

Chapter 8: Yamba Witchcraft Beliefs

1. Introduction

Looking back over the many years I have known Pa Monday Kongnjo, one small but memorable episode often comes to mind. One evening he told me the sad story of his teenage son Benjamin whose death he blamed on the witches of his 'compound' (descent group). The witches were powerless to harm Pa Monday because of his protective medicine, so they turned their maleficent power against his son Benjamin. Benjamin, as his father later discovered with shocked surprise, had possessed the innate power to transform into a leopard. On one of his nightly expeditions the witches had lured him into a waterlogged cave and kept him there for more than a year. (Benjamin had suffered from a long debilitating disease. Several visits to the local hospital were in vain). When divination finally discovered the reason for his sickness it was too late. The 'leopard' was already 'rotting' in the cave. A healer (*ηga ncəp*) managed to rescue the leopard transform and bring it back to the house where Benjamin lay dying, but he could no longer cure him. Benjamin died the very same day.

After Pa Monday had told me this sad tale, he fell silent, his eyes fixed on an imaginary point on the ground. Then he roused himself and said in a warning tone, 'God give you bad thing, fear! No come-out!' (If god has given you a dangerous thing, beware! Do not activate it!). This was Pa Monday's highly condensed way of expressing himself. In these few words he summed up some of the salient notions of Yamba witchcraft: it is god-given, not acquired or learnt; it is conscious - a witch knows that he is a witch; it is dangerous; and those who possess it may use it or decide not to use it. Benjamin should not have activated his witch power and ventured into the dangerous world of witches.

In this chapter I shall give an account of Yamba witchcraft beliefs and how the Yamba try to defend themselves against the noxious and secret activities of witches. It is a first attempt at understanding Yamba notions of witchcraft. Although in my many years of working and living among the Yamba I have gained a fair understanding of their beliefs in witchcraft I do not claim that my understanding is perfect or complete. Witchcraft looms large in the life of the Yamba and is prominent in ordinary discourse. It becomes the topic of the day when misfortune strikes, when somebody falls seriously ill, or a death occurs. But this is not to say that all misfortunes, sickness or untimely deaths are attributed to witchcraft. There are many other causes.

I did not find it difficult to get information about witchcraft beliefs. It is true that there were some people who refused to discuss witchcraft with me, except in more general terms, saying that since they did not 'know witch' they could not tell me more. But my more trusted informants were quite open and forthcoming when we talked in private. Local gossip, too, can be quite specific in terms of the mechanism witches are believed to employ when going about their nocturnal pursuits. When people talk about instances of cannibalistic witchcraft it is with horror, disgust and anger. But towards other forms of witchcraft, such as shape-changing, people take a more ambiguous position.

The Yamba hold that witches may be male or female. There is no suggestion that women are more likely to be witches than men or vice versa. I use the male gender throughout this chapter to avoid the cumbersome use of 'he/she'. So what I say about male witches applies equally to female witches, except where it is expressly stated otherwise.

In their heart of hearts every Yamba believes in the reality of witchcraft. Spider divination is said to detect witches but the ultimate proof of it was autopsy, outlawed by the British colonial authorities, which was performed on every adult person before burial. Formerly, people accused of being cannibal witches were challenged to undergo the *nggu* poison ordeal. If the person vomited it was proof that he or she was innocent and the matrikin would demand heavy compensation. A person who did not vomit invariably died and his death was taken both as proof and punishment.

Yamba believe that god (*nwi*) endows some people with a psychic power while they are still in their mother's womb. This power is given at random and equally to male and female fetuses⁵². Although there is evidence of a 'good god' (*nwi nə boŋ*) and a 'bad god' (*nwi nə bup*) in Yamba cosmology (see also Kwast 1971: 43) no mention was made by my informants that the 'bad god' was solely responsible for distributing witchcraft power to the unborn. The 'bad god' of the Yamba cannot be equated with the god of witches (*nui maŋka*) of the Wuli (Lus) of Mfumte, northern neighbours of the Yamba. Yamba simply say that it is god (*nwi*), without qualification, who randomly gives such evil powers to embryos. Witchcraft power is imagined to reside in the 'belly' and the different categories of witchcraft are associated with different organs. But unlike the Wuli who believe that unborn embryos are remodelled by the god of the witches (*nui maŋka*) 'by giving them extra sets of internal organs or by abnormally shaping their organs' (Baeke 1995: 22), the

52. There is no evidence that among the Yamba witchcraft is transmitted matrilocally as D. Zeitlyn (1994) reports from the Mambila, eastern neighbours of the Yamba.

Yamba do not hold that physiological abnormalities or additional organs are the seat of different categories of witchcraft. According to Yamba belief, children, whether they have been given witchcraft power or not, are born with 'normal' organs. This psychic power residing in the inner organs first manifests itself in children as their having 'eyes'. But no evidence of this would be found as yet in their internal organs. That is also the reason why no autopsy is performed on small children. It is only when such children, endowed with witchcraft power, grow up and begin to activate it that the internal organs associated with the different types of witchcraft begin to show certain signs.⁵³

Witchcraft in Yamba Discourse

Before describing in more detail the different categories and mechanisms of Yamba witchcraft a few general remarks of how Yamba think and talk about witches and their activities may be in order. As with all things invisible one finds a great deal of speculation, fantasy, and, among younger informants, a lot of confusion. It would be a misconception to think that among the Yamba (as among other Grassfields people I know) there was unanimity of opinion as regards the different aspects of witchcraft or its mechanisms. There is no such thing as a 'catholic dogma' to which all Yamba would subscribe in all its details. So although one can find a general consensus all over Yamba territory as regards general notions of witchcraft and its mechanisms, details may vary.

For the Yamba, the visible world as we experience it (the 'day-world') has an exact counterpart in the invisible world of the witches (the 'night-world'). The invisible world of the witches is just as real as the visible world. Ordinary people (non-witches) are limited to the visible world whilst witches move freely in both worlds. Yamba witches are believed to have their own cult institution, similar to the *ɪwantap* cult of the 'day' (see later), the setting up of which, according to Pa Monday, involves the killing of children of its members and applying their blood to their *sacra* to make them effective. Like the Tiv (Edwards 1984: 87), Yamba believe that the 'day' (public and legal) ceremonial performances of their cults have their counterpart 'night' (secret and confined to witches) ceremonial performances. The social institutions of the 'night-world' are a replica of the social institutions of the 'day-world'. The witches have their 'chief' or 'big man'. According to Pa Monday there are two 'chiefs' (lineage heads) in every 'compound' (descent group), one for the

53. But it would be wrong to conclude that, because all people have the inner organs associated with different forms of witchcraft, psychic power is latent in everybody, as the Wimbun, western neighbours of the Yamba, believe (Mbunwe-Samba 1996).

‘day-world’ and one for the ‘night-world’: they may be one and the same person.

Yamba say of somebody they suspect of having psychic power that he has ‘eyes’ (*e tse’ lis*, where *tse’* means ‘to have’ in the sense of possessing something). In ritual statements witches are usually referred to as people possessing ‘two eyes’ (*lis baa*) or two ‘sets of eyes’, one for the day-world and one for the night-world of witches. The ‘eyes’ of the witches are ‘inside’, in the ‘stomach’. Witches are said to have ‘eyes’ because god has shown them ‘everything’ while they were still in their mother’s womb. Once shown they will never forget what they have been shown. To have ‘eyes’ is not necessarily a bad thing. Medicine men (*ŋga ncəp*) are believed to have ‘eyes’, a psychic power they use to fight against the evil actions of witches. When somebody is said to have ‘eyes’ he will be able to recognise all the other people who have ‘eyes’ and he will ‘see’ things which happen in different places although he may be sitting next to you. Small children with ‘eyes’ are in great danger. Twins, breech-births, children born with a caul or with the umbilical cord wrapped around their necks and those who cut the upper teeth first, as well as children who cry excessively during the night, are believed to have ‘eyes’ (see Chapter Six). Although they ‘see’, their psychic power which god has given them while they were in their mother’s womb is still dormant. In order to ‘lock their eyes’ the ritual *fopkə moa* (see Chapter Six) is performed. Some of these children whose ‘eyes’ have been ‘locked’ in infancy will remain in this state for life. But in the case of others, as they grow up, the psychic power in their ‘stomach’ begins to act and opens their ‘eyes’ again. Then nothing can be done for them again. They are responsible for their own actions. People with ‘eyes’ are also said to have ‘stomach’ (*e tse’ mvəm*). ‘Eyes’ and ‘stomach’ go together. You cannot have the one without the other. ‘Stomach’ stands for the psychic power in a witch’s belly which he can ‘move out’ (*fik*).

