

WULI WITCHCRAFT

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Introduction

THE Mfumte form a cultural, linguistic and administrative entity consisting of thirteen villages. Their territory is bordered in the north by the river Donga, the natural border with Nigeria, with the territories of the Mbembe in the northwest, the Limbum in the southwest, and the Yamba and Mambila in the southeast.

The Wuli constitute the population of one of these thirteen villages. They number nearly 4,000 and live on either side of the wooded banks of the Mamfe river, a tributary of the Donga. Today, despite their large numbers, they form a single village community (Lus on the regional geographical maps) subdivided into ten areas or hamlets, each comprising from three to ten units of resident lineages. The lineages and lineage segments are patrilineal and patrilocal. The Wuli practise an almost exclusive village endogamy and more than fifty per cent of marriages occur within the same village or hamlet. The elders maintain that they ignored the institution of chiefship before the German colonization and that all important decisions concerning the village were taken in councils held by the 'fathers', that is to say, the most important members of *ku* or *ro* initiation societies. Three chiefs have served as head of the village this century. This new institution created its own emblems, regalia, status, rights and duties, inspired by neighbouring traditional chiefships, principally that of Limbum. Today the chief of the village serves as the official intermediary between the Wuli and the modern administrative structure of Cameroon.

Witchcraft and Anti-Witchcraft

A Wuli myth relates the confrontation which took place between the two demiurges *Nui Ndu*, the spirit of water, and *Nui Manka*, the evil spirit. The object of this cosmic battle was mastery of the universe and more precisely the creation of living beings. The water spirit won by pouring streams of water over the fire which had been started by the evil spirit. After these events, the first three men came out of a water hole to people the earth. This victory of the water spirit over the spirit of witchcraft is considered a precarious one by the Wuli, one which is constantly being challenged. Since these primeval times, the water spirits have multiplied; they are responsible for women's fecundity and hence for the multiplication of human beings. *Nui Manka* is still pursuing its evil task by giving evil powers to human beings while they are still in their mother's womb: it remodels embryos by giving them extra sets of internal organs or by abnormally shaping their organs. These physiological abnormalities then become the seat of diverse supernatural evil abilities.

To fight the witches' activities, the water spirits help human beings by granting their own powers to certain ritual objects manipulated by the members of the *ro* initiation societies. These ritual objects may be small figures of fired clay or wood, masks of wood and woven fibres, calabash megaphones or iron bells, according to which initiation society they belong to (there are seven in Lus). A few important initiates, the 'fathers', are the guardians of these objects, which they keep in sanctuaries throughout the village; the other initiates are only users, not keepers. During the manufacture of these objects, a chicken must be sacrificed, transferring its ritual potency: the blood running over the objects allows their penetration by the water spirits. After this ritual of investiture, the initiates carefully store the objects away from the sight of women, children and non-initiates.

The aim of the rites performed by the initiates with the help of these objects is to protect a person and his family from any future evil act or, if the person is already ill, to persuade the witch who cast the spell to stop his destructive action. In both cases, the healer-initiates use mostly dissuasion by means of powerful words uttered in public, reinforced by the use of charms associated with ritual objects, which threaten the witches with one of the illnesses that the *rovo* can cause. The imprudent witch who continues to 'drink' the blood of his victim after this public announcement will invariably die, as a result of either the *ro* charms or the action of the other witches.

A fairly precise nosological code guides the seers in their diagnoses. Only certain illness can be caused by the witches, generally the most dangerous or those from which one dies most quickly (for example, smallpox, dysentery, tuberculosis, high fever, generalized oedema or weakness). As for the seven initiation societies, they can each bestow a specific illness (ascite or 'swollen belly', elephantiasis, abscess, swollen limbs or extremities, painful joints, palpitations, loss of manual dexterity, etc.). However,

in some cases the witches can also cause the illness that is specific to an initiatory association.

The Wuli distinguish several categories among the supernatural powers which the *Nui Manka* spirit has bestowed on certain men and women. These powers range from the witchcraft which destroys human lives, the most dangerous, to the power to seize one's neighbours' potential game, destroy their harvest or devour their domestic animals. They all have the reputation of being dangerous; all are illicit, although not all are disowned by society with the same strength and some even have an ambiguous ethical position.

Each type of evil power has its seat within a different physiological abnormality of the internal body organs which allows the subject to 'metamorphose' (*byitə*) into a supernatural being who generally assumes an animal form. The name of the host animal is also used to designate each particular occult power with the exception of the most dangerous of all, which is known by a specific name: *ɾɛ*.

Man-eating Witchcraft

Of all evil powers the *ɾɛ* occupies a particular position, being the only one to attack human beings and also the only one capable of spreading illness and death among them. It designates an evil force destructive of human lives and is violently disowned by society. I use the term witchcraft for this power only. Those who possess this power, the true *bire* witches (e.g. *nwire*), must be fought by any means.

The exercise of this power, exclusively nocturnal, allows the witch to metamorphose into an owl (*wu*), leopard (*bwɥ*) or dog (*mvə*) in order to come to his victim's bedside and transmit an illness. This evil will inevitably bring the sick person to death if the witch maintains control. The witch chooses a victim in a complex process in which personal enmities and rivalry between the victim and the aggressor do not play a direct role. In fact, witches are perpetually on the look-out for words uttered in public during family reunions, ritual assemblies, feasts and discussions. On these occasions, one can sometime hear slander or gossip about a breach of custom or some transgressions that someone has committed. In general, these conversations reveal a conflict between two persons, a person and a group or two groups: a woman and her mother-in-law, the parents of a woman and the lineage of her husband, who have not paid bridewealth in full, a man and the whole of his agnate's wives, the latter against one of them, etc. These 'powerful' words (*bɛ fansə*) often expressed in anger, are dangerous because they are uttered in public, revealing a weakness in the social structure which the witch can then exploit. His future victims can only be the members of the household of the person who has just been put

on the spot by a public statement. If a man is openly accused of not having paid all of the bridewealth to his father-in-law, witches may attack him or, more often, his children. Therefore, witches do not obey their own vindictive urges, but follow the path of other peoples' enmities, disagreements and jealousies. The expression used by a person being accused of witchcraft is 'Your speech draws the attention of the witches on to me.' This means that witches will attack a person because of dangerous statements made by another. The witch needs a link in the form of verbal aggression in order to attack. If such dangerous speech occurs the accused will ask the accuser to perform a ritual of reconciliation during which the latter withdraws the statement, thereby showing that they do not want witchcraft to enter the house of the person whose faults were revealed in public. When witchcraft is invoked during a meeting called to determine the origin of an illness, those who utter imprudent words are severely criticized, as are the witches who turn this verbal aggression into physical aggression. Criticism must also be made with discretion, so that no witch can hear it.

