

# Cooking, swallowing, chewing: 'culinary semi-otics' and the political economy of witchcraft in the Cameroon Grassfields<sup>1 2</sup>

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*In the Cameroon Grassfields, persons are conceived of as the outcome of culinary processes: exchange, cooking and ingestion. Food appears as a gendered medium which, by being exchanged, cooked and ingested by persons has the power to transform others and make them act. The first part of the paper aims at deciphering this culinary idiom, while the second part examines how key terms such as cooking, eating and exchanging (food) easily switch to a lexicon pertaining to political economy, and links this culinary idiom to witchcraft conceptions, arguing that the latter is anti-production, anti-cooking, anti-exchange, and anti-consumption. It will be shown that the key terms of both these languages cover a wide semantic field and that they can be easily substituted for one another. This interchangeability and 'semantic volatility' can explain, at least in part, the widely acknowledged ambiguity/ambivalence of witchcraft discourses. This ambiguity/ambivalence, in turn, accounts for the ability of witchcraft discourses to translate abstract/remote/global ideas and forces into local terms and accommodating historical changes. This is what I intend to illustrate in the third and final section of the paper, arguing that witchcraft can be understood not so much as a 'belief' but, rather, as a modality of 'mediating the imagination'. Overall, the paper argues that the exploration of such themes calls for the combination of both discursive (e.g. the culinary metaphors used by people when talking about persons and/or witchcraft) and non-discursive (culinary practices and ritual performance) approaches since, as it will be made clear, knowledge of the self, others and the world emerges to a great extent through culinary imagery and practices.*

**KEYWORDS**                      witchcraft, personhood, culinary metaphors and practices,  
postcolonial Cameroon, Cameroon Grassfields

## Introduction

The argument of this paper focuses on two common topics in social anthropology: personhood and witchcraft. Its aim is, first, to decipher the culinary idiom in which these concepts are couched, and, second, to examine how the key terms of this idiom switch to a lexicon pertaining to political economy. In particular, it will be shown that the key terms of both these languages cover a wide semantic field and that they can be easily substituted for one another. This interchangeability and 'semantic volatility' can explain, at least in part, the widely acknowledged ambiguity/ ambivalence of witchcraft discourses (Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; de Rosny 1981; Geschiere 1994: 78; 1997: 9; 2014; Nyamnjoh 2002: 119; Rowlands and Warnier 1988: 129; Warnier 1993). This ambiguity/ambivalence, in turn, accounts for the ability of witchcraft discourses to translate abstract/remote/global ideas and forces into local terms and accommodating historical changes.<sup>3</sup> This is what I intend to illustrate in the third and final section, arguing that witchcraft can be understood not so much as a 'belief' but, rather, as 'a modality of mediating the imagination' (Englund 2007: 297).

In terms of methodology, the paper argues that the exploration of such themes calls for the combination of both discursive (e.g. the culinary metaphors used by people when talking about persons and/or witchcraft) and non-discursive (culinary practices and ritual performance) approaches since, as it will be made clear, knowledge of the self, others and the world emerges to a great extent through culinary imagery and practices.

I shall begin with eating.

## From culinary metaphors to the political economy of persons Cooking, eating, and exchanging

The Batié, like all Grassfielders of West Cameroon, make a sharp distinction between swallowing with and without chewing: *pfuo* and *ndzə*.<sup>4</sup> *Ndzə* has positive connotations and refers to 'good eating', i.e. nourishing and unifying: it connotes the well-being procured by sharing and eating food, cooked in the compound, that is, to socialized eating (such food includes domesticated meat such as poultry and vegetarian staples such as *fufu*). A man who succeeds/ inherits his father is called: *ndzə dyə* '[him who] swallows the house', meaning: he who inherits all his material and immaterial assets. *Pfuo*, by contrast is, prototypically, the antisocial and violent way a hunter eats since he kills/ slaughters game and eats alone in the bush. Chewing is also the way witches/sorcerers eat, thus the Batié say of a bewitched person: *dɔ pfuo a*, 'dɔ-witchcraft [the vampire-owl] has chewed him'.<sup>5</sup> Only when I was introduced to witchcraft beliefs did I understand the reason why some people with whom I shared a meal either laughed at me or seemed annoyed by the way I was eating: chewing almost every kind of food

I was offered, I was perceived either as a child or as a ‘bad person’, if not a sorcerer.<sup>6</sup> But there is much more to culinary metaphors/practices than the ways of eating.

In order to fully understand the culinary metaphors and practices deployed by the inhabitants of the Cameroon Grassfields, we must first delineate the gendered division of labor. Besides being otherworldly (see subsequent sections) (Argenti 2001 and 2011 for Oku; Diduk 2001 for the Kedjom), neonates in the Cameroon Grassfields are also considered androgynous (Tsékénis 2015: 340-341). Up to the age of approximately eight or nine Batié boys and girls perform both ‘male’ and ‘female’ work. Thus, boys and girls alike: fetch water, gather firewood, sweep the yard and on school holidays help in the fields. Moreover, children do not follow sexualized (eating) taboos. However, as they grow older and reach puberty, boys and girls comply with the gendered division of labor.<sup>7</sup> Therefore the gendering of children begins by performing proper (gendered) activities, gradually leaving behind their androgynous (or at least ambiguous) state. In everyday life, men and women acquire their gender by performing ‘male’ or ‘female’ agricultural activities. The products of these activities are gendered as well and persons embody them. This is exemplified particularly in ritualized marriage exchanges where men give ‘male’ products and in so doing reveal their (‘male’) part (simultaneously eclipsing their female part) and, by contrast, the women’s ‘female’ part (Tsékénis 2015: 340-342). Conversely, women give ‘female’ products and in so doing reveal both their gender and the men’s ‘male’ part. Therefore, not only is gender performed, but in fact, it is also elicited by others. The person is not the sole author of its acts but is somehow also compelled to act by others, therefore ‘revealing’ its gendered self as well as the relations of which it is composed.