Yamba say that people who possess internal psychic powers ‘come out witch’ (*tise rum*). *Tise* means to leave, to come out from (e.g. as when somebody leaves the house). When a witch ‘comes out’ his invisible double or ‘ethereal body’ (Chilver) leaves the body which remains behind like an empty shell. Pa Monday likened the body left behind to the skin of an animal from which the ‘meat’ had been taken out. ‘It is like when a monkey is skinned: there is the skin, the “outside”, which is sleeping in bed and there is the “meat” (the part which comes out). When the witch returns he “opens” the “skin” and enters.’ Other people draw an analogy between dreams (*mirlo*) and the nightly travels of witches. ‘When a person is asleep his *ma-yoŋse* (breath, spirit) leaves the body and roams about. He dreams that he is here and there.

He dreams that he has gone to visit his brothers at home while in reality he is here in Mbo'. This is why we know that the *ma-yoŋse* is "travelling" (Sam Kobuin). The fact that people dream helps the Yamba to visualise the witches' ability to 'come out'. As the *ma-yoŋse* leaves the body at night and moves about so does the ethereal body of the witches.

Some informants told me that witches, when they leave their bodies at night, fly along invisible threads. 'If you sleep with somebody in the house and you want to wake him you must not shake him. You call him. If he does not answer, call him again. If he does not answer a third time, leave him alone. That means he has "come out". If you shake him, the "rope" he uses to "come out" with may break and he may die. Witches "come out" with something — a rope or some other thing. That rope is like a spider's web. Witches walk along that rope like spiders. They go out and come back on that rope. If he is asleep and you shake him vigorously he may jump and so cut the rope. He would fall off the rope and die' (Sam Kobuin).

Another expression often heard is, '*O fa wu mbuəp wu yaŋ*' (they, i.e. the witches, have given you 'cold air' that is why you are sick). At a social gathering or a compound meeting somebody may have said something which displeased or angered the witches present. They will blow 'cold air' on him and he will get sick. Divination will reveal the cause of his illness and he will be advised to convene a meeting of the same people who have been present at that first fateful meeting. He will cook them a fowl and give them wine saying that he is sorry for what he had said or done and that they should leave him alone. Nobody is accused and nobody takes offence. Those who have given him 'cold air' know it and, if they are satisfied, they will withdraw their spell.

Yamba often protest their innocence saying, '*Mə ka rum ri!*' (I don't 'know witch'). When doing so they do not deny any knowledge of witchcraft, in the sense of being able to describe its main features, so much as the 'knowledge' of using such powers. To 'know witch' is equivalent to being a witch. In this sense one could argue that for the Yamba witchcraft is innate knowledge. 'Just as some children have a lot of sense and do well in school so some children possess the gift of witchcraft. Witchcraft is a type of knowledge. All these gifts are given by god while the child is still in his mother's womb' (Pa Monday Kongnjo).

Yamba believe that all forms of witchcraft are fully conscious and voluntary. Cannibal witchcraft is exclusively nocturnal and anonymous. Other forms of witchcraft may also be active during the day. Some informants state that witches frequent occasions where many people gather, like annual

dances, death celebrations and other festivities to camouflage their activities. Witches also use disputes, e.g. the swearing of two litigants ('licking the double bell'), and even accidents like snakebites to disguise their nefarious activities. Pa Sam Kobuin told me: 'If a snake bites you, you must not tell anyone but go quickly to somebody who has anti-snakebite medicine. You must tell only him and he will treat you. If you tell people that you have been bitten by a snake, the witches among them will add to your injury and kill you. People will say that the snake has killed you while in reality it was the witches who killed you.'

Cannibal witches never disclose the identity of the other members of their witch-*njangi*. If a cannibal witch 'falls' (e.g. has been ritually executed or has been caught by *ɲwantap* and thus fallen sick) and is pressured by his family to make a confession, he may confess that he 'knows' this or that child (i.e. has 'eaten' the child) but he will never implicate his companions. This prohibition does not extend to other forms of witchcraft. I know of several cases in which a 'fallen' leopard witch has implicated an elderly man or woman of the compound by saying that they were the ones who 'trained' him.

Yamba believe that a person born with psychic powers may choose not to 'come out'. 'When he sees that other people have more than he does, he is not consumed by jealousy. At night when he observes other witches as they go about doing their business he does not join them. Instead he covers his eyes and sleeps. Such a witch will not die quickly. He will live on till he reaches old age' (Sam Kobuin).

There is a close link between cannibal witchcraft (but not other categories of witchcraft) and kinship. Cannibal witchcraft can be conceived of as the 'dark side of kinship'. It is operative between agnates and co-residents. Jealousy, aggression, succession disputes, malice and sheer spite within the kinship group, in other words, everything which goes against the ideal conception of kinship and domestic intimacy, is objectified in the idiom of witchcraft. Non-kin do not attack each other with (cannibal) witchcraft. They fight it out openly if a conflict arises. 'If I get into an argument with a non-kinsman, he beats me and I beat him. We are angry with each other. This is not witchcraft. Nothing happens. But if I vex with one of my "brothers" and I "come out witch", and I do a different thing of which you are not aware, then you fall sick - this is witchcraft' (Pa Monday Kongnjo).

Yamba believe that witchcraft follows its own laws. A person cannot be attacked or killed by witchcraft without a cause. Witches do not attack indiscriminately. If this were the case, one informant told me, there would be no

more people left. Witches are constantly on the lookout for breaches of family solidarity, family disputes, verbal aggression, non-fulfilment of affinal obligations, transgressions of cult laws, disobedience of prohibitions uttered by the recent dead, unfilial behaviour towards parents, and other selfish and disruptive acts against the common good of the social group. News of such misdeeds gives them the opportunity to intervene. So, in a sense, witches can also be seen as the watchdogs of tradition and family values.

Major Yamba Witchcraft Categories

In this section I shall attempt a more detailed description of the three major witchcraft categories of the Yamba — *rum* (cannibal witchcraft), *mbɛ* (leopard transform) and *songonɔŋ* (witch-breeze), and also briefly mention some minor ones. This may help us to discover some underlying prior notions of the human person which have helped to shape Yamba witchcraft beliefs.

3.1. Cannibal Witchcraft (*rum*)

Among all the different forms of witchcraft the most feared and most disgusting to the Yamba is *rum*, cannibal witchcraft. *Rum* witches are said to have an insatiable appetite for human flesh. Their victims are babies and small children. According to Yamba belief *rum* witches do not ‘eat’ (*zɥ*) adults. They can kill them or harm them in other ways, e.g. by inflicting an illness or some other misfortune on them. Although a *rum* witch may act on his own it is usually believed that they are organised in covens or witch-njangis, a type of credit ring in which each member has to present a victim in turn, most often an own child or that of a close relative. The word for witch-njangi in Yamba is *bo rum* (hand, witch). This term is related to *bo fak* (hand, farmwork, i.e. to give a hand at farmwork), a rotating work-party whereby work is carried out in the farms of each member in turn. Formerly Yamba did not know of credit rings or njangis so they have no word for it. Nowadays they use the word *ngwa*’ borrowed from the Wimbun. Another term one hears occasionally is *tsəm rum* (meeting, witch).

Although Yamba dogma holds that cannibal witchcraft (*rum*) is operative only within a descent group or between affines witch-njangis are made up of members of different ‘compounds’ and quarters of a village. Pa Monday draws a parallel between the activities of witch-njangis and the communal hunt: ‘If you want to burn a hunting bush, is it only your family people who are coming? Are not hunters from other families and other quarters joining in? But it is the man of your compound who opens the door.’ The members of the witch-njangis need a person with a family connection who is familiar with the

people of the descent group and knows his way about. Witches from other compounds are afraid to enter your compound. They don't know if and where anti-witchcraft medicine has been hidden and so on. Cannibal witches use owls (*von*) as familiars to fly to their nightly meeting places. Alighting on a tree near the compound of the victim they wait for the provider to bring his 'contribution'. The witch of the family chooses his victim and 'opens' the door of the house in which the child is sleeping to remove the child's heart. He acts without a familiar or transform when entering the house of the victim. The other members of the witch-njangi wait 'outside', in the vicinity, for him to bring the victim. The provider is likely to take a child of a close relative whom he hates or is jealous of (e.g. because he has many children), but sometimes he may be forced to take one of his own children.