This impersonal process by which the witch chooses his victim is the most frequently mentioned kind of bewitchment. But there are other mechanisms through which the witch is forced to attack certain victims. Witches have a duty to avenge the members of their lineages for acts of witchcraft committed by their affines. A woman beaten by her husband because of supposed adultery is afraid of being attacked by the witches of her husband's lineage; she is convinced that if she dies, one of her brothers will avenge her by killing one of her husband's sisters by witchcraft. In this particular case, the evil action is invoked before any sign of witchcraft (illness) has manifested itself. The strong statement which, in previous cases, was only slander, gossip or the public revelation of error, now becomes a threat of witchcraft.

In all cases, *ræ* witches always begin by 'drinking the blood' of their victims, who are then infected with a debilitating illness which ultimately kills them. This intermediary step acts like an alarm system. The diviners are consulted, a meeting is called and different groups or persons in conflict explain their case. The meeting generally ends with a healing ritual, performed by an initiate of a *ro* association, which aims to frighten the witches and to persuade them to release their hold over the victim.

There is another category of bewitchment which, unlike the two already mentioned, is not the consequence of any strong statement or particular social conflict. The *ræ* witches who take part in certain cannibalistic feasts with other witches have to bring a victim, one of their children or a close agnate, as compensation for future nocturnal meals. This act of witchcraft within the descent group generally has the immediate effects of a sudden illness leading to death. Unlike vengeful evil acts towards allies, the possibility of killing one's own children or agnates by witchcraft is only mentioned in public to deny it. For the witch, it is the price paid for power. A network of reciprocity among consanguines is

therefore opened in the world of the night, one which is simultaneously parallel and antinomical to the network of reciprocity of institutions, filiation and alliances which govern the social relations which take place during the day.

The realisation that one has been bewitched occurs while dreaming. Certain nightmares, accompanied upon waking by the first pathological signs of an illness, are indicators that the body of the dreamer has fallen prey to a witch. The *bire* act completely anonymously. No one ever admits to possessing this power and precise accusations are rare. The seers merely mention the number of witches, their sex, and the lineage the evil attacks come from. Precise accusations were formerly more frequent but still did not lead to proceedings. Men and women who had been personally accused by a member of their own lineage could decide to submit to an ordeal to maintain the unity of the family group, though they could not be forced to do so. Also, whether the accused was found innocent or guilty, the accuser had to give some goats to his lineage as an indemnity, either for unjust accusation or for having caused the death of a member of the kin group through the ordeal. The ordeal consisted of taking a poison extracted from the bark of a tree, *Erythrophleum guineense*. Nowadays, a ritual called *keke* takes place when a diviner has revealed that a patient is bewitched: all the persons present declare over the medicine of initiatory *ro* societies—as elsewhere over the Bible—that they have not bewitched the patient. If the witch has ‘sworn’ and still maintains his hold over the victim, then the charm will kill him.

Apart from the ordeal, which has now disappeared, the only certain way to detect the *æ* witchcraft power of a deceased person is to perform an autopsy to reveal any physiological abnormality bearing the power. This abnormality, called *gelengu*, designates the auricle of the heart when it is shaped like a cockscomb. Such an abnormality allows a person to change into an owl, leopard or dog, an action described by the verb *byitə*.

The notion of person is important to understanding the mechanism of bewitchment. The human being comprises a body (*mani*), a ‘breath’ or ‘principle of movement, mobility’ (*zi*) and a ‘principle of life’ or ‘heart’ (*mbə*, heart in the sense of centre). The breath, as the principle of life, resides with the heart (*mbəkɣi*, with the sense of the organ). The ‘breath’ leaves the body through the mouth during sleep; it wanders like a cloud in the bush. On waking, it returns to the body through the eyes, which then open. At the time of death, it leaves the body for good, wandering here and there before vanishing. The ‘breath’ can only cease to function, lose its strength or, more frequently, be torn off or stolen by the witches who destroy human lives, which they do by taking some hair from the victim, who is often already ill, during the night. Loss of consciousness and delirium are signs that the ‘breath’ has been stolen, and death will follow unless it is restored quickly. However, to steal a person’s ‘breath’ is the final phase of a bewitchment. A witch begins by causing an illness, which is called ‘sucking the blood’. At this stage, the victim is ‘taken’ but is not

yet in mortal danger. Although weakened by illness, the bewitched remain conscious and retain their psychological integrity, or 'breath'. The 'breath' plays only a passive role in the mechanism of bewitchment in so far as witches attack their victims during sleep, when the breath has left the body.

Remarkably, as well as their life principle and their breath, the *re* witches possess the faculty of secreting, of giving form and movement to an entity called *manka*, which they 'send', 'create' or 'give birth to' (*bo manka*) either when they themselves are dying or at the time of death of other people. In this last case, the *manka* is the product of the witch's evil power and of certain characteristic traits of the deceased, such as their physical appearance and memory. This entity is invisible to all except witches and diviner-magicians,¹ and is a kind of white ghost taking on the form and traits of the deceased; this ghost will wander inside the deceased's courtyard and will haunt the immediate relatives night and day until the end of the funerary rites are finished. Then the *manka* will rejoin and associate with the deceased's *zi* breath and wander forever in the bush, except in some particular cases which we will discuss below. This ghost to whom the witches give life, but in the likeness of the deceased, does not to my knowledge correspond to any concept linked to the human person.²

The *manka* is a complex entity which only manifests itself to humans for a short while during funerals and reveals itself by creating a draught and a strong smell of palm oil. Although harmless in itself, it none the less frightens everybody, because, born from the will of the witches, it is a cog of the witchcraft mechanism. They are, in a way, the invisible support of the ever-present powerful words which the dead uttered during their life, because, as we have seen, these powerful words are the basis of the mechanism of witchcraft and mark the victims of future evil actions. The *manka* is, rather than a spirit-double, the memory of the dead, which the Wuli always perceive as a menace. The witches also use the statements of the dead as well as those of the living. Moreover, as they get older, the elders multiply their injunctions, intimidations (they publicly threaten people with misfortune which will occur after their own death) and prohibi-

1. Called *mantacho*, these diviners have the same powers as the witches but only use them in a socially approved manner to heal or mend the misfortune caused by the *re* witches.

