Witchcraft and the Gift: Killing and Healing in Northwest Zambia

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In 1953, the British colonial officer in charge of Balovale District, in what is now the country of Zambia, wrote in his annual report:

Towards the end of the year, two women were sent to me by the Native Court with a request that I should investigate their "case." The two old women sat on the floor of my office and this is what one of them said:

I am a witch. I was made a witch against my will in Angola years ago in the following manner. I asked a certain woman in my village if I could take some relish from her garden. She agreed, and I took it. Then later she came to me and said that, as she had done something for me, I must now do something for her in return. I asked what she wanted and she told me that she was a witch and that I must also become initiated into the rites of witchcraft. At that time, I had a sickly child a few days old. It was a girl-child. The woman told me that I must kill the child and that we should eat the flesh, and this we did. Afterwards, I was initiated into the rites of witchcraft, and I acquired a familiar spirit. My familiar spirit is a mole... The mole can go into the earth and bring me the bodies of dead people when we want to eat them. The mole can also bewitch people by biting them.

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Sometime after this I came to live in Northern Rhodesia [now Zambia]. All the time I practiced witchcraft. In Northern Rhodesia I initiated this other woman who is with me now. In order to initiate her, I killed the small daughter of my own daughter. I killed her by using my familiar spirit, and then afterwards I strangled her. This woman ate part of the flesh, and I initiated her into witchcraft. But she did not practice as a witch, and when I wanted her to kill her own granddaughter for our ceremonies, she refused. And so I too have decided to give up witchcraft, because the profession is not what it was, and the Europeans are against it. But in that case I want compensation for the child I killed and for the flesh I gave to her.¹

A similar case was reported in 1952, a year earlier, in the Annual Report for North-Western Province. The colonial officer in charge, more frugal with his words, recounted:

An unusual case occurred at Balovale when an old woman sued her colleague for the return of a pound of human meat which had been lent to her. The matter was referred by the Native Court to the Police who found, to quote the District Commissioner, "no evidence sufficient even to support a witch on a broomstick."²

We do not know how common such cases were during the British rule in Northern Rhodesia (according to the colonial officer writing in 1953, such cases were unusual), and neither do we know what thoughts rushed through the minds of the British colonial officers who found themselves in the position of handling witchcraft cases. Nevertheless, such brief and biased reports are revealing of the disparate views of the report writers and the supposed witches. On one side, sitting on the floor, the self-proclaimed witches seek compensation for breaches of contract incurred in the realm of witchcraft, through the legal apparatus of British rule. They clearly see life in the villages and life in the coven as continuous realms. On the other side, sitting behind their desks, across from the witches, the British officers embody the power invested in them by colonialism and the ingrained distinction between reality and belief inherited from rationalism. From their perspective, stories of witches exchanging human meat and employing familiar spirits such as moles to dig out corpses and bewitch their relatives rightly belong in the realm of belief and imagination. Entirely dismissing the witches' accounts as pagan mambo jumbo, the district commissioners and police officers focus on the supposed "human meat." Has someone being

killed? Is there any legal evidence to incriminate the women who confess to having committed murder? Hence the scoffing tone of the second colonial officer, according to whom the police found "no evidence sufficient even to support a witch on a broomstick."

This was a grave mistake. By refusing to take those women seriously, the colonial officers missed the opportunity not only to learn more about those women but also to recognize the power of asking, giving, and receiving to create sociality and effect change. Inspired by the witches, and drawing on two years of fieldwork in the same region of northwest Zambia,³ I hope to show that today, as in the 1950s, asking, giving, and receiving continue to create and sustain sociality in different realms of existence, both forcing people into the realm of witchcraft and freeing them from it.

It is helpful to see the distinction between these realms as the two sides of the same reality, and then define the two reversed sides as "spheres of exchange" (Bohannan 1955). On the obverse side, women exchange food items such as salt and cassava leaves in the name of life; on the reverse side, they exchange human flesh in the name of death. This said, it is equally critical to bear in mind that the distinction between the reversed realms is never absolute. Nor is it impermeable. As Marcel Mauss put it, "everything passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of spiritual matter, including things and men" (Mauss 1990, 14). The power of asking, giving, and receiving is wondrous; not only does it create sociality in different realms of existence, obverse and reverse, but it also moves people into the realm of death and returns them to the realm of life. Gifting may kill you, but it may also save you.

I am struck by the power of asking, giving, and receiving to both kill and heal. I am equally struck by the commitment of northwest Zambians to continue relying on these most simple of gestures to both sustain ongoing relationships in good times and mend severed relationships in the darkest hours. Day in and day out, to enrich and flavor their dishes, women continue to both give and exchange food items, even though they know that asking and giving are fraught with danger. As the Angolan woman in the first colonial report soon discovered, by requesting and receiving food you may become trapped in the web of witchcraft. Similarly, Kanenga doctors continue revealing to all of us the redeeming power of asking and giving. Mistakenly referred to in English as witch doctors, Kanenga doctors continue to negotiate with the witches during Kanenga rituals, hoping to release the bewitched from the snarl of

witchcraft. "Take this cup of goat blood and let the victim live," they tell the witches. In such life-or-death situations, asking and giving may be the only hope.

