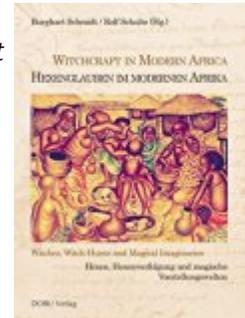**Burghart Schmidt, Rolf Schulte**, eds. *Hexenglauben im modernen Afrika/Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Hexen, Hexenverfolgung und magische Vorstellungswelten/ Witches, Witch-Hunts and Magical Imaginaries.* Hamburg: Dobu Verlag, 2007. 255 pp. EUR 28.80, paper, ISBN 978-3-934632-15-8.

Reviewed by Harald Freter

This volume offers an overview of current scholarly discussions on multiple modernities of occult belief systems in Africa. It is based on revised and extended contributions originally presented during an international conference in Hamburg, held in 2004. It contains thirteen essays--seven written in German and six in English--on various aspects of the subject. Five essays are case studies of occult belief systems in specific countries: Nigeria, Tanzania, Gambia/Senegal/ Guinea-Bissau, South Africa, and the Central African Republic.

In the preface, the editors, Burghart Schmidt and Rolf Schulte, claim that during the last two decades globalization and mushrooming religious movements have had an increasing impact on the fabric of occult belief systems in Africa. The analysis of these systems, they argue, requires an interdisciplinary approach, involving not just ethnology or religious studies, but also economics as well as political and cultural science. In two introductory essays, the editors outline the subject and the organization of the book. Witchcraft beliefs, they maintain, should not be understood as outdated exotic phenomenon, restricted to some remote areas of Africa, but as vivid expressions of current social and political conflicts, which, although deeply rooted in Africa's history, are increasingly influenced by transnational social spaces. Therefore, witchcraft violence does not obey monocausal explanations. Single models that are bound to time and society cannot fully explicate the variety of imaginations and beliefs. Only a composite of interpretational patterns taking into account specific political, cultural, and social conditions within African states and groups can lead any further. Hence, they indicate that the empirical base must be widened by case studies.

Michael Schönhuth gives an overview of different theoretical approaches to the analysis of occult belief. He identifies important paradigmatic changes in ethnological research on witchcraft. Since the early 1990s, changing forms and content of witchcraft belief have been considered as Africa's answer to the requirements of the modern world in the context of increasing globaliza-

tion. The author maintains that middle-range theories, bridging the gap between grand theories and empirical research, applied to case studies, provide at present the most promising path to better understanding extant occult belief systems.

A general analysis of the renaissance of African modes of thought, as represented by occult belief systems, is given by Dirk Kohnert. He maintains that, hitherto, official approaches, designed to cope with the problems of witchcraft violence in Africa, have been based on Eurocentric views and colonial jurisdiction, legitimized by ill-applied Western social science--notably one-dimensional rational actor models. According to Kohnert, these approaches are inadequate; in fact, they constitute part of the problem itself. African religions could provide a framework for valuable indigenous solutions to actual problems of contemporary life, including the problem of witchcraft violence. Besides, they might, under certain conditions, provide the outside world with new dimensions of philosophic thought and emancipatory action; within the realm of conflict resolution and reconciliation, for example.

In a second contribution, Kohnert presents his results of an empirically based long-term study on the articulation of witchcraft and modes of production among the Nupe in northern Nigeria. He hypothesizes a strong connection between the varying content of witchcraft accusations and the change of modes of production over past generations. Over time, witchcraft accusations among the Nupe served different, even antagonistic, ends. Among the stateless village communities of the Nupe up to the fifteenth century, the Nupe anti-witchcarft cult *ndakó gbòyá* was apparently used as a means of mobilization and defense against the usurpation of power by invaders. After the latter conquered Nupeland and established a kind of slave-mode of production during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Nupe state used witchcraft accusations first as a method of securing dominance over the communal mode

of production, and afterward, when the British colonial power forbade slavery, as means of ruthless expropriation of the peasantry by doling out witchcraft accusations against heavy ransom payments during the annual cleansing tours of the cult. Finally, under the nascent capitalist mode of production of the 1970s, villagers turned their witchcraft accusations against individual accumulation of land and capital. Thus, the political economy of occult belief could highlight the origins of social and political conflicts in a period of societal transition, which remain otherwise undetected. But these hypotheses still remain highly speculative if not backed by further empirical research.

Various phenomena of occult experience in the African context are considered by Erhard Kamphausen. He interrogates two approaches: one, going back to Hegel, is characterized by ignorance, prejudices, and contemptuousness; while the other takes mystic forces and resulting fears seriously. From this, he considers the role of Christian missions and a subsequent shift in African theology, which has, in some instances, led to the integration of witchcraft and possession into the religious systems of independent churches of charismatic-pentecostal origin.

