

The Economy of Witchcraft

By David Signer

Why hasn't Africa got anywhere yet? Why have such enormous sums in foreign aid, poured in over decades, simply seeped into the sand? Neither globalization nor the West are to blame. The problem is Africa's economy of envy, saturated in resentment – and the fear of witchcraft.

In sport and in music, Africans are world class. But if your name is neither Henri Camara, like the Senegalese footballer, nor Alpha Blondy, like the Reggae star, but something as plain as Jean-Claude Dao, then the prospects for your future look bleak. Jean-Claude is an intelligent young man in a small town on the Ivory Coast in West Africa. Like so many other young men his age, he spends most of his time doing nothing. As we talked, he complained that there is no work and that the economy in the whole of Africa is stagnating.

"But do you know what the real obstacle to development in Africa is?" he asked me suddenly before giving the answer himself: "Witchcraft."

"Do you really mean witchcraft or rather the belief in witchcraft?" I asked.

"Witchcraft. Witchcraft is real. Witches like most to eat successful people, students, young and promising talents from their own wider family. At night the witch abducts the invisible double of a member of his family and distributes the booty in his witches' circle. The person who has been thus "eaten" loses his vitality, falls ill and dies. Next time it is the turn of another member of the witches' club to offer a relative. And so it goes on. Once you have eaten with them, you are in their debt. If you then fail to regularly offer someone related to you, then you will soon find you are in danger yourself."

After a short pause he asked: "Do you know why there aren't any tall buildings in Africa?" I did not. He explained that when someone builds a two-storey house in Europe, his neighbour builds one with three floors and that man's neighbour one with four. That is productive envy. In Africa, on the other hand, the neighbour says to himself: "Don't be getting ideas. You will not grow old in your house."

And he told me how, for them, it was his father's brother who in some dubious way prevents their succeeding. "His own sons are successful, but all others fall by the wayside. I myself was a good student; when it came to the final exams, I simply gave way. I have no idea why. My head was suddenly empty. I had to quit school. The only thing left for me to do now is hope that I will win the lottery."

Bloodsucking social relationships

Jean-Claude puts succinctly into words a situation that social sciences have formally identified within the past few years and to a limited extent only: what the Africans call "witchcraft", is not simply some kind of superstitious belief, but social reality. "Witchcraft" is a metaphor for the kind of spitefully envious, "cannibalistic" or "bloodsucking" social relationships that take from the richer person and yet do not really make the poorer one better off at all, the motto being: Just as long as you aren't doing better than me.

Even if one does not share this belief in meetings at which the most promising members of the family are

consumed, one cannot nevertheless ignore the destructive power of envy in African society. This power is more than the mere product of naïve gullibility. It is not sufficient merely to explain the situation to people. For the pressure from the relatives on the one who has something is real, whether he terms it "witchcraft", "greed" or "envy". Those seeking handouts are never satisfied, and the number of relatives tends towards infinity. The fact that someone like Jean-Claude can sum up the problem precisely and yet still cannot escape it, shows that "witchcraft" is a problem neither of superstition nor of psychology.

"Witchcraft" is a means *par excellence* by which a conservative society attempts to maintain the status quo, suppress change or, where it becomes inevitable, deny it. It allows all criticism to be turned round and thrown back at the person expressing it: for whoever accuses the system of being rigid, is seen as an antisocial, jealous loner and risks being accused of witchcraft himself.

Particularly susceptible to witchcraft are societies in which a "zero-sum economy" prevails; in which every kind of gain by one member of a society is seen by the others as their own loss; it is a stagnating, restrictive economy, where social relationships have a predominantly authoritarian and hierarchical structure, where any status gained (by achievement, work, knowledge) counts little compared with one's personal attributes (age, sex), and where happiness is not found in personal initiative, but in submitting to a patron, who in response is obliged to look after one. In a society that lacks a "work ethic", and which ascribes success to luck, magic or the favour of the gods, it is only logical that the fruits of this success must be shared, and that the concept of "well-earned possessions" is scarcely in evidence.

No point in working

Abou is another young Ivorian, who, in contrast to Jean-Claude, does have a small income, since he runs a telephone kiosk at the edge of the bus station. But at the end of the day he is not doing any better than his unemployed fellow countryman. "It is actually more worthwhile to do nothing than to work", he told me one day, while I was waiting to be connected.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because either way gets the same result. Every day ten people come to borrow money. Another ten come to telephone on credit. They keep on and on at me until I give in. There is a certain amount of change in the drawer, so I can't say I haven't got anything. And I can't get away from here. They can put me under pressure all day until they finally get what they want. And at the end of the month I have eaten, but I haven't a single *sou* left, so I am no better than the ones who come and borrow from me and don't work themselves. You have seen me sweating away here every day for two years, but I haven't

made a single centimetre of progress. I want to go to London, I've just got to get away."