In *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust* (2013), Peter Geschiere asks: what is the relation between witchcraft, intimacy, and trust? How do we sow trust in a field poisoned by suspicion? The answer to this difficult question may well lie in the simple gestures of asking, giving, and receiving. However modestly and transiently, these gestures call for the suspension of doubt and the cultivation of trust and hope. Are these gestures not a leap of faith?

THINKING WITH MAUSS

In his study of the relation between witchcraft, intimacy, and trust, Geschiere dismisses the concept of the gift. He rightly critiques the pervasive tendency to view gift giving and reciprocity as a haven of solidarity. In his words, "The implicitness with which many anthropologists continue to equate closeness with reciprocity and trust makes the notion and its assumptions a hindrance for arriving at a more nuanced view of sociality" (2013, 31). Not only do I espouse Geschiere's perspective, but I would also point out that Mauss himself fathered the association of gift giving with solidarity. In *The Gift*, Mauss shows signs of nostalgia for the "archaic" societies based on gift giving, stating that the ancient peoples, in addition to being "less sad, less serious, [and] less miserly," "were or are more generous, more liable to give than we are" (1990, 81). Few scholars today would engage in this kind of evolutionist reasoning, placing gift giving at the origins of the modern legal and economic contract, and seeing the pockets of gift giving in market-driven societies as traces of older and more primitive institutions. This said, the ingrained tendency to oppose gift giving to market exchange, and to frame this opposition in moral terms, is as alive today as it was in the 1920s, when *The Gift* was first published in the French language. The widespread description of gift giving as a "moral economy," a concept popularized in economic anthropology by James Scott (1976), speaks to this accepted truth.

Outside academe, the tendency to define gift giving in opposition to market exchange is at least as strong. In the United States and elsewhere, the spirit of gift giving is perhaps more intensely experienced during the Christmas season and Valentine's Day. Close relatives, lovers, and friends create and nurture their mutual relationships through reciprocal acts of gift giving. Moreover, the spirit of gift giving is often as strong among strangers.

Consider Burning Man, the famed weeklong art and community event that takes place every year in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. Participants are encouraged to create and rely on a gift economy, and gifting is indeed one of the event's ten guiding principles; another guiding principle is decommodification.⁴ As stated in the documentary film *Gifting It: A Burning Embrace of the Gift Economy* (2002), directed by Renée Roberts, everyone in Burning Man is "seeking experiences beyond the commonplace and the commodified." Everyone is giving and receiving as a means to connect. Yet, access to Burning Man is never free or even affordable. In 2017, a ticket cost as much as 1,200 USD. The warmer spirit of gift giving is never far removed from the colder spirit of market exchange.

Morality and market exchange are similarly entwined in international religious organizations, as several of the contributions to this volume attest (see Hillary Kael on Christian child sponsorship, specifically ChildFund, and see Britt Halvorson on the Christian medical relief relationship between Minnesota and Madagascar). In the field of religion, Prosperity Christianity provides the perfect example of the seamless union between spirituality and economics.⁵ In Simon Coleman's words, any critical engagement with Prosperity Christianity leads to consider "not only the economics of religion, but also economics *as* religious practice" (2011, 26).

This said, in his book, Mauss goes beyond the portrayal of gift giving as a moral economy in opposition to market exchange. Mauss asks his readers: What drives one to give, receive, and reciprocate? What are the consequences of gift exchange for donors and recipients? Mauss argues that the act of gift giving binds people together in the mesh we call society, a golden contribution to anthropological theory. In his words, "to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself" (1990, 12). "By giving, one is giving oneself, and if one gives oneself, it is because one 'owes' oneself—one's person and one's goods—to others" (1990, 46). The gifts given by the donors and received by the recipients are therefore the material tokens of their interfusion through indebtedness. In this volume, Frederick Klais rightly notes that Mauss does not include the power of asking in his triangular model of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, even though asking is as binding as giving and equally destructive and redeeming (see also Klais 2011). Nevertheless, Mauss's explanation of gift giving through the logic of indebtedness is invaluable.

But Mauss has more to say on the topic of the gift. In addition to cementing relationships, he argues, gift exchange poses risks of its own. As poetic and compelling as the language of love, care, and indebtedness in a religious sermon or marital relationship may be, the indebted do not always feel grateful toward their debtors. Sometimes, to owe oneself to another is to feel the brunt of subservience with particular intensity, and risk losing face, name, and life. In the Luvalé language spoken in northwest Zambia, this somber side of indebtedness, which binds one to the giver until the debt is paid, is conveyed by the concept of *mukuli*. The debtors work day in, day out to pay off their debts, and they may be obliged to provide food to their creditors for days, months, and years. Prior to colonialism, if debtors failed to pay off their debts, they had no choice but to pawn one of their relatives, if not themselves, to their creditors. A *mukuli* is always experienced as a heavy burden. In some cases, a *mukuli* leads to bewitching. Gift giving is as likely to foster love and recognition as to foster hate and domination. The spirit of the gift is a political spirit. Sometimes, the gift is poisoned.

