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## **Sorcery and Spiritual Hegemony in Africa**

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## **Abstract**

In Africa, the spiritual power is at the center of everyday life, politics and religion. What characterizes this power, in most of the continent, is its recourse to magic and sorcery. This thesis intends to understand, if and how, the manipulation of a magical and spiritual reality, might have helped a dominant power in exercising an hegemonic control. Or on the contrary, to dismantle it. The analysis will focus on two main sources: an ethnographic work based in Congo and a medieval epic set in West Africa.

## Introduction

“The pointy hat does not make the witch”. This is a twist on the famous proverb of the monk: it recalls the importance of not stopping at the appearances, and dodge superficial judgments. But, also the opposite seems plausible: what if, it is the pointy hat that makes the witch?

There is a character from a movie<sup>1</sup>, which fits well into the proverb just mentioned: the sorceress Karaba. The movie is set in an imprecise village from west Africa, and stages the birth and genesis of Kirikou – a tiny powerful man -, up to his final encounter with the sorceress. The latter is blamed for the loss of water, the metamorphosis of men into fetiches, and for having stolen all the gold and riches from the community.

Generally, these are recurrent actions attributed to a sorcerer, who is trying to endanger life, wealth and fertility. Towards the end, Kirikou unveils the truths behind the sorceress’ deeds. And, finds out that there was something more than the fear and stigma addressed to the woman. Unfortunately, there is no pointy hat in the movie. When it comes to demonization, some hidden reasons are eluded, and stereotypes are easily formed. In fact, with good reason, Einstein used to say that it is harder to crack a prejudice than an atom. Overall, the power of stereotypes could be exemplified in the image just below, a witch who rides a broom. It should not surprise that this road sign is located in Karoi – Zimbabwe.



Figure 1: "Road Sign Indicating the Town of Karoi" presented in B. Rutherford, "To Find an African Witch. Anthropology, Modernity and Witch-Finding in North-West Zimbabwe, *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1999, p. 90.

<sup>1</sup> *Kirikou et la Sorcière* [DVD], Director M. Ocelot, France, Belgique, and Luxembourg, Les Armateurs, Odec Kid Cartoons, Trans Europe Film, Studio O, 1998.

This icon is heritage of an European past. One might suggest that, it has been put there by Europeans colonizers to come to terms with a reality too unfamiliar to grasp. Yet, this exercise in projecting a familiar icon to approach – or marginalize – the other, lacks of a pivotal element: it fails into account the moral and ethical ground in which this image is placed, the relationship of power *in situ*, and the political shades that encompass them. Whatever or whoever we recognize as a witch, we must put aside for a moment, and forget about it.

In order to clarify this latter sentence, I propose to follow this introduction by framing two entangled concepts, that will serve as basis for my elaboration: sorcery and magic. I am conscious that a definition of these ambiguous terms will never satisfy their performative richness<sup>2</sup>.

Nonetheless, it is equally imperative that we outline a frame in which we do try to understand each other.

There has been a temptation – and I guess there still is – to look at witchcraft and sorcery but also magic, as realms of a primitive past; irrational parenthesis that have nothing to do with our coeval hyper-rational world. Such an equation cannot be more misleading.

First and foremost, it is untenable, because it emphasizes an intellectual superiority in contrast to a backward mind (whatever it might mean); and second, it neglects the rationality of this social idiom. As a matter of fact, witchcraft does cohesively explain misfortune, according to every day circumstances. From institutions to new-born insurgencies and NGOs, each one had and have to deal with witchcraft. The latter finds itself at the conjunction of socio-economic transformations, rising and decaying ideologies and women's revolutions. Witchcraft is deeply embedded in the moral-ethical tissues of society, within the domestic intimacy and neighbours' walls. The universal terror of a horror that lurks inside and outside the fragility of existence. Characterized as the "dark side" of kinship by Geschiere<sup>3</sup>, it might be also be the dark side of unfamiliarity and foreignness. A witch might be the oppressor and the oppressed, the chief or the beggar. It is an idiom that allows us to accuse the spongy rich man or the wise old woman. But, to accuse a rich man is an hazard, for a wise old woman the story could be different. Concretely, in a society, to name a sorcerer or witch is to name alterity, and that alterity can be problematic for the maintenance of status quo. Besides, to name a sorcerer is always a moral dilemma, which is well exemplified in this extract:

African concepts of moral personhood [...] are less concerned with the "man-divinity" relationship and more focused on bonds between individual and society. Dependency on the supernatural world is neither absolute, nor unchangeable. [...] Susan Reynolds Whyte remarks about the East African Nyole: "The question I hear Nyole people ask is not 'Why me?' but 'Why you?' Their immediate focus is not on the self, but on the other: who are you behind this affliction and why are you doing it?".

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<sup>2</sup> A discussion on the concepts has been made in M. Adam, "Nouvelles considérations dubitatives sur la théorie de la magie et de la sorcellerie en Afrique noire", *L'Homme*, vol. 177–178, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> P. Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft, Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1997, p. 214.

Witchcraft might destroy social ties, dry lands, set brothers against brothers and sons against fathers. A political decision has to be taken in order to make 'visible the invisible', and that political decision is not just the divination's proceeding or the chief's judgment; it is the everyday interpersonal interactions and neighbours' quarrels. Hence, witchcraft is morbidly related to power and politics. But, a caveat should be posited, in order not to impair our judgment: we should not be distracted by ambiguity. Nowadays, indeed, witch persecutions are provoking tangible sufferance. Therefore, it is imperative, to draw a clear line and figure out political allegiances, social groups and clashes, and assess the political responsibility of any decision.

Most of the time, the big picture is obscured: people accusing each other, increased violence, massive seizure of lands. The blame falls onto the witch. Behind the witch there is a political power at full engine, though.

### **Objective and Research Questions**

One concern of this work, will be of underlining the political ramifications and consequences of the aforementioned concepts. Sorcery and magic are indeed, institutionalized. Following this conceptual relationship, our main objective will be then to understand, if and how, the manipulation of a magical and spiritual reality, might have helped a dominant power in exercising an hegemonic control. Or, by contrast, if and how sorcery and magic could be actually considered counter hegemonic as political praxis. What is in fact their relevance in negotiating power and status quo? In this regard, hegemony is conceptualized as the capacity of a social group, biological niche or class, to dominate and rule consent; a unity and melange of political, hierarchical, ethical-moral, economical, psychological, patriarchal and spiritual leadership. Hegemony is, nevertheless, not the prerogative of a specific or already dominant class: it is embodied as well in already subordinated social groups, which by being counter-hegemonic, actualize hegemony itself.

Counter-hegemony is intended as an active preparation, an exercise of power, even before the actual seize of state, a-state and institutional power. Hence, to consider who owns and controls those institutions that deal with witchcraft and sorcery becomes a leitmotiv to follow; since, the control of magic forces and evils might transform, consolidate or destabilize social institutions. But, it is not enough. As a matter of fact, both sorcery and witchcraft accusations have to be considered by taking into account the entire social galaxy: witch-finders, village leaders, village elders, chiefs, administration; up to displaced farmers, widows and children. Moreover, to understand who controls 'the monsters' is to understand the relationship of powers in a given community, but also the underlying conflicts.

Furthermore, the research questions will be divided into two parts, according to the chapters of the thesis.

The first part will try to understand, if and how, sorcery and magic affect women in Kukuya society – nowadays Congo. Especially, what I consider cardinal is to look into the entrenched and deep rooted relation between evil, women and spiritual power. All in all, my intention is to understand if there is a correlation between spiritual and political hegemony, and women’s subordination. Secondly, the final chapter, based on a West African epic – Sunjata -, will try to investigate which modalities of hegemonic corroboration are ensured through magical actions and sorcery. In other words, how an hegemonic power is secured or questioned by diversified systematic magical – political actions.

## **Analytical and Theoretical Framework**

Analytically, sorcery and magic are tricky words. That’s why, my preposition for this introductory chapter is to give a broader definition of these terms and specify the main theories at our disposal.

### **Sorcery and Witchcraft**

With the purpose of elucidating the incredible vagueness of the concepts mentioned so far, I intend to give some ethnographic context and examples for both sorcery and witchcraft: by firstly mentioning the Azande – as studied by Evans-Pritchard in the upper Nile.

Among the Azande, witchcraft is inherited by the parent of the same sex, and to be found in *mangu*, a substance in witch’s belly<sup>4</sup>. Otherwise, it is called *evu* for the Evuzok – southern Cameroon - “une ‘chose’ (*dzomo*) qui siège dans le ventre de certaines personnes, et qu'elle est bonne ou mauvaise selon la nature spécifique de ses pouvoirs”<sup>5</sup>. For both populations, witchcraft is specifically situated in one place, inherited, and materially visible after an autopsy.

On the other hand, in center Tanzania and Ghana, the concept of witchcraft seems to be less distinguishable:

for the Ihanzu, witchcraft - *ūlogi* – is an all pervasive, if somewhat mundane, part of people's day-to-day lives. It can be inherited or learned, but there is little concern over which type of witchcraft any particular witch might use. This is because those thought to have inherited witchcraft need not to practice it; and anyone can purportedly purchase witchcraft medicines. Ihanzu witchcraft of any sort is considered evil (*abī tai*) and destructive<sup>6</sup>.

While:

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<sup>4</sup> E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford University Press, 1976.

<sup>5</sup> L. Mallart-Guimera Louis, “Ni Dos ni ventre. Religion, magie et sorcellerie chez les Evuzok (Cameroun)”, *L'Homme*, vol 15, n. 2, 1975, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> T. Sanders, “Reconsidering witchcraft: Postcolonial Africa and Analytic (Un)Certainties, *American Anthropologist* New Series, vol. 105, no. 2, 2003.

for the Gonja (Ghana) it is not effectively possible to distinguish between sorcerers (who manipulate a *materia mystica*, and perform acts which might actually be done, although we might doubt their efficacy) and witches (who possess innate powers to change shape, appear and disappear, leave their bodies and, as pure soul-stuff, seek out and destroy the souls of others, i.e. perform acts impossible by their very nature)<sup>7</sup>.

From these latter two quotes, I believe it is important to stress two particular aspects: evil and destruction, as much as its innateness. Moreover, another distinction has to be taken in consideration: the one between witchcraft and a sorcery - which is allegedly learned.

We might infer that, by inheritance, a witch is potentially everyone: the carpenter or an old lady, a baby or a king. And it is not strictly gender-biased, for instance, in Zambia: “The Tonga witch is usually male, and there is no evidence that Tonga speakers have thought of women as using the most dangerous forms of witchcraft although this may be changing”<sup>8</sup>. Thus, we can define a sorcerer or a witch “as a person who is perceived to cause harm by supernatural, mystical means”<sup>9</sup>. Although, if we posit that in a given society, pervaded by elements of an animistic ontology, everybody *potentially* possess innate magical powers: where would it be the distinction in doing harm? An evil sorcerer is then someone who uses *illegitimate* supernatural powers to do harm. Since, if the political system recognize a legitimate use of that harm, a sorcerer – that can be an elder or a specialist diviner – would not have any political opposition. He or she would be in the right spiritual place to do harm, and incur in no sanctions. So, when it comes to a legitimate use of sorcery, “Contrairement à l’Europe, on ne distingue pas vraiment ici magie noire de magie blanche[...] dans la majorité des ethnies le même personnage (*a sorcerer*) peut travailler ‘en noir’ comme il peut le faire ‘en clair’”<sup>10</sup>.

Witchcraft is in fact a risky concept, a semantic swing. Moreover, we cannot disentangle it from sorcery – its heterozygote sibling – and magic. We shall then postulate, following Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard’s schema: witchcraft as innate ambiguous power – which can be also ‘inactive’ - , whereas sorcery as a technical and conscious acquired evil magic, uttered against others. This statement - ça va sans dire – has its limitations. Limitations, that we did acknowledged with different examples beforehand. Moreover, Mary Douglas, in a way, tried to bridge the differences by stating that:

where the social system explicitly recognises positions of authority, those holding such positions are endowed with explicit spiritual power, controlled, conscious, external and approved – powers to bless or curse. Where the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these

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<sup>7</sup> E. Goody, “Legitimate and Illegitimate Aggression in a West African State”, in M. Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft confessions and accusations*, London and New York, Routledge, 1970, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> E. Colson, “Father as a witch”, *Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 70, no. 3, 2000, p. 336.

<sup>9</sup> Govind Kelkar and Dev Nathan, *Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation*, p.25.

<sup>10</sup> L. Kesteloot, “Magie et illusion au Moyen Âge - Magie et merveilleux dans les sociétés et les épopées d’Afrique noire”, *Senefiance*, vol. 42, 1999, p. 5.



persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers – such as witchcraft and evil eye<sup>11</sup>.

The dichotomy traced by Douglas here is very useful. Nonetheless, it does not take into account the possibility in which, either a social group or an individual possess both a position of authority, and a dangerous ambiguous role. Indeed, a case of convergence. In other words, I am not fully convinced whether in certain African contexts, this dualism would be neat and the attributed roles so clear. To sum up our examples: the conceptualization used by the Ihanzu can help us define witchcraft as an (in)visible harm soaked in ‘evilness’; even though, this definition runs the risk of oversimplification. So, I propose, from now on, to use the word sorcery instead of witchcraft. For two reasons. First, by applying a methodological principle as core of the thesis, Occam’s razor - *novacula Occami: "Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate"* – Do not consider pluralities, if it is not necessary. Secondly, given the ambiguity of both words, I prefer dealing with a concept which unites the innatism of one, and the ‘technicality’ of the other. Furthermore, if we want to move away from merely cultural accounts, sorcery has to be grasped in its totality, and here I quote two Indian scholars:

We have argued that the witchcraft narrative with its circularity, the impossibility of producing evidence of witchcraft, and depending, as it does, on torture-coerced confessions is epistemologically flawed as a way of knowing or identifying the witch. It is also flawed as an explanation of misfortunes since it concentrates on the immediate persons in relation to the accuser, and thus deflects attention from the larger socio-economic and political causes of misfortunes<sup>12</sup>.

