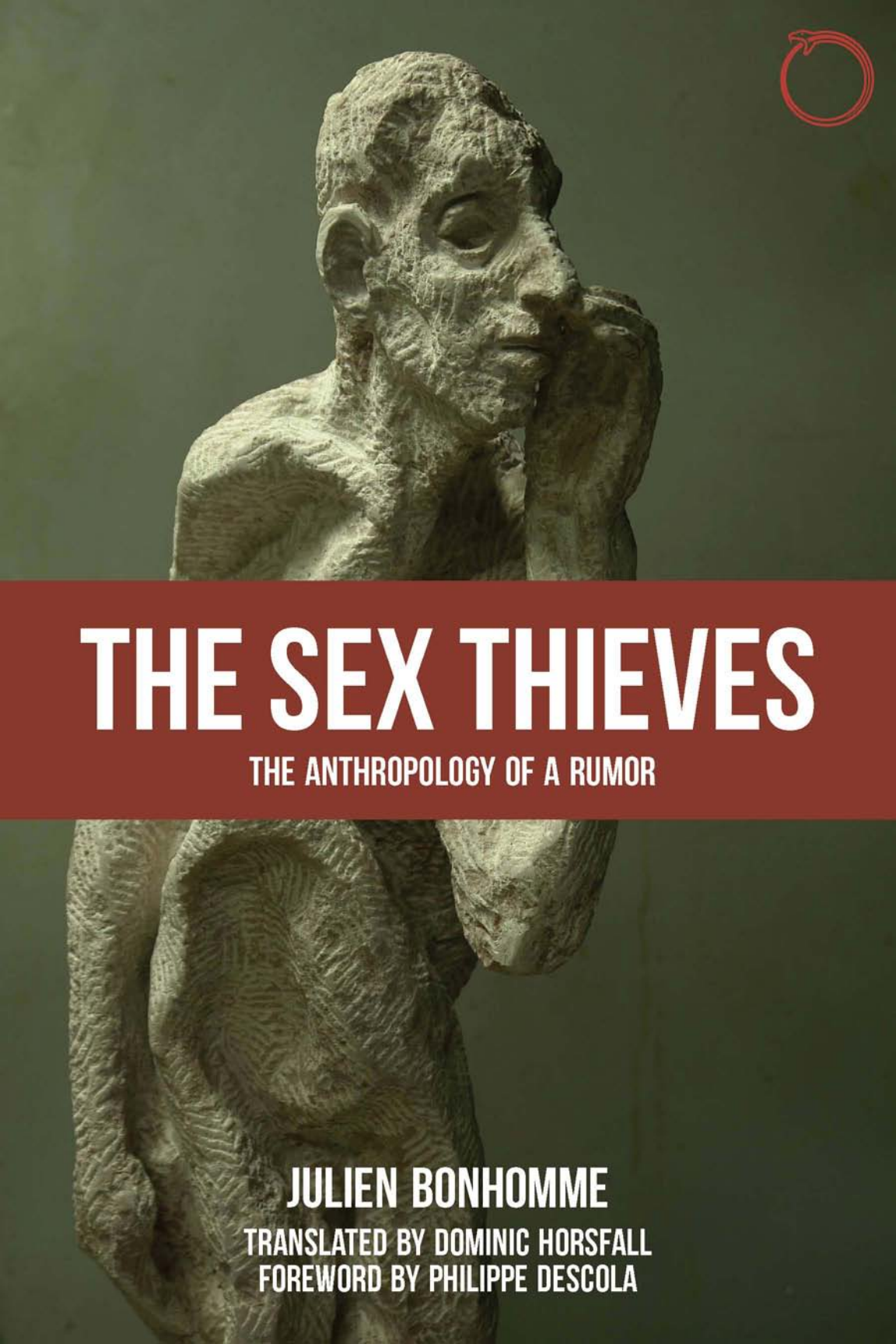

THE SEX THIEVES

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF A RUMOR

JULIEN BONHOMME

TRANSLATED BY DOMINIC HORSFALL
FOREWORD BY PHILIPPE DESCOLA

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HAU Books
Chicago

Cover Image: "Rumor" by Catalin Badarau.

Cover and layout design: Sheehan Moore

Typesetting: Prepress Plus (www.prepressplus.in)

ISBN: 978-0-9861325-8-2
LCCN: 2016953267

Hau Books
Chicago Distribution Center
11030 S. Langley
Chicago, IL 60628
www.haubooks.com

Hau Books is marketed and distributed by The University of Chicago Press.
www.press.uchicago.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

"You say it's just rumors—radio grapevine.
But you don't know that what radio grapevine says is true enough.
Toads don't croak unless it's raining, *dé*."

– Henry Lopès, *The laughing cry* (1987: 22)

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Editorial Note

This book is a revised and expanded edition of *Les Voleurs de sexe. Anthropologie d'une rumeur africaine*, originally published by Editions du Seuil in 2009.

Quotations taken from original French-language sources, from press clippings in particular, where no official English versions are available, have been reproduced by the translator.

Acknowledgments

For their inspired comments on the various oral and written versions of this work, I would like to express my gratitude in particular to Olivier Allard, Laurent Barry, Laurent Berger, David Berliner, François Berthomé, Luc Boltanski, Julien Bondaz, Matthew Carey, Andrea Ceriana Mayneri, Filip De Boeck, Emmanuel de Vienne, Grégory Delaplace, Pierre Déléage, Philippe Descola, Jean-Baptiste Eczet, Arnaud Esquerré, Sandra Fancello, Carlos Fausto, Jeanne Favret-Saada, Laurent Gabail, Peter Geschiere, Olivier Godechot, Arnaud Halloy, Bill Hanks, Michael Houseman, Katerina Kerestetzi, Pierre-Joseph Laurent, Bruno Martinelli, André Mary, Todd Meyers, Olivier Morin, Patrick Mouguiama-Daouda, Ramon Sarró, Carlo Severi, Anne-Christine Taylor, Joseph Tonda, and Jean-Pierre Warnier.

I am very grateful to Giovanni da Col for offering me the wonderful opportunity to publish an English translation of this book. I also express my sincere gratitude to Sean Dowdy, Justin Dyer, and HAU's staff for their enthusiasm and professionalism. I warmly thank Dominic Horsfall for his outstanding translation. Finally, I feel very honored that Philippe Descola accepted to write a foreword to this English translation. I wish to thank him wholeheartedly.

The publication of this book was made possible by funding from the National Research Agency of France (Agence nationale de la recherche), as part of the research program "The State and the Institutions facing Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa: Violence, Justice and Human Rights" (2012–16).

JULIEN BONHOMME

FOREWORD

Sexually Bewitched

This foreword is intended for the doubtful reader who might think that *The sex thieves* sounds too much like the title of a semipornographic zombie movie of the type formerly known as grade Z. The others, whether because they are already familiar with the work of Julien Bonhomme, or because they have perused the book, do not need to read the following lines for they already know, or at least suspect, that it is a little gem. Bonhomme is a very serious anthropologist indeed. A noted specialist of Central African religions and rituals, he devoted his first book, *Le Miroir et le crâne* (Bonhomme 2006a), to the initiation cycle of the Bwete Misoko, a Gabonese cult where the initiates absorb large quantities of the psychedelic iboga plant to induce visions. Oops, now it's sex *and* drugs! But no, it was not the LSD-like effect of iboga which interested Bonhomme, and he hardly dwells on its usage. The central theme of this first book is how the Bwete Misoko initiation cycle manages to alleviate the plight of someone thought to be bewitched, not so much because the ritual operates directly as a therapy, rather because it reconfigures the experience of the suffering subject by allowing him or her to escape from the face-to-face confrontation with the suspected sorcerer. The ritual does so by granting a new identity to the initiate, a complex identity which is at the same time purely relational—it establishes a new social position vis-à-vis the participants to the ritual and the members of the cult—and entirely reflexive—a specular relation to oneself, aptly mediated by a mirror.

Such a process is very different from Amazonian shamanism and the drug-induced communication with the spirit world with which I am more familiar: there, visionary experience introduces order and a temporary certainty to the normally unsettled identity of the beings with whom I interact because it allows enriched perceptual relations with them. In the Central African context, by contrast, the dense tissue of obligations stemming from segmentary affiliations and initiation cults other than the Bwete wraps up the individual in a mesh of ontological and social determinations which leaves little room for ambiguous identities. This is why misfortune when it strikes takes a more dramatic dimension here than elsewhere: it signals the irruption of chance and arbitrariness in a world where everything is organized to eliminate them. Now, instead of reducing this uncertainty, the genius of the Bwete is to institute a constructed ambiguity in response to a contingent indeterminacy, the result of a very structured ritual process, which is thus far more than a simple device for resocialization, as it is often interpreted.

After this initial analytical tour de force, why would Bonhomme devote time to the invasion of penis snatchers in African cities? For the very simple reason that what is at stake in the rumor of sex theft that has spread in a large part of sub-Saharan Africa since the 1970s is also witchcraft, but witchcraft under another guise. This is not the traditional rural witchcraft originating from within the family (beware of your maternal uncle!) to which so many monographs have been devoted; it is an urban and transnational witchcraft, all the more unsettling as it strikes not at night, in the silence of the village, but in the city, in the midst of bustling markets and on crowded public transport, and in contact with complete strangers, many of them obviously foreigners.

Let's go back to the facts. They seem deceptively and tragically simple, hardly deserving a learned essay: someone, usually a man, claims that a passer-by, usually another man, has robbed him of his genitalia through a slight physical contact; an angry mob assembles, ready to take revenge on the offender, and it may end in the lynching of the accused party, or even, if the latter is able to plead convincingly his innocence, of his accuser. The behavior of everyone is in a way expected because this is a rumor which has spread by word of mouth or through the media in a dozen countries, from Sudan to Senegal and from Mauritania to the Democratic Republic of Congo, such that the script for the event is now known by most urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa. But why does it work? This is the obvious question that comes to mind. Why does such a preposterous accusation, which can be easily disproved, take hold of so many people?

Common explanations can be easily dismissed, such as: that this kind of silly story works because the African masses are gullible, illiterate, and superstitious (to the contrary, many of those involved are sophisticated and well-educated city dwellers); that it is a political conspiracy intended to spread unrest (how could it work on such a huge scale?); or that it is a typical symptom of the anxiety of, take your pick, (a) lower middle-class urban professionals impoverished by the reckless neoliberal policies of the IMF, (b) recently arrived migrants from rural villages who are maladapted to large cities, or (c) illegal workers from neighboring countries looking for a better life. There is no doubt that all these people form a good chunk of the population of African cities and that they live in disquieting conditions, but why would their anxiety adopt the specific form of penis snatching?

The explanation which Bonhomme proposes is at the same time simpler and more subtle. Intent on applying to a concrete case the premises of the epidemiology of representations developed rather abstractly by Dan Sperber, and convinced that the saliency of an idea is provided by its contrastive opposition to other ideas, Bonhomme examines both the conditions that appear to favor the spreading of the epidemics—the pragmatics of the rumor—and the reasons why the rumor has taken hold of so many people so easily—the propitious milieu in which it may prosper. He thus shows convincingly that sex theft is a sort of transposition of rural witchcraft to urban settings in that it follows the same patterns of interactional pathology—what he calls, in Goffmanian terms, a "dysphoric interaction"—while the content of the rumor and the conditions of its actualization invert systematically the premises of traditional witchcraft: extrafamily versus intrafamily; urban versus rural; public versus domestic; diurnal versus nocturnal; kinship relations versus anonymous relations; long and close interaction versus short interaction; action at a distance versus direct physical contact, etc. In that sense, sex theft reconfigures African witchcraft in the context of globalization; it is simultaneously a new phenomenon, expanding within the circumstances afforded by new urban modes of life, and a very old phenomenon, the pattern of which can be easily identified in its inverted form by all concerned.

By moving from Bwete to sex, Bonhomme illuminates the fact that the alternative in anthropology is not between, on the one hand, essentialist descriptions of traditional cultural features basking in their timeless simplicity and, on the other hand, a necessary submission to the hot, quick pace of the contemporary world, dissolving in its wake the exotic clichés of the past. For globalized rumors

such as the one studied in *The sex thieves* do not stem from the vagaries of local circumstances and the gullibility of those who are said to believe in them. There is no belief involved here, in the sense of an external coherent creed to which people would—or would not—adhere, but rather there is a series of failed interactions, half-formed fears, and misinterpreted rules of public etiquette rooted in the deeper metamorphosis of behavior which city life brings about. The mechanism of the rumor as Bonhomme unveils it, even the physical experience of losing one's genitalia which many vividly describe, is not particularly African. But the content of the rumor, the reasons for its success, the circumstances of its diffusion, and the nature of the persons deemed responsible for sex theft are all rooted in social and cultural patterns deeply embedded in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa where the rumor took hold. Anthropology is at its best when it manages, as is the case here, to combine general explanations entrenched in a deep understanding of the ecology of practice and of the mind with the insider knowledge of the cultural particulars which endow each phenomenon with the truthful taste of its ethnographic uniqueness.

Philippe Descola

INTRODUCTION

Beware the Sex Thieves!

A man by the name of Ogoula was reportedly beaten up near the community center for having made the penises of three people he had just greeted on the street disappear. The victim was admitted to the ICU of the regional hospital in a very bad state, where he is currently fighting for his life. Ogoula allegedly only returned one of the organs, and not the other two. [. . .] A separate incident on Sunday night: another alleged thief was stopped, suspected of having made three more penises disappear, including that of a nine-year-old boy. Though the child was able to recover his missing organ a short while later thanks to some incantations by his "persecutor," the same could not be said for the other two. Nzamba D., a thirty-six-year-old Gabonese and the presumed thief, was then rounded on by a furious crowd and left thoroughly beaten, stark naked. His life was saved only by the arrival of the local security forces. At the same time, in Quartier Sud, a Cameroonian national was reported to have committed the same act against a . . . girl and a man, before vanishing into thin air. That same Sunday night, around 11.30 p.m., a young man of around eighteen was found lying on the ground at the central police station, claiming that his penis too had been stolen. "Afterward, I tried to masturbate," he admitted, "but I couldn't get even the slightest erection." With each passing day comes a new set of rumors and revelations of this kind. The resulting fear has reached such a height that local residents are no longer willing to shake hands with anyone. Those who dare are quick to feel their groins afterward to check that everything is still in place.

It was in reading this article, first published in the main Gabonese daily, *L'Union*, on Tuesday, March 27, 2001, that I first heard tell of the "sex thieves"—or more correctly, "genital thieves." It was hard to miss the front-page headline in bold: "'Genital thieves' plunge Port-Gentil into fear"; and it was already all anyone was talking about, in the shared taxis, in the cafeterias, around the neighborhoods. It was without question the *kongosa* of the month.[1] The rumor was spreading and the atmosphere in the city was feverish. In Port-Gentil, Gabon's second city, genital thieves had allegedly been on the prowl for a couple of days now. In less than a week, lynchings of suspected individuals left one dead and several injured. But before long, the rumors, the panic, and the violence had all dissipated, and the public imagination was soon occupied by other matters. In the moment, I shrugged off this story as some exotic triviality, with other altogether more serious topics of research already in mind. Several years went by before I realized that this same rumor about genital thieves had in fact swept across the greater part of sub-Saharan Africa on many occasions since the 1990s. Behind this one unusual anecdote, it seems, was concealed a social phenomenon with a much broader spatiotemporal distribution. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to recount in detail this widespread matter of witchcraft. For genital theft is indeed often considered "witchcraft" or "sorcery," inasmuch as it implies an occult act (the penis disappears as if by magic), unjustly targeting an individual's integrity: "The question that remains is: has the penis actually disappeared? According to witness statements taken from the crowd, it has. How is this possible? By the use of mystical processes, say many. And so it is accusations of witchcraft that are going around" (Camerinfo.com, February 2009).

It all seems to start in Nigeria during the first half of the 1970s. In 1975, a Nigerian psychiatrist, Sunny Ilechukwu (1988), is called as an expert witness in the mysterious case of a stolen penis: in Kaduna, in the center of the country, two Hausa are arrested by the police for having caused a disturbance in the middle of the street, in which one of them had accused the other of stealing his genitals. This is the first well-documented instance of genital theft. Yet some authors refer to episodes occurring before 1975 and outside Nigeria. One journalist even posits that the rumor had already visited Nigeria as far back as the 1930s, but without offering any sources (Mandel 2008: 196). One missionary,

1. Making *kongosa* is to exchange gossip, primarily about other people, but also more generally in reference to the rumors of the moment. A Cameroonian term originally, it is now equally used in Gabon.

for his part, remembers that the rumor was already rife in Fort-Lamy (the old name of the Chadian capital, N'Djamena) at the beginning of the 1970s (Ferrer Soria 1999: 13). Finally, an historian briefly mentions a single instance of genital theft that he allegedly witnessed in Cape Coast, Ghana, in 1973, but only in a footnote (Gocking 2000: 59). Most accounts agree, however, that genital theft has its origins in Nigeria. It seems likely, therefore, that it was present in the country before 1973. This hypothesis is indirectly confirmed, moreover, by J. L. Ferrer Soria (1999: 13), who explains that, in Chad, Hausa coming in from Nigeria are suspected of stealing people's genitals: "The residents of Fort-Lamy were panicked by the formidable power of the Hausa, an ethnic group of northern Nigeria. They were accused of spiriting away men's penises and women's breasts in a flash. A tide of irrational fear sweeps through the neighborhoods of the Chadian capital over the course of several weeks. On the street, people avoid even the slightest physical contact with others: a brush of a foot, a graze of an elbow, any sort of bodily touch was now fatal for one's genital attributes." A Nigerian lawyer remembers, moreover, having heard talk of genital thieves as a child at the beginning of the 1970s (*Weekly Trust*, July 11, 2009). Though it is always difficult to trace back the origins of rumors, we can say from a cross-reference of the sources available that genital theft must have started at the very beginning of the 1970s in northern Nigeria in Hausa territory, before spreading quickly to neighboring regions. Between 1975 and 1978, the rumor sparks up on many occasions in Lagos and Imo State in southern Nigeria. The number of incidents mounts up. Several suspected thieves are lynched and killed. The rumor can equally be traced to Yaoundé, in Cameroon, as of January 1975.

Until the mid-1990s, however, instances of genital theft seem to confine themselves to Nigeria and its border regions, Cameroon in particular. It is only in the second half of the decade that the rumor becomes very widespread in West and Central Africa, with 85 percent of the cases occurring after 1995 (see Chart in Appendix). It proliferates in successive waves from its home in Nigeria, a country situated at the crossroads of the continent's two subregions. Marked peaks of intensity can be identified from 1996 to 1997, and then again from 2001 to 2002. During these sudden spikes, the spread of the thefts can be traced from one month, one country, even one city to the next. In 1996, the rumor hits Nigeria, and in October and November the same year, Cameroon. It heads west and reaches Togo in December 1996, Ghana in January 1997, Ivory Coast in March, Burkina Faso and Mali in April–May, Senegal in July, and finally Mauritania in August–September (see Map 1 in Appendix). And when it hits Nigeria

once more in April 2001, it finds its way to Benin in November–December, Ghana in January 2002, Ivory Coast in March, and Gambia in April (see Map 2 in Appendix). Genital theft cases recur periodically in this way, several months or years apart in a single country. Since the mid-2000s, the rumor has remained very active in a large number of countries, as if its cycles of regeneration were gathering pace, with it taking hold more endemically across the continent when compared with the previous decade. Indeed, more than half the episodes documented have occurred since 2004. Senegal turns out to have been the most affected in the last ten years, with the rumor of genital theft having embedded itself firmly there: since 2007, not a year has passed without an incident in connection with the rumor being reported, either in Dakar or further afield. During this period, the rumor continues to spread to new countries, such as Niger (in 2004 and 2007), the Democratic Republic of Congo (in 2008), and the Central African Republic (in 2010). In total, more than eighty significant episodes have been identified (by episode, we refer to a repeated series of genital theft and associated lynching incidents in a single country in the course of a single year) (see Table in Appendix). The region in question constitutes a dense bloc stretching from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Sudan and Mauritania. Between nineteen and twenty countries have been affected (see Map 3 in Appendix): Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, the Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and perhaps Liberia too. However, the extent to which each of these countries is marked by the rumor varies. Some are struck significantly, such as Nigeria, the cradle of the rumor, and neighboring Cameroon, but also Senegal. Others are regularly hit, though to a lesser degree, for example Burkina Faso, Mali, and Gabon. And then there are those that have seemingly only had a single episode to date: the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Sudan, and Mauritania. Nevertheless, compiling a record of genital theft cases is no easy feat, and in all likelihood ours remains incomplete. Inside this dense zone that represents the geographical extent of these thefts, we still find a few persistent gaps: Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Equatorial Guinea. But this absence of proof does not in itself constitute proof of absence. It would not be surprising, therefore, to find instances of genital theft in these three countries too, and even in other states farther to the east and south of the African continent.

The difficulty in putting together an overview comes down to the fact that rumor is a volatile phenomenon that does not lend itself well to observation.

As a sudden disturbance about which one does not really know what to say, rumor pertains to one of those "free currents of social life" that Émile Durkheim ([1895] 2013: 27) described as more resistant to objective analysis than other, more structured social phenomena. It is true that the precise diffusion of a rumor is very difficult to trace. And researchers often arrive too late to witness it directly. Ethnographers feel more at ease with localized events that they are able to observe in the field themselves. This is why anthropology has traditionally been more interested in gossip over rumor. Indeed, gossip, dirt, and idle chitchat all represent a privileged point of access for studying the social dynamics of small communities (Elias and Scotson [1965] 1994; Haviland 1977; Brison 1992; Besnier 2009). Their circulation within the group allows the latter to reaffirm its common values by stigmatizing any deviant behavior (Gluckman 1963). Gossip also represents a strategic means to promote the interests of different factions, or to manage reputations, and thus acts as an expression of power politics (Paine 1967). This explanatory framework has often been used as a model in works on witchcraft in Africa or elsewhere. Indeed, stories of witchcraft are above all simply gossip making the rounds within a family, a village, or a neighborhood, tacitly accusing such and such an individual of indulging in occult misdeeds (Bleek 1976; Bougerol 1997). Witches, therefore, embody the quintessential transgressor of collective values. And gossip in their regard allows a local community to express, in a transposed manner, the tensions and conflicts at its heart—hence Max Marwick's famous understanding of witchcraft as a "social strain gauge" (Marwick 1970). In contrast to gossip, rumors circulate on a much larger scale, often across national borders, not just local. To borrow Isaac Joseph's fine expression, they thus represent "deterritorialized forms of gossip" (Joseph 1984: 39). The issues at stake are therefore much less clearly defined, and a microanalysis of interpersonal conflicts is no longer possible. As a result, the study of rumors poses a particular set of challenges for anthropology. In that sense, this book on genital theft also sets out to provide a more general contribution to the anthropology of rumors, and particularly occult rumors. Contemporary Africa is indeed crisscrossed by these types of rumors. Among other examples, we can cite stories of zombies at the service of fabulously wealthy sorcerers, or ones of snakes swallowing up young people, or mating with them, before proceeding to throw up money (Zame Avezo'o 2005). And since this book's original edition, I have had the opportunity to study other rumors of a similar kind, including stories of killer phone numbers, and rumors of deadly alms (Bonhomme 2011; Bondaz and Bonhomme 2014). These loose accounts

of anonymous origin are to be found in a number of countries and, tailored to suit the local circumstances, provide fodder for various tales of witchcraft, somewhat akin to urban legends in North America and Europe. All these occult rumors are often compared to one another, and thus belong, in my view, to the same transnational genre. New stories appear constantly, drawing on older stories, while rumors believed to have vanished sporadically reappear. Between different versions of the same rumor, or even between different rumors, the plot and details may vary, but a family resemblance remains. The question this book seeks to answer is thus as follows: How can we give an account of witchcraft once it stops being local gossip and becomes a transnational rumor?[2]

What collection of data can we make use of for a research subject as vast as genital theft rumors? With regard to Gabon and Senegal, I was able to gather ethnographic data firsthand by conducting interviews with witnesses or people who had been implicated in various cases since 2001. For other countries, we can rely on a handful of scientific publications.[3] But the most numerous sources come from press articles; more than two hundred articles on genital theft have been gathered for this work from dailies and agency reports (see the list in the References). These have been taken from African media, both paper and electronic. Relying on the press to such an extent throws up the obvious issue of media bias. It is imperative that we take into account the active role of the press not only in surveying and qualifying these incidents, but also in propagating the rumor. The media filter through which most of these cases are presented leads to an overexposure of the most dramatic examples (those involving violence and death), and an underestimation of the total number. The rumor thus inevitably goes beyond what written traces of it in the press can piece together. Accordingly, some of the cases I was able to investigate directly in Gabon and Senegal were never picked up by the newspapers, since they came to nothing more than a few harmless altercations. We can therefore hypothesize that a significant number of genital theft cases go unreported, in that—thankfully—they do not

2. This question has been tackled by anthropologists Pamela Stewart and Andrew Strathern (2004), as well as by historian Luise White (2000). These two books have been inspiring references for my own research.

3. For anthropology, see Sackey (1997); Enguéléguélé (1998); Jackson (1998: 49–54); Mandel (2008). For media studies, see Ledit (2001); Duplat (2002); The Middle East Media Research Institute (2003). For psychiatry and social psychology, see Ilechukwu (1988, 1992); Agbu (2004); Mather (2005); Dzokoto and Adams (2005); Adams and Dzokoto (2007).

result in anyone being killed or gravely injured. Yet media reports still provide crucial indicators, allowing us not only to pinpoint the presence of the rumor in a particular country at a given moment, but also to evaluate the scope, duration, and intensity of an episode. The lynchings and riots that can arise in the wake of an incident of genital theft force the authorities to intervene publicly, on most occasions through the media, in an attempt to restore order. For their part, the media thrive on sensationalist morsels combining sex, violence, and witchcraft. As a result, matters of witchcraft crop up routinely in the African popular press (Bastian 1993). From this perspective, this book can also be read as a study on the ubiquitous role of media in contemporary Africa: it shows how the popular press affects and transforms public perceptions of witchcraft.[4]

However, the African media are not alone in cashing in on stories about genital theft. Western newspapers too are quick to report on events that only too easily reinforce the cliché of a credulous Africa still mired in exotic superstitions. Eschewing these journalistic simplifications, this work aims to convince the reader that rumors of genital theft are much more than some laughing matter, and deserve to be taken seriously. This involves taking a rumor that captures the imagination by dint of its sheer oddity, and turning it into a social phenomenon worthy of interest. Yet as soon as we talk about witchcraft and the occult in Africa, we risk letting ourselves be seduced by a sensationalism more interested in bewitching the reader than in shedding light on the facts. A number of authors have demonstrated how the importance afforded to themes of witchcraft and magic in Africanist literature has contributed to an image of the continent colored by exotic otherness (e.g., Pels 1998). It was for this reason that, during a panel discussion on the links between "Sorcery, State and Society in Contemporary Africa" at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association in 1997, one of the participants, Achille Mbembe, proposed a moratorium on all research regarding witchcraft or magic, making specific mention of genital theft.[5] However, to ignore a subject that is, after all, as much a part of African daily life as any other would to my mind constitute a regrettable abnegation of scientific responsibility. The aim of this work, therefore, is to draw attention to the matter of genital theft, not for the purposes of "exoticizing" Africa that little bit more, but rather to "de-exoticize" it. By highlighting the ordinary preoccupations on

4. On this topic, see also Bonhomme (2015).

5. The matter is described by Adams and Dzokoto (2007: 84); as well as Ciekawy and Geschiere (1998: 2).

which the rumor is based, we hope to demonstrate the sheer mundaneness of witchcraft, however unbelievable it may seem at first glance.

Taking media bias into account, press archives, in combination with first-hand ethnographic data, provide sufficiently comprehensive descriptions of events to allow for a reliable account of the phenomenon. In this way, for the purposes of our analysis, we have more than two hundred reasonably detailed cases of genital theft at our disposal. Newspaper reports try to give the points of view of the alleged victims of theft as much as those of the suspected victims of mob justice; we thus have access to both sides of the affair. Combining qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data brings out the essential characteristics of the phenomenon: the identities of the victims and of the supposed thieves, the circumstances of the theft, etc. This allows us to put explanatory hypotheses to the test, and—no small advantage—to debunk with facts the kind of unchecked symbolic overinterpretations often put forward by commentators on the rumor. By isolating the constants and identifying the exceptions, statistical objectification proves a particularly effective tool for processing such a phenomenon as rumor, which manifests in series. Analysis of the data is made all the more simple for the fact that incidents of genital theft follow a remarkably similar pattern, regardless of the country in question. The development is striking by its very consistency, contradicting the common conception of rumor as being inherently variable, its content changing constantly as its spreads.

It all starts with a point of contact between two strangers in a public place, usually a passing graze or an everyday handshake. The individual touched then experiences something akin to an electric shock around his groin. The shock is followed by the impression that one's genitals have disappeared, or perhaps simply shrunk (the former in around two-thirds of cases, the latter in a third). In reality, there is a lot of shifting and hesitation between the two versions of the phenomenon, including in the witnesses' testimonies. People speak generally of "penis snatchers" or "penis shrinkers" (in French-speaking countries: *voleurs de sexe* or *rétrécisseurs de sexe*, the latter in Senegal and Mali especially).[6] The victim then alerts the passers-by around him and accuses the other of having made his genitals disappear. A crowd rapidly forms and violently sets upon the

6. People also speak—though much more rarely—of "penis killers" (*tueurs de sexe*), an expression that points more to the act of making one impotent rather than causing the disappearance of the member altogether. There are also instances of the terms "penis reducers" (*réducteurs de sexe*), "penis cutters" (*coupeurs de sexe*), and even "penis vanishers" (*disparaisseurs de sexe*).

accused. They beat him into confessing, and to make him return the stolen organ—the treatment of the victim and the punishment of the guilty person occur simultaneously. In the absence of any police intervention, the wretched suspect is lynched, sometimes fatally. The victim is beaten, stoned, even burned alive. The same scene plays out again and again over the course of a few days or weeks: accusations, violence, and sometimes death. The media are quick to pick up on it and fan the flames, as panic sets in. This can often devolve into riots and looting, even more deadly than the lynchings. Among the most violent incidents, we find that, in the course of 2001, genital theft incidents were the cause of at least twenty deaths in Nigeria; in July–August 1997, eight deaths and around forty injuries in Dakar, as well as another ten or so grave injuries in Ziguinchor and Saint-Louis, Senegal; a dozen deaths in Ghana in January 1997, and the same number again in January 2002. In Benin, in November–December 2001, there were six victims in just a few days. Nonetheless, the violence and panic often dissipate quite quickly. But then the rumor moves on to the next country, only to resurface a few years later.

How can we report on such events that recur locally across half a continent and seem to follow the same pattern everywhere? First of all, we must adopt a positive characterization of the phenomenon, and thereby rid ourselves of the depreciatory conception that has overdetermined the scientific view of rumors and crowds ever since Gustave Le Bon's *The crowd* ([1895] 2002). Rumor as a contagious disease of society, the mental regression of the hysterical and superstitious crowd, spasmodic and irrational collective violence—these are all far too simplistic forms of interpretation to properly account for otherwise complex social phenomena. A crowd whipped into a frenzy by a rumor represents something other than a regression to primitive barbarity. Born of the prejudices of the nineteenth-century European elites haunted by the specter of revolutionary mobs and the rise of the labor movement, these common threads are still to be found in later works on rumor.[7] When American social psychology turns its attention to rumors during World War II, it is only to label it once more the result of gullibility, obviously false and irrational (R. H. Knapp 1944; Allport and Postman 1947). These studies tend to lump rumor, unofficial information, and false information all together. The fact that a piece of information is official does not necessarily qualify it as true, however—propaganda being a prime example thereof. Conversely, a rumor can well be proven. In any case, true or false, a

7. On the history of the psychology of crowds, see Barrows (1981); McPhail (1998).

rumor ultimately spreads the same way: passed on by someone we trust, we tend to pay it heed without going too far out of our way to verify it ourselves. Being false is not, therefore, an integral part of rumor. Yet it is no coincidence that these first scientific studies posit a negative conception of rumor: conducted at the instigation of the American government, they are directly linked to the war effort. "False news" does indeed run the risk of weakening civilian morale in times of war. And so authorities seek to control information. One American poster dating from World War II depicts Uncle Sam holding his finger up to his lips: "Think before you talk!" It is in this context that researchers set up "rumor clinics" with a view to healing society. And in a 1960s America rocked by interracial violence, these "rumor control centers" remain official instruments for maintaining public order. According to this school of thought, if a false rumor can spread so easily and so quickly, it must therefore be a serious ailment capable of contaminating minds. Rumor is nothing more then than a pathology of communication. And there are still copious examples of this pathological vocabulary to be found in more contemporary works on rumor. Edgar Morin's classic study of an anti-Semitic rumor that struck Orléans in the 1960s about young girls being abducted from clothing stores is a good example of this tendency: epidemic, incubation, contagion, gangrene, metastasis, antibodies, infection—all are key words taken from this "clinical sociology" of rumor (Morin 1971). Providing a particularly simplistic example of turning a pathological paradigm into pseudoscientific classification, one sociologist even goes so far as to categorize rumors as schizoid, paranoid, phobic, perverse, or hysterical (Reumaux 1994: 16–26). A form of irrational credulity causing problems for public order, rumor is thus seen as a contagious disease of opinion that the sane minds of scientists should above all seek to demystify. This overarching, and frankly contemptuous, attitude shapes a significant proportion of studies on rumor: and in so doing, moral denunciation takes the place of objective description. But if we wish to be able to take rumors seriously, we must rid ourselves once and for all of these depreciatory preconceptions and distance ourselves from the pathological paradigm (Aldrin 2005: 8). We must accept the need to suspend any truth or value judgments, and view rumor from a different, non-negative perspective. Rumor is not a social pathology; rather, it demonstrates a perfectly normal functioning of human communication, and thus no morbid factor can explain how it appears and spreads. With respect to the case in question here, we must work on the assumption that rumors of genital theft constitute a "normal social phenomenon" (to use Durkheimian terminology) defined by certain consistent features.