Like ordinary rotating credit rings witch-njangis have a 'president' or chairman and a 'secretary'. The president presides over the meetings. He cuts up the 'meat' and divides the portions among its members. He also decides who will be the person to provide 'meat' for the next session. The 'secretary' keeps the records. Before cutting up the 'meat' the president is believed to hit the victim-child with a straw (*kaka*) in order to change it into game meat or a goat. The heart is given to the provider. Since the heart stands for the whole person one could say that the provider, as the 'owner', is given back, in a symbolic way, the whole victim. Should he refuse to take the heart of the child the other witches would also refuse to take their own share and tell him to 'join' the child again and take it back. The child would then recover from its sickness but the provider would have to pay with his own life. The witches would kill him (but not 'eat' him).

According to Rowlands and Warnier (1988: 122), 'most African languages, and all the Bantu ones, make a lexical distinction between eating — swallowing soft and ground food on the one hand and eating that involves cutting and chewing on the other. In Mankon...the two words are *dziə* and *kfuru*...Sorcerers "eat" (*kfuru*) their victims...' In Lamnso' the word *yi* (eat) is used for normal eating and *kfər* for gnawing, e.g. a bone or roasted corn. Witches, in Nso', gnaw (*kfər*) their victims. But this distinction is not made in all Grassfields languages. In Limbum, for example, only one word, *yi* (eat), is used for all modes of eating. Cannibal witches (*tfu' yiŋwe*) are said to *yi ŋwe* (eat person). Yamba, too, use the same word for eating food (*zu beku*) and when referring to witches 'eating' a child (*zu moa*).

But the eating mechanism of cannibal witches in Yamba is quite different. When cannibal witches swallow human flesh it does not pass down the alimentary canal but goes through the windpipe into the heart. 'Night-food'

passes down a different ‘rope’ (Pa Monday). The epiglottis, which normally prevents food or liquids from going down the trachea (windpipe) permits the passage of human flesh into the two ‘bags’ or ‘pockets’ situated on either side of the heart. These ‘bags’ Yamba call *bam rum* (witch bags). Cannibal witches are said to ‘eat with their hearts’. The ‘night-food’ thus eaten is not digested or excreted. It accumulates in the ‘bags’. When the ‘bags’ are full the witch dies and his witchcraft dies with him. At the autopsy the ‘bags’ are found to be full of black clotted blood. But not all cannibal witches die when their ‘bags’ are full. In some hardened witches the human flesh spills over into the body cavity or is deposited in the large veins or arteries found in the armpits or the groin. When at the autopsy the veins are cut through and squeezed upwards black blood clots ooze out. The presence of blood clots in the pockets of the heart and in the large veins is the final proof that the deceased was an active cannibal witch.

My informants told me that every human person has the two pockets at the side of the heart. Even animals, like goats, sheep or cows have them. In non-witches (or inactive witches) these pockets are closed as if sealed. There is no opening visible. As soon as a person endowed with *rum* witchcraft begins to taste human flesh the ‘mouths’ of the pockets open and enlarge to resemble a cock’s comb (*jo mvəp*).

Adult cannibal witches do not only ‘eat’ children but may kill them by giving them human flesh out of sheer malice or in revenge because they are unable to harm the father of the children. One informant told me, ‘If a member of your descent group who is a witch (*ŋga rum*) hates you or is jealous of you but is unable to harm you with his witchcraft he will take one of your children who has “eyes” (but whose psychic power is still dormant) and open his eyes. He will take him along on his nightly travels and give him “meat”, lots of “meat”. He wants the child to die. Since the child has no sense yet he will eat and eat. When his “bags” are full the child dies. This is the same as if he had poisoned your child. It is real witchcraft (*rum*).’ Some cannibal witches are said to employ a similar tactic, not so much out of malice but as a precaution (‘using their sense’). Aware of the risk that their ‘bags’ will soon be full if they continue to ‘eat’ human flesh they would ‘eat’ only a tiny morsel of the share given them. They would give the rest to inexperienced child-witches with the result that their small witch-pockets would soon be full and they die. This is a common reason given by informants to explain why some cannibal witches live to a ripe old age.

Another mechanism cannibal witches may employ to prolong their life is that of a witch ‘heart transplant’. It is extremely unlikely that my old Yamba

informants had ever heard of the great strides made in modern medicine, especially as regards transplants of human organs. Yet I have documented two cases where just such a feat was believed to have been accomplished by cannibal witches. L. of Sang quarter of Gom, suspected to be a 'strong' cannibal witch, fell seriously ill. For several days he was confined to his house unable to leave his bed. While he was sick a goat, brought by an in-law to be killed in a ritual and tethered behind the house, mysteriously died. Worse still, two young boys of the descent group also died suddenly at the same time. Some days later L. recovered although many people thought that he was going to die, so serious was his illness. Soon rumours began to spread that a 'medicine man' of the witches had removed first the heart of the goat and then the hearts of the two boys to replace L's 'rotten' heart. It took three 'heart transplants' before L. recovered.

Rum witches can attack adults by inflicting a sickness upon them. Sam Kobuin explained to me the mechanism they are believed to employ: 'The witches will take a lock of your hair or a tiny piece of your clothes. A man of your family will procure these things for them. They will hide these items in the kernel of a palm nut which they then bury next to the fireplace where women cook food. By taking a lock of your hair or anything closely associated with you they have taken your "heart" with the result that you fall sick. As the kernel containing your heart is constantly exposed to the heat of the fireside your sickness gets worse and worse. Divination will reveal that witches have taken your "heart" and have hidden it. A medicine man will locate the place where your "heart" has been hidden. He will dig up the kernel and break it open to release your "heart". Then he will "cool" it and restore it to you.'

3.2. Leopard Transforms (*biaha mbε*)

Yamba believe that some people have the psychic power to transform into leopards (*mbε*). This form of witchcraft is less feared than cannibal witchcraft but still strongly disapproved of. Its psychic power is said to reside in the adrenal glands which are attached to the kidneys. At the autopsy, if the adrenal glands and kidneys appear like polished glass it was taken as a clear sign that the deceased was an active leopard witch. Leopard witches, like all other witches, may be male or female. There are no suggestions that one gender is prevalent among the leopard witches although some informants stressed that female leopard witches are more fierce and ruthless than their male counter-

parts. This may be a reflection of the behaviour of female leopards with cubs in the wild. The age range of leopard witches extends from teenagers to old people.

Leopard witches target domestic animals, especially goats and fowls, but also bush animals. They may act alone, but usually they are believed to act in a group, as is the normal practice when people go hunting. Leopard witches are aware of the risk of being 'caught' by the *ɲwantap* cult's anti-witchcraft devices if they steal fowls or goats inside the hamlet or village. To avoid this danger they must go to the bush or the hunting areas of the hamlet. But this too is frowned upon by people because it reduces the game available for the annual communal hunt. If a leopard witch fails to kill an animal in the bush he is forced to kill a fowl or a goat in the village, otherwise he cannot transform back into human form. This 'law' leads to the downfall of many leopard witches. They are caught by *ɲwantap* when crossing the 'witch-traps' or barrier medicine placed across the entrances into the village. A leopard transform caught by *ɲwantap* is said to have 'fallen' (*gbu mbe*). The leopard witch falls seriously ill and divination will disclose the reason for his sickness. If he confesses he may be saved.

Leopard transformation is the only form of witchcraft which, according to Yamba belief, uses a material object to achieve transformation, usually said to be a piece of animal pelt (leopard or palm-civet pelts are mentioned) or some leaves. In order to 'turn into' a leopard (*biaha mbe*) the person possessing this psychic power places the animal skin on the ground and rolls over it. To reverse the transformation he has to do the same, but he can do so only if he has killed an animal, if not in the bush then in the village. Yamba say that older experienced witches teach and train the young ones. These older witches who possess the animal pelt recognise the young ones who have the witchcraft potential to 'come out' leopards. They will invite them to the bush and show them how to go about it in order to turn into leopards. As they gain more experience these young leopard witches will try to acquire their own animal pelts.

A number of informants told me of yet another hazard which threatens young leopard witches. It is commonly believed that a leopard witch kills an animal, say a fowl, by stabbing it with a 'witch-knife'. As soon as he has stabbed the fowl he must avert his eyes. He must never observe the wounded bird as it runs and flutters about, falling this side and that. If he does, the owner of the leopard transform will contract a fainting sickness. He will 'fall' like the fowl in its death throes. Yamba aetiology attributes epilepsy to the failure of a leopard transform to observe this prohibition.

