‘GOING BUSH’: BLACK MAGIC, WHITE AMBIVALENCE AND BOUNDARIES OF BELIEF IN POSTCOLONIAL KENYA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which contemporary white Kenyans know about, talk about and sometimes interact with what they call ‘witchcraft’ and ‘magic’ in ways they find deeply discomfiting. Although white Kenyans are at pains to justify their postcolonial advantages in Kenya in terms of a level-headed and pragmatic kind of personhood, many of them interact with indigenous religious ontologies more than ever, sometimes as manipulators of the occult and sometimes as its fear-stricken victims. Because of these contradictions between ideology and experience, white narratives about ‘witchcraft’ and ‘magic’ are frequently riddled with tensions and equivocations. Many white Kenyans find creative rhetorical strategies for dealing with these tensions, strategies that sometimes fly in the face of simple models of ‘belief’ as a commitment to truth value by treating it as a state of vulnerability that can lay one open to mysterious ontological forces.

Introduction: Old ambivalence in a new era

I open this article with a vignette about a spirit visitation experienced by a third-generation white Kenyan I will call Richard. Richard is in his early thirties; his parents retired to Kilifi after long careers working in the safari industry, and Richard himself now owns a safari outfit upcountry, returning to the coast from time to time. In his twenties he lived in Mombasa for several years, during which he had a particularly unforgettable experience he related to me. One night as he lay in bed on the brink of sleep, Richard suddenly found himself pinned to the mattress as if paralyzed by an invisible force.

I felt such an—I felt so oppressed. There would be movements, you know like, if you can explain, movements in the dark. I don’t know how to explain it... I thought there was someone in the room. I don’t know what. To the extent that I even said in Swahili “Wewe tokat?” [Get away, you!]. And I was doing that, AND, I could hardly move!... Now, I’m—I don’t know how long it was just—I was shit scared.
Richard kept the lights on all night in terror, fretting that he might be going mad: ‘I thought I was losing the plot.’ The next morning he asked his staff members, a group of Giriama, whether they’d noticed ‘anything different’ lately. The staff told him knowingly that there had been a malevolent spirit hanging around Richard’s place for several weeks. In fact, Richard soon learned that his domestic servant, a Giriama man named Katana, had been pinned to his own bed in a downstairs room on the very same night Richard had. Thoroughly frightened, Richard knew what he had to do. ‘I told Katana, ‘Bas [Okay]. Here’s some money.’ I said: “You guys go, I want you to go to a mganga [diviner/spirit medium; waganga pl.], to your mganga, yeah.”’

According to the diviner, whom Richard never met face to face, the spirit was linked to a mysterious tenant Richard was renting a room to. The spirit visitations ended spontaneously soon thereafter when the tenant moved out, and there were no further consequences in the home. But for Richard, his vivid encounter with the spirit, his shared experience with Katana, and his temporary submersion in a Giriama spiritual ecumene were profoundly unnerving. So much so, in fact, that by the end of Richard’s discussion with me he apparently needed to establish some distance from what had taken place:

I know that [the Giriama people] are very entwined with the mganga, uh, whether good or bad or whatever, it’s very much part of their lives and it—a lot of it is mind, you know? DEFINITELY most of it is mind . . . the mind can play the most amazing games . . . all these guys who live on this coast are all DEEP into this stuff. And they have their shetani [spirits], bad shetani, the good shetani . . . at night they have these demons who walk the beaches, you’ve heard all of that, you’ve heard it, actually. I tend to take most of—normal common stuff that you hear with a little bit of pinch of salt . . . since it’s been so much set in their nature, it’s, it’s PART of their lives, and it’s EFFECTIVE. It is effective . . . You see what happened when Katana, he always goes and sees his mganga. It’s like going to see your psychiatrist I suppose.

In these reflections, Richard reestablishes the alterity of indigenous religiosity through a kind of essentialism in which spirit beliefs and the use of waganga are ‘set in [Giriama] nature’, the implication being that such beliefs and practices remain at arm’s length from those of European descent like himself. Spirit visitations, it turns out, may just be the epiphenomena of an addled mind; talk about spirits should be taken with ‘a pinch of salt’; and Katana’s recurrent visits to his mganga are ‘effective’ as a form of psychiatric rebalancing rather than as supernatural intervention. Notice, however, that Richard’s return to skepticism is not total. With phrases such as ‘most of it is mind’, Richard leaves room for the unnerving possibility of a crack in the dam of rationalism.
'Most' of it is mind... but what of the rest of it? Experiences like Richard's and the equivocations with which he interprets them are the subject of this article, in which I examine the narratives of white Kenyans—former colonials and their descendants—struggling, in this postcolonial era, to come to terms with local supernatural ontologies.

I see their struggle as a microcosm of broader European efforts to situate themselves and their identities in postcolonial contexts. During the colonial era, Europeans aspired to transform East African communities into rational, productive, Christian societies arranged along clearly stratified racial and 'tribal' lines. The outcomes of colonialism, of course, have been far messier; regimes had to cope with tensions in their own political and religious agendas, with the unpredictability of native responses, and with the unsettling dynamics of social and sexual intercourse with the locals. Through numerous uneven dialectics with the Other, it turns out, 'the colonial experience shaped what it meant to be... “European” as much as the other way around' (Cooper and Stoler 1997: vii). Indeed, in the view of many scholars, 'Englishness' itself (the primary identification of Kenya's colonials) is inextricable from the experience of imperial dominance combined with the nostalgia and vexation created by the displacements of empire (Baucom 1999, Kumar 2003). Among settlers in Africa, the colonial experience generated the push-pull of desire and repugnance toward the Other (cf. Cooper and Stoler 1997; Baucom 1999: 7; Gikandi 1996: 48) while furnishing the Kurtzean prospect of 'going native'—a prospect that entrenched the importance of a self-conscious European character at the very same time that it challenged European essentialisms by hinting that European personhood might just be a fragile fiction of modernity. Rushdie's insinuation about imperial identity, glossed by Baucom, is perfectly apposite: '[E]mpire... is less a place where England exerts control than the place where England loses command of its own narrative of identity' (Baucom 1999: 3).

Despite the instabilities of empire even at its height, scholars of postcolonialism widely recognize that no one in post-imperial Africa has transcended the colonial hegemonies of the twentieth century—not Africa's independent nation-states, not the peoples of the former colonies, and certainly not those of European descent who remain. 'The culture of colonialism', says Gikandi, 'continues to resonate in what was supposed to be its negation' (Gikandi 1996: 14; see also Ranger 1996). Hence, just as the residue of colonial hegemony continues to echo in the essentialist ethno-politics of the Kenyan state and the (also, frequently, essentialist) self-conscious cultural revivals of indigenous groups,
so too does it inform white Kenyans’ notions of who they are and what they ought to be—even as they have lost most of their authority to be in Kenya at all, and find themselves increasingly influenced by ideas and practices from the African surround. Both indigenous Africans and whites in Africa, then, are caught between essentialist folk-models of their own identities and the irrefutable evidence of mutual cultural influence.