Besides, representations linked to witchcraft, which the stories of genital theft greatly resemble, are ubiquitous on the African continent, where they are part and parcel of ordinary life. And even lynching, often used in retaliation against alleged genital thieves, represents a widespread popular method of collective action in many African societies. Ultimately, genital theft relies on completely normal modes of communication and action—without detracting from their morally reprehensible nature when they result in false accusations and violence.[8]

And yet the psychopathological paradigm has provided us with a ready-made interpretive grid for analyzing genital theft in Africa. In psychiatric and psychological texts in particular, the genital theft rumor is elevated to a psychopathological disorder (Ilechukwu 1988, 1992; Agbu 2004; Dzokoto and Adams 2005). Belief in genital theft is often compared with *koro*, another widespread "culture-bound syndrome" in Asia, listed in an appendix of the *DSM-IV* (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*), the go-to guide for psychiatric disorders.[9] This "genital retraction syndrome" describes a feeling, linked to an intense fear of death, of the penis retracting into the abdomen. It has produced an abundant corpus of literature in transcultural psychiatry.[10] The term *koro* is of Malay origin and etymologically means "to shrink" or "tortoise" (in fact, this animal's name is slang for penis). Raised to the rank of psychiatric syndrome, *koro* brings together a complex array of disorders commonly found in South Asia, in different variants. Long known in southern China by the name *shook-yang* (Cantonese) or *suo-yang* (Mandarin), this syndrome is thought to be the result of a loss of *yang*, the male principle, following abnormal sexual practices

8. Taking the rumor seriously demands that the researcher's moral responsibility toward his chosen topic of study be taken into account as well, especially when it involves violence and death. The suspension of both value and truth judgments when confronted with the rumor varies in significance according to whom one's target audience is. When, for example, I was invited to talk about genital theft on a Senegalese television program, I deemed it necessary to begin by denying the existence of the phenomenon, before attempting to illuminate the matter from an anthropological perspective, for fear that what I was saying should risk reviving the rumor and unleashing more accusations.

9. A "culture-bound syndrome" is a disorder lacking any identifiable organic cause, manifesting only within a single society (or a cluster of neighboring societies), and therefore appearing to be directly conditioned by cultural representations. A list of the main culture-bound syndromes can be found in Appendix 1 of the *DSM-IV*.

10. On *koro*, see Yap (1964); Jilek and Jilek-Aall (1977); Tseng et al. (1988); Prince (1992); Bartholomew (1994, 1998); Chowdhury (1996); Buckle et al. (2007). On the history of the *koro* syndrome in Western psychiatry, see Crozier (2011).

(masturbation, visiting prostitutes) or a marital dispute. On the island of Hainan, at the southernmost point of the country, *shook-yang* is more associated with a female spirit in the form of a fox. Indeed, the ghosts of the dead are considered not to have penises, which is what prevents them from reincarnating. This female spirit seeks to provide them with one by stealing it from a living person. Young women are sometimes accused of being at the fox-spirit's service, and then beaten to death by the villagers. Fear of the fox-spirit leads to sporadic waves of panic among the islanders. One, for example, was allegedly triggered by the ill omen of a local soothsayer in 1984. In Southeast Asia, *koro* gives rise to veritable collective epidemics that periodically strike Thailand, Indonesia, and Singapore. Often linked to fears of food having been poisoned, these mass panics can suddenly take hold of hundreds, even thousands of individuals. During these panics, many men attach pegs, strings, weights, and even pins to their penis to avoid it retracting at any cost, even though these protective measures occasionally cause serious injuries and mass hospitalizations. In 1967, Singapore descends into panic following a rumor suggesting that pork meat has been contaminated with swine fever, or a vaccine containing female hormones. In this case, it is the Chinese who are most affected, against a background of high tensions between them and the Malay population. In 1976, there are a number of incidents on Thailand's northeastern border, with rumors of Vietnamese refugees poisoning food supplies or contraband tobacco. India is not left untouched either: in 1982, Calcutta, West Bengal, and Assam all flare up in turn, in a climate of tensions between the Indian population and Bangladeshi refugees.

Koro and genital theft syndrome would therefore constitute examples of body dysmorphic disorder, or even panic attacks brought on by fear of castration. Furthermore, the fact that *koro* and genital theft give rise to collective "epidemics" (in contrast to isolated cases of pathological fear of castration among Western sufferers of psychosis) leads some authors to qualify them as collective hysteria, "mass delusion," or yet still "mass psychogenic illness," that is, to revive the old notion of a contagious collective madness. Yet it is worth noting that *koro* and genital theft cannot be attributed to a single psychopathological disorder, their differences outweighing their similarities: penis retraction in Asia versus disappearance in Africa; fear of imminent death in Asia, not so much in Africa; poisoning in Asia versus theft by a third party in Africa; physical protective measures in Asia versus violent retaliation against the suspect in Africa. But above all, if *koro* and genital theft occur in "normal" patients and originate from shared cultural representations (different in Asia and Africa)—as transcultural

psychiatry sometimes acknowledges—, why then do we still talk of psychopathology? It is evident that episodes of panic in Southeast Asia galvanize complex collective representations regarding food, sexual identity, and interethnic relations. Psychiatry would have us isolate a pathological disorder, but finds itself faced with social phenomena and modalities of collective transmission that it is quite unable to account for.[11] From this perspective, our work seeks to demonstrate the singular usefulness of the social sciences—and especially sociocultural anthropology—in making sense of events, such as an extravagant rumor or a savage lynching, that at first glance seem to elude all rational objectivity.

The paradigm of Dan Sperber's "epidemiology of representations" can act as an initial framework within which to analyze the diffusion of genital theft, while avoiding the pitfalls of a pathological approach to the phenomenon (Sperber 1997). Of course, this paradigm still draws its inspiration directly from medical terminology. Yet epidemiology goes beyond the study of infectious diseases alone: it is quite possible to present an epidemiology of diabetes (which is not infectious), or even of baldness (which is not a disease). Stripped of all pathological connotations, epidemiology in its broadest sense consists in describing the dynamics of the distribution in space and time of a phenomenon within a population, and in identifying the causal factors that can explain said distribution. In applying this paradigm to sociocultural events, Sperber sets out to study how and why certain representations spread and entrench themselves within a group. Of all the representations that go through the minds of individuals, only a small fraction are passed on to others, by being transformed by the sender into "public representations" (words, texts, images, etc.), then reinterpreted by the receiver. And only a subfraction of these are communicated repeatedly and spread among the wider group: these are "cultural" representations proper. There is no substantial difference, therefore, between an individual representation and a collective representation, only in how it is spread within the group, which can be accounted for by bringing to light the various factors that may explain it.

This epidemiological paradigm can be applied especially well to rumor, which distinguishes itself precisely by a specific dynamic of propagation: a rapid and intense spread, predominantly by word of mouth, followed just as quickly by

11. In their second article dedicated to genital theft, psychologists Glenn Adams and Vivian Dzokoto (2007) set out in the right direction by interpreting the phenomenon in terms not of a pathological disorder, but of a "cultural construction of reality."

sudden disappearance. The study of a particular rumor gives us the opportunity to put the cultural epidemiology model to the test, which in Sperber's report has the disadvantage of remaining programmatic. Indeed, Sperber sets out his theory in an abstract manner, making do with allusive references to empirical objects. This absence of any detailed case study leads to a somewhat simplified version of the model. Sperber identifies two significant types of explanatory factors to account for the success of a cultural representation: "psychological factors" and "ecological factors." And yet essentially he pays much more attention to the former than the latter, a loose collection that he does not really bother to define. Of course, in applying limits to memorization or categorization, the human mind's universal faculties act as a filter for whichever representations are more liable to spread. Nevertheless, these cognitive faculties only allow us to explain a few very general properties of cultural representations and their distribution, but are still not enough to account for the propagation of a particular representation within a given group. Sperber does acknowledge, however, that his theory is not geared toward ethnographic analysis, aiming instead at a higher level of generality. This orientation fits coherently with his opposition, which he has consistently reaffirmed since the 1970s, between (interpretive) ethnology and (explanatory) anthropology. This separation is untenable, however, from both an intellectual and institutional point of view. An anthropological theory is only of value insofar as it allows for a clear account of precise ethnographic materials.

Therefore, putting together a detailed cultural epidemiology of genital theft means trying to bring to light the various factors that can explain the success of this particular rumor on such a large scale. We must banish to this end the rhetorical oversimplifications of that ad hoc explanation that proposes the phenomenon to be explained as the explanatory cause of the phenomenon itself: that rumor spreads like a viral epidemic precisely because it is inherently "contagious." But why then is this rumor of genital theft so good to think and, above all, so good to tell? Why does it capture the imagination so? What makes it such a gripping story? Going on the theory that stories and incidents of genital theft are conditioned by a very specific environment, we aim to isolate those conditions of possibility that allow for the emergence, and then stabilization, of the rumor. We are interested in the genesis of an "apparently irrational belief" (Sperber 1985), a genesis that, as we shall see, actually comes down to perfectly ordinary mechanisms.

In its most basic expression ("someone shakes the hand of someone else and his penis disappears"), genital theft appears as a simple, highly suggestive, and

unexpected story, one that can therefore easily capture the imagination. Yet in order to avoid a too exclusively mentalist version of cultural epidemiology, it should be emphasized that rumor cannot be reduced to a mere disembodied and decontextualized representation; it is not purely an idea.[12] First of all, the circulation of a rumor depends on the social and material infrastructure of communication; as we shall see, stories of genital theft owe part of their success to their dissemination by mass media. A rumor, moreover, is an utterance in context that involves events, actions, and emotions. This conception of rumor can fall back on historically verified meanings of the term. The word itself probably goes back to a Sanskrit root meaning "he cries out," and a rumor is indeed the clamor, the menacing uproar of a crowd showing their discontent or violent intentions. In a 1274 edict of the Parlement of Paris, rumor designates the *haro!*, or outcry, expected of any citizen witnessing a crime to alert the men-at-arms (Reumaux 1989). Rumor is thus a speech act that should always be considered as both an utterance and an action at the same time. A cultural epidemiology should not therefore be limited to a study of the transmission of representations considered as discrete items, but must instead be able to combine representation, action, and emotion. Indeed, genital theft presupposes belief, but also fear, violence, and crowds. In this sense, it constitutes a social process that transforms as it unfolds: rumors spread by word of mouth, inspire newspaper editorials, manifest themselves in people's real-life experiences, and sometimes lead to irreparable actions. We will thus endeavor to record the many different voices that make up the polyphony of rumor, by following the sequence of transformations and interpretations it undergoes. Genital theft does not come down to a single utterance repeated invariably, but marks a complex "affair": an intricate ensemble of events, actions, emotions, and utterances bound together by chains of cause and effect. We shall stick with the term "rumor" for the sake of convenience, for want of a more appropriate word, while keeping in mind that it does not, in any case, designate a well-defined reality.[13]

One of the most disconcerting questions raised by a cultural epidemiology of genital theft is the spatiotemporal circumstances of its occurrences. Indeed,

12. Mentalist approaches presuppose that culture consists of a mass of representations all stored in the heads of individuals. Yet if the causal chains of culture associate mental representations and public works, there is no reason to favor the former over the latter (or vice versa). See Descombes (1998); and Lenclud (1998), followed by Sperber's response (1998).

13. For a critique on the pseudo-concept of rumor, see Froissart (2002).

instances of it arise in a sporadic rather than continuous manner. Stories of genital theft spread in rapid and localized fashion, and thus advance very clearly like an epidemic, as opposed to other more endemic forms of witchcraft. Even in Nigeria, where the rumor has been most active since the beginning of the 1970s, genital theft gives rise to sudden flare-ups that die down again relatively quickly. Although each of these outbreaks lasts only fleetingly, genital theft is characterized by its episodic recurrence; it appears, disappears, and then reappears over several decades—a distinctive feature that corresponds to what folklorists term a "diving rumor." They are "stories that come around again," as one of my Senegalese interlocutors described it. Furthermore, the emergence, or reemergence, of genital theft, does not appear to be linked to any specific situation, as occurs with crisis rumors that constitute reactions to a particular event (for example, a natural disaster, a coup, a terrorist attack, or a disease, such as the Ebola crisis that struck West Africa in 2014, which itself gave rise to many rumors.) Finally, the rumor's narrative content remains surprisingly consistent as it spreads, in both time and space. This type of cultural transmission challenges classical conceptions of rumors as unstable, temporary phenomena that emerge out of crisis situations. From this perspective, stories of genital theft represent an intermediate medium, somewhere between rumor and legend. As consistent, recurring tales based on stereotypical scenarios that generally transcend local context, legends find themselves inscribed into relatively durable oral traditions, as the works of folklorists have shown. Since the 1970s, researchers into Euro-American folklore have uncovered the existence of a very lively corpus of popular tales that are widely transmitted throughout contemporary urban societies (Dégh 1971; Brunvand 1981). These contemporary legends (also known as urban legends) are mostly anecdotes that showcase the supposed dangers of modern life: those linked to food, new technologies, or urban anonymity, for example. Yet, as we shall see, the genital theft rumor is not unrelated to these urban legends, even though it draws in equal measure on traditional African folklore.[14] Besides, folklorists have highlighted the affinity between rumors and contemporary legends (Mullen 1972; Fine, Campion-Vincent, and Heath 2005), though often with the subsequent qualification that rumors are not traditional, whereas legends are so by nature

14. Comparisons with urban legends allow us to de-exoticize genital theft by demonstrating that certain stories that may seem just as unbelievable also circulate in Europe and North America (and occasionally find themselves picked up by the media as if they were news stories).

("rumor is similar to folklore but usually consists of nontraditional material," according to Alan Dundes [1965: 247]). A rumor, or even a mere triviality, may constitute the seed of a legend. Conversely, a legend can be seen as a "consolidated" rumor. There are, moreover, certain contemporary legends that spread epidemically, just like rumors based on the most pressing current affairs. However, the study of contemporary folklore is too often limited to compiling catalogs of legends, identifying motifs, or drawing up formal typologies, rather than seeking to understand the process of cultural transmission in all its complexity. And yet the study of these intermediate forms of social communication, between rumor and legend, constitutes a unique laboratory in which to observe a tradition in the making, that is, a tradition conceived as an emergent process, rather than as an index of static forms. Neither a stable tradition, nor a simple, fleeting phenomenon removed from the field of "culture" (in Sperber's sense) or "tradition" (in the folklorist sense), stories of genital theft, as with other, similar types of rumor, form part of what I propose to call unstable, or intermittent, traditions.

This intermittent character of the genital theft rumor cannot help but raise a number of questions. Why does it appear or reappear at one given moment over another? Why here and not elsewhere? Once present in one country, it seems that the genital theft rumor has a tendency to spread gradually to neighboring states. But why did it come about in the first place? Why did it originate in the 1970s? And why did it only become so widespread across the continent in the 1990s? The question of the rumor's geographical boundaries is equally problematic—the absence of a phenomenon perhaps being even more difficult to explain than its presence. It appears in sub-Saharan Africa, but not in North Africa. There could be macrocultural reasons for this: the ubiquity of witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa (but also, as we shall see, its focus on sexuality) makes this region the cultural niche of the rumor, which would explain how easily it spreads here. While anthropology is wary—quite rightly—of making generalizations about an entire continent, and usually prefers to base itself on the particularisms of local cultures, the fact that genital theft, following a consistent pattern, encompasses half the African continent does justify our making certain generalizations, on "African witchcraft," for example. Why, though, are only West and Central Africa concerned, to the exclusion of the south and the east? We do find mention of an incident of genital theft in Zimbabwe, despite its being removed from the main area of distribution (Salon.com, November 30, 1999). This geographical exception differs, however, from the usual format of genital theft: it concerns a prostitute taking revenge on a dishonest client who left

without paying. This case therefore relates more to the recurring link between prostitution and witchcraft, rather than to genital theft proper. It is revealing, moreover, that the incident seems to be isolated, and does not give rise to a collective panic as in all the other—more "epidemic"—cases of genital theft. But it is strange that the phenomenon strikes both Congos without spreading further south or east to neighboring countries—Angola or Zambia, for example—, all the more so given that those countries that are concerned do not themselves constitute a culturally homogeneous area. Here, the classic culturalist explanations are found wanting: it is difficult, even impossible, to attribute the existence of a rumor to the presence of a particular cultural trait. Religious denomination does not, for example, constitute a distinguishing trait, for genital theft concerns Muslims just as much as it does Christians and so-called "animists." The limits of the rumor do not seem to reflect the historical carve-up of the great colonial blocs, given that that both English- and French-speaking Africa are equally affected. Short of simply a gap in the data, there is no clear reason as to why the issue does not touch upon all the states of sub-Saharan Africa. Besides, there is nothing to suggest that the area of distribution will not expand with time. The example of the two Congos is proof thereof: situated along the southern limits of this extent, these two countries are struck less frequently and rather later than the central zone. Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was only really hit quite recently, in March–April 2008, after the rumor had struck Nigeria once more in January, and Cameroon in February. In the ensuing months (May–June 2008), the rumor crosses the Congo River and reaches Brazzaville; it seems that until then the Republic of Congo had only seen a brief incident of genital theft in 1999.

I am therefore forced to acknowledge that I will not be able to provide a definitive answer to these difficult questions regarding the geographical limits of the rumor. Could this be because the temporary presence of genital theft in a country depends in fact on unique—or even random— circumstances every time, and that a true explanation is therefore beyond the scope of a general analysis? I do not believe so. Of course, local circumstances undoubtedly facilitate the appearance or reappearance of the rumor in a given location at a given moment. However, the gradual diffusion across national borders, as well as the general consistency of the sequence of events, proves that we cannot reduce genital theft to its local context alone, but must instead account for the phenomenon at a general level. Hence the inadequacy of the few existing works on genital theft, which tend to focus on a single country. Even so, we cannot view the spread of

the rumor from one country to the next on a macro scale alone: the view from above allows us to see that the spatiotemporal distribution of the rumor on a continental scale is not random, but does not reveal its operational processes. Indeed, it is the repetition of the same conditions at the local level that generates the same effect everywhere: this requires us, therefore, to dig down into the details of the circumstances and situations in which incidents of genital theft arise. Our analysis must zoom in and out constantly in order to get a clear picture from both a macro and micro perspective, the big picture and the finer details combined. Though anthropology has not—for a long time now—been able to simply dish out monographs centered on small, and ideally isolated, communities, it must not, in contrast, devolve into great generalizing tracts, skipping over ethnographic description of local situations. One of the main problems facing the discipline today thus comes down to this question of scale. Perhaps more so than all other social phenomena, rumor challenges us to do "ethnography on an awkward scale, neither unambiguously 'local' nor obviously 'global'—but on a scale in between that, somehow, captures their mutual determinations," as the Comaroffs aptly put it (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 282). We must therefore uncover a recurring pattern at the local level that can explain certain characteristics of the phenomenon at the global level. As we can see, putting together an anthropology of rumor allows us at the same time to question the analytical models that the discipline creates to understand sociocultural phenomena. My guiding hypothesis is the following: genital theft can only be made truly comprehensible by isolating the modalities of the particular interactional situation it relies on, and which explain its temporal recurrence and spatial diffusion on a transnational scale. I propose, therefore, to situate genital theft within the framework of a microanalysis of interactions. This approach moves away from the symbolic and functionalist interpretations generally given to rumors. The folklorist approach of urban legends considers rumors as loose utterances subject to scholarly interpretations that are made too often with great remove. Raised to the status of myths ingrained in the collective unconscious, rumor then becomes the subject of a perilous mass psychoanalysis resting on simplistic functionalist interpretations: rumor as a symptom of fear of modernity. In order to avoid these reductive overinterpretations, therefore, it would be better to rely on a meticulous description of what people do and say. By focusing on concrete situations of interaction and speech, this book seeks to provide a pragmatic anthropological study of rumor.[15]

15. On pragmatic approaches in anthropology, see Severi and Bonhomme (2009).

CHAPTER ONE

Sex, Crisis, and Witchcraft

Why does the rumor focus on the genitals? Why is it the penis that disappears? To begin with, it seems quite evident that virility is a particularly sensitive subject; there is no need to lapse into psychoanalysis to understand that the fear of castration evoked by the rumor makes genital theft a gripping story right off the mark. It is revealing, moreover, that the fantasy of genital theft can also be found—though in other modalities—in European witchcraft during the Late Middle Ages and early modern period (Stephens 1998). The sexual organs are, furthermore, a particularly rich "natural symbol" (Douglas 1970b) in sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the realm of witchcraft. The latter constitutes above all a threat to the group's reproduction, and traditionally focuses on sexuality, on male virility as well as female fertility. In this context, the penis represents the metonymic symbol of both the individual's vital potential and that of the wider group. It is understandable then why genital theft is regularly linked to the abduction or murder of children; be it through its young or its genital organs, it is the group's very posterity that is under threat. As a Togolese journalist writes: "It is a fact that, for many years now, around the time of New Year celebrations, mysterious stories are born that fuel popular justice. Last year, it was the story of disappearing penises and breasts. [. . .] This year, child killers are the ones hitting the headlines" (*Le Regard*, November 28, 2006). The victims of genital theft are, moreover, mostly young men (aged between fifteen and

thirty), sometimes even children (nine years old in one case), but never old men. The suspected thieves, for their part, are often older than, or roughly the same age as, their victims (in a dozen cases, the thief is specified as an old man). In this way, it is male youth that feels itself collectively threatened by genital theft. It is no coincidence that it is specifically during the Youth Day parade in Kribi, Cameroon, in February 2009, that two young boys find their genitals missing (*Mutations*, February 18, 2009). Their fellow students then decide to besiege the local police station where the suspects are in custody, in order to "reclaim their schoolmates' penises," as if the latter were their common good.

Genital theft resembles other kinds of occult practices that have been documented on the African continent, with which it shares this focus on the sex organs. It is compared, for example, to "ritual crimes" or "human sacrifices," also known in Central Africa as the witchcraft of "removed parts" (*pièces détachées*).[1] Murders are committed, whereupon the genitals, but also the breasts, tongues, or lips, of the victims (often children, or vulnerable individuals, such as the mentally ill, or albinos) are removed to make fetish-objects meant to bring wealth to their owner, or even to win elections.[2] These magical objects supposedly allow for the direct transformation of vital potential into material wealth or political power. The latter motive explains why ritual crimes are thought to occur above all during election periods, during which time mothers watch over their children anxiously. Many disenchanted Gabonese affirm that the extent of these crimes has increased even more worryingly since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1990, which exacerbated political competition (Minko Mve 2008). These tales of ritual crimes often belong to the fantastical realm of urban legends. Hence the recurring rumors in Gabon that tell of the trunk of a car bearing an official license plate being found full of clitorises; of an icebox being delivered to a prominent political individual, which, as a train is being unloaded in Owendo-Libreville station, sees itself knocked over to reveal a full containment of male

1. Common throughout Africa, the phrase "ritual crime" is borrowed from the fictions of European anti-Semitism. Accusations of ritual crimes against the Jews have been a theme of European Christianity since the twelfth century (cf. the affair of William of Norwich in England in 1144). The legend goes that the Jews murder Christian children in order to use their blood for curative ends, or even to make unleavened bread during Passover (Dundes 1992). It is likely that the transposition of the phrase onto African witchcraft is the work of European missionaries.

2. On ritual crimes in Africa, see, for example, Evans (1992); White (1997); Weiss (1998); Comaroff and Comaroff (1999); Burke (2000); Masquelier (2000).

genitals; of a luxury black car with tinted windows cruising near high schools and picking up young girls, who are found dead some time later; or even of a certain hospital financed by a local person of note that in actual fact is just a death house where sorcerers come to pick up their supplies with impunity.

However, ritual crimes are not always simply the stuff of fantasy. A sinister example in Gabon, the Mba Ntem case, is most likely based on true facts that led to a police investigation and a high-profile trial. Its main protagonist, Mba Ntem, was a *nganga* (healer) belonging to an initiation cult founded by an Equatoguinean and called *Mvoé Ening*, a Fang term with the macabrely ironic meaning of "the tranquil life." In 1988 in Owendo, near Libreville, Mba Ntem reportedly murders several people, before removing their "essential parts" to eat with his acolytes, setting aside the genitals, which, in the killer's own words, are "immediately sent to our 'pope' Essono Mba Filomeno, alias Assili Nssang Mvoe, who lives in Equatorial Guinea," no doubt in order to make fetish-objects (cited in Mary 1999: 264). Upon his arrest, Mba Ntem provides detailed confessions, and even produces some evidence. But it is the photos of mutilated corpses published in *Le Livre blanc des droits humains au Gabon* (Ministère des Droits de l'Homme 2004) that attest to the sinister reality of these crimes, though the true extent of their "ritual" nature is hard to judge. In any case, the matter is deemed serious enough in Gabon to provoke mass protests, and for an "Association for the Fight against Ritual Crimes" to be set up. In 2012, another alleged case of ritual murder (of a young girl) reaches the Gabonese headlines, triggers a moral panic in public opinion, and even shakes the higher echelons of the state (González Díez 2014; Mary and Mebiame Zomo 2015): a senator is publicly accused of having instigated the murder, stripped of parliamentary immunity to answer the charges in a court of law, and imprisoned for several months though ultimately he is acquitted for lack of evidence.

As demonstrated clearly by the historian Florence Bernault (2006) in the cases of Gabon and Congo, while the use of the body and its parts for magical purposes undoubtedly has precolonial origins, this fetishization of the body was reinforced during the colonial era. The prohibition and criminalization of the removal of bones (traditionally used in the making of ancestral reliquaries), tied to the obligatory burial of the dead in public cemeteries, has had the paradoxical effect of encouraging the clandestine use of corpses from outside the family line. Deaths in hospitals, forensic autopsies, or the preservation of corpses in morgues have also wrested traditional control over funerary practices from the local populations, despite their being essential for social reproduction.

These colonial upheavals in the processes for dealing with death thus led to new concerns regarding the body of the deceased being taken by strangers, concerns expressed in the macabre stories of ritual crimes, of removed body parts, or of organ stealing.[3]

In this context, genital theft seems to be, all in all, a form of sorcery that is quite familiar in sub-Saharan Africa—which could explain why it is found exclusively on this part of the continent. Yet genital theft and ritual crimes are not simple equivalents. Indeed, the motives of genital thieves are rarely the same as those behind ritual killings. It is clear to everyone that the latter are employed to make talismans for wealth and power. In contrast, according to popular wisdom, the genital thief does not appear to use the stolen organ for magical ends: no one claims, for example, that the thief robs the victim of his sexual potency in order to enhance his own. In the words of one Nigerian man who had been accused of stealing an individual's penis: "I already have one, what would I do with his?" (AFP, January 31, 2008). In one case, in Ghana, people suggest that stolen penises can equally be used to make *money juju*, talismans that "vomit" money—an interpretation clearly formed around the model of ritual crimes. In one other isolated case, in Cameroon, an account states that "individuals in the pay of some very great practitioners based in Nigeria scour the country to mystically remove people's penises after shaking theirs hands, or just brushing past them. 'They say that the moment your penis vanishes, money is meant to come out of it every time the grand master now in possession of it urinates'" (*Le Messager*, June 11, 2009). But, surprisingly, the whys and wherefores of disappearing sex organs give rise to confused questioning, even though one could simply lean on preexisting interpretations based on witchcraft. Ritual crime and genital theft are thus conceived of locally as two distinct forms of witchcraft: ritual crime involves concrete emasculation by means of a cutting implement, and genital theft involves the magical disappearance of the sex organs; the former necessitates the death of the victim, but not the latter; one has a clear-cut motive, the other does not. The geographical distribution of ritual crimes in Africa, moreover, generally extends beyond that of cases of genital theft, since they concern most of southern and eastern Africa as well. Nevertheless, the fact remains that genital theft

3. In return, Europeans in colonial Africa also worried about what would happen to their remains post mortem: hence the fearful rumors of cannibalism, but also of the desecration of European graves, and the use of human remains as talismans (this was, in any case, one of the reasons for the separation of European and African cemeteries).

threatens the very vitality of the individual, and, by extension, that of the entire community. This constant swing from the individual to the collective, which we will see again in newspaper editorials, explains the intensity of the collective mobilization during incidents of genital theft, and why the crowd reacts with such violent and immediate solidarity, as if it had been itself emasculated.

But it is not only vital potential that is affected by genital theft, but also virility as a basis of male identity. In contrast to ritual crimes, which affect women as much as men, genital theft victims are indeed mostly men (95 percent of the 260 cases where the sex of the victim is specified). Of course, there are still some female victims among them (fourteen documented cases). For instance, in June 2006 in Parakou, Benin, a high school girl about to sit her final exams accuses two old Yoruba tradeswomen of having stolen her vagina at the market after greeting her. Eventually, she gets it back, but "all old." This case corresponds to a typical pattern in accusations of witchcraft that build on intergenerational tensions: old women, out of jealousy, try to rob young women of the fertility of which they themselves are now deprived. In the same city around the same time, a woman accuses a teacher of having stolen her vagina after he stops her to ask a question (*Le Matin*, June 16, 2006). Yet accounts provide very few details about these disappearances of female sex organs. Breasts are as much affected as the genitals themselves; people speak of them vanishing or turning inwards into the victim's chest, following the same model as the stolen or shrunken penis. Given its protrusion, the female chest offers a better equivalent for the penis than do the vagina, labia, or even the clitoris. There is mention, however, of a case involving a stolen clitoris, but also a "sealed" vagina, and one that had been "closed" by the sorcerer, though these last two incidents differ somewhat from a typical "organ stealing" scenario. When witchcraft targets women, it generally affects their reproductive capacities—fertility being an essential facet of female identity in sub-Saharan Africa, as in many other parts of the world. The witch who "gobbles up" children in their mothers' bellies is certainly one of the more lasting images of this type of witchcraft so widespread in Africa. In the few cases of female genital theft, it is impossible to tell if it is fertility being targeted (the ability to bear children), or rather sexuality (the ability to have sexual relations) or the distinct sexual characteristics of the female body.

On the other hand, in cases where the male organ is stolen, which are much more prevalent but often more detailed too, it is clearly the member itself and not only its reproductive function that is being targeted. As well as their penises disappearing or shrinking, victims mention their sudden inability to attain an

erection. This image of the sorcerer who renders men impotent by "killing" their penises is, moreover, widespread across Africa (in Senegal, for instance, this kind of evil spell is called *xala* in Wolof). Sexual impotence is as much at stake here as emasculation. However, sterility is never referred to (generally being thought of as an exclusively female concern). Genital theft therefore threatens virility as the basis of masculine identity above all else. Many authors have highlighted this link between masculinity, virility, and sexual potency in contemporary Africa, as well as the anxieties that inevitably accompany this (Biaya 1997, 2001). As noted by Achille Mbembe (1992: 9), "the postcolony is a world of anxious virility." The vast success of the countless aphrodisiacs and other medications meant to cure impotence sold throughout Africa in markets or by traveling salesmen are a further testament to this. It is no coincidence that, during one incident in Dakar in 1997, it is a peddler of traditional remedies against male impotence who finds himself accused of having stolen a man's penis after shaking his hand to make a sale (*Le Soleil*, July 31, 1997). For his part, Joseph Tonda (2005) refers to "sex-bodies" to describe this anxious sexualization of bodies in Central Africa, which can be seen as much in the seduction techniques of the urban youth as in love magic or stories of sexual witchcraft. And for the Congolese writer Vincent Lombume Kalimasi, "the male member is in a permanent state of erection and yet we are all eunuchs" (quoted in De Boeck and Plissart 2014: 250). In his film *Quartier Mozart* (1992), the Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bekolo sets out precisely this obsession with virility against a backdrop of disappearing penises. In a working-class neighborhood in Yaoundé, an overly curious girl is transformed into a young man by a witch. Montype ("Myguy")—as he is now called—must then prove his masculinity to the other local men. To assert himself as a *chaud gars* or "hot guy," he must succeed in "managing" Samedi (i.e., having sex with her), a young girl who until then has been rebuffing the advances of men. But Montype experiences his new identity in a state of anxiety and lies about his sexual exploits, just as a penis thief is spreading mischief through the neighborhood, and the local gossips are busy mocking the virile pretensions of their men.

