

# MPRA

Munich Personal RePEc Archive

## **On the Articulation of Witchcraft and Modes of Production among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria**

Kohnert, Dirk

GIGA - German Institute of Global and Area Studies / Institute of  
African Affairs

December 2007

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/6962/>  
MPRA Paper No. 6962, posted 02 Feb 2008 06:29 UTC

Burghart Schmidt / Rolf Schulte (Hg.)

# WITCHCRAFT IN MODERN AFRICA HEXENGLAUBEN IM MODERNEN AFRIKA



Witches, Witch-Hunts and Magical Imaginaries

Hexen, Hexenverfolgung und magische  
Vorstellungswelten

DOBU Verlag

Veröffentlichungen des Arbeitskreises  
für historische Hexen- und Kriminalitätsforschung  
in Norddeutschland

herausgegeben von

Katrin Moeller  
und Burghart Schmidt

Band 5

Burghart Schmidt / Rolf Schulte (Hg.)

# Hexenglauben im modernen Afrika

Hexen, Hexenverfolgung  
und magische Vorstellungswelten

## Witchcraft in Modern Africa

Witches, Witch-Hunts and Magical Imaginaries



Wissenschaftlicher Verlag  
Dokumentation & Buch

Titelbild: Ablution (*kuoga*). Painting by Max Kamundi, Njenga/Tanzania, 2002.  
Abbildung Rückseite: Ablution of witchcraft influence from a child, Nachingwea / Tanzania  
Privatbesitz, Abdruck mit freundlicher Genehmigung.

**Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek:**

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

Hexenglauben im modernen Afrika. Hexen, Hexenverfolgung  
und magische Vorstellungswelten / Witchcraft in Modern Africa. Witches,  
Witch-Hunts and Magical Imaginaries. Burghart Schmidt / Rolf Schulte (Hg.)  
Hamburg: DOBU Verlag, 2007

1. Auflage 2007

© Copyright 2007 by DOBU Verlag, Hamburg  
Tel.: ++49(0)40 64891 334 Fax: ++49(0)40 64891 359  
[www.dobu-verlag.de](http://www.dobu-verlag.de) [info@dobu-verlag.de](mailto:info@dobu-verlag.de)

ISBN 3-934632-15-7  
EAN 9783934632158

# Inhaltsverzeichnis

<i>Burghart Schmidt / Rolf Schulte</i> Vorwort.....	7
<i>Burghart Schmidt</i> Einführende Bemerkungen zum Hexenglauben im modernen Afrika .....	9
<i>Michael Schönhuth</i> Theorien zu Hexerei in Afrika: Eine Exkursion ins afrikanische Hexendickicht.....	16
<i>Dirk Kohnert</i> On the Renaissance of African Modes of Thought: The Example of Occult Belief Systems.....	32
<i>Dirk Kohnert</i> On the Articulation of Witchcraft and Modes of Production among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria.....	55
<i>Erhard Kamphausen</i> Hexenglauben, Magie und Besessenheitsphänomene in Afrika. Religions- und missionswissenschaftliche Anmerkungen.....	88
<i>Johannes Harnischfeger</i> Sozialer Niedergang und Kampf gegen das Böse: Hexerei im postmodernen Afrika.....	96
<i>Johannes Harnischfeger</i> Rückkehr der Dämonen: Wandlungen des Christentums in Afrika und Europa.....	110
<i>Walter Bruchhausen</i> Repelling and Cleansing ‘Bad People’ The Fight against Witchcraft in Southeast Tanzania since Colonial Times .....	130
<i>Katrin Pfeiffer</i> <i>Buwaa</i> : Cannibals of supernatural power and changing appearance. A term from the Mandinka language (Gambia, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau).....	153
<i>Rolf Schulte</i> Okkulte Mächte, Hexenverfolgungen und Geschlecht in Afrika .....	167
<i>Oliver Becker</i> „Muti Morde“ in Afrika: Töten für okkulte Medizin.....	187
<i>Joan Wardrop</i> Soweto witchcraft accusations in the transition from apartheid through liberation to democracy .....	213
<i>Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers</i> „Criminal Enemies of the People”: Water Wizards among the Zande, Central African Republic (1950-2000).....	230

*Dirk Kohnert*

## **On the Articulation of Witchcraft and Modes of Production among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Zusammenfassung***

Die politische Ökonomie okkultur Glaubenssysteme in Afrika kann versteckte soziale und politische Konflikte in Transitionsphasen erhellen, die anderenfalls unentdeckt bleiben. Dies wird gezeigt am Indikator der Entwicklung von Hexereianschuldigungen im Zeitablauf, wobei eine Fallstudie der Nupe in Nordnigeria als empirische Grundlage dient. Eine Langzeitstudie der Entwicklung des Nupe-States seit vorkolonialer Zeit weist auf einen engen Zusammenhang zwischen dem Inhalt und der Form von Hexereianschuldigungen und der Produktionsweisen hin. Im Zeitablauf dienten Hexereianschuldigungen unter den Nupe unterschiedlichen, sogar konkurrierenden Zielen, und zwar in Abhängigkeit von der Produktionsweise, mit denen die Betroffenen lebten und arbeiten. Viel Verwirrung in der Literatur über die scheinbaren Widersprüche zwischen den ‚emanzipativen‘ und ‚unterdrückenden‘ Funktionen des Hexenglaubens könnten vermieden werden, wenn man den Zusammenhang zwischen Produktionsweisen, Hexenanschuldigungen und zugrunde liegenden Interessen der Herrschenden stärker berücksichtigen würde.

### ***Abstract***

The political economy of occult belief in Africa can highlight hidden social and political conflict in times of transition which remain otherwise undetected. This has been demonstrated in taking the development of witchcraft accusations over time as indicator, and the Nupe of Northern Nigeria as an example. A tentative long-term study on the growth of the Nupe state since pre-colonial times points towards a close relationship between the content and form of witchcraft accusations and the mode of production under which the stakeholders used to life and work. Over time, witchcraft accusations among the Nupe apparently served different, even antagonistic ends, depending on the mode of production in which they were embedded. Much confusion in literature on the apparent contradiction between ‘emancipating’ and ‘oppressive’ functions of witchcraft beliefs could be avoided by considering this articulation between modes of production, witchcraft accusations, and the underlying vested interests of the ruling powers.

---

1 This paper is based on the author’s hitherto unpublished empirical material, which, although collected some twenty to thirty years ago, is not simply of historical value, but remains crucial in backing the major theses of the article.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

Since pre-colonial times the Nupe are renowned throughout Northern Nigeria for their knowledge of witchcraft. This is so widely accepted in general public that even newspapers are reporting on it occasionally. The virulence of occult belief among the Nupe had serious repercussions even in regional party politics. One outstanding example was the notable shift in political power in Bida Emirate (Niger state), which became apparent during the gubernatorial elections in 1983 and its aftermath of violent conflicts that were related to witchcraft by the concerned population.<sup>3</sup>

Nupe witchcraft belief has already been subject to a rigorous analysis in pioneering studies on comparative witchcraft in Africa by S.F. Nadel.<sup>4</sup> Though Nadel did his field-work among the Nupe about seventy years ago, his subject is by no means outdated. Witchcraft accusations still flourish in Nupeland, and they are an important sign of social stress and strain in Sub-Saharan Africa in general.<sup>5</sup> The Nupe are no exception in this respect. Most Nupe informants interviewed in 1976, 1982 and 1990 insisted that the

- 
- 2 Thanks for valuable suggestions go to Lars Clausen, Georg and Karola Elwert, Max Marwick, Mike Mason, and two anonymous referees. The responsibility for any fallacies or inaccuracies in the paper remains of course with the author. The article is a thoroughly revised and updated version of my working paper, distributed in 1983 by the Sociology of Development Research Centre, Univ. of Bielefeld, titled: „ Indicators of Social and Political Conflict in African Societies: On the Articulation of Witchcraft among the Nupe, Northern Nigeria”.
  - 3 The surprising switch in the allegiance of the Nupe from the conservative National Party of Nigeria (NPN) to the Nigerian People's Party (NPP) in 1983 resulted in terrible incidences of disorder, especially in Bida, where houses and vehicles were destroyed and a number of officials of the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) were burnt to death. Law and order had virtually broken down, with thugs hired by both sides and a mounting casualty list. No wonder that in this tense political climate, witchcraft accusations flourished and were used by both parties to meet their ends. Before the 1983 elections, the fortunes of the NPN in Niger state had already declined, as indicated by the election results, where the proportion of votes they received fell from 74.12% in 1979 to 64.72% in the gubernatorial elections, although these were probably rigged in favour of the NPN. In Bida most NPP supporters had hoped to win, but they polled only 30.95% for the gubernatorial election in Niger state. Disappointed Nupe as well as some minority groups in the state, for example, the Gwan people, protested against the Hausa-Fulani hegemony. In addition, Sulaiman Takuma, Nupe candidate for the post of the national Secretary of the NPN was defeated by his rival Uba Ahmed from Bauchi state, last but not least, because of his unguarded remarks on the sensitive issue of zoning; although this was intended to conserve the power base of the northern Emirs, it was opposed by Takuma, who was campaigning in Niger State for the rotation of governorship between the Hausa-Fulani group of the incumbent governor and his own Nupe group. Cf. Lai OLURODE: A political economy of Nigeria's 1983 elections, John West Publications, Ikeja / Lagos 1990, pp. 54, 64, 80. Lindsay BARRET: Nigeria's Elections – The method and the implications, in: *West Africa*, No. 3461 (12.12.1983) pp. 2865-2868.
  - 4 S.F. NADEL: Witchcraft in four African Societies, in: *The American Anthropologist*, Vol. 54 (1952), pp. 18-29, reprinted in: Max MARWICK (ed.): *Witchcraft an Sorcery. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth 1975, pp. 264-279. IDIM: *Nupe Religion*, London 1954, reprinted 1970.
  - 5 Dirk KOHNERT: Magic and witchcraft: implications for demoncratization and poverty-alleviating aid in Africa, in: *World development*, Vol. 24 (1996), pp. 1347-1355. IDEM: Witchcraft and transnational social spaces, in: *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 41 (2003), pp. 1-29. Peter GESCHIERE: *The Modernity of Witchcraft. Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, Charlottesville / London 1997. Stepfen ELLIS / Gerrie TER HAAR (eds.): *Worlds of power – Religious thought and political practice in Africa*, London 2004.



incidence of witchcraft increased since the early days of colonial rule.<sup>6</sup> In the peasants' view, this growth of witchcraft is mainly related to the growing ineffectiveness of traditional means of witchcraft control, an assertion which will be analysed in detail later. But increasing social and political cleavages, caused by growing social and economic differentiation as consequence of globalisation seem to lay at the roots of this problem.<sup>7</sup>

Up to now there has been a common understanding in the Western World that witchcraft accusations in Africa are based on superstition and strange occult belief which cause harm to a society and should be eradicated as soon as possible in the name of progress. Since the beginning of colonial rule, missionaries and colonial officers tried to destroy „juju medicine” and anti-witchcraft cults, first often by mere force, later also by legal means,<sup>8</sup> but apparently without great success. Despite the existing laws against „ordeal, witchcraft, and juju”,<sup>9</sup> there is, according to a Nigerian scholar in religious studies

„no belief more profoundly ingrained than that of the existence of witches ... To the Yorùbá as well as other ethnic groups in Africa, witchcraft is a reality. It is a belief very prevalent among literates and illiterates, among the high and the low in the society.”<sup>10</sup>

Although it is undisputed that in most individual cases witchcraft accusations were directed against innocent people, there is a growing awareness among social scientists that occult belief systems may have a social justification, and that they are not necessarily a sign of backwardness, but quite to the contrary, symptoms of modern development.<sup>11</sup>

6 Own field studies on Nupe witchcraft belief were conducted mainly within the framework of investigations in the economic history and socio-economic differentiation of the Nupe peasantry in 1975/76, cf. Dirk KOHNERT: *Klassenbildung im ländlichen Nigeria. Das Beispiel der Savannenbauern im Nupeland*. Institute of African Affairs (IAK), Hamburg, 1982. Semi-structured and narrative interviews were the major methods employed, complemented by research at the National Archives, Kaduna. Further enquiries were conducted during an additional field visits in 1982 and 1990.

7 Jean COMAROFF / John COMAROFF: *Alien-Nation: Zombies, immigrants, and millennial capitalism*, in: *Codesria Bulletin* 3-4 (1999), pp. 17-27.

