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# The dangers of anonymity

## Witchcraft, rumor, and modernity in Africa

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This article deals with a series of rumors that spread across West and Central Africa during the last two decades. These rumors of penis snatchers, of killer mobile phone numbers, and of deadly alms constitute a transnational genre that is characteristic of Africa's occult modernity. While the literature on the modernity of witchcraft has been criticized for its macrosociological orientation, the article strives to counterbalance this bias by drawing on microsociology in order to explore the interactional repertoires in which these new forms of the occult are grounded. It shows that they exploit anxieties born out of mundane situations: shaking hands with strangers, receiving unidentified phone calls, or accepting anonymous gifts. New forms of the occult thus focus on the dangers of anonymity and point to the risk of being forced into opaque interactions with unknown others. They draw on two different situations of anonymity, which can be connected to two distinctive repertoires of modernity. Face-to-face encounters with strangers are typical of—but not exclusive to—urban modernity, while mediated interactions with distant and often invisible agents are part and parcel of technological modernity. Therefore, insofar as modernity has extended the scope of human sociality in unprecedented ways, it has extended as well the scope of the occult. This article casts new light on witchcraft and the occult in contemporary Africa, and suggests new ways of tying together micro and macro levels of analysis, by grounding the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity in the minutiae of human interaction.

Keywords: modernity, witchcraft, rumor, cities, anonymity, Africa

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Consider the following three incidents:<sup>1</sup>

In June 2010, in Port-Gentil, the second largest city of Gabon, Élie, a bricklayer in his thirties, is looking for his apprentice. Since he cannot find him, he approaches a young boy, shakes hands with him and offers him the job. Junior

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1. Accounts of the first two incidents are based on fieldwork interviews in Gabon and Senegal (fieldwork in Senegal was conducted in collaboration with Julien Bondaz). The third account is based on a newspaper article: “Two Collapse in Calabar After Receiving GSM Phone Call,” *Vanguard*, August 3, 2004. All names have been changed to protect identities.

declines, but asks his younger brother to help the bricklayer. As Élie is about to leave with his new assistant, he is grabbed by Prince, a friend of Junior, and taken to a nearby house. There, Junior bluntly accuses Élie of the theft of his genitals: just after shaking hands with him, he felt an electric shock in his groin and suddenly realized his penis had shrunk. Élie denies the accusation, the discussion becomes heated, and a crowd gathers around the house. The unfortunate bricklayer is tied naked to an electric post and brutalized for hours by a small group of locals. His ex-wife, who happens to be passing, tries to intervene, but in vain. She calls the police and they finally rescue Élie, who is by now in a poor condition. A few weeks later, the two main culprits, Junior and Prince, are given a fine and a three-month suspended sentence.

In January 2010, in Thiaroye, a densely populated suburb of Dakar in Senegal, Mustafa, a retired agronomist, goes to the market near the railway station with the intention of giving alms to the poor in the form of goat's meat. He spots two women at their stalls, greets them and offers them chunks of meat wrapped in black plastic bags. The women decline even after being pressed to accept this "sacrifice" in charity. Disappointed, Mustafa decides to buy some fruit before going home. But he soon realizes that a hostile crowd is now gathering to his side of the market, after the women have raised an alarm, suspecting that the alms he has offered them will kill them. Mustafa catches sight of a policeman near the railway track and asks for his protection. The policeman tries to escort him to the police station, but a crowd numbering in the hundreds rapidly overwhelms the two men. While stones are being thrown at them, they have to take refuge in a community building in the neighborhood. Young men manage to break into the premises and start to assault Mustafa. Police reinforcements come to his rescue and take him to the police station. Mustafa cannot go home until sunset, when the crowd waiting for him in front of the building finally disperses. Though very much shaken, Mustafa decides not to file a complaint.

In July 2004, in Calabar, the capital city of Cross River State in Nigeria, Vincent, a sixteen-year-old boy, hears his sister's mobile phone ringing; she is busy and cannot answer the phone herself. When he looks at the screen, he sees "a number and not a name." After some hesitation, he answers the call. When he puts the phone to his ear, he hears a strange noise. He says hello, then hears a man coughing and suddenly loses consciousness. His sister Rachel rushes and picks up the phone, only to collapse, too, after saying hello. When the brother and sister regain consciousness, they find they are surrounded by family members and neighbors, who are praying for their recovery. A few hours later, a newspaper journalist comes to investigate the incident. He decides to call back the alleged "killer number," stored on Rachel's phone. The following conversation ensues:

JOURNALIST. Hello, who am I speaking to? (*A female voice answers.*)

WOMAN. How can you call my number and ask me, "who am I speaking to?"

JOURNALIST. This number is said to have been used to call two persons who collapsed.

Then the woman hangs up. The journalist calls back several times, but his calls are left unanswered. When he tries again from a phone center, the woman finally picks up his call.

JOURNALIST. I expect you to put up a defense on whether or not your number sends people to sleep. Is it true that people collapse after receiving a call from your line?

WOMAN. I cover you with the blood of Jesus! I say, I cover you with the blood of Jesus!

JOURNALIST. Thank you for that prayer. But when will I collapse? (*The woman hangs up on him.*)

What are we to make of these three strange episodes? Is it even appropriate to group these seemingly unrelated events together? In a review article on recent academic literature on African witchcraft and sorcery, Terence Ranger (2007) calls into question the validity of the category of “the occult,” prompting further debate on the topic in the columns of *Africa* (ter Haar and Ellis 2009; Meyer 2009). Ranger criticizes anthropologists such as Jean and John Comaroff (1999) for an “over-generalization of the occult” (Ranger 2007: 274). Instead of lumping together incommensurable phenomena, he suggests, “we need to disaggregate and to historicize” (ibid.: 277). In this view, the misadventures of Élie, Mustafa, and Vincent should rather be regarded as three independent events involving three distinct forms of the occult in three different African countries, each one deserving to be studied in its own particular context. And yet they have much in common, as I will demonstrate. Our recognition of the limitations of the term “occult” should not lead us to “retreat into the study of the particular,” as Birgit Meyer (2009: 413) convincingly argues in her comments on Ranger’s essay. From this perspective, the objective of this article is to put forward an analytical framework in which the peculiar stories of Élie, Mustafa, and Vincent can be fully compared and may even illuminate each other.

### **Rumors and the modernity of witchcraft**

The mishaps of Élie, Mustafa, and Vincent are not isolated incidents. All three are closely linked to rumors that were already circulating. Stories of penis snatchers, of deadly alms, and of killer mobile phone numbers were circulating wildly in Gabon, Senegal, and Nigeria at the time of these incidents. Far from being parochial gossip, these diverse rumors are closely interrelated, large-scale phenomena. Of the three, penis snatching is perhaps the most archetypal or paradigmatic. It is the most widespread of the rumors (both in space and time) and the one to which other rumors are constantly compared. The origins of penis snatching can be traced to early-1970s Nigeria (Bonhomme 2009). During the two following decades, it was mostly confined to Nigeria and Cameroon. However, in the 1990s, the rumor spread to most of West and Central Africa, from Mauritania to Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The rumor has been sporadically active ever since. The scenario is always broadly similar: strangers are accused of stealing (or sometimes only shrinking) the genitals of other people during a public encounter, often just a simple handshake. Though sporadic, penis snatching has left its mark on the popular imagination in Africa. Stories of penis snatching are covered extensively in the news and public accusations often lead to instant justice and mob

violence. For instance, about twenty people accused of penis snatching were lynched in April 2001 in Nigeria, and another dozen in January 2002 in Ghana.

Rumors of killer mobile phone numbers also originated in Nigeria as early as July 2004 (Bonhomme 2011). It was said that receiving calls from certain phone numbers could instantly kill those who took the call, with blood pouring out of the mouth, nose, and ears. This new rumor was immediately compared to penis-snatching stories, which were still in circulation at the time (Agbu 2004). From Nigeria, the rumor quickly spread to Cameroon and Gabon within the same month. It mysteriously reappeared in India two years later and, from there, spread to several countries in South Asia and eventually came back to Africa.<sup>2</sup> The rumor was present in Ghana and Angola in 2008 and again swept through Africa in 2010, from Kenya to Mali. Compared to the other two, the rumor about deadly alms is the most recent, the most transient and the least widespread. There has been only one short wave of this rumor, at least until now. It appeared in Senegal in January 2010, in Dakar or Saint-Louis, and quickly spread throughout the country and to Gambia and the Malian border before disappearing within a week or two. During this short time, the rumor was nevertheless hot news and triggered many incidents involving public accusations and violence, even though nobody was actually killed. According to the rumor, people had died mysteriously after a stranger driving an SUV had given them alms. Just like killer phone numbers in Nigeria, deadly alms were systematically compared to penis snatching, which has repeatedly broken out in Senegal since the mid-2000s.