But while a vast literature explores postcolonial dynamics in Africa, most of this work has focused upon the transitions, strategies and ambivalences of formerly colonized peoples, while neglecting the stories of whites who were left rather abruptly without the *terra firma* of empire they had once taken for granted. With just a few exceptions, such as the ethnographic work by Andrea Smith and colleagues (Smith 2003, 2004) on ‘repatriated’ whites from the colonies, and Melissa Steyn’s (2001) examination of white South African identity after apartheid’s end, the influence of indigenous life upon white experience in post-colonial contexts has been under-explored by anthropologists and other scholars. The ethnographic study of contemporary globalization, which is often co-terminous with the study of postcolonialism, has tended to focus upon the complex flow of influence—economic, political, religious, and so on—from ‘the West’ to ‘the Rest’ (cf. Inda and Rosaldo 2002). The flow of ideas from subordinate to dominant groups has been treated as a less politically urgent matter, while the colonials whose ‘tensions of empire’ a few decades earlier have been objects of fascination have more or less vanished from the contemporary ethnographic and historical landscape: ‘Precisely when whites in Africa become powerless, human’, writes Ranger, ‘they seem to fade into insignificance’ (1998: 267).5 Ranger also detects a related but distinct problem in the ways that representations of whites in colonial studies have tended to be ‘distorted by the burden of power’ (1998: 256), making it that much harder to see them as ‘human beings . . . with a fully human capacity for heroism and villainy and mediocrity’ (1998: 256). Part of that distortion, I suggest, has been the common assumption that official colonial ideologies of witchcraft as mere superstition or the ultimate sign of primordial irrationality (cf. Mudimbe 1988) map neatly onto both colonial and postcolonial European experiences of witchcraft on the ground. But what if indigenous metaphysics has held more fascination, more appeal and more disturbing ontological possibilities for Europeans than such ideologies would suggest? What if those ‘uncanny rumors’ known to have floated through colonial societies (Weiner 2003: 152) tell us something profound and startling about European experience?
A small but salient body of anthropological literature suggests that in the colonial era, anyway, Europeans did indeed have more complex experiences with local supernatural ontologies than official colonial discourse let on. Pels (1998), for example, has suggested that colonial-era western writing about Africa—from novels to ethnographies—expresses anxiety about witchcraft not merely because it embodies the ‘irrationality’ that colonialism wished to expunge, but also because at some level colonials suspected that it might be a real force. Similarly, Wiener (2003) has explored the contradictory and anxious European responses to magic in the colonial Indies, describing ‘the space magic occupies in the murky territory between fraud and fear’.

In this article I further develop the themes traced by these scholars, examining the ways in which contemporary white Kenyans know about, talk about and sometimes interact with ‘witchcraft’, spirits and local ritual practitioners in ways they find deeply discomfiting. In white narratives, witchcraft mediates relationships between white and black, being used by skeptical whites to enforce their own authority against credulous blacks, and being used by blacks to exact terrifying occult forms of vengeance against powerful whites. I locate in these narratives continuities with the kinds of colonial subjectivities reported by Weiner and Pels, at the same time that I suggest the postcolonial context creates new conditions of possibility that subtly inflect white responses to witchcraft.

In the colonial era, state policies framed whites as the qualified custodians of Kenya’s resources, while reinforcing the institutional reification and segregation of the races. Yet, as scholars have demonstrated in numerous colonial contexts, state policies alone hardly guaranteed a sense of security in Europeans on the ground, who were often beset by anxieties about whether they were ‘fit to rule’ (Cooper and Stoler 1997: 3) and thus engaged in innumerable forms of self-policing to differentiate themselves from the natives. In post-independence Kenya, where white authority is no longer granted by the state, the socioeconomic power retained by whites is still felt to be under threat. Many expatriate whites are sent to Africa by corporations or NGOs and gain a degree of legitimacy from their expertise and temporary residency, but the enduring presence of African-born whites who own a disproportionate share of local resources—including desirable land and other means of production—is more difficult to justify to Kenya’s majority. And while the work of differentiation has also grown subtler, as old discourses of outright racism among whites have been partially crowded out by the ideal of liberal humanism, most white Kenyans I met nevertheless uphold the longstanding conviction—one tacitly shared by
other whites in contemporary spheres of practice such as development—that Europeans simply manage the country’s natural resources and institutions better than the vast majority of Africans. Even in the absence of state power and overt racism, then, the trope of white superiority lives on for white Kenyans, and so, too, does the requirement for self-policing that helps to ratify it. Accordingly, many of my informants contrast themselves with ‘Africans’ by emphasizing their own level-headedness and pragmatism—traits that qualify white Kenyans, in their ideologies, anyway, to serve as Kenya’s managerial class.7

Yet the boundary between white Kenyans and ‘Africans’ is in some respects more blurred than ever. As the institutional strictures of colonialism have fallen away, many whites in the younger generations—particularly those 35 and under—have more interaction than ever with locals. They are more likely than elderly whites to talk about enjoying and even prizing their interactions with Africans, more likely to speak good Kiswahili and to lace their English utterances with the tongue, less wedded to a strict notion of Christian identity, and more influenced by global currents of fascination with ‘new age’ religion and the romanticization of non-western cultures. Some, in fact, highlight their love for and intimacy with Africa as a core component of their entitlement to remain, as if, in the absence of a colonial mandate, an ‘authentic’ Kenyan identity might ratify their presence in the country. But as part of this complex of affinity, some also demonstrate a deepening involvement in African religious ontologies. Such intensified contact with Africans creates a tension between whites’ apparent susceptibility to African lifeways and their simultaneous need to express a kind of immunity to them. After all, white Kenyans may profess affinity with Africans, but they cannot afford to approach total mimicry of the natives. Bhabha (1994: 86) has noted a related, but converse, anxiety about mimicry in the colonial era: colonials set up an imperative that the colonized Other be more like them, but ‘the discourse of mimicry [was] constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage’ (86). Put another way, the Other was regulated and disciplined through the demand that they ‘normalize’ to civilization, yet it was crucial that this mimicry remain incomplete, for if natives were to assimilate altogether they would obviate the essentialisms that rationalize colonial authority to begin with. The ambivalence I describe among contemporary white Kenyans operates with a similar logic, but in the other direction. Some whites find themselves incrementally assimilating to the natives, and suffer the terror of sameness that would vitiate their claim to superiority. In the domain of
magic and witchcraft, as I will show, many whites thus find themselves in the paradoxical position of simultaneously trafficking in local concepts while trying to sustain a strategic distance from them.