8 Soon after the invasion of Bida by the British colonial forces (1897), the Church Missionary Society (CMS) opened stations all over Nupeland, e.g. in Bida (1902), Kutigi (1904), Mokwa (1906), and Wodata near Baro. Later on, other missionary societies, like the Sudan Interior Mission and the United Mission Church (of Africa) (UMCA), followed. However, Samuel Crowther, Rev. of the CMS and one of the first missionaries who entered Nupeland, opened a station near Rabba (in the present Mokwa District) already in 1857 (cf. CMS, Northern Nigeria Mission, files, G3, A9/0”, 1908, Nos. 1-113; G/3,A9/3, 1913; and Crowther/Taylor 1859: 157/58). – At least from the missionaries at Mokwa it is known that they burnt the masks of the *ndakógbòyá*, i.e. the Nupe anti-witchcraft cult, and forbade the performance of the cult (cf. Leo FROBENIUS: „Und Afrika sprach”, Vita, Berlin, 1912, vol. 2, „An der Schwelle des verehrungswürdigen Byzanz”, S. 39). The rationale behind these actions of the missionaries seems to be quite clear. As Mr. Derwar, A.D.O. in the Colonial Service of Northern Nigeria, put it in a memo on witchcraft to the Resident, Niger Province: „In practice, if not always in theory, ‘black’ and ‘white’ magic are inextricably mingled in primitive philosophy and ... religion and magic (including ‘black magic’ or witchcraft) are similarly associated. Any attempt, therefore, to interfere with or destroy witchcraft ... must certainly interfere with and might altogether destroy the religion into the fabric of which they are so closely woven“ (cf. DERWAR: *Notes on Witchcraft in its Relations to Administrative Problems*, National Archives, Kaduna (NAK), MINPROF, M 1228, 1934).

9 cf. for example the Nigerian Penal Code Law, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 1976, Sec., pp. 214-19.

10 J. Omosade AWOLALU: *Yoruba beliefs and sacrificial rites*, London 1979, p. 81.

11 E. BEVER: *Witchcraft fears and psychological factors in disease*. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 30/4 (2000), pp. 573-590. Peter GESCHIERE: *The modernity of witchcraft. Politics and the*

Witchcraft beliefs satisfy a deeply rooted desire to be sure that the world is concerned with us, our fate and happiness, and that nothing happens simply by chance. The acceptance of a domain of life where malevolent forces, like the witch, can be defined and attacked makes it possible to bear a universe devoid of such design. This is the case in the Nupe religious system too, as Nadel rightly observed.<sup>12</sup>

The occult reduction of complex social and political conflicts, as expressed by its personalisation in witchcraft accusations, was considered to be a legitimate option by the indigenous population *vis à vis* external enemies, like the colonial oppressors, thereby opening new doors for political action. At least this was an option pursued by (anti-) witchcraft movements directed against colonial domination, like the *Ijov-*, *Ha-akaa-*, and *Inyambuan* movements of the Tiv in Northern Nigeria or by the Mpondo of the Transkei, South Africa, in the 1880s.<sup>13</sup> More recent examples are the messianic grass-root movements which used magic and witchcraft accusations to fight their enemies by „cults of counter-violence”, like the *Naprama* of Mozambique;<sup>14</sup> similar traits of occult thought and political action were to be found in Sierra Leone and Liberia in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> Other witchcraft accusations with a strong „liberating”, „emancipative” or „egalitarian” impetus are directed against enemies within the own community. Examples are witchcraft accusations directed against rich peasants and traders in East- and West-Africa, who accumulate large sums of grain or money individually, without due regard to their obligation – under the traditional solidarity-system of the village community – to assist the poor in case of hardship. In the latter case the rich are suspected – quite correctly in the logic of a communitarian redistribute social system – of obtaining their wealth through evil powers.<sup>16</sup> We shall return later in more detail to this question.

---

occult in postcolonial Africa“, London 1997. Dirk KOHNERT: Local Manifestations of Transnational Troubles: Different Strategies of Curbing Witchcraft. Violence in Times of Transition in South Africa, in: Jürgen OSSENBRÜGGE / Mechthild REH (eds.), *Social Spaces of African Societies. Applications and Critique of Concepts of “Transnational Social Spaces”*, Münster 2004, pp. 175-198.

12 NADEL: *Nupe Religion* 1954, p. 205.

13 cf. J.I. TSEAYO: Conflict and incorporation in Nigeria, Zaria, ABU 1975, pp. 57-74. For further examples of witchcraft-control movements caused by stress and strain resulting from colonial conditions cf. Audrey RICHARDS: A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders, in: *Africa*, Vol. 8 (1935), pp. 448-461. Marwick (ed.): (1950), Goody (1957), and Lee (1976). – Early local resistance against colonial oppression in South Africa followed similar avenues, as shown by the Transkei rebellion of 1880 against the introduction of a hut tax register. This, it was believed locally, provided intimate knowledge of the tax payers, which could be used by colonial administrators, who were believed to collude with witches and sorcerers, to inflict serious harm; cf. Redding (1996: 257): „People’s survival, as they saw it, may have depended upon the removal of a state that was prohibiting them from discovering and punishing all the ‘evilly disposed’ people.” Apparently, it was not the individual European, who was suspected of sorcery or witchcraft, but the colonial administration as such, reinforced by collaborating local chiefs with renowned occult power.

14 K.B. WILSON: Cults of violence and counter-violence in Mozambique, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18 (1992), 3, pp. 527-582.

15 ELLIS / TER HAAR: *Worlds of power*.

16 For similar examples cf. Frank A. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft. A Reconsideration of S.F. Nadel’s Theory of African Witchcraft, in: *Afrika und Übersee* 63 (1980), S. 1-20, on ‘*abujanke*’ witchcraft among the Gbagyi (Gwari), Northern Nigeria; cf. Kyari TIJANI: Research priorities for agricultural development. A critique of the irrigation project south of lake Chad (Nigeria), in: *Research and Public Policy in Nigeria, Report of a Conference*, unpublished, ABU, Zaria (1977), pp.

Thus witchcraft accusations, notable those, which are organised in anti-witchcraft cults or secret societies by social groups with vested political interests, are often related to stress and anxieties resulting from the economic and social cleavages caused by the articulation of different or even antagonistic modes of production and the violation of the social laws which they represent. As will be demonstrated in the subsequent chapters, the communal mode of production in the village communities of peasant societies in Nupeland for example, conflicted with the rules of the semi-feudal mode of production of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nupe state, the colonial mode of production installed in the early 1900s, as well as with modern rural capitalist development, induced by the Nigerian Oil-boom in the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> It is against this background that the forms and changes in the meaning of Nupe witchcraft over time will be investigated and tentative hypotheses on the articulation of witchcraft accusations and modes of production in the course of Nupe history developed.

The aim of this study is threefold: firstly, to test whether the analysis of occult belief is a meaningful methodology with which to uncover the origins of past and current social conflicts. Secondly, to obtain better insight into covert social conflicts during a crucial stage of the development of rural capitalism in Nigeria, taking the Nupe society as an example. And thirdly, to give a re-evaluation of Nadel's witchcraft theory, including a reconsideration of the history of the *ndakógbòyá*, a secret society intended to control witchcraft, and at the same time a major pillar of occult belief among the Nupe.<sup>18</sup> Finally, I should like to test the preliminary hypothesis of an interdependency between the form and content of witchcraft belief and the modes of production in which the different actors involved were embedded. As with most social and economic concepts intended to explain long-term historical developments, this hypothesis can be of heuristic value

---

117-143; on witchcraft accusations connected with enrichment through development projects in Bornu Emirate, Northern Nigeria; and Chyntia BRANTLEY: An historical perspective of the Girama and witchcraft control. *Africa*, Vol. 49, 1979, Nr. 2, pp. 112-33. D.J. PARKIN: Medicine and Men of Influence, in: *Man* 3 (1968), pp. 424-39; IDEM.: Politics of ritual syneretism – Isam among the Non-Muslim Giriama of Kenya. *Africa*, Vol. 40, 1979, Nr. 3, pp. 217-33, on the „equalizing“ effects of witchcraft accusations among the Giriama trading communities of Kenya. COMAROFF / COMAROFF: Alien-Nation, analyse the accusation of migrant farm labourers in South Africa as zombies, employed by capitalist farmer, blamed to be witches.

17 For a detailed discussion of the concept of „modes of production“ and its relevance for the analysis of Nupe economic history cf. KOHNERT: *Klassenbildung*, S. 62-242. On the links between globalisation, the rise of neo-liberal capitalism and the political economy of occult belief systems in Africa and elsewhere cf. COMAROFF / COMAROFF: *Allien-Nations*. ELLIS / TER HAAR: *Worlds of power*. KOHNERT: *Witchcraft*.

18 If we talk of „the Nupe“ here, it should not obscure the fact that the Nupe are an extremely pluralistic society [cf. S.F. NADEL: *A Black Byzantium. The Kingdom of Nupe in Nigeria*, London, OUP, 1942, reprinted 1973. 1942, pp. 12-26]. Of course this holds even more when we speak of „the African“. For obvious reasons it is difficult to say whether the research results are representative for all Nupe or not [cf. NADEL: *Byzantium*, pp. ix-x]. This is all the more valid as we are dealing with an extremely sensitive cultural and social aspect of African life. It must therefore be understood that where I limit my description to single events or attitudes, these can only claim to be 'typical' for the groups or villages which I investigated - unless stated otherwise. Although witchcraft belief in Africa is expressed in many different forms (according to region, religion, and ethnic affiliation) I have explained elsewhere (cf. KOHNERT: *Magic and Witchcraft*) that, nevertheless, there are some essential common grounds which allow general insights.

only, as a sound data base for more rigid methodological testing is still lacking. This is all the more so as the scanty data and analyses available on the origins of the Nupe state and society are clouded by myth and ignorance.

### **The Origins of Witchcraft Accusations among the Nupe: Nadel's witchcraft theory reconsidered**

As stated above, witchcraft and magic beliefs may indicate the precise nature of the social conflicts of which they are symptoms.<sup>19</sup> This holds especially for conflicts which dominant forces in a given society are obliged to camouflage, because the open discussion of these conflicts may put into question the whole social fabric on which their well-being depends.

In such a case witchcraft accusations tend to act as a kind of safety valve which canalises existing hostilities towards a few scapegoats, rather than towards those, who would be regarded by the stakeholders as the real enemies of society. There can be no doubt that a society which needs such a safety valve has been badly constructed (cf. Nadel 1954: 206/206). But for research purposes, the study of magic beliefs provides us with a unique instrument to uncover and analyse social conflicts which otherwise might pass through undetected. In fact the latter has been stressed already by S.F. Nadel in a well-known article on comparative African witchcraft, in applying the Durkheimian method of concomitant variances in an analysis of the differences between Nupe and Gwari witchcraft beliefs.<sup>20</sup> However, Nadel's study underwent severe criticism by Salamone (1980), because of the alleged use of poor ethnographical data on the Gbagyi (Gwari).<sup>21</sup> This criticism certainly does not apply to Nadel's well founded Nupe studies which contain a wealth of valid information. But a secondary analysis of Nadel's data – complemented by results of my own field work among the Nupe – support a different interpretation of these data and subsequently a revision of Nadel's witchcraft theory. It is not Nadel's empirical base, but his witchcraft theory itself which will be challenged in the following.

In light of general theories of functional anthropology and social psychology, fashionable in the 1940's,<sup>22</sup> Nadel considered witchcraft accusations as a kind of „social illness“, analogous to psycho-pathological symptoms of mentally disturbed persons.<sup>23</sup> This „illness“ is based, according to Nadel, on sex-antagonism, resulting from the specific marriage system and the sexual and economic independence of women from their husbands in Nupe society.<sup>24</sup> Nadel holds that the symptoms are „easy to read; for in

---

19 cf. NADEL: *Witchcraft*, p. 264. Max MARWICK: *Witchcraft as a social strain-gauge*, *Australian Journal of Science* Nr. 26 (1964), pp. 263-268; reprint in: MARWICK (ed.): *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, pp. 280-295.

20 cf. NADEL: *Witchcraft*, p. 264.

21 According to Salamone, Nadel's inaccurate ethnographical data was not sufficient to test his theory adequately and forced him to modify it, thus „impeding the advancement of sound theory“ (SALAMONE: *Gbagyi Witchcraft*, p. 16).

22 cf. NADEL: *Byzantium*, pp. vi-vii; IDEM.: *Nupe Religion*, pp. 163-206.

23 NADEL: *Witchcraft*, p. 264.

24 cf. NADEL: *Witchcraft*, pp. 266-269. IDEM.: *Nupe Religion*, pp. 172-180, for a detailed account.

Nupe witchcraft expresses the social threats and tensions from which they spring with little disguise<sup>25</sup>. As a proof he lists three points of reference:

- (a) The existing legends on the development of witchcraft
- (b) The concrete accusations against witches
- (c) The explicit reference to the market organisation of Nupe women, with respect to witchcraft-control.

But quite contrary to Nadel, the interpretation of these symptoms might be not easy at all, but highly controversial. This will be shown in analysing his arguments one by one.

The first reason given by Nadel, i.e. the analysis of existing legends on the origin of witchcraft, is of course highly speculative, but it may be accepted for the sake of argument against the background of the methodological concepts of social psychology, current at his time. As far as Nupe concepts of the historic origins of witchcraft, as well as counter measures to defeat it are concerned, Nadel<sup>26</sup> refers to two founding legends of the anti-witchcraft cult of the Nupe, the *ndakógbòyá*<sup>27</sup>, taking them as decisive indicators of the social psychology of Nupe society. One of these legends centres around people living under the reign of *Etsu* Shago (the founding father of the Nupe state), leading a lawless life and refusing to listen to their elders.