2. There is nevertheless the interesting case of Bangwa, a Bamileke chiefship. On the one hand, a kind of exclusively male witchcraft, *sue*, allows its beholder to appear 'as a white shape similar to our half-visible ghosts'. On the other hand, the double—or more precisely the undercover—of the *ngankan* healers, in contrast to that of other people, changes upon their death into *ghangami*. The Bangwa think of this feared entity 'as a white silhouette similar to that which accompanies the witches who belong to the house of *sue*'. It must be ritually chased out of the village after the burial ceremony because it can bring a kind of shame. The *ngankan*, although outside witchcraft, are respected but fearsome magicians who are capable of changing into wild animals.

tions (for example, a grandson must not marry a woman from a certain lineage). The presence of the deceased's ghost at their funeral is a reminder that witches have no intention of forgetting his statements. The transgression of oaths made by the deceased, of rules and prohibitions which he decreed when he was alive, are all open to the witches' evil actions, just as are the statements of the living. But whereas the statements of the living, young or old, men or women, are all 'heard', only the threats from important elders are truly 'registered' after their death. It is often said that the ghosts of persons long dead often come and join that of the newly deceased during a funeral; also, as long as there remains a single person who can remember someone long dead, the witches can summon the *manka* of that dead person during a funeral. However, according to some people, a *manka*'s period of activity does not exceed five years. When a child dies, since they did not live long enough to utter many powerful words, the ghosts of the long dead come to haunt the funeral to recall their own dangerous and strong statements. It is also said that the *manka* haunt the funeral more if the family of the deceased has been unjust, wrong or ungrateful towards them. The dead, through the intermediary of their *manka* manipulated by the witches, are dangerous for the living.

The corpse decomposes in the tomb but nevertheless remains for a time the seat of the memory of the dead, in particular the powerful words they uttered. Curiously, if the witches remember because they have 'heard', the dead remember because they continue to 'see' what their next of kin are doing. Memory moves from the auditory to the visual. The Wuli have no ancestor cult and the dead are only solicited to be asked to forget about the living or, more precisely, to 'close their eyes' (*kʸiləm*) on the actions of the living. Certain rituals take place for this reason only, on the recent tombs of important deceased: to 'close their eyes' on past statements or oaths. If the deceased 'close their eyes', forget, they, the witches, will also forget. If the deceased are obstinate and 'keep their eyes open', their agnates will ask a stranger to the village to open the tomb and remove the skull from the skeleton of this troublesome dead and then go into the bush and lay it on the ground among the roots of a big tree.

Manka ghosts have a final noteworthy characteristic. After the funeral, the ghost of the deceased joins the *zi* in the bush, but if the deceased was a 'father' in a *ro* initiation association, that is to say a guardian of a sanctuary and keeper of *ro* objects (see above), then the *manka* is captured by the water spirits who inhabit these objects and joins the *manka* of previous keepers. One of the rules of the *ro* associations is that a son succeeds his father. There is no ancestor cult but there is a lineage of *manka* which ensures the efficiency of anti-witchcraft associations. The *manka* entity, subjugated by the water spirits, is granted the power to cause illness by entering the ritual sphere of *ro*. We see here a division of labour: the *manka* cause illness, the water spirits cure them (see also Baeke 1985).

Further elaboration of the Wuli notion of the person may be helpful in our understanding of the mechanism of bewitchment. The term *mbɔ*,

which defines the 'breath' and, by extension, the heart in which it resides, designates at the same time the kernel of the palm nut. It is there that the *rɛ* witches hide the 'breath' of their victim by placing within it a lock of their hair that the witch has stolen. But it is also said that when a witch has stolen the 'heart' of a person (i.e. the 'breath'), the 'skin' (*ngo*) may also be seized. This term designates the external envelope of the body, its physical appearance as well as certain personality traits (the voice, etc.). The 'breath' is therefore both the strength and internal energy of a person and some external characteristics; the heart is its seat, the growing hair the visible external metonymical sign.

When the *mbɔ* or 'breath' of a person is captured and 'devoured' by a witch, this person, deprived of this essential part, dies. However, it is also said that the whole person is 'eaten' by the witches, heart, flesh and bones. The autopsy of a presumed witch reveals precise details concerning which parts of the body of his victims he ate; if the heart of the deceased contains a blood clot in the shape of a frog this indicates that they have 'consumed' a child.

To sum up, we can say that the 'breath' or *mbɔ* is defined in different ways depending on the context or the point of view. When it is at one with the body, it is a constituent element of the person and resides in the heart. When the two entities of body and 'breath' are separated, the latter is the whole person in the invisible world of the witches, whereas in the world of the non-witches it is materialized in a lock of hair enclosed in the kernel of a palm nut which is hidden in the bush or in the village.

The body of the victim is the object of symbolic action where metonymy and food metaphors mingle. When a person is ill, it is said that a witch is 'drinking their blood'. When the patient has lost consciousness, is delirious or is at death's door, it is said that the witch 'stole their heart' by taking a lock of hair in a supernatural way, which is a metonymical indication of their 'breath'. Finally, the victim dies, 'eaten' by the witch.