In the final portion of this article I study the ways in which whites use narrative locutions and other strategies to defend their identities against the apparent closing of the gap between white and native cultures. White discourse about witchcraft and magic often circles back to the notion of ‘belief’—a concept that, as many ethnographers have pointed out, is central to Abrahamic systems of religiosity or personhood but not to many non-western ones (Needham 1972; Tooker 1992; see also Ruel 1982). In most western ideologies, ‘beliefs’ are all-or-nothing commitments to the truth value of particular propositions. Stereotypical western ideologies of rationality, furthermore, tend to hinge upon mental states that include well-regulated, internally consistent beliefs (Luhrmann 1989: 308; Gellner 1974). I had expected such ideologies to appear in my informants’ narratives as they strove to articulate their identity to me; certainly denial of the truth of indigenous metaphysics is the epistemological position historically associated with European imperialism. What I ultimately found, however, was more complicated. White Kenyans are aware that they are not ‘supposed’ to accept occult African forces as real, yet many have had experiences that run against the grain of these ideologies. Not only do my informants find themselves sometimes subscribing to the existence and potency of ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’; many also experience a complex mental landscape in which ‘belief’ is treated not merely as a commitment to truth value, but also as a state of vulnerability that can lay one open to mysterious ontological forces. Some informants discuss their own beliefs as if they are not simply ‘off’ or ‘on’ mental states of commitment, but rather mental states that may be ‘on’ but that can somehow be held at bay in order to protect the self. And some informants talk about belief as though it is not the definitive endpoint of a process of ratiocination, but instead a condition that fluctuates—rather like the weather—depending upon one’s spatial setting. Standard connotations of the term ‘belief’ are not, it would seem, up for the job of capturing the experiences or resolving the dilemmas of white Kenyans.

By way of evidence for my arguments, I draw upon the accounts of whites born in Kenya and now living in coastal areas such as Mombasa, Kilifi and Malindi. Most whites in this area are retired colonials and the descendants of colonials, some of them third or fourth generation Kenyan. Most of their ancestors arrived in the white highlands from
Europe to make a living as missionaries, administrators, plantation owners, businessmen and overseers of various sorts; many families moved east to the sunny beaches of the coast when they retired, wished for a change of pace or lost their upcountry lands at independence. The majority of them are of British descent, but a few have parents or grandparents who came to Africa from other European countries such as Sweden, Denmark or Italy. (While some whites of Italian descent socialize almost exclusively with other Italians, particularly in coastal towns such as Malindi that are populated by numerous Italian expatriates, I focus on those who socialize primarily with whites of British descent.) I have elected to refer to all of my informants as ‘white Kenyans’ because all were born in country or arrived as very young children and have lived nearly all their lives there, but as will be seen, not all carry Kenyan passports. I consider this group a heterogeneous subculture within Kenya, for the vast majority of white Kenyans socialize almost exclusively with other white Kenyans, despite the fact that the coast is home to several other relatively elite groups, including South Asians, Arabs, and wealthy Africans.

Still, no one can live on the coast without some degree of contact with the many other ethnic groups there. Of the many African peoples of the coast, the most prominent are the Mijikenda (a cluster of nine culturally related groups) and the Muslim Swahili. My informants have had their most extensive contact with the largest Mijikenda group, the Giriama, who frequently work as servants in white homes or menial laborers in white-owned farms or industries. Giriama and other coastal groups are famous among whites for their prominent use of indigenous ritual specialists, their experiences of spirit possession, and their anxiety about bewitchment. In this area ‘rife with witchcraft’, as one white Kenyan put it to me, many whites find themselves participating in witchcraft narratives and practices.

But before I discuss my findings, it is worth a word about my own position in this social context, and its potential influence on the interview data I collected. I was known to a number of my informants before I began this project on white Kenyans in 2004, because I had previously spent over a year on the coast studying ethnoreligious and linguistic relationships between Giriama and Swahili. At the time I occasionally socialized with white Kenyans but, as an American graduate student with an unusual depth of interest in native cultures, I was considered something of an oddity.8 When I returned, the white population was surprised to find that I was swiveling the ethnographic lens and
re-activating my tape-recorder to focus on them. Many were receptive and indulgent, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. I am also mindful that their words were infused by their assumptions about who I was and what I might want or need to hear, though it is not entirely easy to know what those assumptions may have been. For instance, as an anthropologist and an American I may have represented a strain of transnational liberal humanism that has largely repudiated the legacy of colonialism, thereby provoking some measure of defensiveness about the role of whites in Kenya. At the same time, at least some of my informants probably assumed that we shared an understanding about the value of rational personhood, effective management and other features associated with the western world. Yet it is also possible that, because my interlocutors knew I had studied African religion in some depth, they may have been more inclined to confess some of their interactions with it. I attempted to ask most questions in as neutral and open-ended a fashion as possible, but there can be no doubt that my informants’ narratives were performances textured by my presence.

There were, furthermore, certain matters that I deliberately brought to the surface in our conversations. I was careful in most interviews not to use the term ‘belief’ until my informants themselves had (typically I would choose locutions such as: ‘And what do you make of it?’), but in other interviews I let my zeal get the better of me and pressed informants to clarify their beliefs in ways that sometimes revealed my conceptual biases. My interest in white Kenyans’ beliefs emerged from personal experiences that I discuss in detail elsewhere (McIntosh 2004). Briefly, after having spent a significant period of time on the Kenya coast interacting with spirit mediums, I found myself having a series of experiences in which—despite my identity as a disenchanted modern—I seemed to feel the presence of the uncanny. I was deeply relieved when, upon discovering a ritual gambit of one particular spirit medium, I found myself returning to my familiar ontological commitments. Still, the arc of my experience indicated that I could flip-flop between a state of apparent ‘disbelief’ and apparent ‘belief’ more readily than I would have guessed. As I explain in the final section of this article, however, the ‘either-or’ model of belief and disbelief with which I embarked on this field study seems too simple to account for the complexities of white Kenyans’ experiences, and, sometimes, my own line of questioning in the interviews below reveals both the imperfection and the delicacy of ethnographic epistemology.
I turn now to an outline of some general parameters of white lives in today’s Kenya to demonstrate some of the tensions of identity that inform their interactions with indigenous supernatural ontologies.

‘Intertwined worlds’?: Postcolonial white identifications

Between 1962 and 1966, as whites were displaced from Kenya’s central government, the British government transferred a substantial portion of the land owned by white settlers to African farmers. Thousands of whites left the country for brighter prospects elsewhere. At independence as many as 60,000 whites lived in the country; today, the number of whites of British descent alone runs at least 40,000 (Redfern 2006), but many of these are expatriates staying for only a few years, and only about four or five thousand whites are Kenyan citizens, with a few thousand more entitled to claim Kenyan citizenship but preferring to hold European passports. Many of these lifelong inhabitants of Kenya work in the tourism industry, managing hotels, safari companies or deep-sea fishing boats. A few still own coffee or tea plantations, or run farms of various kinds. Some have become entrepreneurs in small or large businesses; others work in managerial positions for NGOs, development agencies, or national organizations such as the Kenya Wildlife Service.