„Men would steal each other's wives and commit adultery without shame. The older women, especially, caused much trouble; they quarrelled among themselves and 'gave no peace'. The more law-abiding among the men grew angry and spoke harshly to the women; but these 'replied with insolence'.“<sup>28</sup>

In trying to solve this problem, a young man of great strength invented a mask (later called *ndakógbòyá*) to frighten away the insolent women. But one woman refused to run away; she was caught and killed with an iron rod (*sányη*, a slave chain, cf. below). This legend was still widely known among the heads of the *ndakógbòyá* lodges to the north and south of the Niger whom I interviewed in 1982. However, the legend, used by Nadel to back his thesis of „sex-antagonism“ as the principal source of witchcraft accusations among the Nupe, lends itself for other interpretations of the origins of the *ndakógbòyá*. It hints at the police functions of the cult, meant to maintain the moral values of the village community which were disregarded by both men and women, although especially the older women are blamed. As Nadel rightly observed, the „evilness“ of the elderly women implied undermined the authority of the „Great Men“. The reference to the „insolence“ of women in the legend may hint at an event in a very early period of Nupe history, i.e. the transformation of a matrilineal to a patrilineal society. This

25 IDEM.: Nupe Religion, p. 172.

26 *ibid.*, p. 172f.

27 Literally, „Grandfather Gboya“, in Nupe, i.e. a traditional „secret society“, specialised in the control of witchcraft in Nupe (cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 188-201), but used for centuries, also for many other purposes of political oppression and extortion. According to Laing, Acting Resident at Bida in 1920, who investigated in the extortion cases of the *ndakógbòyá*, the latter means „big father of echo“, a meaning derived from the fact „that the gongola, supporting the long body of the mask, is pierced at the bottom, and the man bearing it speaks into this cavity, his voice then appears to come out of the top of this 15' pole“; cf. NAK, SNP 10/8, 340p/1920. The Hausa name for the *ndakógbòyá* was *masugirro* or *magiro*, pl. *magirai*, according to Laing (*ibid.*).

28 NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 173.

transformation stretched over a long period and started, according to Frobenius<sup>29</sup>, during the reign of the Bini dynasty, probably during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. at about the same time as in the Hausa kingdoms further to the North.<sup>30</sup> The transformation probably coincided with the transformation from communal rule in acephalous village societies to the semi-feudal mode of production under the despotic rule of the kings of the emerging Nupe state. Remains of matrilineal rule, especially at the village level and in the Nupe rank and land tenure system, were still evident in colonial times.<sup>31</sup>

This reinterpretation of Nadel's hypothesis seems to be backed by the second founding legend, rendered by Nadel, which tells of a Nupe king whose mother was an interfering woman, constantly meddling in his affairs.<sup>32</sup> The king in question might have been the last of the Nupe Kings before the Fulani invasion (the Nupe/Fulani *jihad*), *Etsu* (Ali) Kolo (Ta-)Nagari, who lived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Etsu* Kolo had been installed by his predecessor *Etsu* Maazu, although the former was the heir to the throne according to the then already outdated rules of matrilineal descent. Therefore he was rejected by the Nupe elders, who had got accustomed to the advantages of patrilineal organisation in the meantime.<sup>33</sup> One of the early European travellers who visited the court of *Etsu* Masaba, wrote of *Etsu* Kolo: „He took his mother's advice so constantly that the Nupe people said they wanted not to be governed by a woman, and, rising against him, drove him to Yauri“.<sup>34</sup> The legend, however, tells a different story, i.e. the king himself succeeded in overwhelming his mother (i.e. matrilineal rule, D. K.) with the help of the *ndakógbòyá* mask<sup>35</sup>; details from different historical events have probably been merged, a familiar feature of myth-making.

However, these founding-legends are not the only ones, and in addition they do not necessarily back Nadel's theory of sex-antagonism as a source of witchcraft accusations, neither in the colonial, nor in the present social and economic order of the Nupe. For reasons subject to speculation, Nadel and others completely ignored the valuable and detailed account on Nupe witchcraft by Leo Frobenius, published about twenty years before the publication of the relevant articles by Nadel.<sup>36</sup> Interesting enough, the two

---

29 FROBENIUS: Schwelle, S. 274.

30 cf. M.G. SMITH : The Affairs of Daura. Berkeley/London 1978, on the transformation of matrilineal rule in Dauwa Emirate, the oldest of the Hausa kingdoms, which counted the Nupe to one of its seven *banza bakwàì*, i.e. „bastard“ or vassal states.

31 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, S. 274. IDEM.: Volkserzählungen und Volksdichtungen aus dem Zentral-Sudan – Der Geist des Quorra, Jena 1924, pp. 9, 87-89. O. TEMPLE (ed.): Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria, Cass, 2nd ed. 1922; new impr., 1965; 1922, p. 329. NADEL: Byzantium, pp. x, 31-32, 51, 54, 147-49, 278. Michael MASON: The Nupe Kingdom in the Nineteenth Century - A Political History, Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham, Centre of West African Studies, 1970, pp. 194-196.

32 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 172.

33 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, p. 41.

34 W.B. BAIKIE: Notes on a Journey from Bida in Nupe to Kano in Hausa, in: Journal of the Royal Geographic Society 37 (1867), pp. 92-109, 105.

35 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 184, 164.

36 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle. IDEM.: Volkserzählungen, 9, p. 9. Even Murdock and the co-authors of the „*Human Relations Area Files*“ did not consult the works of Frobenius as a source on Nupe

legends given by Frobenius did not fit into Nadel's sex-antagonism theory. According to one of them, the *ndakógbòyá* represents the spirit of *Etsu* Guschi, one ancient local Nupe king in Epa (in the Northwest of Nupeland) who refused to come out of his *katamba* to „greet“, i.e. to bow to Edegi (also called „Tsoèdè“ in Hausa, the mystical founder of the Nupe kingdom), who had presumably invaded his country during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century. Thereupon, the Guschi died (was killed?), and his son became the follower of the new emperor. The spirit which rose out of the grave of the late Guschi was – according to this legend – the incorporation of the spirit of resistance which created the *ndakógbòyá*.<sup>37</sup> According to the second legend reported by Frobenius, the *ndakógbòyá*, in olden times named *Lata*, came from the East via Atagara<sup>38</sup> into Nupeland. It was directed against „social enemies“ of the people, and at this time the mask had greater power than most of the Nupe kings.<sup>39</sup>

Apparently there is no reference to any kind of „sex-antagonism“ in these legends. According to them the *ndakógbòyá* originally represented the resistance of Nupe peasant communities against enemies of their society, especially against the usurpation of despotic power by outside forces. Concerning the latter aspect of these legends there are interesting parallels with the *gunnu* ritual of the Nupe – the most important of all traditional Nupe cults according to Nadel – where the *ndakógbòyá* used to play a dominant role as *dògiri nyá gunnu*, lit. „policeman of the *gunnu*“. According to Nadel the *gunnu* priest, assisted by the *ndakógbòyá* mask, which is also called *gunnukó*, lit. „great *gunnu*“, holds all power in his hand during the week-long ceremonies: „Neither parents nor chiefs, not even the *Etsu* of Nupe, retain any authority ... The legal system (introduced and enforced by the 'feudal' overlords of the Nupe, D. K.) is upset rather than confirmed by the *gunnu* organisation.”<sup>40</sup> The *gunnu* guards the community against intruders and ties the whole village periodically to its common values.<sup>41</sup>

---

witchcraft. Although Frobenius' work on the Nupe has a heavy ideological bias which may even sometimes distort the facts, it is nevertheless interesting to read because it avoids another equally serious source of confusion, i.e. the „Fulani bias“ in the „official“ Nupe history, on which Nadel's accounts are mainly based (cf. NADEL: Byzantium, p. 76. KOHNERT: Klassenbildung, p. 90, 380, fn. 212). Frobenius got his information mainly from peasants in the Mokwa area who have a long tradition of resistance against „Fulani domination“.

37 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, pp. 377-378. IDEM.: Volkserzählungen, 9, pp. 78, 81; unfortunately the memory of this legend was lost to all of my present informants in the Zugurma/Mokwa area, including the *Etsu* Zugurma, one of the descendants of a branch of the pre-Fulani Nupe Kings, living in a small palace at Eba.

38 I.e. Idah, the capital of the *Atta* of Gara (Igara or Igala), who became the master of Edigi, when the latter was brought to Igalaland as a slave.

39 cf. FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen, 9, pp. 78-81. This account by Frobenius fits well into another legend, which was related to me in 1976 by the elders of Mokwa, namely that the *ndakógbòyá* had already been created before there was a king in Nupeland. It originated in Tata - near Onitsha. The man who invented the cult was not a Nupe, but he was the first to protect the Nupe by means of his *kuti* (magic) against warriors from that area.

40 S. F. NADEL: *Gunnu* – a fertility cult of the Nupe in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 67, pp. 91-130, here 100, 113

41 IDEM, p. 120.

The evidence for the new interpretation of the historical origins of witchcraft and of the *ndakógbòyá* (as reconstructed from the legends) given above may not be very strong. But one has to keep in mind that Nadel himself admitted that the legends, although talking of gender-cleavages, failed to corroborate his concept of „sex-antagonism“ in its narrow sense, since the empirical base of Nadel's view on the weakening effects of sexual intercourse on the strength of men as a principal cause of witchcraft accusations among the Nupe was not confirmed by the legends. On the contrary, the first of his legends tells about the sexual dominance of the male (through adultery), and frustrations of the (male) elders which concentrate on the old women, not the young and attractive ones.

The same is valid for the second point of reference for Nadel's „sex-antagonism“ theory, the actual accusations against witches. First, they fasten rather on the woman's character as a whole, which rejects the submissiveness expected of women,<sup>42</sup> especially on the dominating character of older women, than on their sexual dominance in particular. Why then did Nadel insist on his „sex-antagonism“ theses, although he himself mentioned several times the important political role played by the *ndakógbòyá*? Might it not be possible that - at least at the beginning - the *ndakógbòyá* ritual was not a „social illness“, but a legitimate political instrument, developed by the peasantry, to fight injustice and exploitation by their overlords? An instrument, which only later on was taken out of the hands of the peasants and occupied by the despotic central powers during the emergence of the state in Nupe society whose representatives turned it against the peasantry?<sup>43</sup>

Second, if the witch in Nupe religion is correctly identified as a person openly and successfully setting aside fundamental values of society, as Nadel presumes, does this not suggest that the most ostensible neglect of these values by the despotic rulers would be somehow connected with such witch accusations? Especially, as the *ndakógbòyá* was most virulent in Trans-Kaduna, a region where the peasants were notorious rebellious. Such a suggestion would also be backed by far reaching analogies, within the realm of the social psychology of Nupe peasants, between the characteristics of a witch (*gici*, pl. *gicizi* in Nupe for witches of both sexes) and those of despotic rulers, namely:

- (a) Both have power over life and death reaching everywhere.
- (b) This (evil) power is conscious, and ordinary persons are powerless against it.<sup>44</sup>
- (c) Both the *Etsu* and the witch have power over the profane and in the spiritual world;<sup>45</sup> this view is widespread even nowadays according to own investigations cf. below).

---

42 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 187.

43 For a description of the ruthless exploitation of the peasantry by the institutionalised and closed lodges of the *ndakógbòyá* under the leadership of the *Maji Dodo* (lit. the „Master of the Terrible“) and the *Etsu* see S.F. NADEL: Nupe State and Community, in: Afrika 8 (1935), p. 442. IDEM.: Nupe Religion, p. 197. Apparently, it reached its peak in the second decade of colonial rule, when the British Resident became afraid that no tax-money would be left for the British, and therefore forbade the cult in 1921. For the exploitative aspect of the cult see also: FROBENIUS: Schwelle, p. 268. IDEM.: Volkserzählungen 9, pp. 78-80). S. CROWTHER / J. TAYLOR: The Gospel on the Banks of the Niger, Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries Accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-59, 1859, reprinted London 1968, 1859, p. 215 and TEMPLE: Notes, pp. 331-332.

44 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 166. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, p. 262.



- (d) The most powerful witches are rich, they accumulate their wealth for their own selfish purposes. And if they wanted money (in pre-colonial times) they would have sold their victims to another country as slaves.<sup>46</sup>
- (e) Witches attack in the dark of the night – like the Nupe slave-raiders in pre-colonial times did. They suck the blood out of their victims,<sup>47</sup> which, in a metaphorical sense, may be said of the ruling class, too.

Third, if witchcraft accusations are mainly based on „sex-antagonism“, how then can the important role of male witches (*eshe*, pl. *eshezi*, in Nupe) be explained, be it as „partners in crime“,<sup>48</sup> or even as male evil witches, said to exist in Nupeland – contrary to the assertion of Nadel – already by Frobenius?<sup>49</sup>

In addition, the connection between magic and worldly power is not restricted to analogies which may appear more or less accidental or superficial, but is very real in the person of the *Lelu*. The latter is said to be the head of all witches in a village, and, at the same time, as *Sagy* or *Nakó*, respected as the most powerful and rich woman in the village, held to be a „good“ witch, who is expected to keep witchcraft within reasonable bounds.<sup>50</sup> But we have to admit that with the emergence of the Nupe state, even the *Lelu* had to bow before the superior authority of the male village chief and district head.

