

THE INCANTATION OF THE DISQUIETING MUSE



Nassim Rouchiche: *Ça Va Waka*, 2015

On Divinity, Supra-Realities
or the Exorcisement
of WITCHERY¹

A S A V V Y Contemporary research and exhibition project
in collaboration with Goethe Institute South Africa in the
framework of *African Futures*

Curator: Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung
Co-curator: Elena Agudio

¹ The term WITCHCRAFT is an insulting generalization of diverse practices that inhabit the realms of the epistemological, metaphysical, technological and cultural. In this project, the term WITCHCRAFT will be appropriated to complexify what it should stand for, i.e. divinatory, medical, magical practices and all sorts of practices that manifest within the supernatural, occult, shamanism, spiritualism and other umbrella nomenclature determined by men of religion and anthropology, who couldn't grasp the reason and rational of such phenomena. The term will be used despite or even especially because of its connotations, so as to liberate these practices from the term and liberate them from the savage slot they have been forced into.

Exhibition: 04.06.–07.08.2016

With the artists: Georges Adéagbo, Atis Rezistans, Sammy Baloji, Jean-Ulrick Désert, Haris Epaminonda, Em'kal Eyongakpa, Louis Henderson, Ayrson Heráclito, Dil Humphrey-Umezulike, Patricia Kaersenhout, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Vladimir Lucien, Marco Montiel-Soto, Emeka Ogboh, Priscila Rezende, Nassim Rouchiche, Georges Senga, Buhlebezwe Siwani, Andrew Tshabangu, Minnette Vári as well as Spoek Mathambo and Mo Lateef

Invocations: 09.06.–12.06.2016

With the performers and speakers: Nora Adwan, Ayodele Arigbabu, Christian Botale Molebo, Shirin Fahimi, Sasha Hueber, David Guy Kono, Vladimir Lucien, Percy Mabandu, Olivier Marboeuf, Carlos Martiel, Achille Mbembe, Molemo Moiloa, Leda Martens, Katrien Pype, Greg Tate, Angela Wachuka, Wanda Wyporska, Jason Young

What might various African futures look like? How do artists and scholars imagine this future? What forms and narratives of science fictions have African artists developed? Who generates knowledge about Africa? And, what are the different languages we use to speak about Africa's political, technological and cultural tomorrow? These were some of the questions addressed by the festival *African Futures*, initiated by the Goethe-Institut. Three concurrent interdisciplinary festivals in Johannesburg/South Africa, Lagos/Nigeria and Nairobi/Kenya in October 2015 explored the future, following potential narratives and artistic expression in literature, fine arts, performance, music, film, and digital formats. In 2016, *African Futures* will be continued in Berlin in partnership with S A V V Y Contemporary.

The moth that enters
your house at night is a grudge
that somebody is holding
against you. It half-sits, bothered
by your light and the roof
over your head. It spreads
its small evening wherever
it lands, over the things
you love most. A dark tent
of dark intentions.

Vladimir Lucien, *The Belief in Obeah*.

Inadequately stressed are the aspects of witchcraft that emphasize interdependence and conviviality without obfuscating the individual or collective aspirations to dream, fantasize and explore new dimensions of being. A closer look at the everyday discourses and practices of Cameroonians suggests that witchcraft is about much more than just the dark side of humanity. As a multidimensional phenomenon, witchcraft is best studied as a process in which violent destruction and death are rare and extreme exceptions, employed mostly when all attempts at negotiating conviviality between the familiar and the undomesticated have been exhausted.

Francis B. Nyamnjoh. 2005.

When I say »this world« I include, of course, such feelings as fear and despair and barrenness, as well as domestic love and delight in nature. These darker emotions may well put on the mask of quite unworldly things, such as ghosts or trolls or antique gods.

Sylvia Plath. 1963.

It goes without saying that any deliberation on the future necessitates an in-depth reflection on the past and the present for that matter. Otherwise, discourses around future(s) and F U T U R I S M S are bound to be escapist, intriguing from a far, but indeed far from intriguing at closer look. Especially in the context of Africa, but also elsewhere, any speculation about the future must thus be situated within the auspices of complicated understandings of the concept of the past (in some African languages like the Bamileke, there are up to eight different concepts of the past tense), as much as in a multifaceted and nuanced notion of the present and its realities.