In former times, when a leopard was caught in a trap or killed by hunters, it was immediately brought to the *cak tu* (hut of skulls) of the hamlet, its eyes and whiskers covered by a large leaf tied around its head. At the *cak tu* an incision was made to take out the heart which was at once cooked and eaten. If this were not done it was feared that the fellow leopard witches would try to retrieve the heart of the slain leopard and give it back to its owner who would then recover. Having removed the heart the carcass was then placed on the roof of the *cak tu* and the *cimbi* cult danced the whole night as at the wake of an adult before burial while his corpse is displayed on a bamboo structure (*ntəŋ*). In the morning, the descent group which is in possession of the *ŋgo mbɛ* (skin, leopard) cult would take the carcass to a place in a stream where the water falls down in a cascade into a sort of whirlpool. The leopard thrown into the water above the cascade would be washed down into the pool and the current would pull it round in a circle. The head of the descent group would then temporarily revive the leopard by hitting it with a straw (*kuka'*) and ask it where it came from, who its parents were and what had brought it here. The leopard would answer in human language. When he had received all the necessary information, the leader of the *ŋgo mbɛ* cult would again strike the leopard with the straw and it would revert to its former dead state. Back at the *cak tu* the animal would be skinned and butchered and the meat distributed among the different quarters.

The world of witches is a dangerous and evil world, full of deception, jealousy and hatred. Somebody who 'knows tiger' (a leopard witch) may venture far afield and join a gang of leopard witches in another village. Together they would go on expeditions to steal goats. One day he may invite one of his companions to his own village. There he would inform the witches of his village who would surround him and kill him. The owner of the leopard transform would die back in his village. Other leopard witches, caught in a situation like this, might not be killed so easily. Some are said to be in possession of a witch-rope (*fə mbɛ*) which they would remove from their bags. They would throw one end to a mountaintop several kilometres away. Speeding along this rope and pulling the end in like a spider the leopard would escape from his attackers.

When divination reveals that a person's sickness is due to 'fallen leopard' (*gbu mbɛ*) the patient must confess. There are several possible ways in which a leopard witch can 'fall'. As mentioned already, he may have been 'caught' by *ŋwantap* when crossing a barrier medicine. Thus caught a sudden 'darkness' may cover his eyes while engaging in some unlawful practices, as reportedly happened in the case of Philemon of Nchak quarter of Gom. He

was a very successful trapper, too successful in the eyes of the people. But he attracted the wrath of *ɲwantap* because he set his traps at the edge of the village and then went to the bush, in the form of a leopard, to drive animals into his traps. This was against the common good of the community because it diminished the possibility of a successful communal hunt. One day *ɲwantap* ‘blinded’ him and he ‘fell into one of his own traps’ and died. A darkened patch of skin like a bracelet on his left forearm was the clue for this interpretation of his death. Another possibility is that the leopard has been lured into a waterlogged cave by other leopard witches (as in the case of Benjamin, see above) or that he has been caught on one of his expeditions far afield by hunters. Whatever the reason the leopard witch who has ‘fallen’ must confess in order to be cured. But if the injuries he sustained are too serious he will die.

‘Fallen’ leopard (and *songoŋ*) witches can be ‘fixed’, but if a cannibal witch ‘falls’ and he confesses he is mercilessly left to die. Pa Monday calls leopard and *songoŋ* witchcraft ‘thing for suntime’ (a day-thing) whilst *rum* is a night-thing: ‘If na thing for suntime make man no die; if na witch (*rum*) them no go fix’m’. (If it is something of the daylight we don’t want the person to die; if it concerns cannibal witchcraft we will not ‘fix’ him). Leopard and *songoŋ* witches are believed to be active during the day (as well as night); cannibal witches are exclusively night-active.

There is no cure without a confession. The pressure applied by the family is great because it is only when somebody confesses that he may be saved. This may also be one of the reasons why witchcraft confessions are quite frequent. The ‘fallen’ witch must disclose the place to which he went, whether he had been stealing goats or fowls, and where his double got trapped. The family of the sick person will bring a fowl and wine to *fiise ɲwantap* (to cool or appease *ɲwantap*). A law of *ɲwantap* had been broken and *ɲwantap* must be appeased. First the fowl is brushed over the *ɲwantap sacra* (or a substitute) and then over the sick person. The beak of the fowl is torn apart and some blood smeared on the *ɲwantap* and on the chest of the patient. A plume is also stuck on the bloodied places. When *ɲwantap* has ‘seen’ the fowl and tasted its blood it will ‘release’ the patient. Finally, the head of the *ɲwantap* cult will sprinkle ‘cool water’ (*təm nɛp*), a gelatinous liquid, on the patient and on the *ɲwantap*. From then on a medicine man takes over. But, before he can start his work, he too must be sprinkled with ‘cool water’ (to clear his ‘vision’). He must get authorisation from *ɲwantap* otherwise *ɲwantap* will ‘lock his eyes’ (a sudden darkness will overcome him) when he goes to retrieve the victim.

When one asks elderly Yamba why there are no more leopards caught or killed nowadays they usually say that the leopard witches are afraid of the

many traps, nooses and guns which are about the place now. Leopard witches may be able to avoid being caught in animal traps or killed by guns, but they are still ‘caught’ by *ɲwantap* or become victims of other witches. According to Yamba belief all leopards were (and are) witch-transforms. There are no ‘natural’ leopards. This is not the case with other animal transforms. For example, not all eagles (*pi*) are transforms. Some are ‘natural’ birds which catch monkeys in the forest. But those which catch goats in the villages or in nearby farms are believed to be witch-transforms.

3.3. *Songon* Witchcraft

We turn next to *songon*, the third important category of Yamba witchcraft. The term *songon* is a composite of two words: *son*, which means to draw out, to drag, to attract with witchcraft; and *ngon*, meaning ground. A *songon* witch is believed to be able to draw out the fertility of a farm by looking at it with ‘two eyes’. Looking at something with ‘two eyes’ is a recurring phrase in ritual invocations and denotes jealousy or envy. Jealousy and envy seem to be the main motivation behind the destructive action of *songon* witches.

The seat of the *songon* witch power is the appendix. If it is found, at the autopsy, that the appendix is firm and filled with matter such as grains of sand or bits of hair, it is taken as proof that the deceased was an active *songon* witch. On the other hand, a flaccid, empty appendix denotes that the deceased did not ‘know *songon*’ or, if he did have that power, did not activate it.

Songon witchcraft, usually glossed as ‘witch-breeze’, is associated with the tropical storms which rage around the month of June ravaging people’s farms, uprooting trees and blowing off rooftops. *Songon* witches are also held responsible for damaging roads laboriously dug by community labour by causing landslides. To achieve this they are believed to use crowbars (*cumban*) to dig holes in the ground into which they ‘piss and shit’ to make the ground rot: it then slides down the precipitous hillsides blocking or breaking away sections of the road. The destructive power of natural phenomena thus finds a ready explanation.

Songon witchcraft is believed to be operative mainly between villages but also between individuals, for example co-wives. Yamba say that *songon* witches ‘come out’ — *e tise songon* — in high winds or storms. Their battleground is the farms. If the *songon* witches of village A see that the farms of village B are very fertile and do well, they will be consumed with jealousy and envy. One day they will ‘come out’ in a storm and damage the farm. When the *songon* witches of village B see them they too will ‘come out’.

They will fight it out on their farms. Yamba readily use the word ‘war’ to describe these witch fights. There will be casualties on both sides. Since the witches pass the barrier medicine when leaving their respective villages they will be caught by *ɲwantap*. It must be remembered that *ɲwantap* does not want anyone to ‘change his skin’ (except when sanctioned by it as in the case of a medicine man when he goes to rescue a ‘fallen’ *sonḡon* or leopard witch). As they start to fight *ɲwantap* will cause a sudden darkness to cover them and they are then helplessly exposed to flying debris (even a flying leaf may turn into a deadly missile) or falling trees under which they may get trapped. Some witches will get injured but still manage to return and rejoin their ‘outer shell’ back home. Those trapped under a tree will remain there till they are rescued by a medicine man. In both cases the injured ‘owner’ will ‘fall’ (*gbu*, i.e. fall sick). The family will go to a diviner to find out the cause of the illness. If divination demands that the sick person should ‘say something with his mouth’ the family will at once know that he has ‘come out’. They will put great pressure on him to confess. Only when he confesses may he be cured. The procedure of curing a ‘fallen’ *sonḡon* witch is the same as that for a ‘fallen’ leopard witch described above.

On a more individual basis, *sonḡon* witchcraft is believed to be practised by co-wives (if they ‘know’ *sonḡon*). Out of jealousy for their joint husband’s favour and affection they may fight it out among themselves by causing damage to each other’s farms again through the medium of destructive winds. They will invariably be caught by *ɲwantap* and ‘fall’. Again confession is a necessary precondition for their cure.