This pearl of wisdom—never take a gift at face value—explains why Mauss, in *The Gift*, does not focus on the relatively disinterested expressions of care and affection between kin, lovers, friends, or even strangers. Instead, Mauss carefully selects a series of ethnographic and historical case studies that he locates along a typological continuum of express rivalry, antagonism, and violence. The most extreme of such systems of exchange is potlatch, as it was still practiced in the early twentieth century by the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, and Haida in the American northwest. During potlatch, rival chiefs and their associates engaged in a relentless war of property. They burned piles of sumptuary skin blankets and threw valuable copper objects into the water, driving their rivals to lose face and prestige. Some chiefs fought and killed (1990, 6). Mauss reminds his readers of “the so to speak voluntary character of these total services, apparently free and disinterested but nevertheless constrained and self-interested.” He continues, “Almost always such services have taken the form of the gift, the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and economic self-interest” (1990, 3). The act of gift giving fosters community and mutual trust; it is also a means to humiliate and destroy.

Mauss’s insights on rivalry and violence are invaluable to the study of witchcraft. Witchcraft accounts in northwest Zambia, and elsewhere in

Africa, suggest that witchcraft may well consist of the most agonistic of all realms, a realm in which asking, giving, and receiving create and sustain a purely predatory regime devoid of political ambitions and the faintest sense of morality. The witches supposedly kill their relatives without blinking an eye and offer their prey to the other witches. They also enjoy feasting on humans, particularly infants.

Interestingly, being social creatures, witches honor the cannibalism equivalent of the incest taboo: they do not eat their own relatives. They must therefore depend on the gifts of other witches, a rule that generates an endless cycle of indebtedness and reciprocity. To be given human meat is to be asked to reciprocate by killing a close relative. Witches also eat together, as villagers do. If reciprocity and commensality are quintessential markers of human sociality, as Lévi-Strauss once said, then witches are fully social. Not surprisingly, then, Mary Douglas’ concluding remarks in her foreword to the 1990 English edition of *The Gift* hold equally true for the domain of witchcraft in northwest Zambia. Referring to cases of obverse reciprocity, Douglas writes: “the whole society can be described by the catalogue of transfers that map all the obligations between its members. The cycling gift system is the society” (1990, ix).

In *The Gift*, Mauss does not address the topic of witchcraft at length (but see his references to witchcraft on pages 75 and 128). He does briefly mention, however, the gifts offered to the gods (1990, 14–18), a theme that more recently developed into an interesting debate about the possibility of “pure gifts”—truly disinterested offerings that invite no reciprocation.⁵ Mauss also elevated vernacular religious concepts to the status of scientific concepts in symmetrical fashion. Mauss writes, “Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are” (1990, 20). He draws on the Maori concept of *hau*, the spirit of the gift, to explain the impetus to reciprocate (1990, 11), a faux pas that earned him a torrent of harsh criticisms. Giants of anthropology such as Sahlins (1972) and Lévi-Strauss (1997) disapproved of his raising *hau* to the status of a theoretical concept. They clearly lamented the fact that Mauss, otherwise a rational thinker, would allow himself to be mystified by his Maori sources.⁶ But what is sauce for the goose is not sauce for the gander. Today, many an anthropologist would praise Mauss for his symmetrical engagement with Maori ethnography. Not only did Mauss seriously

consider Maori concepts such as *hau*, but he also studied the phenomenon of gift giving with Maori eyes.

Based on his symmetrical engagement with the Maori ethnography, as well as his intellectual imagination, I trust that Mauss would be intrigued by the idea of studying witchcraft in northwest Zambia through the lens of his concept of the gift, and taking the "gift" beyond his original focus on the public domain of law and morality (Mauss 1990, 12, 79). Similarly to *hau*, the Luvalé *undumba*, meaning witchcraft, has much to contribute to our understanding of the power of the gift. Witchcraft urges researchers to extend the concept of the gift, as well as that of the request, to the realm of amoral economies—ultimately replacing any fixed opposition between morality and amorality with the broader, double-edged concept of "human economies" (Graeber 2011). David Graeber explains: Being "primarily concerned not with the accumulation of wealth, but with the creation, destruction, and rearranging of human beings" (2011, 130), the concept of human economies is nevertheless double-edged. "These are, after all, *economies*: that is, systems of exchange in which qualities are reduced to quantities, allowing calculations of gain and loss" (2011, 159).

