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African Witchcraft and Religion Among the Yoruba: Translation as Demarcation Practice within a Global Religious History

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Abstract

For years, self-identified witches have demanded the public acknowledgement of witchcraft as “religion” in Nigeria. These political debates are reflected in a long-ongoing scholarly discussion about whether “witchcraft” in Africa should be regarded as religion or not. At its core, this discussion concerns the quest for African meanings. Contrarily, I argue that we should focus on the translingual practice as the reason for today’s perception of “African” and “European” differences as incommensurable. Tracing back today’s understanding of witchcraft among the Yoruba (*àjé*), the *Alatinga* anti-witchcraft movement of the early 1950s becomes the nodal point of Yoruba witchcraft history. Discussing the *Alatinga* as translingual

practice, I understand Yoruba witchcraft concepts as products of a global religious history. Only in the aftermath of the *Alatinga*, a hybrid movement, did the need arise to demarcate “African” and “European” meanings. Thus, Yoruba translingual practice has also affected European understandings of religion and witchcraft today.

Keywords: Yoruba, Africa, Religion, Witchcraft, History, Nigeria

1 Introduction

It is disputed globally whether witchcraft has a legitimate place within a religious history. However, in Europe and the United States “Wicca” and “neo-paganism” have popularly become accepted as religious signifiers (Crowley 2014). Within African contexts, this is not the case. Identification as “witch” is still criminalized in many African countries. In Nigeria, the Witches and Wizards Association of Nigeria (WITZAN) has demanded the public acceptance of witchcraft as religion in recent years. They contend that Nigerian society misunderstands witches as purely evil. Instead, they claim, the members of WITZAN have used their power to do good, indeed, to defend the nation’s integrity and defend its inhabitants (Omidire 2011). They argue that the secular state of Nigeria should therefore protect their rights and acknowledge them as a religion (Ajayi 2016). This interpretation of “secular” as the protection of religious plurality is opposed to the understanding of humanists and atheists in Nigeria. Activists like Leo Igwe argue that religion should not be a public endeavor but should be contained to the private sphere in order not to encourage witchcraft accusations. Along this line, he criticized Nigerian churches, especially the Pentecostal ones, for encouraging the “irrational superstition” of witchcraft:

The public needs to know that the alluded ‘oppression by wicked forces of witches and wizards’ is a make-believe which pastors, godmen and women use as a power base.

Attributing problems to occult forces is a device for the exploitation of gullible ignorant folks. (Igwe 2017)

Igwe's own idea of secularity, presented in the *Skeptic*, a journal issued by Michael Shermer's Skeptics Society, relied on the introduction of "proper scientific education" (Igwe 2004). Igwe asserted that thereby all religions and the witchcraft beliefs that they nourished would be exposed as superstition and not real. Nigerian atheists, as well as the Pentecostals to which they are opposed, refer to global partners in the fight against either witchcraft accusations or evil forces called witchcraft. WITZAN has also been noticed by neo-pagan groups in Europe as a possible contact in the global fight for the rights of self-identified witches (Pitzl-Waters 2011). From this short Nigerian example, it becomes clear that contemporary positions on whether witchcraft is real, or is religious, and whether it should be acknowledged as such in public in African contexts, are subjects of a global debate with contacts in Europe and the United States.

Yet, witchcraft in Africa—with only a few notable exceptions (Masquelier 2008; Meyer 1999)—has not been considered a subject of a religious history. In this regard, it has been treated far differently than Wicca. Basically, there are two positions on witchcraft beliefs in Africa: either they are a product of the encounter between Africans and Christian missions (Meyer 1999) and/or European colonialism (Bernault 2019), or they were preserved from pre-colonial times in African tradition (Hallen & Sodipo 1986). Both possibilities disregard the ways in which Africans since then have adapted their witchcraft beliefs to changing times. This can be compared to a discussion within postcolonial studies between two extremes: either missionary and colonial knowledge production have overtaken and outlasted any attempt at agency by the colonized (Said 2019 [1978]); or the colonized have adapted and in part subverted colonial and missionary knowledge for their own purposes (Bhabha 1984).

This latter position does not view the colonized as absolute autonomous subjects who choose as they like. But it credits them with subtle but real agency within relations of power.

Following this second position within postcolonial studies, I argue that neither colonial and/or missionary knowledge nor pre-colonial tradition has endured unchanged until today in African contexts. Instead, a translingual and comparative practice has been established and used to demarcate identities, especially nationalist and postcolonial but also European identities. Arguing from the example of Southwestern Nigeria, I trace today's witchcraft understanding among the Yoruba (*àjé*) back to the *Alatinga*, a hybrid local anti-witchcraft movement in the early 1950s which became a nodal point in Yoruba witchcraft history. With the *Alatinga*, the perception of witchcraft among the Yoruba changed substantially. The reports on the *Alatinga* are the oldest sources of a systematic use of the word *àjé* which today is considered to be the equivalent of witch and witchcraft. Although the *Alatinga*'s practices had roots within various ascriptions of meaning to witchcraft from missionary, colonial, and nationalist perspectives, their occurrence in the 1950s gave rise to an unprecedented and pervasive debate about witchcraft in Africa. This debate had consequences not only for the Yoruba but also for a global concept of witchcraft. Following the *Alatinga*, the need arose to demarcate *àjé* as a culturally specific concept. This also meant that "witchcraft" was made a European signifier again. Even though both, *àjé* and witchcraft, had been culturally specific products of encounter, exchange, and demarcation—or in fact comparison—the traces of these entanglements were made invisible.

To unveil the long-lasting effects of the encounter and the ongoing global entanglements, this article presents the history of *àjé* and its global effects in a non-chronological way. It begins with the *Alatinga* and argues its way back and forth in order to show the plausibility of the movement's importance as a nodal point within a Yoruba history of witchcraft. It thus presents a genealogical argument following Michel Foucault's ideas

about writing history. The article also discusses this nodal point within the framework of translingual practice, taking cues from Lydia Liu (Liu 1995; Hermann 2015). According to her theory, translation practices determine which kinds of words are taken as equivalents, not the other way around. As such, arguments over “fitting” equivalents are a reaction to the establishment of equivalence. The same argument has been made for comparison (Bergunder 2016; Hermann 2015; Meyer 1999: 82). As these translation practices do not happen in a vacuum, as Liu argues, I also consider ideas about power, agency, and identity formation from Judith Butler and Stuart Hall. This means that phenomena positioned as “Yoruba,” often taken to signify pre-colonial identity, are in fact products of hegemonial, (post-)colonial relations that can only be traced back meaningfully to hybrid and already adapted movements like the *Alatinga*. This does not diminish the legitimacy of the specification of certain phenomena as “Yoruba,” but rather takes them seriously as contingent effects within a global religious history. It argues that the same is also true for European positions that altered significantly in the 1950s due to the global discourse on witchcraft, in which the *Alatinga* also served as a nodal point. This nodal point (re-)established a trans-cultural comparison that produced the very cultural demarcations (“Yoruba”, “European”) regarded as precursors to the comparison today.