For genital theft must ultimately be viewed in the context of relations between the sexes. The rumor does not so much evoke a general crisis of masculinity as a particular form of insecurity: the risk of no longer being able to assert oneself as a man before a woman by displaying one's male member and capacity for an erection. The testimony of one particular man claiming to have had his penis stolen in Kinshasa is telling: "The victim, tears in his eyes, cried

out constantly: 'What will my wife say!'" (*La Tempête des Tropiques*, March 28, 2008). The comments of journalists—themselves mostly men—are often of a similar nature. One Congolese journalist states: "The man is suddenly left like a paper tiger, having lost the instrument of his 'superiority over woman' in this way" (*Forum des As*, April 23, 2008). One of his countrymen adds: "The women, fond of affection and the male touch, felt themselves indirectly concerned, their relations with men hanging in the balance, and utterly bereft at the idea henceforth of having to live with men stripped of their instrument of male power, the scepter of their marital and conjugal authority, in other words, monsters" (*Le Phare*, April 22, 2008). Striking an even more sexist tone, a Sudanese journalist gives his own two cents: "Our women dominate in public services and university classes. [Men] in Sudan today have a right to found an Association for the Rights of Sudanese Men, all that remains of our masculinity are our most prominent biological features, and now someone wants to rob us of them!" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003).

This link between genital theft and the threat to virility leads some to regard the rumor as the direct expression of a crisis of masculine dominance. For them, the growing autonomy of African women calls male power into question, and provokes a fear of castration which translates directly into panicked rumors about genital theft: "With the democratization of society, we are witnessing the emergence of a platform for autonomous women. As soon as a woman speaks, anxiety is born in man. He fears for his sex" (Yannick Jaffré, quoted in Mandel 2008: 204). It is indeed true that the affluence and mobility of businesswomen often grant them an autonomy that calls into question the patriarchal model, and is sometimes seen as a direct threat by their husbands. The best example of these emancipated businesswomen is that of the *Nana Benz* or *Mama Benz* in the Bight of Benin, so called because they can afford the luxury of driving around in a big Mercedes Benz themselves. Moreover, a Yoruba proverb stating that the wife "threatens the husband in the marketplace with a cutlass" evokes very clearly the fear of castration linked to this space controlled by women who are financially independent of their men (Apter 1993: 118). Yoruba witches are even said to be able to "borrow" a man's penis in order to have sex with his wife, or another woman, who then become sterile. They then restore the stolen penis to its owner, who nonetheless risks remaining impotent (Prince 1961: 798). In spite of this, it does not seem that the emergence of the genital theft rumor is directly tied to the threat of female emancipation looming over male dominance. Even though the transformation of gender relations is undoubtedly one part of

the backdrop against which the rumor originally emerged, genital theft is not the direct expression of a hypothetical "war of the sexes" that would open up the stage to a cast of formidable castratrices. On the contrary, the wives themselves appear quite affected by the disappearance of their husbands' penises: "[The victim's wife] was weeping her eyes out, adding to her husband's cries of distress, while he begged the supposed penis thief to give him back his member in front of a crowd of idle onlookers, who stood half astonished, half amused" (*L'Avenir*, April 22, 2008). But it is the pattern of the accusations in particular that contradicts this interpretation of the rumor. While the victims are essentially male, the alleged thieves are themselves much more often men than women (94 percent of the 193 cases where the thief's sex is specified). The sexual distribution of the accusations is therefore well defined: 93 percent of all accusations are by a man against another man, versus just 4 percent against a woman (for a total of 222 accusations, since the same person can be accused several times).[4] And with regard to the few female accusations, five are against a man by a woman, and just one against a woman by another woman. Men therefore accuse one another in 96 percent of cases. But if a crisis of male dominance were truly the correct explanation, men's accusations would be targeted much more at women. In a similar vein, some link the emergence of genital theft incidents to the crisis of sexuality cause by the AIDS epidemic. A play by the Chadian playwright Nocky Djedanoum entitled *Le Sextirpateur* seizes on the rumor of genital theft and makes of it a parable for the disease: "And what if the genital thief was nothing more than the AIDS virus?" We know, however, that the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa comes mostly from heterosexual cross-infection. If this itself were a satisfactory explanation of the rumor, then again we would see far more accusations directed at women by men. Ultimately, we cannot claim that genital theft directly reflects male fears about the emancipation of women or the threat of AIDS (except to suggest that the accusations represent an unconscious displacement—but this is unverifiable and therefore anyone's guess). At the very most, they may be seen as exacerbating background factors.

In contrast, there are other rumors that share a common thread with genital theft, and that can be interpreted as the expression of a crisis of masculine dominance with regard to the growing autonomy of women. Such is the case

4. These statistics are corroborated by those of Dzokoto and Adams (2005) from the casework on incidents of genital theft in Ghana in January 1997: 86 percent of the victims and 92 percent of the alleged thieves are men.

with rumors of female rapists, which have circulated in Zimbabwe since the late 2000s (but also in South Africa in 2015). Women traveling in cars are said to drug male hitchhikers after picking them up. In a semi-conscious state, sometimes threatened at gunpoint, the victims are allegedly forced to have sex with the women, for the latter to collect their semen in the used condoms. The semen is subsequently used in the framework of occult practices intended to increase personal wealth (which leads the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association to denounce the practice as a form of witchcraft). These semen thieves go around in groups of two or three, and are sometimes joined by male accomplices, which means that they are often referred to in terms of gangs or syndicates. Between 2009 and 2016, a few dozen cases are reported in the media, detailed statements are taken from the victims, and formal complaints are lodged with the police.[5] In October 2011, one case takes over the headlines. Three women (and a man, the brother of one of them) are stopped and searched at a routine police checkpoint. More than thirty used condoms, several of which are filled with semen, are reportedly found in the trunk of their car. The gang is suspected of having abused many men to rob them of their semen. The women are arrested, put in jail, only to be freed under caution and finally acquitted almost a year later for lack of evidence. The arrest of alleged female rapists and the media coverage of the story sets the rumor back in motion unabated, with most of the documented cases emerging after 2011. The rumor even inspires a film, entitled *Sinners?*, released in Zimbabwe in 2013.

The stories of semen thieves share many characteristics with genital theft (beside their sexual subject matter). The thieves are always strangers (a crucial component of genital theft, as we shall see in the next chapter). In the case of female rapists, it is said that the women cannot take their own partners' semen, since the use of semen to occult ends is meant to expose the man to side-effects (impotence or madness). Hence, they rape strangers. It is worth noting, moreover, that these rapes always occur in hitchhiking scenarios, the figure of the hitchhiker being a recurring motif in North American and European urban legends (Brunvand 1981). Hitchhiking engenders a close-quarters situation with a perfect stranger within an enclosed space, a prime setting for an attack.

5. For an overview of how the matter is handled in the press, see *The Herald* (July 12, 2011; October 12, 2011; January 4, 2012; March 15, 2012; May 21, 2012; October 16, 2012; December 26, 2012; April 3, 2013; August 12, 2013; September 10, 2015); *The Sunday Mail* (March 27, 2011); *New Zimbabwe* (October 16, 2011); *Times Live* (March 22, 2012); *News Day* (June 4, 2015).

The rumor of female rapists leads to a warning being issued against hitchhiking, just as genital theft brings with it warnings about being approached in the street by strangers (as we shall see in chapter 5). In 2012, a spokesman for the Zimbabwean national police advises: "These cases occurred mostly when the victims were hitchhiking and boarded private vehicles. We encourage people to use public transport" (*Times Live*, March 22, 2012).

On the other hand, stories about semen thieves differ from genital theft with regard to the gendered pattern of accusations: the victims are always men, the guilty parties always women. Furthermore, the latter are often young, attractive, well-off, and independent. It is highlighted, for example, that the three women arrested in 2011 are well dressed and known to frequent nightclubs and lead flashy lives. They are also reputed to be prostitutes.[6] The car in which the female rapists travel is a sign of wealth (it is often mentioned that they drive a luxury vehicle), but also of mobility. The figure of the emancipated woman who moves around freely is in stark contrast to her male victims, who are forced to hitchhike. The rumor lays the scene for an inversion of gender relations, and the fantasy of the female rapist brings this inversion full circle, sexual violence against women being the most brutal expression of male dominance. "Now, men fear women. They said: 'we can't go with you because we don't trust you'," explains one young man interviewed by the press on the subject of female rapists (*Times Live*, March 22, 2012). Another states: "We are shocked with what is happening in our society, where men are now being sexually abused by women. It seems now that the tables have turned" (*The Herald*, October 12, 2011). Some Zimbabwean feminists speak out publicly about the outrage caused by the so-called female rapists, when attacks on women, far more real and much more commonplace, go disproportionately unreported.

Since genital theft is for the most part very much an affair between men, contrary to stories about so-called female rapists, one could wonder if there exists a link between the rumor and male homosexuality. In this book's original edition, I bluntly discarded this hypothesis by remarking that there is never any allusion—explicit or implicit—to homosexuality, either in the personal testimonies of those involved in cases of genital theft accusations, or in the numerous

6. In this region of southern Africa, prostitutes are seemingly often suspected of witchcraft, a sign of the anxiety they provoke in men. It is worth remembering that the only case of genital theft documented in Zimbabwe concerns a prostitute taking revenge on a dishonest client who had left without paying.

comments and interpretations they elicit. However, a colleague of mine, Arnaud Esquerré, aptly pointed out that the most typical scenario of genital theft is not dissimilar to a homosexual pick-up gone wrong. As will be shown in more detail in the next chapter, this is a meeting in a public space between two strangers, generally involving touching and insistent glances. We can even point to a singular case of accusation in Kinshasa in 2008 wherein the victim is relieving himself discreetly in the street, only to have his penis stolen by a stranger who appears suddenly and starts urinating alongside him (*La Tempête des Tropiques*, March 28, 2008)—a situation reminiscent of homosexual encounters in public restrooms (Humphreys 1975). Furthermore, the brutal backlash against the genital thief who touches his victim can be compared to the violence that homosexuals are subjected to when they try to pick up men who rebuff their advances and attack them instead (in the context of the significant stigmatization of homosexuality in many African countries). While this interpretation of genital theft may seem plausible, I do not believe that it fits well with the interactions particular to homosexual pick-ups in most African countries (as opposed to those in Europe or North America). As Christophe Broqua (2010: 44) remarked, in Mali, for example,

> social relations are structured according to the double criteria of age and gender, leading to a very strong homosociality. The strength of relationships formed between young contemporaries especially is expressed by great bodily proximity, holding hands, sitting on top of one another, hugging, etc.; gestures that, in France, would automatically take on erotic connotations. Conversely, in Bamako, this physical proximity tends more to de-eroticize relations between men, that is, they make the likelihood of homoerotic desire, and thus the line between the sexual and the non-sexual, even further removed. The absence of any sexual meaning tied to physical contact between men demonstrates that the possibility of homosexual subtext does not loom over homosocial relations as much as it does in the French context.

He goes on: "anonymity between men conducting homosexual practices is very rare, in contrast to European or American cities" (ibid.: 53). Neither physical contact between men, nor anonymous promiscuity, has specifically homosexual connotations therefore, contrary to what a rapidly formed analogy taken in a Euro-American context might lead one to believe. An interpretation of genital theft in terms of unsuccessful homosexual encounters thus ultimately lacks validity.

Another element helps us to understand the focus of the rumor on the male sex organs. As anthropology has long shown, masculinity is not based on the possession of male sex organs alone. It is above all a social construct. In many African societies, this masculinity comes—or at least came—about through initiation. This consists in the ritual death of boys still attached to the maternal and feminine world, with the aim of making them reborn as men. Contemporary African societies are, however, witnessing an erosion of initiation practices, particularly in urban spaces. In some cases, initiation has disappeared altogether, through the combined impact of urban modernity and monotheistic religions. But even when this is not the case, male initiation is often not enough to become a man and be recognized as such by one's peers. In Gabon, for example, where initiation traditions are in fact still quite prevalent, male initiations are increasingly giving way to healing rituals, whose primary function is not to make men, but to cure individuals of the ills that afflict them. The deregulation of the realm of initiation goes hand in hand therefore with the deregulation of traditional norms that once governed masculinity. In contemporary urban Africa, the social construct of masculinity, no longer regulated by initiation, now falls back solely on sexual potency and social success, two themes that are intimately connected.[7] "Big men"—and politicians in particular—are meant to set themselves apart through exuberant sexuality (Toulabor 1981: 59–64; Mbembe 1992: 6–9). Economic success and political power are measured in terms of corpulence, but also by the number of spouses (where polygamy is legal), and even more so by the number of mistresses, who in Central Africa are referred to as one's "second office."

Conversely, the threat of failure is associated with a fear of impotence. As the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf (2003: 10) notes with reference to the genital theft rumor specifically, "the penis seems to bear (in the literal and figurative sense) the economic and social dream of success and the nightmares of failure." For his part, one Senegalese psychologist tells the press that "this gory psychosis can be explained by the existence of a 'fear of castration' inherent in each individual, and by the loss of economic power in Africa" (*Sud-Ouest*, August 2, 1997). Indeed, accusations of genital theft, among both victims and accused, concern the marginalized urban youth hardest hit by the serious socioeconomic crisis resulting from the policies of structural adjustment imposed by the IMF since the 1980s. Those who lose their genitals are the "social cadets" (Bayart

7. In basic terms, social success can be taken to mean the ability to form a home and support a family, which in town requires a regular source of income.

[1979] 2009), the social bottom-feeders, reduced to struggling along day to day without a stable job, and neither marrying nor having a family as a result. These men regard this failure as their masculinity—and, very much directly, their virility—being called into question. In Senegal, they are referred to as *débrouillards*, or *góorgóorlu* in Wolof. The word comes from the term *góor*, "man," and the suffix *-lu*, which means "pretending to do, to do one's best to." The *góorgóorlu* are thus those who try hard to be men, but who struggle to assert themselves as such on the basis of their inability to succeed socially. In this context, accusations of genital theft bear witness to how difficult it can be in large African cities to assert oneself as a "capable man," according to the common expression to denote the head of a family able to support his wife (a valuable wax loincloth has even been dubbed "my husband is capable" in French-speaking African countries). The crisis at the heart of genital theft is not therefore so much a questioning of masculine norms as it is a failure on behalf of a significant part of the male population to meet these standards and expectations. As Margrethe Silberschmidt (2004: 244) remarks, with regard to East Africa (though her view can easily be transposed onto West and Central Africa), "pursuing masculinity is therefore an exposure to vulnerability." This situation leads to a generalized form of competition among the men at the bottom of the social heap that is conducive to all manner of violence. This is the male equivalent to matrimonial competition between women, as studied, for example, by Jacinthe Mazzochetti (2010) in Burkina Faso. In the case of women, this competition triggers a sexual status struggle that creates a "double bind"—to be a good mistress or a good wife. For men, the competition between social cadets to distinguish themselves as capable translates, among other things, into accusations of genital theft and the cycle of violence that accompanies these. Moreover, we could see in these violent reprisals against alleged genital thieves an attempt to reaffirm some sort of aggressive virility (even though women sometimes also take part in the lynchings). Anonymous competition between social cadets leads to nothing more than violence against all by all. Everybody loses: some have their genitals stolen, others are lynched. This is well illustrated in a cartoon strip published in a Senegalese newspaper at the time of the rumor's first appearance in the country (*Le Cafard libéré*, August 1997). In the first plate, Góorgóorlu (a recurring character depicting a working-class city dweller who strives to earn his family's daily expense) has his penis stolen after shaking hands with a stranger. The next plate shows him looking for his penis; he shakes a stranger's hand to ask for help, is himself accused of being a genital thief, and ends up being attacked by a mob.

The genital theft rumor ultimately seems to be a crystalizing point for multiple phenomena: the focus of witchcraft on sexuality, coupled with a fetishization of the body and the sexual organs; the profound socioeconomic crisis in the wake of structural adjustment policies; and a crisis of masculinity wherein a large swath of the male population find themselves incapable of being recognized as capable men. The combination of these factors creates a climate of anxious virility, a breeding ground for accusations of genital theft. Anonymous encounters in urban spaces—the scenario out of which these accusations emerge, as we shall see—represent a friction zone in which a generalized, sometimes violent, competitiveness manifests between social cadets striving to affirm their masculinity.

CHAPTER TWO

Strangers in Town

One of the most striking characteristics of genital theft is that it is an urban phenomenon (in 98 percent of the cases at our disposal). There are only three documented exceptions. The first two of these instances come from large villages, in densely populated areas, one in northern Ghana (Mather 2005), the other in Gambia (*The Daily Observer*, November 17, 2003). The third concerns a village of two thousand inhabitants in the far north of the Central African Republic, where a passing traveler is accused of having stolen the penises of two villagers after shaking hands with them in 2010; he is executed a few days later by armed rebels who control the region (Lombard 2013). It seems that this specific urban localization is not simply the result of bias linked to the provenance of these sources (in that the media pay more attention to urban occurrences). During the events of 1990 in Nigeria, the rumor strikes Lagos first, before jumping to Ibadan and other cities across the country, passing over rural areas (Ilechukwu 1992: 96). It can be no coincidence, moreover, that the home of genital theft is to be found in Nigeria, the most populated country with the oldest history of urbanization in black Africa, and the highest concentration of cities (Mabogunje 1968). In the 1990s, twenty of the forty largest cities in sub-Saharan Africa were in Nigeria. And Lagos is its biggest megalopolis, with an urban population of more than ten million. Overpopulation is a serious problem here, particularly with regard to security, giving Lagos its unfortunate reputation

as the most dangerous city in Africa, even the world (Osaghae et al. 1994). Yet Africa had already long been home to significant urban centers: Yoruba and Hausa cities in contemporary Nigeria, for example, date back to between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. And since the very beginnings of European colonization, the continent has been shaped by the development of great cities bustling with significant populations of migrant workers of diverse origins. But urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa only takes off after World War II, before truly exploding in the 1960s, namely, just before the first instances of genital theft at the very beginning of the 1970s.[1] This runaway process of urbanization undoubtedly favors the emergence of the rumor.

Genital theft appears to be intimately connected with African metropolises, spaces of insecurity and violence (Pérouse de Montclos 2002). Adam Ashforth (2005) has clearly highlighted the link between cities, violence, and witchcraft. Witchcraft represents one medium of a multifaceted urban violence, creating a "spiritual insecurity," as the author calls it. Faced with the erosion of traditional solidarities, the structural weakness of many African states cannot ensure the security of their urban dwellers. This situation, which Pierre-Joseph Laurent (2003: 271–79) dubs "insecure modernity," fosters all sorts of suspicions of witchcraft in dealing with ordinary life: everyone lives in fear of the other. This climate of generalized mistrust, which can descend into violence at any moment, corresponds well to situations in which instances of genital theft arise. From this point of view, the "crisis of witchcraft" in contemporary urban Africa (to borrow another of Laurent's terms) is a product of anomie, a disintegration of the norms governing social order. Indeed, genital theft constitutes an unprecedented type of occult attack that provokes a violent reaction, which itself lies outside the traditional modalities of reactions to witchcraft. However, using social anomie to explain new forms of witchcraft is not entirely satisfactory, given its overly functionalist overtones. Mary Douglas (1970a) has long demonstrated the aporia of functionalist approaches that seek to oppose (without really explaining why) a controlled form of witchcraft as an instrument of stability in

1. The rate of urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa grew from 2.5 percent in 1920 to 37 percent in 2014 (World Bank). There are, however, significant differences between countries like Niger and Burkina Faso (18 percent and 29 percent respectively) and others, such as Congo and Gabon (65 percent and 87 percent respectively), and this only with regard to countries affected by genital theft. On urbanization in Africa, see Peil (1981); Coquery-Vidrovitch (1988); Vennetier (1991); Hugon and Pourtier (1993).

traditional societies, and a dysfunctional form of witchcraft as a symptom of a society in crisis. It would be wrong to see genital theft and its associated violence as a simple symptom of urban anomie; a reversion to the old notion of cities being responsible for all the ills of modernity would be an overly simplistic explanation of the rumor.

While cities represent the rumor's ecological niche, this alone is not enough to explain it. Upon examination, it can be seen that incidents of genital theft always occur in public places, or at least in open spaces or thoroughfares (as opposed to domestic spaces). Most of the time, they take place in the street (in 55 percent of cases where the location is specified), and also often in crowded, congested spaces. A mosque at prayer time plays host to one episode in Senegal (*L'Observateur*, January 23, 2008), while one Cameroonian has his penis stolen in the middle of a political gathering in Bafoussam (*Le Messager*, September 29, 2004). But the most cited locations are markets, the overcrowded nerve centers of African cities, as well as in shared taxis, where passengers regularly cram together (the former are mentioned in 17 percent of cases, the latter in 12 percent). The first instances of genital theft in Lagos in 1975 occur in the marketplaces of two densely crowded neighborhoods whose populations are made up of recent arrivals to the city following a rural exodus (Ilechukwu 1988: 311). Marketplaces in Africa are notoriously dangerous places, moreover, where witchcraft, especially by women, is prevalent (Masquelier 1993; Bastian 1998). This explains why the few women accused of genital theft are mostly market traders. The timings of genital theft incidents are as striking as their locations: they always occur in full daylight and never at night. As strange as this seems, genital theft is an exclusively diurnal form of witchcraft. The identities of its protagonists are similarly consistent: it almost always relates to strangers with no prior acquaintance (97 percent of the 203 cases where the identities are specified). As one distraught Congolese man cries out, unable to comprehend why the thief should have selected him, "I had no history with my tormentor!" (*La Tempête des Tropiques*, March 28, 2008). And in the three sole instances of genital theft in a village setting, where people are more commonly acquainted, the alleged thief again happens to be a stranger passing through. In all our casework, we find only four exceptions where the thief and the victim are previously known to one another: in one case, it is the victim's "cousin"; in another the "Nigerian friend" of a Cameroonian; and in the other two an "acquaintance," with no further specification given. In the many incidents that occur in a residential area, as opposed to on a public avenue, a marketplace, or on

public transport, the victim almost always lives locally, whereas the accused is a passing stranger. Local identity is a determining factor in the concentration of suspicions (and also explains the swift and violent mobilization of the neighborhood against the suspect). A genital thief is, above all, someone who is not "from here," a stranger to the neighborhood. According to Glenn Adams and Vivian Dzokoto (2007: 87), social status does not, on the other hand, seem to be an important factor: in the case of Ghana, we find a shoeshine boy as well as a businesswoman among the alleged thieves. Although, in the cases I have documented, the suspects include a politician, an academic, a civil servant, a journalist, and two policemen, those accused generally seem to belong more to the lower classes rather than the other way around; this is also true in other cases of witchcraft, which stigmatize the marginalized and the weakest within a group (the latter are often publicly accused and punished, while elites are simply suspected, without being openly confronted). The social disparity in urban means of conveyance serves to explain this to some extent. Members of the wealthier classes have their own cars, which makes them less susceptible to accusations of genital theft in the street or on public transport. In contrast, the peddler, who spends his days going around town on foot and approaching strangers to sell them his wares, is much more exposed; and so it is no surprise that several such individuals number among the suspected thieves.

In short, genital theft involves an interaction between strangers in a public urban space. In this sense, it is intimately connected with urban sociality, a particular form of sociality that a century of urban ethnography, dating back to Georg Simmel and the Chicago school, has allowed us to describe.[2] As Louis Wirth wrote as far back as 1938 in "Urbanism as a way of life," anonymity and impersonality are two essential characteristics of big city life. In contrast to the mutual acquaintanceship found in rural areas, in urban life there is vast scope for potential meetings between strangers. Networks of mutual acquaintance do of course play a determining role in towns, especially with regard to relations between neighbors at the local level. But anonymous, impersonal interactions in the corridors of public space still remain the most specifically urban register. The city dweller is, above all, one who moves along the street absorbed in a crowd of strangers. This type of relation to others is often described in purely negative terms, including in sociological literature: the image of the disconnected city dweller who only engages with his or her peers on an aloof, superficial level.

2. For a classic summary work of urban anthropology, see Hannerz (1980).

This trope of urban atomization arises out of an idealized representation of the solidarity found among rural communities.[3] Urban sociality is not, however, a deficient form of sociality; rather it is a means in itself of regulating how one relates to others. As Georg Simmel ([1903] 1950b: 416) once explained, urban life demands a certain indifference to others, "without which this mode of life could not at all be led," for we would otherwise be exposed to too many encounters. From this perspective, reserve represents the "elemental form of socialization" peculiar to the big city, as demonstrated so pertinently by urban traffic.

"Traffic relationships" constitute a specific type of engagement based on minimal interaction in the form of a simple copresence—individuals happen to be in the same space without necessarily paying heed to one another. This "unfocused interaction" (to employ a key concept of Erving Goffman's urban ethnography) consists in minimal acknowledgment of others in the absence of a shared center of attention (Goffman 1963). Strategies for avoiding and preventing interaction allow one to treat strangers as "nonpersons," as if they were socially absent, despite being physically present (ibid.: 83–88). These codes of conduct, which are embodied in broadly unconscious and mechanical routines, ensure the "regulation of social distance" between strangers, according to rules that vary greatly depending on the culture and, therein, the situation (location, people concerned, etc.). This aspect of urban life has been closely studied in the proxemics of Edward T. Hall (1966). In instances of unsought overproximity, strategies to neutralize the presence of others are enacted in order to keep one's distance, even in situations of physical contact (for example, in public transport during rush hour in big cities): avoiding eye contact, standing back-to-back rather than face-to-face, etc. Traffic relations allow us to deal with these collisions and other forms of threat to our person, to our territory, and to our personal space. Ultimately, urban traffic continuously exposes individuals to the hazards, uncertainties, and dangers associated with meetings—whether voluntary or not—between strangers.

This is precisely what is at play in instances of genital theft. These are a dramatic illustration of the danger of anonymous interactions, all the more uncertain for the fact that the intentions of others, and the extent to which the

3. By way of an inverted value judgment, there are also authors who defend the freedom of urban anonymity, in contrast to the oppressive social control found within small communities (Pétonnet 1987). There is, moreover, a German proverb to support this: "*Stadluft macht frei*."

latter should be trusted, remain unclear. It underlines the potential danger of a certain type of situation specific to urban public space: contact with a stranger that may turn out for the worse. In this sense, genital theft is nothing more than the witchcraft of urban traffic. This hypothesis is confirmed by the precise circumstances surrounding those encounters interpreted as genital theft by the protagonists themselves. All of these require contact between the two strangers: "the shrinkers cannot operate at a distance" (Afrik.com, March 29, 2001). This contact is most frequently physical, but can also sometimes be simply visual or verbal.[4] A one-to-one encounter, or at least close proximity, is a prerequisite. In several cases, the theft transpires upon contact with the stranger's hand as he requests a cigarette or a light from his victim. Still more frequently, the disappearance of the penis occurs following accidental physical contact in a crowd, or in a shared vehicle (as cited in 30 percent of 151 cases). In April 2001 in Libreville, a sixteen-year-old brushes past a Nigerian and experiences an electric shock to the pelvis, whereupon he thinks he hears the man ask him, "Did you feel that?" He suddenly feels his penis shrinking and sounds the alarm. The passers-by set upon the alleged thief, who ultimately confesses (*L'Union*, April 13, 2001: 1). In West Africa, the suspected thieves are more often than not Hausa, traditionally clad in long, billowing boubous. These inevitably brush against strangers in the street, who subsequently accuse their wearers of making their genitals disappear. This unexpected contact is seen as an aggression. What was until then merely copresence between two passers-by is suddenly perceived by the victim as a purposeful interaction: he touched me, therefore he must want something from me, even to hurt me. Studies have shown that physical contact by a stranger can often be felt as an attack on one's person (M. L. Knapp and Hall 1992: 297–331). The numerous disappearances of penises that occur on public transport fall within the same interactional framework: it is the forced convergence of strangers in the same space that causes the unease behind each incident. The fear of contact triggered by the rumor is so potent that sometimes even the authorities themselves are reluctant to get involved; police officers have also been known to lose their members while apprehending a suspect (*Le Potentiel*, April 17, 2008).

In addition to physical contact, exchanging glances is regularly listed among the circumstances of genital theft. In one case, an insistent look is the exclusive

4. In the rural French witchcraft of the 1970s, bewitchment also required direct or indirect contact with the victim: a shake of the hand, a glance, a verbal address (Favret-Saada 1980: 111–17).

modality of the interaction: June 14, 2006 in Parakou, Benin, a young man stares at a girl as he passes by in the street; she immediately begins to cry out that the stranger has just robbed her of her vagina; the man is set upon straight away by the population of the neighborhood, and dies a few hours later in hospital (*Le Matin*, June 16, 2006). Eye contact usually serves as a means of opening up channels of communication, and plays a decisive role in initiating each interaction; before all other forms of communication, eye contact is generally required (Exline 1974). Exchanging looks expresses a mutual intention to engage with the other in a more substantial form of interaction. However, a glance deemed too intent, especially from a stranger, can in turn create unease or irritation, being perceived as a sign of aggression or domination, as in the preceding example: the young man's attempt to catch the girl's eye was interpreted as a sign of hostility, or occult attack. Genital theft is not, moreover, the only rumor where an exchange of glances between strangers in the urban space arouses mistrust. A somewhat similar rumor circulates in Senegal in 1990 (a few years before rumors of genital theft first reach the country): an old lady is said to be attacking people in the streets, savagely biting their necks. She is nicknamed Mère Matété (from *màttat*, "to bite" in Wolof). Several women accused of being the "biting mammy" are assaulted, simply because they are old, have long teeth, or are said to stare strangely at passers-by. Just like genital thieves, the biting mammy is an anonymous figure, and, consequently, incidents occur on occasions of mundane contact between complete strangers.

As well as looks, verbal address is also given as the exclusive modality of genital theft in 9 percent of cases. The most frequently mentioned situation involves a stranger asking someone in the street for information, or the time. In September 2004, a Nigerian official passing through Kano State is lynched and killed by an enraged crowd, who accuse him of having stolen the penis of a man whom he had asked for directions (AFP, September 30, 2004). This modality of genital theft can be compared to another rumor that circulates in Ghana during the 1960s: strangers are allegedly using magic to make the watches of passers-by vanish as they ask them for the time (Sackey 1997: 116). The link between the stolen object and the interaction is more direct in this scenario than in cases of genital theft, but the crime proves to be rather more benign. This undoubtedly explains this rumor's lesser success; a rumor's cultural success can be measured in proportion to the emotions it provokes. At times, encounters with a stranger involve a more substantial form of discussion. In March 2006, in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, a young man accuses a pastor of stealing his genitals

after having stopped him in the street to preach him the Gospel (*L'Observateur Paalga*, March 30, 2006). Under the same circumstances in April 2001 in Nigeria, eight evangelicals going door-to-door proselytizing in Ilesa are burned alive (BBC News, April 12, 2001). It is possible that preexisting tensions between religious groups played an equal part in triggering these incidents. In any case, genital theft often occurs during a commercial transaction, in a store or at a market, or even in a taxi while paying the fare. Verbal exchange is thus generally reinforced by physical contact as money changes hands. "We were haggling over the price of an item, when suddenly I couldn't feel my privates anymore. So I warned those around me and they threatened to lynch him. Faced with these threats, he liberated my private parts" (*Panapress*, March 22, 2007). So recounts a Nigerian trader, alleged genital theft victim in Niamey, in March 2007. The handshake that usually concludes a business deal is cited several times as the triggering factor.

The most common scenario in instances of genital theft involves a greeting (in 54 percent of cases), and more specifically a handshake (in 49 percent of cases); an individual realizes that his organs have disappeared after having been greeted by a perfect stranger. On November 25, 2004, in Bamako, Mali, a journalist becomes the victim of genital theft after greeting a stranger who has approached him to ask if he knows a certain Seydou Traoré, but without stating his own identity (*Le Soir de Bamako*, November 26, 2004). "It was a man I didn't know who shrank my penis after shaking my hand, which he did politely while asking me for the time," recounts one Gabonese victim of a theft in Port-Gentil in October 2005 (AFP, October 17, 2005). The same scenario occurs in February 2009, in Kribi, Cameroon: "I was walking along, I saw this man put out his hand to shake mine. I didn't know him, but being Cameroonian, I took it" (*Le Messager*, February 12, 2009). In January 2010, in Rufisque, Senegal, one peddler shakes the hand of a man he has just met, after asking him the address of an acquaintance he would like to call on. Instantly, the man accuses him of having shrunk his penis. He calls out to a neighbor for help, and together they beat up the wretched peddler. Soon, a crowd gathers around them, and the victim only avoids being lynched thanks to the intervention of an elderly local, who manages to step in, sheltering the victim inside a nearby house until the police arrive (*Walf Grand-Place*, January 16, 2010). Another incident in 2011, in a district of Bamako, provides a good demonstration of how suspicions arise (*22 Septembre*, January 6, 2011). A man, accompanied by a young woman, is stopped by a stranger, who asks the way to the nearest *dibiterie* (a type of food

stall selling grilled meat), before shaking his hand by way of thanks. No sooner is this done than this man reportedly reaches into his pocket to remove something that he puts in his mouth. This gesture seems suspicious to the young woman, who warns her companion that he should be wary of shaking hands with strangers, because genital thieves are said to be in town. The man then notices that his penis is missing, and accuses the stranger. The latter is dragged to the police station, where he denies the claims made against him. But his pockets are emptied to reveal a dried chicken foot, a black powder, and a small piece of paper covered in Qur'anic verses (in all likelihood the ingredients for an amulet from a local marabout). All this is suspicious enough in the eyes of the police officers present to warrant his being remanded in custody while an investigation is opened. It is these kinds of tragic stories of greetings that capture the imagination most vividly; genital theft becomes seared in the collective memory as the witchcraft of handshakes between strangers. The lexicometric analysis of our corpus of newspaper articles confirms that the word "hand" has one of the highest rates of occurrence, along with "penis" (see Wordclouds in Appendix).[5] It is no coincidence when one considers the importance of greetings in Africa.[6] In West Africa in particular, greetings are often prolonged and involve the repetition of various stereotypical phatic utterances, as well as an exchange of more substantial pieces of information relating to the interlocutors and their entourage. Greetings represent an "access ritual": they function as a ritualization of the opening of channels of communication, and the start of an interaction.[7] They allow for the expression of mutual attention, as well as the reciprocal identification of the parties in question: personal identification based on biographical information where possible, but also categorical identification according to various social clues, such as status, gender, or age (Schiffrin 1977). Greetings underpin an entire system of attitudes that corresponds to the respective statuses of the protagonists. Symmetrical greetings express equality and solidarity between the two, whereas asymmetric greetings denote inequality and deference. Certain interactional contrasts allow us to see this opposition

5. The most frequent words in our corpus are: penis, man, police, hand, mob, victim, accuse, report, snatch, and disappear. The corpus in French gives similar results: *sexe*, *victime*, *homme*, *jeune*, *police*, *main*, *prendre*, *voleur*, *foule*, *disparaître*, *accuser*, *vol*.