Many similar rumors concerning, for instance, ritual murders and the trafficking of body parts, could be compared to penis snatching, killer phone numbers, and deadly alms. All of them, which have been circulating in Africa since the 1990s (at least), belong, I suggest, to the same transnational genre.<sup>3</sup> The way the rumors circulate gives the genre its cohesion. They are “stories that travel” (*des histoires qui tourment*), according to a Senegalese friend. New stories constantly appear, drawing on older stories, while rumors that were believed to have disappeared sporadically reappear. Between different versions of the same rumor or even between different rumors, the plot and details might vary but a family resemblance remains. These rumors are not mere tales. They are told as the personal accounts of witnesses and victims. They also cause real incidents, such as those involving Élie, Mustafa, and Vincent (the first two told from the perspective of the persons accused of occult wrongdoings, the third from the perspective of the person subjected to such wrongdoings).<sup>4</sup> People collapse after receiving unidentified phone calls or shaking hands with strangers, while others are accused

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2. In the scope of this article, I do not take into account Asian versions of the rumor, which differ from African ones in various respects and, for instance, are not primarily interpreted in terms of witchcraft.

3. In a seminal book, Luise White (2000) proposes to study various vampire stories circulating in colonial Africa as a “transnational genre.”

4. Élie and Mustafa are victims of physical violence, whereas Vincent and his sister are victims of an invisible violence, which could appear imaginary from an outsider’s viewpoint, but which is perceived as no less real than physical aggression by those subjected to it.

and lynched. Like many rumors of this kind, they are self-fulfilling prophecies. The frantic spread of the rumor in a particular locality creates a climate of fear, or even panic, which makes phone calls, handshakes, or alms suddenly appear suspicious to many. And this suspicion inevitably triggers incidents, which by a sort of snowball effect, impart new vigor to the rumor's circulation.

Rumors are circulated by word-of-mouth at home, at work, at the market, on public transport, or in churches and mosques. In Nigeria for instance, some churches warned their followers against phone calls from "satanic numbers." Mobile phones and text messages were also used to spread rumors, including, ironically, stories about the dangers of receiving phone calls. But these rumors are not an exclusively oral genre. They are also given extensive media coverage, in newspapers, on the radio, on television, as well as in digital media. Even though the media did not invent them, these rumors would not have circulated so widely without the media. There is indeed a correlation between the time when the rumors appeared and the way in which they circulate. In many African countries, notably in Francophone ones, the 1990s saw the introduction of the freedom of the press and thus coincided with the rapid emergence of a popular press, which often draws on rumors and "factoids." This genre of press cashes in on stories about witchcraft and the occult (Bastian 2001). Penis snatching, killer phone numbers, and deadly alms thus come to represent witchcraft in the media age. The media are not only playing an active role in the transnational circulation of rumors, they also contribute to the social perception of the phenomenon—this is why media reports are essential materials if we are to study these rumors to their fullest extent.<sup>5</sup> Neither purely oral nor purely written, this genre of rumor therefore implies a constant back and forth between word-of-mouth and the mass media, a hybrid genre of communication often called *radio-trottoir* ("pavement radio") or *radio-cancan* ("radio gossip") in Francophone Africa (Ellis 1989).

This genre of rumor maintains complex and ambiguous relations with traditional interpretations of misfortune in terms of witchcraft. In their lively discussions about the rumors, local people usually did not agree about how to categorize these phenomena: are they entirely new or do they fit into the old categories of witchcraft? For instance, in Senegal, penis snatching has been regarded either as an unusual form of cannibal witchcraft (*dëmm* in Wolof), as a spell of impotence (*xala*) cast by a *marabout*-sorcerer, as the malevolent trick of a spirit (*jinne*), as a somewhat special kind of theft, as a psychosomatic syndrome, as a fraud to extort money, or even as a simple hoax.<sup>6</sup> In the same manner, deadly alms have usually been thought of as a new form of sorcery (*liggécéy*). Likewise, in Nigeria, killer phone numbers have been said to proceed from a combination of old magic and new technology: "*juju* [magic power or artifact] has been merged with the technology of GSM to produce instant effectiveness" (*Vanguard*, August

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5. As well as conducting fieldwork in Gabon and Senegal, I have also collected several hundred articles from the African press on penis snatching, killer phone numbers, and deadly alms.

6. Wolof is the most widely spoken language in Senegal: it is the native language of the Wolof people (about 45 percent of the population), but also the vehicular language spoken by the vast majority of Senegalese.

20, 2004). In Cameroon, it was said to be “tele-witchcraft” (*télé-sorcellerie*) and an article posted on an Internet forum was titled: “Africa ‘digitalizes’ witchcraft” (*L’Afrique ‘digitalise’ la sorcellerie*). Attitudes toward these phenomena are also diverse and range from absolute conviction to corrosive disbelief, such as this Gabonese woman who declared about penis snatching: “Now even impotent men are going to claim their penis has been stolen.” However most people remain baffled about what to think, such as this Gabonese fireman: “Sometimes we are led to believe it, sometimes we wonder how this could really happen. I still don’t have a personal opinion on this issue. The media say there is some evidence. However, they haven’t shown us a man without a penis yet. Anyway, I believe magic is behind all this.”

These transnational rumors bear witness to the dynamics of the reconfiguration of the occult in contemporary Africa. They bespeak Africa’s occult modernity. Scholars like Jean and John Comaroff (1993, 1999) and Peter Geschiere (1997) have quite rightly stressed the irreducible modernity of witchcraft. In the 1990s and 2000s, the twin expressions “modernity of witchcraft” and “witchcraft of modernity” have thus become the master tropes of academic discourses on the occult in Africa (see Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Bernault and Tonda 2000; Moore and Sanders 2001; Meyer and Pels 2003; West and Sanders 2003, to cite just a few collective works). Max Weber’s Eurocentric conception of modernity as an unequivocal process of “disenchantment of the world” has proved to be too simplistic and the emphasis has instead been placed on the existence of “alternative modernities,” following Arjun Appadurai (1996). In this view, witchcraft, magic, and the occult are no longer regarded solely as a traditional heritage, but rather as inherently modern phenomena, which must be set back in the context of global flows of symbols and images—what Appadurai aptly calls “mediascapes.” Discourses about witchcraft are shaped by globalized imaginaries and spread through modern means of communication. They thrive in the most modern sectors of society, such as State politics (Rowlands and Warnier 1988) or the capitalist economy (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). Therefore, witchcraft is not only part of modernity; it is *about* modernity. African popular discourses about witchcraft are but “a metacommentary on the deeply ambivalent project of modernity” (Sanders 1999: 128). And witches are “modernity’s prototypical malcontents,” inasmuch as they embody the contradictions of the experience of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxix).

The diagnosis is undoubtedly relevant and rumors of penis snatching, killer phone numbers, and deadly alms offerings could easily fit into such an explanatory scheme. Yet the “witchcraft and modernity” paradigm has been justifiably criticized for its analytic uncertainties (Sanders 2003). The argument about the link between witchcraft and modernity remains “suggestive, not demonstrative,” as Sally Falk Moore (1999: 305) puts it in her comments on the Comaroffs’ lecture on occult economies. It amounts indeed to turning “general context into particular explanation” (*ibid.*: 306). Studies of the witchcraft of modernity often rest upon a somewhat loose articulation between the local (the phenomenon under study) and the global (which serves as an explanatory framework). Hence the abstraction of their conclusions: new forms of witchcraft are said to express popular discontent with—or at least ambivalence toward—modernity, globalization, “millennial capitalism,” or the “culture of neo-liberalism.” Even though this interpretation may

be true, the danger is that we may move away from fine-grained ethnographic analysis toward a metanarrative based on macrosociological abstractions with a blend of cultural relativism (Englund and Leach 2000). The Comaroffs themselves are fully aware of these analytic pitfalls: at the end of their lecture, they observe that tropes such as globalization (to which we could add modernity, capitalism, or individualism),

like all catchwords and clichés, [they] are cheapened by overuse and underspecification, by confusing an expansive metaphor for an explanatory term. As a result, much of what is currently being written about them in the social sciences is Anthropology Lite, fact-free ethnography whose realities are more virtual than its virtues are real. (1999: 294)

This paper critically engages with the literature on witchcraft and modernity and argues that the macrosociological concept of modernity will remain devoid of any relevance, unless it is more finely particularized and broken down into interactional repertoires open to ethnographic scrutiny. This matter is first and foremost an issue of scale. What could be the most relevant unit of analysis to “make sense of the enchantments of modernity” (ibid.: 279)? Penis snatching and other occult rumors, like the sale of body parts mentioned by the Comaroffs, are “at once profoundly parochial and so obviously translocal” (ibid.: 282). They thus raise the issue of “doing ethnography on an awkward scale, neither unambiguously ‘local’ nor obviously ‘global’—but on a scale in between that, somehow, captures their mutual determinations” (ibid.). But how exactly are we to situate these phenomena in larger-scale perspectives without yielding to Anthropology Lite and fact-free ethnography? And precisely what kind of analytical scale could capture the dialectical interplay between the local and the global? In the scope of this article, I would like to propose an experiment in imaginative sociology, by putting forward a possible way of tying together micro and macrolevels of analysis, in order to cast new light on Africa’s occult modernity. I suggest counterbalancing the macrosociological bias of the “witchcraft and modernity” paradigm by drawing on microsociology, in order to explore more carefully the interactional repertoires in which new forms of the occult are grounded. How do the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity translate into the basic substance of everyday social interaction on a smaller scale?