2 Witchcraft in Africa and Religious History

In the recent past, scholars have argued that missionary and colonial misconceptions have (mis-)informed scholarship on witchcraft in Africa, and that these misconceptions need to be discarded in order to understand African practices properly. However, using this argument, scholars have arrived at different opinions about what the misinformation was and what the proper naming should be. The discussion on “African” witchcraft has had two aspects: whether witchcraft is religion or not and whether “witchcraft” is the proper translation of

African words. One could think that I am overcomplicating a simple thing here and that the discussion about religion and witchcraft could be clearly distinguished from the discussion about proper translation. My argument, however, is that they are inseparable, as the question about religion relies on the question of what witchcraft “originally” meant. Terence Ranger contended that “witchcraft” had been a colonial container category and that it was the historian’s task to separate the names that had been “lumped together”:

It is very important, though extraordinarily difficult, to make distinctions when one is writing about “magic”, “witchcraft” and “religion”. It is important because colonial administrators and missionaries lumped together every supernatural manifestation – and many natural ones – as “witchcraft”, combining activities and ideas which originally had been not only separate but opposed. (Ranger 2006: 351)

In the missionary and colonial use of the term, Ranger argued, witchcraft had been made a category for many originally different phenomena, including “religion.” Ranger seemed to fear that if these original distinctions were ignored, witchcraft would pervade public discourse more than it already did. Taking the very same argument of missionary and colonial uses of witchcraft, however, Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis came to the opposite conclusion: witchcraft needed to be taken seriously in its religious nature. In the volume *Imagining Evil*, which ter Haar edited in 2007, she argued that “the religious nature of witchcraft beliefs and their religious implications are little explored in the historical and anthropological studies of witchcraft in Africa” (2007: 2). Arguing against Ranger’s accusation of “lumping together” what had been originally separate, ter Haar and Ellis replied that “[p]lacing so-called ‘occult’ practices within a broader religious field helps us to understand the full range of their moral, social and political meanings” (2009: 407). Thus, it seems that both Ranger and ter Haar and Ellis used “religion” with a definition already in mind—either as a socially positive contained practice or as a whole worldview. Criticizing these definitions, Peter Geschiere wrote in his

review of Ranger's 2007 essay: "Rather than imposing a somewhat ex cathedra distinction between religion and witchcraft, perhaps it would be more productive to focus on the constantly changing ways in which people try to maintain distinctions [...]" (2008: 225).

This shift towards taking the understandings of Africans as authoritative occurred within a new perspective on magic, witchcraft, and "the occult" in Africa (Bond & Ciekawy 2001; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993b; Geschiere 1997; Meyer & Pels 2003; Moore & Sanders 2001). "Witchcraft" was seen as part of European knowledge production, a grand narrative about progress in which Africa was deemed to be lacking (Comaroff & Comaroff 1993a). The commendable aim was to show that Africa had its own modernity (Geschiere 1997). However, the impetus to counter this eurocentrism was based on the idea of multiple modernities, which seemingly enabled speaking of Africa as modern in its own right, with occult beliefs and the like. It also required the abandonment of what the Comaroffs deemed "ill-fitting Western categories" (1993a: xviii). Geschiere argued that it was more appropriate to translate the various African terms used by ethnologists and missionaries with "occult forces" rather than with "witchcraft" (Geschiere 1997: 14). Taking the Cameroonian *djambe* as paradigmatic, he maintained that "occult forces" did not confer moralizing and dualistic connotations but illustrated the ambivalent notions Cameroonians associated with *djambe* (Geschiere 1997: 13). However, the idea of multiple modernities had substantial theoretical and practical problems. In practice, there was still a hierarchy of different modernities, among which the European variety was considered highest-ranking. However, the biggest weakness of multiple modernities is, I would argue, an epistemological issue. How do we know of the differences between Africa's and Europe's modernity? Following Geschiere: what are the "ways in which people try to maintain [these] distinctions"?

The new perspective on witchcraft of the 1990s did not come out of nowhere. Even before Geschiere introduced a different translation for *djambe*, the use of "witchcraft" as

analytical category had been criticized within the ethnology of the 1970s (Crick 1973, 1979). In the 1980s, Barry Hallen and J. O. Sodipo (1986) contended that African signifiers could potentially hold other meanings than the ones they had been credited with previously. Following W. V. O. Quine's theory of radical translation, they stressed that in a situation without any prior knowledge of the encountered, there was no limitation of possibilities of translation (Hallen & Sodipo 1986: 16–21). Without keeping in mind the theory of universal language that Quine abandoned, there was simply no way to decide which translation was right or wrong (Hallen & Sodipo 1986: 25). Thus, on a theoretical level they introduced countless translation possibilities. In practice, however, they counteracted this theory by arguing that the Yoruba word *àjé* should not be “mistaken” as “witchcraft” and narrowing it down to one alternative. *Àjé* meant “person with superhuman capabilities or intelligence” (Hallen 2001; Hallen & Sodipo 1986: 107–116). This meaning, they asserted, was the “real” indigenous Yoruba one, since it was shared by the traditional healers they had interviewed. I am critical of this view, as it relegated these traditional healers to a realm separate from global interactions and historical changes, a realm that was “purely” Yoruba.

I suggest, however, that Hallen and Sodipo's theory has far more radical consequences than the ones they actually drew. What does it mean for Yoruba translation practices today if, in theory at least, there are countless possibilities for translation? It means that—just as I quoted from Geschiere—there is need to understand the processes of allocation of meaning and difference. There is need to understand the history of witchcraft in Africa. Following Hallen and Sodipo on a more theoretical level, Birgit Meyer (1999) wrote a history of the “devil” among the Ewe in Ghana. She emphasized the creative potential of translation, “interpreting and transforming the original statement, thereby creating something of new quality” (Meyer 1999: 82). This transformation was at the center of comparative religion, she argued. With this insight, she hinted at something that we take for granted in our daily lives:

the separateness of languages. Often languages are seen as the boundaries of commensurability. What is spoken in a certain language cannot really be compared to something spoken in a different language. But are these limits definite? Hallen and Sodipo argued for incommensurability, but Geschiere noted that the Maka in Cameroon translated *djambe* as “witchcraft” or *sorcellerie* without doubting this translation’s legitimacy and thus the commensurability of *djambe* and “witchcraft” (1997: 14). If Africans translate “witchcraft” with ease into European languages, how can witchcraft in Africa then be seen as different and incommensurable from “European understandings”?

