

Ethnographic Sorcery by Harry G. West. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 132 pp. \$35.00 cloth, ISBN: 0-226-89397-9. \$14.00 paper, ISBN: 0-226-89398-7.

In *Ethnographic Sorcery*, Harry G. West builds on his previous work on sorcery among the Makonde of the Mueda plateau situated in northeastern Mozambique (West 2005). Originally there to refute claims that these persons were “backward-looking” rather than “forward-looking,” his search for expert knowledge on Muedan life led him to healers that steered his research in the direction of sorcery.

Through a series of ethnographic vignettes that traverse both time and place and a careful articulation of several rhetorical moves, West asserts that it is the language of sorcery that enables Muedans to understand, comment on, and transform relations of power. The argument revises standard Structural Marxist and symbolic anthropological approaches to the study of sorcery in that it does not treat sorcery in a normatively metaphorical sense. West does not see sorcery as people’s ways of understanding more immediate social manifestations and conflicts (such as unnatural accumulation or lineage segmentation). Instead, the language of sorcery allows for a metadiscursive inversion (*kupilikula*) of a discursive domain that is invisible. *Kupilikula* renders the invisible visible and so is a sort of “sorcery of construction” that reveals “sorcery of ruin.”

This point is illustrated by reference to the healer’s use of medicine and divination to demonstrate that sorcerer lions exist (as real and not made-up lions) and to dispel such lions as a means of counteracting sorceries of ruin. Sorcery as language and practice entails the ability to use discourse to construct reality in ways that can be either generative or destructive. This flies in the face of symbolic analyses, which typically read sorcery as a representation of something else rather than investigating the ways in which sorcery is productive of material and social reality. It also subsumes power asymmetries that structural Marxists and symbolic anthropology assume to be the real stuff of social relations. Such asymmetries, however, are not neatly stacked between social classes or distinct groups. Rather, everyone is presumed capable of sorcery. In this way, West is

able to account for observed trends that adhere to and disrupt Marxist and symbolic interpretations. For instance, in his experience, the *haves* and the *have-nots* use sorcery to subvert one other. Where other theories consider conflict in a unidirectional way, West supplies a bidirectional analysis.

While the language of sorcery allows Muedans to make and remake their worlds/realities, the author is clear on the point that this fashioning does not create a definite destination; the resultant realities of Muedans may or may not turn out as they expected. West uses this argument to explain Muedan skepticism toward democratic elections, where the people would be, as election organizers claimed, a visible electorate. Through the language of sorcery they challenged the purported visibility of the electoral process (and any political process for that matter) at the same time that they opted into invisibility and thus marginalization. The refusal to be made legible by the postsocialist, liberal democratic regime was a metadiscursive inversion of the sorcery of electoral politics.

Finally, West comments on ethnographic sorcery. Not surprisingly, this amounts to the ethnographer's ability to make the invisible visible. This is not the exclusive domain of academics; West sees everyone as being an ethnographer on some level or other. The critical point that a consideration of ethnographic sorcery exposes is that such work, while productive, entails risks to both the ethnographers and those subjects and beings s/he attempts to make sense of (make visible). As previously mentioned, while we can make and remake the world, we cannot ultimately control how this world will interact with us and with others.

Readers will delight in the fact that the body of this book is a concise 93 pages! This allows for relatively quick reading and re-reading, the latter being critical for those moments when West delves into discussions of phenomenological, linguistic, and symbolic anthropology. Nonetheless, the writing is clear and easily understandable in addition to being well supported by ethnographic details. To get a fuller ethnographic sense of the Makonde *lifeworld* as it relates to sorcery, one will have to defer to his

earlier work, *Kupilikula: Governance and the Invisible Real in Mozambique*. West's contribution in ethnographic sorcery is largely a theoretical one that, while expanding and complicating our methodological and analytic categories, manages to abandon a more holistic anthropological approach that, however it may fail, at least attempts to locate such themes as sorcery within a larger metadiscursive arena and to give a richer outline of the social milieu within which such arenas are located.

Further problems arise while thinking about how unique this theoretical contribution is. That ethnography is a process of rendering something legible is a foregone conclusion and that the implications for such renderings are various and indefinite has been recognized and debated since at least the 1980s. Sherry Ortner, Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George Marcus, Ruth Behar, Marilyn Strathern, and a host of anthropologists have contemplated the violence of ethnography and the need for greater reflexivity. Additionally, West's debt to phenomenological anthropology is somewhat understated, frequent references to Michael Jackson's work notwithstanding. West misses key opportunities (such as a sorcery dance in the ninth chapter) for a more detailed discussion of the role of performativity and embodiment in establishing the co-substantiality of the invisible and the visible in Muedan social life. What is more, he does not make a convincing link between the performativity of the language of sorcery and sorcery as performance; moving outside of the realm of the sorcerer lion to other realities in Muedan society might have been more persuasive. Beyond demonstrating that language is performative (a conclusion linguists had arrived at more than 30 years before), sorcery and ethnographic sorcery, as the author depicts it, may illumine very little about the intersubjective construction/destruction of reality and the ambiguities inherent in the *lifeworld* under investigation.

Reference

West, H. 2005 *Kupilikula: Governance and the invisible realm in Mozambique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewer

Andre Wellington is a Ph.D. Student in the Department of Anthropology at Emory University. His research interests include urban anthropology, the political economy of space, and phenomenological anthropology. His work relates mostly to Johannesburg, but incorporates insights from other cities and regions on the African continent.