As one could expect, ideas/practices of procreation and gestation are also imbued with culinary imagery. Batié women describe that during sex the husband provides his wife with ‘water’ *shyə* while women provide ‘blood’ *cyə* in order to ‘cook’ *lom* a child. Batié women use the same verb to denote the measuring of ingredients necessary for the preparation of a meal and for the ‘cooking of a child’.<sup>8</sup> Gestation, like procreation, is talked about and experienced in terms of cooking. Just as the right measure, mixing, and cooking of ‘water’ and ‘blood’ is necessary for procreation, so too the mixing of these elements is essential to produce a ‘good meal’, and for the proper gestation of the fetus. It should therefore come as no surprise that the term for marriage – *lom ndyə* – lit. ‘cooking [inside the] house’ – bears a literal and a metaphorical meaning: in the first sense it refers to the cooking of food; in the second sense, it refers to the ‘marital or conjugal cooking’. In the literal sense, children (persons) are the products of their mother’s cooking. However, we should bear in mind that the processed food includes both male and female products and as such, cooking, while being a fundamentally female activity incorporates the (agricultural) work of women as well as men.<sup>9</sup>

As already suggested, the use of culinary imagery is restricted neither to the domestic domain nor to everyday life but also pervades the ritual realm. Thus, for example, a newborn child is incorporated into his father’s compound by being ‘eaten’ during a birth ritual called

'plantains of the umbilical cord of the child' while *lom ndyɛ* does not only denote the conjugal bond, since it refers to the sum total (ritualized) marriage exchanges. Culinary imagery and practices therefore extend well beyond individuals and include groups of various size (Tsékénis 2015: 341-343). To sum up, parents are seen as 'cooking' children, newborns are incorporated into the household by being 'eaten' and throughout their lives persons exchange and share food, in both mundane and ritual contexts. In so doing, they constitute (and de-constitute) others revealing at the same time the nature of their relations. Culinary ingredients and food, as gendered (embodied) parcels of persons/groups/bodies and persons as part of groups transform other persons/groups/bodies. Food therefore appears as a means, which, because it is cooked, exchanged, and ingested, has the power to transform others and make them act.

## The political economy of persons

The reader cannot but have noticed how easily one switches from notions such as 'cooking' and 'eating' to others such as producing, consuming or working. The culinary imagery and practices deployed by Grassfielders can be easily substituted for a vocabulary and practices relating to political economy. Thus, one can either speak of the cooking or the production of persons. This cooking/production requires both food (literal sense of the term) and sex (metaphorical sense of the term); food, in turn, incorporates the work/production of husband (farming, herding, trading, hunting) and wife (farming, herding); but procreation requires marriage exchanges, which mobilize multiple groups of relatives and/or friends; finally, 'eating' may refer either to the ingestion of food or of persons (recall the ritual ingestion of the newborn): as we shall see in the next section, a bewitched person is said to have been 'eaten [chewed]' by the sorcerer/witch, in which case 'eating' becomes mere consumption. In this context, terms such as production, reproduction and consumption may refer for example to agricultural activities, as well as to the production and reproduction of persons, products and social relations. Therefore, not only are these idioms easily interchangeable, but they also cover a wide semantic field.<sup>10</sup>

These features – high interchangeability and 'semantic volatility' – explain, in part, the inherent and widely acknowledged ambiguity of witchcraft discourses. This ambiguity is further doubled with ambivalence, in our case, because of the existence of another idiom which provides a kind of conceptual bridge between the culinary idiom and the language of political economy. Indeed, men sometimes use an ambivalent vocabulary when talking about marriage (Tsékénis 2000: 75-84; also Brain 1976: 119 and Pradelles de Latour 1991: 22, for the western and the southern Bangwa respectively). Thus, the word *doŋ* 'price/cost' can refer to both a woman and a commodity: 'bride price' is *doŋ məjwiɛ*, lit. 'price/cost [of the] woman'. However, first: Batié men say that they 'exchange' *kwiapnyɛ* women, a slightly different term

from the one referring to the exchange of goods *kwiap*; second: there exists a specific and exclusive expression for ‘paying the price of a bride’: *ηku məjwiε*. Rather than suggesting an equation of marriage with a commercial transaction (and of women with commodities) then, what could be labelled the ‘trading idiom’ used by men, and amongst men exclusively, must be seen as a means of differentiating men’s from women’s perspectives on marriage, expressing gender complementarity. This link between the ‘trading idiom’ and gender becomes even more obvious when one recalls that long-distance trade was – and still is to a great extent – an exclusively male activity.

Despite the fact that marriage can by no means be equated to a commercial transaction any more than women can be compared with commodities, this trading idiom further enhances the inherent ambiguity of discourses on, and practices of personhood with ambivalence. Not surprisingly perhaps, this ambiguity and ambivalence, which many scholars also label ‘in-determinacy of meaning’ (Geschiere 1998; Englund 2007: 296-297; Niehaus 2005), is also reflected in witchcraft discourses, which draw heavily on both culinary metaphors and a lexicon pertaining to political economy.