There is a second side to this demarcation of “African” witchcraft, one that has remained mostly concealed within the literature of African studies (Pels 2003). It concerns the ways in which scholars have described European witchcraft. Three aspects mark knowledge production on European witchcraft and separate it clearly from the ways in which African witchcraft has been analyzed: first, there is almost no doubt that Wicca is a religion. It is called a “mystery religion” (Pearson 2002: 135), a “religion of immanence” (Morris 2006: 275), and a “religion of late modernity” (Berger & Ezzy 2009: 501). It has been noted though that it may more accurately be called “spirituality,” since there is no institutional link that makes it a “religion,” only its beliefs (Berger & Ezzy 2009: 502–503; Neger 2009: 18). Second, by way of being a “religion of late modernity,” it is seen as a religion of the individual or individual experience, where practices are legitimized via personal religious experience rather than institutional dogma (Morris 2006: 272). Third, there is a discussion about the history of European witchcraft and how Wicca re-invented that history. Jeanne Pearson argued that the narrative of the “gendercide” which claimed that nine million women were systematically killed in the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages was established in the late nineteenth century within the suffragette movement to decry the church’s “crimes against women” (2002: 163). Brian Morris stated that the Wiccans’ claim of witchcraft’s continuity

from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century was an invention of Margaret Murray (2006: 278). According to her, witchcraft was a pagan, pre-Christian fertility cult, and worship of the Greek goddess Diana had been practiced continuously and subversively by rural communities. The claim to continuity, famously presented in Gerald Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* (2004 [1954]), was debunked quickly and vigorously. In the *Encyclopedia of Religion*'s article on *Concepts of Witchcraft*, Jeremy Burton Russell stated that "Gardner had invented the religion on the basis of his reading of the Murrayites and Aleister Crowley, and his experiences in occult organizations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Crowley's Order of the Temple of the Orient" (1987: 421). In the 1990s, Wiccans debated this development themselves: Aidan A. Kelly and Ronald Hutton, both (former) Wiccans, came to the conclusion that Gardner was the founder of Wicca and thus the inventor of contemporary European witchcraft (Hutton 1999; Kelly 1991).

All these ideas—witchcraft as religion, as an individual experience, and as a fairly recent re-formulation of the 1950s—are diametrically opposed to almost everything written about "African" witchcraft. In general, witchcraft in Africa is seen as not really religion, as a product of social structures embedded in (post)colonial power relations and/or a tradition reaching back to pre-colonial ideas. Yet, these presumed opposites of African and European witchcraft are both products of global entanglements, of one and the same debate. This is the case even though—or, better still—exactly because research about European witchcraft so far has not reflected on its entanglements with and demarcations from African witchcraft. Thus, it takes one half of an actual comparative practice for granted. I argue that this is only because of the largely missing religious history of witchcraft in Africa that these global entanglements, which have also produced what we perceive as "European witchcraft," are obliterated. The same is also still true to an extent of research about African witchcraft. Although the new perspective on witchcraft in Africa has brought witchcraft back into the limelight of African

studies and declared Africans' own understandings as authoritative, it has failed to see how the demarcations of European and African understandings of witchcraft were produced alongside and in interaction with each other. Thus, it has re-affirmed certain assumptions about the separateness and cultural origin of witchcraft ideas which were also products of a global religious history. A closer look at what we know of the history of the understanding of *àjé* will reinforce this argument.

3 The understanding of *àjé* and the history of Yoruba witchcraft

Àjé today is often marked as different from “witchcraft.” As noted, Barry Hallen contends that *àjé* does not really mean witchcraft but refers to a person with superhuman capabilities or intelligence (Hallen 2001; Hallen & Sodipo 1986). Teresa N. Washington perceives *àjé* as the female black spiritual and creational power (Oyadare & Washington 2016; Washington 2018). Both distinguish it from witchcraft and see it as culturally specific to the Yoruba. For both, *àjé* is not religion but African philosophy or black spirituality. Taking into account the field research I conducted in Ibadan in the years 2015 to 2017, the answers provided by my interviewees complicate these interpretations. My field was comprised of Christians, Muslims, and self-identified traditionalists from various backgrounds, most of them living together in one neighborhood (Bachmann 2017, 2019). To many of them, *àjé* was clearly embedded into their religion. It did not matter whether it was Islam, Christianity, or traditional practices. Some perceived it as forces on divine assignment, if not divine forces tout court. Others, however, saw it as evil spirits (demons, jinns) that could only be fought by drawing on divine intervention. Many included the *àjé* in their theological interpretations. Most were adamant to explain that *àjé* was a reality. None of them differentiated between “witchcraft” or “witches” and *àjé*; many stressed that these were, in fact, the same.

How can we account for these kinds of differences between scholars like Hallen and my interviewees? One option would be to give privilege to one of the interpretations as Hallen and Sodipo did with the traditional healers. Christian and Muslim understandings would be secondary and probably seen as diluting the original understanding of *àjé*. However, this kind of argument makes it very difficult to engage critically with the development of a Yoruba understanding of witchcraft. So, I am not arguing to choose one interpretation of *àjé*, say that of my interviewees, over another, say that of Hallen. Instead, I want to understand how both are connected and how it is possible for both to exist.

A good example of this difficulty introduced by different interpretations is one of the few attempts at a Yoruba history of witchcraft, undertaken by Andrew Apter (1993). In line with the critique of colonial and missionary enforcements of the African “occult,” Apter turned to the *Alatinga* (literally “people of the *Atinga*”), a witch-hunt among the Yoruba in the early 1950s. Based on his critical reading of a 1950s ethnological account about the *Alatinga*, he interpreted the movement as an event that was accelerated by its colonial circumstances, especially the colonial global economy. But he could not really explain why the *Alatinga* had hunted for *àjé*, apart from the older interpretation that saw the *Alatinga* as the outcome of “structural contradictions” in traditional Yoruba society (Apter 1993: 116). The circumstances were colonial but the concept that was exploited and led to the persecution of Yoruba women still seemed to be indigenous. So, just like Hallen and Sodipo, he privileged a “traditional” meaning as older.

I suggest that looking closely at what we know of the *Alatinga* may have a bigger impact on what is understood as *àjé* today. I argue that it can be considered as a nodal point in the history of Yoruba witchcraft. So, what do we know of the *Alatinga*? They came from the then French colony of Dahomey, today the Republic of Benin, to rural South-Western Nigeria late in 1950 (Morton-Williams 1956: 315). The *Atinga* shrine which they brought with them

was said to have been taken from the then British colony of the Gold Coast, today part of Ghana. The *Alatinga* was a highly hybrid movement, already a local product of various colonial interactions. On the Gold Coast, there had been a conflict about the proliferated practice of witch-finding through the administration of poison in the 1920s and 1930s, which led to a law prohibiting traditional rulers from ruling on witchcraft accusations (Gray 2001). However, after a lawsuit was raised on the matter, shrines were given the small concession that they could still take witchcraft confessions if they were made voluntarily (Gray 2001: 360). The *Alatinga* also relied on confessions. This continuity with debates on the Gold Coast shows that the fact that the *Alatinga* were “foreigners,” as has been stressed in the literature many times (Morton-Williams 1956; Peel 1968: 97–98), did not diminish their impact among the Yoruba. Instead, I would argue, the fact that their practices had already been adapted to the colonial circumstances—without the administration of poison and based on “voluntary” confessions—made them more attractive.