Recent contributions to gift theory are equally committed to broadening the focus of the gift. Mark Osteen argues, "the only way to gain a fuller understanding of the gift is to expand, rather than narrow our focus" (2002, 35). Ilana Silber urges us to pay "attention to flows and transformations" and to consider entire "repertoires of giving" in particular historical contexts (2013, 214). Based on a detailed analysis of the extensive exchange networks found in the Auschwitz concentration camp in Nazi Germany, Susana Narotzky and Paz Moreno propose the inclusion of negative reciprocity in what they call the reciprocity complex (2002, 288). "It is essential that both the positive and negative aspects of reciprocity be dealt with simultaneously," they maintain (2002, 301). Witchcraft accounts are a valuable contribution to this growing scholarship on the gift. Witchcraft challenges researchers to consider the entire spectrum of gifting from moral to amoral economies, seeing these different economies as constitutive dimensions of the same human economy. Asking and giving engender sociality in different realms of existence. Not only do asking and giving create and sustain social realms based on exchange, but they also serve as the means through which the givers and receivers move between those realms. Mauss was right to a degree he never foresaw. In the form of our gifts and counter-gifts, we may kill and be killed, and save and be saved.

A BRIDGE BETWEEN SPHERES

Many northwest Zambians are eager to stress what, to their eyes, are obvious and irrefutable differences between persons and witches: persons distinguish right from wrong whereas witches are amoral; persons are carnivores whereas witches are cannibals; persons live within the physical limits imposed by their human bodies whereas witches fly in whirlwinds and shape-shift into witchcraft familiars, such as lions, cats, moles, and hares; persons are likely to become venerated ancestors in the afterlife whereas witches are better forgotten, being condemned to join the anonymous mass of the worthless, good for nothing ancestors, the *tukundundu*.

Equally notorious, however, are the similarities between life in the villages and life in the coven. Many northwest Zambians do not fail to notice that, in both cases, social life is generated through acts of asking and giving, even though what is asked and given is different in each case. Nor are they oblivious to the perturbing fact that witches are human beings. Witches may be endowed with suprahuman abilities such as shape shifting and flying, but they belong to the human species. Far worse than being attacked by starving spotted hyenas equipped with strong jaws and forequarters is being attacked by a were-hyena. Unlike the wild creatures of the genus *Crocuta*, were-hyenas are witchcraft familiars. They are also your relatives. The witch who attacks you is always your relative, and often your mother.

These are frightening matters that defy understanding. Once an individual "turns" into a witch, he or she becomes a person and a witch at the same time.⁷ These predators live with their relatives in the same neighborhood, village, and home, they share meals with their closest kin, and they participate in the daily tasks expected from adult members in the community. Yet, under the cover of darkness, they turn into malicious witches who prey on their kin and busy themselves with their treacherous dealings and ruthless doings.

This double nature is particularly jarring in the case of childless elderly women, the population group more often accused of practicing witchcraft (Silva 2009). I was told that these old ladies prey on their younger relatives because they resent their indifference, and envy their youth, health, happiness, and wealth. But this theory of emotions is not always fully satisfying. Those ill feelings may have a reason. Maybe the elderly women join the society of witches because their own younger relatives deny them help in

the form of food, water, shelter, and company. Excluded from the obverse sphere of exchange and sociality, the childless elderly women cross over to the other side.

Some elderly ladies opt to search for alternative spheres of exchange and sociality in the obverse realm. The more resourceful among them reach out for help to the Plymouth Brethren missionaries affiliated with the *Christian Missions in Many Lands* (CMML). Instead of begging or voicing despair, asking for help, these women weave beautiful baskets, food covers, and pot bases, which they exchange for used clothing and foodstuffs with the missionaries; on occasion, they may receive or request Zambian kwacha bills. The missionaries see their counter-gifts as a compensation for the women's work. They believe that charity creates dependence, so they see their counter-gifts as a way to promote an egalitarian relationship that fosters industriousness and independence. The old women, however, think differently. Their craftwork creates and sustains a mutual relationship defined by an ethics of patronage (as China Scherz describes the relationship between the East African Catholic nuns and the care receivers at Mercy House in Uganda, in this volume). Whereas barter or market exchange would create no relationship between the old ladies and the missionaries, an ethics of patronage generates a long-term relationship that simultaneously places the old ladies in a situation of dependence and inferiority and binds the missionaries to the continuous obligation to receive and reciprocate.

Sadly, only as childless elderly women who must fend for themselves do these women seem powerless. As basket makers who present their beautifully woven baskets to the CMML missionaries, the childless elderly women exert some power over the receivers, compelling them to reciprocate. As witches, they have the strength and viciousness of hyenas; they ruthlessly kill their own relatives, even the infants, and they offer their kill to the coven. Amoral though the realm of witchcraft may be, I cannot avoid noticing a perplexing fact: unlike their relatives, witches do not exclude the old ladies from the webs of gift giving that generate sociality, belonging, and a full belly.