As if to illustrate this situation, Abou has written two sayings on the wall behind him: "Hell is other people" and "What is a person without people?"

You can hardly express the African dilemma of community and cannibalism more succinctly. Abou really has all the necessary qualities to get ahead. He shows initiative. Besides his job in the kiosk, he runs a small trading company selling all sorts of things. He is intelligent and popular. He left the rural area to come into the city, where he is no longer subject to the cramping restrictions and duties of the family. Nevertheless he has never broken off all contact. He lives with his uncle and goes back to visit his village from time to time. He is neither wasteful nor miserly. He is single and has no children to support. He neither drinks nor smokes. In a peaceful (as it was then), fairly prosperous country like the Ivory Coast, a man like him should really get ahead in life. Why is he getting nowhere? He says it himself: it is down to the kind of social relationships that prevail – the duty always to share everything, which makes it impossible to save money.

Fatal envy

What would happen if Abou refused to grant credit and make gifts? "They would make my life hell," he says. That can be taken literally: all his self-named *petits frères* would come and sit in his kiosk all day and drive him to the edge of a nervous breakdown with their moaning. He cannot go anywhere; he is at their mercy. And: "They would drag my name through the dirt." That would mean that the customers would stay away. There are enough telephone cabins in the neighbourhood. But worst of all is the possibility that someone he had angered would put a curse on him.

"The witches are everywhere; you can't escape them. They can fly from here to Paris in no time at all."

"What can you do against that?"

"The most important thing is to be friendly to everyone. If someone asks a favour of you, you shouldn't refuse him. You must always remind yourself that you are better off than some. You have to provide for poorer relatives, or else they will do something to you. I protect myself with a verse from the Koran which my uncle gave me. Sometimes I write it on the blackboard, wash it off and drink the water. Here it is difficult to get ahead. I know a place where ninety percent of the boys have left. To be born poor in Africa means to die poor. The lazy person is cleverer than the hard-working person, for each gets as far as the other, only one has an easier life."

One often overlooks the most obvious. The connection between the fear of witchcraft – fear of the destructive malice of the envious – and the hampering effect they have on personal initiative and the accumulation of wealth, is clear to every African. Maybe the economists and development experts have ignored these issues up to now because it does not quite seem scientific to deal with metaphysical matters; although they ought to know better since Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, a kind of counter-model to the African system. Religiologists, on the other hand, do not usually make the accumulation of capital the focus of their studies.

A young woman from Burkina Faso describes the consequences of a too-rapid rise as follows (and there is

probably not a single town between Dakar and Dar es Salaam, where you will not come across similar stories):

"A man from our area went to the capital to train and qualify as a pilot. He was due to start work two weeks later. He used the time to pay a visit to his village. There he went mad. He spread papers and maps out in front of himself on the table and shouted: "Pull the steps in, fasten your seatbelts, ready for take-off, full speed ahead!"

When he did not turn up to work at the airport after the fortnight, a message was sent to his boss that he had gone mad. Not wanting to believe that, the boss went and sought out the man in his village. He asked him: "Why haven't you turned up for work?" The man answered: "No problem, boss. Let's get to work straightaway. Please fasten your seatbelts, we are due to take off in a few minutes. Please extinguish your cigarettes and adjust your seats to an upright position...."

The boss returned to Ouagadougou, the man has remained ever since in his village, where he scavenges for food in the garbage. You would never think he could ever have been a pilot. With us, anything that grows too fast gets the chop."

With accounts like these, it is not important whether or not they are actually "true". What is significant is that they express and reproduce a conviction that is shared across all ethnic groups, age brackets, classes, regions and religions: it is dangerous to climb. If another person cannot share in your success for any reason, jealousy arises. This can – in the form of witchcraft – have fatal consequences. And you have to be particularly wary of those who are closest to you. So it is best either to make yourself small and to remain where you were born, or, if you want to become great, seek your happiness elsewhere. But even at the other end of the world you cannot be sure that the malicious envy of your family will not catch up on you. Witchcraft is the dark side of family relationships. (From the psychological viewpoint it is easy to understand that the threat of witchcraft is most potent against those closest to oneself and can drive a person to sickness or madness.)

The dear, dreadful relatives

Through this behavioural code people get caught in a "Catch-22" situation: you have to honour and support the family, nurture relationships and make regular visits "back home" with presents. Anyone who breaks off all ties, risks being cursed. Which is why many who have made their fortune in the city avoid their relatives from back home and make themselves scarce. But that only increases the risk that the people back home bear a grudge against them.