The *Alatinga* went to villages only upon invitation by the respective village elders. Such an invitation usually entailed a financial reward, which also led to the popular interpretation of the *Alatinga* as “scammers” (Atkinson 1992: 64; Morton-Williams 1956: 326). In the villages they offered various services, especially their anti-witchcraft medicine and the identification of witches. The medicine consisted of a piece of kola nut which was soaked in sacrificial blood shed at the *Atinga* shrine. Belief in the powers of the *Atinga* to protect against or detect witches was shared across religions. Morton-Williams, one of the ethnologists who followed the *Alatinga* closely at the time, stated that “to pagans, *Atinga* was a god, to most Christians and Muslims, an angel sent to help them” (Morton-Williams 1956: 317). The *Alatinga* thus seemed to thrive on a plurality of interpretations, not just a “traditional” one.

If a woman had been identified as witch by the *Alatinga* and did not confess immediately, she was tested with an oracle. For that purpose, she was asked: “*Nje, o l’aje?*—Do you possess witchcraft?” (Morton-Williams 1956: 319) Though the written “*o l’aje*” could also mean “you are a witch,” Morton-Williams’ interpretation seemed to be the preferred one. The idea that the women possessed witchcraft rather than were witches made it possible for them to be cleansed and reintegrated. They had to confess all their deeds for the written record, pay a cleansing fee, give up their witchcraft objects, bathe with sacrificial blood diluted in water, and eat the *Atinga* medicine. A few of the confessions were recorded by Morton-Williams. The women confessed to cannibalism, initiations, and involvement in secret groups, as well as gruesome child murders. Yet, they also notably stressed that they had not known of their deeds until the *Atinga* “freed” them. The women also delivered traditional worship tools like calabashes and shrine figurines as their witchcraft objects. In the following months, more and more people, not just the identified women, divested themselves of the traditional masks and devotional objects in their households (Atkinson 1992: 63). These things were piled and ultimately burned in the streets. With these women, I argue, a social practice that until that time had only been imagined across missionary and travel literature took root among the Yoruba (I will return to this point later). However, the sources describing the *Alatinga* were adamant that their effects were short-lived.

The reasons for this argument lay in the ways in which the *Alatinga* seemed to disturb the order of colonial society. The “rascal boys” of the *Alatinga*, as a colonial officer described them, began to attack other shrines, especially the ones associated with social control like those of the *Ogboni* (Atkinson 1992: 57–58). They also ventured closer and closer to the bigger cities, where the colonial administration was busy containing the nationalist movement. In 1945, a general strike in the bigger cities of South-Western Nigeria had demonstrated how much ground the nationalist movement had gained in society. In spring of

1951, the colonial government finally acted and prohibited the *Alatinga* under the anti-witchcraft law that had existed since 1914 in Nigeria's Criminal Law but had never been enforced before among the Yoruba. A few young men were taken to prison, but the movement seemingly abated soon after anyway. Three reasons have been proposed for the demise of the *Alatinga*: the initial group had amassed enough money and returned to Dahomey; an outbreak of the chicken pox "revealed" the *Alatinga*'s protective claims as untrue; and finally the farmers attracted by the *Alatinga* had to go back to work their fields (Atkinson 1992: 64; Morton-Williams 1956: 326). Of course, these reasons also show how the colonial and ethnological onlookers interpreted the *Alatinga*: a rural movement "fueled by superstition" and cleaned out by "scammers."

The *Alatinga* seemed forgotten, declared as such by the very same sources that had reported on them. Yet, looking at what preceded and followed them, I argue that the *Alatinga* became an important nodal point for what is understood as *àjé* among the Yoruba today. It was only in the course of the debates which followed after the *Alatinga* that *àjé* as a culturally specific and precolonial concept was conceived of. I am not saying that there was no word *àjé*, but before the *Alatinga* it is rather unclear whether this word was connected to any specific and clearly differentiated social practice, since the word does not often appear before the 1950s.

The earliest sources available to us about the Yoruba, dating from the nineteenth century, present a rather confusing picture of what *àjé* was, since they either used the word in unspecific and undifferentiated ways or did not use it at all. John Peel has argued that the missionary sources knew of a few witchcraft incidents (Peel 2002), but, interestingly enough, these accounts were all written in English, though attributed to "native missionaries," and thus did not use the word *àjé*. The early vocabulary and grammar book of native Samuel Ajayi Crowther did not distinguish between *àjé* and *osó* (Crowther 1843). Today, however, these

words are used with markedly gendered connotations as female witchcraft and male sorcery, as many of my interviewees emphasized (Bachmann forthcoming). The Yoruba translation of the New Testament that was finished by the 1860s never used *àjé*, perhaps due to German interference in the translatory process (Nickel 2013). Passages of scripture, like Galatians 5:20, were translated with *osó*. Luther's 1545 translation, for example, which was popular until the 1860s, included *Zeuberey* (sorcery) in the list of the temptations of the flesh, instead of the King James version's "witchcraft." The Yoruba translation of the Old Testament, completed in the second half of the nineteenth century, had more use for the word *àjé*. Yet, it appears that even then it was still undecided what *àjé* meant, and which kind of social relevance it held. However, important for its later citational use was the usage of *àjé* in the infamous verse Exodus 22:18: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." (*Iwo kò gbodo je ki ajé ki o wà lâye.*)

In the early twentieth century, the vagueness of *àjé* decreased. At the same time, it emerged as a socially contested concept within colonial and nationalist politics. This can be seen in the debate about colonial and customary law, as well as the discussion about "indigenous" knowledge of the 1920s and 1930s. With the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914-1916, the British established a dual law system: English Civil Law and Customary Law, the latter of which was seen as the realm of traditional authorities. Criminal Law, however, was only to be enforced by the British. This new law system meant that witchcraft became a matter of Criminal Law and was decidedly taken from the hands of traditional chiefs. At the same time though, while it was totally clear that traditional chiefs could no longer preside over witchcraft cases, these were declared a part of Customary Law. Ajisafe Moore explained in his *The Laws and Customs of the Yoruba People* (Moore 1924), still in use today when it comes to the interpretation of Customary Law, that witchcraft was really a part of customary criminal law and called for the administration of capital punishment, which had been

abandoned for witchcraft cases by the colonial Criminal Law. Moore based his call on the instruction not to “suffer a witch to live” in Exodus 22:18 (Moore 1924: 30). However, to Moore’s understanding this verse had become part and parcel of Yoruba laws and customs, at least as their legitimization. Moore’s book was most likely addressed to the colonial administration or the English-speaking Yoruba elite, who, just like himself, worked within the colonial administration.