And by totality, I emphasize the importance of taking into consideration the micro-macro view of any society animated by sorcery and magic, or in other words, the ‘external factors’. We must verify and be conscious that we could run into global, inter-nationals and regional dynamics, linked to wide socio-economic and political transformations. For instance, a powerful social group can be easily identified in a society. Maybe a corporation of diviners with specific spiritual and magical abilities. Still, what happens when we try to untie all the knots that lead to sorcery accusations, covered by antecedent political tensions? Causes and evidences seem to slip away. Indeed, Pritchard on this, writes: “Witchcraft explains why events are harmful to man and not how they happen”<sup>13</sup>.

Thus, if we try to speculate, the agrarian context can give us a hint. Assuming that some acres of land and water are poisoned by some corporations in the vicinity. And, these are owned by a collective group of farmers. What are these farmers going to do? Is it easier to accuse the neighbors

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<sup>11</sup> M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York, Routledge, 2001, p.100

<sup>12</sup> G. Kelkar, and D. Nathan, *Witch Hunts: Culture, Patriarchy and Structural Transformation*, Indiana University Press, 2020, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Evans-Pritchard, E., 1976, p. 24.

or the powerful company for the mischief? In this case, the legitimate use of sorcery and magic by an hegemonic group would be exclusive. Since, only a selected group of people are able to exercise a pragmatic spiritual power and take the responsibility of an accusation against a mighty opponent. Nevertheless, this hypothetical group could be accomplice to this company, and do nothing about it. Analogously, Pritchard tells us, that among the Azande, for the aforementioned reasons, kings, princes and dignitaries were immune to any sort of sorcery's incrimination. All in all, these examples actually explain to us, that a sorcerer might be typified both as an illegitimate perpetrator and a legitimate ruler. Being able of legitimizing oneself as a sorcerer in the eyes of a community, and for the common well is a thing; to de-legitimize and stigmatize someone for the incumbent threat towards society is another. All these different perspectives have in common one thing: spiritual power. This spiritual power contained in any sorcery's deeds is the discrepancy. Whereas, everybody can potentially be sorcerers, only the ones who are able to legitimate themselves can wield a power to do both good and evil. Sorcerer is thus someone who can successfully manipulate spiritual power. Still, what happens when that spiritual power is regarded as evil threat to society?

In conclusion, in spite of the controversial definition of animism by E.B. Tylor, his conceptualization can also come to help:

L'animisme est un système intellectuel, il permet de concevoir le monde comme un vaste ensemble[...] un système d'indications relatives à la manière dont on doit se comporter pour dominer les esprits des hommes, des animaux et des choses... ces règles de conduites sont connues sous le nom de "sorcellerie et magie"... et peuvent être comparées à la technique<sup>14</sup>.

Notwithstanding the fact that we are going to analyse two examples of syncretic world-views, the animistic aspect is cardinal in acknowledging the political importance of controlling the spirits, sorcery and magic. To understand politics in Africa, the spiritual dimensions has to be put at the center of every day life. The living live side by side with the dead. Legitimization – in most cases – is consolidated and handed down by communicating with the dead. Who dominates the spiritual dimension of mundane life, also dominate the past and the future.

## **Magic**

Magic is ubiquitous and transformative, it does not create. It is a 'master signifier': it includes a wide spectrum of phenomena, from divination to spells, sorcery and amulets. It is difficult, therefore, to assess a definition applicable for distant chronologies and geographies.

For this reason, I will take an exemplar renaissance's work as *modus investigandi*: Giordano Bruno's treatise on magic.

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<sup>14</sup> L. Kesteloot, 1999, p. 4.

Before discussing magic, as any other subject, it has to be distinguished among its meanings: many are its meanings, as many are the kinds of mages. Firstly, *Magus* signifies a sapient; as *equally* were Trimegisti for Egyptians, Druids for Gauls, Gymnosophists for Indians, Cabalist for Jews, Mages for Persians 'From Zoroastro', Sophists for Greeks, Sapientis for Latins<sup>15</sup>.

Bruno proposes a theoretical pamphlet which conceptualizes magic as a universal form that encompasses the entire reality, and accidentally distinguishes and materializes itself only in relation to the operation it conducts.

Thus, my concern is with the tangible effects of magic *per se*; if it socially works, rather than a question of belief. For instance, the thaumaturgic touch by the kings of France and England established their divine hegemony<sup>16</sup>, their power was in fact extremely pragmatic. Even if, some of us might rationally call them charlatans. Otherwise, when it comes to Africa, a concept that may come in handy, and help us figuring out the meaning of 'magic' is the word *dalilu* - from Mande society, in what is nowadays Mali and part of Guinea. Historically situated at the eve of Sunjata's rising as the first *mande* – ruler – of the Mali empire, from 13<sup>th</sup> forward. We will further see the relevance of sorcery in the famous epic. Though, for the time being, we posit this definition, given by Conrad for *dalilu*:

according to the context usually seen in oral tradition, magic, or occult power; more generally, any means to achieve a goal, referring to secret power, weather supernatural or not. Someone might have the *dalilu* to bring rain, but also used in casual daily usage – e.g., 'he has the *dalilu* to repair a car'<sup>17</sup>.

*Dalilu* resembles those innate powers that we outlined before – like *evu*. It can be canalized for both amoral and moral affairs, mischief and blessing, ordinary and exceptional deeds.

Thus, from what we can deduce, magic does not seem like the prerogative of certain scholars or mystics with unspeakable knowledge, as Giordano Bruno reminds us in the incipit.

Bruno was not an esoteric fanatic: he was deeply concern with the applicability of magic by the virtuous and aristocrats – in its Greek etymology – to legitimize political institution and harmonize collective living. What I would rather contest is the democratization of knowledge, an aspect neglected by Bruno and foundation of coeval scientific communities. Besides, what makes the magician a magician? Is it the public that makes him/her so? Not only. The ones enumerated by Bruno were recognized for their knowledge and wisdom; although, it is significant to notice that:

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<sup>15</sup> G. Bruno, *De Magia*, Createspace Independent Pub, 2014, p.2.

The original quote, in Latin, is the following: "Antequam De magia, sicut antequam de quocunque subiecto disseratur, nomen in sua significata est dividendum; totidem autem sunt significata magiae, quot et magi. Magus primo sumitur pro sapiente, cuiusmodi erant Trimegisti apud Aegyptios, Druidae apud Gallos, Gymnosophistae apud Indos, Cabalistae apud Hebraeos, Magi apud Persas (qui a Zoroastre), Sophi apud Graecos, Sapientes apud Latinos".

<sup>16</sup> An important reference here is M. Bloch, *Les Rois Thaumaturges, Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre*, Paris, Gallimard, 1983.

<sup>17</sup> D. C. Conrad, *Sunjata: A new prose version*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2016, p.129.

social differentiation, gender differentiation[...] ‘hinges on differential access to social knowledge’ (Bender), a differential access enforced through denunciation of women who acquire such knowledge as witches.[...] What is important is that ritual knowledge requires a specialist who has spend a lot of time in acquiring the knowledge and skills<sup>18</sup>.

Emblematic are diviners, which are ritual specialists: they have a privileged access to knowledge, as they have a privileged political position. The importance of a political support by the diviners is stated with the following example:

The Giriama (Kenya/Tanzania regions) have always been suspicious of those who have accumulated wealth, and envy was a prime source of witchcraft accusations. Recognizing that the ritual processes of traditional elders could never be controlled by them, younger Giriama farmers came to rely on an emerging group of younger medicine men and diviners to support them. These medicine men drew upon Islamic skills, resources and medicines as well as upon traditional Giriama medicines to emerge as some of the more successful ritual specialists<sup>19</sup>.

A magician is thus ‘chosen’ by the public, as much as he/she has access to various knowledge and privileges. And that is not a given. The pervasiveness of magic specialists is extremely contemporary, as its cost, since “rien de plus banal et, dans l’Afrique actuelle, tout affrontement d’importance, qu’il soit sportif, guerrier, ou électoral, donne lieu à des préparatifs et des protections acquises à grands frais auprès de thaumaturges spécialisés”<sup>20</sup>. Even if commodification of magical objects is currently taking an ominous turn<sup>21</sup>, the importance of these medium *per se* has nevertheless a long and persistence heritage: “Les fétiches dont on se sert ainsi sont considérés comme des médiums à travers lesquels on entre en contact avec le monde invisible, et au moyen desquels on peut déclencher les forces de génies ou des dieux”<sup>22</sup>. Hence, a spiritual hegemony is acted between the worlds in different ways, objects or fetishes are as cardinal as ritual and divination in corroborating or dismantling power.

Conclusively, magic will not be portrayed in the course of thesis as a paradigmatic belief, it will be rather inserted, as a supposed ubiquitous active essence in action. For instance, through amulets, rituals and spells; “la magie dans l’épopée comme dans la vie ne se soucie pas de morale. Elle est d’un pragmatisme désarmant. Tous les moyens sont bons pourvu qu’on réussisse”<sup>23</sup>. Magic will thus be investigated by mirroring its potential effects in legitimizing an hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power; as the ways in which is used, and abused. Honestly, I guess it would be quite dumb for a diviner to reveal his magic abilities that unveil a sorcerer. What is rather important is

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<sup>18</sup> Kelkar and Nathan, 2020, p.122

<sup>19</sup> C. Brantley, “An Historical Perspective of the Giriama and Witchcraft Control”, *Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 49, no. 2, 1979, p.120

<sup>20</sup> Kasteloot, 1999, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> H. L. Moore and T. Sanders, *Magical interpretations, material realities: modernity, witchcraft, and the occult in postcolonial Africa*, Routledge, 2001, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

that his/her actions do socially work. On the contrary, what happens when magical acts and knowledge are sanctioned and considered evil?

## Source Materials

The main bulk of sources refer to historical, anthropological, sociological, philosophical and ethnographic contributes. Contributes range from functionalist theories of the English school, up to the coeval discussions of both sorcery and modernity developed by a variety of authors, such as Mary Douglas and Silvia Federici. Besides, authors that deal with medieval Africa and literary critique, in relation to the epic genre. In particular, two works are going to be a starting point of chapter's elaboration: *Nzo lipfu*<sup>24</sup>, *le lignage de la mort: la sorcellerie, idéologie de la lutte sociale sur le plateau kukuya* by Pierre Bonnafé, and *Sunjata: a new prose version* by David. C. Conrad. Geographically, the majority of sources orbit around West and Center Africa, plus some sporadic examples of East Africa. Historically situated from the 1960s until the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Only exception is Sunjata, an oral epic which is passed down by *griot* (bards) since the 13<sup>th</sup> century up to today.

## State of Research and Method

Is sorcery a popular mode of action? This question was raised by Peter Geschiere in an article at the end of the eighties<sup>25</sup>. Fil rouge was traced by Jean-François Bayard, who was interested in observing unorthodox practices, (in)visible actions outside state's visibility and unorganized manners of counter-hegemonic actions. Geschiere argues that due to "lack of a consistent organisation, they tend to become less specific in their effects, or, in Bayard's terms, they are less able to express a 'counter-hegemonic' project"<sup>26</sup>. Pursuing this line of reasoning, Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier claim that sorcery is not only a popular mode of action, but also a state-building enterprise: "manipulating the threat or the reality of sorcery as the destroyer of social order is integral to the local strategies of equalising wealth and making elites honour their kinship obligations"<sup>27</sup>. While, Diane Ciekawi with a Foucaultian touch, conceptualizes sorcery as a discursive power of state formation and "how the production of discourse about magical harm through time and in different political spaces was integral to these processes, and ultimately to the process of state formation"<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> *Nzo Lipfu* can be translated as 'the lineage of death'. It is a power possessed by a sorcerer. To be clear, the language spoken by the inhabitants of the Congolese plateau is also known as *Teke*. And *Teke* is part of a big family of Bantu idioms.

<sup>25</sup> P. Geschiere, "Sorcery and the State: Popular Modes of Action Among the Maka of Southeast Cameroon", *Critique of Anthropology*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1988.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p.37.

<sup>27</sup> M. Rowlands and J. P. Warnier, "Sorcery, Power and the Modern State in Cameroon", *Man New Series*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1988, p.131

<sup>28</sup> D. Ciekawy, "Witchcraft in Statecraft: Five Technologies of Power in Colonial and Postcolonial Coastal Kenya", *African Studies Review*, vol. 41, no. 3, 1998, p.120.

All these three authors offered a fresh take on the relationship between sorcery and modalities of political praxis. What is actually lacking, is an understanding of historical-hegemonic formations, in relation to spiritual power and its manipulation by both dominant and subordinated groups. Methodologically, I will hence try to pin point the modalities of hegemonic corroboration and dissolution, based on sorcery and magic. Overall, my intention is to follow the path traced by these writers, and highlight possibilities and impossibilities of magical-political actions. To answer the ‘how’, when it comes to sorcery and magic, becomes paradigmatic. If, there is an hegemonic control over the spiritual and material life, than we need to find the threads that are hidden from sight. There is a how, because the modalities to exert a magical-political power are multiple. Sources criticism is the privileged method of inquiry: the two texts – Nzo Lipfu and Sunjata - mentioned under ‘sources’, will be then the chapters’ architraves, coupled with oral and written material. Both texts are products of different geographies and time. The first one is an ethnographic work, set in the Republic of Congo, between 1964 and 1967. Whereas, the second, is a medieval epic, principally localized amid Mali and Guinea.

Given these premises, my approach will be historical-morphological. I will try to look for consistent analogies, in the regards of spiritual manipulation and hegemony, that endure with different forms and traits, across space and time. A similar methodology was implemented and discussed by Carlo Ginzburg in two essays: *Microhistory and World History*<sup>29</sup>, and *Conjunctive Anomalies: A Reflection on Werewolves*<sup>30</sup>. In the latter paper, Ginzburg argues: “I regarded morphology, not as an alternative to history, but as a tool that might have opened up the possibility of overcoming the lack of historical evidence, throwing some light upon the puzzling analogies”.<sup>31</sup> These puzzling analogies are my main concern, to understand if there is any historical persistence and resistance of both magic and sorcery in dealing with power and legitimacy.

