
It is hard to imagine that one could publish a book about witchcraft in Africa in 2012 and have something refreshing to say on a topic that has been the subject of many monographs. Yet Norman Miller succeeds in doing just that. In this memoir about living in and travelling through East Africa, Miller presents us with a narrative of his pursuit of ‘the language of witchcraft’. Having been initially befuddled by reading about the murder of a young British mineral prospector and the alleged connection to witchcraft in a newspaper in Mombasa, Miller sets off to acquaint himself with witchcraft and its impact on African life. While most of the book focuses on his experiences in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, we are also treated to brief excursions into belief systems in Malawi, Zambia and DR Congo. Miller brings to light not only the differences but also the links between conceptions of witchcraft in these locations.

Apart from the geographical differences, the reader is given a variety of perspectives that are made possible by the author’s own transformational journey – as an adventurer, a student, then an academic – a process that certainly adds to the complexity of the narrative that he weaves. Whether they are new to his subject or experts, Miller invites his readers to share in his intellectual growth as he navigates his way through the hazy language and world of witchcraft. His first-person account of its impact on various facets of African life over the course of forty-five years is revealing and refreshing, providing a rich intimacy that is rare in the anthropological and historical literature on witchcraft. His interactions and conversations with Africans and foreigners, aristocrats and non-aristocrats, rich and poor, help to enrich the complexity and nuance of his story. Miller raises a number of important questions about witchcraft that have still to be properly answered: for example, why is it that witchcraft seems to be prevalent among settled pastoralist groups and not nomadic ones?

Confronted with witchcraft in East Africa, British colonial officials struggled to come to terms with its perceived immorality. If there was one thing about which the British were in agreement with their African subjects, it was that witchcraft was antisocial and harmful to the society. However, they disagreed over what to be done about the menace. The colonial implementation of laws with the goal of suppressing the activities of so-called ‘witchdoctors’ encountered the practical concerns of Africans who saw these individuals as performing a ‘public service’ (p. 21). The futility of outlawing witchcraft, a fact that was not lost on the colonial officials, attests to the difficulty of dealing with it. Miller’s adventures also point to the weakness of the now disproved modernization theory that Christianity and education would lead to the elimination of witchcraft in Africa. Here Miller’s work is in agreement with scholars such as the Comaroffs and Peter Geschiere who have championed the discourse on the ‘modernity of witchcraft’.

Miller’s ten chronological chapters make it evident that witchcraft is not some relic of the African past but a quotidian part of life, so much so that ‘like sex and soccer, witchcraft was often on the “street radios”’ (p. 166). One of the obvious strengths of the book is Miller’s application of the phenomenological epoché (or bracketing) that enables him to suspend judgement and give voice to his informants and subjects, allowing them to come alive. Although Miller’s own perceptions about witchcraft are discernible, the book’s characters speak for themselves, thereby adding additional layers of insight on the subject. As a result, Miller is able to tackle a very controversial and touchy subject in African studies without denigrating the thought processes that ‘produce’ witchcraft.
This book is a worthwhile addition to the numerous books on witchcraft in Africa and would serve as a good introduction to general readers interested in witchcraft in modern Africa. Although its genre makes it less academic and less theoretical, it should also interest scholars in anthropology, religious studies and history because it raises some key, but often overlooked, questions. One of the weaknesses of this fine memoir is that the author touches on too many aspects of witchcraft, and is thus unable to fully develop all his interesting ideas. For example, I would have liked him to develop the apparent porous gap between witchcraft and insanity, as it pertained to Mohammadi (pp. 51–75). In all fairness however, this perceived shortfall is the inherent result of the genre of writing and the author’s aim, rather than any omission on his part.

DAVID KOFI AMPONSAH
Harvard University
amponsah@fas.harvard.edu
doi:10.1017/S0001972013000351


Theodore Trefon, who has emerged over the past 20 years as one of the keenest students of Congolese society and politics, has recently given us a superb analysis of the failure of international aid to stimulate development in Congo. The work is beautifully distilled, and accessible to an audience with only a modest familiarity with Congo’s history and politics. Trefon writes with refreshing directness and clarity, and his work is unmarred by the infelicities of social science jargon. The list of citations is relatively short, but it includes almost all of the best studies of Congo under the two Kabilas (Laurent and Joseph, father and son) and of the failures of the aid establishment. His careful reading and first-hand knowledge of Congo allow Trefon to sprinkle the text with vivid illustrations of his points.

Most valuably of all, Trefon has identified political culture as the chief culprit in the failure of reform in Congo, and made an excellent case for it as the root of Congo’s perpetual ‘failure to launch’. He draws upon his extensive knowledge of colonial and post-colonial Congolese history with confidence, picking out ideal examples to illustrate some of the continuities of the country’s political practices, and hinting at the origins of its culture. Through a well-chosen case study of reform areas, he shows clearly how elements of Congo’s political culture have thwarted the (mostly) good intentions of the international community. In so doing, he also provides trenchant insights into the culture of the international ‘aid machine’ as well.

Indeed, various members of the international community have been active participants in the illusion of reform and concealment of failure in Congo since the demise of the country’s former dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, in 1997. In fairness to the outside world, little meaningful assistance was possible under the dreadful reign of Laurent-Désiré Kabila, Mobutu’s successor, assassinated in January 2001. After his son Joseph succeeded him in power, however, Congo has been fulsomely engaged by a range of international actors. Alas, virtually all have come with their hidden agendas, institutional preoccupations and interests, illusions, and naïve hopes. The increasingly large United Nations peacekeeping
Anthropos. Norman M. Miller’s Encounters with Witchcraft: Field Notes from Africa, is an educational yet entertaining discussion of the author’s experiences with witchcraft in Africa. Miller’s loving attention to the people he encountered, and his respect for local beliefs and customs, is apparent. Encounters with Witchcraft provides an authentic, enlightening reading experience about a subject that has been overly distorted and sensationalized in popular culture.

Journal of Folklore Research. African Witchcraft and Healing Exhibit. African Witchcraft and Healing, an exhibit honoring the launch of Norman Miller’s book Encounters with Witchcraft: Field Notes from Africa, includes 70 photos, maps, documents, art objects, and a video made by African students. Shown at Dartmouth College’s Baker-Berry Library for several months in 2012, the exhibit was curated by Norman Miller and designed by Dennis Grady. Two related exhibits ran concurrently: Witchcraft Art, Devil Art, and Makonde Art and Solutions to Witchcraft Violence. Interview with Norman Miller in Dartmouth Now, May 9, 2012.

Start your review of Encounters with Witchcraft: Field Notes from Africa. Write a review. Jul 11, 2017 Maddie Lyons rated it it was amazing. “Encounter’s with Witchcraft” is an engaging, detailed and captivating account of Norman Miller’s time in Africa and what he came to learn about witchcraft. The biographical and storytelling style keep the reader engaged while at the same time conveying a great amount of first hand information. The story is also told in incredible detail, giving one an intimate and accurate depiction of what Miller encountered.