In the process of developing new colonial strategies in the twentieth century, which peaked with decolonization, the need increased to know what Africans believed and how their societies worked. This knowledge was needed to re-evaluate strategies for educating “the African” in civilization and self-government (Melland 1931). In 1935, the journal *Africa* published a special issue about witchcraft. At the time, the journal was read and written by a conglomerate of colonial intelligentsia consisting among others of German linguists like Diedrich Westermann, American missionaries and British ethnologists, and colonial administrators. Apart from the expected scholarly debates, the special issue also contained a collection titled “The African Explains Witchcraft.” The title suggests that African voices had compiled these short texts for their specific language group. However, upon closer inspection, most of these texts did not even try to uphold this first impression. They were rather explicit missionary or ethnological interpretations. Among the more interesting exceptions was the text “Yoruba,” which claimed to have stemmed from “a teacher in Abeokuta,” most likely of a missionary school (“Yoruba” 1935: 548). The half-page-long piece is the oldest example of an explicitly gendered differentiation between *àjé* as female and *osó* as male with different practices attached to it. Concerning *àjé*, the article speaks of animal transformation into birds, of “sucking blood,” of secret meetings, of “witches sitting in Church,” and of protection medicines. Most of these tropes—vampirism, cannibalism, animal transformation, and the supposed “cultic” nature of witchcraft—can be found in the missionary and colonial literature

of the nineteenth century, with famous compilations by scholars of religious studies and ethnology in Europe (Frazer 1913; Tylor 1871). However, two new points had been added by the 1930s: the pervasiveness of witches, of *àjé*—to the degree that the Church was not free of them—and the means of protection in “medicines.” These points were likely inspired by the engagement with the so-called *Aladura* movement—an anti-missionary and anti-colonial revival in the early 1930s that focused on healing practices (Peel 1968).

After the *Alatinga*, witchcraft in Africa and among the Yoruba specifically became a focal point of scholarly interest in the second half of the twentieth century, within religious studies, theology, and philosophy, as well as psychiatric and public medicine. The claim that the *Alatinga* had ceased as fast as they had risen was countered by this pervasive and specific attention to witchcraft from the 1950s on. However, references to the *Alatinga*, a hybrid movement that attracted a following across religions, as we have seen above, ceased. At the same time, references to indigenous Christianity or traditional Yoruba practices rose in the discussion about witchcraft among the Yoruba. *Àjé* became a traditional concept.

Discussing Yoruba witchcraft, the psychiatrist Raymond Prince, who had worked in Nigeria from the 1950s onward, applied the findings of the Freudian Melanie Klein on a cultural scale. He concluded that witchcraft among the Yoruba was a cultural obsession with the mother figure (Prince 1961). Europe, he argued, had undergone a “depressive position,” diagnosed by Klein as the necessary consequent stage for children after the natural obsession with their mothers, in the Renaissance. This, Prince contended, could be seen as “a leap forward in reality testing with a concomitant release of human vitality” (Prince 1961: 15). With *àjé*, Prince had diagnosed the Yoruba’s backwardness and at the same time, more interestingly, affirmed the Enlightenment of Europe after the Renaissance.

Yet, the meaning of *àjé* was contested. While witchcraft beliefs stood for the Yoruba’s backwardness in Prince’s work, Yoruba intellectuals used the reference to witchcraft as signs

for the need for a truly indigenous Church, or read in it the steadfastness of Yoruba tradition during colonial rule. The theologian J. A. Omoyajowo argued that witchcraft was real for Africans of any religion but that the danger associated with witchcraft could only be averted by a reformation, a return to the core of the Christian faith:

What is really the trouble with us Christians of this country is that we divide our loyalty between God and these evil powers. [...] Although they still exist, these agents of the devil, they are stingless and harmless to those who follow Christ. [...] If our loyalty to our Lord does not flinch, we have no cause to be afraid of witches.

(Omoyajowo 1965: 41)

E. Bolaji Idowu, a theologian and the first African to lead the religious studies department of the then prestigious University of Ibadan, had a slightly different view than Omoyajowo. Even more than his colleague, Idowu emphasized that there was a reality to witchcraft in Africa and that the European ethnologists who had investigated this so far could never understand it. He wrote of witches and wizards being “sufficiently real as to cause [...] sufferings and [...] deaths” (Idowu 1970: 6) and asked again: “Do witches exist? I will assert categorically that there are witches in Africa; that they are as real as are murderers, poisoners, and other categories of evil workers, overt or surreptitious. This, and not only imagination, is the basis of the strong belief in witchcraft” (Idowu 1970: 9). They were organized in secret groups, Idowu contended, like other traditional African practices. Like Omoyajowo, he saw witchcraft ultimately as a “challenge to faith” (Idowu 1970: 15) and stated that “[f]aith in witchcraft can only be driven out and replaced with a stronger faith” (Idowu 1970: 16).

The French ethnologist Pierre Verger, who had come to Nigeria on an assignment from the French government to investigate the African origins of Afro-Brazilian practices, stated that the Yoruba *àjé* should not be mistaken for the European witch. Interpreting from Idowu, Verger argued for the original independence and difference of Yoruba tradition. The

idea that witchcraft was antisocial and not part of a religious community was a simplification and concealed the fact that “the activities of witches, *àjé*, were linked to those of the deities, *òrìsà*, and the myths of the creation of the world” (Verger 1965: 141). *Àjé* were appreciated and feared at the same time within Yoruba society (Verger 1965: 142). According to Verger, *ìyámi*—my mother, as the *àjé* was called—was the long-forgotten goddess *Odù*. Her symbol was the bird, and she held the world and its *òrìsà* in her calabash. “All women are *àjé*” (Verger 1965: 148); they regulated menstruation and thus controlled the mystical power of all women.