This resort to microsociology does not mean reducing global phenomena to narrow circumstances and retreating into parochial ethnography. On the contrary, local circumstances may presumably play a part in the appearance or reappearance of a rumor at a given time, in a given place, and in the occurrence of related incidents. Yet the rumors’ transnational scope proves that they are by no means reducible to these local circumstances. Narratives of penis snatching, for instance, have remained strikingly stable over forty years in about twenty different countries. Different incidents taking place in Dakar, Libreville, or Lagos proceed, I suggest, from the recurrence of the same local situations. In this view, the microsociological focus on interactional repertoires allows us to abstract the general from the particular: local situations, as a result, acquire a more general relevance in helping to understand phenomena on a wider scale. As we will see, rumors of penis snatching, of killer phone numbers, and of deadly alms all revolve around anonymous interactions that turn out to be fatal. These new forms of the occult

focus on the dangers of anonymity, which is precisely an interactional repertoire typical, and even constitutive, of modernity. In what follows, I will briefly review each of the three rumors and concentrate on a series of incidents, before wrapping up my argument on the dangers of anonymity in a concluding section.<sup>7</sup>

### Shaking hands with strangers

Élie's misadventure is representative of the circumstances in which accusations of penis snatching occur. First, penis snatching is an exclusively urban phenomenon. New forms of the occult are often associated with urban life. Witchcraft phenomena—violence by and against alleged witches—represent but one aspect of multifarious urban insecurity (Ashforth 2005). Cities are insecure places, partly because they are spaces of anonymity. Penis snatching is indeed closely connected to urban anonymity.<sup>8</sup> Incidents occur in public settings, but never in the intimacy of the home. They happen in crowded spaces, such as streets, markets, minibuses, or around mosques. In Lagos, the first “cases” of penis snatching in 1975 took place around markets in densely populated neighborhoods. It is unsurprising that incidents related to penis snatching (as well as to deadly alms) often occur in markets. Markets are often considered to be dangerous places where witches roam (Bastian 1998). They are also places where all sorts of rumors circulate and where the slightest incident can degenerate into mob violence. Moreover, penis snatching always involves total strangers: the alleged thief and the victim are unrelated to each other. “My tormenter has no past history with me!” cries out a distraught Congolese man, who cannot understand why he was singled out in the anonymous crowd by a penis snatcher.

In this regard, penis snatching can be compared to two other contemporary rumors. The first appeared in Cameroon in 1984 and spread to Gabon and Congo the following year, before reappearing in Cameroon and Gabon in 2007. Stories were told of people dying mysteriously after an old lady begged them for a cup of water. Only those who offered her water succumbed shortly after; those who bluntly refused her gesture of hospitality (or who gave her undrinkable salty water instead) remained safe. Each time the rumor triggered incidents: women were lynched because they were mistaken for the “Killer Granny” (*Mamie tueuse*) as she was sometimes nicknamed. A similar rumor circulated in Senegal in 1990: an old lady attacked people in the streets and savagely bit their necks (in contrast with the other rumors, in this case, the aggression is direct and not hidden behind innocent gestures). She was nicknamed *Mère Mataté* (from *màttat*, “to bite” in Wolof). Several women accused of being the “Biting Mammy” were assaulted, just because they were old, had long teeth, or were said to stare strangely at passersby. Penis snatchers, the Killer Granny, and the Biting Mammy are all anonymous

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7. Combined with the analysis of the newspaper corpus, the study of real incidents represents a good strategy to investigate such elusive phenomena as rumors. These ethnographic case studies are based on interviews with witnesses and protagonists (both accusers and accused), as well as fieldwork in locales where the incidents occurred (such as markets or popular neighborhoods).

8. Considerations of virility and the crisis of masculinity in Africa are obviously important to understand penis snatching, but they are beyond the scope of this paper. On this topic, see Bonhomme 2009: 37–50.

figures and, consequently, incidents occur on the occasion of mundane interactions between complete strangers.<sup>9</sup>

Because they focus on public encounters between strangers, these rumors are intimately linked to urban sociality. Anonymity is indeed a defining feature of modern urban life, as Georg Simmel's pioneering work "Metropolis and mental life" (1950b: 409–24) rightly stressed. In contrast to village life, large cities are characterized by countless possibilities for encounters with strangers. Urban public space is a "world of strangers," where they have become the norm rather than the exception (Lofland 1973). In public settings, "traffic relationships" are the interactional repertoire par excellence (Goffman 1963). These relationships suppose only minimal mutual acknowledgement between strangers, who routinely deal with each other as "nonpersons." In this view, accosting someone on the street represents a potentially hazardous or at least uncertain event. "The sheer numbers of people around the urbanite makes it impossible for him or her to feel secure about the motivations and interests of others. Strangers do not, as in the rural areas, come from outside. They live next door or even in the next room," as Misty Bastian (2001: 75) observed in a paper about modern witchcraft in Nigeria.

From this perspective, penis snatching appears as a dramatic illustration of the microhazards of anonymous encounters, to which African urbanites are constantly exposed. It is the witchcraft of traffic relationships and accosting people on the street. The very circumstances of the anonymous encounters that are misinterpreted as penis snatching confirm this interpretation. In 2004, a Nigerian civil servant passing through Kano was accused of penis snatching and lynched to death after asking a local for directions. In a similar fashion, in 2006, on a street in Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso), a preacher was accused of penis snatching after accosting a young man to preach him the gospel. Penis snatching always requires contact. It can be a fortuitous physical contact in a crowded setting: a benign collision with a stranger misunderstood as an occult aggression. In 2001, on a street in Libreville, a young man was inadvertently brushed against by a Nigerian man and suddenly felt an electric shock. He thought he heard the stranger say, "You got it?" Then he felt his penis shrinking. He raised the alarm. Passersby caught the man and beat him so badly that he "confessed." But snatching can also come from simple eye contact. In 2006, in a neighborhood of Parakou (Benin), a young man stared at a girl. She immediately accused him of stealing her genitals (a few cases of genital—or breast—snatching in fact concern women).<sup>10</sup> Locals lynched the young man. Though a shared gaze usually expresses an intention to communicate, a too insistent stare between strangers triggers uneasiness and can even be perceived as hostility. This is clearly what happened in Parakou: the girl misconstrued the young man's enticing gaze as an occult aggression.

The most typical circumstances in which penis snatching occurs are handshakes between strangers. "A man I did not know shrank my penis when he shook hands

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9. In contrast with penis snatchers, the Killer Granny and the Biting Mammy are often considered individuated figures (hence the use of the singular). This is also the case with the "charity killer" in rumors about deadly alms (see *infra*).

10. According to my data, more than 90 percent of the victims of genital snatching, but also of the persons accused, were men.

with me after he asked me what time it was,” complained one Gabonese victim of penis snatching. “I was passing by and I saw this man who held out his hand to greet me. I did not know him but, as a Cameroonian, I shook hands with him,” said a man involved in a similar incident. In the popular imagination, penis snatching is commonly viewed as the occult side of the anonymous handshake. It is not surprising, given the social importance of greetings in Africa (see, for instance, Irvine 1974; Akindele 1990). Greetings are access rituals that “ritually regularize the risks and opportunities face-to-face talk provides” (Goffman 1981: 19). Greetings between strangers are therefore more hazardous, especially in potentially hostile environments (Youssof, Grimshaw, and Bird 1976). This is precisely what is at stake in the case of penis snatching. The anonymous handshake, whose initiator is always the alleged penis snatcher, is perceived by the other party as a threatening gesture. Writing about rural France, where handshakes can also trigger suspicions of witchcraft, Jeanne Favret-Saada points out that shaking hands is “such an ordinary gesture of recognition that one usually forgets what is involved” (1980: 114). The lesson clearly applies to penis snatching as well.