Metonymy and food metaphor are connected in a ritual called *bɛfɔ*, during which a magician-diviner (*ɲwimantafɔ*) captures and destroys the evil part of a *rɛ* witch who is responsible for a recent death. This ritual is often organized when the victim is a child. The magician-diviner attracts the witch into a trap, whose main element is a lock of hair from the dead child. This is placed in a half-calabash partially buried in the ground. When the magician-diviner 'sees' the witch in the calabash, he 'destroys' the witch with his machete by breaking the trap-calabash and burying it in the ground. It is said that, after a few months, the witch will inevitably die of an illness specific to this ritual, *mfɔ*, or inflammation and suppuration of organs situated on either side of the depression situated under the lower ribs (infection of the lining of the lungs).

While the phenomenon of bewitchment is relatively well described by the Wuli themselves the mechanism of its action is relatively unknown. The Wuli make no precise link between the different components of a person described earlier and the transformation which takes place when be-

witchment occurs. The only precise information is as follows: witches possess the *gelengu* (an auricle of the heart in the shape of a cockscomb), and this malformation allows them to transform themselves into an owl, leopard or dog and go to the victim's bedside.

What is the origin, the exact nature of the evil entity which changes into an animal? The Wuli think that it is none other than the person himself, who, while invisible, puts on the 'skin' of an animal to commit evil. When they describe this metamorphosis the Wuli mention neither the components of a person, the body, the vital principal and breath, or the *manka*. The witch is both here and there, and that is all. During the ritual performed in order to kill a witch, the invisible entity which is trapped is the witch in person. The only details we have on this matter come from the description of the ritual associated with the death of a leopard. A leopard-hunt is generally only undertaken when one is seen on the outskirts of a village, thus demonstrating that it has been invested by a witch (the last leopard seen in the region of Lus was killed in 1979). As soon as the animal has succumbed to the hunters' spears, its heart is quickly brought back to the village, where the hunter's father cooks and eats it the same evening. The speed of the operation ensures that the witch who had borrowed the 'skin' of the feline and whose 'heart' had therefore mingled with that of the animal does not have the time to retrieve their own 'heart' and escape this death by proxy. This suggests that it is the 'breath', residing in the heart, which leaves the body during the evil wanderings of a witch. We have seen that the evil power of witches is linked to a physiological abnormality of the heart. To be a witch would therefore mean having the ability to separate the 'breath' from the body without harming oneself—unlike non-witches, who would lose consciousness, fall in a coma and find themselves at death's door.

Other Evil Powers

As well as *æ*, there are other minor evil powers which give their owners supernatural access to belongings, harvests, game, wine, cattle, etc. The first thing to note about these powers is that, unlike *æ* witchcraft, they are active by day as well as by night.

Apart from the *f* power, which we will discuss first, they are not generally the subject of Wuli gossip. They are only considered harmful if their possessors target the territory, harvests or belongings of a village. If they exercise their talents outside Wuli territory, society's attitude towards these supernatural activities goes from reprobation to indifference, and even approbation, because the Wuli think that these powers can bring abundance to the village when they are exercised outside their territory.

To distinguish the possessors of these powers from the *re* witches, who destroy human life, I shall call them 'witch-thieves'.

For each of these minor forms of witchcraft we can establish a precise link between the animal whose 'skin' the witch has borrowed, the physiological abnormality which is the origin of his power, and the nature of the power. These three concepts, indissolubly linked, bear the same name, usually that of the animal, the object of the 'metamorphosis' or 'transfer'.

The ensemble of hosts used by witch-thieves constitute a bestiary representing some of the regional fauna, either carnivores who decimate the livestock or hunt the same game animals as man, or grain- or fruit-eaters who take man's food reserves.

Nevertheless, there is great disparity behind this appearance of unity. There are significant differences between the various forms of minor witchcraft, on both the level of the attitude of the social group towards them and the level of the activities which are attributed to them. The mechanisms through which these witch-thieves steal are different whichever category they belong to.

One person may possess just one of these powers, or several of them or even all of them. Autopsies, which are performed on all the dead—men, women and children—reveal the powers the deceased possessed; each supernatural agency has its power from the physiological 'double' residing in a specific part of the internal organs. We will now examine the different types of these minor forms of witchcraft.

The *fɔ* minor witchcraft: harvests versus fertility

There are three kinds of associated powers under this generic term: *fɔ* itself, *sɔŋbwɔ* and *solɔŋba*. They are generally indissociable and allow their possessors to steal harvests of corn, sorghum, vegetables or root crops, as well as crops which are picked in the bush.

The term *fɔ*, which here designates a kind of bird (unidentified), also means work in the fields and sections of the bush that will soon be cultivated. *Sɔŋbwɔ* is the name of another (unidentified) bird and means 'who steals in the bush (*mbwɔ*) by supernatural means (*so*)'. These two kinds of minor witchcraft operate at different seasons: *fɔ*, when the women work in the fields, and *sɔŋbwɔ*, when the harvest is collected from the fields. The first kind of minor witchcraft is therefore associated with cultivated plants and agriculture, the other with plants which grow in the bush and are not cultivated. The 'bush' here designates cultivated fields (*nso*), potential fields (*fɔ*) and the forest or savannah which surrounds them (*ko*). This territory is the agricultural domain of women, but a part of the bush, the palm forest *koti*, which forms a dense belt around the village, is the exclusive domain of the men. Despite the clear conceptual distinction between these different zones, it is evident that in practice they overlap, at least partially. We will return to this division of space in the conclusion.

Solenbe is the name of an imaginary animal and means 'to steal carrots (*ɲbə*) in a supernatural way (*sole*)'. The carrots are planted in the clearings of the palm forests which are part of the male domain.

The *fɔ* witch-thieves are said to exercise their power as a group according to strict rules, the most important being that they must never use the products of their theft themselves but must exchange them with their partners. Moreover, their acts have metonymic force: the witch-thief need only spirit away a 'part' for the 'whole' to be destroyed, perish or fade, making it 'reappear' elsewhere. In concrete terms, all the witch has to do is set his heart on a field of sorghum for the plants to stop growing or perish, whereas the field to which the loot is destined (and which cannot be his) will see its harvest become more abundant.