In the late 1970s, Olusola Olukunle, a protégé of Idowu, argued in the same manner as Verger and Idowu for a distinct Yoruba concept of witchcraft. He was inspired by a new global trend of philosophy and theology that saw culture as the guiding principle of human perception and understanding (Hallen 2006; Hountondji 1996; Mbiti 1990; Wiredu 1996). Olukunle was a student of John Hick, who interpreted the plurality of religions as the outcome of separate cultures (Hick 1972). For Olukunle, this meant that *àjé* was a part of Yoruba metaphysics, of a Yoruba worldview rather than a superstition or a sign of backwardness (Olukunle 1979). Instead of arguing about the existence of witches, as Omoyajowo and Idowu had done, Olukunle had almost no interest in the question. His focus was rather on its ongoing cultural significance (Olukunle 1979: 8–9). This meant that slowly but surely the *Alatinga* ceased to be a part of the debate about *àjé*. They were not mentioned once in Olukunle’s work. Instead, the *Ifá* corpus, traditional healing, and a decidedly Yoruba “philosophy” became more relevant in the definition of *àjé* (Abimbola 2003 [1997]; Hallen & Sodipo 1986). This shift was accompanied by the implicit claim that an understanding of *àjé* based on *Ifá* verses was far older than any colonial or European contact—almost like it had never happened.

Yet, the concept of *àjé* as indigenous and traditional Yoruba witchcraft grew out of European contact. I argue that this is in fact not surprising at all. *Àjé* is a product of translingual practice, of translatory processes, a positioning within global debates. The question of whether it is equivalent to “witchcraft,” whether it is religion or part of religion is decided in light of these global negotiations. In this light, the *Alatinga* were not just the quick, foreign interlude some scholars have described. They influenced how witchcraft is used today. I want to unpack these thoughts on a more theoretical level.

4 Genealogy and *àjé* as Translingual Practice

Sources like the observations written about the *Alatinga* come with a date attached that gives us the impression that they are testimonies of a particular period or event and that they provide—after subtracting their specific tendencies—a transparent look into the past. Historical inquiry is then often understood as the reconstruction of a timeline of events, a chronology that allows us to judge the age and origin of a certain idea. I have not presented the history of Yoruba witchcraft as a straight chronology for a reason: it is not how we learn about it. In most cases, guided by a specific research interest, we learn about a certain debate, or a specific conflict, and we read the research literature about the topic. The research literature presents us with a multitude of other possible source material and contradicting interpretations of these materials. Thus, the present, motivated by a specific interest, and not the past is the beginning of historical inquiry. Though in theory this is well known in historical studies, Foucault, with reference to Nietzsche, radicalized this insight. Under the name “genealogy,” he presented an approach where historians do not look for an essence, an origin in the past, but follow the heterogeneities, the conflicts from the present backwards. He turned a common sense of history on its head: “What is found at the historical beginning of

things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity“ (Foucault 1977: 142).

Following Jacques Derrida, epistemologically, no writing, no mark on paper can provide or secure its own meaning (Derrida 1982). There is no transcendental essence, no clearly associated thing, authorizing the only possible or true meaning of a written word. It is only through the process of citation and reiteration that meaning is established. However, citation always implies that a new context is given to a seemingly older idiom, thereby giving new meaning to the idiom, e.g., by establishing it as older. Yet, the meaning thus made possible is always the product, not the cause of this reiteration. With Derrida, this process is projected on a simpler text-to-text level. But what if there are many texts citing yet contradicting each other? What if the citation is happening seemingly through an absolute language barrier as in the case of *àjé* and the *Alatinga*?

What, according to Derrida, happens on a rather schematic, theoretical level, becomes more tangible when we see it as a communicative, translatable process. How can two people talking about the same thing really know that they are actually talking about the same thing? Without any context given, you cannot—that is the answer provided by Quine’s theory of radical translation (Hallen & Sodipo 1986), and by Lydia Liu’s theory of hypothetical equivalents (Liu 1995; Hermann 2015). To Liu, translation is a process wherein at first translators do not know whether the equivalents they choose are right; they are hypothetical. Only once this process is repeated again and again are translations established as given or discussed and changed for supposedly better ones. Language thus ceases to be the absolute barrier which it is usually thought to be. This process is not, however, removed from political struggles, but is rather the very product of them:

In that sense, translation is no longer a neutral event untouched by the contending interests of political and ideological struggles. Instead, it becomes the very site of such

struggles where the guest language is forced to encounter the host language, where the irreducible differences between them are fought out, authorities are invoked or challenged, ambiguities dissolved or created, and so forth, until new words and meanings emerge in the host language itself. (Liu 1995: 26)

With her theory of translingual practice, Liu not only changes the understanding of how a translation emerges; she also changes the perspective from Europe's expansion to the ways in which this expansion, especially colonialism and imperialism, was received. The host language was the local, non-European language—Chinese in her example—in which changes were made. She thereby characterizes the past in an almost genealogical manner, thinking of local understanding as the outcome, not an elusive origin. Applying Liu to my example, Yoruba is the host language, whereas English is the guest language. Their boundaries are, as made clear by the process of translingual practice, not static or finished but re-drawn constantly. Thus, the idea that language is an absolute barrier is, paradoxically, also the outcome of translatory processes. Michael Bergunder (2016) has made a similar point about comparison and I argue, following Birgit Meyer, that translingual practice is in fact comparative practice (Meyer 1999: 82).

Does perceiving the uses of *àjé* as the product of a global translingual—or comparative—practice not mean that a colonial lexicon is re-inscribed? Geschiere expresses concern that researchers taking this approach may succumb to a missionary and colonial vocabulary (1997: 13–14). First, on a philosophical level, agency is not possible without the workings of power, as Butler has argued. As subjects are constituted by language, they are introduced by and subjugated to the ways in which language is supposed to be used, to the discourse. “That this is a repeated process, an iterable procedure, is *precisely* [sic] the condition of agency within discourse” (Butler 1995: 135). Every use of that language is a repetition of supposedly older, legitimate uses. Any practice, linguistic or otherwise, can thus

only be relevant if it establishes itself as a repetition and cites a supposedly older practice. Applied to our example, the agency of Yoruba agents to use *àjé* in the way they do today is only possible because it has been an established practice.

Yet, the ways in which citation occurs are open to transformation, according to Butler. The old practice will not just be repeated in the exact same manner. It must be actualized within a new context to stay relevant. Agency is the effect that is produced in this process of citation and transformation, and it is not just the extension of the practices that are cited: “[A]gency is the effect of discursive conditions which do not for that reason control its use; it is not a transcendental category, but a contingent and fragile possibility opened up in the midst of constituting relations” (Butler 1995: 137). To argue for an African agency apart from and independent of the colonial past and the European encounter is ultimately a misunderstanding of agency (Bhabha 1984). Butler’s observation that agency does not take place outside of power relations, but is rather a product of them, does not diminish Yoruba agency as it is in fact taken seriously as adaptation and subversion following the European encounter and colonial rule.