Since the establishment of Fulani dominance over the Nupe peasantry, the *Etsu* Nupe is supposed to be even more powerful. He is said to control witchcraft himself within a wide range around his residence.<sup>51</sup> The alleged magic power of the *Etsu* served, at least until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a well defined political means to maintain the despotic feudal order and the „king's law“. This had been done notably by invocation of the *kúti* (i.e. magic) of the *ègba Tsoèdè*, i.e. the slave-chains of Tsoede (or Edegi), used for strangling political opponents and for uncovering crimes in the manner of an ordeal.<sup>52</sup>

The fear among the peasants that the Emir might employ black magic to achieve his goals did not vanish after this period: Whitaker<sup>53</sup>, for example, reported that even during the electoral campaigns of 1959 local opposition to the Emir of Bida proved to be extremely difficult, among other reasons, because of the prevailing belief among the villagers, that the Emir would pronounce a curse, should they not vote for him or his candidate. Some twenty years later, in 1976, similar fears were still virulent among the peasantry with respect to Local Government elections, as I was able to observe myself. As the „open

45 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, pp. 261-267.

46 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 165, 167.

47 cf. FROBENIUS: Schwelle, pp. 41, 261-271. IDEM.: Volkserzählungen 9, p. 68.

48 I.e. as medicine man, cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 169.

49 FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen 9, pp. 65, 67.

50 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 168.

51 cf. NADEL: Nupe State and Community. Africa, Vol. 8, 1935, pp. 257-303. IDEM: Byzantium, p. 87.

52 cf. NADEL: The King's Hangman; a Judicial Organisation in Central Africa in: Man 35 (1935) 143, pp. 129-132. Parts of this iron chain, which is similar to the old Portuguese slave chains (cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 32, 194), were still a cult object of the *ndakógbòyá* in 1982, at least in its lodges south of the Niger.

53 C.S. WHITAKER: The Politics of Tradition Continuity and Change in Northern Nigeria 1946-1966, Princeton Univ. Press, 1970, p. 296.



Fig. 1: The The Lelu of Dabba (Trans-Kaduna) with her entourage in 1982.

ballot system“ was still in practice at that time, the above mentioned threat proved to be very effective indeed, because the voters had to queue behind their candidate.

Altogether, major factors which constitute a witch in the eyes of Nupe peasants, i.e. illegitimate spiritual and worldly power over life and death, and the disregard of fundamental human rights concerning health and property of their victims, seem to be very similar to the qualities of a traditional ruler in the view of the peasantry, at least in pre-colonial and colonial times. All this leads to my working hypothesis that the belief in witchcraft in Nupeland, namely the origin of the institutionalised anti-witchcraft cult (*ndakógbòyá*), was causally related to the resistance of the peasants within a communal mode of production against illegitimate power accumulation of despotic rulers of the emerging Nupe state. At least, this thesis corresponds neatly to the second legend on the origin of the *ndakógbòyá* as rendered by Frobenius.<sup>54</sup> At the beginning, the actual witchcraft accusations may have been directed either directly against the usurper, or they may have been the result of repressed frustrations, derived from the peasants' impotence *vis à*

54 FROBENIUS (cf. above) Volkserzählungen 9, pp. 65, 67.

*vis* illegitimate force, which was then directed against a few scapegoats. Of course, this hypothesis would have to be confirmed by sound empirical evidence. Although this hypothesis runs contrary to Nadel's witchcraft theory, Nadel was certainly right in his general description of the effect of witchcraft accusations when he said: „Attacks against witches are thus attacks upon the successful enemies of the ideal society ... witchcraft fears and accusations only accentuate concrete hostilities and in fact give them free reign.“<sup>55</sup>

Even though the *ndakógbòyá* was forbidden by the British Resident in Bida in 1921 for the reasons stated above, it continued to be practiced, though on a smaller scale. In any case, the proscription applied only to Bida Emirate, and not to the Nupe districts south of the Niger. There the *ndakógbòyá* remained active, though it seems to have changed its character, and the cult is now even referred to as a „festival“ by a tourist guide.<sup>56</sup> Whether it is really completely void of any exploitative aspect nowadays, and whether new forms of witchcraft control have been developed, will be explored in the following chapter.

### **Witchcraft accusation in present-day Nupeland**

As said in the beginning, even today the Nupe are renown (and sometimes feared) among other ethnic groups of Nigeria, like the Hausa or the Yorùbá, for their knowledge of powerful magic and the prevalence of witchcraft in their society.<sup>57</sup> Nupe informants whom I interviewed during visits in several Nupe villages and towns in 1976, 1982 and 1990 insisted that witchcraft was by no means a minor aspect of Nupe cultural life, but, on the contrary, had increased very much during the past decades. However, this is very difficult to confirm by sound empirical investigation, due to the sensitivity of the subject.<sup>58</sup>

---

55 NADEL: Witchcraft, p. 279.

56 cf. S.A. EMIELU: Guide to Kwara, Ilorin, 1981, p. 27.

57 Some authors maintain that every ethnic group believes its neighbours to have more dark and potent magic than its own (cf. G. PARRINDER: Witchcraft, Harmondsworth 1958, p. 196). But this certainly does not hold for the Nupe, as their „authorities“ in anti-witchcraft matters are proud that they harbour the most powerful anti-witchcraft magic, a secret which is anxiously protected against disclosure to members of other tribes. In fact, the cult has even been 'exported' to other Nigerian provinces, e.g. to Yorùbáland. Named „*igunnu*“ by the Yorùbá, the *ndakógbòyá* mask came to Abeokuta, Lagos and other Yorùbá towns through Nupe who migrated from the Gbado area during World War I, according to the present *Lile* (i.e. Village Head) of Gbado. (cf. also G. PARRINDER: Religion in an African City, London, OUP, 1953, pp. 58, 69, on *ndakógbòyá* masks in Ibadan).

58 Some of the reluctance to discuss the whole issue of witchcraft with outsiders was apparently due to the fear that other tribes could come into possession of the secrets of the *ndakógbòyá* as a result of the carelessness of talkative members of the cult. There is, however, also a more general suspicion among the Nupe concerning the discussion of witchcraft, as already observed by Nadel (cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p.164): Since only witches can really know about their evil deeds, nobody would like to betray too much knowledge lest he or she be accused of being a witch him/herself. This is especially true of women - those most likely to be accused. It is difficult for males to interview these women, especially in an Islam dominated society like the Nupe. Thus, I hardly received any information from them, even though women such as the *Nakó* (lit. „grandmother“) of Dabba, a well known herbalist and head of the women of this village in Trans-Kaduna were said to know *ex officio* about this craft. Needless to say, this imposes serious limitations on the value of the following analysis, which can only scratch the surface of a strong belief which is still deeply rooted in Nupe society.



Fig. 2: The ndakógbòyá mask, welcoming the Oba of Benin and the Etsu Nupe on their arrival in Bida 1982; the mask resembles exactly the ndakógbòyá masks already documented and photographed by L. Frobenius in Mokwa in 1909 and S.F. Nadel in 1936.

Although belief in black magic is still ingrained in both members of the ruling class in Bida, the capital of Nupeland, and the peasants in the countryside, this does not mean that there have been no changes since Nadel made his investigations among the Nupe. Probably the most noticeable transformation did take place in the realm of control of the supposed witchcraft activities. The *ndakógbòyá*, in the 1920s one of the most powerful means in the hands of the *Etsu* of detecting witches and thereby of exploiting the peasantry, is now also used for entertainment purposes, as a masquerade, a „cultural performance“, which features on occasions of social enjoyment, devoid of its original social and religious meaning. Nowadays, the great masks of Kusogi<sup>59</sup>, for example, are invited to perform their dance at Sallah, at agricultural shows of the Bida Agricultural Development Project (established in the early 1980s), or to „greet“ important state guests who visit the Emir in Bida. Such events, like the performance on the occasion of the recent visit of the *Oba* (king) of Benin, who toured the northern Emirates in October

1982 to weld all traditional rulers of Nigeria together in a united front against attacks on their „historic privileges“ in the course of the upcoming 1983 elections (cf. above), must have been experienced as degrading, especially for the mask bearers.<sup>60</sup> After they had been waiting in vain for about two hours for the arrival of the *Oba* and the *Etsu*, who were supposed to ride through the main streets of Bida on horseback as in olden times, the latter rushed through the cheering crowd within seconds in their extravagant Mercedes and Volvo cars, concealed by the darkened car windscreens, and accompanied by

59 The second Kusogi, was founded near Doko under *Etsu* Masaba (1859-73), and since that time has been headquarters of the *ndakógbòyá* lodges in Bida Emirate. The original Kusogi is situated east of Pategi. It finally lost its significance when its last *Majin Dodo* died in about 1970. The new title holder is a teacher of Arabic who is said not to be very interested in keeping up the tradition of the *ndakógbòyá*.

60 The performance in question took place on October 8, 1982, just in front of and in the courtyard of the guest house, or more precisely the palace, of one of the biggest and most important businessmen in Bida, thus demonstrating the emerging alliance between the old traditional rulers and the aspiring new class of the national bourgeoisie; on the latter on the latter cf. Dirk KOHNERT: Unternehmer und Grundherren Nord-Nigerias im Kampf um die politische Macht, in: *Afrika-Spectrum* 13 (1978), 3, pp. 269-286.

their entourage (including the private TV-team of the *Oba*), hardly taking any notice of the frustrated dancing masks and drummers who tried in vain to follow them. But it may be that those concerned held their mere presence as sufficient to chase away any evil minded spirits or witches.

Minor masks, such as the *ndakógbòyá* of Lade to the south of the Niger, now even dance for entertainment on the occasion of important local football matches. But again, there could also be more serious, less overt reasons for the presence of the masks, such as the protection of the players against the witchcraft of their opponents. There are several examples in African football history where violent clashes resulted from witchcraft accusations in connection with football matches allegedly „rigged” by means of black magic.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Májin Dòdo* of Kusogi admitted during my interview that the cult and its members had lost much of their former authority. Many villages and lodges had ceased altogether to perform the ritual. They had to invite the *ndakógbòyá* from other villages, mainly from the Nupe areas south of the Niger, e.g. from Gbado, Tankpufu, Tsambafu, Patizuru, Etsuvun or Lade, if they had serious cases of witchcraft with which they could not cope themselves. One of the cases in the Mokwa area, remembered very well by a Reverend of the UMCA, happened at Kpaki (about 18 miles from Mokwa on the road to Bida) in 1963: A culmination of strange events, such as the outbreak of smallpox, a significant increase in snake bites, and the beating of young men by invisible hands which allegedly resulted in an outbreak of yellow fever, set the village in turmoil. The village authorities called the *ndakógbòyá* from Tsambufu to discipline the witches who were supposed to be the instigators of this sudden outbreak of evil.

The reason most readily given by educated Nupe for the decreasing importance of the *ndakógbòyá* was the ever growing influence of Islam in the already Muslim dominated Northern Emirates and the impact of modern education. Nowadays, fewer and fewer youngsters are prepared to undergo the harsh initiation rituals which involve flogging, staying in the bush at night, or the participation in strange customs such as exhuming of human bones in the graveyard at full moon. Another obvious reason for the decreasing incidence of witch cleansing rituals by the *ndakógbòyá* is directly related to the considerable costs involved in such performances. Most villages, such as Kusogi, Mwuó, and Gbado that could still afford these expenses, exercised the ritual only once a year, most often at the beginning of the dry season, in November or December; some villages, such as Gada, had their annual performance already in September. Of course, the costs were heavy only in relation to the average annual peasants income. As the organised extortion tours of the past had apparently ceased since they were forbidden by law in 1921, and as there has also been a decreasing demand for such cleansing rituals over the past decades

---

61 cf. Paul RICHARDS: Soccer and Violence in War-Torn Africa: Soccer and Social Rehabilitation in Sierra Leone, in: Gary Armstrong / Richard Giulianotti (eds.), *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football*, Oxford 1997, pp. 141-157. In 2002 the Ivorian Government settled a 10-year dispute with disgruntled witch doctors who claimed to have had a hand in the country's African Nations Cup triumph (cf. BBC News, 08.04.2002; [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/sports\\_talk/1917251.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/sports_talk/1917251.stm); 04.02.05). In Tanzania there were allegations that the national team used money earmarked for players to pay a witch doctor (cf. BBC News, 20.10.04; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3756910.stm>; 04.02.05). Witchcraft was also part and parcel of Ugandan football.



Fig. 3: A performance of the cleansing ritual of the *ndakógbòyá*-mask at Kusogi in 1982.

(due to reasons to which we shall return later), a considerable number of the lodges of the *ndakógbòyá* still existing to be at pains to cover the expenses for the ceremonies, dances, and the maintenance of the masks.