### **... and from the political economy of persons to the political economy of witchcraft**

#### ***D#*: the vampire-owl or: witchcraft as anti-cooking**

There is no better way to introduce the reader to the occult world of witchcraft than to narrate the stories that Grassfields teenagers tell each other during the long evenings of the rainy season:

A head of a household had several wives. His first wife, who had given birth to four children, was envious of his second wife, whose children were prettier. She transformed into an owl, so as to drink their blood. The children began to lose weight and got sick. Their mother took them to a healer and then to the hospital but nobody could cure them. Her sister advised her: ‘There is a reason why your children are losing weight, you should pay a visit to another healer’. The women reported this advice to her husband who decided to consult a diviner. The latter consulted the spider (which mediates between God and the humans), which revealed that the children were being ‘eaten’ (‘munched’) by his first spouse. The husband would not believe the diviner. The latter replied: ‘Soon you will be given the proof of my sayings’. The following night, the husband dreamed of being seized by nightmares and fever. He woke up with a start and asked his first wife to bring him a glass of water. When she handed him the glass he noticed that drops of blood were dripping from her lips. He

said nothing. At the crack of dawn he paid a visit to the diviner, seeking his advice. The latter replied: 'Cover the window of your first wife's house with a wired fence and should something abnormal happen, come and see me'. The husband complied. During the night, an owl attempted to pass through the window, got caught into the wire fence and struggled to liberate itself. Frightened by this unusual noise, the second wife rushed outside her house alerting the neighbors. The husband asked his sons to call for his first wife. When they entered her bedroom she was in a coma, moaning on her bed. The healer, who had been called upon, lighted a fire and drove out the owl. Immediately, the woman got up saying: 'What has been hurting me so much?' Her husband, raging mad, publically accused her of being *du*. She pleaded her innocence, but no one would believe her. She was forced to return to her family. After a while the owl, weakened by its wounds, reappeared one night in the compound. The children immediately reported its presence to their father, who killed it with a wooden stick. It was later reported that the witch had died simultaneously in her father's compound' (Pradelles de Latour 1991: 72; my translation).

I shall skip the contingent aspects of witchcraft accusations (actual relations between accuser and accused – kinship, social category, etc., how witchcraft cases/affairs evolve according to context, etc.) and focus instead on the more abstract, formal aspects relevant to the idioms they mobilize.

*Du* witchcraft relies on the idea that every person has an alter ego which, from the moment of birth and until death, is said to wander on the river banks, inside the dark galleries formed by raffia palm trees. The Batié call this alter ego: *jiè*. Although the relation of a person to its *jiè* weakens as time passes by it is never fully severed. The person, at one moment in time, simply stops being aware of this bond. *Du* witchcraft is activated through the identification – most of the time unconscious – of the person with its *jiè*. This explains the witch-spouse claiming her innocence: she drunk the blood of her co-wife's children without 'being aware' of it. Her alter ego, in this instance a vampire-owl, acted *in absentia*.

The vampire-owl transgresses the domestic domain and eats/consumes the product of the 'marital cooking'. *Du*-witchcraft is therefore anti-cooking, abolishing the very foundation of production and reproduction.

But there is another, more imperceptible, disruptive effect of *du*-witchcraft. In the story mentioned before, the healer fights the vampire-owl with fire. When this nocturnal bird howls hidden in the trees, along the creeks nearby the compound, women usually react by throwing burning charcoal towards it, shouting: 'We owe nothing to anyone, the bride price of each woman of this compound has been paid'.<sup>11</sup> Here too, *du*-witchcraft is seen as a blow to the conjugal bond and, aside from that, to the relation of affinity, itself founded on exchanges. Seen from this perspective *du*-witchcraft is also anti-exchange.

## **Siè: a coven of cannibal-witches or: witchcraft as anti-trading**

The son of a king was the owner of a lucrative coffee plantation the profits of which he had invested in the building of a beautiful house roofed with sheets of metal, while he had also undertaken the construction of a department store in town. Everybody wondered where he would get the money to make such an investment. At this very moment, some providential friends lent him an important sum of money and, from that moment on, on the first day of every week, he would leave his compound and join the members of his association who gathered near a murky waterfall. During the rest of the week, while cultivating his fields, he would send his children away, hand over his cutlass to ghost-like figures only he could see, and put them to work. Once his department store was finished his friends kindly asked him to repay them. As he was unable to give back the money, they asked him to deliver instead his first born child which was destined to be eaten by the other members of the association. He then realized that he had been caught in the coven of *siè* but it was too late and he was forced to deliver one of his sons. When they asked for a second one, he refused. When he got back home he said to his wives: 'I don't want to see anybody'. Loaded with despair, he took a rope and hanged himself behind his house. His family buried him far away from his house, aside a fence, and did not mourn for him. Every night, white butterflies flitted above his grave. His second son died after a while. The *siè* adepts were momentarily replete, and the white butterflies disappeared (Pradelles de Latour 1991: 74-75; my translation).

The accusation of belonging to the *siè*-coven is the most daunting of all. It is directed *post mortem* towards men who die under strange circumstances and, in life, towards wealthy and powerful men whose children die consecutively. Such an accusation rests upon the equation: dead children = occult acquisition of wealth. It is said that a *siè*-sorcerer is never replete, his insatiable appetite compels him to sacrifice his own children. This appalling transaction is the sign of both insatiable desire and parental failure. Contrary to *du*-witches, *siè*-sorcerers cannot be killed with fire and have the power of clairvoyance. Again, contrary to *du*-witches, *siè*-sorcerers are held fully responsible for the death of their children. *Siè*-witchcraft is obviously anti-trading.

It is clear by now that witchcraft discourses, like conceptualizations and practices of personhood, make extensive use of culinary imagery and a vocabulary of political economy, and that these terms refer to both the material and immaterial production and reproduction of persons, goods and social relations.

## Instantiations of witchcraft

The witchcraft stories Grassfields teenagers tell each other sound misleadingly parochial in that, as I will try to show, witchcraft discourses have the ability to 'bring the remote close' – therefore 'shrinking' space – and accommodating historical changes (Argenti 2007; Austen 1993; Shaw 2002) – often bringing the past into the present (Argenti 2006, 2007). In so doing, witchcraft discourses function as a 'glocal' idiom, making sense of modern, global, remote, and abstract forces in local terms (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxii; 1999: 286; Geschiere 1997, 2014; Piot 1999; Shaw 2002).