In the postcolonial era, a deep, self-sacrificing affinity for Africa seems particularly important as a white justification for their enduring presence there. Many whites in coastal Kenya experience this complex structure of feeling in terms of ‘loving’ the country whilst suffering for that love. A significant number, in fact, pointedly registered their resentment of Kenya’s ‘Happy Valley’ colonial reputation in conversation with me, feeling that popular representations of decadent partygoers in the white highlands have eclipsed the hard work and sacrifice of the average settler. ‘Our lives have been a lot more hard-scrabble than that,’ as one retired former settler put it. Elderly whites pressed upon me scrapbooks and literature documenting the struggle, risk and loss incurred by them and their parents. Similarly, many in the younger generations resent the stereotype of the spoiled, heavy-drinking, adventure prone ‘Kenya cowboy’, objecting that they have remained in Kenya at great cost to themselves rather than staying to skim the cream off the country. While many do lead lives of great privilege, particularly relative to their indigenous African neighbors, pain and tragedy at the hands of disease and accident are ordinary parts of life for white Kenyans. Indeed, they model their affinity for Africa as that much
more profound because it comes at such a price. Here is Naomi, a fourth generation white Kenyan in her mid-thirties, on the depth of outsiders’ misunderstanding:

What people don’t realize when they look back at colonialism is they assume it was all about exploitation. And they don’t realize how much those settlers struggled, and how they were just trying to do what I’m trying to do now: to lend a hand... We’re here to HELP, to give back, not to take... We could go somewhere else, to Europe—there are always ways, even if you don’t have the passport, we have our connections—but we don’t, because we love this country.

To Naomi, in fact, the overlapping lives of blacks and whites in Africa provide the rationale for white belonging: ‘We’re intertwined worlds; we live this combined existence; we’re not just colonialists.’

Naomi and others have reason to defend their entitlement to be in Kenya. The era of independence and the expulsion of whites from land in the highlands were predicated on an ethnonationalist discourse that coded whites as interlopers—an ideology that sometimes resurges today. While quite a few whites occupy key positions in Kenya’s economy, many blacks resent their share of power.9 When Richard Leakey, a member of one of Kenya’s most venerable white families, ran for president in the late 1990s, he was subject to brutal beatings and an assassination attempt that very nearly succeeded—both, reportedly, inspired not only by political competition but also by alarm at the prospect of a white leader in post-independence Kenya. In 2004 when British Ambassador Sir Edward Clay voiced his disapproval at the enduring corruption in Mwai Kibaki’s new government, his speech was met with cries of neocolonialism. Such tensions occasionally reach the coastal area in dramatic form. In 1998, for example, when an organizing committee made up largely of whites in Malindi planned a ‘celebration’ of the five hundredth anniversary of Vasco da Gama’s arrival in East Africa, Muslim Swahili objected to what they saw as European paternalism in seizing control of the coast’s historical narrative (McIntosh 2001). Letters in national newspapers excoriated the festival events as insensitive to the damage the Portuguese wrought upon coastal cultures and economies, while labeling the organizers neocolonial champions of continued European domination.

In the face of such accusations, Naomi and her peers insist upon their intimacy with Africans themselves. Such sentiments are easiest to conjure in the form of childhood memories, registered before they had to face the political and personal implications of racial and class hierarchies, and embellished, perhaps, in response to their adult under-
standing of their tenuous status in Kenya. Many whites, particularly those in the younger generations, told me proudly of being wet-nursed and raised by a black nanny (aya) so influential that they learned Kiswahili or another tongue such as Kikuyu as their first language. One informant claimed his grasp of English as a child was so poor his parents had to hire a translator to communicate with him and his siblings until they were older. Such narratives are badges of belonging that demonstrate the teller’s virtual kinship with African caretakers. Other tellers recount frolicking with African children ‘in the bush’ as if to emphasize their organic connection to Africa—a strategy used decades ago by Louis Leakey, who often defended his political machinations in Kikuyu affairs on grounds that he himself was a member of the Kikuyu tribe (Shaw 1995: 102). The theme of childhood intimacy with servants can be found in other (post)colonial contexts, but as Stoler and Strassler (2000) remind us, such memories may mask subtle ways in which social boundaries are inscribed. In colonial Indonesia, for instance, many Dutch families photographed their children in the care of Indonesian servants as if to imply a degree of intimacy, yet in discourse and practice nursemaids were regarded as the potential source of numerous forms of danger and contamination (Stoler and Strassler 2000; Stoler 2002).

Despite these tropes of bonding and belonging, many whites are ambivalent about what kind of citizenship they most desire. In fact, Naomi’s brief reference to ‘passports’ touches upon a vexed issue for many. Whites born in Kenya have the right of Kenyan citizenship, but Kenyan passport holders are not allowed to hold a second passport. In a gesture that is as much symbolic as it is pragmatic, it is not unusual for second, third, or even fourth generation whites in Kenya to draw upon their ancestral birthright so as to carry British or other European passports, but not Kenyan ones. Naomi finds it ‘appalling’ that so many refuse to take the passport of their natal country, but she understands the dilemma. ‘We don’t know who we are or where we belong,’ she says; ‘we don’t really have security here because sentiment could turn against us at a moment’s notice.’ Many elderly white Kenyans hedge their bets by referring to themselves as ‘British Kenyan’. Younger whites are more likely to refer to themselves simply as ‘Kenyan’, but it is not unusual for them nevertheless to refer to the United Kingdom as ‘home’. Even among those who do regard Kenya as ‘home’, their sense of self nevertheless extends beyond national borders; transcendence of Africa, after all, has long been an important part of the encompassing form
of competence that justifies stewardship of Africa. One young man born in Kenya of Dutch and Italian parents puts it this way: ‘Well, I think I feel quite Kenyan, I’d say, yeah. I mean this is my home. More than anywhere, but I also think of myself as quite cosmopolitan.’

This sense of apartness is subtly replicated in the fact that, for white Kenyans, being ‘Kenyan’ has a different valence from being ‘African’. Just as the English politician Enoch Powell repeatedly insisted from the 1960s onward that Englishness was defined by whiteness, so too is there an unspoken rule of thumb among most white Kenyans that the designator ‘African’ applies only to darker racial groups. The semantic distinction appears in the words of Frederick, a Mombasa resident born and bred in Kenya, now in his late forties. Frederick runs a small nature park with many Giriama staff, and is often commissioned to capture small animals in the coastal forests. When I asked whether he saw himself as culturally European or instead as a sort of Euro-African mixture, Frederick responded equivocally at first, but soon firmed his stance:

I don’t think of anything like that. I, I, I am who I am. And I know what my life is. And what my lifestyle is. But it doesn’t mean, you know, that I can’t sleep on the floor, if you know what I mean... if I’m out in the bush I’m out in the bush. And that’s one of the things I like being out, free. Just away from the normal type of restrictions that you have in a type of a society and it’s, uh, I’m quite happy. But I don’t THINK of myself as uh, as an African... thirty years ago when my staff would say we’ll give you a Giriama name, and this that—[I said] NO, don’t, uh—no, I’m not—I’m not a Giriama, and I’m a mzungu [white person] who’s brought up here and uh I don’t uh associate myself with other races or colors or creeds.