6. On greetings in African societies, see, for example, Goody (1972); Irvine (1974); Collett (1983); Morton (1988); Akindele (1990); Nwoye (1993).

7. On the importance of greetings in social encounters, see Goffman (1971: 62–94); Firth (1972); Schiffrin (1974); P. M. Hall and Spencer Hall (1983); Conein (1989).

more clearly. Among the Mossi of Burkina Faso, for example, greetings between equals involve eye contact and a handshake, whereas asymmetric greetings are characterized by avoiding the other's gaze and a low bow, or even crouch, by the person of lower rank (Collett 1983).

Greetings serve to stabilize interpersonal relationships within a group, as well as make them more predictable; they "ritually regularize the risks and opportunities face-to-face talk provides" (Goffman 1981: 19). In this regard, greetings between strangers are more uncertain. Ibrahim Ag Youssouf, Allen Grimshaw, and Charles Bird (1976) have shown, for example, that among the Tuareg, greetings in the middle of the desert are particularly precarious, since encounters between strangers in a hostile environment always carry a potential danger. Travelers, who can usually spot one another from a great distance away, must take care to demonstrate clearly their peaceful intentions before actually coming into contact. Conversely, greetings in camps are much more routine and relaxed, for the traveler generally knows whom he is dealing with. On a more general level, greetings between strangers can prove problematic, inasmuch as any greeting is in itself a relatively binding demand; an explicit refusal bears a significant cost—to ignore the extended hand constitutes a grave offense. To greet someone may threaten the interlocutor's "face," in that it forces him or her to return the greeting, whether he or she wants to or not (Brown and Levinson 1978). As Erving Goffman (1981: 23) quite rightly observes, a greeting should only be made on the understanding that contact is actually sought. Or to put it otherwise: "acquainted persons in a social situation require a reason not to enter into a face engagement with each other, while unacquainted persons require a reason to do so" (Goffman 1963: 124). To approach an unknown person and greet him or her is a socially delicate undertaking, for there is always the risk of imposing an undesired interaction on the other. Yet this is precisely what occurs during instances of genital theft: greetings gone wrong. One incident in 2011, in Mbour, Senegal, illustrates this well (*Walf Grand-Place*, January 9, 2011). On their way to buy some bread, two men are hailed on the street by a stranger. They carry on their way without answering him. The man catches up to them to ask why they did not return his call. "Because we don't know you," they reply. A brief exchange follows, and the stranger shakes both their hands. Instantly, both the men feel shivers travel down the length of their bodies, and their genitals shrink. They accuse the stranger of having stolen their penises, and set upon him, soon joined by a crowd stirred up by the scandal (in the end, the accusers receive a suspended jail sentence). The greeting initiated by the stranger is perceived by the

interlocutor as a forced interaction, and thus a threat in the context of traffic relations. The handshake only increases this sense of threat, for it adds an element of physical contact to the verbal, gestural, and visual address. Furthermore, it demands reciprocity, insofar as to shake hands is to return the greeting. While the firmness and warmth of the grip normally express solidarity between equals—as does the frank nature of eye contact—the usual meaning of the gesture is now interpreted conversely as aggression. This handshake is a poisoned gift, a typical modality of witchcraft on the African continent. For example, sorcerers are said to reach their victims by way of evil spells hidden in bank notes or poisoned drinks. In 2010, Senegal is marked by a strange rumor of "deadly alms," which people spontaneously compare to genital theft (Bondaz and Bonhomme 2014). People are said to have died mysteriously after a stranger driving an SUV has handed out alms. The rumor unleashes a series of incidents involving public accusations and violence, though nobody is actually killed. This rumor of deadly alms represents a local variation on the theme of the poisoned gift. It evokes the threatening possibility of a total reversal of the everyday logic of anonymous charity. The "murderous benefactor," as the almsgiver is sometimes called, appears as an oxymoronic figure sharing something in common with the treacherous handshake of the genital thief. Both cases involve an occult aggression, all the more perverse for their being dressed up as charity, or fraternity.

Like the deadly alms, genital theft ultimately rests on a paradoxical interaction, the contextual interpretation of which is at odds with its common meaning. Instead of celebrating the equality between two parties, the greeting suddenly takes on an asymmetric character, whereby one strips the other of what is most precious to him. It is worth bearing in mind that in the rural French witchcraft of the 1970s, the handshake has a similarly decisive function, especially as regards greetings between people who do not habitually greet one another; in this case, the victim interprets this unusual gesture as an attempt to bewitch them. Of course, this context differs in that it concerns neighborly relations in a rural setting. Yet this does not detract from the fact that the victim's inference rests on the same type of evaluation of this interactional situation as in occasions of genital theft. As Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980: 114) rightly points out, a handshake is "such an ordinary gesture of recognition that one usually forgets what is involved."

This interactionist type of approach that we have adopted has allowed us to carefully define genital theft, which comes down to a well-defined and altogether very specific situation—what we could call its interactional salience, a characteristic pattern at the micro level that permits us to explain certain general

properties of the phenomenon. The modalities of the encounter with the alleged thief are precisely what is in play here: physical contact, eye contact, greetings, or handshakes, all the more alarming in that the parties involved are strangers to one another. While an interpretation of the situation in terms of witchcraft may seem strange to us, we can see that it is nonetheless based on completely banal preoccupations concerning the different registers of verbal and nonverbal communication. Genital theft rests on an interactional dysphoria triggered by an encounter with a stranger. A "dysphoric interaction" is a sort of interactional misstep, awkward and embarrassing (Goffman 1953: 259–72). It occurs, for example, when an individual does not demonstrate the interactional engagement expected of him or her—being overly friendly in a formal situation, or, conversely, being oddly cold with someone close. Erving Goffman remarks that certain categories of people often provoke such dysphoric interactions, whom he terms "faulty persons," among them small children and the disabled, but also strangers, who are precisely the main protagonists of genital theft. These thefts come from an interactional awkwardness relating to the manner in which one stranger approaches another. There is a reason that the person initiating the interaction is the one accused of being a thief. The dysphoric uncertainty that hangs over an encounter with a stranger drives the other person to interpret the behavior differently to how he or she would ordinarily: an accidental touch becomes an intentional act; a look an aggression instead of an invitation to engage with someone; a handshake a hostile gesture instead of an expression of solidarity. Compared to a simple touch or an exchange of looks, the thief's greeting constitutes the most contradictory situation, in that it associates solidarity and aggression. A Nigerian journalist remarks that genital thieves "shake your hand under the guise of 'friendship'" (*L'Enquêteur*, March 26, 2007)—the use of quotation marks around this last word clearly illustrating the paradoxical inversion of the gesture's meaning. For his part, a Gabonese journalist laments: "Hello, a sign of friendship and fraternity among men, is currently a source of misfortune" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). This is undoubtedly why incidents of genital theft focus on this type of interaction more than others. The interactional engagement of the stranger is misinterpreted as a violent incursion into one's privacy. This may serve to explain, moreover, the focus on the genitals above all other parts of the body: the "private parts" normally lie outside the sphere of public interaction. The epitome of an invasion of personal space, the thief manages to strike at precisely what should lie out of his reach. What it all comes down to is an encounter with a stranger, where the risk lies not so much in losing face as in losing one's genitals.

CHAPTER THREE

Shivers and Lynchings

According to victims' accounts, the encounter with the stranger triggers a kind of electrical discharge followed by the feeling that one's genitals have disappeared, or shrunk. One child victim in Gabon claims to have felt "a big chill around my tummy. [Then] my willy started shrinking" (AFP, October 13, 2005). Another victim in Benin "felt like a current had passed through him" as the thief touched him (*Le Matinal*, June 12, 2006), while another Gabonese states, "I walked past a man who brushed against me as he went by. That's when I felt a weird energy passing through my body. I couldn't feel the presence of my penis around my groin anymore" (AFP, October 17, 2005). A Senegalese man is even left stunned: "Immediately after having greeted him, he felt shivers running through his entire body, and was left frozen to the spot, unmoving. It was not until an acquaintance asked him what was wrong that he regained consciousness" (*L'Observateur*, February 29, 2008). A final victim gives his own account: "I got the impression that I'd been electrocuted. My physical strength was leaving me, as if I'd just set down a heavy burden" (*Cameroon Tribune*, November 25, 1996). This analogy to electrocution is no coincidence; as an invisible phenomenon, whose effects are nevertheless tangible, electricity is often associated with the realm of the occult. It is worth noting, moreover, that at the time of its practical origins in the eighteenth century, and all throughout the nineteenth century in Europe and North America, electricity was regularly associated with

the invisible, and was a prominent feature of paranormal speculation. But with regard to genital theft, there is a prosaic reality behind this sudden and vivid feeling of electrical discharge: it is nothing more than the effect of surprise, or fear. Fear is an involuntary emotional response to a threat, either real or imagined (LeDoux 1996). By stimulating the sympathetic nervous system, fear unleashes a series of automatic physiological responses: an increase in blood pressure and muscular tension, increased heart and breathing rates, and a sudden release of adrenaline that causes the arrector pili muscles to contract. This surge of adrenaline combined with horripilation is responsible for the mundane act of shivering and "goose bumps." The electric shock described by the victims of genital theft is quite clearly a shiver of fear. As a normal response caused by the sudden activation of the sweat glands, a "cold sweat" is also cited as a symptom, with one Nigerian victim telling of having felt as if a "bucket of ice water" had suddenly been poured over his head (*Daily Trust*, August 6, 2002). Victims also often claim to feel a great weakness following their encounter with the genital thief—a weakness interpreted as a sign of loss of their virility. In the words of one motorcycle-taxi driver in Nigeria, "[the passenger on the back of the motorcycle] squeezed his legs tightly against me and straight away I felt bad and weak" (AFP, January 31, 2008). Following a moment of vivid fear, it is completely normal for the body to react with a sudden loss of muscle tone and a decrease in tension that can even lead to fainting. It is surely no coincidence that in Mali, in 1997, a simple remedy for retrieving one's penis is proposed (there is no mention of this treatment to be found anywhere else): simply to sit down for a few moments and drink a liter of water (Mandel 2008: 197). Not a bad piece of advice, given that this is the best method for recovering from the distress caused by a fright, and regaining one's strength.

The dysphoric contact with a stranger provokes a fright, an altogether ordinary response. But why is this electric shock then associated with the disappearance or shrinking of the penis? Here too, there is a possible causal link supported by physiological facts relating to fear, shivering, and the feeling around the genital area. The size of the flaccid male organ varies depending on the circumstances: cold and physical activity, but also stress, are all common factors in the retraction of the penis. The vasoconstriction caused by fear leads to a reduction in the volume of the penis, which is what gives the impression of shrinkage that the victims relate. In addition, the shiver caused by the surge of adrenaline runs down the length of the spinal column to the groin; and there it provokes a tingling caused by the horripilation of the hairs around the scrotum,

but also a muscular contraction that causes the testicles to retreat slightly into the abdomen. Hence the tingling and shrinking sensations recounted by the victims. A dodging reflex in a case of contact can also enter into play. A graze against the inner thigh automatically causes the testicles to ascend as a result of the contraction of the cremaster muscle (known as the cremasteric reflex). The reflexive triggering of this kind of flexion is all the more plausible when one considers that genital theft is usually initiated through physical contact with a stranger—an accidental touch in the middle of a crowd, for example.[1] Victims' accounts corroborate the determining role played by these specific physiological mechanisms: "It is always the same scenario: a man, after having been touched by or shaken hands with a stranger, claims to have felt a shiver run through him, followed by a tingling sensation, only to then have the impression that his organ has retreated deep within his body" (AFP [Dakar], August 4, 1997). In a situation of intense emotional distress, normal sensations that are the result of a fear response (a fleeting sense of weakness, tingling, a light retraction of the penis) are interpreted as sexual impotence, and the shrinking, even disappearance, of the male member.

Genital theft does not, therefore, rely only upon hearsay, but also involves factual reports based on the testimonies of the protagonists. This transformation of the rumor into an event experienced in the first person is what folklorists studying urban legends call the "ostension" of rumor (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1983). To disqualify the victims' experiences outright by accusing them of pretense would be a mistake, therefore, preventing us from reaching a full understanding of the facts. The sensations they describe are not arbitrary wild imaginings. The fact that genital theft is clearly not "true" does not, however, mean that it is not "real," inasmuch as it produces a marking experience from an emotional point of view. Genital theft cannot be reduced to pure fiction, deserving only of symbolic interpretation (hence the partial inadequacy of the

1. The experience of coming up against someone in a crowd has often been described in terms of electric shock. So too Charles Baudelaire, witness to and thinker on urban modernity: "Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy" (Benjamin [1939] 2006: 191). In contrast to incidents of genital theft, this is more a frisson of excitement than of fear. Nonetheless, the tumult of urban traffic seems to particularly favour "electric" reactions. Did Georg Simmel ([1903] 1950b: 410) not remark after all that the big city provoked an "intensification of nervous stimulation"? In this sense, genital theft comes down to a cultural history of urban sensibilities.

term "rumor" to qualify it). On the contrary, it translates into real-life experiences with a very real somatic basis. Witchcraft is as much a matter of feeling as it is of language; in this sense, it takes on an altogether tangible reality.[2] The interpretation in terms of witchcraft is supported by experiences that are as mundane as they are universal (shivering, tingling, distress, etc.)—which allows us to relativize the exoticism of the phenomenon. Yet still it requires a mental leap, in that it is not a necessary consequence of the fright response, even if it is rooted therein. Seen as a complex emotional experience, and not as a simple series of physiological reactions, fear provides an interpretation of the situation, making us view the encounter in a certain light. An intentional cause is attributed to the shiver felt around the groin by way of an external agent: thus the stranger becomes a genital thief. There is a shift from penis shrinking, or vanishing, to penis theft. This interpretive leap, which could seem baffling to us, is in fact rather common in societies where witchcraft is woven into the fabric of daily life; there is a tendency to see in certain seemingly trivial occurrences a hidden predatory intent. Clearly, then, an interpretation of the encounter in terms of genital theft is only conceivable where ideas regarding the possibility of an act of witchcraft are already prevalent. And yet it is an easy conclusion to reach, given that shivers and other somatic reactions, such as an increased heartrate, often possess a premonitory value in Africa, especially in divinatory systems (Bonhomme 2006a: 81–82).[3] An interpretation based on witchcraft can also rest on a completely ordinary uncertainty regarding the perception of the cause of an emotion; emotional experiences and physiological reactions are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to determine which is responsible for the other.[4] One victim's account of an incident of genital theft in Gabon illustrates quite clearly this reconstruction of the muddled succession of cause and effect: "I felt shivers running through my body. I was scared, and by the

2. Approaching the matter through emotion and sensation allows us to demonstrate the "reality" of witchcraft, without having to adopt a radical constructivist position stating that culture and language "create" reality pure and simple.

3. E. E. Evans-Pritchard already remarked upon this in *Witchcraft, oracles and magic among the Azande* (Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976: 87).

4. This issue of the causality of emotions has been the subject of scientific controversy since the start of the twentieth century: William James claimed that the perception of visceral responses defined subjective experience (I can feel my heart beating frantically, therefore I am afraid), whereas Walter Cannon argued in favor of the opposite (I am afraid, therefore my heart is beating frantically.)

time I remembered the idea of genital theft, it was too late, mine had already lost its normal shape" (*L'Union*, October 26, 2005). Instead of construing fear as the cause of the shiver and the ordinary retraction of the penis, it is the shiver that the man interprets as being the primary cause of what followed. He is thus led to find another cause for the shiver, projecting outward the reason for the sensation he is feeling within (or on the surface of) his body: it can only be the stranger who approached him moments earlier. This person must therefore be a witch who has stolen his penis. Combined, the shiver and the feeling of fear thus form the touchstone of the genital theft phenomenon. The ensuing commotion is living proof of it.[5] Genital theft rests on a complex causal loop of physiological mechanisms, emotional experience, and cognitive inferences in reaction to a very specific interactional situation.

Another decisive element must be taken into account in order to explain individuals' reactions: the catalyzing effect of the rumor. As the rumor announcing the presence of genital thieves spreads through the town, a climate of anxiety and a feeling of insecurity set in, exacerbating the reactions of fear, the combination of which the media exaggeratedly label "psychosis." Anxiety is nothing more than an anticipation of fear. It provokes an increased sense of vigilance and significantly decreases an individual's threshold for alarm. It creates a kind of state of emergency that favors fear. In a certain way, the rumor renders the events it predicts inevitable—it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. One of the so-called victims regrets the drama that led to the death of an alleged thief in Cotonou, acknowledging that he had been "scared of what the people in town had been saying about disappearing penises" (*Le Matinal*, November 2001). In Parakou, Benin, another makes the same confession: "I was numbed by the rumors" (*Le Matin*, June 16, 2006). In this way, the circulation of the rumor creates the conditions for its own fulfillment; it triggers reactions of fear that are interpreted in terms of genital theft, and so this confirmation of the rumor only helps to further its diffusion. Once the rumor is set in motion, its propagation is ultimately self-sustaining (which still does nothing to answer the question of how it began in the first place).

Having tackled the experience of the "victim" of genital theft, one is still tasked with explaining the violent reaction of the crowd. Affects and emotions

5. The *susto*, an attack of fear common in Latin America, represents another good example of cultural elaboration that comes from attributing a magical cause to fear (Rubel 1984).

again play a key part in this matter. The lynching of the suspected thief is based on an emotional dynamic typical of mob violence (Collins 2008: 115–21). The rumor creates a climate of fear that, at the slightest provocation, can turn swiftly into an outburst of collective fury against the accused. The victim's public alarm, echoed by the people in his immediate vicinity, swells to a clamor that grows rapidly, leading to the formation of an aggressive mob. The alleged thief is trapped by the crowd and lynched without any other form of trial. The phenomena of epidemic propagation arise here in two distinct ways, and on two different spatiotemporal levels as far as genital theft is concerned: from one perspective, on the macro level of the propagation of the rumor within a town or a country, and then from one country to another; and from the other, on the micro level of the propagation of the crowd's furor, and the mimetic contagion of the violence following an accusation. The explanation of this second dimension should be approached with caution, however. Crowds as a form of collective action are difficult to observe, and thus analyze (Dupuy 1991). It is particularly hard to give a neat description of their behavior, especially those that form and then dissipate so abruptly, and are characterized by violence, as in instances of genital theft. With our vision so obscured, we are reduced to a simplistic analysis of them. This explains the general tendency to depict crowds as a collective agent, to which a singular intent is attributed. The thief, however, is not lynched by the crowd itself; rather it is a few choice individuals who strike the blows. This difficulty in picking out individual behaviors applies to the subsequent police inquiries and trials as well; those involved in collective lynchings of genital thieves often escape arrest and prosecution, so difficult is it for police officers and judges to distinguish between the persons responsible. The illusion of one-mindedness adds to this myopic description of the phenomenon. While many passers-by, having been alerted by the alleged victim of the genital thief, do indeed rally together to lynch the suspect, others simply go on their way, condemn the violence, or even try to intervene. In many cases, the suspect escapes death thanks to a good soul who ushers him into a nearby house to give him refuge until the police arrive and deliver him from mob justice. It is probably safe to assume, moreover, that in certain cases (which do not appear among our sources, since they leave no trace) the victim's calls for help fall upon deaf ears. Nevertheless, violence breeds a mimetic conformity, insofar as naysayers may risk being taken for the thief's accomplice, and thus lynched in turn. One Burkinabe, witness to the lynching of a genital thief in Mali in July 1997, relates his own misfortune: "All I said to the lynch mob was that it might be

worth undressing the victim to verify his claims before trying to kill someone.' Straight away, someone screamed: 'He's an accomplice!' The mob descends on him. Fortunately, the police, alerted by some of the neighbors, intervened and took everyone away with them" (quoted in Mandel 2008: 193). In any case, it is well known that, according to the threshold effect, the adoption of a certain behavior by a critical number of individuals is enough to precipitate its adoption en masse (Granovetter 1978). With regard to genital theft, the sudden accumulation of the crowd is at any rate particularly striking, even when there is no identifiable leader. While the victim who calls for help is the one who instigates this mobilization, thereafter he seems to melt away quickly into the violent throng. During the lynching itself, he becomes a secondary character, almost indistinct. And it is often not even the victim leading the charge. Still numb and in a state of shock from having lost his genitals, he is more likely to remain prostrate and not take part in the violence directly. The victim gathers the crowd, but does not direct it.

Odious though it may seem, the mob lynching of the suspected genital thief should not be reduced to a savage outburst of violence, thereby evading all form of understanding. On the contrary, lynching represents a popular type of collective action that adheres to common rules. Pierre Janin and Alain Marie (2003: 7) highlight "the extreme violence of agitated crowds against petty thieves, sometimes hacked to pieces by machetes, other times 'braised' or burned by caustic soda." Though they seem to be examples of the most senseless kind of savagery, these attacks actually follow stable patterns of actions, and fall within the scope of traditions of violence. The atrocities carried out by crowds, far from representing mere spasms of irrationality, constitute veritable "rites of violence," as scholars of modern European history have well demonstrated (Thompson 1971; Davis 1973; Tilly 1978). Hence the torment known as "necklacing" in English-speaking Africa, which consists in placing a tire around the victim's body before dousing him in gasoline and burning him alive. Born out of the townships of South Africa in the 1980s, this method of summary execution is employed by the "comrades" of the ANC against collaborators of the apartheid regime, but sometimes against people accused of witchcraft too (Niehaus 1993; Crais 1998). This form of attack goes on to be adopted elsewhere in Africa. In similar fashion, since the popular uprising against the dictatorial regime of Moussa Traoré in 1991, Malians now invoke "Article 320 of the Street Code of Accelerated Procedure"; the number in question corresponds to the price of a liter of gasoline at the time (300 CFA francs), and of the box of matches (20 francs)

needed to "grill" the culprit. They also cite the "BV" Article, short for *Brûlé Vif*, "Burned Alive." Similarly, in Benin, they speak of "Court 125" (100 francs for gasoline and 25 francs for matches). Behind this macabre parody of the penal code can be seen a claim over the exercise of justice, even if such a claim represents a transgression of the law in the eyes of the state. In Africa, mob lynchings represent a common form of instant justice applied to thieves or hit-and-run drivers, but also to alleged witches. In short, it is an ordinary violence in reaction to other forms of ordinary violence. This popular justice is an alternate response to official forms of policing and justice, deemed ineffective and corrupt, and so stripped of their legitimacy (Paulenz 1999). While the upmarket districts of African cities are protected by private security firms, poorer neighborhoods resort to "committees of vigilance" that deal out on-the-spot justice. It is because the legal violence of the state is powerless to protect its people against everyday threats—and in particular the threat of witchcraft—that "the street" is able to contest its monopoly on legitimate violence.[6] The lynching of witches is seen as legitimate violence, inasmuch as it punishes a witchcraft-based violence perceived as completely real and unjust, and that too often goes unpunished. The fact remains that this summary form of justice, however unjustifiable it may seem in our eyes (and surely is), adheres to its own form of practical and moral rationality from the point of view of those who practice it.

The alert unifies the focus of the passers-by around a common goal: a reprisal against the genital thief. It is because he is seen as vulnerable while still remaining a threat that the accused is so brutally set upon by the crowd. Furthermore, the person marked out for public condemnation cannot rely on any solidarity liable to put a halt to the violence, for in most cases he is a stranger passing through, whereas the lynch mob, made up of neighborhood residents or market traders, are all mutually acquainted to at least some degree, which is what drives them to collude in such a way. It might seem strange, however, that no one bothers to verify first whether the victim's penis has actually disappeared. But the very fact that the victim fades into the background after raising the alert serves to explain why the passers-by pay so little heed to his condition. Furthermore, given that common decency decrees that the genitals should normally remain hidden from the view of others, verification would prove a delicate affair, all the more so in a public place. This is why genital theft seems more credible

6. On the consideration given to witchcraft by judicial authorities, see Fisiy and Geschiere (1990); Ashforth (2005); Martinelli (2015).

on the whole than the theft of another, more visible part of the body (which would be immediately disproven), such as the hand (even though this would be more closely associated with greetings). In the more common instances of dangerous drivers, burglars, or pickpockets being lynched, the crowd does not generally bother to check the truth of the facts before acting either. More generally speaking, it has been demonstrated that rumors that generate fear of an imminent threat create a perceived urgent need to act before information can be checked, regardless of what heed one might have paid them in ordinary circumstances (i.e., with a clear head) (Shibutani 1966: 96–108). In cases of genital theft, the crowd immediately draws in on the suspect rather than the victim. In reality, the punishment of the suspect and the healing of the victim are meant to coincide, as if the crowd's furious outburst were itself restorative: "By beating up [the thieves], in just a few minutes, the victim regains his virility, and his penis is restored to its normal dimensions. Which confirms that they are guilty," highlights the brother of one victim in Port-Gentil, Gabon (AFP, October 17, 2005). The victim's fright, and the fear of a population perturbed by the rumor, is transformed into a brutal, liberating discharge. Lynching constitutes a kind of reappropriation of the power to act, for the victim as much as for the crowd; it allows for a transformation of a passive affect (powerless fear) into an active one (the aggressive discharge against the suspected thief).[7] This collective agitation comes out of an explosive cocktail of fear and aggression—something Randall Collins (2008: 83–133) dubs "forward panic." It is of note that no one tries to explain more clearly this link between the beating and the reappearance of the genitals, as if the fact alone were self-evident. But this collective mental leap works in parallel to the original one that linked the encounter with the suspected thief with the disappearance of the penis. Ultimately, genital theft relies on minimal elaborations with regard to which causal mechanisms are in play. These mental leaps also form the basis of a striking inversion of the burden of proof, for it is the violent punishment of the suspect itself that ultimately confirms his guilt. Assisted by the crowd that is dealing with the wretched thief, the victim regains his nerve: once the initial fright has passed, his normal sensations return, which he may interpret as the reappearance of his genitals as a result of the beating. The reprisals invite the same kind of inverted rearrangement of the causal chain as when the victim initially interprets his fright as a sign of

7. For a similar example of emotional dynamics in an antiwitchcraft ritual, see Bonhomme (2008).

his penis having been stolen—proof that it is indeed emotional dynamics that constitute the touchstone of the phenomenon, from the alleged theft itself to the subsequent lynching.

Often, the brutalities enacted upon the alleged suspect succeed in drawing out a confession, confirming the reality of the theft to the assailants, and thus justifying their actions. In April 2002, in Ebo Town, Gambia, an old blind man ends up admitting having stolen the penis of a man who had helped him across the street, and restores the member in question by performing a small ritual (*The Daily Observer*, April 30, 2002). Such a confession on behalf of the "witches" may seem surprising: Why would an individual, obviously being falsely accused, confess to being guilty of something so improbable? And yet the confessions of witches are not so rare in Africa; the very detailed admissions of "child witches" in the Democratic Republic of Congo are a good example of this (De Boeck 2000). These confessions can easily be explained for having been extracted under intense pressure, either psychological or physical, from the crowd. Rather more ambiguously, such an admission can sometimes also allow a witch to gain the upper hand, by giving himself mysterious occult powers; a witch is a powerful man, and thus to be feared. This strategy of putting oneself in the spotlight, which could turn out dangerously, may nevertheless prove profitable in societies where few or no public sanctions against witches exist. It should also be mentioned that confession is often a vital prerequisite for rituals of purification and absolution, which are ceremonies characteristic of the antiwitchcraft movements that have sporadically cropped up across the African continent, at least since the colonial era (the same can be found in Pentecostal Evangelical churches in Africa). In cases of genital theft, however, it does not seem that the suspect's confession is enough for him to avoid being lynched by the crowd, for it does not occur in a context of ritual management of witchcraft. Only the restoration of the penis by the alleged thief (or at any rate an affirmation that he is ready to restore it) appears to be able to calm the enraged crowd—a statement that in itself represents an admission of guilt. In several cases, the accused is only able to escape death at the last minute by improvising a ritual or some prayers meant to restore the victim's penis. In 1997 in Saint-Louis, Senegal, a Beninese man accused of genital theft testifies: "When I realized that the crowd was about to kill me, I called a Qur'anic scholar, whom I asked to write down a verse. Having done this, we dipped the piece of paper in some water, which I made the victim drink, and his manhood returned to him instantly" (*Le Soleil*, August 1, 1997). During an incident in Dakar, in 2010, a suspected thief from

Guinea, threatened with death, plays for time by asking for a copy of the Qur'an and some water with garlic and lemon to be brought (Seneweb.com, September 16, 2010). He then washes his victim—a teenager—with the lotion while reciting prayers. The young man's penis returns, but it seems that it is not his own, for the thief "reversed the words of the Qur'an." The accused begs a second chance, and repeats the prayer, but in vain. He is then shut up in the victim's house until he can restore the penis, but also to protect him from the crowd, which wants done with him. He finds himself caught in trap of his own making; the victim's entourage reproach him for maintaining his innocence, when for them his guilt was proven by the fact that he successfully brought back the victim's penis, even if it was not the right one. The accused is ultimately only saved thanks to a local marabout, whose prayers succeed in restoring the teenager's manhood.

Another determining factor, the call to alert, generates a mass convergence of passers-by, who until then had only existed alongside one another in a state of copresence: "Taxi drivers, traveling newspaper vendors, the trader singing a little ditty, the intelligent, perspicacious white-collar worker; all of them pick up an iron bar, a brick, a club, a crowbar, and beat up innocents, bash their skulls in, and burn them alive" (quoted in Sackey 1997: 114). A community of affects suddenly emerges out of what before had simply been individuals going about their business. Identification with the victim lies at the heart of this congregation; outraged by the theft, the passers-by rally together into a hostile crowd against the suspect all the more quickly for the fact that they themselves feel similarly at risk. The thief does indeed seem to choose his victims at random, given that they are always strangers to him. This explains the crowd's solidarity regarding the stolen genitals. The quasi-anonymity of the crowd also has a disinhibiting effect that facilitates the lynching; it is much easier to be violent as one individual among many in the middle of a crowd. A similar case of collective violence studied by the historian Alain Corbin (1992) supports this argument. Not long after the French defeat of 1870, during a fair in the Périgord, a young nobleman suspected of secretly being a Prussian, alleged, furthermore, to have dared cry out "*Vive la République!*," is brutally killed by the crowd before being roasted like a pig. Yet these atrocities are made possible by the very context of the fair: in contrast to the general acquaintanceship within a rural community, the fair presupposes a relative anonymity that allows for such an irregular outburst of violence. However, the solidarity between the members of the lynch mob, like that of the fairground murderers, is brief and perfunctory. These individuals share no common interest beyond the act of revenge against

the genital thief; once the suspect has been lynched, the crowd formed by this collective mobilization disperses. This type of fleeting social bond is characteristic of public urban spaces; in contrast to the organic solidarity that characterizes small communities, urban social life is governed by an alternation between the dispersion of an anonymous and disparate multitude and the sporadic formation of, let us say, ephemeral or instant communities. The crowd generally disassembles as quickly as it originally formed, and everyone goes about their business until the next incident comes along.

CHAPTER FOUR

Witchcraft, New Style

Genital theft represents a rather unique variety of witchcraft. Witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa should always be described in the plural, given not only the many regional variations, but also the differing forms of it that exist within a single cultural group. Thus, there is no single archetype by which to define African witchcraft. All the more so when one considers the problematic use of words such as "witchcraft" and "sorcery," as anthropologists have long recognized (Crick 1979). These terms designate a concept that, even within the bounds of Africanism on its own, is used to translate numerous local notions, which themselves do not necessarily overlap. This translation also relies on the colonial context out of which it originated; it owes as much to the Western (and in particular missionary) conceptualization of Africa as it does to the reality of local societies (Pels 1998). However, this colonial transposition has seen itself reappropriated by local populations, who today employ European terms such as "witchcraft" or *sorcellerie* as readily as they do their own vernacular equivalents. All this means that witchcraft as a notion is rather a mixed bag—both an analytical concept and an indigenous category—weighed down by multiple layers of meaning, and thus particularly delicate to tackle.