## The Atlantic slave trade and colonialism Cannibal-witchcraft and the slave trade

One can illustrate both the ability of witchcraft discourses to incorporate historical changes and to make sense of remote and abstract phenomena by drawing on analogies between the practices of the Atlantic slave-trade and forced labor under German colonial rule on the one hand, and specific forms of witchcraft discourses unfolding in colonial and postcolonial Cameroon on the other.

The southern Grassfields fed the Atlantic slave-trade first via Duala (from 1614 to 1670) then via Calabar (1820-1830 up to the early twentieth century) by the beginning of the seventeenth century (Warnier 1985: 151 and 1989: 9). The majority of the slaves sold from the Grassfields in the precolonial era were not captured as prisoners of war. Rather, they were abducted for sale by elders from their own kin (Warnier 1989),<sup>12</sup> hence the name given by Warnier to this figure: the Judas.

Cannibal witchcraft is widespread in contemporary Cameroon Grassfields. It is called *siè* in Batié, *süe* in Bangwa (Pradelles de Latour 1991: 75-77); *nzo* in Bangangté (Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: 109); *tvu'* in the Grassfields village Wimbun of Tabenken (Pool 1994: 150-67); *kəvuŋ* in Oku (Argenti 2007: 109). Cannibal-witches are said to band together in *njangi* associations. They offer their family members to be 'eaten' by the group.<sup>13</sup> The victims were traded in exchange for goods imported by the Europeans: guns, gunpowder, beads, etc. during the precolonial era; and all sorts of European consumption goods that flooded into the sub-continent during the colonial era and in the subsequent decades. This trade in human flesh is said to generally occur in the forest (see narratives above). The eaten person does not die outright but rather weakens gradually, becoming frail, confused, and sickly. When juxtaposing the practices of the slave trade to witchcraft discourses in a chart, it can be seen that cannibal-witch discourse is a metaphor of the slave-trade and at the same time that the cannibal-witch stands as a metaphoric figure of the Judas:<sup>14</sup>



<b>Atlantic slave-trade</b>	<b>Cannibal-witchcraft</b>
<p>1. The Judas sold his own kin into slavery in exchange for European prestige goods (rifles, beads, gunpowder, etc.)</p> <p>2. The slave owner would grow fat from the wealth he earned from his slaves</p> <p>3. European slave traders were widely understood to be buying slaves as food. Ship's captains were conceived of as amphibious creatures that took the slaves back to their undersea redoubts where they would eat them</p> <p>4. The victim continued to live in the compound for a time after being sold, unaware that arrangements were being made for his abduction</p>	<p>1. The cannibal-witch sells his kin to his co-members in exchange for European consumption goods</p> <p>2. The witch fattens/grows wealthy in equal proportion to the wasting away or impoverishment of the victim</p> <p>3. The cannibal-witches consume their victims, typically in the other world of the night</p> <p>4. The victim still roams for a time about the village after being feasted upon unaware of his/her tragic fate</p>

### **Famla, colonialism and forced labour**

In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new form of witchcraft discourse known as *nyongo* emerged among the coastal people of Cameroon (Ardener 1996 [1970]). According to Bakweri beliefs *nyongo* adepts were believed to sell their close kin to (*nyongo*) associations in exchange for goods. Those sold were believed to be dead but were actually being spirited away (e.g., 'zombified') by the other members of the coven to work on an invisible plantation (Ardener 1996 [1970]: 248; Argenti 2007: 105; Warnier 1989). These witches were said to carry their zombie victims in lorries to Mount Kupe.<sup>15</sup> The Bakweri apparently invented this (then) new form of witchcraft belief to accommodate their (then) changing economic environment, eg. the introduction of plantation economy by the Germans; the exactions of forced labor of the

colonial era under German rule, followed by the British and the French who replaced them after the First World War. These discourses later spread into the Hinterlands, reaching the Southern Grassfields toward the end of the colonial era (c.a. 1950's) (Geschiere 1994: 78). Adepts of these new associations in the Southern Grassfields were said to gather in *Fepla*, a residential quarter of Bafoussam that suffered rapid urbanization in the early 1950's, hence, *famla*, the term which designates this kind of witch association. In the subsequent decades, *famla* spread to the main urban centers of the country and especially to Douala and Yaoundé.<sup>16</sup> As with the Bakweri *nyongo*, *famla* adepts are believed to sell their close kin to these associations in exchange for great wealth. Again, as with *nyongo*, those sold appear to die, but, in fact, they have been spirited away by the other members of the coven to work on an invisible plantation in the Manenguba mountains (de Rosny 1981: 87-111; Warnier 1989: 26).

Zombie and cannibal-witch discourses coexist in contemporary Cameroon Grassfields. But while the former remain a local/regional idiom, the latter appear in both urban and rural settings.<sup>17</sup> As a result, both continuities and discontinuities in witchcraft discourses can be observed.

Indeed, *famla* discourses build on cannibal-witch discourses and at the same time they encapsulate Bakweri features (*nyongo*) taking into account and addressing the introduction of plantation economy and the traumatic experience of forced labor. These discourses reveal the fact that the experiences of slavery and forced labour are perceived by Grassfields inhabitants in similar terms (Argenti 2007: 288 n. 27; see also Geschiere 1994: 78; Warnier 1989: 26-27).