In general, the 'division of labour' between the sexes disappears when it comes to the sphere of the witches' supernatural activities. Although gathering palm nuts and hunting are male activities, the minor witchcraft which steals palm wine or game can be exercised by both men and women. Similarly, agriculture is essentially a female activity, but men and women can perform the *fɔ* witchcraft which destroys harvests.

This last kind of minor witchcraft is, however, the only one to be analysed in different ways by the Wuli, depending on whether it is exercised by a man or a woman, even though the supernatural actions performed are the same. The female *fɔ* power resides in the uterus, the male *fɔ* power near the liver; *fɔ* women always possess the three powers (*fɔ*, *sɔɲbwɔ* and *solɔɲbɔ*), whereas the men only ever possess the first two. *Solenbe* is therefore a kind of minor witchcraft which is inaccessible to men. It is also the only one not to be associated with a real animal. The Wuli describe *solɔɲbɔ* as a long, two-legged imaginary being who digs out the small *ɲbə* carrots (*phlectrenthus esculentus*, previously *coleus dazo*, commonly called 'Hausa potato') at night.

As in *rɛ* witchcraft, autopsy is the only way to discover if someone possessed these powers. In men, they are revealed as two organs (or extra numbers of organic abnormalities?), *fɔ* and *sɔɲbwɔ*, residing in a bag on the right-hand side of the abdomen, near the liver. In women, *fɔ* is composed of three extra organs coiled inside a transparent receptacle, in the left-hand side of the uterus. *Fɔ* and *sɔɲbwɔ* are described as small, elongated white, soft reticules with a mouth and teeth, whereas *solɔɲbɔ* resembles a small snake with a fairly large head and two short legs. These imaginary beings, strange additional organs, are the internal replicas of external animal shapes, real or imaginary, which their possessor can use.

This is how the Wuli imagine the activities of the *fɔ* witches: men and women metamorphose into *fɔ* or *sɔɲbwɔ* birds, then take flight taking either their game-bag or their basket. They necessarily act as a group. When the expedition is finished they gather among the branches of a *sɔ* tree, a gathering place for *fɔ* and *sɔɲbwɔ* birds (*Bombacaceae ceiba pentandia* or Kapok tree). Here they share the loot, along the principle that no witch uses what he has stolen for his own means.

The male and female *fɔ* witches run the same risk as the *rɛ* witches. They are vulnerable to the medicines of the initiation societies or their maledictions. But the women who possess *fɔ* witchcraft run an even greater risk, because it is extremely dangerous for them to use the *fɔ* power when they are pregnant. If a mother-to-be joins a *fɔ* or *sɔŋbwɔ* expedition, she has to stop at a *sɔ* tree before joining the other thieves. She places her foetus there on a bed of branches and covers it with leaves to hide it from her accomplices, who would otherwise beat it to death. The mother then rejoins her companions; she will surreptitiously take back her child on her return from the expedition. Nevertheless, the mother and her future child remain exposed until the end of the pregnancy, especially at the time of birth, to the evil actions of the *fɔ*, *sɔŋbwɔ* and *solɔŋbɛ* organs. These cohabit with the embryo in the uterus. The open mouths of these frightening entities can draw in or 'drink' the blood of the child and the water of the placenta, thus provoking a miscarriage. Above all, they can hinder the normal progress of the birth. Each element of this trio has a specific role. When the baby tries to come out, *fɔ* intercepts him and swallows the child's head in its bag-mouth. *Sɔŋbwɔ* attacks the placenta, which it presses and swallows to stop it coming out. If the placenta does not come out after the child, this is explained as the actions of *solɔŋbɛ* biting into the umbilical cord and pulling the placenta back into the uterus. These actions can lead to the death of the mother and child or of the mother only. The placenta which does not come out is greatly feared. Old women who are said to have ritual and therapeutic knowledge and who intervene in cases of difficult birth are called *bi fi mayi*, 'those who loosen the placenta'.

For all these reasons, the Wuli never cut the umbilical cord straight after the birth but only after the placenta has come out. When the child is born at term and alive but, several hours later, the placenta is still inside the mother, the women assisting her will carefully cut the cord and immediately tie two *dʒɛ* (*Solenaceae solanum aculeastrum* var. *albifolium*) bush fruits to the extremity of the cord which leads to the placenta, so that *solɔŋbɛ*, who is hiding at the back of the uterus, cannot pull it in.

If a woman does not take part in any *fɔ* activity during her pregnancy, these three physiological entities will keep 'their mouths shut' (*finsɔ wuwu*) and the birth will take place without incident. Although transgressing certain prohibitions or seeing certain secret *ro* objects can also be the cause of miscarriages or difficult births, *fɔ* is generally thought to be the cause of obstetric difficulties.

Among the men and women who possess *fɔ*, only pregnant women are at risk of the entities which are the origin of their power turning against them. The domain of witchcraft appears to contain a specific moral injunction to preserve the fertility of women. Unlike *fɔ* men, women are the only ones to possess *solɔŋbɛ*, the entity which allows them to change into the imaginary animal bearing the same name and to steal *ŋbɛ* carrots. The Wuli do not talk a lot about this last kind of minor witchcraft, but the

women insist that this practice is the only one to provoke 'fever', a metaphor for the onset of menstruation.

It thus seems that while the practice of *fɔ* and *sɔŋbwɔ* hinders the development of pregnancy, the transformation into *solɔŋbɔ* prevents conception or the first stage of the fertility cycle or provokes spontaneous abortions.

But why does this contraceptive witchcraft consist exclusively of stealing *ŋbɔ*, which are small roots of no great importance as food? In fact, the cultivation of this plant is regulated by ritual. Each year, the women work in the small fields where *ŋbɔ* are grown only during the annual ten-day feast called *ɣu-fempwu*. This takes place at the end of June or in early July and marks the break between the end of the maize season and the ritual inauguration of the sorghum season. One of the main events of this festival takes place on the third day, the celebration of all the weddings of the year. Two days and two nights of rejoicing follow, during which the young brides sleep in the hut of their mothers-in-law. On the sixth day, the women go to raise the mounds in the fields intended to receive the *ŋbɔ* roots. That same evening, the newly married couples spend their first night together. The cycle defined by the beginning of sowing and the end of the harvest of the carrots is about nine months. The cultivation of the carrots is therefore closely linked to the first sexual relations of young couples and their fertility. Moreover, the preparation of the root fields is a prerequisite of the preparation of the sorghum fields.