Sheer envy may cause a *sonḡon* witch to destroy somebody’s farm. ‘If a *sonḡon* witch passes somebody’s farm and sees that the crops growing there are doing well, he may be overcome by envy. “Why is this man’s farm so fertile while mine is not doing well at all?” He will look at the farm with “two eyes”. In doing so he draws out (*soḡ*) its fertility which he then throws into the river. Your farm is completely damaged’ (Sam Kobuin). If divination reveals that the destruction of the farm was the work of a *sonḡon* witch he will call in a medicine man and ask him to cut *so*. Informants stated that this kind of wicked action is akin to *rɯm* (cannibal witchcraft) because it attacks the livelihood of people (their food crops) and that the ritual execution is therefore justified.

3.4. Minor forms of witchcraft

A category of psychic powers, considered rather less important than the three mentioned above, is also associated with shape-changing. Some people are believed to have the power to change into butterflies, bats, bees, driver ants, snakes, swallows, as well as the more conventional forms such as leopard and *songoŋ*. Medicine men (*ŋga ncəp*) are credited with this power which they use to escape when trapped by witches in their efforts to rescue a ‘wounded’ leopard or *songoŋ* transform. This witchcraft is often referred to by the generic name *sa* in Lower Yamba and *ŋwaŋwa* in Upper Yamba. Stories are told of how *sa* witches (*buin ŋga sa*) undertook daring adventures into enemy territory and, when detected and cornered, switched from one transform to another in order to escape; such tales are often told to amuse an audience.

Yamba distinguish another type of witchcraft called *zε’*. *Zε’* is a sort of spirit double or alter ego which those who possess it can ‘move out’. It is generally believed that *zε’* witches ‘come out’ in order to visit their relatives before they die. This alter ego takes on visible form and can be seen by ordinary people (non-witches). To those who see it, it is indistinguishable from the real person. I have heard numerous stories of Yamba living abroad who have been seen in the vicinity of their natal village. Confronted later on, they would totally deny that they were ever near their home at the time they were supposed to have been seen. Then people know that they have seen their *zε’*. It won’t be long before they will hear of their death. To see the *zε’* of a person is a bad omen. It is taken as a premonition of his coming death. According to Pa Monday Kongnjo it is also dangerous to meet the *zε’* of a person. ‘If it is the *zε’* of a man with whom you had a quarrel and, when you meet him, you push him; then either you die within a few days or you will be struck dumb. Even if you recover you are “spoiled”. You will no longer be able to speak properly.’

According to Yamba belief, some witches harm people by shooting objects into their bodies. These may be needles, spines, thorns, grains of sand or splinters of animal bones. This is called *ŋgiŋ sar* (bow; needle). These ‘projectiles’ cause severe pain in the part of the body in which they are lodged. A witch who feels offended or angered by something you have said or done may shoot you with such an object. A medicine man (*ŋga ncəp*) must be called in to extract it.

Finally, I should add another psychic power called *tup ruk* (stomach, palm wine), also god-given, which enables some people to consume large quantities of palm wine without ill effects. This is also considered to be witchcraft.

It is beyond Yamba comprehension that a non-witch could drink such huge amounts of wine and still ask for more.

Yamba believe that some witches possess only one of these psychic powers, others may possess several or all of them. Pa Monday told me that at one autopsy he witnessed the operator counted ten different types of witchcraft in the deceased's belly.

Notions of the Person and Witchcraft

Viviane Baeke's extensive work on the Wuli (Lus) of Mfumte, close northern neighbours of the Yamba, has revealed an elaborate cosmology including traditional notions of the person which prevailed more generally before the advent of world religions. In her article on Wuli witchcraft (1995) she has demonstrated that the notion of the person is important for the understanding of the mechanism of bewitchment. And E.M. Chilver (personal communication) has pointed out that early notions of personality (modified by various social structures), or more to the point, the 'spiritual anatomy' of the body parts of a person (and of animals) coupled with the exercise of human imagination are at the basis of witchcraft beliefs. It is now very difficult to get clear information on traditional notions of the person. But even if one may not find significant knowledge of earlier notions of the person, I think that it is still possible to reconstruct some of them from the residue left in speech and emotion and from analogies with the way in which, for example, parts of animals are distributed.

The body (*nyi*) is the visible part of the human person. What gives life to this visible body is the *ma-yoŋse* ('breath', 'spirit') which resides in the heart. Body and breath constitute the visible human person. But there is also the *ma-lulwi* (or *ma-tsəntsən* in Upper Yamba) which is usually translated as 'shadow'. According to Pa Monday, when a person dies his 'spirit' (*ma-yoŋse*) leaves the body and vanishes into the air. The 'shadow' (*ma-lulwi*) on the other hand, which was 'outside' the body during the person's lifetime, now 'enters' the body, becomes one with the body. It is buried with the corpse. The Yamba insist that when a person dies and is put on the *ntəŋ* (a bamboo structure for displaying the corpse before burial) no shadow will be seen. The absence of the shadow is a sure sign that the person is dead. After death the 'shadow', now associated with the memory of the dead person, continues to live on.

So 'shadow' too means life. 'Shadow' and 'breath' are metonyms for life. But while 'breath' (*ma-yoŋse*) seems to be more associated with the life of the

‘visible body’, ‘shadow’ (*ma-lului*) seems to be the life-essence of the ‘ethereal’ body (Chilver) or a person’s double. Both, *ma-yoŋse* and *ma-lului*, reside in the heart (*tum*), which thus becomes the principle of life. When cannibal witches ‘move the heart’ of a child (*fik tum mua*) it is this life principle which they take. The child falls sick. When they ‘eat’ (*zɥ*) the ‘heart’ the child dies. On the other hand, the witches of the bride-giver angered by the wayward behaviour of their son-in-law, may move the heart of his child and hide it in a ‘fine place’. The child falls sick but it will not die. When the son-in-law goes to plead with his parents-in-law and promises to do whatever caused their anger they will put back the heart of the child and the child will recover.

In Yamba conceptions the heart is the principle of life and also the seat of life. In a sense it stands for the whole person or, in the case of animals, for the animal itself. When cannibal witches divide the ‘meat’ of the child the ‘provider’ is given the heart. Thus in a symbolic way he is given back the child. Here we can see a parallel with the ‘day-world’. Formerly, all goats and fowls of a descent group were common property and controlled by the lineage head. Other members of the lineage were given fowls or goats to rear but they did not own them. Only the lineage head could dispose of them according to the needs of his dependents, e.g. for marriage transactions, death celebrations, rituals or fines. If a member of the descent group was fined a fowl or goat the lineage head himself would give it in the culprit’s name. When the animal was killed the lineage head was always given the heart of the goat or the gizzard of the fowl. It was explained to me that, with fowls, the gizzard stands for the heart (the heart of a fowl being too small to be given to somebody as his share). In receiving the heart the ‘owner’ is given back the animal in a symbolic way.⁵⁴

Yamba believe that some witches have the power to take a person’s double (or his ‘ethereal body’) and transport him to far away places without any ill effects to the person. I have been told that at the annual *cam* cult dance the *songoŋ* witches, members of the lineage based *cam* cult association, may take the ethereal body of a dancer (a non-witch) who is known for his dancing skill, and fly with him to *mbaŋgoŋ*⁵⁵ (‘down-country’, or Mambila country).

54. It is interesting that in the Wimbun chiefdom of Sop (War clan) which borders Yamba area in the south west, butchers will give the heart (and formerly also the head) of every cow they slaughter on market day to the chief because ‘he is the owner of the land’. I have had no opportunity as yet to find out whether this is true also for other Wimbun chiefdoms.
55. *Mbaŋgoŋ*, literally ‘down-country’, is an imaginary land to the east, usually referred to as the Mambila country.

There they would put him down in the yard of a compound where he continues to dance to the delight of the onlookers. The people thrilled by the performance of the dancer would become oblivious to anything happening around them. The *songon* witches would take advantage of this lapse of watchfulness and steal the fertility of their farms, raffia bushes, and palm groves. After having completed their stealing spree they would take the dancer back to his village. They would spit on the 'real' person thus restoring his 'double' to him. All this time the dancer back in the village would have been unaware of what had happened to 'part' of him.

So one could say that in Yamba conception every human person is comprised of two 'bodies': there is the outward, visible body of a human person and there is his 'double' or ethereal body. The meeting point is in the heart. In the 'empty-bellied' (non-witches) this double is passive, vulnerable, and people are unaware that they have one, except when they dream or are attacked by witches. In witches this double or ethereal body is energised by the psychic power with which they have been endowed by the divinity while they were still in their mother's womb. Witches are fully conscious that they have this power and they can move it out or come out at will, according to the different forms of psychic power they have received.