The concept of double nature (stating that an individual is both a person and a witch) as well as turning (stating that persons turn into witches) suggest that the world of witchcraft is not perceived as a separate territorial realm. There is no witch-land in northwest Zambia. Some people have seen witches draped in white cloth crossing the villages in the cover of darkness, others have heard the giggling sound of witches,

happily feasting on human meat at the local cemeteries, and others met witches in their dreams while they slept in their bedrooms. These and other signs of nocturnal witch activity suggest that persons and witches inhabit the same space. The continuity between life in the villages and life in the coven is greater than one might think.

This sense of continuity between opposed realms is predicated on their similar constitution as spheres of exchange. Differences notwithstanding (after all, as a Zambian friend jokingly put it, a cemetery would make a sordid dining hall, and who in his or her right mind would eat human meat?), the continuity between spheres of exchange enables movement in both directions. Differences may be surmounted, and boundaries crossed. In addition to serving as the glue that binds people together in a tight mesh, creating and sustaining sociality, gift giving serves as the means through which people and objects pass between exchange spheres.

At this juncture, it is apposite to briefly return to the work of Paul Bohannan on spheres of exchange. Based on fieldwork conducted in the 1950s among the Tiv of northern Nigeria, Bohannan argues that, at the time of fieldwork, the Tiv recognized three distinct spheres of exchangeable items: the lowest ranking sphere of subsistence items, which included foodstuffs, household utensils, and raw materials; the prestige sphere of slaves, cattle, metal bars, and *lugindu* cloth; and the highest ranking sphere, reserved for dependent persons other than slaves, particularly women (1955, 62). The Tiv were able to move from one sphere of exchange to another by engaging in morally charged conversions. In order to move upward from the subsistence sphere to the prestige sphere, for instance, the Tiv would convert food to brass rods, an exchange deemed positive. Not coincidentally, I think, in order to climb up the prestige ladder, the most enterprising and charismatic of Tiv men crossed over to the world of witchcraft where human flesh was traded and consumed (Graeber 2011, 147). Similar to the Luwale and others in Zambia, some Tiv men moved between the spheres of moral economy and amoral economy through exchange.

Let us start with the movement from village to coven. In northwest Zambia, any movement in this direction typically takes place through interpersonal exchanges gone awry. In accounts dealing with the insidious tactics that witches employ to recruit new members into the coven, asking, giving, and receiving are described as traps. In order to recruit new members and ensure a steady supply of human meat, witches employ the following

method: they wait for a close or distant relative to approach them, asking for food, typically salt or cassava leaves. Instead of waiting, they may also decide to take the initiative and approach their victims with a request: "Do you have a bit of salt to spare?" Some people say that it is best to never refuse a request of food, or else the witch will enter your dreams and remind you of your greediness. The general agreement, however, is that the end result is always the same regardless of what you say or do. From the perspective of both the witches and their victims, it hardly matters that you utter a request or hand out a gift; asking and giving perform the same function and achieve the same outcome. You have been trapped, and you will die unless you join the coven. Whereas in ordinary, obverse reciprocity you may win or lose, at least in theory, in reverse reciprocity you don't stand a chance.

Here is how my friend Sapasa described these encounters between witch and victim (Silva 2015): when a good-hearted woman comes to her kitchen and asks for a teaspoon of salt to flavor her stew, the witch agrees and rushes to her salt container, feigning kindness. That night, the malicious witch will invade her victim in her sleep, causing her to dream (*mbolozwa*), and, in that dream, asking her to give back her salt. "I gave you my salt to flavor your stew, didn't I; now, give it back to me!" The victim responds that she cannot return the salt because she used it in her stew. She apologizes profusely, but the witch feels no compassion. "That salt that you ate belonged to my fellow witches, who now want their salt back." Amid tears and pleas, the poor woman admits that she has no salt left, but the witch feels no compassion: "In that case, woman, you must reciprocate by becoming one of us." The poor woman knows exactly what the witch means. If she refuses to reciprocate by killing a close relative, often a baby, she will soon fall sick and die. As mentioned, it matters very little whether you fall in the witch's trap through an act of giving in response to the witch's request or through the witch's giving in response to your request. Either way, you must join the coven by killing a close relative. To ensure that you will kill your relative and present your offer of human meat (*mbika* in the language of witchcraft), you are asked to utter the name of your relative while you tie a knot in a string. The expression "to be tied up" (*kukasa munthu kuli mwakandumbwa*) refers to this tying of a knot in a string and, more generally, to death caused by witchcraft.

But the cycle of killing and eating does not stop here. Once the novice witch has killed her relative and offered her promised gift of human meat to her cove witch, the latter becomes indebted to her. The burden of indebtedness is a heavy one. In potlatch, treasure after treasure, some men of high standing

drove other men to penury and social death, if not literal death (Maus 1990, 6). In the covens of northwest Zambia, witches are said to force their cove-itches to kill their relatives and offer them as meat to be eaten raw.