For the Wuli, the fertility of women and that of the earth are closely linked. Here we see a plant, the *ŋbɔ*, playing the role of catalyst in the future fertility of the sorghum fields, just as the wedding night, which is 'worked' at the same time as the carrots, will be the catalyst of the fecundity of the couples. That being the case, we can understand why to use witchcraft to steal these roots, which symbolize the fecundity of the couples, is an act which endangers witch-thieves during childbirth.

If we compare the destructive acts of the three entities under the generic term *fɔ* (two birds and a small imaginary animal which steals food) on the one hand, with the evil activities of their counterparts lodged in the uterus (two white bags and a small snake which prevent a woman from giving birth) on the other, we notice that on a symbolic level the first are a replica of the second.

We have seen that the *fɔ* bird attacks cultivated plants in the fields, *sɔŋbwɔ* destroys edible wild plants in the bush, and *solɔŋbɔ* plunders the fields of carrots. These small fields are situated in the palm forest close to the village, which is the domain of the men; they therefore have an intermediary position between the female bush fields, away from the village, and the uncultivated forest. This area of palm trees surrounding the village is a liminal zone between the village and the distant bush where the women work their fields. It is also intermediate between the uncultivated wild bush where *sɔŋbwɔ* acts and the fields where *fɔ* acts, because it is the domain of the oil-palm tree, which, according to the Wuli, is neither cultivated nor

wild. As we have seen, during the great annual festival the small fields of *ɲbə* carrots also play a mediatory role between the maize season and the sorghum season, between the fertility of the plants in the fields and the fecundity of couples in the village: premarital, clandestine or 'bush' love is said or wished to be sterile. *Soləɲbə* witchcraft attacks a plant which has little value as food but which plays a key symbolic role.

To return to the action of the three physiological organs lodged in the uterus of witch-thieves. *Fɔ* attacks the child, *soɲbwɔ* the placenta and *soləɲbə* the umbilical cord. The cord is obviously an intermediary between the child and the placenta. The placenta is buried under a tree, generally a banana or plantain plant, in the 'village bush', which is a section of the palm forest surrounding the village and forms the natural border between the residences of two lineages, whereas a dead child is buried behind the house. The umbilical cord is the object of a ritual when the baby first comes out: it is either thrown onto the roof of the house or buried in the same place in the village bush as the placenta. This hesitation is due to the intermediary symbolic position between person and placenta, between village and bush.

The fields of *ɲbə* occupy an intermediate position in the organization of the space of the village territory, which is a counterpart to the symbolic position of the umbilical cord in the midst of the child-placenta duality: the child is linked to the village, whereas the placenta is linked to the bush. The spatial structure, the system of agricultural production and the universe of evil correspond perfectly.

Because of its mediating role within the structure of the village, where the opposition between bush and village plays an important role, the *ɲbə* plant is at the heart of the symbolic framework which links the fertility of plants to the fertility of women; this is reflected in the coincidence between the act of putting *ɲbə* carrots in the ground and the first sexual relations of young married couples (the wedding night of the annual feast). Because fertility is exclusive to women, they are the only ones to have the doubtful privilege of triggering the menstrual flow in their bodies by destroying these tubers in a supernatural way and thereby drying the internal source of their fecundity.

Fɔ witchcraft is the enemy of the emergence of life and can therefore be considered the 'younger sibling' of the formidable *rɛ* witchcraft, which brings death.

Other kinds of minor witchcraft

Let us look now at other kinds of minor witchcraft. Foremost among these is *ka* which consists primarily of stealing wine and palm nuts. This power is linked to the existence of 'pockets' situated on both sides of the heart. *Ka* is the name of a species of fruit-eating bird with a very long beak (unidentified), which is indeed very keen on palm nuts.

There are also a series of powers which enable one to change into an animal: *nkwi* the eagle, chicken thief; *manyapwe* the hippopotamus, who destroys the plantations on the river banks; *maliko* the python, who steals poultry and hunts small game; *nggu* the water snake, who likes fish and sometimes destroys rope bridges; and *mbwu* the leopard, not a killer of men this time but a hunter of game and domesticated animals. The power to change into one or other of these animals resides at the back of the rib cage, in certain veins or arteries with a particular shape. If an autopsy shows that these veins contain black blood, the deceased is a witch-thief who has doubtless used their powers.

Ka power and the other powers listed above differ in the supernatural technique used. *Ka* is the only one which acts in the universe of metonymy: if a *ka* bird-witch 'spirits away' a few nuts from an oil-palm tree belonging to a particular family, most of the production of wine and oil from this family's palm trees will dry up, whereas other palm forests will suddenly produce abundantly. By taking some, the *ka* witch steals everything, as do *fɔ* witches.

By contrast, witch-thieves who belong to the second category—the hippopotamus, eagle, snakes and leopard—behave like their non-evil animal counterparts. When a *maliko* witch-thief (the python) attacks a single animal, the remainder of the herd are unharmed. Similarly, when a *manyapwe* witch-thief (the hippopotamus) destroys a few rows of vegetables growing by the side of the river, the whole plot is not destroyed.

Just as in *fɔ* witchcraft, *ka* is a group practice and the *ka* witch-thief must exchange stolen products with part of the loot of fellow witches. Infringement of these rules can lead the accomplices to turn against that witch. None the less, the Wuli make a clear distinction between the activity of *fɔ* bird-witches and that of *ka* bird-witches, even though they both attack foodstuffs of great importance: wine and palm oil are, with maize and sorghum, the most important products in daily and ritual cooking. Moreover, it is said that *fɔ* witches, and especially female witches, are too often tempted by the harvest of their close neighbours—whereas the *ka* witches are more discerning and, rather than destroying Wuli palm trees, they take palm nuts and male inflorescences which produce wine from the forests of other villages and bring them to the palm groves of the Wuli. When a *ka* bird passes in the sky, it is saluted with joy, unlike *fɔ* birds.