This 'coming out' can have tragic consequences for female witches. Yamba believe that a woman will conceive on the third day after her menses. On that day, after having bathed, she will tell her husband that she is ready. If during that night, while having intercourse with her husband, she 'comes out witch' the child who enters her womb will be 'confused'. Although the 'visible' body is lying there on the bed, it is not really the 'full' body. Some Yamba refer to it as an 'empty skin'. The child entering the womb is unable to find the 'proper place' to occupy. It enters the womb of the part of the woman lying on the bed but when the other half returns it becomes 'confused'. How can it occupy 'two rooms' at once? When the woman labours the child will be unable to 'see a way out' and so remains stuck in the womb. The woman dies in childbirth.

Another important part of the body is the head. The head is the seat of memory. The eyes and the ears, two important senses, are in the head as is the mouth, or more importantly, the tongue, the place where 'bad words' originate. Finally, the head also stands for identity. When a person dies his memory, as we have seen, will live on for some time thanks to the 'shadow' which entered the body at death. The eyes and ears of his "shadow" or 'ethereal' body continue to function. If he sees or hears that injunctions, which he uttered before his death, are disobeyed his 'shadow', now called *nfæssie* (liter-

ally his ‘grave’, grave-dweller) will come out and affect the culprits. According to some of my informants, it is the witches, always eager to pick up news of misdeeds, who report to the ‘grave-dweller’ when family members act against the instructions he gave before his death. This makes his *nfæssie* come out and afflict the guilty. To cancel the ‘bad words’ of the dead the ritual *lam nfæssie* (‘cooking the grave’) has to be performed (see Chapter Five). Through the ritual the ‘bad words’ are ‘cooled’ and the eyes of the dead which have been looking ‘upwards’ or ‘out of the grave’ are turned ‘downwards’ so that they cannot see again. If the dead person continues to come out and afflict members of the family a specialist (*ŋga nfæssie*) is called in to remove the skull of the troublesome forebear and throw it in the river. By getting rid of the skull, seat of memory and identity, ‘the shadow’, i.e. all that was left of the person, vanishes too.

5. Anti-Witchcraft

5.1. *ŋwantap*

How do Yamba try to defend themselves against the maleficent activities of witches? The most important anti-witchcraft device is *ŋwantap*, the most powerful secret cult of the Yamba controlled by the lineage heads. *ŋwantap*, a key institution of Yamba culture which in the absence of a regulatory institution like *ŋweron* in Wimbum, western neighbours of the Yamba, can be seen as having a regulatory function in Yamba society, is the arch-enemy of witches but it also catches thieves, adulterous women, those who commit incest, a lineage head who receives bridewealth from two different suitors for the same ‘sister’ (female dependent), etc. A number of mechanisms are employed by *ŋwantap* to deter or ‘catch’ witches. Firstly, there is the barrier medicine (*ntaamse*). The leaders of the *ŋwantap* cult periodically bring out the *ŋwantap* sacra to ‘lock’ the entrances into the ‘compound’ or hamlet. Special leaves (*tu ŋwantap*) are placed across the road which are held in place on either side by two stones (*mbuk ŋwantap*). *Ndəm ŋwantap*, the powdered medicine of the *ŋwantap* cult is sprinkled across the leaves and wild garden eggs (*Solanum spp.*) are crushed on each of the two stones. Finally, *ŋwantap* ‘urinates’ across the barrier, i.e. palm wine put into the *ŋwantap* (a calabash or earthenware pot) is poured out through a libation hole. The different devices produce different effects. I will only consider two of them which concern us here. First, *ndəm ŋwantap* is believed to ‘blind’ the witch. The powdered medicine affects his eyes and he will be surrounded by darkness. The

witch may enter a trap or fall into a hole. The owner of the transform will fall sick. Second, the ‘piss’ of *ɲwantap* is believed to enter the belly of the witch when he crosses the barrier medicine. This causes his belly to swell up.

A witch ‘caught’ by *ɲwantap* is said to ‘fall’ (*gbu*). ‘Falling’ denotes the sudden onset of a serious illness. But it is also used when somebody collapses. In older people this may happen when somebody has a heart attack or stroke or it may be caused by dehydration, an embolism, severe stomach bleeding, or sheer exhaustion. There are many possibilities. Such sudden attacks are most frightening to the Yamba. In most cases witchcraft is suspected. The family will consult a diviner and if it is confirmed that the sick person has ‘fallen’ he will be put under great pressure to ‘confess’.

Another protective measure against witches from outside the hamlet is a device called *mbúk* (flail). Before the annual *so*’ cult performance which takes place in June a stick about two and a half feet long with a smaller piece tied to the top is driven into the ground next to the barrier medicine. When the *ɲwantap* members drive the flail into the ground they call on the witches of the hamlet to be vigilant. Should they see any witches from other hamlets or villages trying to enter the hamlet (to steal goats or fowls or the fertility of crops) they should take the flail and beat them across the bridge of their noses. The witch hit with the flail would invariably die.

Other counter-measures employed by the Yamba are threatening statements by lineage heads (who are at the same time leaders of the *ɲwantap* cult of their lineage) after the settlement of a case⁵⁶ accompanied by repeatedly knocking ritual objects (*soaŋ* - fly-whisk, *kum tamba*’ — clay tobacco pipe, *lis* — hand stone, *bam bum cur* — medicine bag, *ɲkəŋ* - double bell) on the ground. These statements are conditional curses invoked on any witch who dares to ‘open’ the case again causing the illness to continue or even death to occur.

5.2. Poison ordeal (*ɲgu*)

Members of a descent group who have been accused of having ‘eaten’ a child were formerly forced to submit to the poison ordeal (*ɲgu*)⁵⁷. It was only employed in cases of cannibal witchcraft accusations. Apart from an autopsy,

56. I have already mentioned that the witches of the descent group will review each case judged during the day at their nightly meetings. If they are not satisfied with the verdict or somebody comes up with a point which has been overlooked or forgotten, they will cancel the judgement and re-open the case with the result that the person whose case has been investigated will continue to be sick. Such ‘cases’ very often concern the sickness of a member of the descent group.

the poison ordeal was held to be the ultimate proof of whether somebody was an active cannibal witch or not. Those who vomited survived and were proven innocent. For those who died it was seen as conviction and deserved punishment at the same time. The matrikin of the accused brought him to the place where the poison was administered and they closely guarded him when returning to the compound. It was feared that the witches of his agnates (if he was innocent) would place ‘something’ in the pockets of his heart. In drinking the poison he would die because of the human flesh placed there. The witches of his matrikin (those with ‘eyes’) would prevent this happening. Yamba believe that the poison when drunk follows the same passage down the wind-pipe into the pockets of the heart as the ‘night-food’ eaten by cannibal witches. If it meets human flesh there it kills the witch. If it fails to find ‘meat’ the person vomits and is saved.

5.3. Fleeing Witchcraft

Fear of witchcraft leads many Yamba to settle, for a while at least, among their matrikin or their in-laws, or they may leave the Yamba area altogether if divination reveals that one or more of their children have been ‘eaten’ by the witches of their agnates. There are several options open to them. Usually divination is consulted as to where one should go. A father may decide to settle with his matrikin. The Yamba view is that the witches of his matrikin will not allow the witches of his agnates to come near and harm the children. Another possibility is to move in with one’s in-laws or with an out-married ‘sister’ (female dependent of the family). But many Yamba decide to settle outside Yamba area altogether. The witches of these adopted villages will make sure that the people they have taken in as their ‘strangers’ will come to no harm.

But what if a child dies again in one’s adopted domicile? Yamba have different explanations ready. The father (or mother) may himself be a cannibal witch and may have joined a witch-njangi in his new place of settlement. When his own turn comes to provide a victim he will have to take one of his own children since there are no other relatives at hand. Another reason may be that the father has run away from his natal compound because of some prob-

57. In Lower Yamba, one descent group of Nkwi, a quarter of Gom village, was in possession of the ‘medicine’ which allowed them to administer the poison ordeal (*nggu*) to accused cannibal witches of Gom and other Yamba villages with impunity. According to my information, *nggu* was a concoction of the pounded bark of a certain tree growing in the area, called *li* (*Erythrophleum Africanum*, ‘sassafras’ in English) and some leaves, mixed with water.

lem he had with his family without ‘fixing’ it. The angry words of his agnates would follow him and attack one of his children. If he does not go back to his people and ‘fix’ the palaver the child will die.