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<sup>29</sup> C. Ginzburg, “Microhistory and World History”, in J. H. Bentley, M. E. Wiesner, S. Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Cambridge World History: The construction of a global world, 1400-1800 CE. Part 2: Patterns of Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> C. Ginzburg, “Conjunctive anomalies: a reflection on werewolves”, *Presentation of Publications of the School of Social Sciences at the Universidad de los Andes*, Bogotá, Colombia, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 111.

## Chapter one: Evil and Women, a Fertile Alliance

The starting points of this chapter will be Pierre Bonnafé's book *Nzo Lipfu, le lignage de la mort*<sup>32</sup>, and "Une force, un objet, un champ: le buti des Kukuya au Congo"<sup>33</sup>, both ethnographic works, geographically situated in coeval Republic of Congo (as shown in the following map), and chronologically set in 1967.

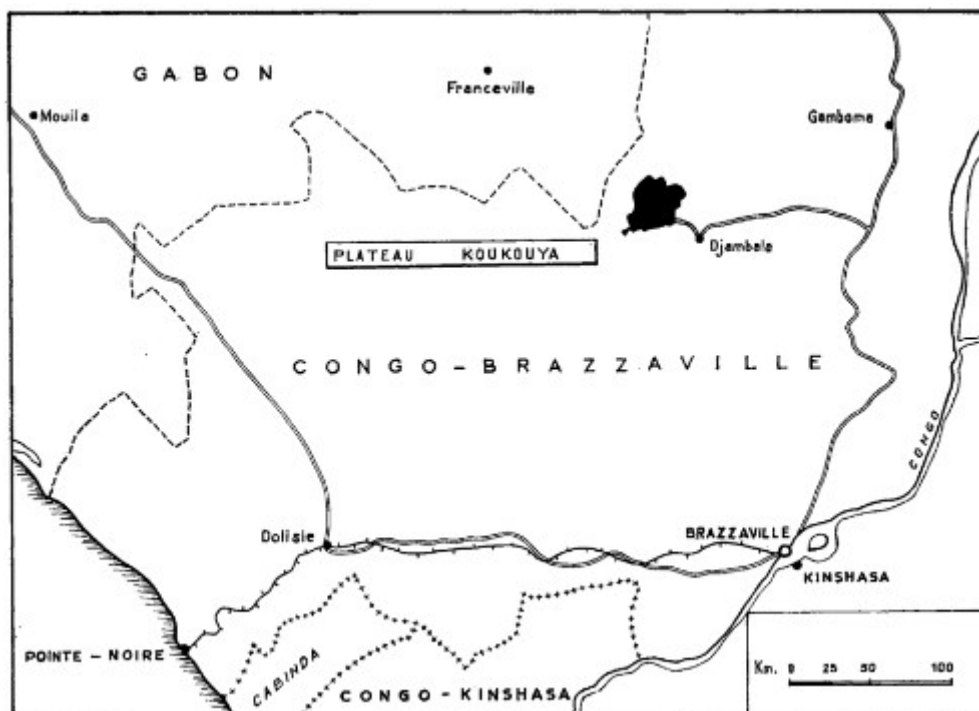


Figure 2: Geographic location of Plateau Kukuya presented in B. Guillot, *La Terre Enkou. Recherches sur les structures agraires du plateau Koukouya (Congo)*, Paris, Mouton & Co, 1973, p. 12.

The first text takes us for most of the prose, in detail, inside a *mutere* - a judicial ritual - to publicly reveal a sorcerer's evil misdeed. The *mutere* is a social mirror, "une cérémonie de découverte d'un sorcier"<sup>34</sup>, which enfolds into three phases: multiple death occurred, a menace to society has been perceived, so elders and chiefs start consulting; a local expedition goes and confer with a foreign diviner; eventually, the troupe returns, and the assembly takes place until a verdict<sup>35</sup>.

While, the second article, part of the same investigation, mainly deals with magical objects – *mati* – that are used by sorcerers to accumulate power, destroy life, prosperity and even kill. Everything

<sup>32</sup> P. Bonnafé, *Nzo Lipfu, le lignage de la mort: la sorcellerie, idéologie de la lutte sociale sur le plateau kukuya*, Nanterre, Publications de la Société d'ethnologie, 1978.

<sup>33</sup> P. Bonnafé, "Une force, un objet, un champ : le buti des Kukuya au Congo", *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire*, vol. 8, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49.

<sup>35</sup> The social composition of a *mutere* is the following: elders, chiefs, judges, guards, a messenger which recites the foreign diviner's consultation, a local diviner, a *griot* – a bard, spectators, suspects, and finally, the lineage's member under accusation (in Bonnafé, 1978, pp. 58-67).

that can be identified with destruction, death and infertility is plausibly a sorcerer's evil doing. Conversely, fertility is rain, a mild sun, collective harmony, a good harvest, kids strolling around: it is more or less an idyllic scenario of prosperity, in which time freezes in order to give breath to the new.

Who can pose a threat to this state of things, if not a malicious sorcerer who feasts on other's sufferings? Likely, this evil sorcerer could be a woman. A stereotype old as the wheel, that has concrete historical explanations, rooted in diversified, and institutionalized patriarchal systems<sup>36</sup>. The purpose of this chapter is rather to understand, if and how, magic and sorcery – in the shapes of a gendered evil – played any role at all in subordinating women in the hands of hegemonic powers, mainly supported by men and elders. My intention here, is of course not to enforcedly generalize any conclusive remark that can be applied in every context or any condition *tout court*. It is rather to evidence how Kukuya women – in this case - , given certain conditions and in very different shapes, might end up with very similar result: political subordination, oppression and asymmetrical relations of power. Where, by certain conditions, I mean gerontocratical, patriarchal and hierarchical societies, tied to particular sex specific or sex related socio-economic exploitations. To do so, we have to follow entangled trajectories of manipulation of magical objects, land issues, control over infertile bodies, and ritual knowledge exclusion.

## **Myth and Dualism**

The subjects and objects of this chapter is Kukuya society, inhabitants of the homonym plateau, nowadays Republic of Congo. Bonnafé writes and lives within a society in which its people are and were embedded into a world of Animism and Christianity, an all-encompassing magical reality which can be difficult for us to grasp. It is a reality that does not oppose material to immaterial, nature and culture, nature in contrast to humanity, or the other way around. Besides, there are two temporal moments, distinguished by the Kukuya, where visible and invisible coexist and intermingle: "*mandaka ma wiri*, 'les affaires du jour' et *mandaka mampiriba*, 'les affaires de la nuit', normal et déterminé contre anormal et indéterminé".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is a universe where sentient and non sentient beings have a 'soul', and magic activities are not just child's fantasies or parallel dimensions. So, in order to briefly introduce and imagine this distant cosmos, we have to interpellate the myth. Kukuya's cosmogony tells us that:

Nzami (the supreme being) a créé en même temps les hommes, les femmes, les animaux et les plantes ainsi que les éléments. C'est ainsi qu'il a pourvu les humains d'un principe vital *mumpuki*, lié à celui de leur lignage *nzo*, le *mumpuki a nzo* [...] Ces principes sont des forces assurant le succès à

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<sup>36</sup> E. B. Leacock, *Myths of male dominance: collected articles on women cross-culturally*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1981.

<sup>37</sup> Bonnafé, 1987, p. 27



tous : *mpolo*. Mais Nzami a créé simultanément des *pfuna*, qui sont les «choses» agissantes de la sorcellerie<sup>38</sup>.

This dichotomy *mpolo* and *pfune* is of extreme importance: the first one, is associated with fertility, good health and life's reproduction; whereas, the second is the innate sorcery and substance that potentially is inherited by matrilineal, agnatic and bilateral line. However, there is a further kind of sorcery that interests us, the 'technical' one, called *mati* (sg. *buti*). *Mati* are not singular and easily identifiable objects, their nature is manifold and elusive, they might even transform or hide, as a matter of fact "toutes ces puissances ont en commun d'appartenir à un monde différent du monde «simple». Par conséquent, se défendre contre elles ou les acquérir pour les manier, suppose qu'on fasse appel à une relation cachée avec ce monde invisible"<sup>39</sup>.

Hence, there is a kind of necessary knowledge to activate or deactivate these 'hidden' objects or powers, which in turn, would defend against threat and menaces. It is a knowledge, so to say, that allows for a capacity to interact and 'see between the worlds'. Such a privileged discernment is monopoly of a specific social group: the *ngàà* – namely, 'those who possess the gift'. Obviously, this knowledge has to "reste secrète", because "une puissance révélée à tous perdrait son efficacité"<sup>40</sup>. Socially, these magic specialists are healers, diviners and witch-doctors; and notably, the only difference with a sorcerer's power is their legitimate use. Despite the fact that the *ngàà* are the only connoisseurs of sorcery and magical arts, *mati* are also detained by the "plupart des aînés privilégiés"<sup>41</sup>; they can be inherited, and nowadays are also easily affordable, with money – of course. For the rest, "les femmes, dépourvues de richesse, ne peuvent que très rarement acheter de tels objets à leurs risques et périls", while, "les jeunes n'en ont pratiquement pas d'importants, sauf objets hérités et magies d'amour"<sup>42</sup>. At a first glance, the unequal relation between magical objects and women stoutly appears. Still, before addressing the substance and reasons behind the relationship magic, sorcery and women, we must concretely understand what are these *mati*.

In primis, it is important to differentiate between an act of legitimate and illegitimate use of *mati*. A perilous and evil sorcery is operated only when it is overstepped a fixed boundary and 'limit' (*ondili*): namely, when "les motifs en soient jugés illicites (la vengeance défensive ne l'est pas), que les effets en soient nettement funestes (maladies ou morts)".<sup>43</sup> Otherwise, *mati*, as stressed before, are potentially acquirable or inherited by anyone. It is rather knowledge and the ability to act as medium that is a unique privilege of the *ngàà*.

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<sup>38</sup> Bonnafé, 1987, pp. 29-30.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p. 47.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 46-47.

Having pointed out this premise, we can articulate one tangible example of *mati*.

*Mati* can be characterized as a composition of different substances, called *mpiini*. The latter is actually the metamorphosis and combination of natural forces - i.e a buffalo, a thunder or a caiman – into a definite product. Let's take the example given by Bonnafé, who asks:

Un homme désire-t-il obtenir une puissance de vision (*limuni*)? Il devra réunir les signes de l'étoile (?), des plumes du petit oiseau lintoli, la peau de ntsi, un petit animal proche de la fouine avec des taches, ressemblant un peu à la panthère (l'animal repère les ennemis avant qu'ils n'attaquent par sa faculté de changer de taches: kikalika kele), un petit rat limpfina, le boa<sup>44</sup>.

The *ngàà* will then crush the assemblage, mix either nails or hairs taken by the requester – which assures a material and spiritual continuity - , and indicate those prohibition to adopt.

Once the melange is done, it will be placed on leaves that need to be thrown into a river or to be buried into the ground. Subsequently, these concocted leaves will either transform into 'benevolent' creatures or threatening genies. On the contrary: if it is suspected a sorcerer in possession of different *mati*, all the presumed substances of a composition have to be gather, brought to the *ngàà*, and destroyed. Indeed, "après blessure ou meurtre, tous ces *mpiini* deviennent visibles, car le principe vital du sorcier est faible. Un chasseur peut passer alors, par exemple, et lui tuer ses animaux"<sup>45</sup>. The continuity between the – in this case - powerful creatures and the sorcerer is hence shattered. What happens if it is a woman in possession of *mati*, though?

### ***Mati* and Women**

The relation between *mati* and women, among the Kukuya, is emblematic. Bonnafé states, in fact, that: "dans le domaine des *mati*, les femmes sont vues comme mauvais génies femelles"<sup>46</sup>. Evil genies who acquire and draw their formidable power from the 'invisible world' and, embodiment of those women, considered "plus faibles dans la vie courante et la puissance diurne"<sup>47</sup>. This, does not mean that women have no access to *mati*, either in forms of money or inheritance. Rather, it shows how these 'weak women' have to resort to hidden strategies in order to damage, accumulate wealth, or obtain magical substances, since they are deprived of a visible strength during daylight. Women, given their latent secrets, are then easily rumored as sorceress. Bonnafé, on this issue, provides an interesting case, regarding a sorceress's denunciation. Let's see the example.

Une femme dans la Terre Lage (*part of the plateau*) en 1965 avait un «boa de richesse», hérité de son lignage utérin (frère ou mère), autre nom de ce *buti* qui était fait pour enrichir. Ce boa volait la nuit les semences de ses «voisines» (terme pour désigner ses compagnes de travail). La femme en effet était «jalouse» d'elles (*mpfuna*) et aspergeait la nuit toujours leurs semences avec une eau maléfique<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> Bonnafé, 1984, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

A female working partner, who complains for her lack of seeds, denounces this 'jealous' woman. The diviner is thus consulted, and it is found out that the latter woman possess a *pfuna*, an evil genie in the shapes of a young goat, and the 'boa of prosperity' – a *buti*. Three kinds of sorcery, then. Whereas, the mechanism in action, is the following: the boa steals the seeds, it fills the sorceress's bag, and the little goat comes to eat them. The *pfuna*, instead, gives strength to the act itself. Consequently, the sorceress is not 'caught', so the last drastic measure is taken: "L'oncle utérin et les parents paternels décident de monter un véritable piège avec un breuvage kitsie, qu'on placera sur le champ de la femme lésée. La sorcière, si elle ne peut se contenir, viendra boire cette eau sous forme de boa ou de cabri et absorbera ainsi un poison"<sup>49</sup>. Once the poison has been drank, the woman will be thus easily recognized by her smell. Again, the contiguity sorcerer and *mati* is stressed. The damage inflicted to either the boa or the little goat is a damage against the sorcerer itself; which shows, how, "de l'homme à l'animal se révèle une identité d'organes et de fonctions"<sup>50</sup>.