Compared with accidental collisions or eye contact, handshakes represent the most paradoxical situation of penis snatching, since the aggression is disguised as its very opposite, namely solidarity and friendship. A symmetric interaction is turned into asymmetric predation. “‘Hello,’ a sign of friendship and fraternity between men, has now become a source of misfortune,” as one Gabonese journalist put it (*L’Union*, June 18, 1997). As a consequence, all anonymous handshakes suddenly become suspicious and are to be avoided. Public warnings are broadcast in newspapers, on the radio, on television, in churches, and in mosques.<sup>11</sup> “Keep your hands in your pockets. Avoid any unexpected handshake. Your friends are maybe not the ones you think they are,” a Gabonese journalist advocates. (*L’Union*, June 18, 1997). “Inhabitants of Port-Gentil make sure they do not brush past strangers. As far as handshakes are concerned, from now on they are proscribed, except between close relatives or old friends,” adds another (*Agence France Presse*, October 17, 2005). In Sudan, another journalist gave the following advice: “I consider it my duty to warn anyone who wants to come to Sudan to refrain from shaking hands with a dark-skinned man. Since most Sudanese are dark-skinned, he had better avoid shaking hands with anyone he doesn’t know.”<sup>12</sup> In Niger, even religious *communitas* is undermined by the rumor: “Now the faithful waver over whether they should shake hands after prayer, as recommended by the Sunna of the Prophet” (*Agence de Presse Africaine*, March 23, 2007).

The rumor, as short-lived as it may be, thus raises a critical issue: how should people behave with strangers? All local comments about penis snatching indeed stress the opposition between acquaintances and strangers and dramatize the dangers of anonymity. They advocate maintaining distance and vigilance toward

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11. All three rumors elicit public statements by various authorities (government officials, psychiatrists, journalists, religious leaders, traditional healers, etc.). But only some of them warn people against the dangers evoked by the rumors, whereas many others denounce these stories as false rumors or frauds.

12. Quoted in “Panic in Khartoum: Foreigners shake hands, make penises disappear,” *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, special dispatch series 593, 2003.

strangers and sometimes even pre-emptive aggression—a suggestion prone to cause new incidents. In 1990, in Lagos, “it was thought that inattention and a weak will facilitated the taking of the penis or breasts. Vigilance and anticipatory aggression were thought to be a good prophylaxis” (Ilechukwu 1992: 96). In a striking manner, this calls to mind the “slight aversion” that regulates urban life, according to Simmel: “Outer reserve is not only indifference but, more often than we are aware, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of a closer contact” (Simmel 1950b: 415–16). And yet distance and reserve are social norms typical of Western cities, but not of African ones. Urban life as a universal phenomenon inevitably generates anonymity; but this does not mean that anonymity is lived and perceived in the same manner everywhere, for instance in Paris and in Dakar. The observing of “civil indifference” in Western cities aims to keep strangers in a state of anonymity and thus reasserts the crucial social distinction between public and private spheres; but the same distinction does not hold in most African cities where contacts between strangers in public settings are not to be avoided. On the contrary, shaking hands with strangers is perfectly common. Conversely, distance and coldness are very negatively perceived as behaviors typical of white people. For instance, in Brazzaville, “it is impossible to stay in a bus or a cab without being talked to. . . . Urbanites feel uncomfortable remaining indifferent to the presence of others, *be they total strangers*” (Milandou 1997: 124).

Rumors of penis snatching, therefore, appear all the more striking. They elicit, at least temporarily, avoidance behaviors that would otherwise be largely disapproved of. The rumor thus calls into question the everyday norms of urban life. Max Gluckman (1972: 2) once observed that situations of “moral crisis,” in which people’s behavior is torn between contradictory social norms or values, are a hotbed for witchcraft accusations. In my view, penis snatching brings about such a situation of moral crisis (rather than it being the consequence of a preexisting crisis). It puts urban sociality to the test (just as rumors about the Killer Granny put hospitality toward strangers to the test). Rumors indeed reveal the tensions and contradictions underlying uncertain social situations—as deadly alms and killer phone numbers will confirm. Exposed to the hazards of anonymity, urban sociality appears to be torn between contact and distance. The personal account of a Togolese man, interviewed for a radio program on penis snatching in 2005, perfectly illustrates this tension. The man said he felt confused because he did not know how to behave in the street anymore; he was torn between his resolution not to shake hands with strangers for fear of penis snatchers and the social obligation to greet others for fear of being overly rude. However the instruction to avoid strangers cannot long withstand the strong social preference for contact. As soon as the rumor vanishes life returns to normal and strangers start shaking hands again.

If penis snatchers are always unrelated to their victims, accusations tend to target specific categories of strangers. In Nigeria, people accused of penis snatching are often Hausas.<sup>13</sup> This is also the case in other countries, such as Chad, Senegal, Mali, or Ivory Coast. However, outside Nigeria accusations are prone to switch

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13. The Hausas are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa and are located mainly in northern Nigeria and in southern Niger. Hausa communities are also scattered throughout West Africa.

from Hausas to Nigerians in general. In Togo for instance, in 2005, the Nigerian ambassador was compelled to call a press conference to deny rumors that his fellow citizens were stealing the genitals of Togolese men. As the rumor moves away from Nigeria, accusations are extended from specific subgroups to the larger group that subsumes them. In Gabon, they target not only Nigerians, but also more broadly West African immigrants. “This trick most certainly comes from West Africa,” claims a Gabonese. “Let’s deal with foreigners who come to our country and mess up everything,” adds another man. Accusations are thus fueled by xenophobia and build on preexisting tensions and often a past history of communal violence. They usually lead to even greater violence and stronger collective mobilization of “us” against “them.” Groups rather than single individuals are targeted and lynchings turn into riots. For instance, when penis snatching hit Cotonou in 2001, accusations targeted Ibos, a Nigerian ethnic group present in large numbers in Benin where they often work as traders. Several Ibos were lynched and collective violence soon degenerated into rioting: the market where Ibos usually worked was looted and burned.

As the accusation patterns show, the abstract figure of the unknown other easily leads to specific categories of strangers. Even though unrelated people cannot rely on biographical information to frame their interaction, they use perceptual clues (such as clothes, physical complexion, or language) to identify others and categorize them according to social stereotypes (such as social status, ethnicity, or nationality). In large cities, such categorizing modes of thought are by necessity the most important way of identifying others. “The city created a new kind of human being—the cosmopolitan—who was able, as his tribal ancestors were not, to relate to others in the new ways that city living made not only possible but necessary. The cosmopolitan did not lose the capacity for knowing others personally. But he gained the capacity for knowing others only categorically” (Lofland 1973: 177). This is why ethnicity has not lost its relevance in African cities: ethnic diversity often leads urbanites to categorize others spontaneously depending on their supposed ethnicity (Shack and Skinner 1979; Mitchell 1987). The importance of ethnic stereotypes inferred from perceptual clues is manifest in accusations of penis snatching. Hausas are often singled out by their long, flowing robes (*boubou*): the inadvertent brushing of the robe against a passerby is enough to raise the alarm against its wearer. In Mali and Ivory Coast, Fulanis “who look like Hausas” or “boubou-wearing Sahelians” have also been accused of penis snatching.<sup>14</sup> This illustrates how ethnic or regional stereotypes are used to single out penis snatchers in a world of strangers.

Penis snatchers are thus, following Simmel’s well-known conception of the Stranger (1950a: 402–8), those who are at the same time familiar and foreign, spatially near but socially far, such as Hausa traders in West Africa or West African immigrants in Gabon. The relational tension that shapes everyday interactions with those familiar strangers helps to explain why they are targeted. The rumor, therefore, bears witness to the “shifting ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 1996: 34) of African cosmopolitanism. It is intimately related to the two defining features

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14. The Fulanis are a vast ethnic group spread over about fifteen countries, principally in West Africa. Fulanis and Hausas are often categorized together in Nigeria and neighboring countries.

of modern urban life. The figure of the stranger is associated both with urban anonymity and with ethnic diversity, the latter being a common feature of all major African cities since the colonial period. Even though urbanization may be a global social phenomenon, the forms of urban sociality, however, differ in Shanghai, São Paulo, New York, or Lagos. Rumors of penis snatching precisely illuminate one aspect of Africa's own version of urban sociality: how African urbanites experience the tension between distance and proximity, between strangeness and familiarity in their daily lives. "The making of a new Africa lies in the city, for better or for worse," announced Georges Balandier decades ago (1985: vii). African cities are indeed places of experimentation for new social relations (Simone 2004). The rumor reveals all the ambiguity of this burgeoning urban life and highlights its occult side.

