.⁵⁷ The cold, ritualized cruelty with which they hacked their victims to pieces and burned them was intended to demonstrate that any attempt at opposing their ruthless power would be in vain.⁵⁸ To create an aura of invincibility, they surrounded

56. William Reno, “The Changing Nature of Warfare and the Absence of State-Building in West Africa,” in *Irregular Armed Forces and Their Role in Politics and State Formation*, ed. Diane E. Davis and Anthony W. Pereira (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 322–45, here 335–36, 340.

57. The cultic aspect was more pronounced in the ritual killings committed by politicians and militia groups in Liberia; see Stephen Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War* (London: Hurst, 1999), 249–59.

58. Such dastardly acts were not alien to European states either, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the absolutist state was seeking to establish itself in opposition to other sources of power. The sovereign staged cruel executions in order to present his power with triumphant gestures: “La cérémonie du supplice fait éclater en plein jour le rapport de force qui donne son pouvoir à la loi.” “[L]’exécution de la peine est faite pour donner non pas le spectacle de la mesure, mais celui du déséquilibre et de l’excès . . . Et cette supériorité, ce n’est pas simplement celle du droit, mais celle de la force physique du souverain s’abattant sur le corps de son adversaire . . . pour le montrer marqué, vaincu, brisé. . . . Le supplice ne

themselves with attributes of the occult, especially with jujus that they wore clearly visible on their upper arms, and sometimes also around their hips or ankles. It was through such mysterious means, coupled with their fearless and resolute appearance, that they acquired the reputation of being bulletproof, so that initially even the army and the police did not dare to attack them.

LACK OF PREDICTABILITY

The decline of the state might be contributing to the return of the occult in yet another way. Since power is hardly regulated institutionally anymore, it has become unpredictable and seems to be connected to hidden forces, and everyone in society has an interest in manipulating these forces. In all spheres of life, it now seems advisable to take occult influences into consideration. In the universities, for example, students seek the help of miracle doctors or (Christian) spirit mediums in order to pass their examinations. Government employees seeking promotion or businessmen looking for customers arm themselves with amulets against the evil magic of their opponents, and in politics, too, the rise and fall of powerful figures seems to depend on invisible forces. Despite the introduction of “democracy,” the use of power has not become more transparent; rather, “power is located other than where the law proclaims it to be.”⁵⁹ As in the period of military dictatorship, cliques of politicians, rich businessmen, and (pensioned-off) army officers arrange among themselves who will fill which positions—a game of intrigues and swiftly moving alliances. Whoever wins any power must defend it tirelessly since the possession of power is no longer guaranteed by institutions. As in other African countries, “the most amazing changes of fortune are possible,” for example, “Laurent-Désiré Kabila, a small-time bandit chief and smuggler . . . dropped almost entirely from international view, before emerging from nowhere, as it were, to become president of Congo.”⁶⁰ Power attaches itself to certain individuals and leaves them again, without any clear criteria that would make its use calculable. The assumption that power has an occult dimension is sometimes corroborated by politicians themselves, who feed the suspicion that they are in league with sinister forces. What brought them to the top was not only intrigues, cleverness, and criminal machinations (which they share with their rivals), but also more mysterious means.⁶¹

rétablissait pas la justice: il réactivait le pouvoir”: Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 61, 60.

59. Ellis and Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 190.

60. Ibid., 45.

61. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999), 66ff.

A COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

The impression that the world is ruled by dark forces has been intensified by a kind of moral trauma. Social and political decline has placed Nigeria's inhabitants in a world in which the relationship between good and bad, guilt and atonement, has become unbalanced. As in other African countries, people "are increasingly concerned with the presence of evil."⁶² The importance of such collective anxieties becomes apparent when compared with the situation in Europe in the fifteenth century. Here, as in other premodern civilizations, the peasant population had always been worried about witchcraft and malicious forms of magic. Yet they had learned to coexist with sorcerers and witches so that large-scale witch hunts were rare. On the eve of the great witch-craze, however, it seems that "European civilization was overwhelmed by collective fear."⁶³ Historians have pointed to the "threat posed by Islam, the increasing frequency of hunger crises, the return of the Black Death, and the split of the Roman Church." As Wolfgang Behringer has argued, no one can assess the extent to which these events affected peasants in the valleys of the western Alps where the first major witch hunts took place. Nevertheless, there were developments that had a direct impact on all communities involved in witch-hunting. Starting in the 1430s, waves of extreme climatic deterioration "left European society 'on the brink of apocalypse.'"⁶⁴ The disaster that the Little Ice Age brought had two main features—it affected all spheres of society, and it was incomprehensible.