Of the many present realities that might be in existence, some that in many ways, from time immemorial, have influenced, preoccupied and basically consciously or unconsciously domineered in the daily lives of most people on the African continent and in the various African diasporas are concepts often pejoratively termed sorcery, folk magic, witchcraft, animism, occultism or otherwise, and that take the shape of Nganga, Juju, Ngambe, Obeah, Vodun, Palo, Santeria or otherwise. These practices that are manifested as social, economical, political, historical, medical, technological or scientific infrastructures give human existence a sense of meaning, as well as an incessant drive for survival.

Though these concepts vary widely from one social group to another, and though these practices have been brand-marked and connoted by anthropologists and representatives of monotheist religions, the belief and the practicing of W I T C H C R A F T and other supranatural knowledges still form a crux and frame for many African and African diaspora societies. It is to this end that the project *The Incantation of the Disquieting Muse* proposes

W I T C H E R Y as a point of departure in the past and present, and as a parallel reality from which extrapolations can be made to deliberate on African Futures. This project will not concern itself with the nitty-gritties of nomenclatures, nor with evaluations or assessments on whether W I T C H C R A F T is good or bad, but rather, it will look at concepts of the supranatural beyond the misconceptions of Western scholarship and Western religion, beyond the superficiality of power machination, i.e. the project will look at how the axioms related to or emanating from W I T C H C R A F T beliefs and practices manifest themselves within cultural, economical, political, religious and scientific spaces in African and African diasporic societies.

From a socio-cultural point of view, in contemporary times, issues of W I T C H C R A F T seem to be the foremost topic in pop culture e.g. in Nollywood films, but also in music and other mediums of cultural expression. Not too long ago, after the 2008 riots and destructions in Cameroon, the president Paul Biya in a speech delivered to the nation on 27th Feb 2008 put the blame of the escalating situation on some »apprentis sorciers qui dans l'ombre manipulent les jeunes« (*apprentice sorcerers in the shadows who manipulate young people*).²

In another example, in an article for *Der Spiegel* Thilo Thielke wrote that

»Just as every German team has a physiotherapist, every African team has a resident witch doctor. And the spells

² Maybe Paul Biya had just read Tahir Shah's *Sorcerer's Apprentice* (New York: Time Warner, 2002), which describes Shah's travels across southern India to find and learn the art of magic from one of India's greatest practitioners.

work, say some. The governing body of African football has gone out of its way to ban the practice.«³

He went on to write:

»At the 2002 Africa Cup, Cameroon's trainer Winnie Schäfer had to do without his co-trainer Thomas Nkono because, just prior to the semi-final, he had been seen burying bones under the turf and spraying a strange elixir, in order to cast a spell on the playing field. Nkono, a legendary African goalkeeper, was arrested and led away in handcuffs and had to spend the night in police custody.«³

But what is it about this practice of sorcery that Biya mentions, or the »elixir« that Nkono used that has the potential to influence a nation and a team respectively? What if one were to extrapolate on those forces and implement them as a future science? In any case, these are parallel realities believed and practiced by millions of people.

Not only at the level of the president, but also on a daily basis in even very banal situations are discourses of W I T C H C R A F T invoked. In some parts of the continent, it is normal that if someone dies a »medium« is contacted to facilitate the communication between the dead and the living. In this process, not only is the dead venerated, but one also has the chance to do final clarifications about heritage and more.

In some parts of the continent, it is believed that some people have the power to transform themselves into animals like lions or otherwise and go out in the night for a hunt. In an interview with Pius Bejeng Soh⁴ on such transformation practices in the grasslands, he narrated a scene he had experienced as a kid, wherein his father, who was a practitioner of Therianthropy had been out all night in an animal form, and panic broke out, when he wasn't back shortly before sunrise. The break of dawn was never supposed to meet the transformed in the skin of an animal.

It is normalcy that f.e. a Nganga in Zimbabwe is consulted for divination when one is traveling or if someone is facing charges in a law court. The Nganga and other practitioners are also consulted to resolve love or marital problems, or are asked to intervene in situations of infertility.

In *The Faith of Our Ancestors*,⁵ Tatab Mbuy takes up a position in a long line of priest-anthropologists/-philosophers that reflect on such practices as religion, in what he terms African Traditional Religions (ATR). In his opinion ATR withholds beliefs of a supreme Being or God, in the anthropomorphisms of ATR the concept of incarnation is lived, through the veneration of the ancestors a communion of the saints is experienced, the »rites of passage« could be considered sacramental, inter alia.