5.4. Medicine Men (*buin nga ncəp*)

Medicine men or healers, among the Yamba, are exclusively men. They are akin to witches in so far as they have been given psychic powers by god while still in their mother’s womb. But they put their psychic powers to constructive use, mainly to fight against the maleficent activities of witches. Medicine men are said to be people with ‘eyes’. The god who has given them ‘eyes’ has also shown them the different herbs and medicines and how to use them in dreams. According to some informants medicine men periodically go to *ntesa* (witch-market) where they will receive further training for a fee. Having ‘eyes’ they are able to see what is going on in the ‘night-world’ of the witches. They are credited with possessing *sa* power (shape changing) including the ability to transform into leopards and *songon*. These supernatural powers enable them to rescue ‘fallen’ leopard or *songon* transforms and restore them to their owners before they begin to cure them.

Another counter-measure employed by medicine men to fight witchcraft, especially cannibal witchcraft, is the ritual execution of witches (*gwe ran* or *gwe so*). It took the place of the poison ordeal after it was outlawed by the British Colonial Government. For the ritual execution to be effective one must ‘cut *so*’ several times and in different places. As Pa Sam Kobuin explained, ‘If you break a calabash once it can be repaired. But if you break it three or four times it will be beyond repair and thrown away.’ The witches have their own ‘medicine men’ who will treat those ‘cut’ by the ritual. If they are ‘cut’ only once they may be able to cure them. But if they are ‘cut’ several times they will die. At the autopsy a subcutaneous lesion in the neck is proof that the deceased died as a result of a ritual execution.

It is possible to reverse the ritual execution. I have been told of a man who went to ‘cut *so*’ because one of his children died and divination revealed that it had been the work of some of his close relatives. The medicine man warned him that the culprits were ‘people from inside his house’. The man, in his anger, told the medicine man to go ahead. But when one of his brothers and a son died soon afterwards he got scared and begged the medicine man to reverse the ‘medicine’. The reversal cost him dearly, several times the price he had paid for the original rite. Many Yamba now refrain from ‘cutting *so*’, saying that ‘it will finish the family’.

Medicine men are not regarded without suspicion. They are sometimes suspected of using their mystical powers in other than legitimate ways.

5.5. Chief and Witchcraft

According to Yamba belief witchcraft and chieftaincy are incompatible. From the day when the person chosen to be the new chief is knocked with the bush-cow tail he must part with witchcraft should he have 'known' any form of it. During the time of his seclusion ('fattening') he is given a medicine called *duə ŋkum*. Opinions vary as to what effect this medicine has. According to some it 'locks' the incumbent's 'eyes' so that he is unable to 'see outside' again. Others say that the *duə ŋkum* 'cools' his witch power but still allows him to 'see'. But all informants agree that should the new chief dare to activate his witchcraft power again and 'come out' he would die. The medicine would kill him. Sam Kobuin told me that the main reason why a chief must not 'come out witch' is that '*ŋwantap* e dey all for he skin', meaning that the chief is like *ŋwantap* or rather that the chief is the embodiment of *ŋwantap* and, as we have seen, *ŋwantap* and witchcraft are arch-enemies.

The last three chiefs of Nchak quarter of Gom are often quoted as proof to support this belief. One of them did not even survive his installation. He died the day after he was 'moved out'. People say that *ŋwantap* killed him because he 'came out witch' during the time of his seclusion. Next a young man was put on the chair and since he did not 'know witch' he reigned for many years. He died an old man. The last Foa-Make (the title held by the chief of Nchak) again died just a few years after his installation. He too is said to have 'come out witch' after his installation which proved his downfall. The chair has been vacant now for several years.

5.6. The Makka or Tasa Cult

The Makka or Tasa cult, which spread from the Mambila area in the east into Yamba, Mfumte and Mbo' areas in 1938, was essentially a witch-hunt. No earlier anti-witchcraft movement was known or reported from the Yamba area nor has one occurred since then. It was short-lived but very popular. It is said to have originated at Barup (Adamawa Province) in August 1938 and was rapidly adopted by nearly all the villages of the Mbo' and Yamba areas, but only by two in Mfumte (Kwaja and Bitui). According to a report to the Resident, Cameroon Province, Buea, by the D.O. of Bamenda, N.H. Swabey, the cult manifested itself in epileptic like fits. Inclined to be opposed to constituted chiefs, 'it has resulted in unprovoked attacks on Bororos (Fulani), refusal to pay tax and rumours that Europeans will soon depart' (Swabey 1938). Baptist

Missionary Paul Gebauer reported the outbreak of the cult to the D.O. of Bamenda in a letter dated 10 December 1938 and described the dance. N.H. Swabey quotes Gebauer:

Large numbers of persons took part, both men and women and it was frequently danced for three or four consecutive days during which time all farming work and other activities ceased. The dance was accompanied by a drum and gradually as they danced themselves to excitement, persons began waving their arms like windmills...then the eyes of some of the dancers would become set in a fixed stare and they would begin to shake as if they were in convulsions of an epileptic fit. These persons then fell down to the ground apparently insensible (par. 8).

A person who had 'fallen' was believed to be endowed with supernatural powers to detect witches. The objectives of the cult seem to have been to rid the place of witches, to cure sickness and to bring fertility to crops (par. 10).

According to Pa Monday Kongnjo who still talked enthusiastically about Makka, the cult dance in Gom, Lower Yamba, was organised at descent group level. When a lineage head decided to stage the Makka dance he would invite the leader of the cult, Ku-Makka, a 'big man' of Bang (a sub-quarter of Sang, Gom village). Ku-Makka (apparently a nickname) was the cult leader of all the six quarters of Gom village. All out-married 'sisters' and all women married into the lineage had to provide a fowl for the occasion to ensure the success of the dance. These fowls were cooked and eaten at a common meal before the dance started. Here is how Pa Monday Kongnjo described what happened at such a dance:

When Ku-Makka came he would address the people and then the dance would start. As the dance got hotter and hotter he would suddenly fall to the ground. People would try to revive him and he would continue to dance till he fell into a trance. Then he would lead the dancers through the compound. Occasionally he would stop and shout, "Hurry, bring a shovel! There is something here!" Somebody would bring a shovel and dig up the place. Invariably they would find a palm kernel, a stone or some other suspicious object, which Ku-Makka would put in a small basket. Or he would stop near a tree and shout, "There is something up this tree! Climb quickly!" A boy would climb up the tree and search it. He would throw down a seed kernel or a palm nut.

These suspicious objects were believed to contain 'good things' of the lineage (the fertility of the palm bush, of farm crops or domestic animals, or even the 'heart' of a child who was sick at the time) hidden by the witches. At the end of the search Ku-Makka would release these 'good things'. Pa Monday said

that in that year the palm bush produced a lot of wine and oil, farms yielded an abundant harvest and domestic animals thrived. Because of reports of assaults, refusal to pay tax and hostility to chiefly authority the Makka cult was immediately outlawed by the British colonial administration (in December 1938).

The Witch-market (*ntesa*) and *cam* Cult Association

So far we have been concerned with the way the Yamba attempt to understand misfortune. But what about the ambiguity of chance, of good luck and bad luck, of prosperity and danger? The occurrence of good fortune also needs some form of explanation. The experience of chance and of good fortune finds its explanation in the belief in *ntesa* (witch-market) and in the journey of some *cam* cult members to *mbaengon* (literally ‘down-country’; Mambila country). Both the witch-market and the journey to *mbaengon* have attracted a great deal of Yamba fantasy and speculation.

The people of Lower Yamba believe that the *ntesa* (*n*te, market; *sa*, shape changing) is situated to the north west of Yamba area, near Koffa (Mfumte) on top of a boulder-strewn mountain⁵⁸. This witch-market with its fabulous riches is believed to serve the needs not only of Yamba witches but also those of the witches of Mfumte and Wimbun areas. Only those people with ‘eyes’ can go there. This also includes medicine men (*ngga ncəp*). The witch-market is organised into sections or ‘rooms’ according to the different categories of psychic powers and their needs. Thus there is a ‘room’ for leopard witches, another one for *songon* witches, yet another one for medicine men, and so on. Medicine men, for example, are believed to go there to receive further training in their healing methods and the knowledge of herbs. According to some informants there is even a ‘hospital’ in the premises of the witch-market where those witches who have come to harm while exercising their nefarious activities are being ‘joined’, i.e. treated. Witches who ‘know many things’ will be given more and more responsibilities in the *ntesa* and will become ‘big men’ in the market establishment.