The first African commandment is: Thou shalt not try to rise up above the status quo and surpass your equals or even your betters. Whoever attempts to go one up on his elder brother or even his father on his own, will soon be "brought down to earth". By a witch, they say. But "witch" is only another word for the forces of a society that could be termed either "evening out" or "castrating" depending on one's viewpoint.

Nowadays, however, in modern Africa, it has become very common for the young generation to overtake the previous one and for the children to be wealthier or better-educated than their parents. That is all that is expected of them in the modern sphere of school, university, city workplaces. In the traditional sphere, however, it is precisely that progress which is often felt to upset the

traditional egalitarian and hierarchical social order. The deviant is called to order, and is forced – primarily with psychological and social, sometimes even economical pressure – to return to his allotted place (for example, when an intelligent boy has to quit school so as not to blemish the honour of his less intelligent elder brother).

African society is both egalitarian and hierarchical. It is egalitarian in the sense that breaking out of the hereditary surroundings or overtaking of older brothers and sisters is punished immediately and steamrollered down again. Envy causes the indignant demand for the restoration of a social equality that is considered normal. It is hierarchical, in that superiors (father, boss, politicians) may not be rivalled; social differences are accepted as entirely natural and thus permanent. The powerful person is accepted, as an almost biological fact, but not any rising, growth, careerists. It is only the latter that provoke envy. Witchcraft is therefore primarily to be understood as a political and economic regulator that intervenes in all areas of life.

A system that might have had a stabilizing effect in the village context, when applied under the conditions of the free market economy and democracy, leads to the paralyzing of every kind of entrepreneurial spirit. This effect is backed up by a logic that sees in the unseen (to which witchcraft belongs) a powerful, parallel realm which reduces the visible world to a superficial phenomenon and with which one has to reckon in everyday life. This does not exactly encourage rational thinking.

A white or well-dressed visitor to Africa wonders fairly soon why he is constantly being addressed in the street by people he doesn't know as *patron*, boss or *grand frère*. The answer is simple: because one of the chief sources of income is to make oneself small and thus appeal to the wealth and generosity of the boss. And if one doesn't get anything, then the *petit frère* has his methods of making the *grand frère*'s life hell. "Because the poor cannot give anything else to the rich, he gives him problems," explained a young Senegalese woman, and by this she meant nothing other than witchcraft (or the threat thereof) in revenge for stinginess.

Make yourself small, the boss will pay

This kind of relationship is termed *patron-client* relationships. The patron is the one who not only gives his protégé work, but assumes the responsibility for large parts of his life. In return, the client obeys and admires him rather like a mighty father figure. One should bear in mind that, in Africa, most labour is still controlled and exploited by families. It is the father and the wider family who have an equalizing effect by creaming off surpluses, guaranteeing in return a certain social and economic security.

However, if this form of village organization is expanded to the level of a large enterprise or a whole nation, problems are unavoidable. Such "neo-patrimonial" institutions, as Patrick Chabal, Professor of African Studies, calls it, are characterized by the exercise of personalized power: whilst the clients render favours to their boss (we would usually term these acts of politeness "corruption"), the latter legitimizes himself on the one hand by displaying his personal wealth, and on the other by being in a position to feed the network of relationships on which his power is founded. This kind of boss-client social structure, of course, is far removed from a modern body politic (or governmental state) in the western sense of the word.

It should be specified that the term "witchcraft" is normally used to describe the dangerous sense of personal grievance that the less fortunate person has, however an invincible powerful person can also be termed a "witch". The "little" witch will be shunned, ostracized, expelled or driven away. But people will only whisper fearfully behind their hands about the "big" witches. (The Ivorian Ex-President Houphouët-Boigny, who used the state income to turn his home town Yamoussokro into the new capital, complete with a copy of St Peter's Cathedral, is sometimes admiringly called "the Old Sorcerer".) But in both cases the effect is the same: the social climber is intimidated through witches or demonized as a witch. "Normal" social mobility does not exist.

In the case of the "powerful witch" the aura of the supernatural also serves to scare off enemies. Thus it is said of many African politicians that they have magic powers at their disposal that make them invulnerable and that foil assassination attempts before they happen. Similarly the demonstration of splendour by the rich is a kind of mystification of power designed to have an intimidating effect against possible challengers.

It's up to the others

Unlike other continents, it is clear that Africa has never seen a social or cultural revolution. Coups d'états may have been frequent occurrences, where one patron was replaced by another, but never any sustained attempts at radically restructuring society. And as both Africans and Europeans persist in attributing the African plight entirely to slavery, colonialism, the World Bank, globalization or insufficient development aid, then it will stay that way for quite a while to come.