The previous example describes a conflictual episode among women, an event that recalls two often quoted *topoi* of sorcery's accusation: jealousy and greed. Jealousy, as we noted before, is result of machinations excogitated by a 'weak woman', and greed, due to uncontrollable behaviour of a sorcerer who is unable to share wealth. Yet, what catches the eye is the impressive mobilization by the lineage family and the accuser. *Mati* are potentially obtained by women, but the overwhelming majority of these objects, and its secrets, are in the hands of elders, powerful men and diviners. As a matter of fact, Bonnafé adds, that during his fieldwork: "A l'époque, comme par le passé, «les femmes n'ont pas plus de *mati*» [...] Qu'elles aient recours à ceux de leurs frères, époux, parents, aînés, semble normal"<sup>51</sup>.

Hence, to what is linked the lack of *buti*'s possession and knowledge, to women's condition in Kukuya society? The answer lies in the pivotal role of women as workers and life reproducers. Indeed, the paradigm recites that : "le succès agricole (*mpolo*) est d'abord placé dans l'énergie humaine de la femme"<sup>52</sup>. Agricultural wealth cannot be obtained, if not from massive and intensive toil, endured by women. Especially, when the amount of working hours, registered by Bonnafé are "35 heures de travail par semaine aux hommes actifs contre plus de 60 aux femmes"<sup>53</sup>.

In a sense, the *mati* reflect the relationship between men and women in a society, the role of who detains a spiritual hegemony over these objects, and to whom belongs the legitimacy of sanctioning and punishing the 'wrong' use of these magical items. Even if, "quelques brillantes exceptions ont

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<sup>49</sup> Bonnafé, 1984, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

toujours confirmé la règle”<sup>54</sup>, and possession is something that also women can secure, their technical knowledge remain monopoly of the *ngàà* caste. There is a reason why, a sorcerer’s accusation does never touch the stratified power of the *ngàà* and elders. Who establishes the *ondili* (the limit), is also the moral guardian of the status quo. Who controls the knowledge of these spiritual artifacts, controls the reins of a society well being. And, it is a well being that does not necessarily coincides with women’s prosperity and agency. Furthermore, a *buti* can be established as point of departure, in order to address three plausible ways in which women might be subordinated. Yet, to make sense of this exploitation, we have to articulate the position of Kukuya women in relation to an almost exclusive monopoly over magical substances.

The articulation can be configured as follows: firstly, by asserting the capacity of dominant group to exclude women from a specialized magical knowledge, pivotal to the preservation of a status quo, and legitimate political counter-actions; secondly, by deepening the analysis of a socio-economic exploitation; and thirdly, by controlling and demonizing women’s body, in relation to other African counter-parts.

## Land of Wisdom

There are three important features of knowledge through which hierarchy is formed. First is the difficulty of acquiring the knowledge. Second is the ring-fencing of that knowledge, so that its acquisition remains controlled. Third is the social valuation of that knowledge. [...] In indigenous societies too we can see that the monopolization of areas of knowledge through taboos and persecution as witches for breaking the boundaries is a way in which differences in knowledge are turned into hierarchy<sup>55</sup>.

In order to further elaborate on this point and pursue the regards given so far, we need to specify these three important remarks in regards to Kukuya population. But first, a clarification of this concept, knowledge.

Knowledge here, is understood as ritual knowledge in relation to *mati*. In particular, that kind of knowledge which allows divination, use of magical skills to expose sorcery, evil misdeeds, and ability to unveil the hidden magical secrets among worlds. Ritual knowledge is a key factor in establishing dominion if it is assured within a biological and economical niche. Men and elders possess an incontestable authority as long as they cannot be openly disputed by both women and youngster. Ritual knowledge, in this sense, does have a prominence in ensuring an hegemonic control, and it is pretty crystalline. What concerns me here is not the enormous body of ritual knowledge, which encloses numerous kinds of different rituals, categorized by Bonnafé under the voice *Ngàà*. Rather, its exclusivity: when knowledge becomes, in fact, evil. And, it is acted and possessed by a specific social group, in our case, women. In order to expurgate evil, you firstly need

<sup>54</sup> Bonnafé, 1984, p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> Kelkar and Nathan, 2020, p. 124.

to justify your actions – that can be equally evil. Thus, evil is legitimated by a dominant hegemony, when wielded to counter-act evilness itself.

For instance, Maia Green acutely observes that “in order for evil to become actionable, it has to be institutionally supported”<sup>56</sup>. The equalization women and evil genies, or women and weakness is codified by the dominant institutions, and slowly internalized equally by women and men, who reiterate myths and tales of feminine weakness. For this reason, ritual knowledge has to be inserted into a big canvas of different and intertwined trajectories, institutional changes and stasis. Specifically, magic and sorcery, have to be grasped only by assessing this a priori articulated scenario. If we do not acknowledge a gender struggle that inexorably excluded women from ritual knowledge - together with other ‘rights’ -, we are not able to comprehend why the juxtaposition of evil to women have been so common and violent. When we look closely among the Kukuya, for instance, women are enforcedly excluded by divination proceedings regarding sorcery, and not only. Bonnafé writes about the *mutere*:

Le savoir sur lequel se fonde le procès politique (*mutere*) est tout aussi insaisissable dans un premier temps que les autres composantes du procès. [...] Il existe un savoir proprement politique. Les histoires de sorcellerie se déroulent sur un laps de temps souvent considérable, au cours duquel s’enchaîne toute une série de procès variés. Ce n’est pas dans le *mutere* qu’on perçoit le plus la présence du savoir politique, mais dans l’intervalle entre les grands rituels: connaissance des intrigues, évaluation des forces, recherches des appuis, art d’orienter la rumeur diffuse et surtout décisions<sup>57</sup>.

It is exactly this political knowledge that legitimizes the uncontested power of the elders, diviners and chiefs among the Kukuya. A parallel can be traced, in terms of exclusion to political knowledge and hegemony, with the intertwined fate of Latin in opposition to vulgar Italian, and the fracture between intellectuals and illiterate masses. Antonio Gramsci, on this, writes: “Of religion, the people *see* and *hear* exhortative sermons, but cannot follow up with the discussions and ideological developments, which are monopoly of a caste”<sup>58</sup>. The monopoly of a caste, in our case, is the one of the *Ngàà*. Who, above all, thanks to a magical-political knowledge over *mati*, are able to preclude women from institutional position with ruling powers over sorcery. And secondly, by engendering women as innately weak and easily prone to transform into evil genies. Hence, the exclusion from *mati* possession and knowledge becomes matter of great importance, since manipulation of spiritual reality is decisive in consolidating power. To continue the thread and

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<sup>56</sup> M. Green, “Sorcery After Socialism. Liberalization and Anti-Witchcraft Practices in Southern Tanzania”, in W. C. Olsen, W. C., and W. E. A. Van Beek (eds.), *Evil in Africa: Encounters with the Everyday*, Indiana University Press, 2016. p. 325.

<sup>57</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p.144

<sup>58</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Edizione critica dell’Istituto Gramsci a cura di Valentino Gerratana, Einaudi Editore, 1975, vol. I, p. 354.

The original quote, in Italian, is the following: “Della religione il popolo *vede* i riti e *sente* le prediche esortative, ma non può seguire le discussioni e gli sviluppi ideologici che sono monopolio di una casta”.

follow the three remarks introduced at the beginning of the paragraph, we have to pin point some observations in the regards of Kukuya women.

Firstly, the difficulty of acquiring knowledge is coupled and reinforced by a total political exclusion. Primarily, due to a confinement inside the domestic sphere and harsh labour; as a matter of fact, “la tâche d’une femme étant avant tout de cultiver les champs”<sup>59</sup>. Furthermore, concern is confirmed by the fact that diviners and witch finders are merely men, called *Ngàà*. The latter corporation, chiefs, judges, and elders are clearly not interested in institutionally legitimizing women’s power, since, “Les alliances politiques sont au coeur de la place de la corporation dans le rapports sociaux”<sup>60</sup>. In addition, working exploitation is too important to be questioned, since the stratification of power lies in this unequal treatment.

Secondly, control over knowledge is assured by the exemples just mentioned, plus the guardians. The police and military apparatus is scarcely mentioned by Bonnafé, if not to show how during a mutere, for instance, “Si l’appareil juridique (et donc l’appareil politique) était réellement contesté a ce niveau, le recours aux gendarmes de la sous-préfecture serait presque inévitable”<sup>61</sup>. From this brief quote, we can assume that a military and police presence is pivotal in confirming ‘law and order’, and ‘order and knowledge’. The degree of militarization is nevertheless, not specified. So, given these premises, it is plausible to think that a knowledgable woman eager to intervene, would be immediately dismissed.

Thirdly, the social valuation: what would happen if the knowledge acquired by *Ngàà* and magic specialists became public? “The concept of secrecy implies exclusive control over types of knowledge that are not to be shared with all and sundry. Power is always related to the control and restriction of information”<sup>62</sup>. In fact, a diviner maintains his power if he is effective and concealed in what he/she does. Even if stupidity can be characterized as an axiomatic human condition<sup>63</sup>, no women or men are completely fools. That’s why the importance of a magical deed is in its act, and secrecy: it might work, but, luckily, it can be contested.

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<sup>59</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p.19.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, p.143.

<sup>62</sup> S. Ellis and G. Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power, Religious thought and political practice in Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 84

<sup>63</sup> C. M. Cipolla, *The basic laws of human stupidity*, Il Mulino, 2011.

## Land of Labour

“When the women are fat and the men thin, the men will talk at the border of the fields”<sup>64</sup>. (Fulani, Senegal)

In the previous paragraph, we have often mentioned how women in Kukuya society, performed much of the daily work, and are regarded as the epitome of agricultural wealth. The relation to *mati*, here again, is significant in evidencing the daily condition of these women and their liason with spiritual power. In the following paragraph, we are going to outline the socio-economic importance of these women in reproducing richness, heritage, life and miserably, exploitation itself. But firstly, an overview of Kukuya society: “On est en présence d'un système communautaire lignager hiérarchisé”<sup>65</sup>. I would also add, matrilinear and gerontocratic – elders, in fact, do have exclusive positions of power. In merit, I provide a definition of hierarchy posed by Murray Bookchin:

The cultural, traditional and psychological systems of obedience and command, not merely the economic and political systems to which the terms class and State most appropriately refer. Accordingly, hierarchy and domination could easily continue to exist in a "classless" or "Stateless" society. I refer to the domination of the young by the old, of women by men, of one ethnic group by another, of "masses" by bureaucrats who profess to speak in their "higher social interests," of countryside by town, and in a more subtle psychological sense, of body by mind, of spirit by a shallow instrumental rationality, and of nature by society and technology<sup>66</sup>.

This explication is cardinal: any hierarchical society we put under our lens has to be considered by taking into account both the cultural and psychological traits, historically inherited, and those economic and political nuances that materialize inequalities and gender stratification. Concisely, given the text's orientation, if we indulge into the socio-economic aspect of the latter, relations of production give us a first hint: “Ce ne sont pas des classes sociales comme dans le capitalisme, mais des couches sociales biologiques. Les rapports de production ne se réalisent pas directement sur un base économique, mais sur l'âge et le sexe, deux éléments biologiques”<sup>67</sup>.

Positions of power are ossified through the reproduction of certain privileges, traditions and rights, over decades and time. Bonnafé writes that reproduction of social formation happens within "le cycle de circulation matrimoniale [...] un cycle de femmes qui circulent entre aînés (femmes à marier appropriées – compensation de mariage – acquisition d'épouses)" , differentiated if "les femmes à marier sont des parentes utérines (nièces) ou des filles. [...] la richesse lignagère – passe par l'acquisition d'épouses”<sup>68</sup>. Women are both a biological "treasure" and a working one.

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<sup>64</sup> M. Schipper, *Source of all evil: African proverbs and sayings on women*, London, Allison & Busby, 1991, p.90.

<sup>65</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p.15.

<sup>66</sup> M. Bookchin, *The ecology of freedom*, Cheshire Books Inc., 1982, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p.31.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, p.26.

"Seuls les hommes ont des droits résidentiels"<sup>69</sup> and from the 'scramble for Africa' forward, "de plus en plus les femmes ont été confinées dans la pure production domestique alors que les hommes, pris par des cultures commercialisables, délaissent le travail du foyer à usage immédiat"<sup>70</sup>. As a matter of fact, "les femmes accomplissent la plus grande part du travail nécessaire commun[...]: elles assurent presque à elles seules la reproduction physique de la société"<sup>71</sup>. Women are thus exploited both from their parents and future husbands – tied to the land, they nevertheless provide and *are* a tout court surplus. These fragments evidently show how much women are tied to land(s): simultaneously enslaved by propriety inheritance, and by their legitimate owners – the elders. Land is thus a linchpin to demonstrate the radical subordination of women to society *in toto*. A woman is dangerous and potentially evil because she might stand in the way between men and social stability, land and transmitted privileges; a woman is a threat, because she might exacerbate domestic and intimate fragility. Nonetheless, how does this relate to sorcery? A sorcerer is the perfect example of someone who would destroy your crops, dry your ground, confabulate with other sorcerers to even steal your land. As we suggested in the introduction, sorcerers do not have to be necessarily women; they could likely be men.

To return to the land issue, the reason is simple: to understand how land is allocated and to whom is given, is to pin point how power relationships in a community are shaped and obtained. In our case, how women relate to land, tells us how they are considered, and how they see themselves in a society; their role and position. Women are indeed often workers but not owners.