It is doubtful that under such circumstances they still contribute any considerable amount to the shadow household of the Bida emirate, like the *ndakógbòyá* did during the reign of *Etsu Bello* (1916-26), when the lodges, beside gifts in kind, got ransoms of £ 20 on the average (up to £ 100) per village, a profit which they shared with the *Etsu* in Bida.<sup>62</sup> An investigation by Laing, the Acting Resident of Bida in 1920, revealed that the *ndakógbòyá* extortion concentrated on the districts to the West of the Kaduna river, notorious for their quest for independence.<sup>63</sup> The range of gross family-income from

62 cf. NADEL: Nupe State. IDEM.: Nupe Religion, p. 196.

63 According to inquiries of the colonial administration into the extortion tours of the *ndakógbòyá* in the early 1920s, the acting resident in Bida, Mr. Laing, came to the following conclusion: „the parties of the *masugirro* (*ndakógbòyá*, D. K.) who were found to have visited the Districts of Labozhi, Egbako, Sakpe and to a small extent Jima-Doko, the details are as follows: (37) Egbako Dist. Livestock and goats extorted £ 471.0.0. It was obvious that these depredations could not have been carried out without the knowledge of the DH and Alkalin Egbaki. (38) 11 *magirro* arrested; (39) Labozhi Dist. Goods, livestock, money taken: £ 367.2.10.; (40) Skape Dist., Goods, livestock, money taken: £ 165. 1.2; (42) 13 *magirro* arrested at Kutegi; (43) From the forgoing it was obvious that extortions on such a large scale could not have been carried out without the knowledge of the Hakima (the DH, D.K.). After further investigation ... I arrived at the conclusion that the Emir alone was the instigator and prime mover of the sending out of these *masugirro* parties; (45) ... after a half hearted denial the Emir acknowledged his guilt. (47) This catastrophe has been a severe blow to the N.A. and has done an incalculable amount of harm. The District Heads were witness of the daily extortion, carried on with the sanction of their paramount chief, and the District Alkalai were not permitted to exert their authority. The Alkalin Bida, whose court is a Court of Appeal, was ren-

farming at that time was estimated at between £ 2 and £ 12 per year, corresponding to the different resource positions of peasant families.<sup>64</sup>

According to the *Lilé* of Gbado, every villager – „even the child in the womb“ – had to give the „traditional one shilling“ for a performance still in 1982 according to my interviews, whereas the elders in Mokwa said that they themselves gave a total of about Naira 200 (2 Naira ~ 1 £ in 1982) in cash. Apart from money, the villagers had to contribute in kind: a he-goat, food and drinks, - even Indian hemp in one village to the south of the Niger. So the total value of the contributions for one performance of the *ndakógbòyá* was estimated at about Naira 400 to 600 in 1982 by the elders of Mwuo, a village in southern Mokwa District.

Thus, according to the author's own rough estimates, the income of the cult per performance has decreased in real terms within the past six decades by about 20 to 50 per cent.<sup>65</sup> Of course the performance may have yielded additional income, in case the *ndakógbòyá* discovered a witch. The accused, or her/his relatives, would have to give a ransom, like a black goat, cloth, and money, according to the seriousness of the supposed offence and the willingness to undo their spell or misdeed. But, as said above, such incidences were few in the 1980s, compared with the past, and the deflated total annual net income from witchcraft eradication by the *ndakógbòyá* decreased certainly much more than by mere 50 per cent.

The potential of systematic exploitation, based on the social structure of a semi-feudal kingdom, which did not exist any more, decreased even further. On the other hand, the cult might have guarded, consolidated or even extended its political influence into the realm of party politics, as indicated by the witchcraft accusations linked with the switch of party allegiance of the Nupe in 1983, mentioned at the beginning. In this respect, the *ndakógbòyá* might resemble nowadays more to the *Ogboni* secret society of the Yoruba, or the *Okija* cult, i.e. the *Ogwugwu*-shrines in Okija, Anambra State. The gruesome spiritual and worldly powers of the latter, and its strong influence on high ranking politicians in Anambra government and parliament, including the governor himself, became known to the Nigerian public in August 2004.<sup>66</sup> However, again we enter the sphere of mere speculation, and further investigation would be required.

---

dered powerless to act in this matter; on referring the complainant, the Alkalin Sakpe to the Emir, he was practically told to mind his own business and turn a deaf ear to the allegations which were daily taking place.” (cf. NAK, SNP, 10/8, 340p/1920. „Nupe Province – Report, no 37, for half year ending 30th June 1920”) „ ... (6) ‘smelling out’ witchcraft was a lucrative branch of these charlatans, who levied their tolls, at times on individuals or on the whole community. Men and women have been tied up and beaten on the slightest pretext and only obtained their freedom on payment. It will be easily understood what scope this afforded to individuals having grudges against their fellow villagers; a word spoken to the ‘*magirro*’ accompanied by a *douceur*, would speedily occasion ‘a certain weakness’ in the household of the unfortunate accused.” (ibid.; I am grateful to Mike Mason who allowed me to quote from his copy of the relevant files).

64 cf. KOHNERT: *Klassenbildung*, pp. 226-227.

65 The nominal growth rate of the income for one performance between 1920 and 1980 was about 4 to 4.6% per annum, whereas the price per unit of staple food, like sorghum or rice, increased about 5 to 5.6% p.a. during the same period (cf. KOHNERT: *Klassenbildung*, p. 487).

66 cf. Peter MORTON-WILLIAMS: *The Yoruba Ogboni cult in Oyo*, in: *Africa* 30 (1960) and Nathaniel FADIPE: *The sociology of the Yoruba*. Ibadan University Press 1970 on the traditional Ogboni soci-

Although the *ndakógbòyá* is still a „secret society“ in the sense in which Nadel used this expression,<sup>67</sup> as the members of the lodges still guard certain important secrets on the rules and the magic of the cult, the very source of their power, and as they threaten any adept with serious punishment (even death penalty) should he dare to betray their secrets, the cult can not any longer be described as a „closed society“, apart from the still existing strong gender bias. According to the Heads of the lodges in Gbado and Tankpufu, i.e. the two major centres of the cult to the south of the Niger, any self-confident and reliable man who feels strong enough to stand the initiation rites and to keep the secret of the *kúti* (i.e. ritual or magic), may apply for membership. The high initiation fees of former times which rose up to £ 20 (or twice the customary bride price)<sup>68</sup> have been reduced to a token payment of one cock and some 60 Kobos (1 Naira = 100 Kobos) intended for the initiation sacrifice.

The attitude of the villagers towards the *ndakógbòyá* seems to have changed considerably, too. The terrifying influence which the dancing had in former times especially on women has almost gone, as far as I can judge from my limited experience with two performances at Tsambafu and Bida, which may be taken as another sign of the vanishing influence of the cult in general.

And although one of my informants, a high ranking Nupe officer from Koro (east of Patigi), but resident in Ilorin, would not exclude that the *ndakógbòyá* still served the aim of upholding the authority of men over women and to extract resources from them, he also agreed that most villages which still harbour one of the lodges of the society perform their dances mainly to honour a cherished tradition.

It remains to be added that now, as in the past, the purpose of the masquerade is not restricted to social entertainment or to fighting actual cases of witchcraft, but is still used to ensure the well-being of the village at large, e.g. the cult pleads for rain at times of drought, helps women to become pregnant, or protects the villagers against illness.<sup>69</sup> When there was a change in the District Headship at Doko in 1976, even the compound of the D. H. (District Head or *hakɲmi*, pl. *hàkɲmai*) had to be cleansed by the *ndakógbòyá* to protect the new D. H. against any evil magic which might have been placed in his official residence during the interregnum. Although the new District Head – as usual belonging to the Majigi royal family in Bida – ridiculed this performance a bit in the presence of a European like me, he was nevertheless eager to point out that he is the major authority over all movements of the *ndakógbòyá* in his district. He claimed that even the *Etsu* Nupe had to consult him before he could send the mask to any village in his district. But, according to him, the villages preferred to handle all witchcraft cases which they couldn't settle themselves through mediation by the D. H.

Therefore, it is no wonder that during the three years of tenure (1973-76) of the D. H. at Doko, the *ndakógbòyá* of Kusogi (which was under his jurisdiction) was not called at

---

ety, and The Sun, of 05. & 19.08.2004, as well as other Nigerian newspaper reports in the following month on the Okija-affaire. Cf. my first article in this volume.

67 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 196.

68 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 194.

69 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 195.





Fig. 4: The local ruler of the ndakógbòyá, the District Head of Jima/Doko, at his home, surrounded by his councillors (in 1976).

all for the purpose of detecting and punishing witches, although the D. H. himself had to deal with three witchcraft cases during this time, according to his own statement. The first happened in Ebagi, a hamlet south of Doko, where he was called at night because the inhabitants had accused a witch of poisoning the village well. The second and third cases occurred in Doko itself; the issues centred around marriage disputes (i.e. jealousy and adultery). The D. H. asserted that he was capable of telling at once – if necessary with the help of the *Sagi* – whether the accused was a witch or not. And, in the D. H.'s own words, „because the peasants still fear and respect my authority, I normally succeed in convincing the evil-doers to loosen their spell on their victims, - otherwise they are threatened with jail“. As, however, only Upper Area Courts, like that of Bida, are allowed to deal with witchcraft cases, simple Area Courts, such as that of Doko, Kutigi, or Mokwa, can make just preliminary investigations. One of such cases in Doko happened in 1975 and involved one local policeman who had an argument with a prostitute whom he „forgot“ to pay. According to the D. H., she tried to impress the policeman with the following incident: Some days after the dispute, the policeman took a kettle as he wanted to clean his mouth and hands for prayer and suddenly heard a voice, coming from nowhere saying, „Don't touch me, I am poisoned“. Though he was surprised and startled he tried again, but the warning was repeated. The case was reported to the local Judge and investigated with the help of the *Sagy*. The detected „witch“ confessed of being responsible for this incident and of wanting to teach her customer a lesson. This example may serve as an illustration that witches are supposed not just to kill randomly, but that as a rule there is a kind of „Dantesque appropriateness“ between the

offence of the victim and the punishment by the witch, as Salamone observed already concerning the neighbouring Gbagyi.<sup>70</sup>

The range of such „punishments“ is said to stretch from impotence to pauperisation and murder. This became evident in a case related to me by a Hausa assistant to the Irrigation Officer in Patigi: In 1976 the Irrigation Officer laid off some of his workers for unknown reasons. Two weeks later he had a road accident under strange circumstances, escaping narrowly with his life. Some days later, my informant overheard a conversation between two of the sacked Nupe workers in which one of them boasted of having bewitched the officer in causing the accident expressively to serve as a first warning, but that this „idiot“ would not escape so easily the second time. It seems to be noteworthy that this time the self-confessed „witch“ was a male, who in addition belonged to the *ndakógbòyá* society, according to his own words. This indicates the general ambivalence of many Nupe towards medicine-men or witch finders that they often equate – unconsciously or not – with witches themselves, as we shall see later in detail on Gbagyi medicine-men.<sup>71</sup>

How many of such or similar cases are brought to the courts annually, or whether the number is increasing or decreasing over the years is difficult to tell.<sup>72</sup> But since most Nupe peasants are still bewildered by the ambivalent attitude of Western educated judges towards the handling of witchcraft cases, and as they do not feel sure about the intentions of the existing law<sup>73</sup>, it is doubtful that there is a significantly larger amount of witchcraft cases handled by the courts today compared with the 1930s. As in the past, the courts are most likely to be involved only if witchcraft cases assume strong political overtones, or if serious offences, like murder, were committed. The following two case histories may serve as an illustration:

The first case, which got nationwide attention, happened in spring 1973 in Mwuo, a remote village at the western border of Nupeland.<sup>74</sup> As usual, there are different versions of the story. According to one version the victim was a 28 year old patent medicine seller, born in a Christian family and a staunch member of the UMCA (United Missionary Church of Africa) in a village, whose population was almost equally made up of Moslems and Christians. The medicine seller, G., had a quarrel with his mother and other co-villagers, possibly because of his recent marriage with an 18 year old girl, and was warned by his brother, a pastor at the Salaka Bible School, to leave his village over New Year. However, G. disregarded this warning and subsequently fell seriously ill. Two days later he died. The villagers suspected that he died as a result of some „evil prac-

---

70 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 9.

71 cf. similar SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 15.

72 Both the former Chief *Àkàli* of Bida, who was among the members who drafted the Nigerian Penal Code (including section 214 to 219 on ordeal, juju, and witchcraft) and who was one of the chief members of the Emir's Council at the time of the interview, and the *Àkàli* at the Bida Upper Area Court in 1976 were very reluctant to provide any useful information on this issue.

73 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 163-164.