At the same time however, witchcraft discourses account for historical contingencies: *famla* as a metamorphosis of cannibal witchcraft had to account for the fact that unlike victims of cannibal witches, *famla*'s 'zombies' did not disappear ('eaten' by the cannibal witches) but eventually returned back to their villages.<sup>18</sup> Hence, *famla*'s victims are said to work as zombies on invisible plantations keeping the possibility of their coming back alive. *Famla* beliefs also account for rapid urbanization and the spread of market capitalism in urban settings. Contemporary Grassfields imaginary has therefore expanded beyond the mysterious and mystical world of the forest – the conventional *topos* of witchcraft – to the cities (Argenti 2001: 84; Pradelles de Latour 1991: 76).

## **Allegories of capitalism**

The analogies between witchcraft beliefs/discourses and the market have been noticed and documented by many authors working in Cameroon (Geschiere 1997 [1992]; Nyamnjoh 2002: 122-123; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998: 5; Pool 1994: chapter 6) as well as in other parts of Africa (Austen 1993; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998: 5-6; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Ciekawy and Geschiere, for example, notice that 'in many parts of the continent, people com-

monly use expressions such as ‘the market of sorcery’ (1998: 5). Interestingly enough, there is such a place in Batié, a community of the southern Grassfields where I conducted fieldwork in the mid-1990s: *sim siè* – literally: the ‘market of *siè*-witchcraft’, is situated in the heart of the polity, nearby the king’s palace. The Batié therefore, like many Grassfielders (see Nyamnjoh 2002 for Bum people; Poole 1994: 159 for the Winbum people), make a direct (linguistic) link between witchcraft and the market. But what are the analogies between witchcraft and the market sustaining such an identification?

As the reader may have noticed, witches and sorcerers belong to the nocturnal and secret kind: indeed, vampire-owls raid the compounds at night and, more relevant to the witchcraft/market analogy, adepts of the *siè* and *famla* covens hold secret, nocturnal meetings.<sup>19</sup> One can easily perceive in witchcraft beliefs three fundamental properties of market capitalism: secrecy, invisibility and anonymity.

Like capitalism, *siè* and *famla* offer opportunities only to a limited minority. Like global capitalism, the pursuit of wealth and power by occult means enhances self-seeking individuals at the expense of the household and the wider community: it is only by marginalizing family and the collective interest that *siè* and *famla* adepts can attain personal success (the acquisition of power and wealth) of the type studied by Rowlands (1995) and Warnier (1993: 163-196) in the Grassfields and among the diasporic Grassfielders (Nyamnjoh 2002: 123). But, again like consumer capitalism, *siè* and *famla* adepts are caught in ‘an eternal cycle of indebtedness’ and insatiable desire and ‘become ultimately consumed themselves’ (Nyamnjoh 2002: 123).

Witchcraft discourses therefore portray a kind of negative political economy where human (and non-human) agency and subjectivity reign undomesticated, to borrow Francis Nyamnjoh’s phraseology (Nyamnjoh 2002). It is a world in which ‘short-term individual acquisitiveness subordinates the long-term reproduction of the social and cosmic order’ (Austen 1993: 96). This reflects a kind of ‘moral economy’ diametrically opposed to the one proffered by capitalist and neo-liberal cosmology.<sup>20</sup> In order to better understand how and why witchcraft beliefs instantiate such values, then, we must turn to the West African cosmologies underpinning witchcraft beliefs, that is: the interrelated notions of a ‘second world’ and a ‘zero-sum universe’, which remain central themes right through contemporary Africa in both rural and urban settings.<sup>21</sup>

## **Grassfields imagination of the ‘second world’ and the ‘zero-sum universe’**

I shall begin by fleshing out the rather abstract idea of the ‘second world’, then sketch some properties of the more concrete ‘zero-sum universe’, and at the same time illustrate how these notions intertwine through different instantiations of witchcraft.

In order to grasp how Grassfielders imagine the second world, one must delineate the local cosmology and topography. Batié 'compounds' (*mbe*) like in most parts of the Cameroon Grassfields, slope down from grassy hilltops to rivers flowing through forest-galleries. [see Figure 1. The compound of *Dzə Tanyə Tenk<sup>h</sup>hə* in Batié]. One accesses the compound from the top of the hill. The women's houses cluster around the husband's house, while their fields stretch on the right and the left side of the 'descending alley' (*kwɔ bu?*), which ends in a small courtyard. The house of the family's head is built on the right side of the courtyard; further left is the house of the ancestors, where each of the lineage successors' and their mothers' skulls are buried. Further down is located the tree where the 'god of the compound' resides.

