



Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison

By Peter Geschiere

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In Dante's *Inferno*, the lowest circle of Hell is reserved for traitors, those who betrayed their closest companions. In a wide range of literatures and mythologies such intimate aggression is a source of ultimate terror, and in *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust*, Peter Geschiere masterfully sketches it as a central ember at the core of human relationships, one brutally revealed in the practice of witchcraft. Examining witchcraft in its variety of forms throughout the globe, he shows how this often misunderstood practice is deeply structured by intimacy and the powers it affords. In doing so, he offers not only a comprehensive look at contemporary witchcraft but also a fresh—if troubling—new way to think about intimacy itself.

Geschiere begins in the forests of southeast Cameroon with the Maka, who fear “witchcraft of the house” above all else. Drawing a variety of local conceptions of intimacy into a global arc, he tracks notions of the home and family—and witchcraft's transgression of them—throughout Africa, Europe, Brazil, and Oceania, showing that witchcraft provides powerful ways of addressing issues that are crucial to social relationships. Indeed, by uncovering the link between intimacy and witchcraft in so many parts of the world, he paints a provocative picture of human sociality that scrutinizes some of the most prevalent views held by contemporary social science.

One of the few books to situate witchcraft in a global context, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust* is at once a theoretical tour de force and an empirically rich and lucid take on a difficult-to-understand spiritual practice and the private spaces throughout the world it so greatly affects.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Geschiere provides a new understanding of witchcraft and valuable keys that help to explain the persistence of the occult in contemporary Africa and elsewhere. . . . Representing a huge step for the anthropology of witchcraft, this study offers new analytical and methodological tools. It emphasizes the need for comparative and historical approaches that are fundamental not only for studies of the occult elsewhere, but also for anthropology at large.”

(Social Analysis)

“This thoughtful work reminds readers of the complexity of the subject. It is a refreshing addition to the study of witchcraft in anthropology, and one that will move forward the debate and understanding in the field far beyond Africa.”

(A. K. Leykam Choice)

“Witchcraft—as a theme—always risks carrying a sort of pejorative or even racist undercurrent of meaning: it cannot help but evoke the backward, the irrational, the pre-political. This began to change in the 1990s, owing in large part to the work of Peter Geschiere, whose book *The Modernity of Witchcraft* showed that concepts of the occult are dynamic and changing instead of static and timeless, and that they bear directly on people’s experiences of capitalism, politics, and the state. In his newest book Geschiere takes this project a step further, setting out to show that the anxieties that many Africans express through the idiom of witchcraft are not at all unique or ‘other.’ Once we strip away the trope it becomes clear that witchcraft hinges on a rather general human experience: the disturbing realisation that intimacy is always intrinsically dangerous—that the most threatening aggression comes from within families and among neighbours.”

(Journal of Modern African Studies)

“*Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust: Africa in Comparison* is a great read in which Geschiere manages to de-exoticise the notion of witchcraft and show its universal dimension. In his search for answers, he poses many fascinating questions that open up new areas for research on the topic.”

(Social Anthropology)

“Just when we thought there was little more anthropologists had to say about witchcraft and sorcery, Peter Geschiere has uncannily done it again. Working with a large canvas, moving across space and time, drawing not only on his long experience in Cameroon but also on the work of others in Europe, Brazil, Melanesia, and beyond, as well as on unexpected sources—Freud, Simmel, Lauren Berlant—Geschiere paints a brilliant and unsettling portrait of the perils of intimacy at the heart of witchcraft imaginaries. A work that will change the field once more.”

(Charles Piot, author of Nostalgia for the Future)

“Situating witchcraft anxieties within a fundamental human experience of intimacy as ambiguous, this lucidly written, engaging book breaks new, exciting ground for the study of witchcraft in Africa and beyond. Peter Geschiere not only powerfully rejects exoticizing readings of African concerns with the occult, he convincingly pleads that we redirect our anthropological inquiries toward core human concerns, such as the genesis of trust.”

(Birgit Meyer, author of Translating the Devil)

“Peter Geschiere presents a sensitive interpretation of witchcraft as both a discourse and a lived reality, zooming into his fine-grained fieldwork material and then zooming back out to give historical, sociological, and political-economic context. As in *The Perils of Belonging*, he takes what might seem to be exceptional African circumstances and puts them in conversation with comparable cases from other parts of the world, allowing him to clarify what is really at stake—not only in Africa, but all over the globe.”

(Mike McGovern, author of *Unmasking the State*)

About the Author

Peter Geschiere is professor of African anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of many books, most recently *The Perils of Belonging: Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe*, also published by the University of Chicago Press. He lives in Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jacqueline Kang:

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