Frederick initially refuses to define himself in categorical terms, but by the end of his statement his boundaries come into focus with the Kiswahili term for white person, mzungu, commonly heard among blacks and whites alike. Whiteness is a paramount element of Frederick’s identity; Africanness, set in contrast to whiteness, is patently not. Evidently, there are limits to the ‘intertwined worlds’ described by Naomi.

‘Going bush’: Geographies of alterity

As the intimacies of childhood fade with social maturity and the easy comfort with nursemaids shifts into a more obviously hierarchical class system, locals become situated primarily as manual laborers and domestic staff rather than playmates or peers. With a few exceptions in the younger generations, most white Kenyans do not retain the African tongues they learned in childhood except for Kiswahili, a national lin-
gua franca particularly useful for getting by with staff. Some, particularly those in the older generations, note that all they can now speak is a stunted version of the tongue, laced with imperatives and household nouns, they call ‘kitchen Swahili’—the kitchen being a metaphor for more general forms of domestic service (cf. Hansen 1992b: 267). This phrase not only indexes the hierarchy between whites and their African staff, but also locates the servants on the lowly margins of the household—a social distance further reflected in the spatial layout of most white residences on the coast. Domestic servants, gardeners and security guards tend to live on the margins of the gated compound, just inside the security fence, in a humble dwelling. Many staff are men who leave their wives and children dozens or hundreds of miles away, returning home anywhere from once a week to once every few months. Agnes, an eighty year old second generation Kenyan retired to Malindi, instructs her servants not to bring their wives or children to her home because, she says, ‘I just don’t want a village in my back yard.’ Another elderly woman, Grace, recounts her distress at leaving home for a holiday and returning to find that an Italian man she distantly knew and his African girlfriend had moved in with over ten of her relatives. ‘It was like a village here—I mean, the septic system!’—so I just said, you know, everybody out! The ‘village’, in such locations, seems a spatialized metaphor for the untrammeled African ways (of reproduction, of hygiene, of habit) that—particularly in the views of elderly former colonials—do not belong within the core of the civilized European household. Such discourses channel a common colonial trope of the Europeanized, hygienic domestic interior as a ‘civilized’ foil to the ‘savagery’ without (Hunt 1992; Hansen 1992b; Moran 1992; Stoler 2002).

The cordons that encompass white households often extend to their romantic and sexual lives (cf. Stoler 2002). Most white Kenyans socialize almost exclusively with other whites, the exceptions being Indian and African elites highly educated in westernized institutions, and most go on to date and marry other whites as well. This racial barrier is beginning to weaken slightly among some members of the younger generations, but it is fairly rigid among the older. Grace notes that while her feelings toward ‘the African people’ have improved over the decades, there are some barriers best not crossed:

I don’t—I KNOW lots of Africans... I've never entertained—it’s—I’m quite ashamed of that actually, but the fact is that I haven’t, I don’t have any African friends... but it’s true to say that one’s attitude has changed when I look back on all what it was like in my childhood and now. I mean I really like African
people. But (2) I, uh, one of these children [we were speaking about], her brother married an African girl. And I'm very happy to say that my children didn't do that because I do think the culture thing and it's on both sides, it's not just on the white side either, it's very hard, and it's even hard for the children.

Grace’s objection to racial intermarriage is, she says decorously, centered on ‘the culture thing’, and she softens the blow with the clear implication that whites are not alone in this prejudice. Some white Kenyans, though, state their objections in more vociferous terms. One famously opinionated barfly in Kilifi, who once referred to Giriama as ‘the missing link’ within earshot of several Giriama staff, informed me he had told a friend of his that if she dated an African he would never speak to her again. She did, and he fulfilled his word.

This social geography of distance is reflected in the derogatory phrase ‘going bush’, used to refer to sleeping with or marrying a black African, or to more general types of racial boundary crossing. One middle-aged white Kenyan man defined ‘going bush’ tentatively as: ‘Going, going a bit stupid because they’ve gone out with an African.’ An elderly Kenyan of Scottish descent put it this way: ‘You know, [it’s] letting the side down.’ The ‘sides’ to which he refers can be mapped not only onto race, but also an urban versus rural topography in which the urban is associated with rationality, order and all things civilized, in contrast to the ‘bush’, which is seen as primal, chaotic and potentially polluting. As will be seen, these ideologies of place interact with ontological commitments, for while white ideologies stipulate a chasm between their own mentality and that of people of who (to use a white locution) ‘dwell’ in witchcraft, apparently one way to cross the gap and vex the distinction is to venture into proximity with the territory and people associated with ‘the bush’.

Complex sentiments

The disdain telegraphed by the phrase ‘going bush’ hardly begins to encompass the complex structures of feeling that many white Kenyans have toward locals. These sentiments have special piquancy in white representations of the financial lot of their staff members. Most white Kenyans enjoy a standard of living far above that of Giriama (and of most other Africans)—the product of a long, structured history of hierarchy, including the fact that whites themselves calibrate the pay they give to their staff. The brunt of this dual economy is entrenched (and repressed) by whites’ emotional stances in ways that sustain both the white sense of intimacy with their staff, and the hierarchy that sepa-
rates them. For instance, although the monthly wages paid to their servants barely cover basic subsistence, many white employers regard themselves as generous benefactors who are effectively saving their staff from total indigence. They often go out of their way to find work for the staff of other whites who go overseas, or offer ‘extras’ to their own servants such as a large bag of maize meal to supplement their income. Many take a kind of exasperated, paternalistic pride in bailing their staff out from difficult financial situations, and discuss their foibles with mingled amusement and affection. They sometimes keep tabs on how servants appear to spend their money, expressing their distress when servants ‘waste’ their wages by spending them on traditional healers or giving it away at the funeral of a distant relative. ‘It’s tragic’, the lament goes; ‘They don’t invest or think of the future.’ Such discourse is backed by genuine frustration and concern, but it also indirectly underscores white qualifications as managers whose presence in Africa, were it only influential enough, might just save Africans from themselves.