For the vast majority of Igbo and other Nigerians, a surfeit of suffering has broken over their heads. As the means of survival grow scarce, they desperately fight their rivals, but in doing so they become all the more caught up in a web of aggression with no way out. For many, life is becoming a nightmare, and they find no means to arrest the downward spiral: "When you look at yourself as an African, it is easy to think that God has cursed you."⁶⁵ All attempts to emulate the development of Western societies by adopting their technical and administrative systems have led to a dead end, and the causes of this "catastrophic decline"⁶⁶ are obscure. Of course, everybody knows that politicians in Nigeria are corrupt, as are policemen, teachers, and

62. Ellis and Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 41.

63. Wolfgang Behringer, *Witches and Witch-hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 60.

64. *Ibid.*, 60, 61.

65. Paul Gifford, quoting a preacher from Zambia: Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst, 1998), 324.

66. *Ibid.*, 348.

administrative staff. But why are state bureaucracies working in Europe and North America? Some former students and colleagues told me that Europeans, in their quest for hegemony, have relied on the superiority of their witches or sorcerers. How else did they manage to invent computers or send rockets to the moon? The secrets of their strength, so I was told, might also be due to the fact that they have found ways to handle occult forces in less destructive ways. Instead of directing magic and witchcraft against each other, as Africans are inclined to do, they may have turned these forces into a resource of common strength.

Commentators in the West have pointed to a sense of “moral panic” or “moral confusion” that has spread in large parts of Africa.⁶⁷ Many Nigerians would agree that they are witnessing a “moral collapse in the nation,”⁶⁸ but while Western experts propagate social technology and secular institutions as a way out of the crisis, Nigerians look instead for religious solutions. Before they can transform their social and political environment, they need to develop a sense of common direction. Without a consensus on what is good or evil, right or wrong, the mass of the population will not find the strength to check the excesses of the ruling elite and enforce political reforms. Yet in a deeply divided country like Nigeria, there is no consensus in sight. For Muslim reformers in northern Nigeria, Sharia is the only way to overcome “the collapse of moral values.”⁶⁹ By turning to the immutable laws of God, they try to leave the African past behind. According to the new penal code that has been introduced in Zamfara and some other Sharia states, it is a criminal offence to worship gods other than Allah: “Whoever . . . takes part in the worship or invocation of any juju . . . shall be punished with death.”⁷⁰ The term “juju,” which normally refers to various forms of magic and traditional religion, is defined in the Sharia penal code in such a broad sense that it covers all sorts of African religious practices: “‘Juju’ includes the worship or

67. Ellis and Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, 36; Heike Behrend, “Man ist was man isst,” *Kursbuch* 143 (2001): 167–83, here 168.

68. Ogbu U. Kalu, “The Religious Dimension of the Legitimacy Crisis, 1993–1998,” in *Nigeria in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Toyin Falola (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002): 667–85, here 674.

69. Abubakar D. Muhammad, *Muslim Responses to the Re-Implementation of Sharia in Northern Nigeria*, paper presented at the Conference on “The Sharia Debate and the Shaping of Muslim and Christian Identities in Northern Nigeria,” held at the University of Bayreuth, July 11–12, 2003 [unpublished], 7.