The question of sorcery in relation to women and land is again emblematic. Since it outlines the general power relations, and the social position of who detains a magical knowledge to advance or destroy any claim, political or not. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning, even if it not our topos of inquiry, a plausible relation between sorcery's accusation and land seizures – especially in the last decades, in various part of Africa. Silvia Federici argues that: "Accusing women of being witches is an easy way to avoid attending to their land claims"<sup>72</sup>. Moreover, "as land is privatized and monetary relations become hegemonic, women's subsistence activities are no longer perceived as a contribution to the well being of the community. Many elderly women today are persecuted because they are perceived as a dead weight"<sup>73</sup>. Conversely, Kelkar Govind and Dev Nathan, in relation to economic distress and by comparing South Africa and Nigerian sorcery, ask: "Why is it that witch persecutions are restricted to people, basically women, of their own kin group and not to the

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<sup>69</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

<sup>72</sup> S. Federici, "Women, Witch-Hunting and Enclosures in Africa Today", *Sozial.Geschichte Online*, vol. 3, 2010, p.16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, p.23.



capitalists or mine owners?”<sup>74</sup>. An alleged sorcerer might easily be an old women with a succulent fortune in land inheritance: so, very pragmatically, why not to get rid of her? This and others are not just a cause/effect and deterministic episodes, parallels with the seasons of witch hunting in Europe are a good comparison, and it is glaring how accumulation of capital through land enclosures echo similar sounds. But, we do not have to be enchanted only by the analogous episodes. Witch persecutions are nowadays following unique historical trajectories and their horrors are well and alive. Sorcery – again – is important to notice, it is not just the accusations themselves, it is the spectrum of every day life rumors, bickering, divination and mystical aggression.

All in all, more than looking at a relationship between land and sorcery accusations, my intent here is to highlight how the reproduction of land privileges transmitted in patriarchal and gerontocratical societies consolidate the hegemonic power of men and elders over women and youngster.

Hegemony here, is of course not merely economical. Still, in organizing consent, it has material basis. Control over evil and magical activities is hence pivotal in establishing dominion over lands issues; especially, if we are talking about wealth. Magical objects, like *mati* are in fact allocated among the most powerful elders of Kukuya society, those who control land and knowledge alike.

Women are deprived of both: a socio-economic exploitation affects the possibility of autonomously acquire knowledge, wealth and even power. If most of the work is endured by women, time itself also becomes a heavy burden.

## **Dry Land**

The socio-economic exploitation outlined just above has to be centered on women’s body. The exercise of power by the dominant hegemony finds its *raison d’être* by incarcerating women’s body to an incessant work and an infinite cycle of marriages and wealth exchanges. So, what could be more dangerous than the threat of infertility in the regards of land and sex?

Hypothetically, every community facing these calamities would walk on very thin ice: control over the reproductive means of life is control over the heart and souls of any society. For instance, among the Lele people (nowadays Congo), there is a severe control on sexual pollution:

The danger of sex was also controlled by rules which protected male enterprises from female pollution and female enterprises from male pollution. All ritual had to be protected from female pollution, the male officiants (women were generally excluded from cult affairs) abstaining from sexual intercourse the night before. [...] Similarly women should abstain from sexual intercourse before planting ground nuts or maize, fishing, making salt or pottery. [...] Males and females are set off as belonging to distinct, mutually hostile spheres. Sexual antagonism inevitably results and this is reflected in the idea that each sex constitutes a danger to the other<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Kelkar and Nathan, 2020, p. 153.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas, 2001, p.153

Can we seemingly hypothesize that matrimonial control over Kukuya women's body resemble Lele's ritual exclusion? Kukuya women, as we stated before, accomplish their role of life and privilege 'reproducers' by being exchanged like cattle in wedding cycles. Instead, infertility is an element that would break the cycle, both sexual and rural; since, it is a perilous state of things. Either Kukuya and Lele women are the ones who hold the reins of a society's well being – in contrast to men. Yet, they are also the ones who are constantly subjugated to men's dominion. An inversion of life reproduction and goods production is the domain of an upside world: the one of sorceress feasting on human flesh, death, destruction and sterility; these are the features of an evil realm that destabilizes power and life itself. For instance, the preoccupation with infertility can be also linked to the concern in the regards of elderly people – especially women – that is so tangible across Africa. Mark Auslander in an ethnographic work about the Ngoni – in Eastern Zambia – asserts that:

Ngoni men in general – and younger men in particular - express ambivalence over women's privileged control over matters of sexuality and reproduction: they constantly assert that women are liable to abuse these powers undercutting male authority and subverting the reproduction of households. [...] a 'jealous' elder woman may be accused of 'closing' her womb without her consent, through nocturnal witchcraft<sup>76</sup>.

It is fair to notice how jealousy is recurrent in depicting women's attitude. Additionally,

among the Yorubas of south western Nigeria; it is believed that witchcraft is a feminine art that had power from the devil called "Esu" (the trickery god). [...] It is therefore, not surprising that for an average Nigerian, a typical witch is an old woman who has a reputation for being weird or anti-social<sup>77</sup>.

An oral myth, also, indicate a testimony of women's innate malignancy among the Kukuya:

Les vieilles femmes racontent aux très jeunes enfants des deux sexes toute une série de contes sur la sorcellerie [...] un fils a voulu dépasser son père, il lui a ordonné d'aller cueillir un fruit sur un arbre; quand il est redescendu, il n'a pu décoller ses mains de son visage sans en arracher la peau. Une femme jalouse de sa coépouse a enlevé l'un de ses enfants, l'a enterré en cachette; découverte, elle fut brûlée<sup>78</sup>.

All these examples apparently confirm an unequivocal equation of women to evil sorceresses.

Although, another caveat should be made at this point, otherwise we run the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water. Bonnafé in his book, does not mention the ways in which women actually engage in every day counter-hegemonic practices both magical and not; and, that is a big limitation to our inquiry. One might also ask: are women always the grim face of a limitless evil?

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<sup>76</sup> M. Auslander, " 'Open the Wombs!' : The Symbolic Politics of Modern Ngoni Witchfinding", in J. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents*, University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp.180-181

<sup>77</sup> F. A. Eboiyehi, "Convicted without Evidence: Elderly Women and Witchcraft Accusations in Contemporary Nigeria", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2017, p.251.

<sup>78</sup> Bonnafé, 1978, p. 46.

We have acknowledged so far, that a patriarchal and gerontocratical society, like the Kukuya, is capable of asserting a political economic and biologic domination over women, through fertility and infertility control, and by engendering women as innate evil creatures. To turn things upside down, I propose now, two counter examples and theories, to further pursue our investigation. Two contributions, one from Christina Larner and one curious example of Maasai women.

Friday Eboiyehi in his paper on sorceresses persecutions<sup>79</sup> sharply summarize Christina Larner's take on witch hunting, in Europe. The latter argues, that witch persecutions were not sex specific but sex related, in contrast to Federici's claim<sup>80</sup> of a tout court war on women – in Africa as well. "Despite her understanding of patriarchy and consciousness of the historic oppression of women [...] proposes that women were more prone to suspicion because men considered the feminine nature to be malevolent, sensual, evil, and irrational"<sup>81</sup>. From these statements, I presume accusations were a sort of a structural issue eradicated in the assumption that evil itself equated with womanhood. Women are more prone, then, to suspicion, given the socio-economic conditions in which they have historically lived. The dichotomy, at this point, between sex related and sex specific can be misleading. Dramatic women's hunt are attested and documented, but at the same time, inexorably relate between sexes. If it is a war, a war involves both men and women. Moreover, it involves, as well, those women that are not accused of being sorceresses. I guess, Larner's intention is of being cautious in using a concept, such as war. Wars in fact are not only *Blitzkrieg*: they might be invisible and subtle, not violent and seemingly unorganized. Stated this, are the previous observations applicable to the African contexts provided so far? Can we couple these observations with the assertion by Ismahan Soukeyna Diop that: "In many, or all African tales, the figure of the devouring mother, is present, combining the power, greed, strength and beauty, of the woman goddess, associated with the chaos.[...] the all powerful mother/sorcerer"<sup>82</sup>? What I sincerely draw from these arguments are two reflections: firstly, that we do not have to fall into the trap of considering women as privileged victims; women are in fact, not those passive agents that have been so often depicted. Where is then, women's agency in challenging an hegemonic status quo, in spite of stigmatization and subordination? Secondly, it is dangerous to hazard general conclusions on so vast topics, but at the same time we cannot neglect the uniform truthfulness of systematic women's political subordination and stereotypical claims of women's innate evilness. The danger here, is to regard men and women's relationship as immutable, antagonistic and inevitable life's conditions. Why African myths resound so similar to the ones of the old continent, if patriarchy, hierarchy and gerontocracy do not have a similar tale to tell us?

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<sup>79</sup> Eboiyehi reviews C. Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-Hunt in Scotland*, John Donald, 2000.

<sup>80</sup> S. Federici, 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Eboiyehi, 2017, p.256.

<sup>82</sup> I. S. Diop, *African Mythology, Femininity, and Maternity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p.30.

## Complementary Evil

Africa's continent gives us also, a splendid counter-example against the alleged evil innateness of women. Dorothy Hodgson in a paper<sup>83</sup> on evil expressions and actions among the Maasai women explains how the latter, after the spread of a contagious and dangerous spiritual possession – named *Orpeko* and accounted by David Peterson in 1971 – were able to organize in churches and collectively enhance group's solidarity to face the evil threat on the horizon. However, who did actually embody this spreading evilness?

They attributed (evil), indirectly, to the increased materialism and immoral assertions of power and privilege by Maasai men. [...] Women feared the effects of these changes in their lives on their capacity and power for both biological and social reproduction. [...] The spread of *orpeko* also empowered women by strengthening relationships among them and facilitating the creation of 'churches of women'. Women came together to support possessed women, holding them, caring for them, and taking over their work while they were incapacitated<sup>84</sup>.

Under the light of this quote, two inferences can be made: firstly, the impact of Christianity in shaping local cosmologies of good and evil. It is plausible that the syncretic exchange and conflict of world-views took place long before it is empirical observability; evil manifested itself in the shape of men, but it is not strictly dichotomic as in biblical terms. Therefore, we must take into account the fact that a Christian demonological knowledge might afflict in the long term, local and trans-local manifestation of evils. Secondly, accusations of sorcery are not present in these regards, towards men, nor in the form of public denunciation, neither divination (it is fair to notice that male are the ritual leader diviners, *Oloiboni*<sup>85</sup>). Hodgson tells us that rituals like baptism alleviate women's suffering, but it does not actually tell us how and if women challenge men's 'increased materialism' and privilege outside the churches' domain. I wonder, if those privileged positions of men inside the ritual spheres, prevent women from accusing directly those that have accumulated power. Hodgson quotes: "Maasai women said that they joined the church because they were directed to do so by their *oltau* – an inner 'spiritual' force"<sup>86</sup>. Evidently, Christian rituals like baptism offered a meaningful answer to these women's new concerns and with success. The hegemonic relationship between churches and state's administrative power in dealing with this matter, is not attested. Although, if we interrogate history:

During the colonial period—after first the Germans then the British took control of Tanganyika—colonial initiatives such as creating "Native Authorities," directing all economic and development assistance to men, and ignoring the rights and responsibilities of women, solidified what were gender differences into gender hierarchies. Men were now perceived as the household "heads,"

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<sup>83</sup> D. Hodgson, "The Gender of Evil: Maasai Experiences and Expressions" in W. C. Olsen and W. E. A. Van Beek (eds.), *Evil in Africa: Encounters with the Everyday*, Indiana University Press, 2016.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 258.

<sup>85</sup> Hodgson, 2016, p. 256.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.

livestock “owners,” and political authorities<sup>87</sup>.

Even if we hypothesize a hierarchical corroboration between male local authorities, churches and national states, the other side of the coin is that women are actually carving for themselves an autonomous space of dialogue and empowerment. We have no absolute clue of what outcome this might have. Variable is how much of this autonomy is going to be reclaimed and if it would actually challenge gender hierarchies.

To wrap up these considerations. In spite of the premises outlined so far, women are indeed often represented as evil and dangerous creatures, but to state this, would miss a point. Evil cannot be appreciated merely in terms of symbol, rather of practice, in its performative essence. Maasai women are the perfect example: they are not the evil’s faces par excellence, but they actually engage and struggle if any danger upon reproduction of life and privileges takes hold. A conceptualization given by Kelkar and Nathan over women’s agency is quite important:

women’s agency has five major dimensions: having unmediated (that is, not through marriage relations) right to control and own resources; freedom from fear of violence within the home and outside in streets and workplaces; ability to think and act to secure their strategic interest and, if necessary, change gender norms; decision-making over their reproductive work, including birthing and nurturing; and having representation and voice in society and influencing policy<sup>88</sup>.

Nevertheless, this picture has to be framed within a context of changing socio-economic conditions, wealth accumulation, national and international policies focused on myths of eternal growth and reinforcement of gender hierarchies. I ponder if a clash might occur between holders of spiritual knowledges. I intend a scenario in which Christian women, as ritual spiritual leaders, might enter in collision with the power of traditional healers and male diviners.

For instance, I. M Lewis tells us of a similar episode:

In his discussion of *zar* possession in Somalia, he shows how women, by becoming possessed, may create legitimate space for themselves in which they make political and economical claims that would not normally be admissible. Those who go too far in this direction, however, risk being accused of witchcraft, turning this spiritual power into an illegitimate force<sup>89</sup>.

What would it be the outcome then, a negotiation of privileges or a worsening of women’s rights? Are there going to be institutional changes due to new manifestations of evil, or a sedimentation of those riches in the hands of few? Is it enough to assess an effective empowerment of women through Christian institutions as counter-hegemonic political actions?

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<sup>87</sup> Hodgson, 2016, pp. 253-254.

<sup>88</sup> Kelkar and Nathan, 2020, pp. 202-203.

<sup>89</sup> Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, pp. 98-99

## Conclusive Remarks

At the beginning of the chapter, *mati* have been placed at the centre of analysis. These magical objects are not only sources of immense power for those who exerts their control, but they are also social mirrors. Mirrors that reflect inequalities, hierarchies, spiritual monopoly, and subordination. *Mati* are double edge swords: whoever manipulate magic, sorcery's power and exclusive knowledge over these artifacts, maintains a socio economic and psychological hegemony. The manipulation of magical objects seems to be simultaneous to a capillary control over life and goods reproduction. Indeed, so far, we have pointed out three cardinal manners to sideline Kukuya women from positions of institutional authority and power.