These accounts of witchcraft are never seen as mere stories, legends, and fables. Consider the following episode from 1996: while Rose, my neighbor, and I were chatting in the evening while her dinner cooked in the kitchen, an elderly woman named Flai approached Rose and kindly asked her for a bit of salt to season her stew. After a moment of hesitation, Rose walked into her kitchen and returned with a small portion of salt in the fold of her right hand, which she gingerly poured into Flai's hand. Flai thanked Rose profusely and walked away. As soon as she disappeared from sight, though, Rose asked, nervously, "Why did that elderly woman come to me?" She seemed agitated. Flai lived in a small house at the CMMI mission. The late missionary Paul Logan had rescued her from the hands of her relatives who were mercilessly beating her after a basket diviner confirmed her identity as a witch. Why had Flai approached Rose when other women lived closer to the mission? Faced with Flai's suspicious behavior, Rose decided to please her by giving her a bit of salt. She knew, however, that witches are never pleased and that they use gift giving to trap their victims in a cycle of flesh debts. For many women in northwest Zambia, requests and gifts of food—particularly requests and gifts of food from elderly women who act suspiciously—are not simply ambiguous in the semiotic sense; they are a risky business. Interpersonal relations are necessarily ambivalent; and asking and giving is often more than meets the eye.

Again, it would be senseless to downplay the differences between food transactions in the obverse and reverse spheres. In the villages, women form a sphere of exchange in which they often ask, give, and receive small food items, such as salt, a spoon of oil, and cassava leaves. In this way, not only do they help one another in lean times, but they also develop relationships of reciprocal indebtedness that ensure future gifts of food and commodities. They thus fulfill one of their key roles as women. Witchcraft is a complete reversal of this realm. As wives and mothers, women exchange and cook food in the name of life; as witches, they give out their relatives in the name of death. As wives and mothers, they cook meals to feed their children, husbands, and relatives, always caring to complement the staple thick porridge (*shimwa*) with a nutritious accompaniment and a flavorful gravy (*inyo*); as witches, they kill their relatives and offer their bodies as raw meat to the other witches. While families eat cooked food in the

moral space of their villages, witches eat raw human flesh in the amoral space of the cemetery.

Nevertheless, these absolute differences between reversed realms do not efface their similar constitution as spheres of exchange in the same human economy. In both spheres, exchange is centered on the value of human life, or the denial of it, "food" assuming the status of a true valuable.⁸ Equally notorious is the fact that women pass from one sphere to the other through the very same acts of asking, giving, and receiving on which they depend to cement relationships with their neighbors and secure help in times of shortage. The requesting and giving of food always engenders sociality, although one can never tell for certain what kind of sociality.

Another common crossing from village to coven is *mukuli* or the indebtedness caused by the inability to reciprocate. As any individual in northwest Zambia will tell you, the burden of a *mukuli* is not simply tied to the hierarchical and exploitative relationship between creditors and debtors, a relationship in which the debtor feels that he or she is at the creditor's mercy. In the past, as mentioned, debtors unable to pay off their debts would be forced to pawn one of their relatives if not themselves to their creditors. A prolonged *mukuli* may lead to hate, envy, and rancor, ill feelings that grow and canker overtime, opening the way to bewitchment. Debts lead to bewitching; bewitching leads to new debts in the realm of witchcraft, and debts in the realm of witchcraft may lead, as took place in Northern Rhodesia in the 1950s, to the witches' attempt to settle those debts in the obverse realm. In attempting to settle flesh debts through the legal system of Northern Rhodesia, those resourceful witches showed that it is possible to move between exchange realms without experiencing a sense of misfit and discontinuity.

Thus far, we have considered instances of forced movement from the villages to the coven through acts of asking and giving gone awry: requests and gifts of food among women and unpaid debts. But such poisoned exchanges do not only move individuals into the realm of witchcraft, "ripping" them from their communities and webs of relations, as Graeber describes the violence often unleashed through acts of exchange (2011: 159); they also bring back the bewitched to the realm of life. Kanenga doctors in northwest Zambia rely on the power of asking and giving to release the bewitched from the snare of witchcraft. In the face of death and extreme suffering, asking and giving become the last hope.

Kanenga is a nightlong ritual performed to release the bewitched from the chains of witchcraft after a basket diviner confirms a witchcraft suspicion (Silva 2011). By this time, the tension between the victim's family and the supposed witch identified by the basket diviner has escalated to the point of public verbal accusations, if not physical blows. It is the magic of Kanenga to bring both sides to talk with one another, sharing their grievances and viewpoints. In this seemingly impossible conversation, Kanenga doctors bring the witch and the bewitched to momentarily recognize their common humanity. For the ritual to work, however, it does not suffice to talk, exchange viewpoints, and recognize a common plight as sufferers. Toward the end of Kanenga, the bewitcher disappears through the wall of darkness surrounding the ritual's bonfire. In his hand he carries a small bowl containing blood from a sacrificed he-goat, which he offers to the witch in exchange for the life of the bewitched. "Take this bowl of blood and let that person live," he says. The life of the bewitched depends on this last act of asking and giving, an act that attempts to reverse the promise made by the witch to another witch that the victim, now moribund, would be killed and sacrificed. The reversal of fortune depends on this last opportunity to ask and give.