74 The incident received nationwide publicity, as one Nigerian magazine carried a photo-story on this witchcraft case; cf. „Mystery man of Mwuo“, in: „Spear - Nigeria's National Magazine“, July 1973, pp. 15-18.

tices“, they buried him in the village cemetery after a funeral service conducted at the local church. Four months later, the dead and buried man was found alive again – though distressed and confused – in the bush near Ndafu, a hamlet some 18 miles from Mwuo. The story of this apparent rise from the dead spread rapidly, and the Local Administration – fearful of the religious and political disorder that might entail this story – instructed all religious leaders in Mwuo to tell their congregation that no human being could ever arise from the dead. The case of the „resurrected” man was later investigated by the police of Mokwa, a medical officer from Bida General Hospital, and even the *Etsu* Nupe himself. A skeleton of doubtful origin from G.'s grave was dug up, which some villagers had found unusually depressed shortly after the burial. It was suspected that the Christian community of Mwuo, or at least its representatives, took part in a religiously motivated campaign to destabilise the traditional (Islamic) authorities. The former Village Head and others were tried in the courts for inciting religious unrest, first at Mokwa, then at Bida and Minna (the division and state capital, respectively). The accused Village Head goz deposed, whereas the victim could apparently coin the newly acquired fame into money. At least, G. owned a Toyota van and ran a prosperous medicine selling business in 1982.<sup>75</sup>

The second case happened long ago, in 1953, but is still of interest because it throws light on the close relationship between Nupe and Gwari witchcraft beliefs, which exist, quite contrary to Nadel's theory<sup>76</sup>, at least in the peasants view.<sup>77</sup> The incident took place at Yidna, a Gwari village of Paiko District (neighbouring Badeggi District of the former Bida Division). It centred around accusations of unlawful trials by ordeal administered by three Nupe medicine-men.<sup>78</sup> At that time mass ordeals were also endemic in Nupeland, probably because, with the official prohibition of the witch hunts of the *ndakógbòyá*, the people thought they had no alternative for detecting witches than taking recourse to individual witch finders. The people of Yidna feared that their village was troubled by an evil spirit, which among other things had caused illness and an attempted murder of the *Nákorjí*, the Nupe title of the Village Head of Yidna, when the latter was riding through the bush. In November 1952, the *Nakorjí* sent for three travelling Nupe „witch doctors“ (*bocizi*<sup>79</sup>) who had been seen practising in some neighbouring villages (Gawu and Buku). As the *bocizi* had never before been in that area, they first asked the *Sarkin* Paiko, the District Head, for permission to come to Yidna, which was granted after they had sent a tribute of £ 5, as well as a calabash of cola nuts to the D. H.. When the Nupe *bocizi*, two brothers and one of their friends from Bida, who earned their living by such extortion tours, arrived at the village, they told the population that the *Sarkin* Paiko had given them authority to dispense a liquid potion for eve-

75 However, according to another local source of information, G. was later accused of being a witch himself because two children died shortly after he treated them with an injection.

76 cf. NADEL: Witchcraft, p. 267.

77 cf. similar SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 4.

78 cf. here and in the following: NAK, MINPROF. 2478, „Preliminary inquiry: Regina vs. Moh. Kusogi Bida and 5 others“, trial at the court of Minna, Jan. 16, 1953.

79 Medicine men or „witch doctors“ are called *boci* (pl. *bocizi*) or *cigbeci* (pl. *cigbecizi*) in Nupe; the suffix *ci* indicating the actor or owner of the medicine (*cigbe*, in Nupe). The Gwari equivalent is *beki*.

rybody to drink in all the hamlets of his District, which would reveal any witch among the population. Anyone who should refuse to drink their „medicine” would be arrested. The next morning, the whole village assembled in front of the door of the *Nakorji*'s compound, and everybody, including babies, had to drink from the potion, mixed from water and different powders by Moh. Kusogi, the leading *boci*. Some of the villagers fell down immediately after drinking the potion, while three of them - all women - died on the spot and were buried the same day. This caused some concern among the *bocizi* because, according to their own statement, all their victims had recovered from similar ordeals in the past, if treated with an antidote (in this case lemon juice). But since the villagers were convinced that the women who died were indeed witches, the travellers could nevertheless collect ransom money or fines from the victims and their relatives, respectively. One unlucky man, whose mother and wife died, had to give £ 3, two lengths of cloth, and a chicken. Others gave a big gown, three lengths of cloth, and five chicken or 35 sh. and a chicken, etc.

It is interesting to note that there was little opposition to the dealings of the *bocizi*, even among the relatives of the deceased victims. When one of them dared to protest, the elders replied: „Why has your mother died, others drank and are still alive?” The husband of another woman who died during the ordeal even agreed that „she died as a consequence of her evil ways“ as revealed by the ordeal. And again another villager confessed to one of the *bocizi* that he was an evil person and had attempted to kill the *Nakorji* by witchcraft. Eventually, in spite of the attempt by the villagers to cover-up the incident, the colonial administrators heard about it, albeit by chance.

At about the same time, another famous *boci* called Ndasogba, from Badeggi, used to tour the southern and eastern Districts of Nupeland on invitation of villages sending for him to cleanse their villages from witchcraft. He was known as the leading herbalist in the Cis-Kaduna area in the last two decades of colonial rule and was in the habit of organising public trials to prove the innocence of persons who were suspected of being witches. Reasons for such suspicion were described by the Nupe as follows: If a person is bewitched and falls ill, there is a chance that he (or she) will signify the name of the person who has bewitched him in his dreams. The dream figure will be only dimly recognizable through a column of smoke.<sup>80</sup> However, the victim himself will not be able to remember either his dream or the name he uttered. Therefore, the cooperation of the *boci* or the watcher at the sick-bed is required to note the name of the accused that usually belongs to a person with whom the victim is in close contact. The relatives of the bewitched or the *boci* himself will then visit the accused person and demand the release of his or her spell. Should the accused refuse or deny the accusation, he or she will be

---

80 cf. „Note on witchcraft in Badeggi District“, A.H.M. Kirk Greene, Badeggi, September 24, 1954; included in: NAK, Bida Div., Non-Current Papers, B118, 1933, „Witchcraft cases and anti-witchcraft in Nupe society“; cf. similar, FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen 9, p. 65. - The reference to smoke in this report probably indicates the use of a certain anti-witchcraft medicine, called *toràri*, which is put beside the sick person on a fire and is supposed to cause the bewitched person to utter the name of the evil spirit. According to the *Etsu Zugurma*, the *toràri* was one of the most powerful anti-witchcraft medicines in the 1980s, and had replaced the *ndakógbòyá*, at least in the Eban/Zugurma area of Nupeland.

forced (normally moral coercion will suffice, as the whole story will be spread round the village) to prove innocence by ordeal. There are two well known Nupe potions applied: *ukpa* and *kpakangici*, made from the powdered bark of a poisonous tree.<sup>81</sup> Similar kinds of witch finding in other parts of the country were already used in the twenties as a means to extort money, as a report from H.M. Irwin indicated. The report was included in the above mentioned memo on witchcraft prepared for the Resident of the Niger Province.<sup>82</sup> Whether this report, together with the sad experience of the extortion tours of the *ndakógbòyá* described above, caused the British Resident to exert some moral pressure on the *Etsu* Nupe is not known. But it is likely that the Colonial Officers persuaded the *Etsu* and his council to take a closer look at such mass ordeals. At least in the above mentioned case of Ndasogba the *Etsu* told his District Heads that such public trials would spread only worries and fears among their people and would cause disunity among them. He ordered the *hakimai* (D. H.) to announce that any community inviting witch doctors, as well as those who would apply the ordeal, would be seriously punished. Apparently, this order was implemented immediately. After Ndasogba was caught a third time, the *Àkalin Àlkaki* of Bida fined him, as well as the inhabitants of Tswakoko, the village which had invited him, £ 5.<sup>83</sup>

However, this reflects just the official handling of the subject. Similar to the prohibition of tribute payments (under the pretext of *zakkat*) – which the British tried to enforce in vain because it ran contrary to the interest of the ruling class<sup>84</sup> – the traditional authorities apparently were not very eager to stop the business of „witch finders“. Even after the death of the Ndasogba, other travelling *bocizi* continued to perform „witch trials“ in Nupeland unmolested.

One well-known *boci* in western Trans-Kaduna, who continued to earn his living in 1982 by touring villages on invitation, was the Ndagena of Ebi. His junior brother, a *boci* himself at Mokwa, told me that both of them, assisted by other villagers, conducted a witch hunt in Mokwa just four weeks before my arrival. Altogether four witches were detected and punished. They were all females, one old and three younger women, married, but from different families. None of them could be called rich, though each of them had her sideline occupation, e.g. petty trading in foodstuffs. All cases centred around conflicts within the extended family. In two of the cases the mother of the family head

---

81 In the court case against Moh. Kusogi, mentioned above, the potion, analysed by a Government chemist, revealed a lethal dose of *aworoso*, which is sometimes used as a purgative in a smaller dose.

82 „Sometimes, however, this belief in witchcraft was only used as an excuse for raising money by the chiefs. When someone died, the relatives when bearing away the corpse would approach as if voluntary the door of a certain man, who would at once be accused of causing the death of the deceased. The victim would always be a man of means which would be appropriated by the Chief. The latter would previously give his instructions to the deceased's relatives and probably a present also for their pains... The natural effect of such a custom was to militate against the acquisition of wealth, as its possession was a source of temptation to the accuser. Even today no pagan will make a display of wealth...“ H.M. Irwin, D.O., „Extract from Kumbashi Assessment Report, 1920“, NAK, MINPROF, M. 1228, 1934.

83 cf. the correspondence of *Etsu* Nupe, Muh. Ndayako, on „Ndasogba Mai-Maganin Maita“ and related subjects, Nov. 1952 to Feb. 1954; included in: NAK, Bida Div., Non-Current Papers, B 118.

84 cf. KOHNERT: Klassenbildung, pp. 99-119.



Fig. 5: A convicted 'witch' - One of the three framed photographs of detected 'witches' displayed, together with a diploma, certifying that the owner was a recognised witch-doctor, on the wall of the compound of a *boci* in Mokwa in 1982.

was accused of having bewitched her son and husband „to give his mother money“, i.e. to guarantee the social security of his mother. In another case a small schoolboy fell seriously ill. He was allegedly bewitched by a barren older woman living in the same compound, said to be jealous of the fertility of her female co-residents. In both cases, the accused women „confessed“ their evil deeds and loosened their spell, i.e. their „victims“ recovered from their illness.<sup>85</sup> Whether these confessions were made without coercion is doubtful, last but not least, because my informants in Mokwa agreed that if an accused person tried to argue, he or she would be forced to prove his or her innocence by an ordeal, applied either by the *ndakógbòyá* or a *boci*. In the Mokwa region the accused was given a certain potion, called *fien* or *tagan*, which is meant to cause him to confess im-

---

85 According to the elders of Mokwa there are seven different kinds of illness caused by witchcraft in Nupeland: (1) *shamu*, i.e. stomach trouble which causes severe pain to the victim right from birth; (2) *zana-zana* which can be seen in the eyes; (3) *lan-jwan-jwa* which is witnessed through continuous headache; (4) *esu*, i.e. severe pains under the ribs; (5) *wuregi*, an illness which paralyses the whole body; (6) *kparagi*, i.e. convulsions which are lethal for children; (7) *bogun*, which will cause the body of the victim to swell up so that he loses his power.

mediately if he or she is a witch. Innocent people, they say, do not feel anything if they drink the medicine.<sup>86</sup>

Beside payments in cash and/or kind to the *boci* or the *ndakógbòyá*, witches were also punished by flogging, and in more serious cases by exposing them naked in the streets of the village in broad daylight still in 1982. First of all, however, they were ordered to repair the harm they were accused of having done. The failure or success to obey this order was a decisive element in determination of the degree of the punishment. Though at least Nadel's informants maintained that a witch was never killed, since that would entail only revenge by other witches,<sup>87</sup> this information was apparently falsified by the evidence of violent clashes connected with the „witchcraft riots“ in Bida in 1931, when even troops had to be called out to quell the riots.<sup>88</sup> Also one of my informants, a Nupe from Katae-regi, confessed that as a young boy he had taken part in the stoning of a witch in his village. The witch in question was an old woman who confessed to having bewitched her co-wife out of jealousy. This case, however, happened in the late thirties and it seems unlikely that such an incidence of stoning would occur today, although one should not rule out the possibility, last but not least in view of the heated international controversy around the stoning verdicts of Sharia courts, related to cases of adultery, in other Northern Emirates in 2003 and 2004. Generally speaking, according to the elders of Mokwa the most serious cases will nowadays be handed over to the police and the courts.

The *bocizi* are often assisted in their search for evil magic by the Village Head and the *Lelu* of affected villages. The use of the word *Lelu* is ambiguous in Nupe. In pre-*jihad* times (i.e. before 1806) it denoted the office of the Head Woman of a village, and it still refers to the supposed spiritual qualities of this woman.<sup>89</sup> But as many Nupe villagers used to call any woman who is suspected of being experienced in witchcraft *Lelu*, rather in an abusive sense,<sup>90</sup> the existence of a *Lelu* in a village will often be denied by the inhabitants. Therefore it is doubtful whether the assertion of the *Majin Dodo* of Kusogi that today the *Lelu* is found only in Patigi Emirate is valid. At least other informants, natives of Doko, insisted that they still have a *Lelu* in this village, which is only a few kilometres from Kusogi. In Dabba, a medium-sized village in Trans-Kaduna, they even have four *Lelu*, one for each of the four village wards. These women were so much re-

---

86 Yet another ordeal, known as *wasa*, was applied in the Doko area. This is a snake bite medicine, the belief being that a true witch would be killed or at least frightened and subdued by a snake after drinking the medicine (cf. also NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 188). As the former D. H. of Doko told me, the *wasa* medicine was still applied in Jima/Doko District in 1982, also to detect thieves. The same is valid for the *sòrògi* dance, mentioned already by Nadel (Nupe Religion, p. 188), which was still applied as recently as 1982 in villages south of the Niger, to detect and to punish witches, who are supposed to get a swollen throat from watching the dance, according to the *Lile* of Gbado. The ordeal where the suspect had to scratch the ground with his finger-nails until blood appeared from under his nails (cf. FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen 9, p. 66. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 188), however, disappeared some generations ago, at least in the Mokwa region.