The actions of witch-thieves who borrow the 'skin' of the leopard, python, water snake or eagle are also regarded as part good, part bad. The leopard, like the python, can take a goat but it can also consciously kill certain wild herbivores who destroy crops, thereby protecting the crops. The eagle, chicken thief, can choose, just as the *ka* bird can, to attack another village; it is sometime said that two village groups attack each other via the proxy of witch-eagles. The destructive actions of hippopotami are lessened by recalling that they often play gently with children.

Nevertheless, despite the ambiguity between actions approved by society and those which are reprehensible when performed within the village or

the lineage, the nature of these powers remains illicit, secretive and dangerous. Everybody knows that any witch-thief who attacks the belongings of the inhabitants of his own village will in his turn be attacked by the *ro* initiatory societies.

It is therefore surprising to find that these minor kinds of witchcraft are the responsibility of two ritual associations. All lineages have their own *ka* and *kemvre* societies which exist in order to increase the supernatural powers of the lineage's witch-thieves by enabling them to use the ritual objects which facilitate the exercise of their power. The *ka* association activates the power bearing the same name, the *kemvre* association the powers associated with the leopard, snakes, eagle and hippopotamus. The paradox is that although they favour illegal powers, these two societies have a legal and official status. The symbols of *ka* are a bird sculpted out of wood and an engraved terracotta pot used for palm-wine. The symbols of *kemvre* (literally 'the materials of the calabash'), which are linked to all the animals whose 'skins' (fur or feathers) can be used, are three bands of woven cotton material inside a calabash. Each material represents one or several different animals. The colour of the first band of material is off-white and corresponds to the eagle and the hippopotamus; the second, black or red, is associated with the python and water snake; and the third symbolizes the leopard and is striped in white, black and red. Now that European materials are widely available, these bands of traditional cotton materials are often replaced with scraps of modern materials. There is, in each lineage, only one keeper of the calabash containing these ritual materials. Within a local descent group of around forty married men, I have counted some fifteen members of *kemvre*.

Membership of these two associations generally goes from father to son. If a man delays the initiation rituals after the death of his father, the public gossip will be such that he will eventually be attacked by the witches of his lineage. In the *kemvre* association, they will infect him with scabies (*mbe*); in *ka*, it will be a weeping eye infection. These two illnesses are those which the 'medicines' associated with these associations can inflict on the witch-thieves of other lineages who may attempt to 'borrow' the powers of these objects. The charm associated with *kemvre* is a wild rash-inducing plant (*Urticaceae Laportea ovalifolia*) and scabies here symbolizes the illegal usage of 'skins'. The *ka* medicine includes porcupine spines, which are compared to the spines present in bunches of palm nuts and which can harm the bird who tries to eat them, thus provoking an eye infection.

According to the Wuli, these societies play a positive role because if one of them ceased its activities in a lineage, then the witch-thieves of the family group would turn against the negligent initiates. The symbol objects of *ka* and *kemvre* must be exhibited during the funeral of their members. A sacrifice of chickens and the sharing of palm-wine are required at initiations, as in the initiation into other cultural associations. It is said that the water spirits and the *manka* ghost spirits of previous members cohabit in

the ritual objects we have described above, just as they live in the ritual object of *ro* associations who fight all forms of witchcraft.

The existence and activities of these societies represent an assurance that the witch-thieves of a lineage will not turn against their agnates, *nduma* (the mother's agnates) or *vedze* (sisters' and daughters' children) but will direct their powers to the outside, far away, preferably outside the village. In counterpart, the efficiency of the powers of the witch-thieves are increased by these symbols of the lineage, whose powers are reinforced by the presence of water spirits and ghosts. In this context, can we still talk of witchcraft? What is surprising is not that there is a code of ethics within the world of witchcraft—there are other examples of this—but that this code should be the result of a transaction between the invisible world and the world of social institutions. From this point of view, by 'taking part' in witchcraft, the *ka* and *kemvre* associations have an attitude which is completely different from that of the *ro* initiatory associations, which fight all forms of witchcraft without exception. Wuli repeatedly told me that the only difference between the *ka* sculpted wooden bird and the *kemvre* bands of cloth was that women can see the first one without danger. In a world where witchcraft is as much masculine as it is feminine but where only men can be members of the initiation societies, this tells us a lot about the respective functions of these two kinds of association. One of them, *ro*, is organized on the level of the whole village and fights all forms of witchcraft when it is turned against a villager; only men can see its ritual objects. The other type of association, grouping *ka* and *kemvre*, which are lineage organizations, can be seen by all, because its aim is to enable witches of both sexes to use their evil talents for the good of the lineage.

Witch-thieves must exercise their talents according to a code defined by these associations. This is not to touch the belongings of the lineage and to use their powers as far away as possible, beyond the village boundaries. The main aim of this charter is to counter the evil aspects of these powers and to lead them into positive consequences for the village. If witch-thieves are foolish enough to harm their own village communities they will, as happens to *ræ* witches, be attacked by the protective charms of the *ro* secret societies, who fight all aspects of evil power.

Conclusion: Witchcraft, Sorghum and Oil-Palm

The preceding sections have emphasised the clearly negative status of *ræ* witchcraft and also *fɔ* witchcraft, whereas the status of most of the other minor witchcraft is ambiguous. Whether evil or beneficial, approved or disapproved, they are nevertheless all of an illicit character, and those who

exercise such powers are exposed to many dangers. I will now discuss this strange morality.

Although Wuli exploit to the full the ambiguous powers of witchcraft within the social structure, neither *rɛ* witchcraft, which destroys human lives, nor the minor *fɔ* witchcraft,³ which can annihilate the fecundity of women, are linked to any association whether legal, lineage or other. They are both too destructive. *Fɔ* is indeed, after *rɛ*, the form of witchcraft which is most disapproved of by the Wuli. This contrasts with the status of *ka* witchcraft, despite its resemblances to *fɔ* already noted.

