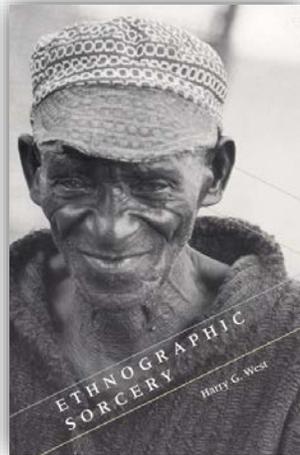


## BOOK REVIEW

# ETHNOGRAPHIC SORCERY

*By Harry West*

Reviewed by Ned Wilson



Chicago: University of Chicago Press  
2007

The following book review is written not as a stand-alone review. Instead, the goal is to review Harry West's *Ethnographic Sorcery* in relationship to the journal article in this issue by Robert Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell, entitled "Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC" (2020).

Initially, Harry West's research objective focused on how the Muedans envisioned their future following the breakup of the state agricultural sector (6). His intent, grounded in earlier doctoral research, was to dispel the stereotype of Mozambique's exotic other and 'backward-looking peasant' (7). However, West surmised that the language of sorcery was inseparable from the Muedans' vision of the future (11). As such, sorcery became the focus of his 1999 research project and his subsequent writing of *Ethnographic Sorcery*. West's exploration of "the epistemological paradox arising from the ethnographic study of sorcery" gave rise to his experience being both the observer and the observed (xi). Though the book is short, readers will find his work refreshing and original.

Both "Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches" and *Ethnographic Sorcery* investigate the perceived power ascribed to those practicing their

nefarious craft within the supernatural domain. However, the contrast concerning the practitioners' maturity, modality, and intent is acute.

For the Muedans, located on the Mueda plateau of northern Mozambique, sorcery connotes individuals wittingly working their craft within the supernatural lion schema. According to West's interlocutors, sorcery's ontological lions are not symbolic, instead, they are real lions made by people—or people making themselves into lions—and they attack, stalk, and devour humans (5, 20). To fabricate the sorcery lion, the skilled sorcerer must transcend and overcome the constrictions associated with the visible world. Transcendence is achieved by using medicinal substances that make the sorcerer invisible (47). Once the sorcerer resides in the invisible domain they can ruin and reconstruct the world for their benefit (17). Sorcery is so intertwined in the Muedan culture that it is a rare case for a person not to be a sorcerer (17). Regardless of socioeconomic status, most Muedans suspect that just about everyone is a sorcerer. It is within the above framework that West asks, "to what kind of reality do they [sorcerers and lions] belong (47)?"

Counter to the skilled Muedan sorcerer's medicinal transcendence into the supernatural domain stands the indictment from Kinshasa's largest megachurch's apostle against witches. The Reverend Apostle writes in his 2013 brochure that "witches have great power, as evidenced in their ability to transform themselves into 'a mosquito, rat, cockroach, or lion'" (Priest et al. 2020, 22). The problem, however, is those purportedly practicing witchcraft in the DRC are not practitioners at all. Instead, they are thousands of stepchildren—many who suffer from physical disabilities and mental disorders living in homes with unemployed and often absent caregivers—who are wrongly accused of practicing witchcraft. Tragically, the children often fall victim to accusations of practicing witchcraft when their family experiences misfortunes such as infertility, poverty, of illness (2020, 3).

The Kinshasans actively search for pastors who not only agree with the family's witchcraft suspicions, but also for pastors who know how to identify and properly perform child-witch deliverances (Priest et al. 2020, 5). It is not uncommon for pastors to remind their

congregants “that even the children living in their own homes might be witches that are to blame for family tragedies” (2020, 8). In other words, treating witches is a highly competitive, and perhaps lucrative, religious market for the Kinshasa churches (2020 5, 29-30). Whereas the Kinshasans seek deliverance from witches to explain and validate the causal ontology of their misfortunes, the Muedans, on the other hand, seek out the skilled sorcerer’s craft for protective treatments. Such was West’s experience.

West’s thick description skillfully navigates through two conflicting realities that leave the reader mesmerized and rightfully perplexed. For instance, he describes his bout with dysentery as a violent episode “where something broke loose deep inside me, erupting through my chest and out of my mouth . . . [m]y legs dangled numbly . . . I felt another eruption from within, this time flowing beneath me” (27). Rather than interpreting his experience scientifically—blaming unsanitary conditions as the reason for his bout with dysentery—West humbly retells his experience through the Muedan worldview. In the Muedan construct, just “[a] few days before he [West] fell ill, there was an argument with someone” that was not peacefully resolved (31). Additionally, his truck, camera, and tape recorder attract attention and envy which may also be the cause of his affliction (33). After his illness, and through the prodding of his closest interlocutor, West allowed a sorcerer to treat him, thus giving him protection from nefarious sorcerers and future illnesses (33). In other words, West expects his reader to employ a culturally sensitive phenomenology and juxtapose two viable, but seemingly incompatible, realities.

West’s consistently humble posture not only allows his interlocutors’ voice to be heard but also leaves little opportunity to objectify the Muedans as an exotic other. In the end, West makes it explicitly clear that the Muedans’ reality concerning the sorcery lion rests on the notion that “metaphors don’t kill the neighbors, lion-people do!” (25). For the Muedans, there is one domain that contains Imbwambwe, the lion and Imbwambwe, the man (37). Conversely, for the Kinshasans there are two domains. One contains the constructed supernatural witchcraft that victimizes the DRC children and the other holds the physical realm which experiences the human plight.

In sum, both research projects recognized and appreciated the interdependence between the physical and supernatural domains. By acknowledging the whole person Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell demonstrated the positive change that faith-based models had in transforming the thinking and conduct of DRC Christian pastors (9). To ignore the whole person presents the reader with a thin description of the human

experience; such was not the case in either of the reviewed texts.

## Reference

- Priest, Robert J., Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell. 2020. Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4(1):1-51.



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