Firstly, by excluding women from certain ritual privileges and knowledge: a political act that demonizes women and invigorate a pernicious stigma. Hence, to possess a kind of forbidden knowledge is not only dreadful spiritual power, but spiritual and social death. Secondly, by making them slaves of their own propriety rights, and bound them to an unrelenting cycle of land privileges in which they are captives of their 'own house'; thus, sorcery and magic turn into a fertile ground to consolidate positions of authority and land rights. Thirdly, by controlling fertility and sexuality, uniqueness of women. Once women are designated as agricultural and biological treasures, everything that resembles 'un-productive', becomes a terrible danger to the community if not retained. And, women sorceresses are the swan song in this case.

This chapter has also tried to highlight if those evil connotations solemnly attributed to womanhood have been exploited by hierarchical and gerontocratical societies in order to consolidate power and hegemony – with the aid of sorcery and magic. It seems, that a cohesive exploitation on women, that can be either political economic, cultural, or built on gender antagonism, translate itself into a spiritual alienation, reinforced by magical knowledge and sorcery's control.

Actually, we have to look at multi causal explanations, in order to identify how magic and sorcery actually entrenched and helped assuring an uncontested hegemonic order. Notably, the example of Maasai women is illuminating: it tells us that the matrix of evil can be appreciated only by grasping a society *in toto*, within its dead weights, and mutable horizons. Clearly, it is not an ordained determinism that magically produced these various outcomes, but historical processes of patriarchal and hierarchical strengthening, ensured by men and women in flesh and bones alike. It tells us that gender inequalities and sex antagonism are historical contingencies, multi layered and not perennial. It tells us that women and men are indeed both faces of the same evils, but apparently, some are more evil than others.

## Chapter two: A Sorcerer's Tale of Hegemony

The fundamental question that embraces this chapter is the following: which are the modalities that would consolidate an hegemonic power through magic and sorcery? In the previous chapter, we acknowledged different examples of how women, in determined contexts, suffer a political subordination due to the spiritual hegemony of both men and elders; whereas, the latter, consolidate their power, thanks to an absolute and legitimate control of both magic, sorcery and the sanctioning of evil. This time, we will try to delve into an oral prose handed down by generations of *griot* – bards and poets – for hundreds of years: the epic of Sunjata<sup>90</sup>. The reason is simple, since the story narrates the tale of two sorcerers facing each other: Sunjata and Sumaworo. Both characters will try to secure their power and the one of their allegiances in various ways, for instance, by an intense involvement with sorcery, by negotiating with the spirit world, by acquiring supernatural powers – i.e. magical objects - , and by obtaining the approbation of diviners and elders. The context of the time is imbued in magic<sup>91</sup>, and furthermore, the emblematic aspect of spiritual power lay emphasis on how “the tendency for politicians to seek spiritual power, and for spiritual leaders to develop substantial material power, shows distinctive patterns in continuity with systems and ideas rooted deep in Africa’s history”<sup>92</sup>. And equally, “the vital role played by such African religious practices as magic and divination in mobilising people for revolt and in sustaining them in combat”<sup>93</sup>. This continuity is at the center of our analysis. Since the time span and geographies differ from the first chapter and this one, the purpose here is to follow the traces of permanence. In this chapter, I intend to outline the permanence of a spiritual power, possessed by both men and women, elders and diviners, who wield sorcery and magic in strikingly similar forms, either in the past and recent present. So, my aim is to apply a morphological approach that does not try to de-historicize, but emphasize the persistence of certain human endeavors in shaping politics, power and religions.

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<sup>90</sup> Conrad, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Magic and prophecy also went hand in hand with divinities in west Africa at the 13<sup>th</sup> century, that to say, magic had a great importance in the life of old Malian. In magic practices, West African used their king’s body parts such the head because they believed that is a pure spirit. These practices were considered by Mandingo as a mutual heritage which belonged to Sassouma (Sundiata’s Mother) since she used to call after the power of evil ‘Soubago’. (Mistakes in the English grammar are in the original) Mohamed Oulhadji, *The West African Medieval Empire of Mali (13<sup>th</sup> -15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, p.19.

<sup>92</sup> Ellis and Ter Haar, *Worlds of Power*, p. 99

<sup>93</sup> Donald Crummey, *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa*, p.13.

## Eastern Wisdom

Sunjata or Sundiata, the ballad here narrated, is expression of Mande<sup>94</sup> culture and art. It is pronounced by a *jeli* – a bard -, whose performance is registered and written by David C. Conrad. The latter is in presence of Djanka Tassej Condé, who chants the epic of his ancestors, inhabitants of Dò No Kiri<sup>95</sup>. A legendary land of smoky origins and contested spaces, in which, many cities are still undiscovered. For clarity's sake, it suffices to notice that the stories approximately took place in nowadays Mali and Guinea<sup>96</sup>. In figure 3, the Area of Detail, shows the approximate location of the Mande territory.

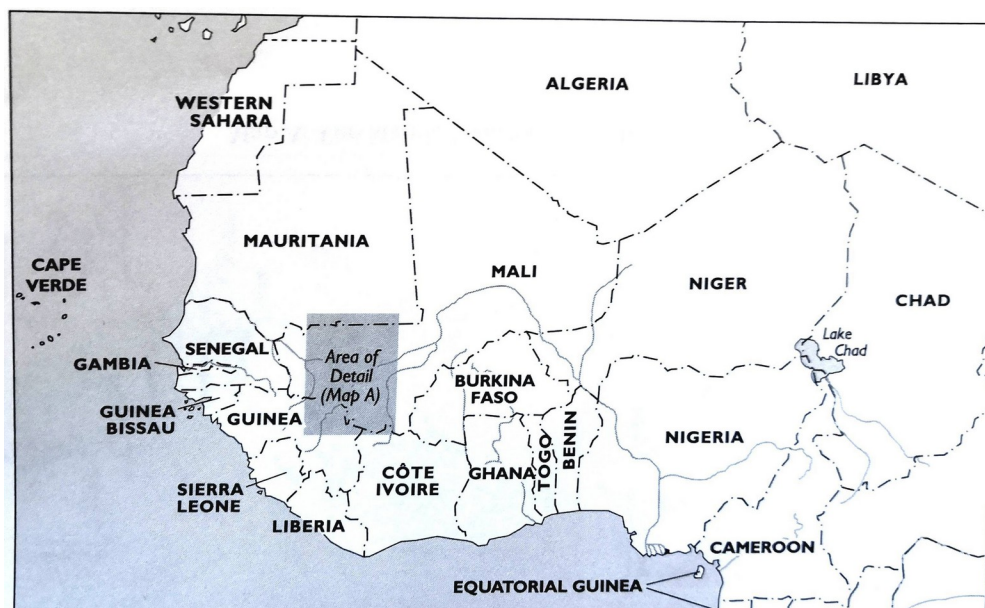


Figure 3: "West Africa and Area of Detail According to Oral Tradition" presented in Conrad, 2016, p. XL.

Sunjata is, in spite of the title, neither the main nor the least character of the tale. His birth is a long and painful wait: many different events were boiling, and meaningful events left traces, prior to the nascence. Historically, Sunjata was born in 1210, and raised in the Keita clan, inside the small kingdom of Kangaba. Once he established a powerful military and political leadership, he was able to defeat another regional mighty ruler, Sumaworo, at the battle of Karina, in 1235. The latter date is considered the founding moment of the Mali empire, and the Kurukan Fuga, its constitutional

<sup>94</sup> The Mande refers to a linguistic and cultural population which includes the Mandenka (Guinea, Mali, Gambia Bissau, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Liberia), the Diola and Senufo (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast), the Bambara, Soninke and Fulani (Mali, Senegal, Mauretania, and Gambia), and the Wangaran (Ghana). Quoted in M. Diawara, "Canonizing Soundiata in Mande Literature: Toward a Sociology of Narrative Elements", *Social Text*, no. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues, 1992, p. 156.

<sup>95</sup> For an interdisciplinary look into Dò No Kiri: K.C. Macdonald; N. Gestrich; S. Camara; D. Keita, "The 'Pays Dô' and the origins of the Empire of Mali" in T. Green and B. Rossi (eds.) *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past. Essays in Honour of Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias*, Leiden | Boston, Brill, 2018, pp. 63-87.

<sup>96</sup> For geographical details: pp. xxxiii – xxxvi, Conrad, 2016.



chart<sup>97</sup>. The sources at our disposition which document these events are the Islamic contributes that reconstruct the genealogy of Mali kings, recorded by Ibn Khaldûn and Maqrîzî, in particular<sup>98</sup>. Instead, when it comes to the epic, after a brief invocation to the prophets of Islam, the bard sings of a prominent happening. The coming of Karamogo Bereté – a learned Muslim, native of Farisi, a Persian region. Before remarking the singularity of the episode, we have to single out the fact, that the meeting between Bereté and Sunjata’s father – Konfara - , was blessed by a series of cadenced and misfortunate occurrences. The latter wanted a son, but all the women he slept with only bore daughters. In a row, all the prophecies uttered by *moriw*<sup>99</sup> and diviners failed, so to leave Konfara without a boy. Nevertheless, these men of wisdom, completely ashamed, lastly announced: “someone will come from the East. He will be coming from the land of the white – skinned people. This much has been revealed to us. Let this man pray to God for a solution to your problem. [...] We won’t be able to accomplish this ourselves. God has shown us a good man”<sup>100</sup>. This man from the East, appeared, and when Bereté and Konfara finally met, their first encounter resulted in a failure. Bereté found nothing but a place of apostates, while the latter, forcefully took the wise man’s sister. The Persian, dismayed, returned then to his motherland, and pondered the course of actions with his brethren: he will decide to ‘give’ his sister away, only if the Mande chief decides to convert to the holy book – the Qu’ran. Bereté went back to Mande, and Maghan Konfara decisively accepted the proposal: he had his head shaved and read the Qu’ran<sup>101</sup>. Afterwards, Bereté predicts:

When I was praying, God revealed to me that there are others like me who will come. [...] Those people will not bring any woman with them when they come. But they will tell you the name of the place that is their destination, and if you ask them to, they will bring you a woman from that place. She will bear that child<sup>102</sup>.

That woman is of course Sogolon, Sunjata’s mother.

Anyhow, why is this event cardinal? Because the diviner who actually prophetized Sunjata’s birth was a Muslim scholar. The remarkable aspect is that of legitimacy. Where all the other diviners failed – albeit, not entirely -, he succeeded in anointing a Mande chief and established himself as a Muslim leader. Bereté was not the first Muslim diviner to come along the way, though. As a matter of fact, the bard tells us of both *moriw* and diviners, when to announce the ineffectual first prophecies regarding the future king of Mande. So, what is the novelty? Firstly, it is worth briefly mentioning the Islamic background in the region:

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<sup>97</sup> Y. T. Cissé and J. L. Sagot-Duvaurox, *La charte du Mandé et autres traditions du Mali*, Albin Michel, 2003.

<sup>98</sup> I. Khaldoun, *Histoire des Berberes et des dynasties musulmanes de l’Afrique du Nord*, Geuthner, t. II, 1927, p. 89.

<sup>99</sup> “Muslim cleric [...] often referring to a seer or diviner who draws on spiritual connection with both the indigenous system of belief and Islam”. For the glossary: *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibidem*, p.11.

<sup>101</sup> Khaldoun, 1927, p.15.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 15-16.

Islam had arrived in parts of sub-Saharan West Africa long before the 13<sup>th</sup> century events described in the Sunjata epic, but the extent of its influence on Manding society by that time is extremely difficult to determine. [...] Many of those who did profess Islam most likely did not entirely abandon their traditional system of belief. [...] However, such acknowledgment of the power and prestige of Islam did not mean abandoning the ancient water and earth spirits of the pre-Islamic ancestors. Attractive elements of the Middle Eastern religion were appropriated and claimed as part of the indigenous system of belief”<sup>103</sup>.

For instance, the presence of *moriw* or marabouts is justified by Robert Pageard by stating that: “Par cette présence constante des marabouts dans la légende, le combat de Soundiata contre Soumangourou Kante a un peu le caractère de la lutte de deux pays en voie d’islamisation (le Câna et le Manding) contre un chef foncièrement fétichiste”<sup>104</sup>. This statement resounds a bit like the famous formula ‘clash of civilizations’. Yet, to define two monoliths in clash with each other, sounds to me as an hypertrophic stance. It is true that Islamization started to take its course; nonetheless, Sunjata resorted to magical actions and protections, typically Malinke, in the same measure as Soumaworo. Moreover, the latter was even tricked by Sunjata’s sister, who will reveal his secret magic abilities to the future Mansa himself. We cannot, therefore, ignore both the conflict and mutual reciprocity between systems of belief.

Kenneth W. Harrow on this, comments: “The destruction of Soumaoro's ‘fetishes’ is not represented as the conquest of monotheistic Islam over polytheistic Sosso, but as the apotheosis of the Son of the Buffalo”<sup>105</sup>. Son of the Buffalo, being clearly Suniata. Then, to further elaborate and return to the issue of Islamic diviners, another scholar states that “The presence of the marabouts in several versions of the legend suggests rather a later addition, a modification of the legend by the griots according to the changing values of Manding culture.”<sup>106</sup> An important comment that reminds us of the porosity of oral transmission as historical accounts and, the reliability of these sources. In fact, it has to be stressed, that this story has been reshuffled countless of time by the bards themselves. Thus, given the general opacity regarding the documents of the time, we must keep a very cautious posture in order not to stumble into gratuitous anachronisms.