Still, employers do not always fancy themselves omniscient masters. Many live with the nagging anxiety that they may not fully understand the temperament or motives of their staff. In other colonial contexts, too, Europeans have been undecided as to whether their servants are a ‘metonym of the loyal colonized’, or an ‘icon of danger’ (Stoler and Strassler 2000: 38; cf. Hansen 1989). White Kenyans are particularly dismayed when staff members filch money or other items from the household or, worse yet, collude with thieves to stage an organized robbery. Some, like Grace, find a way to preserve their narrative of emotional intimacy with staff even in the face of such betrayal. Here, as Grace and I discuss Giriama (whom she says she finds ‘difficult to understand’), she notes that ‘ALL [tribes]’ are similarly inscrutable. By way of example, she recounts a story of betrayal by a Kikuyu servant when she lived upcountry—a narrative that, by its end, interprets his behavior in sympathetic terms:

I think the Giriama are very interesting people. They really are. I find them difficult to understand. BUT, it’s throughout ALL [tribes]. I mean my old Kikuyu [servant] that I used to chat to, I discovered he was the treasurer of the local branch of Mau Mau! You know. [Grace laughs.] Yes! I mean when we had him, he became part of the family—the children still talk about him, and they had him right up until we sold [our house]. And you know that was an interesting thing. He never stole a thing, not a thing, not a thing, and we had him for twenty odd years. When we were leaving, he started to steal. And that is because—and I was so HURT, and then I really realized it was because he felt that his loyalty to us was gone because we were abandoning him... he really was so much part of the family, and it was SUCH a shock to him.
Grace’s analysis has a complex effect; her stance toward her servant’s participation in Mau Mau is indulgent and forgiving, at the same time that it dissolves the structural politics of that resistance movement, rendering it an apparently benign moment in the past. Similarly, as she describes the way the servant acted out when he learned his ‘family’ was departing, she manages to subsume the model of domestic-as-threat beneath a model of domestic-as-child, as even thievery becomes explicable in terms of the special, paternalistic bond between employer and servant.

Some whites, however, are more keenly aware of the tenuousness of the racial hierarchy, and more unnerved by the prospect of revolt. Take Priscilla, a Mombasa resident born in Kenya of Italian parents, now in her mid-forties. While she socializes with many of British descent, she rhetorically distances herself from ‘the wazungus’ [the white people] in the narrative below, while articulating her unsettled feeling that she is not in control of her inscrutable and wily employees:

I have the impression that it’s not me that adapts to them, it’s they that adapt to me. And that is very clear if you look at their eyes... if there is something that they don’t want to [do], they shut. I promise you... there is a completely different glare—it’s an unbreakable wall. Kabisa [totally]... they know how to shut in on themselves tremendously, remaining very polite and whatever, but you have this—I mean, maybe I’m paranoid [laughing] I’m not denying that maybe I’m paranoid, but I always have this feeling that... THEY are playing the game, it’s not you... Which, usually if you speak to the wazungus they think it’s absolutely the opposite, because the wazungus they always think that they are—it’s again this arrogant attitude.

Priscilla is hardly the only white Kenyan to feel leery of her staff members. This push-pull between feeling in and out of control recurs in chronic vacillations between trust and wariness, intimacy and fear. And sentiment, of course, is not the only domain of experience where white Kenyans experience uncertainty. The double logic of intimacy and aversion plays out on the stage of supernatural ontology as well.

‘Witchcraft’ and Christianity: Encounters

Most white Kenyans living on the Kenya coast learn about indigenous religious beliefs and practices through their contact with Giriama staff (though a few have had sufficient contact with Muslim Swahili to know something of their practices as well). Giriama are famous in Kenya for their involvement in indigenous religion; even the guide books sold to tourists tout the coast as an area where ancestor propitiation, spirit beliefs, ‘magic’ and ‘witchcraft’ are widespread. But such
glosses fail to acknowledge the indigenous distinction between the positive rituals and forces of *uganga* (as it is called in both Kiswahili and Kigiriama) and the malicious and destructive magic of *uchawi* (Kiswahili) or *utsai* (Kigiriama). *Uganga* includes a raft of useful ritual devices, including divination, healing rites, adjudication by supernatural means, exorcism of unwanted possessing spirits, and so on. The terrible forces of *uchawi/utsai* are typically said to be commissioned by those who are jealous or vengeful; they can result in anything from a decline in fortune to disease and death. But the colonial, Christian and (often) post-colonial state tendency has been to regard nearly all indigenous forces and rituals as pagan and primitive, and to gloss most of them under the English term ‘witchcraft’ (with the occasional exception made for practices such as ‘herbalism’). Similarly, the spirits that make up Mijikenda cosmology—some helpful, others capricious or vengeful—tend to be portrayed by the national media as uniformly ‘evil spirits’ or ‘demons’ that are anathema to Christianity and ‘development’ (*maendeleo*). Of white Kenyans today, a few are aware of the distinction between helpful *uganga* and harmful *uchawi/utsai*, reserving the term ‘witchcraft’ only for the latter, but many make no such distinction. Many, too, use the terms ‘witchcraft’ and ‘magic’ more or less interchangeably. The ‘black magic’ of my title, and my use of ‘magic’ throughout this article, is deliberately polyvalent, intended to denote any of the mystified indigenous practices that whites associate with Africans.  

Settlers of English descent were typically brought up under the Church of England and attended Anglican grade school; those of other faiths such as Catholics, Quakers and Lutherans were often able to find other like-minded Europeans with whom to worship and study. Religiosity among whites, however, has shifted since the colonial era. Regular church attendance is no longer a part of life for many white Kenyans, and, although most describe themselves as ‘Christian’, quite a few indicate their reluctance to attach their faith to a particular denomination. Several of my informants profess affinity for other systems of thought, including Buddhism and Scientology. Quite a few young people frame their religiosity in spiritual rather than institutional terms, saying they see God in the natural beauty of the Kenyan landscape and wildlife, and require no church to feel worshipful. And several elderly white Kenyans on the coast also told me they don’t attend services on a regular basis because so many church leaders today are African and the aesthetic accoutrements of worship—including vigorous song and dance, local styles of oration, and even the ministers’ accents—no longer ceremonially invoke ‘the homeland’ the way they once did. In the twilight
of these elderly colonials, nostalgia extends not only to a bygone era of governance but also to one of worship.

Of course, in the colonial heyday, religiosity was acceptable only in very particular forms. While there was no single Christian colonial culture, and while the missionary process often found itself bound up in contradictions (Beidelman 1982: 9; Pels 1999), it was nevertheless widely the case that among whites Christianity had to be reconciled with the rationalism of ‘modernity’ and clearly demarcated from the kinds of ‘superstition’ and ‘magical thinking’ associated with colonized peoples. The resultant ideology valorized a kind of level-headed empiricism when considering the causality of everyday occurrences and activities. A transcendent God, in standard missionary discourse, observes human choices and rewards good behavior and enterprise in heaven, but to believe that minor spirits, ancestors or curses can affect one’s fate, to detect supernatural forces in inanimate objects, or to attempt to harness such forces oneself is to indulge in heathenistic, native-like behavior (cf. Beidelman 1982: 17, 138; Chidester 1996; Nelson 1992: 35, 43; Pels 1999: 240). Among the natives, ‘magical thinking’ and ‘witchcraft’ were thought to be part of a culture of wasted energy and paranoia antithetical to both salvation and ‘development’. Unofficially, as Pels has documented in late colonial Tanganyika (1999), ‘the denial of witchcraft by missionaries went along with a much more murky practice’ (Pels 1999: 240) and missionaries may have experienced more fascination with and more ‘moving towards’ the African exotic than they were prepared to let on. Still, the official ideology was sufficiently powerful that, in combination with the overarching messages of colonialism and contemporary discourses of development, it continues to reverberate among elites in numerous ethnic groups in post-colonial Kenya. In the Malindi Municipal Council’s Strategic Plan report of 2004, for instance, a group of European, Indian, Swahili, Arab and Mijikenda policy-makers asserted that ‘entrenched community values on witchcraft [are] considered retrogressive to growth and thus bound to negatively influence institutional development’ (Malindi Municipal Council 2004: 14).