The fact remains, however, that anthropologists have uncovered the tenacious presence in sub-Saharan Africa of a typical form of witchcraft, which here we will term, for want of a better label, "family witchcraft." Of course, this family

witchcraft should be seen as no more than an ideal-type, allowing us to produce a synthesizing description of a whole host of representations widespread across the continent, and which share a certain family resemblance. As with any ideal-typical construction, it comes with a certain simplification of reality. This mental image—or *Gedankenbild*, to borrow Max Weber's own expression—can nevertheless be useful for bringing some order out of the rich chaos of contemporary African witchcraft, in how it draws out some striking contrasts. Once it has been understood that witchcraft is a shaky analytical category corresponding to some very fragmented realities, must we then abandon the notion and give up on any venture of comparison? I do not think so. To go on with a protean characterization of witchcraft only makes a comparative undertaking all the more necessary, one able to shed light on the sociocultural variables and the historical dynamics that allow us to account for this diversity.[1] The opposition I propose here between family witchcraft and genital theft constitutes a first step in this direction. This ideal-type of family witchcraft does not rely on a compilation of literature alone; rather it is rooted first and foremost in the ethnographic research I conducted on witchcraft and counter-witchcraft in Gabon while working alongside *nganga* (healer-diviners), a few years before my investigations into genital theft (Bonhomme 2005, 2006a, 2008). This path of research allowed me to get the measure of the variety of guises in which witchcraft can manifest, of the social context in which it unfolds, and of the discourses to which it gives rise.

A comparison between genital theft and family witchcraft presents a striking contrast (see Table below). As its name suggests, family witchcraft operates within the sphere of kinship. This intimate association between witchcraft and kinship represents without a doubt one of the most typical traits of witchcraft in sub-Saharan Africa, in contrast to other regions of the world such as Melanesia, Amazonia, or Europe.[2] Two proverbs belonging to the Mitsogo of Gabon warn, for example, that "the one who kills you is never far away," and "the first creature that the panther eats is the civet, its kin." Another saying of the Duala in Cameroon similarly states that "the one who bewitches you is always one of your own" (Rosny 1981: 159). And among the Lovedu of South Africa, they say:

1. On this point, I share the approach taken by Peter Geschiere in his latest work (2013), one of the best texts on witchcraft published in recent times, in light of its comparatist scope.

2. On witchcraft and kinship in African societies, see, among other classic works, Middleton and Winter (1963); Marwick (1965); Douglas (1967); Bonnafé (1978); Lallemand (1988).

"you eat with him, but it is actually he who eats you" (Mayer [1954] 1970: 61). A witch cannot attack an external lineage or family without an accomplice in place. In many matrilineal societies, the quintessential witch is the maternal uncle, the bearer of lineal authority. This is the case among the primarily matrilineal peoples who live south of the Ogooué River in Gabon. In contrast, among the Fang, a patrilineal people from the north of the country, the witch is more likely to be found on one's paternal side. The bond between witchcraft and kinship manifests in a huge variety of differing situations, making it impossible to reduce this diversity to a uniform image of family witchcraft (Adler 2006: 33–63). Depending on the circumstances, the witch and his victim might be husband and wife, uncle and nephew, brother and sister, cousins, cowives, or even just cohabitants.

	Family witchcraft	**Genital theft**
Social sphere	Kinship	Outside kinship
Location	Rural and urban	Urban
Space	Household	Public streets
Temporality	Night	Day
Parties involved	Kin	Strangers
Situation	Mutual acquaintance	Anonymity
Identification[3]	Biographical	Categorical
Duration	Long term	Instantaneous
Type of interaction	Hidden	Face to face
Mode of action	Remote	Physical contact
Accusation	Suspicion and insinuation	Direct accusation
Reprisals	Infrequent and indirect	Lynching (direct violence)
Vector of diffusion	Gossip	Rumor
Scale	Local	Transnational
Network[4]	Closed	Open

While family witchcraft is prevalent in rural areas, the link between witchcraft and kinship remains in urban settings: "even in modern contexts—for instance, in the big cities—, witchcraft is supposed to arise, first of all, from the intimacy

3. On this point, see chapter 6.
4. On these last three points, see chapter 7.

of the family and the home" (Geschiere 1997: 11). In a metropolis like Duala, healer-diviners are always quick to implicate the family in matters of witchcraft (Rosny 1981). Similarly, in Libreville, the revelations of the *nganga* alongside whom I worked consisted above all in telling their patients if the witches responsible for their misfortunes were more likely to be "from the fathers' side" or "from the mothers' side." Generally speaking, in Africa, the witch is more commonly an insider than an outsider; the attack comes from within the community (Douglas 1970a: xxvii). According to Philip Mayer, "the witch is the hidden enemy within the gate," inasmuch as "witches turn against their own neighbors and kinsmen; they do not harm strangers or people from far away" (Mayer [1954] 1970: 61 and 47). Comparing witchcraft among the Mkako of Cameroon and the Bimin Kuskumin of Papua New Guinea, Elisabeth Copet-Rougier (1992) reaches the same conclusion: among the former, the witch is a kinsman operating within the group, whereas conversely, among the latter, he is an outsider (as is often the case in Melanesia and Southeast Asia). For the most part, witchcraft in Africa involves relatives, neighbors, or kin. Even when it is not a kinship relation in the strictest sense, the relationship between the witch and his victim presupposes a prior acquaintedness; though the witch is not necessarily family, he or she is always familiar. Suspicions and accusations emerge from against a backdrop of preexisting jealousies, rivalries, and interpersonal tensions. Regarding the Ibibio of Nigeria, Daniel Offiong (1983: 90) remarks that, from a sample of fifty-two accusations of witchcraft gathered between 1978 and 1981, "in not a single case did strangers, that is, persons who had never met and become involved in some conflict situation, accuse each other; people in close contact were always involved."

Genital theft diverges markedly from this typical pattern. On the one hand, it is almost exclusively an urban phenomenon. On the other hand, and most importantly, it always operates outside the sphere of kinship. Moreover, it does not require any preexisting interpersonal connection between the thief and the victim, but invariably involves strangers and, as we shall see, often even foreigners instead. Family witchcraft by definition bears out over the long term: mounting tensions and resentment, retrospective interpretations assigned to past misfortunes, repeated attacks of witchcraft, consultations with healer-diviners in order to "armor" oneself and counterattack. In contrast, genital theft rests on a form of instantaneousness: the lightning-fast spread of the rumor, the brevity of the exchange between the thief and the victim, immediate accusation and sanction. Just as we speak of "instant justice," we could speak of "instant witchcraft" with

regard to genital theft. Whereas family witchcraft is based on a bond (presupposing a shared past between the victims and "their" witches), genital theft is based on contact (involving no more than a brief encounter between the victim and a stranger). The locations in question also differ. Family witchcraft affects for the most part the domestic space, for it is tied to kinship and household: the witch casts evil spells under the door of the house, poisons the family food supply, and even attacks people in their beds. In this respect, the Maka of Cameroon refer to "witchcraft of the house" (Geschiere 1997: 45). Genital theft, on the other hand, always occurs in the public space, particularly in the street; it demands anonymity between passers-by caught up in urban traffic.

Another significant difference lies in the fact that family witchcraft is fundamentally nocturnal. Witches are reputed to be able to transform themselves into panthers or owls, quintessential nighttime predators. Witchcraft is a nocturnal affair, because the night—time for sleep and place of darkness—allows the witch to act away from the gaze of others, and thus not be recognized by his kin. His misdeeds demand dissimulation. A witch is a font of occult acts and remote attacks, generally qualified as "mystical," in that they do not require any form of direct confrontation (Bonhomme 2005). In Gabon, one of the principal modalities of witchcraft-based attacks consists in "going out as a vampire" or "vampiring" (*vembaga* among the Mitsogo). Come the night, the vampire leaves behind his sleeping body and flies to his prey's bedside to sap them of their vital strength. This is meant to trigger a nightmare in the victim's slumber, before bringing about sickness and misfortune at a later date. Nightmares are the sign of a witch's incursion into a person's dreams, the violence of the nightmare in fact representing that of the witch. Witches also reputedly make use of a "mystical airplane" fueled by the blood of their victims, in which they can travel vast distances almost instantaneously. "Night guns," "mystical mines," and other "kappa missiles" are also part of the occult arsenal that allows them to attack their victims remotely. The effect of the night gun, for instance, reveals itself by way of an intense pain in the foot that climbs up the leg, and which can lead to necrosis or even paralysis of the limb in question. The inexplicable nature of the pain leads the victim to suspect that a witch must have "sent" him or her a night gun. It is also said that witches try desperately to scupper electrification projects in their villages, for fear of seeing their nocturnal exploits illuminated, and thus exposed. A witch must always be invisible; hence matters of witchcraft relate more often than not to suspicions surrounding fundamentally uncertain acts and their actors.

In contrast, acts of genital theft always occur in full daylight, and in full view of everyone. They involve direct contact and a genuine interaction between the thief and the victim, mostly face to face. The witch is no longer an absent figure; he is right there, in front of his victim. This is a visible and public form of witchcraft, unlike invisible, private family witchcraft. From this perspective, genital theft is arguably less witchcraft and more a peculiar form of stealing; indeed, genital theft and pickpocketing occur in the same places—streets, marketplaces, public transport—, in contrast to family witchcraft, which strikes at the domestic space. In Senegal, moreover, people often speak of victims of genital theft as having had their "luggage" (or "stuff") stolen. And in English-speaking countries, such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Gambia, the most common designation for genital theft or genital thieves is "penis snatching" or "penis snatchers." The lexicometric analysis of our corpus of news articles indeed shows that the words "sorcerer" and "sorcery" (and their French equivalents "sorcier" and "sorcellerie") appear consistently (more than "witch" and "witchcraft"), though significantly less than "snatch," "thief," or "theft." Genital theft thus manifests the ambiguity between what can and cannot be defined in terms of witchcraft or sorcery, from the perspectives of the local populations, but also from those of the anthropologists seeking to account for these new phenomena by categorizing them.

Family witchcraft constitutes a transgression of the rules governing solidarity between kinsmen; it represents "the dark side of kinship" (Geschiere 1997: 42). During the day, relatives must force themselves to keep up appearances of solidarity by avoiding conflict in their face-to-face interactions. But come the night, giving way to their jealousies, hatreds, and resentments, they tear each other apart. Witchcraft is a manifestation of the hidden violence within these relationships. Yet this "mystical" violence also represents an alternative to direct physical action, an expression of violence by other means. Eric de Rosny (1981: 392) sees in witchcraft a "diversionary system" for violence, while Elisabeth Copet-Rougier (1986: 61) makes a similar observation (regarding the Mkako of Cameroon): "Hostility and conflict in the daily life of the Mkako community are quite common. But since physical violence is not allowed, they take forms which we might regard as 'phantasmal'—but which are quite concrete for the people concerned." The greater the intimacy of the relationship, the more invisible the violence: "The closer people are in space ('fire') and time (i.e., in agnatic relationship), the greater the potential for the invisible violence of witchcraft" (ibid.: 31). For this reason, there is often no direct sanction taken against the

witch, nor even any kind of public accusation. Victims satisfy themselves in consulting a healer-diviner in order to "armor" themselves and return the occult attack against their attackers. In Gabon, this is referred to as "returning to the sender." It involves a mirror that has been "worked" by a *nganga* and placed in the doorway of a house to protect its inhabitants by reflecting evil spells back at those who cast them. The prescribed course of action against night guns, known as "triggering," uses the same methodology. The *nganga* lights a small package containing gunpowder, among other ingredients, under the leg of the sick person. This is a counteractive night gun meant to nullify the witch's own. But it also represents a response that sends evil back to the sender. Mystical violence calls for mystical violence in return, but rarely a confrontational action (though these do sometimes occur). In contrast, genital theft requires confrontation between the two parties involved. The accusation is direct and public. And it immediately leads to an equally direct and public form of violence. The lynching of the suspect by the crowd is a reaction brought about by the very act of genital theft itself, which is ultimately more like pickpocketing than witchcraft between kin. On the other hand, it does not appear that the victims seek out the help of *nganga* to heal their affliction after the event (in Senegal, however, the intervention of a marabout, who prays for the return of the genitals, is sometimes mentioned). And though the absence of any longitudinal data prevents me from speaking in absolute terms on the subject, I can offer one field anecdote to support this hypothesis. It concerns an instance of genital theft in Gabon, in 2006, and its victim Régis, the eldest son of one of the *nganga* with whom I have often worked in Libreville. At this time, he is about fifteen. After greeting one of his contemporaries in town, he suddenly feels a weakness around his penis. He goes home and looks at some pornographic magazines, but he cannot get an erection. Fearful, he calls on a friend with whom he happened to have been that morning when he greeted the person in question; the friend, however, appears intact. Together, they set out to find the suspect, and they beat him up. In order to stop the blows, the suspect finally tells them that he can restore the penis, which he does on the spot. And the matter stops there. While the story itself is not so distinct from the usual scenario, it is worth noting that his father was present when Régis recounted it to me. As an expert in counterwitchcraft, this man had grown used to telling me which rituals were necessary for each type of misfortune. But that day, he had almost nothing to say in regard to his son's misadventure, nor did he ever claim to know how to heal a victim of genital theft. He contented himself with stating that genital theft was something the

Nigerians did to claim ransom against the safe return of an individual's penis (though this was not the case in this particular incident). What this anecdote illustrates is that, in the eyes of a Gabonese *nganga*, genital theft is perceived as a foreign evil, as distinct from the type of witchcraft he himself deals with on a daily basis. It is not simply the modalities of aggression, therefore, that differ between family witchcraft and genital theft; it is also the relational configurations in which these forms of witchcraft are rooted, the moral rules with which they are intertwined, the modalities of accusation and sanction to which they lead, and the types of remedies to which the victims resort.

In short, family witchcraft is one based on mutual acquaintance among kin, whereas genital theft is a witchcraft of urban anonymity. It should be stressed that, in both cases, witchcraft derives not from extravagant exotic beliefs, but rather from ordinary preoccupations. As a threat creeping into the most mundane experiences (speaking, eating, greeting, touching, looking, sleeping . . .), it reflects the occult part of sociality. Stories of witchcraft make up a sort of moral discourse, an inverted image of the rules that any peaceful relationship must obey. The threat of witchcraft generally arises when an individual is in a state of vulnerability or insecurity. Ever since Evans-Pritchard's seminal work on Zande witchcraft ([1937] 1976), the trend has been to see witchcraft in terms of uncertainty and insecurity. In order to account for contemporary Africa's obsession with the occult, Adam Ashforth (2005) posits the idea of spiritual insecurity, a sense of exposure and vulnerability to occult forces. Indeed, the people involved often cast witchcraft as well as genital theft in "spiritual" terms. In French-speaking Africa, for instance, *mystique* has become a catch-all epithet, which encompasses everything from religion to magic, and witchcraft too. But many "mystical" phenomena stem in actual fact from perfectly mundane situations, and could thus more aptly be analyzed as the unfortunate results of an insecurity or vulnerability that pervades everyday social interactions. A redefinition of this kind, in terms of "interactional" or "relational"—as opposed to "spiritual"—insecurity, can allow us to deconstruct the category of "the occult" by reconnecting it to more mundane concerns, and thus to de-exoticize African witchcraft all the more convincingly (though Ashforth has undeniably achieved much in this respect already).

Representations of witchcraft dramatically evoke altogether banal situations that take on an air of opacity, uncertainty, and insecurity, to the point that one's confidence in everyday life is shaken. This uncanny experience amounts to "the horrible realization that the familiar can turn against us," as Peter Geschiere

(2013: 179) aptly puts it. Family witchcraft is tied to a dissimulation within a context of mutual acquaintance. It emphasizes the fact that one may always be the victim of devious acts at the hands of one's kin, for one can never be sure of what they are up to under cover of darkness or behind one's back; a daytime relationship of reciprocity may be overturned into a nighttime relationship of predation. It demonstrates the impossibility of absolute transparency or trust in one's interpersonal relationships, including—and even especially—those contexts of greatest familiarity, such as kinship. As highlighted by Geschiere (2013: 1–33), family witchcraft reveals the ambiguity of intimacy; the intimacy of the house proves to be both comforting and menacing at the same time. The closest relationships turn out to be the most dangerous. And yet witchcraft can also come from elsewhere, as illustrated by genital theft. Navigating the city amidst strangers is a familiar experience for every urban dweller, but it can also prove uncanny. In this case, insecurity stems from the uncertainty that looms over anonymous face-to-face encounters: in not knowing the stranger's intentions, a seemingly harmless act (such as a light touch) or an act of solidarity (such as a greeting) becomes impossible to interpret. All contact with strangers takes on a potentially dangerous aspect, especially when initiated by them, as is always the case. This could easily turn into an unpleasant encounter, so best to keep one's guard. In a discussion of this book's original edition, Geschiere (ibid.: 228) criticizes this opposition between family witchcraft and genital theft, which he deems too radical, and suggests instead that "even here it remains important to look for unexpected links with the witchcraft from 'inside the house' that also constantly emerges in the anonymity of the city; but this may require a more in-depth following of cases of supposed 'penis-snatching' and their mixture of familiarity and strangeness in everyday contexts." It is worth repeating that the contrast I make between family witchcraft and genital theft is ideal-typical in nature. It would be quite possible, even necessary, to complicate this picture of witchcraft by introducing intermediate forms of it, and dabbling with more refined continuities and discontinuities than those found here.[5] Nevertheless, the fact remains that genital theft is disconnected from kinship and household, without a single piece of evidence to the contrary in more than two hundred documented cases. We cannot, therefore, interpret it in terms of intimacy, kinship, and familiarity, as Geschiere would have us do.[6] We must accept that there

5. On this point, see the last section of Bonhomme (2012a).

6. Ironically, in a presentation of my ethnography on the Gabonese *nganga* during

can be different forms of witchcraft, predicated upon different forms of sociality, the occult side of which is revealed in each circumstance. While genital theft may yet relate to intimacy, this is of an entirely different nature to that shared by relatives or close acquaintances. Genital theft is a matter of personal intimacy, specifically one's "intimate parts." This is an intimacy removed from kinship and reduced down to the person and his or her bodily integrity. Genital theft concerns individuals who, away from the ambivalent comfort of their own home, and thrust into the familiar chaos of the city, now see their personal intimacy at stake in a context of an anonymous competition pitting all against all.

The acceleration of the rural exodus in the latter half of the twentieth century served to significantly increase the chances of anonymous encounters—even though Africans have crossed paths with strangers for centuries, be it in royal courts, in marketplaces along trade routes, or in the course of migrations. Inasmuch as urban life has extended the scope of human sociality in an unprecedented way, it has extended the scope of the occult as well. As Filip De Boeck remarks about Kinshasa, "witchcraft is no longer something from within. [. . .] Contrary to older forms of witchcraft, the witchcraft 'new style' is wild, random and unpredictable, without clear direction or intention [. . .]. Because the possible sources of witchcraft are often disconnected from kinship relations, the danger may now come from anywhere. One becomes bewitched in public places like markets and shops, and through relations with unrelated or anonymous people" (De Boeck and Plissart 2014: 203). What this comes down to fundamentally is the potential scope of interactions in which anyone can now fall victim. Luise White (2000: 22) puts it well by highlighting that occult rumors are not only new imaginings for new times, but also more specifically "new imaginings for new relationships." We can, moreover, propose a hypothesis regarding the emergence of these new kinds of witchcraft: that they came about through the mutation of preexisting forms that are constantly being recalibrated

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an Africanist seminar at the University of Chicago in 2004, the audience of which was comprised principally of the Comaroffs' graduate students, I was reproached for stating that the witches to whom the *nganga* referred were in most cases close relatives of the victims. From their point of view, this was not possible; the witch by definition had to come from without, and embody the occult threat of a capitalist modernity that lay outside the sphere of kinship. Conversely, Geschiere seems to question the idea that genital theft can really be disassociated from kinship. However, facts are stubborn things, and it is risky to dispense with those that do not seem to fit the theory, which is a form of "violence committed against data"—something that Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (1996) has strongly warned against.

to adapt to a new sociocultural environment. Each transposition induces a series of adjustments with regard to modalities of aggression, the parties involved, the locations in question, etc. This theory can be supported by certain facts. In November 2005, a young Cameroonian woman causes astonishment aboard a bus in Duala when she suddenly starts screaming that she is the victim of a "mystical rape." "I was sitting down when I felt a tingling in my vagina. But also the strong sensations of a sex act. That's when I started screaming, just as if I was being f*****. Everyone turned around to stare at me, and that's when I pointed at the suspect, who had his hand down his pants and was touching himself" (*Mutations*, July 12, 2005; *Afrik.com*, July 13, 2005). The young woman is trembling with fear, and the accused is finally taken down to the police station, where he is held in custody, despite the absence of any concrete evidence. This is not an isolated case: there are repeated reports from bus drivers in Duala concerning these mystical rapes inside their vehicles. Mystical rape is not dissimilar to genital theft, of which it is to some extent a female variant. Of course, mystical rape involves two people of different sexes, as opposed to most cases of genital theft. But both forms of witchcraft overlap on various points: a focus on the sex organs, the accusation of a stranger, the context of urban traffic and public transport, being rooted in a somatic, emotional experience linked to fear (it is the strange sensation that the woman feels combined with her perception of the stranger's suspicious gesture that triggers the imputation of witchcraft). Yet mystical rape appears to be the result of a transposition of a preexisting form of witchcraft out of the family sphere. Those involved compare it to stories of incubi—sometimes called "husbands of the night"—that torment women by way of erotic nightmares (dreams about rape in particular), and that are often associated with suspicions of witchcraft within the family. Given the similarity between mystical rape and genital theft, it is possible to speculate that the latter also comes from an extension of the realm of witchcraft beyond the family sphere through a mutation of preexisting forms. The emergence of genital theft at the beginning of the 1970s in Nigeria may be the result of the transformation of a form of witchcraft that focused traditionally on the sex organs, and that has been adapted to the environment of urban traffic, in a context where encounters between strangers are particularly sensitive, perhaps because of the interethnic tensions provoked by the Biafran War (1967–70).

By contrast to family witchcraft, genital theft represents a "new style" witchcraft, which bears witness to the dynamics of the reconfiguration of the occult in contemporary Africa. It bespeaks Africa's occult modernity. And it is far from

being alone in this: genital theft is neither the only, nor indeed the first, of these previously unheard of forms of witchcraft to have escaped the household and the sphere of kinship. Since the beginning of the 1990s, an entire current of research has reinvigorated Africanist studies by insisting on the intractable modernity of African witchcraft (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Bernault and Tonda 2000; H. L. Moore and Sanders 2001; Meyer and Pels 2003). Anthropologists have long thought that religious traditions and witchcraft constituted the cultural vestiges of a rural Africa inevitably destined to disappear. History has proved them wrong, however. Max Weber's Eurocentric conception of modernity as an unequivocal process of "disenchantment of the world" has shown itself to be too simplistic. All across Africa, anthropologists are continuously finding new examples of the abiding persistence of witchcraft. Large urban centers in particular are marked by the proliferation of previously unknown forms of occult aggression, as well as new healing rituals. The fragmentation of systems for interpreting misfortune is accompanied by an increase in the number of types of remedies and punitive systems. African city dwellers themselves mention a worrying resurgence in witchcraft, now running wild—a revealing mind-set, though one that has proved very difficult to quantify, as Mary Douglas (1970a: xx) remarked. For many Africanist researchers, this demonstrates that contemporary African witchcraft cannot be analyzed in terms of tradition alone, but should be placed in a context of colonial and postcolonial modernity characterized by ever more globalized sociocultural flows. Witchcraft is not only part of modernity; it is about modernity: African popular discourses about witchcraft are but a "metacommentary on the deeply ambivalent project of modernity" (Sanders 1999: 128). The twin expressions "modernity of witchcraft" and "witchcraft of modernity" have thus become the master tropes of academic discourse on the occult in Africa.

Economy and politics—the two spheres of social life that have been the most profoundly affected by the changes linked to colonial and postcolonial history—represent the focal areas of study in the search to demonstrate this theory of witchcraft modernity in Africa. Witchcraft is intimately connected to the exercise of political power within the context of the modern state (Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Geschiere 1997; Ciekawy 1998). Harry West (2005) has shown by example how, in Mozambique, the language of witchcraft has generated a crucial lexicon relating to power and the profound transformations the latter has undergone since the beginning of the twentieth century, from colonization

by the Portuguese to recent democratic government, passing through Marxist guerilla warfare. But witchcraft is also connected with the modern economy. The language of witchcraft serves to describe—and often criticize—new ways of accumulating wealth (Ndjio 2012). Zombie stories are a good example of this: some witches are suspected of having turned their victims into zombies and put them to work for their own profit. Certain places are even said to host invisible labor camps, where hordes of servile zombies are exploited. Having probably surfaced in the first three decades of the twentieth century, this rumor provoked genuine anxieties in Cameroon and several other regions of Africa (Geschiere 1997: 137–68; Comaroff and Comaroff 2002). Relying on the magical transformation of the human workforce into material goods, this previously unheard of form of witchcraft provides an explanation for new strategies of wealth accumulation (but also conjures up memories of the slave trade or of the forced labor on plantations during the colonial era); the witch is said to "sell" his victim, who then wastes away and dies as the former grows fabulously wealthy. The Duala of Cameroon consider, moreover, that this new form of witchcraft, known as *ekong*, spread with the rise of the salaried classes, and the influx of money that this brought with it (Rosny 1981: 97–111). Economic and political modernity in Africa sees itself accompanied by a worrying extension of the realm of the occult.

An occult puppet-master pulling the strings of government or an entrepreneur made rich through the labor of zombies, the witch is meant to personify the idea of menacing modernity. As the Comaroffs highlight, witches are "modernity's prototypical malcontents," inasmuch as they embody the contradictions of the experience of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxix). This diagnosis is undoubtedly relevant, and rumors of genital theft could easily fit into such an explanatory scheme. Yet it should not be forgotten that witchcraft can just as easily involve "things traditional," including in contemporary contexts (Sanders 2003). In any case, "traditional" and "modern" witchcraft are ideal-types, to which a strictly chronological meaning should not be ascribed. These terms designate not so much time periods as they do levels of scale that interlink contemporaneously. In cities, rumors, like those of zombies, mystical rape, or genital theft, can coexist alongside family witchcraft, which is undoubtedly rooted in "tradition," but also bears witness to contemporary reconfigurations of kinship in urban environments and in translocal spaces (since an urban dweller or a migrant living abroad can still be bewitched by his relatives from the village—on this point, see Geschiere 2003). These various forms of

witchcraft can even overlap at times: for instance, when a witch is suspected of having transformed his own kin into zombies.

It is regrettable, moreover, that the argument about the link between witchcraft and modernity remains "suggestive, not demonstrative," as Sally Falk Moore (1999: 305) puts it in her comments on the Comaroffs' lecture on occult economies. Indeed, it amounts to turning "general context into particular explanation" (ibid.: 306). Studies on the witchcraft of modernity often rely upon a somewhat loose articulation between the local (the phenomenon under study) and the global (which serves as an explanatory framework). Hence the abstraction of their conclusions: new forms of witchcraft are said to express popular discontent with—or at least ambivalence toward—modernity, globalization, "millennial capitalism," or the "culture of neoliberalism." Though this interpretation may be true, there is a danger that we may move away from fine-grained ethnographic analysis toward a metanarrative based on macrosociological abstractions mixed with a dash of cultural relativism (Englund and Leach 2000). The Comaroffs themselves are fully aware of these analytical pitfalls: at the end of their lecture, they observe that tropes such as globalization (to which we could add modernity, capitalism, or individualism), "like all catchwords and clichés, are cheapened by overuse and underspecification, by confusing an expansive metaphor for an explanatory term. As a result, much of what is currently being written about them in the social sciences is Anthropology Lite, fact-free ethnography whose realities are more virtual than its virtues are real" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 294). The macrosociological concept of modernity will remain devoid of any relevance, unless it is more finely particularized and broken down into interactional repertoires open to ethnographic scrutiny. This is why the microsociological approach I have taken here provides a more adequate scale on which to describe the phenomena and their causalities more precisely. In the fine details of each interactional situation, we have sought to uncover which factors in particular are in play regarding the rumor. It transpires from this that genital theft does not express a widespread anxiety in the face of modernity; rather it focuses more precisely on the dangers of anonymity, which is an interactional repertoire typical—and even constitutive—of modernity (Bonhomme 2012b). By putting forward a new way of tying together micro and macro levels of analysis, our approach enables us to cast fresh light on Africa's occult modernity. It illuminates how the wide-ranging dynamics of modernity affect the minutiae of human interaction, and how occult imagination can pervade even the most basic aspects of everyday life.

CHAPTER FIVE

Danger: No Greeting

Genital theft occurs when an individual encounters a stranger in a public urban space. This meeting triggers a fear response, which itself incurs an aggressive reaction from the people nearby—with the intense preliminary diffusion of the rumor acting as a catalyst to proceedings. Handshakes between strangers generate the strongest concerns, to the extent that new techniques for avoiding greetings come into practice (to avoid not only having one's own genitals stolen, but also being accused of stealing someone else's while shaking their hand).[1] The social consequences of the genital theft rumor are quite real, affecting the rules that govern interpersonal relationships. This is heavily emphasized in all the statements of the victims, the people interviewed in the media, and the journalists themselves. In order to defend themselves against genital theft, some resort to the kind of amulets that are commonly used against witches: "'Now, everyone is taking precautions,' concludes one public official as he admits to carrying several 'fetishes' and other 'gris-gris' on his person, to protect himself against these people with supernatural powers" (AFP [Libreville], March 27, 2001). In

1. During the Ebola crisis that struck West Africa in 2014, people also started to avoid handshakes for fear of contagion by contact. In Liberia, a new style of greeting, known as the "Ebola handshake," became popular: people touched elbows (while wearing long sleeves) instead of shaking hands. In Sierra Leone, some village chiefs even prohibited handshakes and threatened to fine the contraveners.

Cameroon and Nigeria, in 2009, the word is that a lump of coal, a chili pepper, or a safety pin is effective against genital theft (*Journal du Cameroun*, February 24, 2009; *Weekly Trust*, July 11, 2009). But faced with the unfamiliar threat of genital thieves, these talismans constitute a very uncertain means of protection. It is better to simply avoid greetings altogether. In Gabon, a journalist recommends: "What advice can we offer the people of Port-Gentil in the meantime? Other than keeping their hands in their pockets, and avoiding all unexpected handshakes. Their friends may not be who they think they are" (Afrik.com, March 29, 2001). "From the moment I first heard this story, I started reminding my husband and sons every day not to go around greeting people every which way," declares one Gabonese woman (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). The worry is so profound that "the residents of Port-Gentil make sure not to brush against strangers as they walk past them. And as for handshakes, these have now been banished, except among relatives and old friends" (AFP, October 17, 2005). In Mali, the newspapers make similar pronouncements: "People of the capital, take heed! Do not shake hands with people you do not know, in case you too find yourself exposed to the same misfortune as our friend here [an alleged victim of genital theft]" (*Le Soir de Bamako*, November 26, 2004). And in Niger too: "This state of affairs means that these days, nobody shakes hands in Agadez anymore" (*Aïr-Info*, April–May 2004). Or yet still: "many people limit themselves to waving" to avoid any direct contact (APA [Niamey], March 23, 2007). The fear is so vivid that the very tenets of religion itself are shaken; the genital theft rumor "has now invaded our mosques too, where the congregation is loath to shake hands after prayer, as decreed by the Prophet in his Sunnah" (APA [Niamey], March 23, 2007). There is a heightened tension underlying communion among the faithful, which is generally expressed by a mutual handshake, for fear of the treacherous greetings of the genital thieves. In Gambia, "as this situation became more worrying, it was announced that the people, especially the male youths of Lamin, should be very careful about whom they shake hands with, while many of them now walk the streets of the village with their hands in their pockets, to be on the safe side" (*Expo Times*, September 13, 2002). In Nigeria, one observer even notes that "men could be seen in the streets of Lagos holding onto their genitalia either openly or discreetly with their hands in their pockets. Women were also seen holding onto their breasts directly or discreetly by crossing their hands across the chest. It was thought that inattention and a weak will facilitated the taking of the penis or breasts. Vigilance and anticipatory aggression were thought to be a good prophylaxis" (Ilechukwu 1992: 96). And finally,

in Sudan, one journalist also warns: "I consider it my duty to warn anyone who wants to come to Sudan to refrain from shaking hands with a dark-skinned man. Since most Sudanese are dark-skinned, he had better avoid shaking hands with anyone he doesn't know" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003). Two cartoons appear in the Sudanese press to highlight the issue. In one, a man shakes another man's hand using a prosthetic, telling him: "Prevention is better than cure." In the other, an armless man declares: "Thank God I don't shake anyone's hand and no one shakes mine."

The moral that those involved draw from these matters affects the rules governing ordinary sociality. All their comments highlight the distinction between strangers and familiars, between the public and private spheres. Don't greet strangers on the street! Don't interact with strangers as you would your acquaintances! In Sudan, whereas most cases of genital theft involve a handshake, one singular (and frankly quite dubious) occurrence stands out from the usual scenario: at the market, a stranger approaches someone and hands him a comb, asking him to brush his hair with it; as soon as the man obliges the stranger, his penis disappears. In this instance, the theft relies on an imposition of physical contact via a personal object belonging to a stranger. The journalist reporting the subject adds his own revealing comment: "You jackass, how can you put a comb from a man you don't know to your head, while even relatives avoid using the same comb?!" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003). As in the more typical scenarios, here again we find the same dangerous overlap between the personal and the unknown.