### **Anonymous gifts**

Rumors of deadly alms have much to do with penis snatching, even though they have been much more limited in space and time (at least until now). Both rumors are intimately related to anonymity, but they focus on distinct social occasions: on handshakes between strangers for penis snatching, on anonymous charity for deadly alms. When they appeared in Senegal in 2010, rumors about deadly alms (frequently called *offrande de la mort* in local French) were based on the following scenario: "An SUV driven by two men—one of whom was said to wear a turban—would 'generously' distribute meat, ten thousand CFA francs and percale as alms to passers-by. Unfortunately 'all those who accepted this charity had a sudden attack and passed away'" (*L'Observateur*, January 26, 2010). The content of the "deadly package" (as it was sometimes called) varies in some narratives, but meat and money are by far the most frequently cited items. Though not always mentioned, the presence of percale (white cotton cloth) has an obvious symbolic meaning: it is traditionally used for Muslim shrouds and thus refers to death.

Narratives most often enumerate the items given, but do not specify the almsgiver's identity. About the "mysterious charity killer," only two things can be hinted: he is rich and he is a stranger. His wealth is suggested by the fact that he drives an SUV and gives out ten thousand CFA franc banknotes, the highest denomination and a highly unusual sum for charity. This generosity is too extraordinary not to appear suspicious. In some incidents, conspicuous wealth plays a direct role in the accusation. A Senegalese man who lived and worked in Europe was back in his hometown of Rufisque where he planned to build some houses. As soon as he arrived on the building site driving a big black SUV he started distributing money around him. His gesture was motivated by the desire to ingratiate himself with the locals in order not to jeopardize his real estate project. Unfortunately, recipients misinterpreted this generosity: they accused him of being the deadly almsgiver and immediately assaulted him. Policemen eventually rescued the man and escorted him to the police station, but the crowd followed them and tried to break into the police station to seize the almsgiver.

Wealth is a central aspect of the rumor and this theme recurs in all local discussions about it. It is obvious to everyone that the rich donor's motivation is to get even richer by distributing deadly alms and that the targeted victims are always those who are likely to accept gifts from strangers out of necessity, be they beggars or, more broadly, the have-nots. The rumor and its local interpretations are

shaped by a moral imagination that resorts to the occult to explain social inequalities: the rich are rich only because they selfishly sacrifice the poor by occult means. Even though nothing in the deadly alms scenario alludes to politics, people often suspect politicians of being behind deadly alms. They are thought to give deadly alms to get elected or appointed to a position of power. “They do it all the time,” a disillusioned journalist told me. In this view, deadly alms must be seen in the political context of Senegal in the late 2000s. The popular hope placed in Abdoulaye Wade at the time of his election in 2000 had given way to bitter disillusion because of the economic crisis and the persistent suspicions of corruption and racketeering in the higher reaches of government. The figure of the almsgiver who drives an SUV and distributes high denomination banknotes refers implicitly to the nouveaux riches of Wade’s era who live in ostentatious luxury, while the have-nots struggle to make ends meet. Such interpretations in terms of witchcraft of riches and power have also been made occasionally in relation to penis snatching and killer phone numbers; but deadly alms more clearly connect anxieties over strangers and anonymity to occult economies and occult politics, the two main themes that have been investigated so far by studies of the witchcraft of modernity.

Indeed, the almsgiver is not only rich but he is also unrelated to his victims, just like the penis snatcher. He is said to drive around in his SUV and to stop in a locality only to circulate deadly alms before leaving hastily. Some (but not all) narratives hint at the almsgiver’s ethnicity: he is light-skinned and wears a turban. This ethnic stereotype could refer to Fulanis (who are present all across Senegal) or to Moors from Mauritania. In one incident, this stereotype played a role in the accusation. A peddler passing through Tambacounda, in the south of Senegal, was accused of distributing deadly alms in a market. He was lynched by an angry mob, rescued by a policeman and admitted to intensive care in the local hospital. The man attracted suspicion not only because he was carrying a black plastic bag (though he had no intention of giving its contents), but also because he was light-skinned and was wearing a turban. The peddler was a Fulani coming from the border of Mauritania and he was clearly perceived as an outsider in Tambacounda, which is on the other side of the country. However, rumors of deadly alms do not lead to overt xenophobic violence to the same extent as penis snatching. The fact that the almsgiver is a stranger is much more important than his ethnicity. “We don’t know who does this,” a Senegalese interlocutor told me. “The car stops, they open the window, give the package and leave. We can’t know their nationality.”

The almsgiver is anonymous, because he conceals his face with a turban and remains hidden inside the car, about which it is sometimes added that it has tinted windows. The car is therefore used as a mask. This explains why many narratives omit the vehicle’s occupants, as if the car itself was the main protagonist: “the car gives alms,” it was often said. It was even called the “death SUV” (*4x4 de la mort*). The “death car” is a motif that recurs in many other African rumors. A few weeks before the appearance of deadly alms, another rumor was circulating in Senegal, according to which someone driving a luxury car was kidnapping children to sacrifice them. The same rumor has been circulating in Gabon for some years: a black car with tinted windows prowls around high schools and kidnaps girls who are later found dead. These stories are not totally new. During the colonial era, in East Central Africa, fire trucks and ambulances were suspected of hiding occult

wrongdoings behind tinted windows (White 2000: 127–30). Strange windowless vehicles and cars with curtains over their windows were also mentioned. All these rumors draw on anxieties about situations of asymmetric anonymity: they stress the dangers of being watched and preyed upon by hidden agents who cannot themselves be seen.

In some incidents related to deadly alms, cars driven by strangers are enough to attract suspicion, even though no gifts are involved. Anonymous gifts are nevertheless the focal point of most incidents, as in the following example. A man called Baldé works in Kolda and wants to send a sack of rice to his mother who lives in a distant village. He entrusts the gift to a taxi driver who was planning a journey to a village near his mother's. When the driver arrives in the locality where he intends to drop off the rice so that Baldé's mother can pick it up later, he meets hostile villagers who refuse to take it and order him to leave at once. Baldé, whom he calls on the phone, advises him to leave the rice in another village a few miles away. But the same scene occurs again. The taxi driver has no option but to drive back to Kolda and return the gift to its giver. The incident is the result of the presence of intermediaries in the act of giving: what was originally intended as a simple family gift is turned into a threatening anonymous gift. Not only does the giver commit the gift to an intermediary, but also the villagers are not the final recipients and are not expecting to be used as intermediaries. From their perspective, the taxi driver is just a stranger who comes to their village and insists on giving them an unsolicited gift. This is enough for the sack of rice to appear suspicious even though it does not match the common description of the deadly alms.

Other incidents have been caused by an even more unsettling category of anonymous gifts: gifts without a giver. In a village near Sédhiou, a man found a ten thousand CFA francs banknote by the wayside, "just after an SUV drove by." Instead of picking it up, he raised the alarm. A crowd gathered around the banknote, but nobody dared to touch it. As some people suggest burning it, a schoolteacher made his way through the crowd and grabbed the money. His bold gesture elicited mixed reactions. While some praised him, others condemned his foolhardiness. After the episode, local shopkeepers refused to take any money from him for fear of falling victim to deadly alms through him as the intermediary (as if money's anonymity was contaminated by the dangers of anonymous gifts). A similar incident occurred in Diourbel. In a market, a tailor found a bag in front of the local mosque. A crowd of onlookers quickly gathered around the mysterious package. A man eventually dared to open the bag, where he found percale. People speculated: was it just a charitable gift that had been left anonymously in front of the mosque, as recommended by the Koran? Or was it the deadly alms that everybody was talking about?

The latter incident highlights a tension inherent in almsgiving. Giving alms is an ordinary gesture and often a daily one in Senegal. It is indeed a religious obligation for Muslims (about ninety percent of the population of Senegal). The Wolof word for charity—*sarax*—is derived from the Arabic *sadaqa*, which is used throughout the Koran to designate alms (Weir 1995). Besides, Muslim ethics recommend that charity be given anonymously rather than publicly and conspicuously: only impersonal gifts are truly free gifts. In this view, deadly alms are nothing but a perverted form of *sarax*, a pious gesture turned into sorcery. In Wolof, they were

indeed called *sarax buy rey* (“charity that kills”) or *saraxu dee* (“charity of death”). In fact, deadly alms bring to the fore an ambiguity underlying the moral economy of charity. Since the giver’s motives remain opaque to the recipient, anonymous almsgiving involves the threatening possibility that the selfless gift in fact conceals selfish motives and may even turn out to be detrimental to the recipient. Religious charity ought to be a gratuitous act that entails no direct reciprocity. And yet it usually implies the hope of a divine reward, either spiritual or material, in the afterlife or here below (Cruise O’Brien 1974). Even though recipients benefit from charity, they are only intermediaries or even instruments in a larger relation between almsgivers and God.