While many scholars have noted that colonials treated witchcraft as an impediment to salvation and civilization, only a few have scrutinized the fact that whites in colonial and post-colonial contexts sometimes take witchcraft and magic seriously as ontological forces. My fieldwork among white Kenyans attests to the enduring presence of the ontological ambivalence that Pels (1998, 1999) has located among colonial missionaries in Africa and in colonial texts about Africa. Even the
oldest former settlers, those most reluctant to associate themselves with local magic, admit that mysterious bewitchments in their community have planted a seed of fear in them. A surprising number of whites have themselves enlisted the assistance of *waganga*, indigenous ritual practitioners, typically to mediate their power struggles with their Giriama staff. Perhaps most surprising of all, however, are the occasional cases of relatively younger white Kenyans who have begun to use *waganga* as a means of mediating their relations with other whites, blurring the boundary between white identity and magic thought to be the exclusive terrain of ‘Africans’.

Native credulity, white pragmatism

I will detail some instances of white uses of *waganga* below, but it is crucial to understand that these take place against the backdrop of a widespread white discourse that frames whites as levelheaded and pragmatic, in contrast to the superstitious tendencies of Africans. Indeed, there is a tacit evolutionism in some white discourse about Africans, in which native metaphysics is considered a throwback to an era that has not caught up with the disenchantments of modernity. Explaining the prevalence of *uganga* among Giriama, Letty, a retiree living in Malindi, says:

> [W]ith the Giriamas and people like that, they have not, they’re so, they live so much in their—still very tribal. They’re still in that respect very um (1) backwards not the right word; they haven’t um (1) ah, matured or been educated enough, mixed in with another society. They’re still very close knit tribe down here. Very close knit.

Like many of her counterparts, Letty equates secular education and cosmopolitanism with the loss of mystical thinking. To be sure, not all white Kenyans engage in a discourse of condescension—indeed, from time to time I encountered a kind of relativism that may reflect global currents of contemporary liberalism, though it may also have been prompted by my presence as an anthropologist. Richard, for instance, says of *uganga*: ‘[I]t’s part of their culture. I can understand that... I understand it. And I will not EVER criticize them or say [oh damn] how can they believe in that. Because they BELIEVE in it, it’s part of their culture.’ Agnes, a retiree in her sixties, also asserts that ‘I respect their beliefs.’ Yet even these speakers were firm in their conviction that mystical thinking is the domain and perhaps even the blight of Africans, not whites: ‘[I]t’s tied in to these people’s lives very much and their tradition and their culture,’ says Richard; ‘It’s become very central to
it... It's difficult for them to shake it off.' Whites, in this locution, have found a kind of cultural and cognitive freedom from the strictures of mysticism, and put their energy and curiosity into more pragmatic matters. Agnes asserted repeatedly during our conversation about *uganga* that 'basically it doesn’t interest me... Things that interest me, I do inquire about, but this has never interested me... I’ve got my feet planted firmly on the ground.' And although Richard spent several hours over the course of several conversations discussing his occult experiences with me, he reminded me from time to time that he was neither curious nor credulous when it comes to *uganga*:

I, you know, I’m not someone who, I actually tend to take things a lot with a pinch of salt... I’m not interested in looking into the sort of occult of all that, for me I think it’s just below—I don’t, it doesn’t interest me.

Other informants, too, repeatedly performed their common sense and self-possession in their narratives, expressing their aversion to *uganga* with phrases such as: ‘You have to make your own decisions in life’, and ‘You can’t let yourself be steered by something else.’

Many whites expressed dismay to me that their Giriama staff, when requiring medical attention, are so willing to give money to ritual practitioners they regard as quacks and conmen (cf. Weiner 2003: 137). In keeping with this theme, I found that when I asked about their own knowledge of witchcraft or magic, many white Kenyans initially produced narratives that underscored the damaging strength of local ‘superstition’. Most had plenty of tales of staff members who believed themselves to be bewitched; this storyline, in fact, is so common it feels like a narrative genre in its own right. In the typical version, the servant is said to fall ill out of the blue and to be convinced that he or she has been cursed. In most cases, employers solicit the help of a medical doctor who finds that ‘there’s nothing physically wrong with them’. In other cases, the servant refuses medical care altogether, convinced that he or she is doomed. These tales culminate in the total loss of hope and a rapid physical decline. Agnes describes the behavior of her servant when he was convinced he was bewitched: ‘It was as if he turned his face to the wall... He just refused to take his medicine. Two days later he died.’ Narratives like these often culminate in rumination about ‘the power of belief’; in a kind of bewilderment that people can effectively kill themselves through their convictions alone.

But white Kenyans do not merely observe African metaphysics at a distance. Some become involved in witchcraft and magic as devices that mediate the power relations between Africans and whites. It is not
uncommon, for instance, for white employers to dupe or police their staff by pretending to have harnessed the power of witchcraft. One elderly man in Malindi, Pieter (born in Kenya of Swedish descent), insisted he knew little about local magic, but related a familiar scenario, one I heard from many other whites:

The only witchcraft I know about is the type of witchcraft where we white people take advantage of witchcraft. I haven’t done it myself, but I have many friends who have. What they do is, if they have trouble in a household, or if they have trouble on a farm, and the trouble won’t go away, and they try to resolve it one way or another, even if they bring in the police or whatever and the trouble goes on and on and on. What you do is you go far away from your farm and you get a hold of a mganga and this mganga he agrees to your price and everything, he will come to your farm and he will perform this witchcraft.

Pieter went on to explain the importance of ensuring the staff witnesses the rituals being performed so they will be sufficiently frightened as to give up their troublemaking (most likely, thievery or disobedience). Another elderly retiree in Malindi named Lucy tells me the Malindi golf club was subject to so much petty thievery, she hired a couple of waganga to come and ‘do their mumbo-jumbo’ to frighten the thief, thought likely to be a member of the golf club staff. ‘Witchcraft’, in such cases, mediates white authority by frightening natives into line. Whites thereby enforce order within their institutions using a quintessentially African policing device, but retain their distance in many cases by implying that they themselves are too level-headed to think the occult has real ontological force; only the credulous natives do.