Second, on a more practical level, to decide that something has existed before its European contact is a fantasy ultimately produced by this very contact as well (Chakrabarty 2000). Discussing the criticism of her own translatory practices presented to her by Yoruba scholars, Margaret Drewal came to the opinion that her translation from Yoruba into English, was first a necessity of her line of scholarship, and second a historical possibility because Yoruba write and translate themselves in the English categories she was about to use (Drewal 1992: xiv–xv). Based on her thoughts, J. Lorand Matory has argued against the idea of recourse to a somehow original and untouched Yoruba worldview: “to reconstruct some pre-‘translated’ contemporary Yoruba episteme (which it is then our lonely task to translate) is an

exercise in imagination, which seems to invite our own idealist projections about an Africa that is not and, most likely, never was” (Matory 2005: 233).

Writing about the effects of European encounters on religion in South Africa, David Chidester stated in a similar vein: “No pure, precontact position can be recovered for our return” (Chidester 1996: 29). It is helpful to understand this, as Butler has done, not as the demise of local self-identification; rather, it should be considered as its very possibility. Stuart Hall has argued that cultural identities, rather than lying untransformed and untransformable in “some essentialised past” to be reconstructed, are products of being always already historically positioned and, at the same time, attempts at strategic positioning:

Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall 1990: 225)

The question of the intelligibility of sources and history is then intertwined with translanguaging practice and the political struggles of positioned and positioning subjects that become agents within and through the very processes that subjugate them. Global entanglements are not the alternative origin in the past. Their point of departure must be regional, present debates. With witchcraft in Nigeria, as we have seen in the beginning of this article, these are the questions of whether it is religion or not, whether it is real or superstitious, and whether it should be acknowledged in public. As we have seen in the research literature on witchcraft in Africa, the question whether witchcraft is religion or not is connected at its core to the debate about African and European understandings of witchcraft and whether these should be considered incommensurably different from each other. Taking it all the way round in the next step, if African and European understandings are in fact the product of the very same global debate,

we then must also ask: how did the idea of a purely European understanding of witchcraft emerge?

5 Religion, Witchcraft, and the African Other: West African Wicca?

The translingual practice of *àjé* during the twentieth century has also had effects on the understanding of witchcraft in Europe. It has not only produced the understanding of *àjé* as exclusively Yoruba and the understanding of witchcraft as exclusively European or “Western.” It has also established the possibility of conceiving of witchcraft in Europe as individual and possibly religious and, at the same time, as a structural, never-religious danger in Africa. Thus, comparative practice has led to its own obliteration and made it possible for research of “European” witchcraft to totally ignore African understandings.

This has to do with a scholar of religious studies now long forgotten or mostly ignored: Geoffrey Parrinder. Though his works have come to be perceived as rather quaint, his ideas are still influential today. Before he became a professor of Comparative Religion at the University of London in the late 1950s, Parrinder was asked to establish the department of Religious Studies at the University College of Ibadan (later University of Ibadan) which was then part of the University of London. He had come as a Methodist missionary to the African West coast and had written extensively on the topic of religion, arguing, like his teacher Edwin Smith before him, that Africans had, in fact, a religion, a polytheism similar to the Greeks and Romans (Parrinder 1948, 1954). In his earlier books, witchcraft was a part of the “lower aspects” of this religion. In the late 1950s and early 1960s though, he published a book dedicated solely to *Witchcraft: European and African* (1963). In it, he addressed the differences and similarities of witchcraft in Europe and Africa and applied ethnological knowledge production, especially E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s work, to the European context. He

argued that the only difference between witchcraft in Europe and in Africa was that in Europe the imaginary belief, the superstition, had been overcome by “an enlightened religion” (Parrinder 1963: 207) in the seventeenth century. He thus followed the same progression narrative which Raymond Prince had applied to the *Alatinga*. The *Alatinga* were also mentioned in his introduction as an important factor for his writing: “In 1951, Nigeria, the largest African state, and one of the most advanced, suffered from a witch mania that caused death to some unfortunate women and terror to thousands” (Parrinder 1963: 15). The framing sentences clarified what his aim was:

Governments, missions, and native leaders of thought and politics in Africa are faced with recurrent witch-hunts which, as one authority says, seem to appear as if they were from nowhere, flourish for a time, and then subside again. [...] Anything which can help to explode this dangerous illusion should be welcome to both rulers and people. (Parrinder 1963: 15)

His aim was to persuade African elites at the dawn of political independence. He wanted to alert them to the dangers of beliefs in witchcraft. At their core, his arguments countered Margaret Murray’s witch cult theory. He addressed this theory mainly for the following reason:

The witch-cult theory of Europe is often said to have African parallels, and so the truths about African witchcraft need to be made plain. On the other hand, Africans often say that witchcraft must be true since Europeans believed in it once. If there was a European witch-cult, that might strengthen their contention, and so this theory needs examination. (Parrinder 1963: 15)

Parrinder feared that the witch cult theory supplied the basis of comparison for both witchcraft in Europe and in Africa. He was thus concerned that it supported the idea that

African witchcraft beliefs were not just “imaginary,” as Evans-Pritchard had contended, but had a real basis. As we have seen, the issue of the reality of witchcraft had been in fact an important one for the Yoruba intellectuals Omoyajowo, Idowu, and Olukunle.

Considering Parrinder’s specific rhetoric of “parallels,” it is surprising that one person is not mentioned at all but seems to be made present by his very omission: Gerald Gardner, who a few years prior to Parrinder had published a book on witchcraft (2004 [1954]) for which Murray had written an endorsing foreword. Why would Gardner be interesting at all in the West African context that Parrinder mostly seemed to address? Next to stories of coven meetings in England, Gardner also claimed to have travelled to the West African coast to engage with African witches. In 1952 and 1953, as he himself described, he tried his luck in Nigeria and, after that did not work, he travelled to the Gold Coast:

[...] After I had given a suitably watered-down lecture on witchcraft at Accra, Gold Coast, in January 1954, in (of all places) a Y.M.C.A. building, followed by a small wireless talk, information began to trickle in, and now I have seen magic worked in the Coast fashion. (Gardner 2004 [1954]: 155)

Gardner wrote about his engagement with persons whom he called “professionals” and whom he contrasted with the English “amateur” witches (Gardner 2004 [1954]: 155). He presented them as confirmation of the idea popular in the Murray school that witchcraft had existed through the ages and across different cultures, that witchcraft was in fact a comparable practice.

Did Gardner really travel to the West coast? And did he really meet with the people he claimed to have met? Though *Witchcraft Today* is not known for its accuracy—Gardner was accused of some inventions—he did have colonial contacts and probably also the opportunity to travel to West Africa. It is, however, less interesting whether he was really there or not. The

more interesting—and, considering Parrinder’s fears, more pressing—question at the time was: could he really have met whom he claimed to have met on the Gold Coast and in Nigeria? That he claimed to have first travelled to Nigeria in 1952 and 1953 means that he could have heard about the *Alatinga*. That he did not have any luck finding witches in Nigeria (probably Lagos) could point to the pervasiveness of the implementation of the anti-witchcraft law against the *Alatinga* in the wake of its demise. That he then travelled to the Gold Coast, the very place the *Atinga* cult was said to have originated, could also tie in with the knowledge the British administration had about the *Alatinga*. I admit that this is speculation for now and I hope that more research will be done in this area. But I also think it is plausible due to another factor.

