

Abstracts for Panel 9: Politics, ontology and the occult: concepts of power in Sub-Saharan Africa past and present

Conveners

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Panel abstract:

In the introduction to the undeservedly neglected volume “Creativity of Power” (1989), the editors, Bill Arens and Ivan Karp, outline an anthropological perspective on power that in many respects prefigures the current concern with ontological alterity – the probing effort to comprehend and explicate ontological orientations other than the rationalistic/naturalistic ontology presumably prevailing in (Western) Modernity. Arens and Karp make the general point that concepts of power and political practices in any society are profoundly molded by its culture and cosmology; power is a cultural construction, politics culturally coded. Focusing on Africa, the contributions to the volume show how, in African societies, power tends to be understood as an ambivalent force immanent in the cosmos and emanating from gods, ancestors and nature spirits. This perspective on power implies that politics – in Africa and elsewhere – should not be understood as a discrete modality of practice, separate from its broader social-economic and cultural-ontological context. In many parts of Africa, politics, economy and popular spirituality are intimately intertwined, characteristically involving negotiations and interactions with the spirit agents of the otherworld. On this account, politics in African societies, just as politics in Western modernity, can be productively explored as a form of ontopraxis – an ontology in practice – but one played out in a different ontological context, one in which power and politics have a distinctive occult or metaphysical dimension. In this vein, the panel invites ethnographies of power, past or present, from different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

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[Abstract: Anders Norge Lauridsen](#)

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Paper title: Cosmic Power in Madagascar

Abstract

Cosmic power in immanentist cosmologies have been subject to much debate in anthropology. Most well-known is perhaps 'mana', which was initially interpreted as a mysterious substance permeating the Polynesian cosmos. Such essentialist views have later been challenged; for instance, Rodney Needham showed that oftentimes the ethnographic evidence simply does not support such claims, while Roger Keesing warned against mistaking mere metaphors for metaphysics. Heeding this advice, I look into how 'hasina', the cosmic power of Madagascar, is being practiced among the Sihanaka people. Examining acts of blessing, bathing rituals and powerful objects, it transpires that hasina actually is conceived by Sihanaka people as a substance located in certain places and things and transmissible through certain mediums and techniques. These findings concur with novel theory of immanentist cosmology (Marshall Sahlins and Alan Strathern) as well as with other essentialisms in Malagasy ethnography. The ethnographic material suggests that hasina is best translated as 'efficacy' or 'potency' and constitutes an emic notion of agency distributed between humans and metahumans (divinities). Furthermore, its workings are obscure and unknowable to the Sihanaka themselves, who nonetheless deal with hasina in discourse and practice as a kind of mysterious substance.

[Abstract: Nadia Lovell](#)

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Paper title: Bad death in Togo and Cuba: continuities in Voodoo and Santería

Abstract:

There is no doubt that death fascinates: it is the antithesis of life, and signals immobility and stillness as opposed to life's movement and energy: one is laid to rest, hopefully and expectedly in peace. Death is shrouded in societal rules, evidenced through ritualised actions and the taking care of bodies in specific ways. By contrast, violent deaths are of perennial concern to the living. Although such statements may seem obvious, it is clear that even in its most benign and accepted form, death seldom signals an end to social relationships. A good and normal death, achieved through longevity and good health, sees the dead put to rest in typical heterotopic places where they can rest in peace, in a setting which ensures serenity and the continuity of convivial partnerships. Disruption of life, unpredictable events, illness, conflicts or accidents, murder or suicide are but a few markers that can disrupt the course of life and, by association, the path a person may take after physical death. Bad death is about being bereft of life, at inopportune moments. Life itself is thus cut short, either by taking someone when too young, or by taking in the wrong way: an old person afflicted by illness or falling victim to an accident is still considered to have left life in an inauspicious manner. The paper addresses these issues in relation to ethnographic material focusing on Voodoo on Togo and Santería in Cuba, addressing continuities between these two separate fields.