While the acts of asking, giving, and receiving create reversed sociality in the realm of witchcraft, they also serve as the means to escape from the coven. This is good news for both the witch and the bewitched, for it may save them from possible death. Elsewhere in Zambia and southern Africa, the violence of witchcraft has been addressed with more violence in the form of witch-hunts. These cleansing movements vary widely from the simple ingestion of emetics by the accused witches to gruesome killings delivered with a degree of cruelty and expediency that closely matches the evil crimes for which the supposed witches are being punished. Kanenga has enabled northwest Zambians to address cases of bewitching in a less gruesome and traumatic fashion, saving lives and restoring the possibility of coexistence. As perfectly captured in a Duala proverb from the Cameroonian coast, "You have to learn to live with your witch" (Geschiere 2013: 29).

Sometimes, though, Kanenga fails and the bewitched dies. The relatives of the deceased proceed to organize a wake at their village and then bury the corpse in the cemetery. If someone mentions the name of the supposed culprit during the wake, igniting arguments and quarrels, the devout Christians in attendance may strive to muffle their words with their Bible readings and fervent singing. In the remote regions west of the Zambezi River and across the international border in Angola, the sudden death of a

relative may reportedly lead to witch killings. Beatings and killings are infrequent in the areas closer to the townships of northwest Zambia.

Dewitchers know that Kanenga rituals do not always work. They also know that oftentimes they do work (as the late dewitcher Kazuzu liked to point out), saving the victim from certain death and the perpetrator from constant shunning or possibly a mob killing. The purpose of Kanenga, however, is not to eradicate witchcraft or assert the validity of universal human rights. Kanenga provides a healing space where i) the victim and his or her relatives may engage in dialogue with the perpetrator and ii) the dewitcher may engage in a gift exchange with the same perpetrator, hoping to undo the dreaded knot of bewitching. Together, these gifts of words and sacrificial blood achieve the desired outcome. So much becomes possible through simple acts of asking, giving, and receiving: women help one another in lean times, women fall in the trap of witchcraft, witches seal their deadly killings, and Kanenga doctors persuade the witches to release their prey. Gifting leads to killing, but it may also save lives.

A RISK WORTH TAKING

Had the British colonial officers in Northern Rhodesia not dismissed what the witches told them in the 1950s as a matter of principle and a laughing matter, they perhaps would have seized the valuable opportunity that presented itself to them. Similar to the Kanenga doctor who approaches the supposed witch with an exchange deal, asking the witch to take the plate of goat blood instead of the victim, the British officers could have welcomed the witches who approached them, and taken their words very seriously. One witch explained to the colonial officer writing in 1953: "In Northern Rhodesia I initiated this other woman who is with me now. In order to initiate her, I killed the small daughter of my own daughter. I killed her by using my familiar spirit, and then afterwards I strangled her. This woman ate part of the flesh, and I initiated her into witchcraft. But she did not practice as a witch, and when I wanted her to kill her own granddaughter for our ceremonies, she refused. And so I too have decided to give up witchcraft, because the profession is not what it was, and the Europeans are against it. But in that case I want compensation for the child I killed and for the flesh I gave to her." Had the colonial officer compensated the witch for her exchange debit incurred in the realm of witchcraft, maybe the witch would have freed her debtor from her

obligation to reciprocate, returning two witches to the realm of life and preventing further violence. This would have been a wise decision: to offer a gift in the name of life to promote reconciliation.

These encounters between colonial officers and local witches in Northern Rhodesia are amenable to other interpretations. In many ways, they epitomize the unequal relation between the European colonial officers and the African population, including, as we intuited from the annual reports written in Northern Rhodesia, such telling signs as the officers' confidence in their own superiority. Likewise, the specific content of the conversations described in the annual reports—the exchange of human meat among witches—may be read as a metaphor for the ills of colonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism. In the last two decades, a number of anthropologists have taken this interpretive route, arguing that accounts of witchcraft in contemporary Africa offer a chilling commentary on the excesses of neoliberalism.⁹ In a system in which everything is for sale, even human flesh, morality is in jeopardy. In a thought-provoking article entitled "Save Your Skins," Todd Sanders states, "The occult?—by which I mean unseen powers, positive or negative—provides a compelling local lexicon for re-moralizing sterile World Bank/IMF stories about structural adjustment and social change" (2001: 162). Sanders does not cite Mauss; nevertheless, the older tendency to critique market exchange on moral grounds informs his argument.