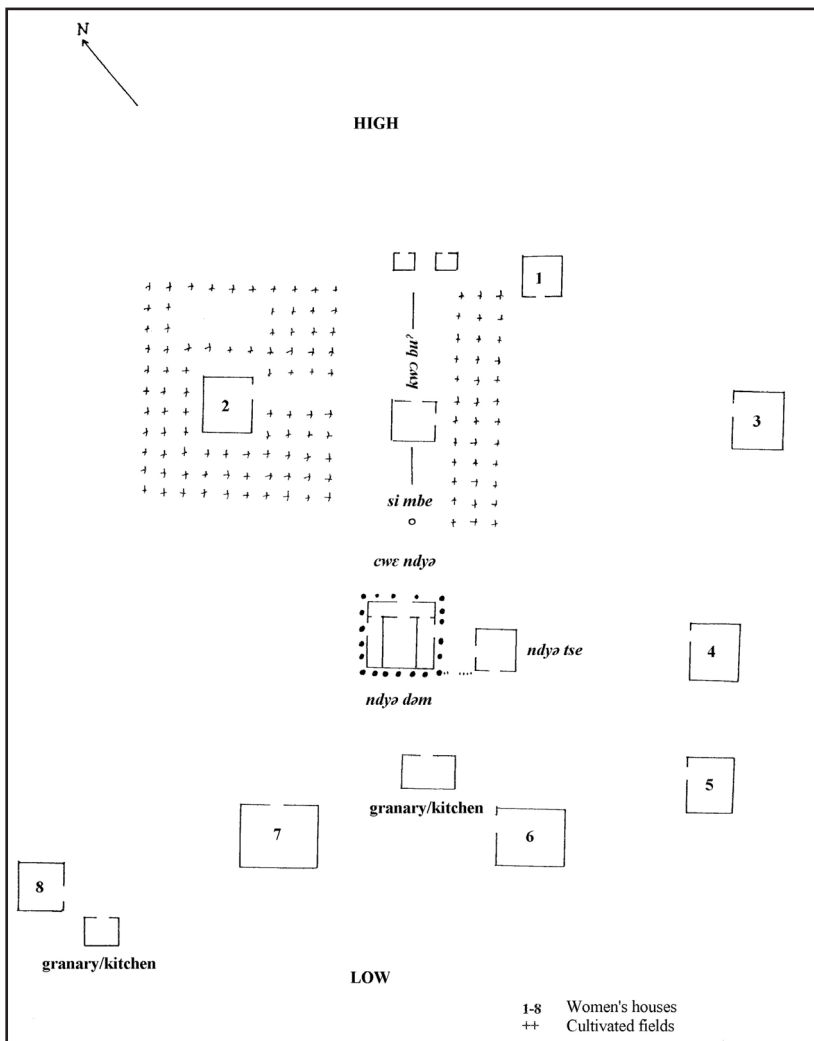


Figure 1. The compound of *Dzə Tanyə Tenk<sup>h</sup>hə* in Batié

Compounds, as inhabited places, are conceptually opposed, both in symbolic and topographical terms, to the 'bush' *gu* (high/above) and the 'rivers' *kwə* (low/below). Compounds, where human activities take place, are differentiated from spaces where human activities occur only temporarily during daylight (*gu*), and spaces inhabited by ancestors and benign or malevolent spirits (*kwə*). However, *gu* and *kwə* are not conceived of in absolute dual terms. First, *gu* does not refer only to the top of the hills and its immediate surroundings where human activities take place, but is to be understood as the outer limit separating the compound – permanently inhabited place – from the outside, the unknown and dangerous world of the forest. In that sense, *gu* is a kind of extension of the wild into the compound – a liminal space. Likewise, spaces such as *kwə* are not strictly restricted to the lower areas surrounding the compound, but extend to the earth beneath the surface of the inhabited space. Second, as natural boundaries, streams evoke the borders of the polity and are conceived of as transitory spaces facilitating the passage between the forest and the village (see also Argenti 2010: 231 and 2011: 280 for Oku). Third, the Batié speak of the 'ground (*nyɛ*) of the day' and the 'ground of the night' as two aspects of the same place, while the night/day or dark/light opposition is equally expressed in terms of above/below ground (Argenti 2011: 289 n. 31 for Oku; Diduk 2001: 32 for the Kedjom). 'Night' therefore does not refer only to actual nighttime but, more substantially, to a 'second world' conceived as coeval with the 'world of the day.'<sup>22</sup>

The zero-sum universe, in which the world is conceived of as containing only a finite and fixed amount of wealth or resources, is a corollary of the second world (or vice-versa). Paraphrasing Rowlands and Warnier, we could define it as a world where 'what someone possesses can be appropriated only at the expense of someone else' (Rowlands and Warnier 1988: 123). The belief, already mentioned above, according to which every person has an alter ego and how this relates to notions of conception and human reproduction allows one to grasp the workings of both the zero-sum universe and the second world.

The alter ego of a person is materialized by an earthworm, or a subterranean snake called *mobiap nyə* 'snake of the backwater'.<sup>23</sup> These chthonian creatures, which are metaphorically amphibious – 'swimming,' as it were, beneath the surface of the inhabited spaces, where the watery realm of *kwə* extends to – are said to venture in pairs like 'brothers' into the compounds at night. One of them eventually enters a woman's house, while the other returns back to the 'other world' (see Argenti 2011: 280 and Pradelles de Latour 1991: 55-56 for similar beliefs in Oku and eastern Bangwa respectively). In the act of giving birth a woman actually separates two 'kin' and is perceived as wresting souls from the 'other world'. Indeed, in a cosmology based upon the premises of two parallel worlds and a zero-sum universe, birth is merely a death seen from the perspective of the other world: what is the birth of a child to his alter ego if not the death of a kinsman? (Argenti 2011: 283)

Likewise, in the seemingly mundane activity of farming a woman breaches the surface of the ground every working day, transgressing the boundaries between the two worlds, and

reaps a harvest by extracting it from the 'other world' (Argenti 2011: 280). The production of food and children in a zero-sum universe, where one's profit is gained at someone else's loss, inevitably implies the transgression of boundaries and the incurring of a debt.

Cannibal witchcraft (*siè* and *famla*) and vampirism (*du*-witchcraft) are perfect instantiations of a zero-sum universe. The vampire-owl increases its life-force at the expense of her co-wife's children who get sick and eventually die, while *siè* and *famla* adepts acquire wealth by selling their own kin and even their children. While in the case of *famla* and *nyongo*, adepts sell their kin in exchange for wealth (in the 'real world'), and those sold appear to die but in fact are spirited away by the other members of the coven to work on invisible plantations (in the 'other world'). Here too, witchcraft, like the market 'conjures up the idea of an opening, a leakage through which people as resources are withdrawn from the community and disappear into the outer world' (Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998: 5).

To return to the culinary metaphors, we can contrast the woman who takes a life from the other world and 'cooks' children – a pro-social activity equated with the food she cultivates and cooks that is swallowed –, with witches who take life from the real world (world of the day) like (male) hunters do (and as warriors once did), 'chewing' their victims like the hunter chews the meat he has caught and slaughtered in the forest (and as the warrior was said to have 'eaten' his vanquished enemy), outside the domestic sphere, through violence.