While, a second inference to this quote is the following: if we assume, for a moment, that *moriw* and Islamic diviners were a later inclusion, the role played by Bereté in consecrating Sunjata’s father becomes doubtless cardinal. Still, does this event sanctify an increased importance of Muslim diviners among the hegemonic classes of warriors and elites? *De iure* and *de facto*, Bereté legitimized a spiritual power which originated from the East; a spiritual power that proved flawlessly successful – and useful, evidently. Sunjata’s father and the same Mansa could be the

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<sup>103</sup> Khaldoun, 1927, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>104</sup> R. Pageard, “Soundiata Keita and the Oral Tradition”, *Présence Africaine*, vol. 1, no. 36, 1961, p. 63.

<sup>105</sup> N. Levtzion, and R. L. Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000. p. 522.

<sup>106</sup> A. J. Shelton, “The Problem of Griot Interpretation and the Actual Causes of War in Sondjata, *Présence Africaine*”, *Nouvelle série*, vol. 2, no. 66, 1968, p. 151.

examples of those who show that “African leaders borrowed from Muslim society— which, like indigenous African religion, believed in a single God— what was convenient for the effective administration of their kingdoms and helped them sustain their legitimacy and consolidate their power”<sup>107</sup>. Conversely, an example from the oral tradition of Hausaland<sup>108</sup> can deepen the matter:

In a tale, recorded and analyzed by Priscilla Starratt (1996), a conventional struggle is recounted: a traditional bori priest is pitted against a Muslim holy man (malam) in a contest staged by the ruler. The ruler has placed a horse inside a house; he is the only person to know the house's contents. What, he asks, is in the house? The bori priest divines his answer: a horse. When the malam is asked the same question, he prays to Allah for guidance and is provided with a different answer: a white bull with horns. The ruler, expecting to find the horse still there, orders the walls of the house demolished. To the ruler's amazement, a white bull is found<sup>109</sup>.

Which is followed by a comment of the author, who remarks how: “the confrontation between the Hausa bori priest and the Muslim malam establishes the tale's framework, providing a setting frequently found in many African oral traditions: magical contestation of power forms the central action”<sup>110</sup>. An evident magical contestation that does not take place at the beginning of Sunjata. Rather, a crescendo of magical events, interwoven by fate, crafted by Allah’s will and mediated by diviners both Islamic and ‘traditional’. Hence, divination, in the hands of both specialist, legitimized a syncretic spiritual power, long before Sunjata’s birth: a sorcerer’s king who was magically announced by an Islamic diviner. It nevertheless marked the importance that the Islamic faith will play among the hegemonic groups until at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century; from then on: “The Malinke chiefs returned to the middle position between Islam and the traditional religion, with a greater inclination toward the latter”<sup>111</sup>.

### **A Sister’s Sacrifice**

Retrospectively, it appears that every magical clash and hegemonic dispute in Sunjata, picture as preordained by an all-encompassing fate. It is a fate intertwined by a climax of interactions and bloodshed that eventually legitimize the hegemonic power of the Mali Empire. How can we sharply distinguish between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic actions, if everything fits in an already fixed schema, where human endeavours make sense only in relation to Sunjata’s ascent itself? To further pursue our investigation, I propose the episode which seals Sumaworo’s ascension to power and hegemony: his encounter with supernatural beings, the forest genies. This event is an analepsis – a flashback in the middle of the tale, to give us a background regarding of Sumaworo’s youth.

It started when “One day, while young Sumaworo was in the bush of Soso, a Folonengbe genie from Kodowari (*today Ivory Coast*) named Jinna Maghan, who had long hair down his back,

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<sup>107</sup> G. Martin, *African political thought*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 32.

<sup>108</sup> City states that gained importance between the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup>, in modern northern Nigeria.

<sup>109</sup> Levtzion and Pouwels, 2000, p. 522.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

appeared before him”<sup>112</sup>. This genie is of course no creature as the one who faces Aladdin, nevertheless the roots are similar:

‘jinna’ was borrowed from Arabic [...] referring to Islamic ‘jinns’ in the urban dwellers’ discourse, and to tutelary beings of the land in rural areas, some but not all of whom are mentioned in the Koran. [...] Generally speaking, genies are linked to any matter related to economic wealth. They can propose that men exchange their women for material goods. [...] In order to seize their goods, one must either negotiate with them or fool them with the help of ‘medicine’<sup>113</sup>.

Sumaworo followed the creature up to a cave, where a group of other genies started gathering: Jinna Maghan took out a series of instrument, and the *bala* (a traditional heptatonic xylophone and sacred object), which raised the young man’s complete attention. The latter, fascinated, asked the genie what he wanted to exchange for such a piece. The creature, after declining multiple offers in wealth, answered: “I am not the only owner of the *bala*. It belongs to all genies. But the genies say that if they should decide to sell the *bala*, they will only sell it for a human being”<sup>114</sup>. Four humans for four instruments, the *bala* for just one. And these humans, must be member of Sumaworo’s family. However, the latter, had only one sister left. So, the young hunter refused the proposal, and went back to Soso, where he met Kosiya Kanté – his sister. Listened to what he had to say about the genies, she made her mind and decided to sacrifice herself for her brother’s future. She went to the meeting point, where his brother and genies were haggling again, and told him: “It is not up to you to give me away or not. I have come to give myself away. I prefer your success to my life”<sup>115</sup>. Then, she went into the cave, and disappeared. Sumaworo, saddened, returned to Soso with the *bala* and the other instruments.

What is the importance of this *bala* in making Sumaworo great, though? A digression: the ones that play the *bala* are *jelilu* ( sing. *jeli*), like the bard mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. These are hereditary musicians and historians, who possess a strong *dalilu* – magical power -, that “in the past served political rulers and the *horon*<sup>116</sup> free nobles, reciting their genealogies and singing patronymic *fasaw* (praise songs) that glorify the heroic feats of their ancestors”<sup>117</sup>. Always, with an eye towards the past, a coeval account of *jelilu*’s performances is quite reveling; the ethnographer writes:

the most provocative message delivered is that ‘You don’t become a jeli (griot); you are born one.[...]. In doing so, they unambiguously capitalize on the hereditary status they enjoy and, relatedly, on the historical idea that genealogy blesses them with privileged access to a powerful, specialized knowledge that can be commoditized and profitably sold. Professional identity and

<sup>112</sup> Conrad, 2016, p. 64.

<sup>113</sup> V. Leblan and B. Bricka, “Genies or the opacity of human-animal relationship in Kakande, Guinea”, *African Study Monographs*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2013, pp. 90-91.

<sup>114</sup> Conrad, 2017, p. 67.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>116</sup> In Mande’s caste system, *Horon* refers to those whose family lineages are associated with farming, fishing and fighting.

<sup>117</sup> T. H. J. Marchand, “It’s in our blood: Mali’s griots and musical enskilment”, *Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 85, no. 2, 2015, p. 356.

musical ability are construed as innate - literally 'in the blood' or coming from 'the breast milk of their mothers' – and no amount of musical or oral training can turn an outsider into a griot<sup>118</sup>.

Again, innatism is stressed; the social role and status attributed to these bards is enormous, as the power they possess, either in collective and individual terms. In the epic, Balafaséké Kouyaté will be the *jeli* under Soumaworo, until his defeat. Afterwards, he will be instead at the court of Sunjata. *Bala*'s control, means control over history and political legitimacy, the future and the past. As a matter of fact, “according to Mande oral history, Soumaoro used the supernatural powers of the Sosso Bala for his own benefit, consulting the instrument as an oracle to show him future conditions that would aid him in his battles”<sup>119</sup>. In other words, the Sosso *bala* is thus a magical instrument that paved the sorcerer king's way, to an hegemonic power which lasted for twenty years. Both in the present and the past, to play the *bala* is to play history and tradition itself; it is, to detain a privileged and specialized knowledge which assures a spiritual hegemonic role, difficult to contest.

Balafaséké Kouyaté will thus sing:

Saluez Soumahoro Saluez le premier roi du Manding  
Vainqueur de Koukouba et Bantama  
de Niani et de Kambasiga  
qui revient du combat couvert de gloire  
Nul ne peut égaler  
l'unificateur du Manding<sup>120</sup>.

Balafaséké Kouyaté was the only person – except for Soumaworo – allowed to play the instrument, a magical object that ensured the sorcerer's dominion over Mande society for a long time. The *bala* was not the only magical item in his possession, though:

ce roi-sorcier a une chambre d'homme (tié so) secrète où il conserve tous ses fétiches. Mais on en dit assez pour comprendre qu'il y conserve la grande jarre où vit le serpent totem des rois soninke, depuis les temps anciens de l'empire du Wagadou. Et nous savons par le mythe correspondant que ce dieu-génie exigeait le sacrifice annuel d'une vierge de la noblesse<sup>121</sup>.

Reference to this myth, and the devouring serpent in the chamber, is not made in Sunjata's epic. It is, instead, quoted in *Le mythe du Bida de Wagadou*<sup>122</sup>. A similar room is also used by Sunjata himself. These are, in fact, places of royal power: “a place of contact between the divine and the

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 357.

<sup>119</sup> J. L. Williams Jr, *Transmitting the Mande Balafon: Performing Africa at home and abroad*, Ph.D. diss., College Park, University of Maryland, 2006, p. 68.

<sup>120</sup> Y. T. Cissé and W. Kamissoko, *La grande geste du Mali. Des origines à la fondation de l'Empire*, Paris, Karthala, 1998 cited in L. F. Kesteloot, “Mythe, religion et pouvoir dans les épopées du groupe mandé”, *Permanent seminar “Mundos Africanos”*, URBANITATS DIGITAL 7, 2002, p. 4.

<sup>121</sup> Cissé and Kamissoko, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>122</sup> Kesteloot and Dieng, 1997.

magic. [...] The room itself is a closed space, and what happens there must remain secret. Any violation of this secrecy by a foreign gaze invites disaster, for it would constitute a menace to royal power, and even to the life of the ruler”<sup>123</sup>. It becomes clearer, in the course of the tale, that, even if both are sorcerers – Sunjata and Sumaworo - , the stereotypical images associated to them differ. Both are born to be famous rulers, yet only one is destined to be the definitive one. Although, fundamentally, one element acts as a watershed between the two characters. What the *jeli* sings about Sumaworo: “he made many women widows. He made shirts and pants from the skins of Mande and Soso people. He sewed a hat of human skin. He even made shoes of human skin and then ordered the surviving Mande people to come and name them”<sup>124</sup>. The bard precisely dehumanizes Sumaworo, as his morbid relation with magical power and objects. He, in fact, embodies the typical monstrous and evil sorcerer who represents inverted elements of human life, and constantly recurs to horror. On the contrary, Conrad argues, when it comes to Sunjata, “sorcery is less central to Sunjata’s image and accomplishment than it is to Sumaworo Kanté”<sup>125</sup>. Still, Sunjata’s life is interwoven into magic and magical deeds. Sorcery is maybe less central to the depiction of the image *per se*, but, sorcery – in praxis - is as central as in Sumaworo’s quest for power. Either in forms of fetishes and sacred objects, soaked in spiritual breath, “la magie africaine consiste toujours à s'emparer de cette énergie vitale, cette force occulte qui réside aussi bien dans les êtres que dans les choses et les éléments, et de la faire servir soit à la collectivité, soit à des fins individuelles”<sup>126</sup>. Sunjata cannot – willing or not – evade this intricate magical cosmivision. Hence, what the epic pictures, is actually a clash of hegemonies, set in a magical reality, and centered on the manipulation of spiritual elements. Earlier we assumed, at the beginning of this section, that if everything was predestined and decided, hegemony and counter hegemony would be difficult to distinguish. In a fatalist understanding of the world, there would be no interest whatsoever in concerning ourselves with the ways Sunjata and its military and political forces managed to build an empire. He was predestined, Allah’s will crafted his ascension. Yet, this does not suffice: there were political factions who were struggling among themselves, and were interested in consolidating and building institutional power and dominance. If we look at the process of historical-political formations, Sunjata’ ascension was counter-hegemonic. Despite the magical surroundings and narrations, Sunjata’s action, are his own actions. In fact, the entire trajectory of preparations that will make Sunjata the Mali ruler can be considered counter-hegemonic. His life is an active and life preparation in order to achieve power. What we might rather do, to be sharper in our analysis, is to couple filological and critical thought to systematic archeological excavation, that do lack. These

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<sup>123</sup> L. Kesteloot, T. A. Hale, and R. Bjornson, “Power and Its Portrayals in Royal Mandé Narratives”, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1991, p.18.

<sup>124</sup> Conrad, 2016, p. 116.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>126</sup> Kesteloot, 1999, pp. 4-5.

sort of sources would help us better discern the political dynamics, rivalries amid factions and the kind of weight popular interventions had. Furthermore, the material ground leads us to the next consideration: which magical objects, ultimately, helped Sunjata becoming the *mansa* king?

### **The Sorceresses' Pact**

Before her departure, Sogolon – Sunjata's mother -, decided to bequeath her husband's legacy to her three sons. A *dalilu*<sup>127</sup> that includes three magical objects, one for each. Big concern is the fact that these objects cannot be separated, otherwise they will lose their power. It is a power that all the brother would love to share. So, while talking to her sons, Sogolon, suddenly stated "the Mande messengers have come for your brother Ma'an Sunjata. You must allow him to be given the three things, because the three things – the sorcery horse, the sorcery bow, and the sorcery mask – all work together"<sup>128</sup>. After a quarrel among brethren, it is finally decided that the heritage will go to Sunjata. All these magical items will be used by the future mansa, during his final battle with Sumaworo, and will save the former's skin. Anyhow, I think a caveat is necessary to explain the massive recourse to magical acts, we have been outlining so far. Kasteloot in fact tells: "la protection magique et ses instruments semblent ne rien enlever à la gloire du héros vainqueur. Au contraire, la vaillance de son bras, même "assistée" de façon occulte, n'en sera pas moins louangée"<sup>129</sup>. It is a supernatural aid, yes. But it does not make humans some sort of super humans similar to Marvel's characters. *Dalilu*, in the epic, is indeed fervently human.

Apart from Sogolon, there are also other sorceresses that will come along the way, and provide help, during Sunjata's quest for power. The episode to which I am alluding, is salient and worth mentioning. Yet, In order to connect the thread, we must rewind the bard's performance, and point out some gaps left open before Sogolon's death.