One of the main functions of spiritual agency is resistance to social deviation--such as amassing power and wealth without regard to the needs of the extended family or community--outlined in Johannes Harnischfeger's first essay. He establishes a link between occult belief and state decline in Africa. Since power is hardly regulated anymore in Africa's failed states, it has become unpredictable and seems to be connected to secretive and often invisible dark forces. This evil, then, which is personified in witches and sorcerers, has to be fought by spiritual means. Harnischfeger offers the example of Nigeria--with its unfettered economic growth during the first oil boom and the subsequent disillusion of the marginalized about the benefits of "modernization"--to show that individual experiences of moral and social

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decay can be expressed in terms of witchcraft or sorcery--two concepts the author is careful to differentiate.

In his second contribution, Harnischfeger looks at changes in Christianity as practiced in and exported from Africa and Europe. Africans are participating in a global market of magico-religious objects and services. Choices are made individually, pragmatically following the principle of trial and error rather than on the basis of entrenched beliefs. People living in fear about uncontrolled spiritual forces may join religious movements or communities that embark on crusades, exorcisms, or other collective endeavors of confronting evil. African churches have become deeply involved in spiritual warfare. This is, however, not just an African phenomenon, but seems to be part of a global process of re-enchantment. Believers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who form a majority of today's church members, are transforming Christianity into a non-European religion, with a heavy emphasis on miracles and demonism. Hence, the author expects a growing influence of African theology in the future.

Walter Bruchhausen examines southeast Tanzania to show how image and practice of reactions to witchcraft adapt to various processes of modernization. The dissolution of traditional political and religious authorities with the introduction of Islam and colonial rule as well as the colonial and postcolonial anti-witchcraft legislation reshaped the response to witchcraft: from an ordeal executed by community leaders via public witch-finding and cleansing by foreign "experts" to a more private and often religious practice of witch-detection, protection, and reconciliation by spirit mediums.

Another regional study by Katrin Pfeifer focuses on the ambiguities of the transfer of European concepts and terms of witchcraft into the African context. She focuses on denotations and concepts of occult belief in the Mandinka language spoken in Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea-Bis-

sau, and she questions the translation of these concepts into European languages. For example, she suggests translating the Mandinka term *buwaa* as a "person who is said to be a cannibal of supernatural power and changing appearance" (p. 166). However, whether such translations are likely to reduce Eurocentric prejudices is open to question. But, the author is certainly right in underlining the fact that hardly anybody will dare to discuss openly the existence or nonexistence of such occurrences or creatures, because many people are afraid that discussion itself might attract the spell of *buwaa*.

Unlike in Europe, one cannot find one-dimensional gender-specific factors in the consideration of witch-hunts in Africa as Schulte points out in his essay on occult forces, witch-hunts, and gender in Africa. Although conflicting gender relations can lead to brutal consequences during times of crisis in Africa, age is another important variable, as are economic, political, and other cultural or social factors. While gender-specific factors played an important role in Europe, there is wide variation in the proportion of male to female witches in Africa. A constant female stereotype of a witch is not to be found. Hence, common feminist approaches to witchcraft and the occult offer only partial solutions.

So-called *Muti* murders as an example of extreme occult violence are considered by Oliver Becker. The main characteristics of Muti murders are the removal of parts of the body for the production of medicine. Although belonging to a distinct category of crime, these murders are subsumed, together with exorcism and subsequent killing of witches, under the term "witchcraft violence" in the bulk of sociological and anthropological research. The results of Becker's empirical studies show that both these forms of murder must be regarded and treated as related aspects of one and the same problem.

In another case study, Joan Wardrop considers witchcraft accusations and processes in Sowe-

to during the South African transition from apartheid to democracy. Suppressed conflicts from the apartheid era exploded and reflected the rapid political and social change spawned by the transition.

In the concluding essay of the volume, Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers describes the longtime development of water wizards among the Zande in the Central African Republic. Based on field research and archival studies, Grootaers explores the imaginations and experiences of the so-called crocodile men during the period 1950-2000. Again, like Harnischfeger, Grootaers carefully distinguishes between witchcraft as an innate quality and sorcery as an acquired ability. Grootaers's work shows that witchcraft and sorcery reflect and shape social relations and changes within society; hence, they must be seen and considered as dynamic rather than static phenomena.

Witchcraft in Modern Africa offers a well-balanced overview of current studies of occult belief systems in sub-Saharan Africa, including both theoretical and conceptual considerations as well as empirically based case studies to illustrate the major findings. The inclusion of essays written in German makes it a valuable resource for the German-speaking Africanist community as well.

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