In her polemical essay on the underdevelopment of Africa *Neither Poor nor Powerless*, Cameroon economist Axelle Kabou puts forward the theory that, to a certain extent, Africa as a whole assumes towards the West the passive, begging attitude of infantile client before an almighty patron: "The Africans are the only people on earth who still think that someone other than themselves is supposed to take care of their development. It is widely known that permanent recourse to foreign lenders is not perceived in Africa as a disgrace. Less well known is the reason: the fact that the African does not feel responsible for the present."

Presumably therefore the accusations that an upset Africa makes to the "tight-fisted" Europeans result from a pattern of relationships that has long dominated the social system within Africa: hierarchical patron-client social order, avoidance of competition and a general inclination to expect both evil (witchcraft) and salvation (boss, witch-doctor) from without.

Kabou herself reasons that it may well have been rich people's fear of the envy of the poor and of the magic directed against them by the Marabuts that prevented them from thinking about how to spread the wealth over a broader mass of the population. This fear has led to the rich concentrating on expanding their privileges even more, in order to protect themselves from the enmity of others.

"One cannot emphasize enough," she writes, "how much the belief in the magical powers of witchcraft has hindered and still hinders the social development of Africa... The more diplomas someone in Africa possesses, the more he believes himself to be the target of envy and

magic, and the more he uses talismans for his personal protection.”

Inability to save

In light of their short-sighted carefree attitude, Africans are often chided for being incapable of saving, building wealth or making long-term financial investments. Presumably, however, the problem lies less in the area of “mentality” than in the area of social relationships. Even for someone who is able and has the will to save, his family obligations will make it almost impossible for him to do so. An inability to save ought then to be ascribed to the society as a whole rather than the individuals. The individual is often generous against his will (and fully aware of his short-sightedness), but cannot do otherwise because of the social pressure on him.

Another indication of this is seen in the fact that most shops in East Africa are in the hands of Indians and in West Africa in the hands of Arabs. These foreigners probably succeed not because they are necessarily more capable, but because they stand outside the ruinous African family obligations.

The African upper classes, who determinedly try to insulate themselves from “below”, attempt to achieve the same effect by literally erecting protective walls around their property, to stem the claims for handouts. This does not stimulate the economy. Whilst normal people with a little more have to show solidarity with the poor until they too are poor again, the rich keep their luxury to themselves.

Many social climbers escape from this unbearable situation through migrating. (The African brain-drain ought to be examined from this point of view.) This means one may escape the immediate expectations, demands and rebukes, but not the possible revenge through witchcraft, which indeed is not bound to a particular geographical location. This is where the witchdoctor comes on the scene as a kind of tranquillizer. He can assuage a person’s fear of those he has left behind, by identifying it and setting up protective magical devices. But by ascribing the bulk of social, psychic and health problems by witchcraft, he also keeps the system and the fear alive. He offers solutions for problems that – to a certain extent – he himself creates.

Important for the medicine men are the sacrifices that have to be made. Even in a major city such as Abidjan on the Ivory Coast with its civic highways and neon advertising signs, a study has shown that more than half of the inhabitants regularly make sacrifices such as a chicken or a sheep. If the person most in danger of becoming a victim of witchcraft is the one who does not give, then the obvious remedy for his fear is to get him to give something, and to do it in a ritualized, sacred, general way, where the gift becomes an end in itself. That is what the sacrifice symbolizes. It is a gift to no-one and everyone: God, spirits, witchdoctors, family, neighbours, the poor, those who feel badly done by, potential enviers, oneself.

The main thing is the feeling of relief that comes by having given something and thus having somehow restored the equilibrium. But even though the sacrifices might give a feeling of relief and alleviate the fear, they do not provide a way out of the distribution ideology and the economy of witchcraft. They reinforce the society’s theory and practice that to be successful is dangerous, and that at any time someone else might destroy you in

an incomprehensible way, though they might also rescue you.

Scoring for everyone

But why does something that works nowhere else, work in sport and music? The African football players themselves often attribute their success to the numerous witches that travel with them from stadium to stadium. However it may be that the true reason for the exception lies in the idea that every goal that the Senegalese scores, is scored for all Africans everywhere. So the goal scorer does not take anything away from his brothers and sisters, quite the contrary. And when Alpha Blondy gives his thousandth rendition of “Mon Père avait Raison”, he does not enrich himself alone, but also all those who identify with him. He is not their rival, but their representative, and thus everyone can participate in his success.

If this perception – that every exceptional achievement is good for the larger community in the long term – could be expanded to include all other activities, the African cult of mediocrity might soon die out. But for the time being the minimalist slogan from Mali continues to apply: “We can forgive failure. But not success.”

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For clarity, the terms ‘witchcraft/witch’ have been used throughout this English translation to refer generally to all practice/practitioners of African witchcraft, magic and sorcery.