In this regard, we can allow ourselves a comparison between genital theft and another rumor that has resurged on several occasions since the 1980s, particularly in Cameroon, Gabon, and Congo. A woman, always a stranger, calls on people to ask them for a glass of water (or sometimes to use the bathroom), a completely mundane, ordinary situation. Those who invite her in for a drink are said to die mysteriously not long after. The rumor appears for the first time in Cameroon in 1984; the witch is reputed to be a *Mami Wata* (a female water spirit often associated with sirens, and a common figure across Africa). The following year, the rumor reaches Gabon, and then Brazzaville, where the woman is now said to be Gabonese by birth. Other than refusing the stranger's request for a glass of water, the only effective defense consists in pouring ashes along the landing of the house, or else to hang palm fronds from it (palm leaves are traditional wedding and funeral decorations, and are thought to also have the power to banish evil spirits). Such is the scale of the fear that, in just a few

days, palm fronds begin to appear in every neighborhood. Twenty years later, in October 2007, the same rumor strikes several towns in Cameroon once more (*Mutations*, October 2, 2007; *Cameroon Tribune*, October 3, 2007; *Le Messager*, October 5, 2007; *La Nouvelle expression*, October 17, 2007). This time, the word is that the witch is an old lady carrying a baby on her back. In Ebolowa, she is even referred to specifically as "Maman Martha." Several women fitting the description of the "killer granny" find themselves all but lynched as they are going about their business in certain neighborhoods. The mysterious woman returns to Gabon that same month; rumor spreads that she comes from Lambaréné and is on her way to Libreville. The only way to escape death is to offer her a glass of salt water. The media help to relay the rumor and sow panic. But the stranger ultimately spares the capital and, for reasons unknown, appears to call a halt to her murderous tour in Ntoum, some twenty miles outside of Libreville. Regarding the Congolese episode in 1985, Joseph Tonda (2005: 193–94) interprets the rumor through the prism of the HIV/AIDS epidemic: this foreign woman represents the deadly virus transmitted through an exchange of water, which itself is a symbolic equivalent of semen. I find it dangerous, however, to ascribe a hidden symbolic meaning to the rumor. We would be better served to confine ourselves to the primary significance of events in order to gauge what is actually behind the rumor. Offering a stranger a glass of water constitutes a fundamental rule of hospitality in Central Africa. It is often the first gesture made upon a visitor's arrival. The rumor conjures up a stranger who enters the domestic space, only to betray her chosen hosts' hospitality; in exchange for water, she offers death. The only solution to protect oneself is to refuse her this minimal hospitality; to not give her anything to drink, or else to offer her a glass of undrinkable salt water. The moral of this story of betrayed hospitality is ostensibly the same as that of genital theft (even though the encounter takes place at the threshold of the domestic space rather than in the public space): it is best to be wary of strangers who ask something of you.

By forcing people to remain on their guard, these two rumors lead to a temporary inversion of the communal norms governing ordinary sociality. Commentaries on the subject of genital theft recommend avoiding strangers, and even go so far as to advocate, beyond mere vigilance, a particular form of preventative aggression against unknown individuals. These recommendations are strikingly reminiscent of the rules of conduct surrounding urban traffic in Western cities. Georg Simmel refers to the "slight aversion" that subconsciously drives city-dwellers to keep others at arm's length: "Outer reserve is not only

indifference but, more often than we are aware, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of a closer contact" (Simmel [1903] 1950b: 415–16). This reserve is much more a Euro-American behavioral trait than an African one, however. The urbaneness (or civility) that etymologically underscores the city ethos has its origins in the royal courts of Europe, to be reinforced in the bourgeois society of large towns (Elias [1939] 2000: 47–72). By promoting emotional self-discipline, this civilizing process imposes a controlled distance between oneself and others. In Europe, as in North America, propriety dictates that contact between strangers be kept to a minimum. The observing of "civil indifference" aims to keep strangers in a state of anonymity, and thus reasserts the crucial social distinction between the public and private spheres. To approach a stranger on the street is not the done thing, or at least it should not be done without good reason. To do so constitutes an infraction, however slight, of the codes of reserve between strangers, and normally requires an almost trivial ritual of repair in the form of preliminary excuses: "Excuse me, I beg your pardon, but would you be able to . . ." Similarly, to greet passers-by unnecessarily would appear incongruous. In North America, more so even than in Europe, any sustained eye contact would be considered rude, if not aggressive. But one should not be too quick to generalize regarding these rules of civility. This is one of the criticisms frequently made of Erving Goffman's sociology, in that his symbolic interactionism tends to hold up the behavior of the white urban North American middle classes as a universal truth. While urbanization is a universal phenomenon that engenders a specific mode of sociality, the latter develops differently depending on the culture and the period in question; people in Berlin, Chicago, Shanghai, or Dakar do not experience city life the same way as one another. As a rule, reserve between strangers is not as enshrined in African cities as it is in European metropolises. This is not to revive old clichés of a warm, undisciplined Africa versus a cold but civilized West; nor the overgeneralized opposition between cultures of contact and avoidance (E. T. Hall 1966: chapters 11–12). Within a single culture, social distance varies according to many different factors (location, people present, gender, age, status). And I am also not suggesting that new African city dwellers are "strangers to the city" (Plotnicov 1967) who have yet to properly internalize the urban ethos, and continue to act like rural folk. As Max Gluckman (1960: 57) put it quite rightly, "an African townsman is a townsman." The emergence of the genital theft rumor is not the symptom of an unstable transition between a rural way of life (supposedly based on contact) and an

urban way of life (supposedly based on distance). Nevertheless, rules of urban sociality in Africa do not demand as much distance between strangers as do those in Europe and North America. It is easier—and more common—to approach a stranger in Libreville or Bamako than it is in the Parisian metro or on a New York street.[2] This goes hand in hand with a rejection of anonymity, which Congolese anthropologist Augustin-Marie Milandou highlighted so well in the working-class neighborhoods of Brazzaville:

> In a bus or a taxi, it is impossible to complete a long journey without someone talking to you at one moment or another. [. . .] Like any villager, city dwellers find it very difficult to remain indifferent to the presence of others, even strangers; they simply must talk to them. They are masters in the art of making friends and building relationships. [. . .] And when, after all is said and done, these residents of the less affluent parts of Brazzaville find themselves faced with a complete stranger, they have a very effective method of dealing with this: an immediate affirmation and establishment of kinship. (Milandou 1997: 124–25)

Similarly, in Gabon, two strangers meeting for the first time will try to identify a family connection—however distant or fictitious—in order to build an acquaintance. One's grandfather, for instance, will turn out to be from the same clan as the other's, which makes him the other's classificatory grandfather. Interethnic clan connections only serve to increase yet further the possibilities for opportunistic kinship, preventing an individual from ever being a stranger anywhere. In the precolonial era, this system of clan interconnections was already used by long-distance traders to find host families in the course of their journeys to distant villages (Dupré 1972: 629). Mutual acquaintance is not only valued; it is actively sought out of a general enthusiasm for new encounters. Physical contact between strangers in the public space is not something to be systematically avoided either. And it is completely normal to shake hands with a perfect stranger (Nwoye 1993: 47). Conversely, distance, coldness, and anonymity are

2. In one sequence of the mockumentary *Borat* (2006), the provocative comedian Sacha Baron-Cohen, who, in the title role, plays the role of a foreigner little versed in local customs, tries to greet strangers in the subway and on the streets of New York. Startled, these real-life passers-by display strong reactions: they flee in panic, scream "Don't touch me!," or instantly become aggressive. This is a good illustration of how extreme North American sensibilities regarding physical contact between strangers can be.

all perceived in negative terms as something typical of white people. Rosalind Shaw (1997: 860–61) remarks that, among the Temne of Sierra Leone, "the Temne word for 'Europeanness' or 'Western ways' (*ma-potho*) designates a range of antisocial behavior—living a secluded life, exchanging abrupt greetings, not stopping to talk, not visiting others, eating large quantities of meat, and eating alone without inviting others—all of which are defining features of Europeans in Temne experience." In short, strangers in African cities approach one another, they greet and touch one another, and they interact with one another quite comfortably.

The genital theft rumor, seen in this light, is all the more striking, in that it encourages people to impose a distance between one another, something which cannot in itself be taken for granted. It forces African city dwellers to act as anonymous passers-by in a sea of other anonymous passers-by. Suddenly, they are no longer allowed to greet strangers, as if this were a bad habit ill-suited to urban life. In a similar vein, the rumor of the woman asking for a glass of water calls into question codes of hospitality toward strangers. These two rumors resist any functionalist explanation, therefore, such as that so widely applied to African witchcraft by British anthropology during the 1950s and 1960s.[3] Following the functionalist paradigm, witchcraft should encourage conformity among individuals (who want to avoid becoming a target of accusation), and reaffirm the moral values of the group (Gluckman 1955). As edifying parables, stories of witchcraft serve to stigmatize deviant behavior. The solitary sorcerer transgresses the rules of kinship solidarity and its redistributive ideology; the incestuous or homosexual sorcerer the rules of sexuality; and the cannibalistic sorcerer the rules of commensality. A unanimous condemnation of witchcraft should lead to functional reinforcement of collective values. Yet such an explanation is not enough to satisfy the issue of genital thieves, or killer grannies, for these lead people conversely to doubt their own codes of conduct. Instilling as they do an unprecedented feeling of insecurity, they call into question the customary rules of everyday sociality, to an unsettling degree. In Senegal, several commentators lament the fact that, in creating this sense of mistrust toward strangers, the genital theft rumor calls into question the concept of *teraanga*, hospitality, which constitutes one of the cardinal values of Senegalese society.

3. For a criticism of functionalist explanations of witchcraft, see Douglas (1970a) and Augé (1975: chapter 4). Both authors highlight the contradictory diversity of social functions commonly attributed to witchcraft.

The Archbishop of Dakar, for his part, in his own appeals for calm, expresses his regret: "In our traditions, if we are no longer able to extend gestures of greeting, trust no longer prevails. Handshakes and greetings have a symbolic value that expresses peace; and so if mistrust and fear were to banish them from life in Africa, it would be a sad loss indeed" (*Le Soleil*, August 5, 1997). Max Gluckman (1972: 2) once observed that situations of "moral crisis," in which people's behavior is torn between contradictory social norms or values, are a hotbed for witchcraft accusations. In my view, genital theft brings about just such a situation of moral crisis (as opposed to its being the result of a preexisting crisis). Rumors, in a general manner, do indeed reveal the tensions and contradictions underlying uncertain social situations. The personal account of a Togolese man, interviewed for a radio program on genital theft in 2005, illustrates this tension perfectly (Radio Lomé, 2005). The man says that he feels confused because he does not know how to behave in the street anymore; he is torn between his resolution not to shake hands with strangers for fear of genital thieves, and the social obligation to greet others for fear of being overtly rude. The rumor puts urban sociality to the test (just as rumors about the killer granny put hospitality toward strangers to the test).[4] Exposed to the hazards and dangers of anonymity, urban sociality appears torn between contact and distance. However, the instruction to avoid strangers cannot long withstand the strong social preference for contact (being permanently wary of everyone soon becomes unbearable). As soon as the rumor vanishes, life returns to normal, and strangers start shaking hands again.

From this point of view, the "free hugs" movement in Western cities represents an inverted form of genital theft. The principle consists in someone standing in a public space and offering passers-by a friendly embrace. This free gesture of goodwill is meant to provide a panacea against the cold, self-centered individualism of large cities. With a view to neutralizing the fear that comes of being approached by a stranger, these do-gooders hold up a banner with their intentions marked out clearly in big letters. First attempted in a shopping mall in Sydney in 2004, the campaign then spread to cities in North America and Europe, but also Asia, especially via videos posted online. The idea has since been taken up by advertisers, most notably in a film seeking to undo the stigma of people living with HIV. A comparison between the free hugs movement and genital theft is less incongruous than it may seem at first, despite the fact that

4. On scandal as a test of values, see Dampierre (1954); Blic and Lemieux (2005).

these social phenomena stem from two very distinct cultural areas. Their respective cultural success derives from the fact of their calling into question—one through friendly provocation, the other through a fear rumor—common rules of everyday sociality, by playing on the tension between contact and avoidance in urban traffic. Free hugs put Western norms of reserve to the test of contact, while genital theft puts African norms of contact to the test of reserve. Rumors of genital theft thus illuminate one aspect of Africa's own version of urban sociality: how African city dwellers experience the tension between distance and proximity, and between strangeness and familiarity in their daily lives. "The making of a new Africa lies in the city, for better or for worse," announced Georges Balandier ([1955] 1985: vii) some decades ago. African cities are indeed places of experimentation for new social relations (Simone 2004). The genital theft rumor reveals all the ambiguity of this burgeoning urban life, and highlights its occult side.

CHAPTER SIX

The Foreigner

There is one significant characteristic of the accusations relating to genital theft that we have yet to tackle: xenophobia. In addition to the fact that the alleged thieves are always strangers, they are also often foreigners. The designation "strangers" includes all those who do not form part of an individual's network of acquaintances; whereas "foreigners" are defined as those who do not belong to his or her group of reference. This social category does not simply encompass anyone from a different nation (i.e., immigrants), but varies depending on the context: it is possible to be foreign to a neighborhood, a region, a country, an ethnicity, a religion, etc. (Shack and Skinner 1979; Coquery-Vidrovitch et al. 2003). The latter category falls only partially within the former, given that some foreigners are not strangers, and vice-versa. The fact remains, however, that, in social encounters, foreigners are often taken to personify the abstract figure of the stranger. Urban life has led to a significant increase in the number of strangers one has occasion to meet day to day. Yet it would prove quite intolerable to remain in a state of pure anonymity that would imply total uncertainty regarding the identity of others. Personal identification based on biographical information is impossible between strangers. On the other hand, it is quite possible to rely on various perceptual clues (clothing, physical appearance, language, etc.) to classify a stranger along various categorical lines, such as ethnicity, nationality, or social status. This type of identification, often carried out automatically

and unconsciously, is termed categorical reasoning (Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000). It allows us to interpret a stranger's behavior in terms of certain social stereotypes. In cities, this has by necessity become the principal mode of identifying others: "The city created a new type of human being—the cosmopolitan—who was able, as his tribal ancestors were not, to relate to others in the new ways that city living made not only possibly but necessary. The cosmopolitan did not lose the capacity for knowing others personally. But he gained the capacity for knowing others only categorically" (Lofland 1973: 177). Ethnicity has by no means become irrelevant in large African cities. On the contrary, cosmopolitanism often leads one to perceive and treat strangers according to their presumed ethnic identities or nationalities (Cohen 1969: 1–6; Mitchell 1987: chapter 6). These inferences are based on a series of stereotypical clues: language, of course, but also distinct clothing, variations in skin color, certain bodily traits, or even occupation. This explains why instances of genital theft tend to revolve around foreigners; the easiest way to identify a stranger in the most basic terms is to categorize him or her as a "foreigner." The foreigner appears as the very prototype of the stranger. One case of genital theft, which reached me through a Dakar student whose neighbors had themselves been victims, gives a clear indication of this shift from stranger to foreigner in people's accusations. After the man had had his penis stolen by a stranger, some of the residents of the neighborhood set off to find the suspected thief in order to punish him and force him to restore the member. But, according to my witness's account, they made a mistake and set upon the wrong man based entirely on the fact that he was Ivorian, and that he "looked strange and had a French accent." They beat him up, with the man dying shortly after being taken to hospital. Generally speaking, in Senegal, those accused of genital theft are often those suspected of being *ñag*, a derogatory term used to designate foreigners from other African countries (especially south of Senegal), most notably those who are not Muslims.

The identities of those suspected of genital theft confirm the importance of these presumptions made about ethnicity or nationality. In Nigeria, they are often Hausa, an ethnic group from the north of the country. This concentration of accusations on Hausa can be found outside of Nigeria as well, for instance in Chad, Mali, Senegal, and Ivory Coast. This is the result of categorical reasoning based on certain ethnic stereotypes, including, among others, their clothing: Hausa genital thieves are identified by their long flowing robes that brush against people on their way past. Paul Stoller tells the story of a Hausa trader, originally from Niger, but who had been in Ivory Coast close

to thirty years, who was accused of genital theft at a market in Abidjan, and lynched by the crowd, who were able to identify him as Hausa "because of his grand boubou" (Stoller 2004: 818). In Senegal and Ivory Coast, Fula, who "can look like Hausa," as well as people from the Sahel "wearing boubous" are the targets of lynching too (AFP [Dakar], August 4, 1997; *Jeune Afrique*, March 19–25, 1997: 15)—which proves quite clearly the determining role played by stereotypes. This focus on Hausa is not incidental: in addition to Nigeria and Niger, they have a strong presence across a number of African countries (particularly in Cameroon, Chad, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Sudan), where they generally work as merchants, and sometimes live in distinct neighborhoods (Cohen 1969: 8–28; Skinner 1963: 307–20). The presence of significant Hausa diasporas across the whole of West and Central Africa could in part explain the extent of the rumor in this region of the continent. Hausa have already long since embodied the most familiar and most typical figure of the foreigner. As Georg Simmel ([1908] 1950a: 403) remarked, moreover, in his famous essay on the stranger, "the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as stranger." This quality of being foreign merchants can also serve to precipitate hatred and resentment against Hausa; economic tensions and inequalities latch on to the rumor and reinforce it. Indeed, this focus of the rumor on merchant communities can be found in cases of genital theft that do not involve Hausa (in Benin, for example). Another significant factor that can explain this stigmatization of the Hausa may be that they are often said to be specialists in aphrodisiacs and other remedies against impotence. They are thus associated with sexual problems. For having originated in Nigeria, genital theft rumors often shift from Hausa in particular to Nigerians in general, as if the rumor was being borne along by the memory of its homeland. This is the case in Ghana, Togo, Benin, Niger, and Cameroon. The incidents of genital theft that occur in Togo in December 2005 even go so far as to lead the Nigerian ambassador to organize a press conference with a view to dispelling rumors that his compatriots are spiriting away Togolese penises (Radio Lomé, December 9, 2005). It is worth noting that Nigerians often have a bad reputation in neighboring countries, where they are regularly associated with all manner of fraud, crime, and witchcraft, and occasionally subject to mass expulsions (Masquelier 2000). In Cameroon, moreover, the concentration of accusations and lynchings around people of Nigerian extraction also relates to ongoing border disputes between the two countries. According to one author, the fear of castration conveyed by the rumor may rest on an equivalence between national power and sexual

potency, with geopolitical relations being reflected in bodily contexts (Jackson 1998: 49–54). This is a tempting hypothesis, even though we have already seen that the focus on Nigerians derives from a more general pattern; local circumstances do serve to reinforce the stigma against Nigerians, but they are not enough in and of themselves to explain it.

As the rumor leaves West Africa behind, heading into Central Africa, the focus of genital theft accusations tends to shift in turn onto West Africans. In Gabon, the comments are telling: "Definitely something that came out of West Africa"; "It must be some kind of magic from the migrants who've just arrived in the country"; "We have to put a stop to these foreigners coming over here and spreading chaos" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). In light of their great numbers in this country, West African expatriates are often subject to categorical identification in this way; the Gabonese speak with particular disdain of the *Ouest-Af*, as if somehow these represented a homogeneous group (Gray 1998). As the rumor spreads further outward from Nigeria, so categorical identification spreads progressively from specific subgroups to the groups that subsume them. From Hausa to Nigerians, then from Nigerians to West Africans. Sudan is a particularly interesting example of this, in that it constitutes a borderline case allowing us to understand not only the logic governing xenophobic stigmatization, but also the dynamics of the rumor's transformation. Accusations of genital theft in Khartoum in 2003 focus, as in Gabon, on West Africans in the country, but also more broadly on "Blacks." It is no coincidence that the one and only wave of genital theft recorded there occurs during peace talks between the government in Khartoum and John Garang, long-time leader of the SPLA, the predominant South Sudanese rebel group. This civil war, having broken out in the early 1980s, stems, among other reasons, from divisions between the Christian and animist "Blacks" in the south, and the Muslim "Arabs" in the north. Yet 2003 also marks the beginning of the conflict in Darfur; in April, Darfuri rebels attack Al-Fashir, the regional capital, inflicting a bitter defeat on the Sudanese army. In September, just as rumors of genital theft first strike Khartoum, large-scale massacres are being committed in Darfur. The war in Darfur is a conflict between center and periphery, exacerbated by tensions between settled farmers and seminomadic herders, which themselves have arisen from the desertification of the surrounding region. But the conflict also stirs up opposition between Blacks and Arabs: the central government foments anti-Black racism to mobilize militias of "Arab" camel herders (*Janjawids*) against the local "Black" population. The genital theft rumor that

hits Khartoum in September 2003 has an undercurrent of anti-Black sentiment that is a direct reflection of the wider state of affairs at the national level, while simultaneously displacing this antagonism into a more general opposition between Sudanese and West Africans. But there is more: as soon as a Sudanese journalist working in Saudi Arabia goes on to report the issue in the Arab press, the principal character of the genital thief, bizarrely dubbed "Satan's friend," becomes "an imperialist Zionist agent that was sent to prevent our noble people from procreating and multiplying" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003). Lying at the eastern extent of the genital theft rumor's area of distribution, Sudan is at the crossroads of black Africa, Arab Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. The country represents a border zone between two different rumor cultures; no sooner does the African rumor of genital theft reach the Arab world than it quickly transforms to incorporate the theme of Zionist conspiracy, a common thread running through the ubiquitous anti-Semitic rumors across the region. These transformations are less the result of a natural distortion of the message as it spreads further and further (as per the entropic model of "Chinese whispers" studied in the social psychology of memory, starting with Frederic Bartlett's experiments in the 1930s) than of the existence of culturally distinct systems of rumor that act as attractors around which the message reconfigures itself. The ethnic, racial, or national stereotypes upon which identification of the alleged genital thieves is based, as well as the narrative patterns that the rumor follows, adhere in this way to laws of transformation. This serves to explain the rumor's area of distribution and its limits. At its northwestern extent lies Mauritania, a pivotal junction between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa constituting another interesting borderline case. The data relating to the episode of genital theft that occurs here between August and September 1997 are sadly too incomplete for us to assess whether the accusations polarize themselves correspondingly to relations between Arabs and Blacks. The most that we can draw from them is that those accused are most frequently Senegalese, the rumor having arrived in Mauritania from Senegal, in a context of mutual tension that has persisted since a border conflict between the two countries in 1989.

The rumor does not focus on just any category of foreigners therefore. Europeans, Lebanese, or Chinese, for example, are never suspected of genital theft, though they can be found everywhere across the whole continent.[1]

1. On rumors about the Chinese in Africa, see Sylvanus (2009).

"Whites" are not always beyond witchcraft, however. Along the entire length of the African coast, the transatlantic slave trade and its memory have given rise to many rumors of witchcraft that revolve around a central figure of the cannibal slaver (Shaw 1997; Isichei 2002: chapters 2–5). Up until the end of the nineteenth century, among the peoples of the Gabonese hinterland, terrifying stories circulate about white spirits who buy up slaves in order to eat them; these rumors are carefully maintained by the coastal populations, who use them to protect their commercial monopoly with the Europeans (Bonhomme 2006b: 501-2). A little later, during the colonial era, the figure of the white man reappears as a witch come to consume African vitality; one recurring rumor conjures up white vampires who feast on the blood of Africans (Musambachime 1988; Pels 1992; White 2000). In Tanzania, for example, "tales vividly described how a victim would be rendered unconscious and then hung head down in order to let the blood from the slit jugular drain into a bucket. The fluid was then transported by a fire engine to an urban hospital, where it was converted into red capsules. These pills were taken on a regular basis by Europeans who [. . .] needed these potations to stay alive in Africa" (Arens 1979: 12). This rumor of the white vampire probably emerges from somewhere along the Swahili coast in the last decade of the nineteenth century, before spreading throughout East and Central Africa in the 1920s. It reaches as far as Madagascar, where another rumor is going around suggesting that Europeans and Westernized Malagasy are stealing the livers, hearts, and blood of young people (Freeman 2004).[2] These African rumors are not dissimilar from stories of *pishtacos* and *sacaojos* that have existed throughout the Andes since the time of Spanish colonization (Oliver-Smith 1969; Molinié-Fioravanti 1991; Wachtel 1992). Usually linked to whites or *mestizos*, these terrifying figures are said to murder Indians and remove their fat or eyes. The fat is reportedly used to lubricate strange machines, make powerful medicines, or even fuel airplanes. In many countries of the Southern Hemisphere, there are also tales of organ stealing, the "products" of which go to feed the transplant markets of the North (i.e., Europe, North America, Israel) (Scheper-Hughes 1996 and 2000; Campion-Vincent 1997). The opposite rumor also exists in the Northern Hemisphere: in this

2. The last manifestation of this kind of rumor arises in 2013 on a tourist island north of Madagascar, where two Europeans and a Malagasy working in the informal sector of tourism are lynched and burned alive by a crowd accusing them of having killed and mutilated a young boy in order to traffick his organs.

case, victims who have had their kidneys or eyes removed are Western tourists traveling to Southern countries. All these rumors revolve around the troubling figure of the Other: witches, cannibals, vampires, and other organ thieves permit the expression—in fantastical terms—of situations of political, economic, and technological inequality born out of the colonial context. In contrast, genital theft involves an entirely different form of social otherness, for it is not directly tied to the white man and colonization; an otherness that, in a sense, is more closely associated with the intermixing of African populations in urban centers. As Misty Bastian (2001: 75) observed in a paper on modern witchcraft in Nigeria, "the sheer numbers of people around the urbanite makes it impossible for him or her to feel secure about the motivations and interests of others. Strangers do not, as in the rural areas, come from outside. They live next door or even in the next room." Following Simmel's conception of the stranger, genital thieves are therefore those who are both familiar and foreign at the same time, spatially near but socially far.[3] The relational tension that shapes everyday interactions with these familiar strangers serves to explain why they themselves are targeted.

Genital theft confirms the view accepted by many Africans themselves whereby witchcraft represents an awesome power that has been abused for purposes of destruction. This stands in contrast to the conception of the "magic of the whites," not more effective necessarily, but rather more constructive; whereas African witchcraft, according to oft-repeated popular discourse, is seen as being responsible for developmental failures across the continent. In one curious article, moreover, a Gabonese journalist rethinks the story of genital theft in terms of relations between Africa and the West (*L'Union*, June 20, 1997). Playing on the equivalence between sexual potency and political power, he turns the curse of witchcraft on its head to make of it the vehicle of an African renaissance. His article describes a dream with prophetic overtones:

> African witches came together around a table. One among them declared with a grave, mournful voice, "My dear brothers, we must act fast to rid ourselves of our penitential misfortunes: poverty, disease, armed conflict, and refugees have become our daily lot. Investors have abandoned us for Asia and Latin America. Let us play the West at their own game, they who seize our raw materials and sell

3. "As a group member, rather, he is near and far at the same time" (Simmel [1908] 1950a: 407).

> them back to us at a killing." The declaration was approved; the witches trained thousands of young people in the occult sciences and sent them to America and Europe to shake the hands of white men, who soon found themselves stripped of their male organs. In Washington, Paris, London, Bonn, and Rome, the newspapers furiously put out articles evoking the sense of panic among the great powers: "A strange ill, against which medicine is powerless, is threatening the world . . ." African statesmen sent messages of hope to their white counterparts: "Come, we can heal your missing members." And I saw a procession of a million Western men, determined to recover the instruments of their male pride, swarming to these makeshift "hospitals." Our hotels were filled to capacity, our countries' coffers were overflowing, the tourist sector was developed, our representatives at the UN secured the cancelation of our debt, and we all celebrated the resurgence of our unity.

This surprising reconfiguration of the genital theft story in the larger framework of relations between Africa and the West clearly demonstrates how witchcraft is a very productive mode of expression through which to view social relations, and on a scale that significantly surpasses the mere sphere of kinship (on this topic, see also Englund 2007).

The xenophobic component is one of the most significant aspects of the genital theft rumor, hence why it is regularly mentioned in press articles on the subject. Xenophobia serves to prolong the context in which events take place while provoking a stronger collective reaction. The crowd acquires a greater degree of consistency; instead of immediately dispersing after lynching the unfortunate suspect, it stays together and seeks out new targets among those communities that find themselves stigmatized by the rumor. When the rumor hits Senegal for the first time in July 1997, a Hausa finds himself accused of genital theft in Ziguinchor (*Le Soleil*, August 1, 1997). The crowds set upon him, before moving on to a neighborhood known for its many *dibiteries*, traditionally run by Hausa. Four other Hausa, despite having nothing to do with the original incident, are lynched, and gravely injured. Lynchings sometimes devolve into much more violent and bloody riots and looting. Benin provides an edifying example of this. In November 2001, the rumor of genital thieves comes to Cotonou. The accusations and violence crystalize around the Igbo population (an ethnic group from southeast Nigeria with a considerable presence in Benin since the Biafran war), recognizable from their pale complexion, and who usually work as traders

in the many marketplaces across the city.[4] Because of their alleged involvement in various unsettling incidents of theft, organized crime, and child trafficking, for many years the Igbo have suffered from an extremely poor reputation. Tensions brew. On Friday, November 23, 2001, a man is accused by a taxi driver of having stolen his penis after asking him for directions. He is also suspected of being Igbo (whereas in fact he is Congolese). The wretched man is immediately lynched. Burned, mutilated, and skewered, his corpse is then dragged through the streets by the crowd, who cry: "It's the Igbo, they're all thieves!" (quoted in Duplat 2002). The next day, a similar scenario plays out: an apprentice carpenter is accused of stealing the penis of a man whose hand he had just shaken (*Le Matinal*, November 2001). Despite the hammer blows he suffers to the head, as well as being stoned and doused in gasoline, the suspect manages to take refuge in his cousins' house. An enraged mob besieges the house. This alleged genital thief is also accused of being Igbo (whereas in fact he is Beninese). One family member tries in vain to intervene: "You're making a mistake! He's not Igbo, he's my son; he's Beninese just like you, and he hasn't stolen anyone's genitals." This is not enough to prevent hundreds of people from wrecking the house and attacking its inhabitants. The minimarket next door and a cybercafé are also looted. However, the suspect's relatives are miraculously able to calm the attackers by begging their forgiveness. Yet the crowd remains agitated and moves on to Red Star Square to attack all the Igbo traders working there, and ransack their stalls. This Igbo hunt continues all weekend. Missebo Market, where many Nigerians work, is also looted and destroyed. In just three days, riots, lynchings, and looting leave six people dead, and many injured, while causing significant material damage too.

In such extreme cases, the rumor rests on an opposition between groups, and not just individuals. Genital thieves are no longer a handful of disparate strangers—they are "them"; whereas the victims and the mob become "us." This antagonistic collective dynamic significantly increases the scope of the violence. It feeds, moreover, on preexisting interethnic or xenophobic tensions, and on the prevalence of intercommunity violence as a form of collective action (Horowitz 2001): in Nigeria, for instance, between the Muslim north and largely Christian south. In such a destructive context, the rumor has an essentially catalyzing role. Future victims are accused of being attackers before they are mistreated. Others

4. In neighboring Togo, Nigerian Igbo are equally the privileged recipients of accusations (Radio Lomé, 2005).

are said to have committed the very atrocities that are then perpetrated against them by the accusers themselves. Victims and attackers change places, or at least the line between them becomes blurred, since the attack is perceived as a legitimate act of defense. This performative role played by rumors of aggression in the propagation of hate can be found, moreover, in the anti-Semitic pogroms of Europe, the race riots of the United States, or the intercommunity violence of South Asia and Oceania (Knopf 1975; Tambiah 1996; Emde 2005). In 1960s America, rumors of a young white boy having been castrated by a black teenager were widely reported in the white community, for example; meanwhile, the opposite rumor circulated among African Americans (Rosenthal 1973). Similarly, in Delhi, following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984, the violence enacted by Hindus against Sikhs was directly preceded by rumors of emasculations being perpetrated by the latter (Das 1998). The strong emotional reaction triggered by the idea of emasculation only serves to fan the flames of hate and violence further.