87 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 188.

88 cf. NADEL: Byzantium, p. 127. IDEM.: Nupe Religion, p. 163.

89 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 167-168.

90 cf. memo of M. Aliyu on witchcraft and related subjects“ NAK, Bida Div., Non-Current Papers, B118, 1938.

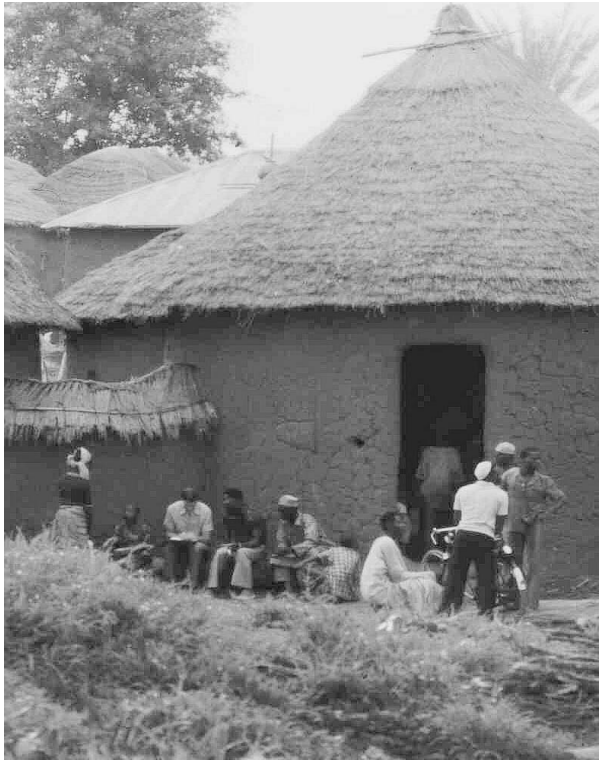


Fig 6: The author during his interviews with Nupe peasants in Dabba, 1976.

spected by the *Nkó*, the Head Woman of Dabba and a great herbalist herself, that she had to consult them first before granting me an interview, out of fear that otherwise these women would take her to task because of single handed decisions on such important matter providing information to strangers. It is therefore evident that many Nupe villages still have their *Lelu*, but as witchcraft remains such a sensitive issue, people would rather avoid calling her by that title.

Anyway, everybody agreed that a *Lelu* is not sufficient to check evil magic at the village level. Despite the relatively dense network of „witch finders“ described above, most Nupe authorities which I interviewed insisted that the number of witches in Nupeland must have increased over time. Three reasons were given to explain this development.

The first two of these explanations seem to be quite obvious with regard to the inner logic of occult belief systems: Firstly, population growth caused a growing effective demand for witchcraft medicine. The growth of population meant that, other figures being equal, the absolute number of witches would double every 25 years.<sup>91</sup> In addition, it was said that the incidence of witchcraft per village increased also in relative terms. This was explained by the growing impact of the market economy and the aftermath of the Nigerian Oil Boom (both in terms of economic growth and the spread of corruption and social differentiation), which had its side effects in Nupeland, too; more money became available in the villages, leading to more opportunities and a greater effective demand for witchcraft medicine.<sup>92</sup> The Nupe as a rule believe that witchcraft is not necessarily hereditary since there are various methods of acquiring it.<sup>93</sup> The most common method, they say, is to buy the *cigbè*, either from other witches or from a *cigbèci* or *boci*, the crucial implication being that the evil deed of the witch is intended. In view of the legal situation no *boci* would ever admit openly selling such witchcraft medicine, but nevertheless some offer „guestimates“ on the costs involved, namely some £ 5 in the

91 Population increase in Nigeria was estimated at about 2 to 2.5% per annum in 1982 in the countryside and 3% in the urban areas. This would imply that the population - and *ceteris paribus* with it, the absolute number of witches - doubled within one generation (or every 23 to 35 years).

92 The Nupe have various names for such medicines (*cigbe*): They call them *ega(n)*, like witchcraft in general, *eshe*, like the name for male witches, or *bàdufù*, literally, „dark place“ (cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 158-159).

93 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 165-166, 170.



olden days, probably Naira 400 - 600 in 1982.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, my informants reasoned, someone who is really poor could hardly be a witch. But you never know, since a young girl could have been initiated into this sinister occupation free of charge by her mother, who was already a witch.

The growth of the market economy also played a crucial part in the closely related reasoning of some of my informants, that with the Oil Boom and its socio-economic effects spreading well into the country-side, it became easier to accumulate capital, the impact could be easily seen in the growing farms of rich peasants and capitalist absentee farmers and the flourishing business of big traders all over Nupeland. But the growing social differentiation, even within the village,<sup>95</sup> raised the envy of the poorer villagers, and some of them accused their wealthy neighbours of having enriched themselves by evil means. However, as we have already seen, this widely reported „natural effect“ of witchcraft accusations to militate against unequal acquisition of wealth, is nothing new. It was already noted by British colonial officers in the 1920's (cf. the touring notes of H. M. Irwin, D. O., quoted above), and it is common in other African societies, too.<sup>96</sup> However, there is no empirical evidence available to back the working hypothesis that witchcraft accusation as a means of defending traditional egalitarian community structures against the intrusion of rural capitalism in Nupeland increased in importance over time, relative to other factors, like jealousy, greed.

The most worrying local explanation for the growing incidence of witchcraft accusations in Nupeland was given by „Papa Angulu“, a former Reverend of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) at Doko. His account was confirmed later by similar reasoning of other informants and runs as follows: In view of the official ban of the *ndakógbòyá* and of witchcraft ordeals, many Nupe were afraid to be left unprotected against the evil intentions of the witches, now supposed to spread all over the country without any effective control. In addition, the power and influence of the *ndakógbòyá* and the *Lelu* deteriorated due to other reasons listed above. Under these adverse circumstances, it might happen that a desperate family head or a mother would feel pressed to resort him- or herself to witchcraft to protect the family against evil magic from outsiders. The argument behind this reasoning being that it is possible to drive out the devil with Beelzebub – similar to the concept of the *Lelu* and the *ndakógbòyá*.<sup>97</sup> However, this could lead to the tragic situation that a mother, in her despair about an actual incidence of witchcraft, might see no alternative than to commit a ritual murder, either to appease the witches, or

---

94 FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen 9, p. 68, mentioned that a „Boschi“ would ask a price of 30,000 cowries in 1909, i.e. roughly the equivalent of the price of a slave in pre-colonial times.

95 cf. Dirk KOHNERT: Rural Class Differentiation in Nigeria - Theory and Practice, in: Afrika-Spektrum 14 (1979), 3, pp. 295-315. IDEM.: Klassenbildung.

96 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft on the Gbagyi (Gwari). PARRINDER: Religion, p. 54 on the Yoruba. Brantley (1979:131/32) and D.J. PARKIN: Politics of Ritual Syncretism: Islam among the Non-Muslim Giriama of Kenya, in: Africa 40 (1979), 3, pp. 217-233, 223 on the Giriama of Kenya. COMAROFF / COMAROFF: Alien-Nation on South Africa.

97 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 191.

as a precondition for acceptance into the witch order as the Nupe see it.<sup>98</sup> Since the easiest available victims to get at for a mother are likely to be young children (notably young girls) of the own extended family, especially the kin of her husband or co-wives, she was said to be placed before the tragic choice, either to kill one of her own relatives in order to be able to protect the rest of the family against the evil intentions of co-witches, or of leaving the family unprotected.<sup>99</sup> This indicates that there existed also altruistic reasons for practising witchcraft, beside the usual selfish reasons given, like greed or jealousy. Regarding the logic fabric of Nupe religion, this certainly had serious repercussions concerning the evaluation of the committed witchcraft by the relatives and neighbours of the witch as well as by the *bocici*, and may be, even the Alkali courts. Besides it is an additional explanation, why in the view of the Nupe, the evilness of the witch is so often directed against his or her husband's or co-wives' kin. And as the woman is considered to be the traditional keeper of the family by the Nupe, this was finally given by my informants as an explanation why more women than men are accused of witchcraft.<sup>100</sup>

### Towards a new conception of Nupe witchcraft

In summary, a consistent local concept of Nupe witchcraft, if existent, would have to distinguish between at least two different kinds of witchcraft: First, the employment of black magic – e.g. the sacrifice of own family members – for good ends, i.e. to protect the rest of the family.<sup>101</sup> And second, the use of black magic to harm anyone in order to

---

98 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, p. 165; a more prosaic, but no less tragic, situation would arise if a family head or a mother, in desperate need of protection against witchcraft, were requested by the consulted witch-doctor to commit ritual murder in order to get parts of the human body considered to be necessary for the preparation of an anti-witchcraft medicine. Cases of ritual murder are reported periodically in the newspapers, not only from Nupeland, but from all parts of Nigeria, one of the outstanding cases being the Okija-cult incident in Anambra state, mentioned before. The spread and commercialisation of so called *muti*-murder, i.e. ritual murder for the purpose of enhancing the business success of greedy businessmen, has been widely commented in Southern Africa in recent years (e.g. in South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe); it has already been subject to scholarly analyses (cf. COMAROFF / COMAROFF: Alien-Nation).

99 Exactly this protection of the family against witchcraft might be the strange „special“ and „unintelligible pleasure“ which FROBENIUS (Volkserzählungen 9, p. 67) narrated 80 years ago from the Nupe in Mokwa in the following, somewhat confused statement on the reasons and methods by which the male (!) would-be Nupe witch acquired his evil craft from the *boci*: „If a man has many children, he may very well fear for them, or else entertain the hope, by means of their help, namely in sacrificing some of them, to gain a special pleasure, which is of course unintelligible to us ... The man (asks the *boci*, D.K.): 'Give me a good medicine which I can take home ... and which I can use for me and for my children ... Give me a good Tschibe (i.e. *cigbe*, D.K.) so that I can prove my power to everybody.', The medicine which the family head eventually gets from the 'Bassa-tsch'i' or 'Boschi' has to be eaten by the witch himself 'and all his children'. (Translation from German, D.K.). Probably, Frobenius confused and mixed the protective and the greedy reasons for acquiring witchcraft medicine, which, however, had significantly different repercussions in the logic of Nupe religion.

100 At Mokwa, my informants estimated the proportion of male to female witches to be one male (*eshe*) to 20 female (*ega(n)* or *gaci*, as witch is called in general in Nupe) in a gang of witches in 1976. But as the female cannot kill without the help of the male (cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 169-170), the latter were considered to be more dangerous. However, as nowadays the males are said normally not to kill themselves, they are hardly ever detected and punished.

101 It goes without saying that even in this case the end does not justify the means, killing of family members or co-villagers, for whatever reason, is regarded by any Nupe as a capital crime.

satisfy unsocial, selfish desires, such as greed, envy, jealousy, private redress, or other sinister reasons (killing for fun is also held to be possible, according to my informants). Apparently there are – contrary to Nadel's comparative witchcraft theory<sup>102</sup> – close similarities between these two types of Nupe witchcraft and the *nwando* and *abujanke* witchcraft of the neighbouring Gwari (Gbagyi). My Nupe informants agreed to this, though they do not distinguish the two types by separate names. However, among the Gwari the *nwando* witchcraft is restricted to personal gains resulting from witchcraft of males within the family, and *abujanke* is restricted to female witchcraft against outsiders or social enemies for reasons of revenge.<sup>103</sup> But it seems necessary to point out some differences between these two indigenous witchcraft theories. First, among the Nupe there is not such a strong correlation between the type of witchcraft and the sex of a witch, the victim, and the client, respectively, as among the Gwari.<sup>104</sup> Second, the Nupe do not differentiate between the „real evil-doer“ (i.e. the client of the witch) and the witch, who performs the evil for him, like the Gwari. Again, this separation between the witch and his or her client in Salamone's witchcraft account seems to be more of a theoretical nature, as the Gwari hold that in practice the real evil-doer is the person who intends to harm other people by the help of either a witch or a witch-doctor.<sup>105</sup> This is similar to the Nupe belief, where the would-be-witch has to consult the *boci* or another witch before her/his evil intentions can become effective. The most sinister effect of witchcraft, the murder of one's enemies or rivals, depends anew in each of the case on the co-operation of the *boci*.<sup>106</sup> At other occasions the Nupe witch may act directly, without the help of others, provided that he/she has been initiated into the witch order, again depending on the *boci*.<sup>107</sup> Third, whereas in Gwari society, according to Salamone, witchcraft itself acts as a means of social control, it seems that among the Nupe, witchcraft accusation, i.e. the anti-witchcraft activities, are meant to fulfil this function. This thesis may need some explanation: According to Salamone, the Gwari witches are „tragic“ figures. They get their evil power already with their mothers' milk, and their victims have been selected for them by their clients. These clients again seek revenge for a harm previously caused by the victim. So the witch's victims are not innocent, on the contrary, certain social norms of Gwari society have been violated by every victim.<sup>108</sup>

---

102 cf. NADEL: Witchcraft.