Mbuy, like his colleagues Bolaji Idowu,⁶ John Mbiti⁷ shares a rather Christianized and Western view of ATR, which is related to a High God e.g. Chukwu, Olodumare, Nyame, Nwi, Roog. On the contrary Okot p'Bitek believed that the aforementioned scholars' search for a High God was a continuation of a colonial strategy through conversion to monotheism.⁸ In general, such supranatural practices e.g. Vodun, though believing in a »Bondye« as Supreme God, in its synchronism with Christian religion, the focus is on the tying of the body and soul together.

From an economic point of view, there are numerous manifestations of W I T C H C R A F T . Of the many, it is worth mentioning the case of zombification called Ekong (Douala), Nyongo (Bakweri), Shipoko (Mozambique), Obasinjom (Banyangi) etc. According to Francis B. Nyamnjoh in his paper *Images of Nyongo amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri*:

»Nyongo is a dynamic, flexible, fluid and common form of witchcraft among the coastal and Grassfields peoples of Cameroon. Amongst these peoples, one is accused of Nyongo when he or she is perceived to have appropriated or attempted to appropriate the life essence of another person, occasioning a sudden and often mysterious 'temporary' death. It is claimed that those capable of Nyongo benefit from the afflicted by harnessing the abilities of the latter to slave for them as zombies after their presumed death. Nyongo also refers to the mysterious place(s) where victims of fierce greed – Nyongo – are said to be slaving away, visible mostly to slavedrivers or to those who have consigned them to slavery.«⁹

In his paper *Dead Men Working – A historical-anthropological look at the modern zombie phenomenon in Africa*, Patrick Harries writes:

»But for many Africans, the zombie is very real. He is a neighbour, a relative, being wrenched from his life because a witch forces him to work for him. He becomes a shadowy figure, a labourer without a soul, making his owner rich while he himself is robbed of his identity.«¹⁰

The Nyongo practice (as we will generalize it here) is the act of sacrificing a human being for economic gain. While the sacrificed goes to a place a yonder to work, the sacrificer becomes richer. Historically, according to Comaroff and Comaroff:

»Zombies themselves seem to be born, at least in the first instance, of colonial encounters; of the precipitous engage-

3 Thielke, Thilo. 11. June 2010. *They'll Put a Spell on You: The Witchdoctors of African Football*. www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/they-ll-put-a-spell-on-you-the-witchdoctors-of-african-football-a-699704.html

4 Soh, Pius Bejeng. 2015. Interview on Witchcraft in the Grasslands.

5 Mbuy, Tatab. 2007. *The Faith of Our Ancestors*. Bamenda: Maryland Printers.

6 Idowu, E. Bolaji. 1962. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*. London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.

7 Mbiti, John Samuel. 1969. *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.

8 p'Bitek, Okot. 1990. *African Religion in European Scholarship*. African Heritage Classical Studies Series. 1st published 1971

9 Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2005. *Images of Nyongo amongst Bamenda Grassfielders in Whiteman Kontri*. Citizenship Studies, Vol. 9, No. 3, 241–269. Dakar (Senegal): CODESRIA.

10 Harries, Patrick. 2005. *Dead Men Working – A historical-anthropological look at the modern zombie phenomenon in Africa*. Seminar: *On the African Occult*, Universität Basel.

ment of local worlds with imperial economies that seek to exert control over the essential means of producing value, means like land and labour, space and time.«¹¹

But according to local connoisseurs and historians, this practice dates as far back as the age of slavery, when European slave ships combed the shores of the African continent for slaves. Since some Africans were also involved in the capturing or selling of their fellow brothers and sisters to go and work in the plantations in the New World, the practice and its discourses were then integrated in occult practices. This view is also shared by Eric de Rosny¹² in his writings about the Ekong and Mt. Kupe.

It is thus not surprising that this concept of Nyongo is used as a metaphor for many other capitalist and neo-liberal systems reigning today. In many cases, the proverbial 1% rich and 99% poor common in most societies is easily comparable to the sacrificer and the sacrificed. Likewise, cheap labour or the concept of voluntary work! It is common for someone doing an unpaid internship or someone working in a non-profit institution or on voluntary basis to be asked the question »na which kind Nyongo you di work so« or »na who gi you for Nyongo.«

With the increased migration flow of Africans to the West in the 1990s and 2000s, the discourse on Nyongo gained another comparable territory. As many families in f.ex. Cameroon sacrificed a lot to send out a kid to Europe or America (in what is called »bushfalling«), and in many cases as young people sacrificed their own lives crossing the Sahara desert and boarding dilapidated boats just to get to Europe to work under sometimes terrible conditions so as to send money back home, this too was considered a contemporary form of Nyongo. In his seminal paper, Nyamnjoh explores the contemporaneity of this concept of Nyongo, as his research on diasporic Cameroonians showed that »the expectations of modernity through consuming foreign goods have engendered highly mercantilist attitudes by kin and acquaintances determined to treat those in the diaspora essentially as disposable wallets on legs.«¹³