We have seen that Wuli distinguish between the activity of *fɔ* witch-birds and that of *ka* witch-birds. The first destroys crops and causes difficulties in childbirth, whereas the second creates richness and abundance by bringing to the village wine and palm nuts from other villages. Why do the Wuli suppose that *ka* witches generally resist the temptation to take flowers and fruits from nearby palm trees, whereas *fɔ* witches, especially female *fɔ* ones, succumb to the urge to take crops or bush fruits from their close neighbours? We have seen that these two kinds of minor witchcraft differ only in the nature of their loot: on the one hand, products from the fields (the *fɔ* bird itself), from edible bush plants (the *sɔŋbwɔ* bird) and from *ŋbɔ* carrots fields within the oil-palm forests (the *solɔŋbɔ* imaginary animal), and on the other, the wine and palm oil which come from the oil-palm forest (the *ka* bird).⁴ To question why the contrast between their respective ethical status is to ask what is the difference between the oil-palms and the plants cultivated in the fields or the wild fruits and vegetables collected from the bush within the economic, social and symbolic structure of the Wuli?

To answer this question, let us start with the symbolic status of the oil-palm tree. Unlike the produce from the fields, it is not a cultivated plant, as is shown by the regulation of land ownership. When a plot of land passes from one lineage to another, great care is taken to define what is being transmitted: it may be just the right to cultivate it or it may be extended to the right to gather from non-cultivated wild plants. In the first case, the palm trees cannot be exploited by the person who has received the land, since they still belong to the previous lineage. Palm trees are never planted and grow without any help from men. The Wuli say that they 'follow men', an allusion to the speed with which they spontaneously multiply around any new residential area. The original agricultural myth confirms this status:

3. We have seen that the term *fɔ* is often used by the Wuli as a generic term designating the associated powers *fɔ*, *sɔŋbwɔ* and *solɔŋbɔ*.

4. Even if the observation of the behaviour of these different species of birds showed that one is more destructive than another or that some flew for longer distances than others, this would still not explain the *fɔ/ka* antinomy sufficiently.

Once upon a time, men did not work the land. One day, while making palm oil, a man was taken away by the lightning of the sky. He came back with the seeds of plants to cultivate.

This tale stresses the fact that the exploitation of palm trees came before agriculture and is confirmed by an episode from the Wuli origin myth which tells us that the water spirits gave to the messenger dog of the first men the fire to cook their food in the form of burning *gansu*, the fibrous remains of the manufacture of palm oil. A variant of the myth, from the Mfumte village of Nchi, tells of a dog who, attracted by the fire over which a water spirit is roasting some palm-nut kernels, stole a firebrand and brought it back to men. Both these variants associate domestic fire with the palm tree and also show us that this non-cultivated plant is none the less part of culture. For instance, apart from its importance as a foodstuff, the oil palm plays an important role in rituals. Palm-oil, which is a basic ingredient of daily cooking, is a sign of fecundity and is used by women in birth rituals, whereas palm-wine (which is spat on objects or people) is linked to the rituals of male initiation associations and generally seals the return to an order which had been disturbed.

The ritual importance of oil palms, with their symbolic status half-way between nature and culture, is enough to justify the existence of an initiation association whose role is to protect this precious tree from the *ka* witch-birds. These witches are restricted by a kinship pact which allows them to 'steal far away'. They are free to exercise their talents against those with whom they have no alliance or kinship relations. They also bring back what they steal to their own village and thereby benefit their own community. Their power only destroys strangers.

It would be useful to compare the action of the *ka* bird with that of the *nkwi* eagle who is linked to the *kemvre* lineage association. It must be remembered that witch-eagles steal chickens and that, in order to respect the pact which binds them to their lineage, they must steal, like the *ka* bird, outside their village. They go further than the *ka* bird, directing their actions toward villages which are in conflict with the Wuli, but using the same supernatural method.⁵ We must add that chickens have the same importance as palm-wine in the initiation or reparation rituals. The sacrifice or gift of a chicken together with a calabash of wine are the essential ingredients of any ritual of this type. Moreover, although goats are sometimes required as payment, only the chicken is used in sacrifice: its blood links people to the water spirits. It would therefore seem logical that precautions are taken against the witches who steal chickens by giving them the means to 'steal far away' from the other villages.

5. Nowadays the witch-eagle is rarely evoked in this context, but this might be a consequence of the longstanding prohibition forbidding war between villages.

Apart from chickens and palm-wine, only wild plants which have no value as a foodstuff are used as medicine in the protection and reparation rituals. These rituals are directed exclusively by males. On the other hand, plants that are eaten, whether picked wild or cultivated by women, are never used in any ritual. They are used strictly as food. The *fɔ* women, who steal sorghum and other edible plants, have their own code of practice within the world of witchcraft protecting them from the consequences of their witchcraft. Although *fɔ* is a minor power similar to *ka* witchcraft, it is nearer to the nocturnal *rɛ* witchcraft. Nothing seems to assuage the destructive desires of these two forms of witchcraft, the one attacking the principal food of men and the other their 'breath'. The *rɛ* witches who 'drink the blood' of their victims and then 'eat' them pay for their pleasure by being forced to give their own children to their evil partners. They are true anti-social beings. The *fɔ* she-witch also sees her powers turn against herself and her future progeny, but only when she contravenes the ethical code of the witches. The first pays the price of witchcraft when obeying its evil code, the second when disobeying. The *rɛ* witch 'eats' victims and then gives children to be eaten; the *fɔ* she-witch 'eats' the food of her family or allies, and then herself and her child 'are eaten'.

The destructive activities of the *rɛ* and *fɔ* witchcraft follow the circuits of kinship and alliance: they are linked to the internal conflicts of the village. By contrast, the witch-animals grouped under the lineage inscribe their actions within the circuit of external relations between villages.

Thus the constellation of Wuli witchcraft beliefs constitutes an inverted image of the usual communication networks. But in this mirror we can also see human attempts to understand misfortune.

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FIG. 1. Plan of the village of Lus