103 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, pp. 6-8, 12.

104 In Gwari witchcraft theory the client is the „real evil-doer“ who consults the witch (or the witch-doctor) and selects the victim for him/her. However, it may be that Salamone overstated this point, as his case histories underline that this correlation between sex and type of witchcraft is a vague „general tendency“ (cf. SALAMONE, *ibid.*).

105 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 10.

106 cf. NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 169-170.

107 However, it remains an open question, why – contrary to the Nupe – the Gwari should punish not the „real evil-doer“ but their partners in crime (i.e. the consulted witch) as Salamone (Gbagyi Witchcraft, pp. 10-11) maintains. This is even more puzzling, as the Gwari say – contrary to the Nupe – that one becomes a witch not by intention but by birth, unconsciously and involuntary (cf. SALAMONE, Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 9).

108 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 5, 13). Those violations are „jealousy, hatred, refusing to share good fortune, withholding love, injustice, and resorting to magic to advance your fortune to

As shown above, under certain conditions also the Nupe are said to employ black magic against victims who openly set aside the customary social norms of Nupe society, thus punishing the social deviant, or at least accused of having done so. This happens especially in cases of rich people, who refuse to share their resources in times of hardship. Even in such cases, where witchcraft against outsiders is employed to serve good ends, the witches would be considered as evil persons because they seek to settle their grievances individually and by illegitimate force. This egoistical impudent use of individual power, however, is contrary to the social norms of Nupe religion. As in most African societies, the prerogative of punishing enemies of the society is restricted to the community, the state, or its representatives. In this respect there is no difference between the Nupe and the Gwari.<sup>109</sup> For the Nupe, however, the important point is that the use of power is not considered as such to be evil – as maintained by Salamone for the Gwari.

On a theoretical level, the evil embodied in the illegitimate use of individual power for selfish purposes, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of witchcraft within the realm of the occult belief system of the Nupe. Other things being equal, anti-witchcraft cults are a means for a society to effect sanctions against egoistic private redress, which represents the illegitimate use of individual force; illegitimate, of course, only from the stand-point of the dominant ideology, which reflects more often than not the ideology of the rulers. However, in different socio-economic formations this could have a completely different meaning which may be camouflaged by seemingly insignificant changes in the appearance of witch purge.

Under the conditions of the communal mode of production, e.g. among the stateless village communities of the Nupe *zányi* (i.e. the „pure“ Nupe) in pre-Edegi times up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>110</sup> such socially organised witch accusations might have been used as a direct defence against the usurpation of private power by despotic invaders (like Edegi, cf. the first legend quoted above), similar to witchcraft accusations in other parts of Nigeria, as among the Tiv of the „Middle Belt“.<sup>111</sup> Under the slave (or semi-feudal) mode of production of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century they were used by the Nupe state, first as a method of securing and consolidating the appropriation of power from the gentile organisation.<sup>112</sup> Afterwards, during a period, stretching from the Nupe *jihad* (i.e. during the 19<sup>th</sup> century) well into the colonial mode of production (i.e. the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

---

the detriment of another. All can be reduced to the formulation that violators have not acted like true Gbagyi“ (ibid., p. 13). – This statement raises some doubts again: According to the case histories that Salamone provides as examples to clarify his point (ibid., p. 9), at least jealousy and hatred were motives of the witches and their clients, respectively, not of their victims. In fact, the latter interpretation would appear more reasonable and is common not only among the Nupe, but also in many other African societies. However, this interpretation would fail to back Salamone’s thesis that among the Gwari the witches act as agents of social control.

109 cf. SALAMONE: Gbagyi Witchcraft, p. 15.

110 cf. NADEL: Byzantium, pp. 19-20, 25, 73.

111 cf. TSEAYO: Conflict, pp. 57-65.

112 According to narratives of the Nupe, as recorded by Frobenius in 1912, the Head of the *ndakógbòyá* and the *Etsu* Nupe already shared the extortion money, which is said to have been paid in cash (200,000 cowries, i.e. the price of 4 - 7 slaves) and in kind (e.g. cola, goats, chicken) per village, at the time of Edegi (cf. FROBENIUS: Volkserzählungen 9, S. 79-81. Cf. also KOHNERT: Klassenbildung, S. 62-90, on the articulation of the slave mode of production in Nupeland).

century), the witch hunts were used as extortion tours of the *ndakógbòyá*.<sup>113</sup> This might have been welcomed by the ruling class in Bida as a substitute for the expropriation of the peasantry through tribute and slave hunts, which were first restricted and finally forbidden by the British colonial power.<sup>114</sup> Thus the anti-witchcraft cult in this period reconfirmed the power of the ruling class in threefold respect: Apart from acting as a substitute for the punitive expeditions against disloyal or resistant tributary villages, especially in Trans-Kaduna, it was an open sign of the power of local rulers in the profane as well as in the spiritual world and signified their judicial authority even over the occult enemies of the society, as they themselves defined them. And third, it served to disguise their true goals of aggression, of exploiting the peasantry by promoting the witch craze in Nupeland. In this respect, it is revealing that not just individual women were accused, but whole villages, and the Village Head had to pay heavy ransom to the members of the lodges. Quite often, the villagers appealed to the *Etsu Nupe*, to order the *Maji(n) Dodo* to recall his servants.<sup>115</sup> But in fact, the *Etsu* himself was considered to be the prime instigator of the extortion tours of the *ndakógbòyá*, as mentioned above. This lends further support to the thesis that anti-witchcraft cults among the Nupe were principally based on class antagonism and only to a lesser extent on gender-specific cleavages, although the latter should by no means be excluded from consideration as another determinant.

However, I do not think that it is necessary to take sides, either for or against cognitive, political, feminist, or any other „pure“ witchcraft theory. All of them are likely to be too restrictive, although each of them may contain valid arguments. The point is, that anti-witchcraft movements may change their content and meaning over time, although their outer appearance remains the same; a change which is closely related to and interdependent with the different modes of production in which they are embedded.

It seems equally important to note that witchcraft accusations themselves may not only have served opposite ends under different modes of production, but might also have done so in quite different manners, i.e. the societies concerned, in adhering to the *ndakógbòyá*, used quite different social or socio-psychological mechanisms to make their ends meet.

As Nadel<sup>116</sup> rightly observed, Nupe peasants, similar to peasants all over Africa, do not face the choice between faith and knowledge concerning the explanation of the realities of their life. They generally believe that hard work and good weather will provide a good harvest, but may hold that under certain conditions good or evil spirits would bring the same results. Notwithstanding the fact that in African as well as in Western societies, religious or magic and scientific knowledge are complementary to rather than exclusive. This absence of conflict between the supernatural and natural science be-

---

113 Already CROWTHER / TAYLOR: Gospel, 1859, p. 215, who were among the first missionaries to arrive in Nupeland, wrote about the big mask (*gunnukó*) of the *ndakógbòyá* in the Rabba-Mokwa-Region of Trans-Kaduna: „These (Gunoko) dance about from village to village and receive cowries. They exercise some tyrannical influence over the people during the time of their appearance.“

114 cf. KOHNERT: Klassenbildung. MASON: Foundation.

115 cf. NADEL: Nupe State, p. 441. IDEM.: Nupe Religion, p. 196.

116 NADEL: Nupe Religion, pp. 4-5.

comes relevant on different levels of explanation. It is against this background that I would like to forward three working hypotheses which would challenge Nadel's witchcraft theory if they should prove to be valid.

First, the anti-witchcraft cult among the Nupe was created in the beginning as a direct means of defence against an aggressor, i.e. the Nupe openly pointed at the true enemy of the community whom they tried to eliminate; therefore, at this stage of development of Nupe society, anti-witchcraft accusations would be misinterpreted as symptoms of mental stress in the society. Second, even if one were to agree that witchcraft accusations of the Nupe were developed to cover social frustrations and anxieties, it does not necessarily follow that they are to be interpreted as pathological symptoms of the society, i.e. as an (social) illness which had to be cured. If, as I maintained at the beginning, under certain circumstances (e.g. anti-colonial witchcraft movements, accusations against selfish accumulation of resources), witchcraft accusations act to attack directly or indirectly (through scapegoats) true enemies of the society, they might prove to be a powerful antidote – serving to prevent the destruction of the valid social structure. The fact that from the Western point of view of rational science there exists better medicines (i.e. social strategies) may not be of great help to the stakeholders, as long as the actual relations of production in which they are embedded, do not favour the development of such a superior social medicine. Third, socially organised witchcraft accusations (e.g. organised by anti-witchcraft cults) are to be interpreted as pathological symptoms of social conflicts only if they are mainly used (consciously or unconsciously) by dominant forces in a society to repress or exploit other social groups, i.e. if they serve the same purpose as ideologies.<sup>117</sup> In this respect, the degree of ritualisation of the witch hunt may serve as an indicator of the strength of the ideological component of such a purge:<sup>118</sup> a high degree, like that of the *ndakógbòyá* performances described by Frobenius<sup>119</sup> and Nadel,<sup>120</sup> indicating a strong exploitative character, and a comparatively low degree, like that of the current performances of the *ndakógbòyá* lodges (see above), pointing to a diminishing exploitative content. Only in this context do witch hunts tend to canalise social antagonism by diverting the interest from the real source of the conflicts. But to stress it again, „canalise“ does not mean that they solve the conflict. In the long run they rather tend to build up social tensions even further. Finally, it goes without saying that the Durkheimian methodology of „concomitant variations“, i.e. to detect relevant social divergences by further, concomitant divergences – a method which, according to Nadel<sup>121</sup> „any enquiry concerned with social facts must employ“, will be meaningful in the latter two cases only.

---

117 Here, ‘ideology’ is not meant in the totalitarian Mannheimian sense, but in the stricter sociological meaning of wrong or dependent consciousness.

118 A.J. BERGENSEN: Political witch hunts: The sacred end the subversive in cross-national perspective. *American Sociology Review*, 42 (2), 1977, pp. 220-233.

119 FROBENIUS: *Volkserzählungen* 9, pp. 65-68, 78-82.

120 NADEL: *Nupe Religion*, pp. 188-201.

121 NADEL: *Witchcraft*, p. 264.

However, let us be clear about it. Much further and deeper empirical investigation is necessary, before we can arrive at any conclusive theory on the social function and meaning of Nupe witchcraft, especially in its present function and its relation to changes in the past. Currently available information bears more resemblance to some pieces of an incomplete puzzle than to a meaningful picture. The shift from a subsistence to a market economy provoked not only the dissolution of the production unit of the extended family (*efakó*, in Nupe) in favour of smaller consumption units, which could hardly afford to support the sick and „unproductive“ elder members. It also led to the deterioration of the economic and social independence of the female members of the farming household.<sup>122</sup> Could it be that the remarkable increase of witchcraft accusations in Nupeland is related to an individualisation of the socialisation-process caused by the growth of the market economy, rural-urban migration, and class differentiation within the peasantry that promotes the personification of evil powers and the apostasy from traditional beliefs in collective actions of gods or one's ancestors?<sup>123</sup> Could it be that the increasing prominence of females as targets of witch accusations in Nupeland over the past two or three generations was caused by the combined effect of the above mentioned socio-economic development patterns, just as during the witch craze in medieval Europe?<sup>124</sup> Was the source of witchcraft accusations against females thus not the jealousy of the male regarding the independent economic and sexual position of the Nupe women in the 1940s<sup>125</sup> but, on the contrary, the growing dependence of the women on their men, whereby the latter were tempted to consolidate their newly acquired power by witchcraft accusations, which may have compensated them for the dim prospects of their own economic future? Could the predominance of accusations against old women as murderers of young children result from a fear of the guilt-ridden young, male and female alike, concerning imaginary (or real) threats of their elders, feeling neglected by their kin? Had the projection of this hatred into witch fantasies been promoted by the fact that still the only legitimate method to question the authority of senior relatives in cases of social conflict within the family was to press them into the role of an outsider? All these, and many more questions await an answer, which could be provided only by painstaking further grass-root research.

---

122 cf. KOHNERT: *Klassenbildung*, pp. 232-242.

123 A similar argument has been put forward by G. ELWERT (*Bauern und Staat in Afrika*, Frankfurt 1983) concerning witchcraft movements in rural Benin, and by COMAROFF / COMAROFF (*Alien-Nation*) concerning Southern Africa.

124 cf. Nachman BEN-YEHUDA: The European witch craze of the 14th to 17th centuries: A sociologist's perspective, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 86 (1980), 1, pp. 1-31, 17-18.

125 NADEL: *Nupe Religion*, pp. 172-181.