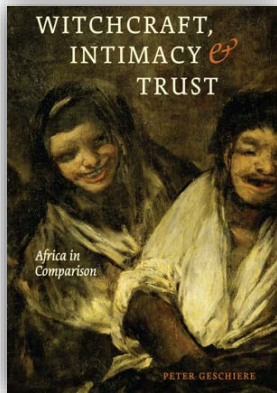


BOOK REVIEW

WITCHCRAFT, INTIMACY AND TRUST: AFRICA IN COMPARISON

By Peter Geschiere

Reviewed by **Adriana Myland**



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Peter Geschiere makes an excellent contribution to the field of anthropology on the topic of witchcraft. He holistically seeks to understand the complex social relations entangled in witchcraft, specifically among the Maka of southeast Cameroon. Also, he surveys the globe to examine witchcraft historically in Europe, Brazil, Melanesia and Java. Geschiere's focus is on trust, including its roots in ontology, however, he later describes ontology as not useful to his study (170-172, 201). I will critique this point about ontology in light of the report by Robert Priest, Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell (2020) on pastors' responses to child witches in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Priest et al. report demonstrates that ontology is crucial to understand witchcraft in post-colonial Africa and globally. Geschiere exemplifies a humble approach to understanding the complexities of "witchcraft, intimacy and trust" that would be greatly enriched if he considered ontology more closely in his study.

Geschiere provides a new approach to witchcraft that implicitly supports the ontological turn in anthropology. He pleads that witchcraft does not expose Africa's "otherness" but looks at the "link

between intimacy and danger" (xv). Throughout his study there is tremendous evidence of the human condition relating to imminent fear of the other (in the Cameroonian case, witches), while recognizing the elasticity of African kinship that is transcontinental (xix). This exposes humanity's desire for connection and belonging and can even be found among purported witches, as Geschiere excellently observes. Similarly, Priest et al. describe the response of communities facing difficulties that convert the question of "why" to "who," through "interpersonal causal ontologies" (2020, 5). This view of causation is evident in Geschiere's focus on intimacy and danger as he implicitly suggests an "interpersonal causal ontology" in the social response to witchcraft in the context of Cameroon.

I commend Geschiere's approach because it helps redeem anthropology's engagement in the study of witchcraft. He avoids the grievous practice of the past—primitivizing Africans (xxi). Instead he views witchcraft as part of the human struggle (xxii). I believe this is critical to the understanding of witchcraft that Geschiere addresses throughout his book. It is a relief that Priest et al. have actively responded to Geschiere's remark that child witches, who often end up on the street in Kinshasa, are "more than a humanitarian issue" (194). Geschiere's perspective exposes the struggles communities face, and brings justice and honour to those suffering. He looks beyond the horrific stereotypes of witches and instead sees the human person.

Further, Priest et al. identify cultures that practice witch ontologies connected to Western Christendom and the poor translations of Scripture that have impacted the Congolese interpretation of Christianity (2020, 43-45). This connects colonization and missionary influence in Bible translation to the development of witchcraft. It is for this reason that Geschiere's historical account needs greater depth to understand the witch ontologies in Cameroon that have developed in part from Western influence. He mentions the decade of silence from witchcraft following decolonization in the 1960s, but this does not

mean the remnants of colonialism disappeared (7). Moving forward, as Priest et al. have done, it is important that Geschiere considers how Cameroonians have committed to their witch ontologies and who has influenced their beliefs.

Additionally, Geschiere makes a strong point on the triangle of “witchcraft, intimacy and trust” (101): He notes courts in the East condemned witches; however, this paradoxically reinforced ideas in society that courts intended to dismiss witchcraft (85-86). In the case of the Maka, Pentecostalism had played a significant role in the community’s response to witchcraft. For example, in the 1980s, Pentecostalism rooted its trust in God’s work, shaping a new morality, and viewing witchcraft as from the devil (89-90, 92). However, Geschiere does not elaborate on the Maka’s beliefs about the devil nor how Pentecostals came to their belief that witchcraft is from the devil. On the other hand, Priest et al. indicate how evil is imagined to reside in a child accused of witchcraft. The goal then is for Kinshasa pastors to learn to understand that evil is rooted in false accusations rather than the child and then to change their approach to dealing with witchcraft (2020, 37). It would be beneficial if Geschiere explored the history of Pentecostalism, including what Pentecostals believe and teach about the devil and witchcraft. This would help establish an understanding of their epistemology and support the need for greater emphasis on ontology in the anthropological approach to witchcraft.

Next, the comparative perspective Geschiere examines reinforces the false notion that witchcraft is practiced only among the “primitive.” For example, he suggests that intimacy is demonstrated in Europe differently than in the African context. Witches in Europe attack close neighbours and not kin, unlike the African contexts where witches are tied to the house (123-124, 131). This global perspective indicates extensive research is still needed across continents to fully understand how ontology influences the conceptual triangle of “witchcraft, intimacy and trust.” Another comparison includes how witchcraft in Candomblé de Bahia, Brazil provides a unique approach to understanding witch ontology. Instead of intimacy being rooted in the family, temples are sought as a haven of intimacy (159). On the other hand, Kinshasa pastors hold authority that justifies ideas about child witchcraft, and the church plays a central role in the spread of child witch ideologies and deliverance practices (Priest et al. 2020, 37-38). Geschiere’s coverage of near and distant communities involved in witchcraft should dismiss the notion that it is reserved only for the “primitive.”

Finally, Geschiere has done excellent work, but there is still significant information on “witchcraft, intimacy and trust” to explore. Further research on witchcraft among urban elites and how witchcraft is

imported to villages would be beneficial, as Geschiere covers this topic only briefly (41, 44-45). It would be helpful to explore whether patron-client relationships could help explain the changing dynamics between different communities and classes. For instance, Priest et al. explain there is a competitive religious market and great need for understanding witchcraft suspicions (2020, 5). Addressing how beliefs about witchcraft develop could assist in understanding human struggle and how patron-client relationships may be involved in the globalization of witchcraft. Most significantly, a greater emphasis on the study of witch ontology is needed, as there is far more to understand about the radical Pentecostal crusades that sought to eradicate witchcraft, as Geschiere points out (204-205). Geschiere exudes a humble approach that must be adopted to honorably understand *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust*, as well as ideologies and traditions that carry witchcraft throughout generations.

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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