This is all the more so as alms are often prescribed by *marabouts* in order to protect the giver against misfortune or to succeed in an undertaking.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the second incident described in the introduction, Mustafa’s motive for giving alms of meat was to protect his family, as he told me. He was accustomed to performing such a *sarax* once a year. Even though he was well aware of the rumor, he regards himself as a pious Muslim and did not expect that recipients might mistake his gift for deadly alms. Alms prescribed by *marabouts* are viewed ambivalently, since the almsgiver’s success is sometimes thought to be obtained at the expense of the recipient. Beggars complain that they are used as “repositories for bad luck” (*dépôts de malheur*).<sup>16</sup> They are afraid of receiving gifts “weighed down” by misfortune and are therefore suspicious of the gestures and words that may go with the gift. “If someone spins the alms around his head before giving it, I never accept it,” declares a beggar. Another refuses alms that go with incantations: “I don’t know which prayers have been recited upon it. That’s why I refrain from taking it.” Since only a thin line demarcates magic from sorcery, *marabouts* are regularly suspected of being sorcerers (an accusation often related to the distinction between Muslim and pagan practices). They are said to perform *liggéey* (which means “work,” but also refers to magic) not only to protect their clients, but also to help them harm others. And this suspicion affects almsgiving as well. From this perspective, the rumor only takes to the extreme preexisting anxieties over the motives of anonymous almsgivers.

Deadly alms elicit public warnings against anonymous gifts, not unlike those against anonymous handshakes in the case of penis snatching. Beggars cannot afford to stop begging, but they grow even more suspicious. “We live on alms,” says a beggar, “so we’re compelled to accept what people give us. However we won’t accept just anything anymore. When somebody gives us alms, we screen the content.” Conversely, almsgivers refrain from giving in fear of being accused. Another beggar observes: “We have been receiving fewer alms lately. The few regular almsgivers who dare to go on being generous hesitate when they are about to give. Those who used to step out of their car to greet us now just reach out and slip away” (but this behavior is not without risk, precisely because it can attract

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15. “Marabouts” (*sērīn*) here refer to local healers and diviners (who most often combine Koranic and pagan magic); but the word is also used for religious leaders of Sufi brotherhoods.

16. For similar Indian cases of gifts contaminated by the givers’ sins, see Raheja 1988; Snodgrass 2001.

suspicion). Rumors of deadly alms thus jeopardize the everyday gestures of charity. They illustrate the moral perils of giving and receiving (Parry 1989).

Deadly alms are in fact sacrifices disguised as gifts. In Wolof, *sarax* means both charity and sacrifice. Indeed, charity often includes the sacrifice of an animal and the gift of its meat. Deadly alms expose the occult dimension of this gift-cum-sacrifice. Meat, one important item of the deadly package, clearly alludes to sacrifice. But ultimately, the sacrificial victim is not the animal but the recipient, who is killed by the gift. “Human sacrifices” and “ritual murders” are recurring themes in this kind of rumor; the popular imagination often associates them with pacts with sorcerers and evil spirits (*jinne* or *seytaane*). Deadly alms are frequently interpreted along such lines. It is thought that the almsgiver has engaged in a pact with evil powers in order to obtain wealth or power in exchange for the sacrifice of a human victim. Instead of being the beneficiary of a gift, the recipient turns out to serve as an exchange value to pay a debt. On the occasion of almsgiving, without even realizing it, the recipient gets involved at his own expense in an opaque relationship of a totally different nature with evil powers.

Deadly alms also represent a variation on the theme of the poisoned gift, a recurring topic in African witchcraft. They evoke the threatening possibility of a total reversal of the everyday logic of anonymous charity. The “murderous benefactor” (*bienfaiteur assassin*), as the almsgiver is sometimes called, appears as an oxymoronic figure who has something in common with the treacherous handshake of the penis snatcher. Deadly alms are thus a dramatic illustration of the crisis of the gift in contemporary Africa. This crisis affects not only kin-based reciprocity, as Filip de Boeck (2005) has shown in the case of the accusations against child-witches, but also gifts between strangers. These new forms of witchcraft bear witness to “the cracks and flaws that have started to appear in the urban gift logic” (ibid.: 209). “What poses as gift in the social interaction is no longer what it appears to be. Underneath the visible gift lurks another invisible pattern which corrupts regular patterns of exchange” (ibid.: 208). This perfectly applies to deadly alms—a sacrifice posing as gift.

### Unidentified phone calls

Compared with penis snatching or deadly alms, rumors of killer mobile phone numbers bring to light another facet of Africa’s occult modernity. In Africa as elsewhere, mobile phones are the true emblems of modernity. They are indeed perfectly aligned with its main cultural values: mobility, individualism, permanent accessibility, and space-time compression (McIntosh 2010). However it would be overly simplistic to interpret rumors of killer phone numbers as a fear of modernity. Such rumors are not a symptom of cultural resistance to foreign technological innovation, just as rumors of penis snatching are not a symptom of cultural maladaptation to urban life. On the contrary, the rumor is evidence of the enthusiastic appropriation of this new technology: the rumor is but a by-product of the popular craze for mobile phones in Africa. The rumor appeared in Nigeria in 2004, just three years after the introduction of GSM technology in the country. Nigerians have eagerly adopted this new technology of communication, as everywhere else on the African continent, where household landlines are very scarce (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, and Brinkman 2009). This enthusiastic appropriation nevertheless aroused new anxieties. The year before the rumor’s

appearance, Nigerians participated en masse in a one-day boycott of mobile phones to protest against the high tariffs and the poor service provided by phone operators: phone calls were often disconnected or misdirected such that people sometimes found themselves talking to unintended and unknown interlocutors (Obadare 2006). Killer numbers thus appear in an ambivalent climate of popular demand for mobile phones and widespread distrust towards phone operators.

The rumor draws inspiration from Asian and American horror movies such as *Ring* (1998), *Phone* (2002), or *One missed call* (2004), which exploit the theme of haunted phones and which were probably circulating in Nigeria through pirated DVDs when the rumor appeared. It is not surprising that mobile phones have fed the imagination of horror movies and popular rumors: both cultural phenomena draw on the same anxieties about anonymous phone calls. Phones are “access points” through which users can be reached by others (Goffman 1971: 351). Mobile phones grant even greater access than household landlines, since individual users can be reached always and everywhere. But accessibility inevitably means potential intrusion and thus vulnerability: “points of access can easily become points of alarm” (ibid.). Phone users are exposed to unsolicited calls by unknown and invisible others. Compared with face-to-face interaction, phone communication is carried exclusively through the vocal-auditory channel without any visual access to the other party. Hearing without seeing makes identification more difficult for participants, although mutual identification is a requisite for every social interaction. This is why the first turns at talk in a phone conversation are systematically devoted to identification between parties (Schegloff 1979). But when the phone rings, before the first words are spoken, there is a sharp asymmetry between caller and answerer since the latter does not know who is calling. The person being called is therefore more vulnerable than the caller, at least in the preopening and opening sequences. Caller ID—a service usually available on all mobile phones—enables preopening identification and thus neutralizes asymmetry, even though call masking restores it (Schegloff 2002). The phone’s address book further helps anticipated identification by substituting proper names for abstract numbers.

Killer numbers play precisely on these technological features common to all mobile phones. The calling number flashes on the screen but is not identified in the phone’s address book. Indeed, the danger only comes from unidentified calls; calls from friends or relatives are said to be safe. This explains why killer calls only affect mobile phones. Landline phones did not usually have caller ID: all phone calls were, therefore, initially anonymous. As a result, with landline phones the rumor could not focus on specific numbers. Killer numbers stress the contrast between identified and unidentified calls, just as penis snatching puts the emphasis on the distinction between unacquainted and acquainted people. In the incident described in the introduction, Vincent’s reaction is telling: he gets scared when he looks at the screen and sees “a number and not a name.” In a similar incident at a bus stop in Lagos, a street seller receives an unidentified phone call and raises the alarm, calling on the blood of Jesus to save him from killer calls. The scene attracts a crowd. Later, he finds out that the caller was in fact one of his friends who had just acquired a new phone number. The rumor thus focuses on the threat of being contacted by a total stranger whose identity comes down to a phone number (in Mali, the mysterious caller even uses a masked call to hide his identity). “The

names of the persons to whom the killer numbers belong should have been publicly revealed,” insisted a Gabonese journalist (*Gabon Flash*, August 22, 2004). The fact that alleged killer numbers were often unattributed or inaccurate (with too few or too many digits, or with nonexistent prefixes) did not weaken the rumor: on the contrary, these incongruities emphasize the mystery of the phenomenon. They were also regarded as a trick from the caller even better to conceal his identity.