Yet instances of genital theft cannot be reduced to xenophobia alone, however striking an aspect of it this may be. Quite often, the lynch mob sets upon an individual at random, without their being any clear identification of a "them." Just as often, lynch victims are fellow compatriots and not foreigners at all. In Nigeria, the issue originates in the early 1970s, with accusations concentrating around the Hausa in the north of the country. During the events that rock Ghana in 1997, Vivian Dzokoto and Glenn Adams (2005: 68) remark that "although sensationalist editorials initially suggested that the perpetrators of penis theft in the Ghanaian incidents were Nigerians, our analysis of these incidents suggests that the majority of those accused were Ghanaians." In Gabon, in 1997, one journalist observes the same thing: "Among the accused, 75 percent were Gabonese. Among the victims, 25 percent were foreigners" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). Four years later, when the rumor returns to the country once more, all those accused are Gabonese, with the exception of one Liberian, who is lynched and killed. Xenophobia does not, therefore, seem to be the only motivating factor behind the violence committed against genital thieves, even though foreigners are clearly overrepresented among the accused when one considers their numbers in relation to the total populations of the countries in question (the suspect's differing nationality being mentioned in 31 percent of the 180 documented cases in which the identity of the genital thief has been specified). This is why the many articles that focus exclusively on xenophobia, and seek to condemn it, are oversimplifying the matter. Accusations involve strangers above all,

but they tend to revolve around foreigners. The rumor of genital theft, therefore, bears witness to the shifting ethnoscapes of African cosmopolitanism.[5] It is intimately related to the two defining features of modern urban life. The figure of the stranger is associated both with urban anonymity and with ethnic diversity, the latter being a common feature of all major African cities since the colonial period.[6]

5. On ethnoscapes, see Appadurai (1996: 34).

6. As the agglomeration of a significant number of people within a relatively restricted space, cities by definition imply anonymity, but not always ethnic heterogeneity: the precolonial Yoruba cities, for example, were ethnically speaking relatively homogeneous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Front-Page News

In comparing family witchcraft and genital theft, we emphasized the fact that they were associated with two distinct forms of sociality: small mutually acquainted groups, on the one hand, such as families, villages, or neighborhoods; and the anonymous multitude of urban traffic, on the other. This distinction is also reflected in the contrasting scales in the mode of diffusion of witchcraft stories: gossip on one level, rumor on the other. Family witchcraft rests on gossip, which circulates within a network of kin members or acquaintances. Gossip is a typical communication process of small communities (Bergmann 1993; Besnier 2009). It relies on strong, transitive connections: one person tells someone else a story about a third party whom they both know personally. As a result, gossip concerning witchcraft can only circulate on a small scale, within the limits of a closed social network. Outside of this, it loses all value and relevance. In contrast to gossip, rumor revolves not around personal matters, but around news of a topical interest instead (Shibutani 1966; Fine and Rosnow 1976). Whereas gossip is always about people close to those involved, rumors more often relate to strangers, to groups, or categories of people, or to anonymous situations. In this sense, they do not presuppose any prior relation between the interlocutors. They rest on loose connections, which allow for a much wider propagation of their message than would stronger ones (Granovetter 1973). By the very fact that they consist of information that is of interest to virtually everyone—no

matter how unofficial, unverified, or uncertain—, rumors are able to travel very fast and very wide by word of mouth. They can circulate on a huge scale within an open social network. In this context, "new style" witchcraft must be considered as a witchcraft of rumor rather than gossip. Stories of genital theft, for example, are not about specific individuals, but evoke the more generic figure of a stranger, the anonymous passer-by who appears in everyone's day-to-day life. They therefore affect everyone. Hence they are able to spread on a transnational scale, unconstrained by the limitations of family witchcraft.

The intense circulation of the rumor creates a climate of fear and suspicion, providing optimal conditions for the breakout of incidents. The rumor captures the public imagination in the space of just a few days. Warnings spread very quickly via the *radio-trottoir*, or "sidewalk radio," an informal means of communication and discussion of news that in African cities directly competes with official outlets in the circulation of information (Ellis 1989; Nlandu-Tsasa 1997). Public transport and social hubs—such as marketplaces, *grand-places*, newspaper stands, or *maquis*[1]—, where current affairs and the latest gossip are enthusiastically dissected and debated, play a significant part in the transmission of rumors. This rumor in particular is passed on with even greater intensity, inasmuch as it would be dangerous to remain unaware of it, regardless of whether it eventually proves true or false. As one commentator from Senegal remarks, "with these types of stories, you can't be too careful" (*Walf Grand-Place*, November 21, 2007). Regarding the recommended mindset when confronted with rumors such as genital theft, one Dakar resident chooses to quote me a Wolof proverb: "Whether or not it bites, you don't put your hand out." This preventative function explains why "dread rumors" (which raise the specter of dire events) tend to be circulated more than "wish rumors" (which bring hope of fortuitous ones). In light of the anxieties that attend them, dread rumors are also more likely to generate their own consequences, irrespective of whether those who peddle them believe them to be true or not. The spreading of a rumor does not necessarily require the speaker to believe it; it is in fact the most reasonable thing to do, not only to warn those close to one, but also to test the credibility of the information. This allows one to know what other members of the group think of it, and to adjust one's own attitude based on their reactions. Not long

1. A *grand-place* designates an outdoor space, sometimes covered, where residents from the same neighborhood regularly gather to talk, and play cards or checkers. A *maquis* is an informal type of eatery.

after 9/11, both in North America and in Europe, one rumor circulated on a large scale: someone (often a friend of a friend) had been told to avoid a certain place (a large store, a station, or some other busy location) by an "Arab-looking" man on the street after picking up his lost wallet and returning it to him. No matter how little truth they may have attributed to the story, many still chose to pass it on to those around them, as much to gauge its credibility as to warn them not to go to these places—"just in case." The same applies to genital theft as to this urban legend of terrorist threat: when the stakes are high, it is better to be safe than sorry.

The propagation of rumors is also facilitated by the most modern forms of communication: in Khartoum, in 2003, the genital theft rumor spread very rapidly and very efficiently by text message. Given Africa's largely underdeveloped landline telephone infrastructure, the exponential boom in mobile telephony since the late 1990s has opened up new channels for the circulation of information, enabling rumors to spread (and even be created—see Bonhomme 2011). Furthermore, there are certain categories of people who have often served as active relays for the rumor, helping to alert as many people to them as possible. In Benin, for instance, these are the motorcycle taxi drivers, those who make up for the shortfalls in public transportation, better known as *zémidjan* ("get me there fast" in Fon). One public official issues a statement declaring: "People are being incited to commit acts of violence, under false pretexts of child snatching and genital theft, by small groups of individuals with ill intent, in particular motorcycle taxi drivers, commonly known as *zémidjan*" (*Le Matinal*, November 2001). He is not wrong: in Cotonou, on December 24, 2001, a woman suspected of genital theft is lynched, burned, and then dragged along the road behind a motorcycle by a *zémidjan*, thereby only encouraging more violence (AFP, January 12, 2002). Taxi drivers are themselves regularly implicated in matters of genital theft. They are more likely to be victims or members of the lynch mob than suspects, and the thefts often occur in their vehicles. In Nigeria, an entire local chapter of the motorcycle transport union even threatens to bring legal action against a man if he does not restore the allegedly stolen penis of one of their drivers (*AFP*, January 31, 2008). It should be noted that *zémidjan* are generally known to be suspicious and quick to act at the slightest sign of danger; particularly vulnerable as they are on their bikes, they are often the victims of attacks. Always on the move, ferrying people around, and coming into contact with a whole host of strangers, taxi drivers are often best placed to drive a rumor. They are the modern equivalents of the peddlers and traveling salesmen who actively

helped to spread rumors of famine conspiracies or the Great Fear of 1789 in the French countryside just before the Revolution (Kaplan 1982; Lefebvre [1932] 1973); or indeed similar to the servants in towns and cities around the same time who endlessly circulated from house to house and store to store (Farge and Revel 1991; Ploux 2003). In the case of genital theft, the rumor is compounded in both medium and message: strangers spreading a rumor warning of the dangers of interacting with strangers.

The central position occupied by Beninese motorcycle taxi drivers in the spread of the rumor can also be explained by the specific association that they have with the dissemination of information: *zémidjan* make up fundamental links in the chain of communication as regards the conversion of mainstream media stories into informal *radio-trottoir* news. In Cotonou and Benin's other large cities, radio press reviews broadcast in the country's national languages (most notably Fon) enjoy a sizable audience. Generally speaking, this kind of radio news has a wide appeal across Africa, in that it constitutes a privileged point of access to information for illiterate people, or those who do not understand French, in which the majority of newspapers are written (or English in English-speaking parts of the continent). Today, in Benin, the most famous radio news bulletin belongs to Dah Houawé, nicknamed "King Houawé," and is broadcast every morning on CAPP FM. Dah Houawé gives his own acerbic and mocking version of the news, focusing on the lighter items of the day in particular. Often criticized for its lack of serious content, this news review nevertheless remains extraordinarily popular, especially among the *zémidjan*, who take a break at the various listening posts scattered around Cotonou (such as newsstands) every day at 10.00 in order to listen to the program, and comment on the day's news with wit and vigor.[2] From the paper press to radio news to popular commentary, there are a number of different possible information channels between the media and the *radio-trottoir*. And the *zémidjan* occupy a strategic position in this polyphonic chain of dissemination and interpretation of information, lighter news, and rumors too.

It is clear, therefore, that the genital theft rumor spreads not only by word of mouth, but also as a result of the significant media coverage afforded it. In their analysis of genital theft cases in Ghana in 1997, Glenn Adams and Vivian

2. On *zémidjan* and Dah Houawé's news review, cf. V. Cagnolari's radio report, "À Cotonou, la capitale économique du Bénin," *On est où là?*, broadcast on July 30, 2007, Radio France Internationale.

Dzokoto (2007: 88) remark that, while most people hear about the rumor through the grapevine, a certain number of them cite newspapers, television, or radio as their original source of this information. My own interlocutors in Gabon and Senegal confirm the centrality of media in the rumor's circulation. Genital theft is a good illustration of how the popular conception of witchcraft in Africa is one that is not only borne along by the media, but actively shaped by it too.[3] Whereas, according to Peter Geschiere's estimation, the first decades after independence saw people reluctant to speak openly about witchcraft, it has now become a free topic of public discussion (Geschiere 2013: 182). This shift to a new regime of discourse occurred in the 1990s, due in part to the liberalization of the media sector, as well as the emergence of the so-called popular press. The media coverage given over to stories of witchcraft afforded them an unprecedented amount of publicity. One could speak of an extension of the scope of the occult in this respect, together with the paradox of the occult becoming more visible by public exposure. Henceforth, witchcraft is connected to the global flows of information and images driven by the mass media, which offer their audience new ways of imagining and experiencing reality—what Arjun Appadurai (1996: 35–36) refers to as "mediascapes."[4] Furthermore, considered alongside traditional forms of media (i.e., print press, radio, and television), electronic media have done even more to accelerate and widen this circulation. Yet genital theft cannot be reduced to a pure product of the media; newspapers, radio, and television only relay the rumor once the first "cases" have occurred. But, even though the rumor is not a complete media fabrication, the latter do nevertheless help it to achieve more significance and widen its audience. The technological infrastructure the media enjoy facilitates a form of mass communication whose influence is weighted heavily in favor of their own particular versions of the rumor, as opposed to those spread by word of mouth. The mass media also play a decisive role in the diffusion of the rumor on a larger, transnational scale, and no longer simply a local one. Without the media in play, genital theft would almost certainly not have known such broad success across the continent.

3. On the media coverage of witchcraft stories, see Bonhomme (2015).

4. Alongside the popular press, cinema is another form of mass media that serves to popularize stories about witchcraft on a global scale: extremely popular throughout Africa since the 1990s, Nigerian or "Nollywood" movies have made witchcraft one of their favorite subjects.

It is possible, for example, that a radio station as popular as Africa n°1, broadcast throughout French-speaking Africa, could be responsible for the rumor's international circulation (though it is harder to find traces of it here than in print media archives), especially in light of the regular coverage given to matters of witchcraft on the radio: in the first decade of the twenty-first century, two shows on Africa n°1, *Triangle* and *L'Aventure mystérieuse*, in which Franco-Gabonese star presenter Patrick Nguema Ndong showcases stories of the occult, are internationally famous. Surrounded by specialists in "African mysticism" (such as marabouts, *nganga*, or pastors), Nguema Ndong relates and offers his views on countless tales of witchcraft, answering listeners' questions live. Radio therefore plays a leading role in the mediatization of witchcraft stories, particularly through interactive programs, during which listeners can call in with their own personal experiences. In providing a platform for popular discourse on witchcraft, these kinds of programs have a direct link to the rumors spread by word of mouth.

The genital theft rumor is also reported in newspapers, in the tabloids naturally, but occasionally in the so-called serious press as well. There is, moreover, a relation of cause and effect between the rise of the popular press in the 1990s, following the liberalization of the media sector in many African countries, and the internationalization of the rumor during the course of the same decade (whereas genital theft had already emerged twenty years earlier in Nigeria).[5] Today the foreground of the media scene is occupied by a tabloid press made up of a plethora of different titles, all in direct competition, some only very short-lived. This commercial competition forces the press to dedicate a large number of column inches to the most sensationalist news items, among which stories of witchcraft feature heavily. Unusual rumors, in the mold of genital theft, are particular money spinners for the media, inasmuch as they take on an aspect of recurring novelty, with one story following another to fill the rapid demands of the news cycle. They are generally published toward the end of the papers in the "Society" or "Miscellaneous" sections, which they share with sordid crime stories, and other strange news items ("mystical" phenomena, swindles carried out by "fake marabouts," etc.). But they are often also splashed across the front page under sensationalist headlines intended to grab the reader's attention (even if the content of the article within the paper is actually more nuanced). The way in which the readership of the popular press operates confirms the strategic

5. On the history of the African press, see Perret (2005); Frère (2000).

importance of the composition of the front page. Every morning, the kiosks and newsstands attract small crowds of curious individuals who drop in to browse the headlines, without necessarily intending to buy the papers, or indeed read the articles inside them. This cursory overview of the main stories goes on to fuel conversation throughout the course of the day. In West Africa, this form of reading is dubbed *titrologie*, and those who practice it are called *titrologues* (Bahi 2001). One should not view this simply as a lack of newspaper culture; in contrast, this represents a form of collective appropriation of the information provided by the press. And yet this undoubtedly favors the dissemination of less serious news items, of rumors, and of other stories about witchcraft.

The majority of journalists condemn and bemoan this sensationalist orientation, but are powerless to resist it, as an editor for one of Senegal's leading popular titles, *L'Observateur*, confided in me: "It's an extraordinary tabloid tendency within the press, not to mention a dumbing down. Take the example of our own paper, or of *Le Populaire*, *Walf Grand-Place*, *L'As*. These are some of the biggest titles in the Senegalese press. But they're tabloids. They write about things that people talk about at home. And these things are 10 percent truth and 90 percent rumor." The popular press draws its inspiration directly from the *radio-trottoir*. Journalistic discourse tends to align itself in this way with popular discourse. This is true with regard to both what is said and how it is said. Indeed, the popular press is characterized by its ubiquitous use of colloquialism, colorful language, excess, and derision. While the porous relationship between print media and oral rumor makes commercial sense, it is also the result of the journalists' limited professionalization, as well as limited means: little to no training, poorly paid, and with only informal channels of information to rely on, they are often forced to take hearsay as an authoritative source. These rumors then find themselves printed in articles full of impersonal turns of phrase that allow certain things, in defiance of journalistic ethics, to be reported without having to attribute any clearly identifiable provenance: "word is going around," "so they say," "people are whispering" "according to local reports," "so the story goes," "based on what our satellites are picking up," "from what our sensors, radars, and extendable ears have gathered," to name but a few choice examples from our casework. The effects of this tabloid style are felt across the journalistic spectrum, as the so-called serious press finds itself forced to deal in the day's trivialities, and rumors too, so as not to lose its readership to the competition. It does tend to adopt a more detached attitude in the face of these phenomena, however. Already in the mid-1990s, for example, Senegal's newspaper of record,

Le Soleil, lamented the fact that journalists were now condemned to live under the "tyranny of rumor" (*Le Soleil*, June 21, 1995). Similarly, Gabon's leading daily, *L'Union*, entrusts its editorials to Makaya (a *nom-de-plume*), an embodiment of the average Gabonese man on the street, who, in his trademark colloquial style, reports what he has heard on the *radio-trottoir* while discussing the issues in question using reasoned arguments. In June 1997, and then again in April 2001, Makaya dedicates his editorial to the topic of genital thieves.

The example of the Congolese popular press, studied by Nicolas Martin-Granel (1999), bears witness to journalism's ambivalence when confronted with rumor. The latter is perceived negatively as a "disease of information," a "silent epidemic" sometimes compared to malaria-carrying mosquitos. And yet in the context of democratization, "this parasitic spokesperson of the street" is also supposed to represent the direct expression of the people, the "voice of the voiceless in Congo," as one newspaper subtitle puts it. Even the titles themselves of the Congolese newspapers poke fun at this journalistic tendency for recycling rumor: *La Rumeur* ("The Rumor"), *Les Chiens écrasés* (lit. "The Run-over Dogs," the French equivalent of a journalistic dead donkey), *La Rue meurt* (lit. "The Street Dies," a play on the French word for rumor). The leading opinion piece in *La Rumeur*'s first edition presents rumor in the first person and gives it a voice, in such a way that could equally have been applied to stories of genital theft: "Just like stubborn mosquitoes, we come to whistle these words of intrigue in your ears to make your skin crawl, to irritate you, to enrage you." As we can see, popular discourse and journalistic discourse maintain a symbiotic relationship, with one feeding the other, and vice-versa. Hence this relationship between the mass media and popular culture should be thought of not as a sterile opposition between production and reception, but rather as a form of reciprocal mediation.

The print media's attitude toward genital theft is neither simple nor single-minded. As is often the case when it comes to reporting on matters of witchcraft, the popular press adopts "that inimitable style closely combining irony and fear, blind faith mixed with Cartesian doubt" (Henry and Kadya Tall 2008: 23). Ambivalence is indeed the defining characteristic of the media's handling of the rumor. It is in keeping with an editorial strategy strongly dictated by commercial logic. But it also echoes the attitudes of the journalists themselves with regard to these kinds of stories, as one Senegalese tabloid journalist confided in me: "Newspapers, television, radio, we can't just disentangle ourselves from society's currents. I'm a journalist, but I'm also Senegalese. When I'm at home, my mother, my sister, my wife, they tell me stories. And when you get

to work, you've already passed around so many rumors and whispers that it inevitably ends up rubbing off on what you do. You can't just throw off the yoke of society. And you don't even realize it when you're writing your article or your headlines."[6] While, according to one of his colleagues at *Le Populaire*: "As regards the press, we at least always try to exercise a certain restraint. To show judgment, and detachment. Because we mustn't see things from the same perspective as the general public. Even if we believe it, we don't believe it." These statements illustrate the double-think mentality adopted by journalists, torn between adherence to popular discourse and necessary but difficult critical detachment. Theirs is an ambivalent relationship with regard to stories of witchcraft, which they report on, or draw inspiration from in considerable measure, and yet all with a certain pinch of salt; they believe and do not believe at the same time.

The press's attitude swings uncertainly between propagation and denial, from stoking tensions to tentative appeasement. Newspapers generally begin by giving an account of the events in question, alternating their focus from the stories of genital theft themselves to the lynchings of the so-called guilty parties. But some publications go the extra mile in fanning the flames by contributing to the general panic and violence. In the November 30, 2006 edition of the *Cameroon Tribune*, we read: "Science has confirmed it. Open season on Nigerian penis snatchers" (quoted in Enguéléguélé 1998: 355). Similarly in Benin, on November 23, 2001, the day before the riots against alleged Igbo genital thieves, the headline on the front page of *Le Matin* reads in bold red print: "The penis snatchers are back!" The same day, the editorial of the—inaptly named—newspaper *Fraternité* dangerously stirs up xenophobic tensions: "Where do they think they are, these Igbo who have been polluting our country for so long now? Day by day, they are gradually turning Benin into a breeding ground for their treachery . . . No, it's gone too far. Since this situation is the result of the laxness of our competent (or rather incompetent!) authorities, we the citizens must make our own justice and form a nationalist party, a National Front. We must teach these Igbo discipline and restore order to our country!" (quoted in Duplat 2002). In sowing general alarm in this way, the media serve to transform genital theft into an issue of moral panic.[7] Isolated incidents thereby

6. It should be noted in passing that the speaker views gossip and rumor as an essentially feminine form of discourse, in line with a very widespread stereotype in Senegal, and elsewhere too (though clearly the facts prove otherwise).

7. On the notion of moral panic, see Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994).

take on new significance: what was previously just a trivial news story becomes an affront to collective values, a threat to the whole of society. The "dog rumor" provides another example of a sexually themed story that provokes a moral panic in West Africa (Froissart 1999). In April 1992, in Conakry, Guinea, a rumor spreads that a white man is bringing young Guineans back to his house in order to photograph them having sex with his dog. The rumor is so shocking that the European's house is destroyed at the hands of an enraged mob. In the days that follow, some young women wearing miniskirts are also assaulted. The violence leaves one dead and a dozen or so injured. Through the lens of this particular rumor, it is the way of life and sexual freedom of young women that become the focus of accusations.

In the case of genital theft, there are certain media channels that actively turn the rumor into a public scandal. This hinges on the condemnation of a guilty party, sometimes raised to the status of a collective tormentor (Boltanski, Darré, and Schiltz 1984); hence the accusations leveled against the Igbo as an ethnic group. The victim too attains the status of a collective body: the genital thieves are a threat to the national community as a whole. The media bring out a united "us" using strategies of identification between the journalists and their readership. This constant refrain of "us" is typical of the African press, where often "opinion trumps fact" (Frère 2000: 267). It is not enough to simply inform one's readers; they need to feel that they are affected. This shift to a collective mindset creates an "imagined community" through a rhetorical style that allows for a form of emotional harmonization. In this way, the editorial press acts to trigger a mobilization around a danger perceived to be imminent. The articles that condemn the genital thieves constitute veritable calls to action; they are "rich in virtual collective action" (Dampierre 1954: 338). Condemnation is in itself a speech act that functions as a form of remote violence, foreshadowing the very real violence of the lynch mob. As Marie-Soleil Frère (2005: 11) remarks, "a free press can also kill." One only needs to recall the sinister role played by Radio Télévision Libre de Mille Collines in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. The radio station broadcast its hateful propaganda against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu ad nauseam, inciting and directly contributing to the genocide with slogans such as "Kill all the cockroaches!" Likewise, with regard to genital theft—though the two are on a completely different scale—, various media outlets have played an active part in the propagation and exacerbation of hatred and violence.

Nonetheless, many journalists do carry out their work in a responsible manner, analyzing and verifying the facts before relating them, unafraid to deny

false information and to condemn the excesses of popular justice. During the events in Benin of 2001, a press release from the Observatory for Deontology and Ethics in the Media condemns the hateful editorial published in *Fraternité*, but congratulates numerous press organs on their own articles condemning the lynch mobs and denouncing the rumor as false (Duplat 2002). These media denials tread a perilous line, however. Studies have shown that the fact alone of repeating a rumor (even in denial of it) has the effect of confirming it in the minds of those who are already more or less convinced (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007: 212–24). A rumor's influence comes not from the fact of believing it, but simply from the fact of thinking it. Any media coverage given to the rumor, even in service of demystifying it, proves to be a doubled-edged sword: it seeks to encourage critical detachment, but mainly serves to expand the rumor's audience. In any case, it is uncertain as to whether these media repudiations are the main reason behind the extinction of the rumor (inasmuch as each wave in any given country only lasts a few days or weeks). While the rumor does eventually die down, this is mostly because it has lost its novelty value. The interest generated by the story wanes of its own accord to make way for a different news items. The rapid media cycle of information thereby deprives the rumor of one if its principal vectors of diffusion, doing more to kill it than any official rejection thereof.

The media's self-reflection and criticism usually occur in progressive fashion. This statement given by a journalist from a Malian daily lays out the evolution of media coverage in respect to genital theft: "It's true, it's a mistake, at the start we didn't investigate. [. . .] We were in a hurry, we had a scoop, our photographer happened to be on the spot, and our agency was able to sell the photos to all the papers. [. . .] But once all the agitation had died down, we carried out a review" (quoted in Mandel 2008: 197). The frantic rhythm of the media cycle, combined with the heated competition between the titles, puts pressure on journalists to respond to rumors "in the heat of the moment." And yet, with each new edition coming out every day, the articles focus less on the genital thieves and more on the lynchings. The use of terms denoting reported speech—one of the defining characteristics of journalistic language—grows more and more systematic when talking about incidents of genital theft. These are now only referred to with caution, generally between quotation marks. The victims' cries of alarm become false accusations. Gradually, the media piece together a new image of events. The changing headlines of the Gabonese daily *L'Union* during the genital theft episode of 1997 are revealing. The June 14 edition reads: "The psychosis of vanishing penises reaches Libreville." From June 18, quotation marks and

words of caution begin to appear: "The matter of the 'shrunken' penises. A dangerous circus we should put a stop to." On July 11, the denial is unambiguous: "Shrinking penis phenomenon. Beware false accusations!" Glenn Adams and Vivian Dzokoto (2007: 94) observe the same progression in the media coverage of genital theft in Ghana; some newspapers are quick, however, to condemn false accusations (the *Daily Graphic*, for example), whereas others persist in their own versions, incriminating the thieves for longer, such as the *Ghanaian Times* (despite the latter, like the former, being a state-owned newspaper, and not a commercial tabloid).[8] Ultimately, we are privy to two distinct temporalities and two distinct relays of the rumor: the public and the crowd (Tarde [1901] 1969). On the one hand, the crowd spreads the rumor with urgency, and carries out acts of violence against the alleged genital thieves. On the other hand, the informed public—which may well consist of individuals who have just engaged in acts of violence themselves—is encouraged to adopt a more detached attitude toward events, and view them in a new light. Depending on how they choose to present genital theft, the media can either help to inflame the passions of the mob by repeating the rumor and inciting violence, or they can be responsible for educating their audience to think critically. The phenomenon of genital theft in no way suggests, therefore, that Africa is trapped in a hypothetical age of crowds (Moscovici 1985), but rather attests to the fact that, on the contrary, the continent is living in the media age.

8. For a journalist's account of media coverage of genital theft in Ghana, see Hasty (2006: 73).

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Everything is in Place"

The rumor faces a gauntlet of tests, which the media also participate in and reflect: witness reports, fact checking, and experts are all used to test the veracity of genital theft.[1] While at the time of the incidents themselves and their associated violence, no one is concerned to check whether or not the penis has actually disappeared, subsequently verification becomes a major topic, in which medicine, the police, justice, and the media all become involved. Genital theft victims undergo medical examinations, either on the spot or in hospital. And all attest to the fact that "everything is in place," which has now become something of a common refrain. Faced with this evidence, the majority of patients claim that their genitals have just now reappeared, thanks surely in part to the beating of the suspect. Some maintain that prayer made their return possible. Others insist that their penises had never truly disappeared, but simply shrunk, as one Cameroonian victim states in his defense: "I'm not saying I lost my penis, I'm just saying it's not the right size anymore" (*Cameroon Tribune*, November 25, 1996). A few assert that, while their organs are indeed in place, they no longer work, or are like a phantom limb that does not belong to them. Many claim impotence, or sexual dysfunction. Erectile problems are indeed harder to counter, and provide a more acceptable version of events. It would be easy to see all this

1. On the concept of test in pragmatic sociology, see Chateauraynaud and Torny (1999: 40–45).

backpedaling of the so-called victims as a defense strategy employed by deceitful pretenders. And yet it seems that these muddled turnarounds bear witness, often sincerely, to the victims' sensorial and emotional distress when faced with something that they themselves do not understand.

In light of the victims' denials, the evidence is carefully displayed. In Senegal, the chief commissioner of the Dakar police releases an official statement in the media: "All the genitals that I have seen are in their rightful place and completely normal" (AFP, August 4, 1997). In Benin, the examination of one so-called victim reveals "a flaccid penis that would not look out of place next to an erect one" (*Le Matinal*, November 2001). During the events in Gabon in 2001, "some women are brought in for the occasion to 'test' [the victims'] virility—successfully—by 'fiddling' with them" (AFP, March 27, 2001). And in 2005, investigators resort once more to "the expert hands of a young woman" (AFP, October 13, 2005). Victims are submitted to similar tests in Ghana in 1997 (Adams and Dzokoto 2007: 89). In Benin, one television station even broadcasts close-ups of the victims' genitals (Duplat 2002). During one incident in Dakar, police officers even force two men accused of penis shrinking to masturbate their alleged victim on the spot to the point of erection, to prove their innocence, or at least their resolve in restoring his virility. The scene is filmed by the officers in question, to subsequently be splashed across social media (since deleted).[2] As the two wretched suspects struggle under duress to arouse their "victim" (obviously in vain, given the embarrassment of the three parties, forced into this shameful act in the middle of a crowd of onlookers), some of the spectators can be heard suggesting that it would be better to have done with the accused, and simply kill them on the spot. All this could appear grotesque. And yet one should not be too quick to judge; the voyeuristic nature of these exhibitions is a way of discrediting the rumor and the victims' accounts, or at least of testing their validity (as in the latter case).

This process of disqualification also rallies psychologists and psychiatrists, whose expert advice is often sought by the media. The victims' experiences are interpreted in psychopathological terms, and labeled psychosis, hysteria, or suggestibility. Indeed, journalists frequently employ the terms *psychose* in French and "hysteria" in English (as often as "rumor," for example), as lexicometric analysis has shown. Superstition and low levels of education are often cited as

2. There are several videos to be found on social media featuring scenes of crowds and alleged genital thieves, or detailed witness statements from victims.

aggravating factors. One official tells the Senegalese press that "the victims are people with psychological, or even sexual problems. [. . .] This matter affects people who are mentally unbalanced" (AFP, August 4, 1997). In the Sudanese press, meanwhile, a "prominent psychiatrist" explains that the "phenomenon was similar to cases of women who imagined themselves to be pregnant" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003). Sometimes the media also call on the expertise of so-called "tradi-practitioners," the healers, marabouts, or *nganga* who abound in African cities. In their capacity as experts in all things "mystical," their advice is sought in the same way as that of scientific specialists. In 2016, the Senegalese press interviews a marabout from the Casamance region, who for his part corroborates the existence of genital theft (Senenews.com, March 3, 2016). According to him, the thieves do not make the penis disappear; instead they "hide it inside the individual's body to the point where he can no longer feel its presence." To this end, all that is required is a pocket flip-knife and a few choice magical spells. (Short of being a symbol of emasculation, the foldable blade of the knife is no doubt an analogy of the retracting penis.) The same results can be achieved by way of a simple handshake. Though he claims not to be adept in the practice himself, the marabout says that he "knows certain people in his field who stake their livelihood upon it." As a good illustration of the curious blend of biomedicine and esotericism that characterizes the speech of urban healers, one Gabonese *nganga* proffers his own opinion: "It is mystical and magical, and can only be demonstrated on a highly spiritual level. [. . .] The penis does not disappear; in reality, it simply loses its original shape and potency. The sensations that shoot through the body can be viewed as a descent of energy toward the genital area, where it may cause shrinkage. If no immediate action is taken, then the victim may suffer from secondary sexual impotence as a result" (AFP, October 17, 2005). However, at times the advice of traditional healers proves more nuanced. For example, one Cameroonian healer insists that the disappearance of a penis is impossible. And yet his convoluted justification is ultimately quite ambiguous. In answer to the question "Is it possible for a human being to make the sexual organs disappear?" he states: "No. However, to my mind, there are certain people with powers of witchcraft who can achieve such a thing. But traditional healers like myself, we do not believe that they would attack an innocent person. They cannot succeed without a motive. Except in such cases, I think that this story of disappearing penises is a confidence trick. [. . .] There do exist some varieties of plants that I have heard can cause impotence, penis shrinkage, or testicular hernia. But I am

not interested in these plants, nor in anything else that might cause the genitals to disappear" (*Cameroon Tribune*, November 25, 1996). And when the journalist draws his attention to the fact that certain genital theft victims have in fact testified in person, he responds: "I imagine that these are tall tales made up for the sake of revenge. People should think twice about where this problem is coming from. Perhaps you have an enemy, or else someone is trying to steal money from you. [. . .] The truth is that no disappearance has ever been diagnosed in a hospital, or proven in any way. I issue this challenge: anyone whose penis has disappeared may come to me to be healed free of charge." He concludes: "People should stay calm. I remember one charlatan who tried to blackmail me by warning people not to shake my hand for fear of having their faces completely paralyzed. This was nothing more than his wanting to settle a score with me." The healer does not, therefore, discredit the genital theft rumor entirely, but tries instead to avoid any accusations being turned back on himself (while also taking advantage of the opportunity to advertise his skills as a healer). His caution bears witness to the blurred line between witchcraft and counterwitchcraft; healer-diviners are regularly accused of being witches themselves, for the only way to effectively combat the occult is by harnessing the very same skills. As one proverb of the Bapunu people of Gabon states clearly, "the witch and the *nganga* are friends." Healer-diviners must be circumspect in their validation of stories about witchcraft lest they too find themselves caught up in the circle of accusations.

These diverse processes of verification lead genital theft to be qualified in new terms. In the words of journalists, the phenomenon becomes a "rumor," in the pejorative sense of false information preying on popular credulity. The differentiation between simple rumor and verified information is performed in the media. Genital theft is also often referred to as a "swindle" or a "con"; the so-called victims are said to have wrongly accused innocent people of stealing their organs. As Georges Balandier ([1955] 1985: 190) remarked as early as the mid-twentieth century, "certain disputes, which seem to arise from matters relating to traditional therapies, inasmuch as they involve witchcraft and magic, are being rationalized to appear as no more than simple offenses, or cases of fraud." What motivates these false victims varies, however, depending on whom ones asks. For some, the accusers are allegedly pickpockets taking advantage of the gathering crowd to rob the false suspect and the onlookers present. One man accused of genital theft defends himself: "It's just a way of mugging someone with lots of money or nice jewels" (*Cameroon Tribune*, November 25, 1996).