70. Zamfara State of Nigeria, *Gazette. No. 1. 15th June, 2000. Vol. 3. Law No. 10. Shariah Penal Code Law* (Gusau, Zamfara State: Ministry of Justice, 2000), sec. 406.

invocation of any object or being other than Allah.”⁷¹ By classifying indigenous forms of religion as godless and wicked, Sharia law treats them like witchcraft, which also carries the death penalty.⁷² Despite such official commitment to “de-Africanize”⁷³ the country, however, it is unlikely that Sharia states will start killing witches or “idolaters.” So far, there have been only mild forms of prosecution. State authorities in Zamfara and Katsina tried to enforce a ban on music and dancing, both of which play a vital role in traditional forms of worship. For some time, such orthodox measures found popular support. Murray Last, an expert on northern Nigeria, wrote at the height of the Sharia campaign: “La culture domestique ‘traditionnelle’ que j’ai connue il y a trente ans n’existe plus.”⁷⁴ But the wave of religious enthusiasm ebbed when the faithful realized that Sharia did not improve their living conditions. As their collective endeavor to eliminate evil has failed, many have begun resorting again to common magic and spiritual means to ward off personal misfortune.

Christians in the south, among them many Igbo, tend to demonize “pagan” traditions as well. But unlike Muslims, they have no blueprint for a just and godly society. When Pentecostal pastors call for a “complete break with the past,”⁷⁵ they expect an inner transformation, a rebirth of the personality that has been steeped in sin: “[W]e are the problem ourselves. The problem . . . is ingrained in us, and to resolve it will require a complete crushing . . . of our personality.”⁷⁶ At the core of the crisis seems to be pacts with “satanic” powers, which take possession of their adherents and drive them to pursue their individual interests recklessly. In order to free themselves from these destructive forces, Christians should acknowledge that their godless ways have led them astray. As one Christian minister noted, “If God does not punish Nigeria in future, then He (God) certainly owes the people of Sodom and Gomorrah an apology.”⁷⁷ Yet the appeal to the personal morality of the individual has a limited effect, since it cannot change the system of patronage and personal dependence that breeds corruption.

71. Ibid., sec. 405.

72. Ibid., sec. 406.

73. William F. S. Miles, “Shari’a as De-Africanization: Evidence from Hausaland,” *Africa Today* 50 (2003): 51–75.

74. Murray Last, “La charia dans le Nord-Nigeria,” *Politique Africaine*, 79 (2000): 141–52, here 148.

75. This expression is taken from Birgit Meyer, “‘Make a Complete Break with the Past.’ Memory and Post-Colonial Modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist Discourse,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 28 (1998): 329.

76. *Tempo* (Lagos), December 5, 1996.

77. Rev. (Dr.) James Ukaegbu, in *Champion* (Lagos), December 23, 1996.

As long as people are locked in a world of decline without any way out, their thoughts tend to revolve around possible conspiracies being set in motion by monstrous means.⁷⁸ Stories of ritual murders, satanic banknotes, and cannibalistic feasts open up a view into a chasm of malice, a world in which nothing can be relied on anymore since the last moral taboos have been broken. These gloomy stories are popular because they dramatize what everyone believes they have experienced when confronted with the unscrupulousness of their fellow humans. This may be a reason why such fantastic stories are accepted with so little skepticism. Listeners assure each other with a bitter realism that admits no illusions that there is nothing they would not believe their fellow humans capable of doing.

In Nigeria, as in other African countries, the decline of state structures is leading to a loss of trust. Contractual relations, sanctioned by law, are being replaced gradually by personal forms of dependence. And even personal loyalties are fragile. As they are largely determined by self-interest, they provide little security. It appears Europe underwent a similar process in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it moved in the opposite direction. With the creation of the state, which removed people's fear of one another, the concern with hidden forms of aggression slowly subsided.

78. This includes global conspiracies. Some Sharia states in northern Nigeria discontinued the polio vaccinations organized by UNICEF, claiming that the vaccine had been contaminated with AIDS. In the south, Christian pastors made it known that the Antichrist, the Great Beast of the Apocalypse, had been born in Europe. Under his leadership, the European Union was preparing for a global showdown by establishing a common parliament, a single currency, etc.: Simeon U. Ezekwe, *European Union Plans to Rule the World with Antichrist*, 2nd ed. (Jos, Nigeria: End-Time Missionary Bookshop, 1999), 20–21.