Killer numbers thus point out the dangers of anonymity, just like penis snatching and deadly alms, but they relate to technological rather than urban anonymity. The rumor dramatizes a vulnerability intrinsic to phone communication: the banal risk of being exposed to anonymous calls becomes a mortal danger. But in a sense, it was to be expected that a technology, which is based on a disjunction between hearing and seeing and which enables long-distance communication between parties beyond physical copresence, could be considered an occult phenomenon. The enchantment of mobile phones does not proceed from a lack of understanding of modern technology but, on the contrary, emerges from an acute perception of its potentialities. Phones are witchcraft technology by design. In 2002, in Gabon, I saw several mobile phone users rejecting unidentified calls, for fear that it could be a witch’s trick to send them “night-guns” (*fusils nocturnes*).<sup>17</sup> Two years before the rumor’s appearance, anxieties over the potential use of mobile phones as witchcraft were already there.

Killer numbers must be seen in the context of the social use of mobile phones in Africa, just as was seen with penis snatching and urban sociality. Whereas the Internet is predominantly used to establish new contacts, notably with foreigners from Western countries, mobile phones are instead used to manage and strengthen preexisting social relationships among kinship, friendship, or business networks (Slater and Kwami 2005). In Nigeria for instance, “people make many calls just to say hello and to be in touch. To have a phone and not use it to reach out to family and friends is similar to the idea of living alone or preferring solitude and privacy to social interaction. . . . The vast majority of ordinary customers use a good deal of their credit making calls that are the cellular telephone version of a friendly visit” (Smith 2006: 506). The ubiquitous practice of “beeping” among African mobile phone users corroborates this analysis. Beeping consists in calling someone and hanging up at the first ring (Donner 2008). The reason for beeping is to urge the person called to call back and thus to meet the communication cost. Beeping follows rules of etiquette: in business relationships for instance, buyers are entitled to beep sellers who ought to call back, whereas in personal relationships, women beep and men call back. Beeping, as well as the transfer of communication credit by SMS (another common practice), thus inscribes mobile phone use in a preexisting nexus of social relations and exchange patterns. Such practices are restricted to communication between people who are already acquainted, who share strong ties rather than weak ones. Besides, beeping requires caller ID. This routine use of beeping and caller ID makes even more sensitive the difference between identified and anonymous calls. The threatening situation evoked by the rumor stands in sharp contrast to the ordinary social use of mobile phones. From this perspective, killer calls represent the occult flipside of beeping.

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17. Night-guns are considered a common technique of occult aggression in Gabon.

Killer numbers are not regarded as the unfortunate outcome of technological hazard, but as a premeditated act of witchcraft. However, the mysterious agent hiding behind an anonymous number is not necessarily thought of as a single individual. According to many, mobile phone companies could be involved since they control telecommunication networks. These suspicions bespeak the anxieties of mobile phone users, who feel at the mercy of large-scale impersonal forces controlling complex technologies. These impersonal forces are all the more difficult to grasp and, therefore, all the more threatening as, in most African countries, since the privatization of the telecoms sector in the 1990s and 2000s, mobile phone operators have been in the hands of multinational companies of foreign origin, which operate on a transnational scale. The rumor thus exemplifies the occult suspicions that surround, in the popular imagination, the alliance between new communication technologies and global capitalism. A journalist writing about rumors of killer numbers, for instance, denounced the collusion between “Nigerian systems, leaders and corporate organisations” (*Guardian*, August 4, 2004). Foreign powers are sometimes suspected of hiding behind killer numbers. In Kenya, Somalia, and Mali for instance, killer numbers are said to come from abroad, so much so that all international calls become suspect. The rumor therefore evokes the threat of being exposed through the mobile phone to anonymous actors, impersonal forces, and foreign powers whose scale far exceeds the familiar circle of social relationships, of which the phone’s address book is a direct expression. What is at stake in the rumor is not an overall fear of technological modernity, but rather the wide range of relationships to which mobile phone users are likely to be exposed, without even knowing it.

Just as penis snatching and deadly alms elicit recommendations to avoid shaking hands with strangers or receiving gifts from them, killer numbers elicit public warnings against anonymous calls. “Don’t answer any call if you don’t know the number; otherwise you’ll just die for nothing” (*Vanguard*, July 28, 2004). Mobile phone users are led to change their communication routines, at least as long as the rumor remains active. Switching off all mobile phones is the most radical response. “I have decided to disconnect the line, I don’t want any of my children to die mysteriously,” declared one Nigerian businessman in Ikeja, “and I have warned my wife against receiving unregistered phone numbers, nobody can say which one is mysterious or not. I have to take precaution. Prevention, they say, is better than cure” (*This Day*, July 23, 2004). But this has a high social cost, since phone users become temporarily unreachable to all, including their friends and relatives. Screening calls is a less drastic measure. “The story spread so fast and got so twisted that at a point people completely stopped picking calls from numbers which they did not have on their phonebooks” (*This Day*, May 24, 2008). “It’s better to miss an important call than for somebody to die a mysterious death just because she wants to answer a phone call,” observed one Nigerian woman. ‘Most of my friends have their own phones and if they want to call me, they’ll use their phones,’ she submitted, just as she made another attempt to stop her phone from continuing its ringing” (*Vanguard*, July 28, 2004).

Another protective measure consists of letting the mysterious caller speak first—a blatant violation of ordinary turn-taking in phone conversation. A Nigerian TV newscaster warned viewers: “If it is important that you have to receive all your calls, you have to allow the callers to speak first before replying them. Once this is done,

you are free from their trap. But if you first say hello, you are gone for it” (*This Day*, July 23, 2004). The same warning is to be found in Mali: “If you pick up the call, do not speak first even if the caller greets you in Arabic, the language of the Prophet” (*L’Indépendant*, October 4, 2010). Though the latter statement is contradictory (speaking first *after* being greeted!), it shows that the danger comes from answering the call, rather than just from picking up the receiver. The danger does not lie in the technological device by itself, but in the communication it enables. This is a matter of exposure and vulnerability. Speaking first and saying hello means exposing oneself and granting the caller access to one’s identity; whereas keeping silent means refusing contact and forces the caller to expose himself.

The rumor thus highlights the hazards of anonymity and identification in phone conversations between strangers, as well as the ways these hazards are dealt with via the delicate social organization of taking turns at talk. In Vincent’s misadventure (described in the introduction), these hazards of anonymity are extended and repeated in the surreal dialogue, or rather absence of dialogue, in the aforementioned exchange between the venturesome journalist and the unfortunate woman to whom the alleged killer number belonged. The journalist’s phone calls were intended to shed light on the mystery, but only resulted in even greater misunderstanding (several similar—and unsuccessful—attempts have been made in other incidents). This phone conversation, with its absurd summons and aborted beginnings, amounts indeed to a monument of incommunicability and misidentification between strangers: “- Hello, who am I speaking with? - How can you call my number and ask me ‘who am I speaking with?’”

### **The dangers of anonymity**

Penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer phone numbers all illustrate the dangers of anonymity. Anonymity stands out clearly as the most distinctive common denominator of these new forms of the occult, especially if contrasted with “family witchcraft,” which represents the archetypal form of witchcraft in Sub-Saharan Africa. Witchcraft most often stems from the family. The close link between witchcraft and kinship continues in modern settings: “even in modern contexts—for instance, in the big cities—witchcraft is supposed to arise, first of all, from the intimacy of the family and the home” (Geschiere 1997: 11). In Libreville for instance, divination sessions performed by *nganga* (witchdoctors) aim, above all, to locate the origin of witchcraft on the victim’s “mothers’ side” or “fathers’ side.” As a result, the African witch has been predominantly conceptualized as a treacherous insider in anthropological tradition: he or she is “the hidden enemy within the gate” (Mayer 1970: 61). And yet, as Filip de Boeck rightly observes, “witchcraft is no longer something from within. . . . Contrary to older forms of witchcraft, the witchcraft ‘new style’ is wild, random and unpredictable, without clear direction or intention. . . . Because the possible sources of witchcraft are often disconnected from kinship relations, the danger may now come from anywhere. One becomes bewitched in public places like markets and shops, and through relations with unrelated or anonymous people” (de Boeck and Plissart 2004: 203). Witchcraft undeniably represents the “dark side of kinship” (Geschiere 1997: 11); but it now increasingly represents the dark side of anonymity as well, as penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer numbers paradigmatically show. In contrast with the

circulation of witchcraft gossip within small-scale kinship networks, broadcast rumors bring witchcraft to a wider dimension (Stewart and Strathern 2004). This “unbounded” or “deterritorialized” witchcraft circulates through transnational rumors that are connected to the global flows of information and images of modern mediascapes (see Englund 2007 for a similar argument).