Two hunters were prophesied by the Muslim diviner – Bereté. Those two men and brothers came, and were appointed by Sunjata's father to kill a buffalo who was ravaging and pillaging the territory. During the first encounter, the buffalo – a powerful female sorceress – trusted the two hunters, and revealed her weak spots, provided that they accept three requests. One of this, is to marry her sister, Sogolon – Sunjata's mother; extremely ugly and deformed, enchanted by the Buffalo woman herself. Once accomplished the deed, both brothers tried to lie down with Sogolon, but the latter refused, and magically repelled them. Sogolon will be then brought to Sunjata's father, and finally married – only after a magical contestation between the two grooms. Sogolon thus entered into a polygynous marriage. One among the other wives, Sansun Bereté, had a son and stepbrother to Sunjata, Dankaran Tuman. The latter wanted his brother dead, as much as his mother;

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<sup>127</sup> *Dalilu* is a secret magical power, supernatural or not.

<sup>128</sup> Conrad, 2016, p. 87.

<sup>129</sup> Kasteloot, 1999, p. 9.

so, he concocted a plan in order to kill Sunjata with the help of nine powerful sorceresses. As luck would have it, one of the nine sorceresses was Sunjata's ally, though. She told him "Sunjata, if God agrees with our plan, we'll kill you the day after tomorrow. You'd better do something to protect yourself. Among the cows from your father's legacy [...] is a big bull. Dankaran Tuman has told us [...] that if we kill you, he'll give us that bull"<sup>130</sup>. On the other hand, Sunjata answered her to "tell them – the sorceresses – that one bull is not bigger than three male antelope, and that if they spare me, I will give them three male antelope for one bull"<sup>131</sup>.

One day and a half later, he went for a hunt, and killed three antelopes in a row; he left the carcasses outside town, and returned to the sorceress' friend. The sorceresses then found out the meat, roasted it and cooked it for a nice meal. Besides, they added "Ma'an Sunjata, no female genie will harm you, let alone a human female.[...] we are with you to the death. No female will ever harm you: no female genie will chase you, no female ant will ever sting you, no female wild animal will ever hurt you. We promise this, God willing, or we are not producers of kitchen smoke"<sup>132</sup>. This is a decisive moment for Sunjata: women and feminine creatures, natural and supernatural, legitimize and give their blessing to the future *mansa*. And, obviously, God did not agree with his brother's plan. This pact is a bond that corroborates the magical defences at Sunjata's disposition, ensured by every feminine creature of the world. The latter aspect is paradigmatic. Since, like the genies' encounter with Sumaworo, "every investiture establishes the ruler's relationship with the supernatural forces and helps impose the image of a power that exists by 'divine right'"<sup>133</sup>. However, this time, is a coven of sorceresses that offer their spiritual allegiance and power to Sunjata. A negotiation between the visible and invisible world, again occurred. The manipulation and help from the supernatural realm, as we can notice, is building the way to Sunjata's future hegemony. Still, if we step out the epic for a moment, and try to project this congregation of sorceresses into a specific social group composed by women, and historically identify it, we remain empty handed. It is a daunting challenge: simply because there are no available sources at our disposition. Otherwise, we can postulate this question: can we theorize the fact that these sorceresses were actually powerful elder women? The equation elder women to sorceresses is too inviting not to be tempted with. In the course of the epic, only this time we are faced with a collective of women; every other time it is powerful individual, or women exchanged like meat at the market for political alliances. It is exactly the latter kind of woman that will pursue our investigation, Sunjata's sister, Kolonkan.

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<sup>130</sup> Conrad, 2016, p. 52.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>133</sup> Kesteloot, Hale and Bjornson, 1991, p. 23.



## The Tree of Intrigue

“Before she died, my mother asked God to help me earn the support of a Mande elder whose *dalilu* is greater than mine, and I believe I must not go to war without having first accomplished this”<sup>134</sup>. These words are uttered by Sunjata to Fakoli – a sorcerer’s chief and commander- not long before the final confrontations with Sumaworo. This is the last step, so to say, of magical preparation and legitimacy that Sunjata needs before battling with his foe. The meeting between the elder – Kamanjan – and Sunjata took place beneath a tree called *balansan* (acacia albida). *Balansan* is together with other trees in Mande, “dwelling places of *wòkilòw* and other spirits both dangerous and benign, and, along with other prominent landscape features, they mark the enter interface between the natural and supernatural worlds”<sup>135</sup>. Under its refreshing shadows, these two characters started measuring their own magical powers, by trying, firstly, to flip the tree upside down onto its top branches, and then flip it back over onto its roots.

Kolonkan – Sunjata’s sister -, observing the scene reproached her brother: “this is not what my mother told you to do. Let Kamanjan do this. [...] if you add his *dalilu* to what you already have, maybe you will win the war against Sumaworo”<sup>136</sup>. Sunjata, this time, like many others, “methodically violates the sacred taboo (*tana*) of his host, there by demonstrating firm control of occult forces”<sup>137</sup>. He proved his force, but was anyway defeated by the elder. Though, the latter, surprisingly offered him a counter proposal: the Kamara people – that he obviously represent – will join the common struggle, if only he accepts to marry Kolonkan to him. The deed is of course sealed, and Kamanjan’s *dalilu* is finally part of Sunjata magical reservoir. Nothing seems to be standing in the way between Sunjata’s ascension and kingdom, except Sumaworo. About this, Conrad reports that

the bards’ message is essentially the same: an irresistible, commanding agent of change announced, as the superhero (*danama yirindi*) marches through the sacred landscape giving notice that a time is approaching when the pre- imperial *jamanaw* (chiefdoms) and their formerly autonomous rulers will be subject to a new order<sup>138</sup>.

A new order that is yet to be firmly established. As already remarked, the elder’s approval will be the last step before the battle.

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<sup>134</sup> Conrad, 2016:, p. 110.

<sup>135</sup> “From the Banan Tree of Kouroussa: Mapping the Landscape in Mande Traditional History”, *Canadian Journal of African Studies/La Revue canadienne des études africaines*, vol. 42, no. 2-3, 2008, pp. 391-392.

<sup>136</sup> Conrad, 2016, p. 112.

<sup>137</sup> Conrad, 2008, pp. 389-390

<sup>138</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 390.

## Conclusive Remarks

The battle of Dakajalan will mark the dusk of Sumaworo's reign and determine the death of the old and the coming of the new: the Mali empire. The focus of this chapter was trying to understand how, and in which forms, magic and sorcery could actually reinforce an hegemonic order, or on the contrary, disintegrate it. It is impossible to think of the Sunjata epic if not in magical terms. Everything in the epic breathes of enchantment, amulets and supernatural beings. We cannot, therefore, be fully immersed in the tale without acknowledging the spiritual world that encompasses the entire narration and its dwellers. And, it is exactly this spiritual realm that has to be manipulated in order to either build or destroy an hegemonic order, from divination, to the encounters with fantastic creatures. This is an omniscient power that needs to be discussed between what is visible and what is not. Once Sumaworo bargained with the genies, he accomplished an hegemony over the spiritual world, which made his reign long and lasting. As it is for Sunjata, who was predestined from birth: his rise was announced, and fate was on his side. The more we are dragged into the tale, any recourse to magic and sorcery looks like something that it is taken for granted. It is a world of magic, in which rational explanations are side by side to a belief in a material continuity between beings, sentient or not. However, if we try to answer the question and pin point the main architraves of a spiritual hegemonic power, we should mention the diviners, the *jeliw*, the elders, the various array of magical objects, and certain landscape or places. Starting from the latter, it is worth mentioning that Sunjata's journey starts with an exile. The entire epic is centered on a spiritual pilgrimage for power, every place he visits, from villages, to rivers are spaces of clashes and harmony, "structural markers that divide the traditional texts into cognitive units and spatially anchor stories so they can be recalled by remembering the land"<sup>139</sup>. Next, if we comment the role acted by the human inhabitants, the importance of the *jeliw*, especially from a modern perspective, is indisputable. There is a reason why Sumaworo kept his bard alive, and not only because he could play. A *jeli* is also an historian and a guardian of knowledge, a caste of poets who hands down legitimacy and power, that need to be negotiated with the elders. And here Kamanjan fits like a glove. The gerontocratic order is well pictured in this event: alliances such as this one, despite the prize, are necessary to assemble the bricks of dominance. It is indeed, a dominance that cannot be consolidated without the intervention of a traditional diviner or Islamic marabouts: "ces marabouts sont invoqués et utilisés à égalité avec les mages animistes. D'ailleurs le marabout mêle sans scrupules les prières du Coran avec les plantes, cornes et cordelettes des feticheurs"<sup>140</sup>. Their protection is as important as the objects that the same Sunjata and Sumaworo use.

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<sup>139</sup> Conrad, 2008, p. 398.

<sup>140</sup> Kesteloot, 1999, p. 8.

Possession of certain magical items, as we have seen, is pivotal to enhance one's power and to stipulate agreements with the invisible world. Genies, like sorceresses, are part of the same reality Sunjata and Sumaoworo live. To have their blessing means not to be worried from what you cannot see.

## Conclusions

My primary intention, throughout the thesis, was to understand if and how, the manipulation of a magical and spiritual reality, could have helped a dominant power in exercising an hegemonic control. And, on the contrary, if a contestation of that spiritual power, could have had the opposite effect: being counter-hegemonic. In order to unravel the issue, we have framed two syncretic contexts, gerontocratic and hierarchical, pervaded by animism and magical thinking: the Kukuya society – in nowadays Republic of Congo – and the Mande territory, depicted in the Sunjata epic. The reason why, I decided to articulate the dissertation by investigating two chronologically and geographically distant worlds, is the following: an alleged continuity and persistence of certain modalities to exert magical-political power. There are, in fact, two main striking similarities that can be briefly underscored.

Firstly, a monopoly over spiritual knowledge. The *Ngàà*, among the Kukuya, are the magical-spiritual leaders of the community. They detain a privileged knowledge over sorcery and magic, and are considered medium between the worlds. They do not only possess a spiritual exclusivity, but they are also legitimated in using a kind of sorcery that would usually be considered evil. In parallel, in the Mande epic, there is a social group bestowed with a similar task: the *Moriw*. These are historians and bards, who possess unique spiritual abilities and knowledge. Moreover, in the epic, there are also Muslim and ‘traditional’ diviners. Both have specific kinds of knowledge, political influence, and are considered the protectors of royal figures and kings. Apart from some notable exception among the Kukuya, as pointed out by Bonnafé, either here and in the context of the epic, women are uniformly left out from these positions of spiritual power. In the epic, powerful women are described with astonishing magical and sorceresses’ abilities; nonetheless, they never figure among the pivotal political social groups next to Sunjata or Sumaworo.

Secondly, the instrumentalization of magical objects. Magical substances and objects are called by the Kukuya *mati*. These are sources of an ambiguous power that can be canalized by diviners and sorceresses, to either weaken and destroy, or corroborate and enhance one’s power. They are both amulets for defense and attack. But also, they are gateways amid two worlds, the visible and the invisible. Whereas, in the epic, the two sorcerer kings embark on a journey starred with magical deeds that are achieved thanks to the pragmatic use of enchanted objects. And, to make use of these objects, the royal figures have to communicate and negotiate within an invisible world, populated by genies and mysterious creatures. Nevertheless, they cannot always do it alone. For this reason, the protection of the diviners have to be coupled and associated with magical objects. One is maimed without the other. Hence, these two elements together, and in both cases, are based on the manipulation of a spiritual dimension that secure the hegemonic status and power of a social group.

Furthermore, when it comes to women, and their relation to sorcery, magic and evil, two inferences can be made. The first one, is that both in Kukuya society and in the epic, women are pictured as powerful sorceresses. The chapter on Kukuya women showed us that a socio-economic exploitation and gender antagonism are simultaneous to a magical and spiritual alienation. While, as far as the epic is concerned, no similar considerations can be drawn. Women in the epic, do not figure among the military chiefs, diviners and marabouts. They are notably sorceresses. Probably, the political role was more or less centered around the elderly women. Nevertheless, the latter are episodically exchanged in matrimonial businesses and are usually assigned to culinary tasks. This is fairly similar to the condition of Kukuya women, destined to domestic duties and bio-wealth interchanges. But, apart from these observations, the socio-economic situation and the spiritual leadership are not easily determinable.

Secondly, we ought to overturn the question of the first chapter and ask instead: how do women affect sorcery and magic in a given society? We have given the example of the Masaai women, but for the entire thesis, my focus has been on the ways dominant social groups corroborate their power thanks to sorcery and magic alike. Even when it comes to Sunjata, my concern has been to look at already powerful political classes, either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. The everyday use of magical arts and actions by the majority of the population has been left out, and this is a big limitation to my inquiry. And, this leaves us to ponder again: what is the relevance then, of magic and sorcery as a popular mode of action? The inconsistency of a ‘counter-hegemonic project’, claimed by Bayard, could be wrong. In fact, there is a quite recent example of a dissident movement in South Africa, emerged in 1959: “This group known as the Congo Movement (alternatively known as i-Kongo or “the Congress”) employed tropes of witchcraft and sorcery as they sought to create a nation separate from that of apartheid South Africa”<sup>141</sup>. As the other way around, they might deeply oppress, deprive social classes of any political life and sink them into perennial state of ignorance and illusions. It resembles technology<sup>142</sup>, it is neither good nor bad in itself. But, it cannot be neutral when it comes to any relation of power. Since, it embodies the moral-ethical concerns of who is directing and shaping its course.

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<sup>141</sup> K. Fidler , “Chiefs into Witches: Cosmopolitan Discourse of the Nation, Treason, and Sorcery; The Pondoland Revolt, South Africa, in L. N. Parés, and R. Sansi, *Sorcery in the black Atlantic*, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 76

<sup>142</sup> For a discussion about the relationship technology and magic, see: A. Gell, “Technology and Magic”, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1988, pp. 6-9.

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