Some of the authors who gave birth to the witchcraft modernity paradigm are now explicitly recognizing that witchcraft in contemporary Africa is never coterminous with the social, political, and economic conditions developed under neoliberal regimes, even though it is necessarily embedded in those conditions. Sanders remarks, "African witchcraft may well be part of modernity, but by no means needs to be *about* modernity" (2003: 338). This is all for the better. A closer engagement with Mauss, however, would enable a broader reflection on the experience of danger. Unsettling witchcraft accounts speak to the real dangers of gift giving at least as much as they do to the real dangers of capitalism.

A closer engagement with Mauss would also raise the following question: Might we benefit from considering neoliberal exchange networks and relationships through the lens of the "gift"? Rosalind Eyben (2006), a social anthropologist with a career in international development, including two years as the head of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) country office in Bolivia, thinks that the concept of the gift brings

into focus what the current models of international development often conceal. Whereas these models promote a view of international aid as either an economic contract or an entitlement based on international human rights, the gift model, Eyben argues, exposes the violence and power dynamics that shape and shake international aid relationships.

Interestingly, aid workers and sponsors of faith-based humanitarian organizations would probably disagree with Eyben. For them, the ultimate purpose of their aid work is to foster an ethics of giving informed by spiritual and moral concerns (see Hillary Kaeli and Britt Halvorson, this volume). Similarly to Mauss in *The Gift*, aid workers understand aid in two different ways: while some among them wish to protect the gift economies of philanthropy from the imperatives of the commercial economy, the others understand gifting as political work. In both cases, however, it might be helpful to reconsider aid work through the lens of the concept of the gift as well as that of the request.

Other global spheres broadly defined as givers and receivers come to mind: colonizers/colonized and missionaries/missionized, for example. Given the extreme inequalities underlying the global political economy, it would not be preposterous to see the givers as witches who practice an agonistic form of gift exchange. Nevertheless, I would like to believe that the lesson to be drawn from these fraught encounters and exchanges is not always and necessarily a negative one. The donors dressed up as helpers do not always turn out to be witches in disguise. The consequences of asking, giving, and receiving remain indeterminate. Gift giving may kill you, but it may also save you.

The Kanenga doctors of northwest Zambia stand tall as a source of inspiration to all givers and receivers. In order to save lives and tolerance, negotiating with the other side may be the best alternative. When the gift turns out to be poisoned, the solution is not to stop asking, giving, and receiving. It is rather to creatively reconsider the types of questions asked and the gifts exchanged, explore the possibility of substitution and compromise, and bring the donors and recipients to converse and negotiate.

Geschiere asks: what is the relation between witchcraft, intimacy and trust? How do we sow trust where there is only hate and suspicion? The answer to these questions, insurmountable as they might seem, may reside in the simple gestures of asking, giving, and receiving. Measures against witchcraft such as those described by Geschiere (2013, 32, 205)—ostracizing or killing the witch, moving to the city, shielding oneself with protective medicine, and redistributing wealth among relatives to prevent

envy—constitute acts of distancing and disengagement. In sharp contrast to these measures, asking, giving, and receiving are forms of engagement of the most precious kind, for they reveal the unique combination of knowledge and faith that Simmel distinguishes in his thoughts on trust (1950, 318–320, 1990, 179). Risk awareness does not stop women from requesting, giving, and receiving food in the villages, or the Kanenga doctors from engaging with the witches during Kanenga rituals, asking the witches to accept their gifts of goat blood in exchange for the life of the bewitched. A leap of faith this is—negotiating with the killer face to face. These women and men show great courage. They also show their firm commitment to continue depending on one another and working out a living together.

Gift theorists should not worry that the concept of the gift, stretched beyond boundaries, may lose its heuristic power. Elasticity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy are its defining qualities as a social practice and theoretical concept. Through gift giving as well as asking, not only do we create and reproduce different social worlds, but we also move between those worlds. Such is the power of the gift, a risky endeavor, but a risk worth taking.

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NOTES

1. “Annual Report, North-Western Province, Balovale District, 1953, available at the National Archives of Zambia.
2. “Annual Report, North-Western Province, for the year 1951 (African Affairs, Solwezi, February 13, 1952),” available at the National Archives of Zambia.
3. I conducted fieldwork in the Chavuma district of Zambia, an area included in Balovale District during British colonialism.
4. See Burning Man’s webpage, <http://burningman.org/>
5. Multiple examples of pure gifts are described in Caner 2013, Laidlaw 2002, and Parry 1989.
6. For a discussion of these criticisms of Marcel Mauss, see, for example, Parry (1986) and Osteen (2002).
7. In *Kupitukula* (2005), Harry West captures the movement of “turning” between realms very well.

8. I owe this insight to Frederick Klaits.
9. See, for example, Moore and Sanders (2001), Ciekawy and Geschiere (1998), as well as the remaining essays published in the same special issue of *African Studies Review*. See also Comaroff and Comaroff (1993).

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