[Abstract: Syna Ouattara](#)

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Paper title: Medicine murders: Power, wealth and suspicions of occult medicinal practices in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire

Abstract

In recent years, occult medicinal practices – and human murder associated with them – have become a serious issue in Côte d'Ivoire, as in several other African countries. A central feature of the notion of occult medicine is that it links occult forces to political power and material wealth and, more generally, to vitality and prosperity. However, occult medicine is also occasionally used with lethal effect, perhaps increasingly so – as in the case of the medicine murders, the killing of human persons to harvest body parts for making and selling medicine. Although these practices have since long experienced the influence of Islam and Christianity as well as the secular heritage of colonial and post-colonial regimes, they remain alive and active, not only in their traditional roles but also in addressing and resolving contemporary issues and problems. This paper examines these medicinal practices in the context of power and wealth in Côte d'Ivoire. It explores (1) what occult medicine is and what it means to those who use it; (2) how it is used and why it is perceived to be so effective and, particularly, (3) why human body parts, especially from children, are perceived as so excessively powerful that people are capable to resort to murder in order to obtain it. The paper argues that a thorough understanding of current occult medicine practices in Côte d'Ivoire demands that close attention be paid to the meaning and uses of occult medicine in the past and, thus, how the past is reconfigured in the present.

[Abstract: Kaj Århem](#)

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Paper title: Medicine, witchcraft and the ambivalence of power: an ontological perspective on African concepts of power

Abstract:

The paper is inspired by two seminal texts on concepts and uses of power in African societies: one is the Introductory essay by Arens & Karp to their edited volume *Creativity of power* (1989) in which they outline a cultural-anthropological perspective on power; the other is the more recent book by Stroeken on “medicinal rule” in East- and Central Africa (2018). Like Arens and Karp, Stroeken criticizes the conventional social-science approach to power which is largely inspired by Western political-philosophical scholarship centered on the notions of government and the state as the paradigmatic polity. Stroeken refers to this perspective as the polity prism. Against the polity prism Stroeken pits the notion of medicinal rule by which he means power derived from possession of, and control over, powerful medicine (charms or “fetishes”, broadly understood as objectified spirit subjects with superior creative and destructive powers). The defining feature of the institution of kingship in Sub-Saharan Africa, he maintains, is medicinal rule, kingship developed out of medicinal power and medicinal cults. In this paper, I propose that the perspective on power advanced by Arens & Karp and Stroeken can essentially be seen as instances of an ontological approach, or as akin to and compatible with it – i.e.,

one that explores ontological alterity on the basis of comparative and historical ethnography. I will exemplify this perspective with a brief discussion of Bakongo ethnography.

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Paper title: Varieties of witch figures in Africa (and elsewhere): a comparative exploration

Abstract

The paper broadly explores three types of Africa witch figures (with resonances in other places and times):

(1) the prototypical, imaginary witch, i.e., the “evil incarnate” personages (which, curiously, are not themselves aware of being a witches). This is the type labelled “witch” by Evans-Pritchard. In many places Africa this character is accused of “eating” its victims – but proof is rarely provided. This witch type is often seen as possessed by a “witch creature” (typically residing in the belly) who is the “real” witch-agent.

(2) the evil “ritual-specialist” type. This may or may not be a real person engaged in harmful magic. This person, like type 1, is often accused of murder, typically perceived as ritual sacrifice. (This is the type labelled “sorcerer” by Evans-Pritchard.)

(3) the “metaphorical” witch – the famous pop singer, successful businessman, or powerful politician who is likened to a witch due to his remarkable success and/or power.

This paper will suggest that these different types are varieties of a (near-)universal “witch complex”, a witch cosmology. Intriguingly: Whilst the witches of the first type appear often to serve as “prototypes” for the other types, they are more often than not at the bottom of society’s power structure – whereas those who are seemingly “mimicking” them, the powerful type 3 individuals, are at the very top. The paper will explore this landscape of witch imagery spanning from Senegal to South Africa, through ethnographic examples, news articles, as well as through popular movies from Nollywood and South Africa.