## Conclusion: a 'gastronomic' knowledge of the world

The culinary metaphors examined in this article are not specific to the Grassfields or even to Cameroon, but constitute a fundamental feature of the post-colonial state in Africa (Mbembe 1985; Bayart 2006 [1989], although it must be noticed that the emphasis, in this context, is on eating/consuming.<sup>24</sup> The Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe is probably the first scholar who used the metaphor of hunger, linking its pervasiveness to food shortage in post-independent Africa (Mbembe 1985) and arguing that it has turned the state into 'a vast space where one lives and expresses a *gastronomy of poverty*' (*op. cit.*, p. 125; emphasis mine).<sup>25</sup> French political scientist Jean-Francois Bayart developed Mbembe's idea in his book *The state in Africa (L'état en Afrique, 2006 [1989])* which he characteristically subtitled *The Politics of the belly (La politique du ventre)*, an expression often heard in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. Cameroon's political life is so imbued with the metaphor of eating that Bayart calls it a 'total social phenomenon' in Mauss' sense (Mauss 1990 [1950]) (Bayart 2006 [1989]: 12). Therefore, not only is the desire for food seen as a form of hunger, but also the quest for wealth and power.<sup>26</sup>

What could be seen as a parochial phenomenon is therefore a nation-wide reality and even an African one; one that is rooted in a specific historical experience. My purpose in this

paper, however, was rather modest as I only wanted to show, first: that in order to grasp the complexities of personhood and witchcraft in the particular cultural context of the Cameroon Grassfields, one must both decipher the culinary idiom and ‘follow the food’; second, that Grassfielders easily switch from the culinary idiom to a lexicon pertaining to political economy; third, that this interchangeability and the ‘semantic volatility’ of these languages explain, if only in part, their ambiguity and ambivalence. They also account for the genius of witches for ‘making the language of intimate, interpersonal affect speak of more abstract social forces’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 286), and accommodating historical changes.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, witchcraft stories/discourses which may sound ‘parochial’ or even ‘exotic’ are in fact (also) ‘an aspect of experiencing and imagining the world, comparable to other modalities of mediation’ (Englund 2007: 298) – albeit gastronomic ones!

## NOTES

1 I am very grateful to Nicolas Argenti for his comments and suggestions for revision.

2 The Cameroon Grassfields area roughly extends to the present North West and South West provinces of Cameroon. Batié is a polity of the southern Grassfields. The bulk of the Batié material presented in this paper was collected during fieldwork conducted from 1995 to 1997 and a one month fieldtrip in 2011. References to other works of scholars working in this region of Africa are introduced in order to complete my ethnography and to enhance and generalize my argument.

3 Witchcraft discourses/beliefs and notions/practices of personhood as well as the idioms within which they are couched and the realities they portray both shape and are shaped by history (see next sections).

4 This distinction is common to most African languages, and Bantu languages in particular. The distinction holds equally in Oku (Argenti 2007: 110-111 and personal communication) and Mankon (Nyamnjoh & Rowlands 2013: 145).

5 Similar expressions are to be found in many parts of the continent of course. For example, among the Maka monetization has altered the relations between generations with the young men complaining about ‘the elders ‘eating’ the bridewealth’ (Geschiere 1997 [1992]: 350).

6 Chewing one’s fufu leads to outbursts of hilarity all around and being called a small child.

7 Boys help in animal husbandry (medium livestock: goats principally but also pigs) and help their father in the maintenance of the compound’s structures (houses, fences), while girls usually feed poultry (small livestock), help their mothers in the fields and may sometimes cook the evening meal on their mother’s hearth.

8 The term for 'semen' is the same as 'water' (*shyə*) while the term for 'blood' (*cyə*) is almost the same as the one for 'palm oil' *naʔ cyə* (see also Brain 1972: 59 for western Bangwa; Feldman-Savelsberg 1999: note 9, p. 211 for Bangangté).

9 Furthermore one can notice that 'blood', the 'female reproductive ingredient' is strongly associated – not only linguistically but also sensually and visually – to palm oil. Palm oil, in turn, is provided by the husband through trading. It seems therefore that each gender contains the other, and this, at every stage of production and reproduction.

10 One cannot but notice, beside the ambiguity of witchcraft discourse, ambivalent interpretations towards both power and wealth. Rowlands and Warnier notice that 'sorcery and power are perceived as the two sides of the same coin. As a result, power is ambiguous' (Rowlands and Warnier 1988:121) while as regard to wealth 'the public recognition of personal possession of socialized occult powers is an integral component in the evaluation of success and achievement in contemporary Cameroon' (*ibid.*, p. 129). See also the ambivalent notions of *msa* and *uwung* among the Bum studied by Francis Nyamnjoh (Nyamnjoh 2002: 121). Among the Maka witchcraft is perceived as a weapon of the weak against the state and its projects whereas the villagers themselves see it as an indispensable form of support of the new elites.' (Geschiere 1997: 10). Witchcraft discourses, Geschiere goes on: 'express (...) both the desire to level inequalities and the ambition to accumulate power and wealth' (*ibid.*). In South Africa, Issak Niehaus notices: 'stories of witches and zombies capture the desire to dominate' but at the same time: 'Discourses about zombies also capture the intense fear of excessive domination' (Niehaus 2005: 197).

11 This is one of the rare occasions were women adopt the 'trading idiom', usually used by men and amongst men exclusively. But it must be noticed that, in this instance, women talk on behalf of the household – if not of their husband, who actually stands for the whole compound.