Others take them to be master blackmailers who offer to retract their accusation in exchange for a large sum of money; or else looters using the cover of the ensuing violence to ransack local stores; or else racists trying to incite a mob to lynch foreigners. Several commentators also suggest that it is simply a matter of score-settling between enemies, false accusation providing a convenient excuse for one to attack the other. One Gabonese journalist warns that "a lot of petty jealous types could exploit the situation to get back at their rivals" (*L'Union,* June 16, 1997). Yet the fact that strangers are almost always the targets of accusations clearly invalidates this theory. Some go so far as to claim that the rumor's propagation is the work of dangerous agitators looking to destabilize the country. In Benin, there is even mention of a political conspiracy: "There are various political reasons being put forward that are worth considering. [. . .] Today, Benin must face up to its 'enemies,' who are evidently not backing down. [. . .] Their only goal is to trigger a psychosis capable of throwing the country into a state of total insecurity, even ungovernability. [. . .] The idea that there are politicians out there lurking in the shadows, hoping to exploit the situation as a way of crying foul against the government, and drawing profit from it, does not bear thinking about" (*Le Matinal*, November 2001). These diverse theories may appear reassuring, in that they allow the rumor to be demystified. It is no surprise that the Western media often resort to this version of events, thereby allowing witchcraft to be swept under the rug. These attempts at rationalizing genital theft discredit the rumor by reversing the roles of the victim and the suspect: the victim of genital theft becomes the guilty party, while the accused is now an innocent victim. These rationalizations are built on rather shaky foundations, however. We have seen how the experience of genital theft victims has an emotional and somatic basis that is quite real; from this we can deduce that their experiences are genuine, and their accounts sincere, even though no real theft occurs. Furthermore, it is always the alleged thief who initiates the encounter with the victim, and not the other way around, which makes it extremely unlikely that the latter is able to premeditate a ruse. It seems, therefore, that the incidents are only very rarely used by individuals or groups for profit. There are no little schemes or big organized plots hiding behind a pretext of genital theft. But it is revealing that these attempts at demystification, intended to undermine any arguments based on witchcraft, still choose to interpret the rumor in terms of conspiracy theories, as if the events in question inevitably had to have been orchestrated underhandedly. Whether as witchcraft or fraud, genital theft is still considered in terms of occult agency. Both protagonists and commentators

struggle to accept the idea that the types of incidents linked to genital theft could occur without a hidden agenda.

The repudiations published in the press are often issued by the authorities, who use the media—and state media in particular—to try to quash the rumor. Urgency drives ministers, police chiefs, or other state officials to act, by making statements in the press, on the radio, and on television. In the wake of several incidents linked to accusations of genital theft that led to the death of a man in Koudougou, Burkina Faso, in May 2014, the regional governor appeals for calm during a public forum, to which the media are also invited (*L'Observateur Paalga*, May 21, 2014). She offers her condolences to the victims of the violence and their families, before strongly condemning the mob justice behind it. Alongside her stands the director of the regional hospital, who claims to have examined eleven supposed victims of genital theft, and confirms that everything was in place. He produces photos as evidence. Also present at this meeting are traditional and religious authorities, police officials, and even a member of the National Assembly. Generally speaking, authorities are less concerned with the falseness of the rumor than they are with the disturbance it causes to public order. Their version of events describes genital theft in terms of criminal activity rather than psychopathological disorder. The summary use of popular justice poses a serious problem, in that it challenges the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. The intervention of public officials follows the same pattern wherever it occurs: denying the rumor, appealing for calm, and—most importantly—instructing the police and the justice system to arrest and prosecute the troublemakers. At the outset of an episode, alleged thieves sometimes find themselves arrested, even charged with a crime. In July 1997, in Saint-Louis, Senegal, three men (an old marabout of Malian origin, a young peddler, and a Beninese immigrant) are accused of having stolen the penises of at least five people (*Le Soleil*, August 1, 1997). After being arrested, they are eventually found guilty of "fraudulent practices liable to disturb public order and harming people or property" (though the Senegalese state's hardline approach to beggars, drifters, and peddlers suggests that the "state of vagrancy" in which they were found no doubt contributed to the verdict). But following the intervention of public officials to denounce popular justice, it is the accusers and the lynchers who see themselves charged with false accusations, breach of the peace, grievous bodily harm, or murder. In July 2007 in Senegal, for example, a pair of individuals are sentenced to two months in prison and a fine of 163,000 CFA francs in damages, payable to the Ghanaian man whom they had wrongly accused of

genital theft (Afrik.com, July 5, 2007). Of course, on more than one occasion, the crowd decries the arrest of the lynchers, whom they see as heroes of justice. These events can at times lead to violent clashes between the police and the people, and even rioting. In March 1997, the police in Abidjan are forced to deploy tear gas to disperse a hostile crowd getting ready to lynch a suspected genital thief (*Magnus Magazine*, March 13, 1997). In June 2006, in Benin, the city of Parakou has to be "strongly militarized by order of the prefect" to put an end to the violence (*Le Matin*, June 16, 2006). The following month, the town of Toucountouna's police department is set upon by a furious gang of youths trying to lynch an alleged thief who has been taken into custody (*Le Matinal*, July 19, 2006). After the wretched suspect is stoned, the riot turns into a pitched battle between the police and a crowd armed with bows and arrows, among other things. Despite reinforcements from two other police departments and the army, the violence rages long into the night, until the attackers fall back and retreat up a mountain. These confrontations do not last long, however. Afforded significant media coverage so as to have a better deterrent effect, the arrests, immediate trials, and sentences of the accusers and lynchers generally succeed in extinguishing the violence, which serves to weaken the rumor.[3]

During the course of events associated with genital theft, the roles of victim and attacker prove fluid, and subject to multiple inversions. In Duala, in 1996, three men are accused of genital theft by a store apprentice while collecting a VCR that they have handed in for repairs (*Cameroon Tribune*, November 25, 1996). Set upon by the crowd, they are rescued by the police at the last minute. However, according to one of their accounts, "after being taken to the police station, we were beaten up and detained for three days. We had to negotiate very hard to be let go." Once out, all three return to the police in spite of everything to file a formal complaint against their accuser. In matters of genital theft, the authorities often ask law enforcement officials to take both the alleged thieves and the supposed victims and lynchers into custody. Arresting the thieves is the best way to ensure their safety and protect them from popular retribution. But this also leads to confusion inside the police stations. During the events of 2003, "the Sudanese, unsure how to handle the affair, arrested 40 people who filed complaints along with some 50 other people on suspicion of sorcery and fraud. Many West Africans were brought into police stations for questioning,

3. On the fundamentally dissuasive finality of the Ghanaian justice system's trying of troublemakers, see Gocking (2000: 59–60).

amid attempts by groups of people to assault them" (quoted in The Middle East Media Research Institute 2003). Disconcerted, one high-ranking police officer states: "We met with the suspects and discovered that they were in fact the victims." The situation is sometimes just as muddled in the courts themselves. In Africa, it is not unusual for matters of witchcraft to be brought before a judge (though this is subject to differences in national legislation across the continent). During the colonial era, judges generally refused to take accusations of witchcraft into account. It was more often the healer-diviners who found themselves charged with defamation. Yet in the last few decades, some courts have been known to charge and sentence people for "acts" of witchcraft, with healer-diviners being called as witnesses for the prosecution (Fisiy and Geschiere 1990; Cimprič 2012; Ngovon 2012). This is how some genital thieves have ended up being brought to trial. In June 2007, in Guédiawaye, Senegal, two penis shrinkers find themselves "in trouble with the law" (*L'Office*, July 2007). The defense attorney points out to the prosecution that his clients were beaten and tortured by the plaintiff, whose penis had never been verified as actually having shrunk. The result of the trial remains unknown, however. A few months later, in the same country, a Bissau-Guinean accused of having stolen at least two penises, and "facing six months in prison as requested by the prosecution, was found guilty of charlatanism and breaching the peace, before being sentenced to three months instead" by the court in Ziguinchor. In contrast, his alleged "accomplice," a Senegalese "who had not shaken hands with anyone, was simply let go" (*Le Soleil*, December 8, 2007). This confusion that extends all the way to the courts is highlighted by the bizarre paradox that consists in sentencing a genital thief for "charlatanism." As a Senegalese lawyer interviewed by the press explains, "if the facts are true, I cannot understand why a verdict of charlatanism was handed down, since the accused must be a real marabout and not a charlatan." It is true that "charlatan" as a term is open to misinterpretation; in Africa, it often refers not to an impostor, but, on the contrary, to a "true" healer or magician. Confusion reigns on the streets in equal measure. Ghana provides an edifying example of the possible shift between attacker and victim (*Libération*, January 18, 1997; January 21, 1997; January 22, 1997; January 24, 1997). In 1997, seven genital thieves are lynched around mid-January. On January 22, one of the false victims is sentenced to a year's hard labor. Up to this point, eleven people are dead, and eleven others charged with having accused them falsely. On January 24, another individual accuses someone else of having made his penis disappear. In this instance, the crowd examines the victim's member

instead of setting upon the suspect; everything is in place. And so the victim is lynched in place of the falsely accused party. In the confusion caused by events, it becomes hard to distinguish between innocent and guilty. In the words of one headline run by a Senegalese newspaper with regard to the genital theft rumor, "there are 'victims' and there are victims" (*Le Cafard libéré*, August 1997).

Requalifying genital theft as fraud is not free from ambivalence either, in that it is not always clear who the deceiving party is. Sometimes the matter is explained in terms of false accusations destined to make the innocent suspects pay. Other times, genital theft is said to be quite real, but it only serves as a pretext to secure a substantial ransom in return for the restoration of the penis; this interpretation of the rumor can be found in Gabon, Gambia, Senegal, Sudan, and Niger at least. There is sometimes mention of an "organized gang," even a "mystical syndicate." This network is supposedly organized into two groups, with one in charge of stealing the genitals, the other of restoring them for a price in their capacity as healers. So it is that, in Niamey,

> some well-dressed strangers, members of a well-organized network, approach you on the street with a smile on their face, and go to shake your hand as a gesture of "friendship." With your guard down, you play along. And the moment they are gone, you can no longer feel your assets. Men have been subjected to these ill deeds for several days now. They spot their mark, generally someone who looks capable of "banking" a few CFA bills in return for his goods. Once the crowd has gathered in response to the "dope's" laments, the wrongdoer's accomplice introduces himself and offers his services. He plays the part of the marabout, sent by the Good Lord to counteract evil spells. And since the victim (or his relatives) has no choice, the deal is done! The penis reappears. And the two will come together later in some shady house nearby to split the loot. (*L'Enquêteur,* March 26, 2007)

In Gabon, one suspect admits under duress that he can restore the stolen penis for 4 million CFA francs (about 6000 euros). In Sudan, a poorer country, the ransom does not exceed 2500 euros, though this is already a considerable sum. Curiously, this version of a con job organized by a genital thief and his fake healer accomplice is picked up by a French journalist, who reduces genital theft to a "simple matter of fraud" (Mandel 2008: 188–89). To his mind, it is a "confidence trick set up by two fake drug peddlers, but very real itinerant charlatans." However, this attempt at rationalization rests on two glaring improbabilities.

According to the journalist, the conman touches his victim on purpose, who feels his penis "shrivel, then disappear deep into his body." And yet the author, who clearly does not believe in the reality of genital theft himself, does not explain how the conman has the power to provoke such an effect in his victims at will. It is, moreover, absurd to think that people should try to pass themselves off as a genital thief and his accomplice, given the very real risk of being lynched forthwith by the crowd.

In being so scrutinized, the genital theft rumor thus finds itself open to dispute. As a result, many versions of the truth—often muddled and ambiguous—circulate and compete for attention, without any one in particular taking precedence over the others. When the incidents finally cease as a result of either the dissuasive actions of the authorities, press denials, or the mere fact of a waning interest in the rumor, this does not mean that the controversy is over. This merely lays the ground for the rumor's resurgence some months or years later.

CHAPTER NINE

To Believe or Not To Believe

Genital theft, like other rumors of the same kind, maintains complex and ambiguous relations with traditional interpretations of misfortune relating to witchcraft. In their lively discussions of the rumor, local people cannot usually agree on how best to define it: Is it something entirely new, or does it fit into old categories of witchcraft? In Senegal, for instance, genital theft has been variously regarded as an unusual form of witchcraft, possibly imported from abroad; as an impotence spell (called *xala* in Wolof) cast by a marabout-sorcerer; as the malevolent trick of a *jinne* spirit; as a somewhat special kind of theft; as a psychosomatic syndrome; as a fraud to extort money; or even as a simple hoax. But whether witchcraft, fraud, or hoax, genital theft remains something that troubles minds and blurs the lines between victims and attackers. This relational instability is a recurring trait of witchcraft in Africa, from witches assuming the guise of an innocent party to accuse another in turn, to accusations of witchcraft that lead to counteraccusations. A climate of general suspicion is born out of it, wherein nobody knows who are the victims, and who are the attackers. As one Gabonese journalist remarks, "everyone becomes a suspect in the eyes of everyone else" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). The rumor of genital theft engenders a loss of confidence in everyday life; even the most ordinary gestures become hazardous, and attract suspicion. People begin to screen handshakes and even glances from strangers. Cracks suddenly start to appear in the orderly give-and-take of

daily interactions. When these everyday rituals can no longer sustain trust or provide a sense of security, normal appearances no longer hold, and even the most banal events can no longer be taken for granted. According to a classic paradigm passed down from the first works of social psychology on the subject, rumor is the product of ambiguous situations, which explains how the majority of them originate in crisis situations (Allport and Postman 1947). In this sense, the process of circulation and transformation of rumors would represent a collective negotiation intended to reduce this ambiguity. Building on the works of Leon Festinger (1957) on cognitive dissonance, sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani (1966) sees in rumor a sort of collective problem-solving. The example of genital theft, however, proves that the rumor itself may create ambiguity when it breeds general suspicion. In triggering cognitive dissonance, it opens up a moment of crisis, as acute as it is short-lived.

This climate of confusion brings us to examine more closely the question of belief in the rumor. According to one persistent cliché, rumor invites such blind adherence as to lead one to believe the unbelievable: if people are spreading a rumor, then logically they must believe it; and if they believe it, then they are suggestible. But to impute rumor to public credulity, as do the majority of rationalist explanations seeking to demystify it, only serves to reinforce the great divide between "them" and "us," between belief and knowledge; it is always the Other who believes. And this type of explanation is nothing more than a reflection of the social prejudices harbored by the educated elite toward the lower classes. As Gérard Lenclud (1990: 5) remarks, "belief is a dogmatic judgment on the psyche of others."[1] The case of genital theft shows that the question of belief cannot be presented as a clear-cut alternative between public credulity and scientific skepticism. To pass on a rumor does not preclude critical reflection on its validity—quite the contrary. To tell it is to test it. The circulation of rumors does not rest on their message being repeated mechanically and more or less verbatim (in the same vein as the "Chinese whispers" that inspired the first studies in social psychology on the subject). It is in fact a rich and complex form of social communication through which those involved try collectively to make sense of uncertain news (Rosnow 1988). A rumor always arises out of a larger conversational context, with the story serving as a pretext for discussion between the participants; its legitimacy is debated, as well as the reliability of

1. For a critical review of the concept of belief in anthropology, see Needham (1972); Pouillon (1979).

the reports surrounding it, attempts are made to explain its origins, and comparisons are drawn up with other stories or themes of the moment. It is the controversy surrounding the rumor—as much as the story itself—that constitutes the spice of the discussion. This variety of perspectives relates in particular to opinions as to whether the news in question is true or false. Rumor does not, therefore, imply belief. It is rather "a proposition for belief," to borrow Robert Knapp's classic definition (R. H. Knapp 1944: 22). If rumor raises the question of belief, then it does so problematically, inasmuch as the latter is precisely the crux of the debate. Whereas gossip generally invites a moral judgment in regard to the person concerned, rumor prompts an epistemic evaluation of the news it brings.

Attitudes toward genital theft bear witness to the fluidity of the boundaries between belief and disbelief. The utterances of those involved reveal a—sometimes muddled—combination of skepticism and conviction. In Ghana, from a sample of people interviewed, Glenn Adams and Vivian Dzokoto (2007: 88) find that 45 percent of them believe in genital theft and 23 percent do not, while 32 percent remain skeptical; education does not seem to have a bearing on the camp to which they belong. My conversations with the most diverse interlocutors on the subject of genital theft or other such rumors, in Senegal and Gabon, confirm this divide in opinion. The titles given to compiled street interviews conducted by the Gabonese press during the 1997 and 2001 episodes are of a similar nature: "Very mixed opinions!" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997); "Alleged genital theft. Between disbelief and disquiet" (*L'Union*, April 3, 2001). The press in Burkina Faso makes the same findings in 2011: "Disappearing genitals: Ouagadougou divided into believers and skeptics" (*Faso Zine*, October 27, 2011).[2] The opinions of those questioned on the matter straddle the whole possible spectrum between conviction and disbelief. Some are convinced of the reality of these thefts, such as one trader from Burkina Faso: "It's a real thing, and I believe in it. I've seen it happen several times in Abidjan and in Ouagadougou. [. . .] For me, it's not a question of believing or not believing, it's quite real. Generally speaking, the people behind it are foreigners." In a similar vein, a Gabonese housewife assures us that: "Genital theft is a real phenomenon. I don't want to be a Doubting Thomas. I've already taken precautions, and it'll be hard luck on anyone who tries it!" The woman makes a veiled threat that she is able to turn the spell back onto her potential attacker. In Gabon, this type of protection

2. See also the street interviews broadcast on Togolese radio (Radio Lomé, 2005).

is known as "returning to the sender." The woman's insinuation that the thieves risk the loss of their own genitals by attacking her serves to blur the lines all the more. But this is a typical consequence of the ambiguous cycle formed by witchcraft and counterwitchcraft, that witchcraft can only be defeated by using its own methods against it.

For many, belief in the reality of genital theft is predicated on the credibility of hearsay alone, which is by nature more dubious than perceptual evidence, or verified reports; to believe the rumor is "to see with one's ears," as is sometimes said. One Dakar street trader, for instance, told me cautiously in regard to genital theft that "people say it's true." Similarly, an electrician in Burkina Faso says, "In my opinion, there are well and truly people capable of making penises disappear. If this wasn't possible, then nobody would be talking about it." One of his compatriots, a librarian, has the same line of thinking: "I've never witnessed genital theft, but if people are talking about it, then it must exist." Still in Burkina Faso, a student states that: "I've never seen it happen, nor do I know anyone who has. I don't completely believe in it, but I think that if people are talking about it, and keep talking about it, then there must be some grain of truth in it." Other people interviewed cite their own experiences as the source of their conviction, including one Gabonese man, who says, "I believe in it because I witnessed a scene myself in Miniprix district." This statement is in itself interesting, since it shows that, for many, it is the lynching of the suspect that proves that the theft is real, analogous to "no smoke without fire," a phrase often proffered by my interlocutors with regard to the rumor as evidence of its validity. This also confirms that genital theft does not confine itself to rumors whose strength of conviction rests on the credibility of hearsay alone; it also entails events to which one can personally attest. This tension between opposing systems of evidence—between being told something and actually witnessing it for oneself—fuels contrary and ambiguous epistemic attitudes to the rumor. Some are convinced, but in spite of themselves, such as one Gabonese victim, who explains:

> I was in a taxi when, what I'd previously taken to be a simple rumor, became reality at my expense. Another passenger got out at the same place as me. The moment he touched me, I felt a sort of electric shock. I naturally suspected him, as he had a guilty look about him. So I alerted the people around me, who ordered this unsavory character to explain himself. Faced with this pressure from the group, he confessed his crime, and asked me to give him a little time to

> concentrate, so that he could restore my penis to its normal size. Which he did, but once we got to the police station, no one wanted to believe me. It's a shame.

In any case, the rumor is sufficiently threatening for it to be deemed imprudent not to believe it, to some extent at least. And yet there are those who remain completely incredulous. One Burkinabe psychology student declares: "I don't really believe that anyone is mystically capable of making someone's genitals disappear. It has never been proven scientifically that the penis has vanished or changed shape. To my mind, it is pure fabrication. Those claiming to be victims have definitely formed an impression that, internally, makes them believe that their genitals are missing, whereas in reality, everything is still in place." Meanwhile, a Gabonese secretary states: "I've not seen anything up to now. [. . .] In fact, I don't believe in it personally." And then there is one sarcastic woman, still in Gabon, who laughs, "Now all the impotents are going to start claiming they've had their penises stolen." This biting humor proves the critical detachment that some individuals are able to exercise with regard to the rumor. Satirical cartoons published in newspapers on the topic represent visual counterparts to this popular derision.[3] If the genital theft rumor has enjoyed such success, it is also because it constitutes an entertaining story—and therefore one worth telling—, whose sexual theme lends itself particularly well to the mocking tone.

The majority remain undecided, uncertain of what to really think about genital theft—an ambivalent stance shared, as we have seen, in many newspaper articles written on the subject. Bafflement seems to be most common attitude. In Gabon, for example, a fireman offers this view: "I think it's a worrying phenomenon. Sometimes you're tempted to believe it, other times you wonder how on earth it could be possible. For my part, I don't have a definitive opinion on the matter yet. The media say there are witness reports. And yet we're never shown anyone missing his penis. [. . .] In any case, I think magic is behind it all." A manager adds: "The whole business is a surprise to everyone. At the beginning, people talked about it as a rumor, now we're seeing that it's a real thing. What I find myself asking is why this is going on. Nobody knows. To the extent that, these days, it's not unusual to see people always covering their genitals, especially in taxis, since you can no longer be sure who's who." This statement's conclusion is a good illustration of the confusion and general suspicion that the rumor creates. Others, unable to make sense of events, start to ask questions,

3. On popular derision, see Toulabor (1981).

such as this Libreville shopkeeper: "What I want to know is who's behind all this? Is this linked to politics, seeing as we have elections soon? No one knows. [. . .] You have to be a victim or a witness to truly believe." In Gabon, elections are a particularly sensitive period, during which candidates are reputed to engage the services of witches to their benefit. In this sense, the shopkeeper is implying that there could be a link between genital theft and ritual crimes (since the latter are always linked to politics, according to popular wisdom). Many reports are ultimately ambiguous, and can leave themselves open to double interpretations, including one housewife's: "To my mind, these are satanic practices that have to be punished. People with bad intentions are taking advantage of the naïvety of Gabonese people in order to manipulate them psychologically at will." It is not clear who in her opinion the "naïve" party is: the one who believes the rumor, or the one who has his penis stolen by "psychological manipulation" (or believes he has had it stolen)? But one West African mechanic living in Gabon is undoubtedly the most upset: "I'm anxious every time I get in a taxi, or a group of people approach me, or when a man makes eye contact with me. That's when I'm forced to grab my penis for fear of losing it. The authorities need to take things in hand [*sic*!], especially since people have already died because of it. And now it's foreigners who are getting the blame. That's why I'm scared." His choice of words is telling; powerless, the man leaves it to the authorities to protect his virility. But above all, these nervous statements bear witness to the ambiguity that prevails in matters of genital theft. The wretched mechanic fears both being the victim of a genital thief and being taken for one too (as a West African immigrant in Gabon). Uncertain of what to think, he conjures up every possible scenario in which he could be a victim, a clear demonstration of the climate of general insecurity that the rumor instills.

Common attitudes toward genital thieves leave room for doubt and skepticism. In fact, this is a fundamental trait of rumors more generally. As stated quite pertinently in the editorial of the first issue of Congolese newspaper *La Rumeur* (an extract of which has already been quoted in the previous chapter), "Lend me your ears, not your confidence. [. . .] *La Rumeur* is tailor made for you; man needs doubt much more than he needs certainty" (quoted in Martin-Granel 1999: 375). The ambivalence regarding how much credit to give to the rumor is a recurring factor in most stories of witchcraft, which are always based on uncertain suspicions surrounding invisible agents and occult acts. As a previously unknown form of witchcraft, often considered, moreover, to have come from elsewhere, genital theft is all the more perturbing. As one Gabonese

nganga remarks: "It's the West Africans coming over here to confound us with their strange ways" (*L'Union*, June 18, 1997). What I find particularly noteworthy here is not so much the accusations made against West African immigrants as the apparent confusion of this woman meant to be an expert in counter-witchcraft. The same applies for genital thieves as it does for ghosts in the eyes of Madame du Deffand, who is reported to have said: "I don't believe in them, but I fear them" (Bazin 1991: 493). An attitude toward them that is not unbelieving so much as it is uncertain does not preclude the triggering of a whole series of responses, emotions, actions, and discourses. Ambiguity proves to be the rumor's most effective vehicle; the rumor circulates further, for the very fact that its uncertain status sparks debate and discussion. On the subject of stories of unidentified flying objects that sweep across the United States after World War II, Pierre Lagrange (1990) emphasizes that it is doubt and uncertainty that motivate the passionate investigations of "UFOlogists," which contribute to the spread and revival of belief in flying saucers. Ultimately, regardless of whether the subject is genital thieves, witches, ghosts, or UFOs, the attitudes of those involved with regard to these apparently irrational beliefs can often be expressed in the ambiguous terms of "I know, but still" (Mannoni 1969). And it is this slight hesitation that assures the continued cultural success of these stories.

Conclusion

Genital theft is not so much an anecdote open to ridicule as it is a case study for understanding contemporary Africa, its modes of sociality, the channels by which information circulates, its moral norms, and even the forms of violence that manifest within it. As unbelievable as it may first appear, the rumor constitutes an ordinary social phenomenon to be described, and not an aberration of opinion to be condemned. We have set aside overly simplistic interpretations in terms of pathology or credulity, and sought to identify what it is that makes it such a good story to think and tell, which would explain its geographic extent on such a vast scale, and its sporadic resurgence over several decades—a circulation pattern that makes genital theft stories an intermediate form between fleeting rumor and more durable legend, what we could call an intermittent social phenomenon. We have attempted to construct a cultural epidemiology of genital theft by using a double-sided approach, both descriptive and analytical, wherein we have deconstructed its spatiotemporal diffusion, and brought to light an array of factors (triggering, exacerbating, enabling) that serve to explain it. By shifting between scales of perspective, we have sought to connect a general overview with the more detailed picture on the ground, to account for the rumor's international propagation as much as the precise circumstances surrounding accusations on a micro level. In paying close attention to the detail of these situations, interactions, and utterances, we have striven to isolate the particular stakes at the heart of the matter of genital theft, so as to avoid any symbolic overinterpretation of the rumor.

We have emphasized the importance of a set of cultural representations that predate the rumor, and facilitate its emergence by affording it a basis of credibility and a narrative pertinence in particular. Stories of genital theft share a family resemblance with an entire series of stories of witchcraft, widespread across the African continent, that have a specific focus both on attacks on people's sexuality and on organ stealing. Without descending into psychoanalytical interpretations relating to fear of castration or impotence, it is also clear that virility is a particularly sensitive subject, which makes genital theft a remarkably emotive story, and thus instantly captivating. Furthermore, genital theft rests on a specific environment that in a way constitutes its ecological niche: the urban environment, and traffic relations in particular. It manifests therein as a previously unheard of kind of witchcraft, quite removed from the family witchcraft that more commonly affects the domestic space. Through its nervous evocation of streets and marketplaces, of handshakes between strangers and encounters with foreigners, genital theft uncovers a malaise at the heart of city life and its modes of sociality, pervaded by a general tension between contact and avoidance. In this sense, the crux of genital theft lies not in urban anomie, but rather in a form of insecurity that is inherent in a specific type of urban interaction: anonymous encounters between strangers. Moreover, the preeminence within towns and cities of a categorical mode of identification of others explains why accusations of genital theft concentrate themselves so easily around foreigners, on the basis of ethnic, racial, or national stereotypes. Widespread preexisting social tensions also serve to narrow the focus onto any particular group of outsiders.

Within this ecological niche, the rumor heralding the arrival of genital thieves spreads intensely, swiftly, and very widely, especially along the grapevine. The alert function that characterizes all dread rumors suffices to explain this manner of propagation. The news is taken to be of the utmost importance, and assumes an air of pressing urgency. There is thought to be a danger in not letting it be generally known; true or not, it is better to be safe than sorry. Furthermore, passing the rumor on is a good method for testing its credibility, inasmuch as it allows people to gauge the views of their peers on the matter, and modulate their own epistemic attitudes according to the others' responses. Reporting the rumor in no way implies that one is fully convinced of its validity. On the contrary, the absence of certainty that marks the genital theft rumor represents its most effective relay for transmission. In any case, above a certain threshold, the rumor becomes entirely self-sustaining by a process of autocatalysis. The circulation of the rumor instills a climate of anxiety that hyperactivates basic fear

responses, while accentuating the cognitive salience of the framework of interpretation surrounding encounters between strangers in terms of genital theft. All the conditions are set for the remotest solicitation on behalf of a stranger to trigger a fright response, the symptoms of which (shivering, dizziness, tingling, penis retraction, scrotal contraction) are immediately interpreted as signs of genital theft. The victim's alarm precipitates the mobilization of the crowd, followed by its violent reaction, in line with an established pattern of behavior that predates the rumor: lynching constitutes a popular register of collective action that is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, a way of taking the law into one's own hands when the justice of the state is in doubt. These events only compound the rumor's influence, and reinvigorate its momentum. Genital theft does not therefore rest on stories alone, but involves very real events, emotions, and actions as well. Without this interactional and emotional foundation, the rumor could never have known such wide success.

The initial outbreak of the rumor at the beginning of the 1970s in Nigeria is somewhat harder to explain. Why there and then specifically? At most, we can speculate that the emergence of genital theft was the result of the transposition of a preexisting form of witchcraft (with a sexual basis) adapted to suit the environment of urban traffic, in a context where encounters between strangers become particularly sensitive (arguably because of interethnic tensions triggered by the Biafran War). In contrast, its transnational spread, as well as its periodic resurgence over four decades, is easier to account for. From the moment it appears in any one location, the genital theft rumor tends to gradually diffuse to neighboring cities and countries. Unlike personal gossip, a public rumor concerns practically everyone, retaining the same pertinence wherever it goes (inasmuch as one comes into contact with strangers everywhere). One could imagine that the presence of a particular national diaspora in its neighboring countries might constitute an effective relay for the rumor's transmission across borders. But it is the media's coverage of the news above all that serves to significantly increase its propagation, in terms of both reach (by multiplying its audience) and intensity (by making the rumor a public scandal). This is why the internationalization of the rumor in the 1990s coincides with the proliferation of a popular press unafraid to harness stories of witchcraft to exploit in the name of sensationalism. But it is this very media coverage that brings about the rumor's dissipation as well. The media participate in the verification process of the rumor, not only through journalistic investigation, but also by reflecting medical expertise and official denunciations. They contribute to the spread of

coexisting and competing versions of the genital theft issue that aim to discredit it. The nature of the news cycle, which quickly serves to devalue the rumor's newsworthiness, soon extinguishes the original interest aroused by it. And judges and police forces strive concurrently to discourage its diffusion by reprimanding those who propagate it. This series of actions intended to quash the rumor finally leads to its extinction, at least temporarily. For these interventions are too incidental to permanently thwart its pertinence and hinder its future resurgence—hence the enduring success of this intermittent social phenomenon. The genital thieves will no doubt be back to sow more panic . . .

Appendix

Map 1. Propagation of genital theft rumor (1996–1997)

Map 2. Propagation of genital theft rumor (2001–2002)

Map 3. Countries affected by genital theft rumor (1975–2016)
(Dates indicate first known episode in country.)

	< 1975	75	76	77	78	79	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	2000	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	TOTAL
Benin																												x					x											2
Burkina Faso																								x	x								x	x					x			x			6
Cameroon			x	x					x	x									x				x	x									x		x	x	x				x			12
CAR																																					x							1
Chad		x																				x																						2
Congo																										x									x									2
DRC																																			x									1
Gabon																								x				x				x									x	x		6
Gambia																													x	x									x					3
Ghana		x																						x					x					x										4
Guinea																											x																		1
Ivory Coast																								x					x					x								x			4
Mali																				x				x				x			x							x	x					6
Mauritania																								x																					1
Niger																															x			x										2
Nigeria		x		x	x	x											x						x				x	x	x		x		x		x	x	x					x		16
Senegal																								x						x		x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		13
Sudan																															x													1
Togo																							x						x			x	x											4
TOTAL	3		2	2	1	1			1	1							1		1	1		1	3	8	1	1	2	4	5	2	4	3	5	5	5	3	6	3	3	4	2	2	1	87

Table. Episodes of genital theft (1975–2016)

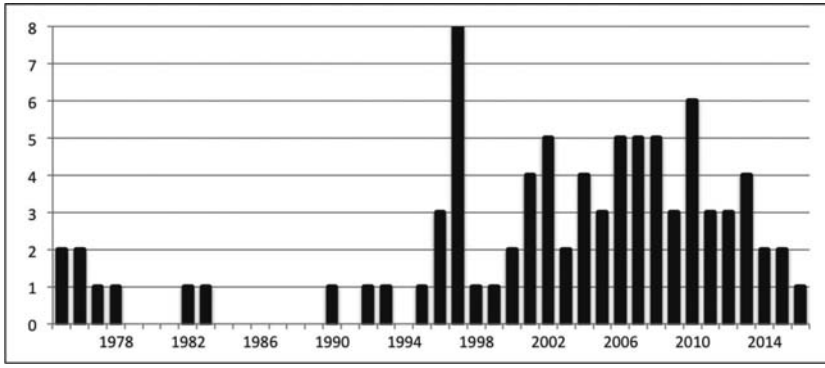

Chart. Number of countries affected by the rumor (1975–2016)

Wordclouds. Most frequent words in newspaper articles about genital theft (English and French corpora. Based on lexicometric analysis with R.)

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