On occasion witches visit the witch-market⁵⁹ and return with leaf-packets which may contain good or bad things. ‘When the witch-market opens the witches in charge of the market will count all the witches attending the mar-

58. The existence of similar witch-markets has been reported from Nso’ (Chilver 1990: 235), from the Wimbun area (Pool 1989: 167, Mbunwe-Samba 1996:12), and from Kom (in an unpublished conference paper by Shanklin [1988]). Further afield we have Mount Swem of the Tiv (Edwards 1984).

ket. They will tie as many leaf-packets as there are visitors. On leaving the market each witch may take one packet with him. He does not know what is in it. He must not open the packet on the road to check its content. Only when he arrives at his place may he open it. At first he must open it only a tiny fraction. If he sees that there is something bad inside he must lock it quickly and throw it in the river. The little “breeze” which escapes will make a few people sick but not seriously. The sickness soon disappears. It would be very dangerous to open the packet completely when inspecting it. An evil witch sometimes opens his packet completely when he sees that it contains sickness. Then many people will fall sick and die’ (Sam Kobuin). Leaf-packets containing ‘good things’, on the other hand, will benefit the whole community.

When a ‘big man’ of the witch-market dies the doors are opened. The booming sound produced by this is heard by everybody. To non-witches it sounds like a mighty gunshot and is called *lip dze*’ (beating the war drum). When people hear this sound they know that very soon some ‘big man’ will die. The doors are opened to allow the ‘corpse’ to be taken out and to be brought to the house of its ‘owner’. Only when it arrives and enters the house where the ‘big man’ lives will he die in his place.

While the belief in the *ntesa* (witch-market) explains the experience of chance, of good luck and bad luck, the journey of some *cam* members to *mbaengon* unequivocally brings prosperity to the whole community. These *cam* members who come from all the villages of Yamba ‘come out’ in *songon* (they fly ‘with the wind’) and are believed to use birds, also called *cam* (Abdim’s stork, *Cicomia abdimii* or *Sphenorynchus abdimii*) as familiars. In that imaginary country (*mbaengon*) there is said to be a large lake right in the centre of which stands a tall palm tree. It is there that the *cam* birds alight before going on their stealing spree. But this journey is fraught with hazards. The inhabitants of that country apply bird gum to the palm tree and to other places in order to catch these thief-birds. A *songon* witch (*cam* member) caught in that palm tree will ‘fall’ back home and must be rescued by medicine men. But the *cam* cult association has its own devices to prevent one of its members being caught there. At the annual *cam* dance two members dance ahead of the main body each wielding a broom (*soan*) and some *bap* leaves in their hands. Making short dribbling steps they glide along in imitation of the

59. According to the Wimum, western neighbours of the Yamba, it is dangerous for witches to visit the witch-market (Pool 1989: 173). In Nso’ it is sometimes said that visitors to the witch-market have to cross a river (Chilver, p.c.). My Yamba informants did not mention any hazards that witches would have to overcome in order to get to or leave the *ntesa*.

cam birds. Holding the broom and the leaves they open and close their outstretched arms as if sweeping the road in front of them. Informants told me that with this symbolic action the dancers remove the bird gum from the palm tree and from other places at *mbaengon* so that the *cam* members who go there will not come to harm.

While at *mbaengon* the *cam* members try to steal the fertility of different food crops, of the palm oil and palm wine of that country. On their way back they assemble on top of a certain hill and divide the good things they have brought. Lower Yamba will be given palm oil and wine tapped from palm trees. Upper Yamba will receive raffia wine. Corn, cocoyams, yams, groundnuts, and sugarcane, will be shared equally. The *cam* members will take these things to their respective hamlets and villages and distribute them equally among all the descent groups. On no account must they keep them for themselves.

Illustration 9: Members of the *Cam* cult



Justified Witchcraft?

A. Edwards (1984: 87) says that among the Tiv '*tsav* (witchcraft) covers two quite separate ideas: a destructive power motivated by envy and employed by evil individuals, and a legitimate punitive power employed responsibly albeit mystically, by a group of senior men to maintain generosity and suppress

envy among agnatic kinsfolk...’ Among the Yamba, the interventions in support of morality and the common good of the descent group by senior members, although mystically employed, are not considered to be witchcraft. My informants told me that it is the mystical power of their words uttered in public which is effective. But they readily agreed that it may be the witches among the senior group (or of the community as a whole) who use these ‘strong words’ to attack individual members who act selfishly and against the common good of the social group. In this sense one could argue that this type of witchcraft is legitimate. But then it all depends on which side one stands. When a son-in-law fails in his affinal obligations the witches of the bride-giver’s family will feel justified to bring the offender to heel, usually by afflicting one of his children with sickness. Yet the afflicted son-in-law will see the witchcraft of his affines as a collective persecution, something which should not happen between affines.

From the different cases I have documented it is also clear that witches, especially those who are members of the senior group of a lineage, act in support of an ethical code. The tragic death of Pa Kateri as told to me only a few days after the accident happened can serve as an illustration. Kateri was the ‘sub-chief’ (lineage head) of a ‘compound’ in Nchak quarter of Gom. His son Jumassa was residing in his compound with his wife and children. They had a daughter whom Kateri had given in marriage to somebody without the consent of her parents. This gave rise to bad blood in the descent group. The wife of Jumassa and Jumassa himself complained bitterly about the behaviour of Kateri. The children of Jumassa, too, talked angrily to other people. The parents should have been given the first calabash of wine brought by the suitor. Accepting and drinking some of the wine would have been a sign that they agreed to the marriage, but Kateri had not done so. The angry words uttered by Jumassa and his wife and children annoyed Kateri very much. He took them as an insult and an affront to his authority. This anger made him ‘take the heart’ of the youngest child of Jumassa. The child fell seriously ill. Divination accused Kateri of having ‘moved the child’s heart’. At a family meeting which lasted almost the whole night bitter accusations were voiced from both sides of the conflict. To save the child Jumassa and his wife apologised to Kateri and both had to pay a fowl as fine. Although outwardly Kateri agreed to accept the apology in his heart he was still determined to ‘kill the child’. At the end of the family meeting he killed one of the fowls, cut it up and put it in a pot. While the pot was on the fire he took his climbing rope and tapping knife and began to tap the palm trees nearest to his house. When he climbed the third palm tree the witches of his compound (who had been

present at the family moot) saw that he wanted to hide the child's heart up on the palm tree so that the child should die. One of the witches climbed up the tree and cut the rope. Kateri fell down and was killed instantly. The witches took the heart of the child from his hand and restored it to the child. The child recovered.

It is clear that Kateri acted against the ethical code of the descent group and the witches of his compound did not approve of it. That is why they killed him. Jumassa and his wife had apologised and paid the fine imposed on them. Kateri should have accepted the apology wholeheartedly and restored the heart he took from the child. Since he still harboured vengeance in his heart they killed him.

Conclusion

Witchcraft beliefs are part and parcel of the traditional religion of the Yamba. They provide an explanation of social conflict and misfortune but also of chance, prosperity and good fortune. In the Yamba view everything that happens must have a reason and people are determined to find out what caused a particular misfortune if only to prevent further one. There is nothing more unsettling than an unexplained misfortune. It will have been made abundantly clear that the diviner plays a pivotal role in this system of apportioning blame on the different agencies which can cause misfortune. Witchcraft beliefs and divination constitute two important pillars of traditional Yamba religion. It seems that with the weakening of traditional beliefs witchcraft accusations and suspicions have become more prevalent ousting other alternatives as presumed causes of misfortune.

In this chapter I have tried to describe Yamba notions of witchcraft. Yamba witchcraft beliefs can be seen as their attempt to make sense of the world they live in, as an explanation of misfortune, but also of chance and good luck. The 'realien' of Yamba witchcraft beliefs are a combination of 'the fruit of human imagination and early notions of personality modified by various social structures' (Chilver, p.c.). Despite the fact that witchcraft is a constant preoccupation of Yamba thought and discourse it would be wrong to think that the Yamba live in a state of continual terror. Having accepted it as a part of everyday reality they try to cope with it fighting it with all the means at their disposal. As long as there is no significant improvement in health facilities, hygiene and balanced nutrition, standard of living, infrastructure (roads, especially for easy access to the main markets), employment facilities or wage labour, the present situation will not improve and witchcraft beliefs will continue to plague the lives of the Yamba. The advent of schools, of world reli-

gions and the modern nation state have done little to eradicate these ugly and irrational beliefs.

Because of the extreme mobility of the Yamba — it is now estimated that more than half of the Yamba live or work outside their natal area - new types of witchcraft have been added to the traditional ones. *Munyongo*, *kupe*, and *mammiwata* have entered the vocabulary of Yamba witchcraft discourse. Yamba people who fall sick while staying abroad are often brought back to their natal village. Many of them claim to be the victims of these new types of witchcraft. In response some of the medicine men have already adapted their skills so that they are able to deal with this new situation.