These occult rumors are quintessentially modern insofar as anonymity itself is a key aspect of modernity. Penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer phone numbers draw on two different situations of anonymity, which relate to two distinctive repertoires of modernity. Face-to-face encounters with strangers, around which both penis snatching and deadly alms revolve, are typical of urban modernity (though admittedly not exclusive to it). Mediated interactions with distant and often invisible others, around which killer phone numbers revolve, are part and parcel of technological modernity (cars with tinted windows, mentioned in rumors of deadly alms, in fact fall somewhere between the two categories). Because they are based not on parochial circumstances but on very common situations, these rumors can easily apply to many different places. They must be understood in the context of the cityscapes and technoscapes constitutive of modernity in Africa (“The city” and “Technology” are indeed two key chapters of the *Readings in modernity in Africa* [2008] edited by Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer, and Peter Pels). They speak of the particular ways in which urban life and new information and communication technologies are lived and experienced on the African continent. These occult rumors are not only new imaginings for new times, but also more precisely “new imaginings for new relationships” (White 2000: 22). Inasmuch as modernity has extended the scope of human sociality in unprecedented ways through urban life and technology, it has extended as well the scope of the occult. Occult rumors are but by-products of Africa’s modernity.

Penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer phone numbers give evidence of the pervasive sense of insecurity characteristic of Africa’s occult modernity. They are paradigmatic of what Adam Ashforth (2005) calls “spiritual insecurity,” a sense of exposure and vulnerability to occult forces, which relates to other dimensions of insecurity in everyday life. This spiritual insecurity is but one aspect of what Pierre-Joseph Laurent (2008), for his part, calls “insecure modernity” (*modernité insécurisée*). This condition of insecurity brings about a climate of generalized suspicion, which is a hotbed for witchcraft accusations and violence, since no one trusts anyone any more. Occult rumors take this collapse of trust to its extreme. “Everybody grows suspicious of everybody else,” explains a Gabonese man commenting on penis snatching. “We don’t know who is who any more,” adds another man. As penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer phone numbers all clearly show, situations of urban and technological anonymity are a locus of special vulnerability, in which insecurity is brought to the fore. Both face-to-face and mediated anonymity are potentially insecure because participants are either mutually unacquainted or invisible to one another. Anonymous situations are, therefore, fraught with uncertainty and opacity. This opacity concerns not only the participants’ identity and intentions, but also the very framing of their interaction, from which it derives its meaning. As a result, situations of anonymity often involve diminished trust between participants. In normal circumstances these hazards of anonymity can be smoothly dealt with in the course of everyday interactions. But occult rumors dramatize them and turn them into mortal dangers. Penis snatching,

deadly alms, and killer phone numbers bring about a crisis of anonymity (as acute as it is short-lived). In the wake of the rumors, even the most ordinary gestures become hazardous and attract suspicion. People start screening phone calls, gifts, handshakes, and even glances from strangers. Cracks suddenly appear in the orderly give-and-take of daily interactions.

Occult rumors thus feed on anxieties born out of very ordinary situations: shaking hands with strangers, accepting anonymous gifts, receiving unidentified phone calls, offering water to anonymous guests, or spotting a car with tinted windows driving around the neighborhood. From this perspective, “spiritual insecurity” might seem to be too loose and misleading a term to describe these phenomena. Admittedly, the people involved often cast penis snatching and the like in “spiritual” terms. In Francophone Africa for instance, *mystique* has become a catchall epithet, which encompasses everything from religion to magic, witchcraft, and sorcery. But many “mystical” phenomena in fact stem from perfectly mundane situations and could thus be more aptly analyzed as the unfortunate outcomes of an insecurity or vulnerability that pervades everyday social interactions. Such a redescription in terms of “interactional” rather than “spiritual” insecurity would enable us to deconstruct the category of “the occult” by reconnecting it to more mundane concerns and, thus, to de-exoticize witchcraft and sorcery even more convincingly (though, undeniably, Ashforth has already achieved a lot in this respect).

This attempt at de-exoticizing the occult is the reason why I draw heavily on Erving Goffman and microsociology, a reference that might look odd from the perspective of the existing literature on witchcraft and modernity. Goffman is best known as the brilliant ethnographer of the daily routines of social interaction. His analysis of the public order shows us, according to Anthony Giddens, “how modernity is ‘done’ in everyday interaction” (1991: 46). The public observation of civil indifference between strangers in Western cities, for instance, represents an implicit contract of mutual acknowledgement and protection and thus serves to sustain attitudes of trust and provide a sense of security, on which modern social life depends. But, in the same movement, Goffman also brings into light the occult flipside of modernity. Indeed, he often describes everyday life as something fraught with hidden dangers. His essay on “Normal appearances,” published in *Relations in public* (1971), is a masterpiece of this sort. A reviewer of Goffman’s book presents the essay as “a tour de force of paranoid logic and imagination” and even views Goffman as “the Kafka of our time . . . because he communicates so vividly the horror and anguish—as well as some of the absurd comedy—of everyday life” (Berman 1972). Influenced by spy fiction as well as the ethology of predation, the essay indeed exposes the many dangers that lurk behind the normal appearances of public order and always threaten to undermine it. As Goffman (1971: 375) warns us:

What is important is this: given that an apparently undesigned contact can turn out in retrospect to have been the first visible move in a well-designed game being played against the individual, and therefore not incidental at all, and given, further, that a genuinely incidental contact can be opportunistically exploited by bad characters—given all this—it follows that *any* current incidental contact that has so far not led to anything alarming might indeed do so.

Strikingly, one could not find a more appropriate description of the situations in which suspicions of penis snatching, deadly alms, or killer phone numbers arise. Thus, these occult rumors do not allude to an invisible otherworld, but more mundanely to “an everyday world turned upside down,” as Richard Handler (2012: 186) characterizes Goffman’s *weltanschauung*. In the wake of the rumors, anonymous encounters turn out to be the opposite of what they seem to be. People start suspecting that anonymity in fact serves to hide occult relations. Alleged victims of penis snatching, deadly alms, and killer phone numbers get involved in anonymous interactions, only to realize after the fact that they have been forced into opaque relationships of a totally different nature. All the incidents triggered by the rumors thus proceed from the same situations of dysphoria caused by face-to-face or mediated encounters with strangers (on dysphoria in interaction, see Goffman 1953). It is always the interaction’s recipient and not its initiator who grows suspicious and feels threatened: the one who is accosted and whose hand is shaken, the one who is given alms, or who is called on the phone. Because of the climate of fear created by rumors, the recipient is led to interpret the stranger’s initiative in a way that is at odds with its ordinary meaning: engagement cues are misconstrued as signs of hostility. When everyday rituals are no longer able to sustain trust and provide a sense of security, normal appearances no longer hold and even the most banal events cannot be taken for granted anymore.

Such a fractured world where the sense of normalcy of appearances seems to be constantly on the verge of disruption aptly describes the situation of insecure modernity in which postcolonial Africa finds itself. This is a world of endless possibilities, but ones that all too frequently turn out badly: “Nigeria is a country where anything can happen and usually does,” remarked a journalist writing on killer phone numbers (*Guardian*, August 4, 2004). Thus, even though at first sight Erving Goffman and Jean and John Comaroff may seem like chalk and cheese, their serendipitous encounter is not without heuristic value in casting new light on Africa’s occult modernity. It illuminates how the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity affect the minutiae of human interaction and how occult imagination can pervade the most basic aspects of everyday life.

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## Les dangers de l'anonymat : sorcellerie, rumeur, et modernité en Afrique

Résumé : Cet article porte sur une série de rumeurs ayant récemment circulé en Afrique. Ces rumeurs de vol de sexe, de numéros de téléphone qui tuent et d'offrandes de la mort relèvent d'un même « genre » transnational, caractéristique de la modernité sorcellaire en Afrique. On a souvent reproché à la littérature consacrée à la modernité de la sorcellerie d'adopter une perspective trop macrosociologique. Par contraste, cet article adopte une approche microsociologique et examine les répertoires interactionnels dans lesquels s'enracinent ces nouvelles formes de l'occulte. Il montre que ces dernières exploitent des inquiétudes suscitées par des situations banales : les poignées de main entre inconnus, les appels téléphoniques non identifiés, les dons anonymes. Ces rumeurs tournent ainsi autour des dangers de l'anonymat et évoquent le risque

de se faire entraîner à son insu dans des interactions louches avec des inconnus. Elles s'appuient sur deux formes d'anonymat, associés à deux répertoires spécifiquement modernes : les interactions en face à face avec des inconnus, typiques de la modernité urbaine ; les interactions à distance avec des agents invisibles, typiques de la modernité technologique. En contribuant à élargir sans cesse davantage les limites de la socialité humaine, la modernité s'accompagne donc d'une inquiétante extension du domaine de l'occulte. En définitive, cet article éclaire sous un nouveau jour la place de la sorcellerie dans l'Afrique contemporaine et propose de nouvelles façons d'articuler perspectives micro et macro en examinant comment les dynamiques de grande ampleur de la modernité se traduisent dans les plus menus détails des interactions sociales.

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