12 Warnier (1989: 10) estimates that 0.5 per cent of the Grassfields total population – three hundred thousand – left its homeland in caravans which represents no less than fifteen thousand individuals per year.

13 These cannibal-witch associations replicate the ordinary saving associations common throughout the littoral and the Hinterland known as *njangi* in pidgin, tontines in Francophone Cameroon Grassfields; but while the members of the later contribute in money or gift in kind, *famla* adepts contribute in kin.

14 Analogies 1 and 4 are elicited by juxtaposing practices of the slave trade with the cannibal-witchcraft discourses. To these I added analogies 2 and 3 which further enhance the argument (Argenti, personal communication). Further analogies in other sub-Saharan countries and on a continental scale can be found in Austen 1993: 92; de Rosny 1981: 93-95; MacGaffey 1986; Miller 1988: 4-5, 201-202, 674.

15 100 km to the north of Douala, Cameroon's major city and economic center.

16 Bafoussam is a chiefdom of the Southern Grassfields and the current capital of the West Province.



17 According to Argenti, the reason of the prevalence of cannibal-witch discourse is due to the fact that they focus on the experience of slavery which marked Grassfielders as these 'produced' slaves while communities to the south of the Grassfields and along the coast were middleman societies, *buying and selling slaves* (Argenti 2007, 114).

18 Forced laborers on the German plantations on the coast were sent back by the German managers when an epidemic broke out on the plantation. This had the consequence of spreading the disease in the hinterland villages as the sick laborers returned home. As they most often died soon after returning, the local villagers understood them to have been bewitched on the plantations.

19 Among the Maka, *shumbu* is the withes' nightly meeting (Geschiere 1997: 40sq.).

20 The moral aspects of witchcraft have been underlined by many scholars, beginning with the seminal study of Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]). In the witchcraft stories Grassfielders tell each other, one cannot but notice that *du*-witchcraft is triggered by jealousy while *siè*-witchcraft originates in greed.

21 For the notions of the 'second world' (and alternatively: 'invisible world' or 'other world') in the Cameroon Grassfields see Argenti 2011: 281, 283, 289 and Nyamnjoh 2002: 119; for the Duala of Cameroon see de Rosny 1981: 59-63; for central Africa: MacGaffey 1986 and Miller 1985: 4-5; for Zaïre: De Boeck 2002. For the 'zero-sum' universe see Argenti 2001: esp. p. 79 sq., 2007: 116 and 2011: 283; Nyamnjoh 2002: 119-120; Rowlands and Warnier 1988: 123; for South Africa: Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 289.

22 '(...) the ancestral afterworld is located beneath the earth (...) the mystical world more generally is portrayed as a plane parallel but invisible to mundane existence' (Diduk 2001: 32). Not surprisingly witchcraft, being a 'business of the night/dark/below', belongs to a world 'lying behind the daily world' (Pradelles de Latour 1995: 604). See also *msa* among the Bum (Nyamnjoh 1985: 15; cited in Geschiere 1997: 257 n. 28).

23 I was not able to witness any of these creatures during my sixteen months stay in Batié, but the description given to me by Batié men and women fit the one mentioned by Argenti as a creature 'which burrows in the ground and resembles a large black worm' and which he categorizes as probably the West African blind snake *laptotyphlops debilis* (Argenti 2011: 280 n. 15). Brain mentions a similar belief in western Bangwa (Brain 1972: 60). In Bandjoun, these are called *mu nok* (lit. 'child snake') and it is equally believed that each child has an *alter ego* living in the forest-galleries (Malaquais 2002: 98 n. 12). Women potters in Babessi (in the northeastern Grassfields) portray snakes with arms on their pots, and when asked by Argenti why they did so, they told him that snakes do have arms, but that they know how to hide them from humans (Argenti 1999: 279). This ambiguous, doubled representation perhaps suggests a conceptual slippage between the categories of the snake and the mole.

24 I place "consumption" next to "eating" advisedly since it has become, at least in the Euroamerican imagination and since the end of the twentieth century, the prime site for the cre-

ation of value and identity. This has resulted in a concomitant eclipse of production (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000: 294-295). This, of course, has impacted Africa as well.

25 Mbembe writes: 'Africans have never eaten as badly as we have since the independences' (Mbembe 1985: 122). Not surprisingly, perhaps, in an environment dominated by the fear of hunger, eating has become a fixation that takes on political dimensions.

26 Bayart records the following significations for hunger: the situation of food shortage, (cf. Mbembe 1985); but, more often, it describes practices of accumulation which pave the way for social distinction; it is also used as a sexual metaphor; 'belly' refers to stoutness, a sign of power and to lineage, a kin group with political influence sometimes even on a national level; last, and maybe more relevant for my argument, the belly is where the occult forces are located, and these are a prerequisite if one wants to acquire wealth and power (Bayart 2006 [1989]: 12; see also Rowlands and Warnier 1988).

27 Of course witchcraft discourses do not only translate 'global' phenomena into 'local' terms but also enable people to imagine intermediate scales of reality. Thus, for example witchcraft discourses bring into play multiple cleavages of Malawian society: African/whites, Malawians/Asians, Malawi/other African countries, and Christians/Muslims (Englund 2007: 303). Likewise, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh show how witchcraft discourses express the complex urban-rural relations and trigger issues of 'belonging' and 'autochthony' in contemporary Cameroon (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 1998). Geschiere also notices that ethnic stereotypes contrasting the Beti of the Center and the South with People of the West and Northwest provinces (Bamiléké and Bameda) refer to particular forms of witchcraft: thus, *famla* supposedly explains the success of the Bamiléké entrepreneurs' while *evu*-witchcraft 'makes Beti civil servants 'eat the State' in order to appease the jealousy of their greedy kin' (Geschiere 1997:11; see also Warnier 1993).

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