Not only are these mostly young people in their best productive age seen as sacrifices, when they go abroad to look for greener pastures for their loved ones back home, they too perceive themselves as being in or victims of Nyongo, due to the enormous demands they get from back home, the load of the society which they have to carry on their shoulders and due to the sometime inhumane dwelling and working conditions they find themselves in:

»Bamenda Grassfielders abroad compare Whiteman Kontri to Nyongo and liken themselves to victims of Nyongo. It is common to call and ask to speak to someone and be told he or she »has gone to work Nyongo«, meaning that

they have to offer devalued and highly exploited labour at factories, as cleaners, maids, security guards or prostitutes, sweating and toiling round the clock, just to make ends meet. I was first intrigued by this comparison among undocumented Grassfielders in Italy, and as I discussed further with others, I realized the comparison was indeed widespread.«¹⁴

W I T C H C R A F T doesn't need to be science or a technology. Believers and practitioners do not need the legitimisation of S C I E N C E , S C I E N T I S T S or some S P E C I A L I S T B O A R D to be able to divinate, practice Therianthropy, heal or do whatever they do through invocations of spirits, using spells, chants, herbs, performance (dance, movement, gymnastics) or otherwise. Indeed science is upvalued and upgraded if it is associated with W I T C H C R A F T . Science as a discipline is intended to facilitate or provide techniques to resolve complicated or adverse conditions such as sickness, transportation and in general other hindrances in the quotidian. It goes without saying that one of humanity's primary aim is to overcome such hindrances for the continuity of his/her kind. For this to happen, the world and its hindrances have to be studied through observations, experimentations and the development of methodologies, objective in nature and solidified by hypotheses and theories.

Discourses on W I T C H C R A F T and/as science have often been polemicized, but could be summarized by Stein & Stein as follows:

»Science deals only with empirical observations, that is, observations that are made through our senses, such as using vision to examine animal tissue under a microscope. Scientific conclusions also must be testable. [...] However, all peoples make detailed observations about their world and sometimes manipulate objects in their environment in order to come to some understanding of their world. All peoples have systems of technology that use rational and practical methods to achieve certain objectives.«¹⁵

Most W I T C H C R A F T practices and observations are done on empirical basis, they are testable and their theorisation and experimentation in the forms of rituals, chants and performances have existed forever. Manifested/implemented in everyday knowledge, passed on from one generation to the other as a craft, and ameliorated to meet up with the demands and discourses of contemporary society, W I T C H C R A F T knowledge can be considered important for a society and its future.

The project *The Incantation of the Disquieting Muse* thus proposes the possibility of looking at W I T C H E R Y , its idioms, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, chants and otherwise expressions as manifestations cultural, economical, political, historical, medical, technological or scientific infrastructures on which present parallel realities are built, and on which futures can be built. The aim of the

¹¹ Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John L. 2002. *Alien Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism*. In: *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 4.

¹² de Rosny, Eric. 1999. *Die Augen meiner Ziege: Auf den Spuren afrikanischer Hexer und Heiler*. Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag.

¹³ Ibid 8.

¹⁴ Ibid 8.

¹⁵ Stein Frankle, Rebecca L. & Stein, Philip L. 2005. *Anthropology of Religion, Magic, and Witchcraft*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

project is not to give answers, but rather to pose critical questions that might create new spaces of understanding.

The project will also look at W I T C H E R Y as an epistemological space and a possible medium of historical, spiritual/religious, scientific and cultural continuity between the African continent and the African diaspora – especially but not restricted to.

This project also aims at using the prism of art and discourse to liberate and exorcise W I T C H C R A F T from that space of the S A V A G E S L O T , as well as cleanse it from the pejorative associations in which it has been confined and bonded for centuries by perpetrators of the monotheistic religions and the S C I E N C E of anthropology.

A part of the project's title is borrowed from the poem *The Disquieting Muses* by Sylvia Plath, after Giorgio de Chirico painting of the same title that portrays three mysterious and enigmatic faceless beings. Indeed, as enigmatic as they might be, these muses, just like witchcraft, might still be goddesses that inspire literature, science, and the arts, as considered in Greek mythology.