This is another connection that makes Gardner’s visit to West Africa more likely, one which has been largely ignored in African as well as religious studies. Esoteric and occult literature was very popular on the West African coast at the beginning of the twentieth century (Isichei 1995: 295; Turner 1967: 73). The *Occult Review* had a few reports on Nigerian “Occultism” and “Supernaturalism” in the first half of the twentieth century (Besterman 1928; Kulekun 1907a, 1907b; Toye-Warner 1914). The most probable sources of the spread of esoteric literature were the Freemasons and Rosicrucians, whose networks pervaded the colonial apparatus and were soon the inspiration for associations founded by indigenous elites on the African West coast, since they were often barred from membership in colonial groups (Peel 1968: 118).

Maybe it was even Parrinder’s teacher Edwin Smith himself who inspired the connection that Gardner, and before him other Murrayites, had noticed. In 1946, Smith had written that the monotheistic belief of African people was weak (Smith 1946: 120) and that their religion was mostly influenced by belief in magic or “dynamism.” He stated: “Africans are Spiritists: that is universally accepted.” (Smith 1946: 114) This idea stemmed from mostly

missionary-influenced scholarship of the late nineteenth century. E.B. Tylor had compared Spiritualism and the West African belief in witchcraft (Tylor 1871: 125–129). In a widely popular book, Reverend P. Baudin had even claimed that Spiritualism formed the greater part of the religious system of fetishism on the African “Slave Coast” (Baudin 1885: 6). Even though Baudin’s book, just like Tylor’s phrases, was infused with criticism of esotericism, it was read as proof that there was really such a connection. His account was discussed in the esoteric journal *L’Initiation* as “initiation of the black race” (Tidianeuf 1900). Thus, one could say that the comparison of witchcraft in Africa and esotericism in Europe was a criticism of both which led to the realization of their connectedness.

Parrinder’s agenda of presenting African witchcraft—but really, as we can see by his criticism of Murray and the omission of Gardner, any witchcraft—as backward and to be overcome by “enlightened religion” really gave rise to a global discussion about witchcraft. Omoyajowo, Idowu, Verger, and Olukunle took his thoughts, countered them, and developed them in a wholly new direction, each within their own contexts and with their own agendas. Contrary to Parrinder’s wish that witchcraft would fade away, it became the global category it is today. That witchcraft is a category does not mean that there is only one definition of it—just the contrary. It means that there is an implicit comparison at work in all its uses, even if it is never expressed or reflected as such (Bergunder 2016). This implicit comparison is paradoxically most at work in those uses marked as purely local. It is made possible because witchcraft in Africa and witchcraft in Europe were, in fact, compared and, due to their historic entanglement, are still comparable.

6 Conclusion

Based on a genealogical understanding of history, I have argued that the *Alatinga* were the nodal point for today's understanding of witchcraft among the Yoruba. The movement claimed to be able to identify witches and had them confess "voluntarily" for the written records. Most likely inspired by reactions to colonial legislation on the African West Coast, it was adapted in a heartbeat, and reportedly attracted a following of Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists. In its aftermath, witchcraft became a central issue of medicine, psychiatry, and healing, as well as theology and philosophy. To specify the meaning of *àjé* as culturally specific and different from the English "witchcraft" or "witch" was a reaction to, rather than the precondition for, this translingual—and in fact comparative—process. This does not mean that we ought to give privilege to global entanglements as yet another origin. Instead, they allow us to highlight the local debates about meaning that are still ongoing and the continuities and changes of meaning that occurred within these debates. Thus, today's debates about witchcraft and the positions taken in them—Igwe, WITZAN, and the Pentecostals—are not without precedent. Their arguments about whether and how witchcraft should be engaged with in the public sphere can be traced back to the interpretations given to witchcraft globally in the aftermath of the *Alatinga*. Muslim and Christian interpretations do not have to be regarded as secondary to "the original meaning" of *àjé*. Instead, these positions can be treated on equal footing as self-identified traditional interpretations. For traditional positions like the ones Hallen presented, this also means that they are taken seriously as products of their time and context, which also includes Muslim and Christian interpretations.

All in all, I have attempted to show how the debate about witchcraft and religion and the discussion about the Africanness (and Europeanness) of witchcraft were connected to each other as a quest for the original meaning of African signifiers. What I have undertaken, is neither to prove that witchcraft is religion nor that it is not. Instead, I have tried to show how these seemingly opposed perspectives are intertwined and constitute each other in the

dynamics of the interpretation of Yoruba witchcraft, if its position within a global religious history is taken seriously. The criticism against global history is often that it is just a re-imagining of missionary or colonial history, that it is based on the eurocentric perspective that ideas like civilization or education spread from Europe to the world. However, if we cut African witchcraft from its global entanglements, we are just as likely to affirm hyperbolic theories on European Enlightenment (Chakrabarty 2000) and how this Enlightenment, a supposedly “truly critical education,” is still missing in African contexts. Following the debates within postcolonial studies, a global religious history must address the ongoing heritage of colonialism and imperialism, not just as the spread of European and North American knowledge power (Said 2019 [1978]) but also as the negotiations and subversions from the former colonies (Bhabha 1984).

A global religious history is not a totalitarian endeavor to overcome all research problems at once. Written and researched, it is always connected to a specific interest and a particular perspective, as has been shown in this article. In the ways historians find, address, and interpret specific sources they are never independent of the traditions, the “systems of injustice” (Foucault 1977: 157) in which they find themselves always already positioned (Hall 1990). It is a distinct critical commitment to question and subvert the logics presented as natural that drives the historical inquiries of a global religious history (Bergunder 2014; Foucault 1977). Thus, these inquiries can only be written from a certain perspective, marked by a specific research interest. In order to provide these attempts at a counter-memory, as Foucault has envisioned, a global religious history has to look for relevant events “in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history” (Foucault 1977: 139). From this perspective, regional expertise, especially linguistic, outside of Europe is a must to be able to show the workings of translingual practice, of agency and power, and transformations invisible because they are yet to be fully conceivable. Only thus can it be shown how global

entanglements did not only effect witchcraft beliefs in African contexts but also, in turn, influenced European understandings of witchcraft and religion. The identification of a specifically African understanding of witchcraft has thus become not only a product and cornerstone of African anti-colonial, nationalist, and culturalist ideology, but also a constitutive part of the positionings of “European” secularity, “enlightened” religion, and “Western” esotericism that are still rampant in academia today.

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