The anxiety of susceptibility

Despite the prevalence of this discourse, in which whites see the folly of magic and witchcraft that natives do not, I also encountered many narratives in which whites do not feel they control the deployment of magic and witchcraft, but instead become the terrified targets of its occult forces. Indeed, whites in Kenya seem to sense and to fear what scholars have widely recognized: that witchcraft frequently serves as a rejoinder to and form of resistance against power (Auslander 1993; Ciekawy 1997, 1998, 2001; Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1992, 1995; Niehaus 2001; see also White 2000). Capitalist accumulation, ‘development’, the social asymmetries and instabilities brought by colonialism and neoliberalism—all have been the targets of supernatural rumor and ritual on the part of those who might be called ‘modernity’s malcontents’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). While I did not hear whites explicitly identify the
structural critique available in witchery’s forms of revenge, I heard many express anxiety that doing wrong to Africans could invite supernatural reprisal. One middle-aged Malindi resident, Stephen, makes this anxiety plain as he relates a common form of discourse in the white community: ‘Everybody’s been saying to me don’t ever go against the Giriama because they’ll put witchcraft on you.’

Perhaps not surprisingly, white anxiety about bewitchment often focuses on the servants. Lucy, for instance, told me of a woman she grew up with who fired a servant and suddenly developed strange spots on her body, dying almost immediately. She was, explained Lucy with mingled wonder and horror,

A very sophisticated woman! Not a—you know—whatever! And she just believed it was witchcraft! And she died!... Who’d done it? [It was] one her servants who she’d got rid of... She came to see me seven days before she died. And she was all right!

Lucy’s unease stems in part from the fact that her ‘sophisticated friend’—a friend who was, I infer from Lucy’s discreetly unfinished phrase (‘Not a—you know—whatever!’), not someone low class, uneducated, irrational or, perhaps, prone to mingling with Africans—had believed so strongly in witchcraft. Lucy’s expressed shock that such a thing could happen to a ‘sophisticated’ person clearly establishes her presupposition that civilized Europeans are not meant to fear the occult. At the same time, however, her narrative leaves Lucy’s own opinion about the role of belief tantalizingly unclear: was the witchcraft itself real (a horrifying, non-viable thought within the parameters of European ‘sophistication’), or did the woman’s belief alone kill her psychosomatically (still a frightening idea, if more ‘rational’ as an explanation), or did the mind and the supernatural interact as her belief somehow rendered Lucy’s friend vulnerable to the real forces of witchcraft? Such ambiguity is repeated in other white narratives I detail below, as is the theme of the once lowly servant enjoying retribution against his employers. The fear of betrayal by one’s subordinates—and the corresponding conversion of intimacy into treachery—evidently looms large in the European imagination.

Very occasionally, whites would express fear that witchery could be used against them in a context of competition over business. Stephen, a white Kenyan in middle age who runs a small business in Kilifi, finds himself in direct competition with some Swahili, Arabs and Kikuyu who run shops in the same arcade:

An African, if he sees somebody else who’s got the same business as him doing better than he is, will immediately run to a mganga. To get medicine, to go against
Stephen goes on to explain he knows that the Muslim African who owns the complex where he runs his business uses evil jinn spirits to bewitch his tenants. ‘One by one, all his renters are going down in business.’ On the face of it, this would seem an odd pattern; one might expect a landlord to want his tenants to thrive. Yet Stephen’s fearful narrative implies that the landlord follows the laws of jealousy and malice, not capitalist rationality, in his deployment of these terrifying forces.

White witchcraft anxieties also revolve around contests over entitlement to land, a deeply vexed issue in colonial and post-colonial Kenya. Grace related a particularly striking anecdote about a case of bewitchment in the era just after independence. A Scottish friend of hers worked as the Registrar of Land Titles out of Mombasa, and was charged to sort out title deeds along the entire Kenya coast. He traveled north to the Swahili-dominated town of Mambrui, and when he returned, he came down with an illness and ‘this awful rash’. Grace continued:

[H]e was really obsessed by the fact that he had had, you know, something—some sort of spell put on him, because he went from one bad moment to the next. So he was going on leave and he went on leave and he’d only got six months of his contract left, and he’d applied not to come back... [he] felt he’d been bewitched because he knew where, you know, [the land was] they didn’t know about aerial photographs, and things, and he’d had old aerial photographs and [he] was silly enough to joke about it, when they said ‘How do you [know all of this about our land]’ you know, and and and it was something to do with that... because he KNEW, you see. And in a way I guess he walked into it by saying: ‘Aha, you see, we have our powers, too’, or SOMETHING like that, I imagine... Because he did think it was a joke to begin with! But they didn’t take it as a joke.

In this tale, the aerial photographs of the Registrar play the role of the white equivalent of witchcraft, allowing colonial officials access to knowledge that may seem abnormal or unnatural from the point of view of some natives. The Registrar plays upon the photographs’ perceived potency, joking about them as preternatural ‘powers’ (and, by implication, mocking the very concept of African supernatural command), then pays a terrible cost at the hands of those who have powers that in fact transcend his own. According to Grace, the man sank into deeper despair over the subsequent months. He married ‘to try and get over all of this’, she says, but ‘it didn’t work’. After being institutionalized for a time, he took his own life. Grace herself is terrified of local magic, telling me she wants nothing to do with it. She explains that when she lost her diamond ring,
[S]omebody suggested that I go to a witchdoctor because I would find out IMMEDIATELY who had taken it. I said 'I'd rather lose the diamond ring'... I'm scared of it... I'm scared of it. Simple as that... I mean, I just absolutely would not want—if THEY want help that way, and feel it helps them, then I understand, it's it's their culture, but I personally, um, I wouldn't I wouldn't touch it. I'm too frightened of it.

Local occult powers are a source of acute anxiety for Grace—her statement of cultural relativism ('if THEY want help that way... then I understand') goes beyond mere tolerance to ontological awe ('I'm too frightened of it'). The tale about her Scottish friend thus functions as a cautionary one, in which black magic keeps white hubris in check. The target of disenfranchised wrath, furthermore, includes both the technologies of imperial control over land (aerial photographs, title deeds), and the hubris of the colonial who arrogantly dismisses African 'powers' as impotent.

The link between witchcraft and land recurs in other white narratives about certain geographical areas. A number of whites mentioned to me that the sites of famous Mijikenda or Swahili shrines are suspected to be bewitched, while the small villages of Mamburu and of Takaungu, the latter of which is said to be the oldest slave port on the Kenya coast, are thought not only by Africans but by some whites to be haunted. Grace, for instance, describes Mamburu and Takaungu as 'spooky places', adding, 'I'm not the only mzungu who has felt it.' Richard echoes her, saying that Takaungu is 'a very spooky place... I go there and I get goose pimples.' Another white Kenyan living in Mombasa described seeing some 'gorgeous real estate' at Takaungu, but added: 'I saw those black magic items hanging in the trees... it made me leery... I decided I didn't want to live there.' Whites here are driven away by an Other force that makes itself known at a visceral level and that, arguably, constitutes a subterranean manifestation of fear of reprisals against whites who (along with Arabs and Swahili) have been the targets of Mijikenda accusations about both slavery and land-grabbing.

**Crossing the boundary: Whites who use witchcraft**

Despite the anxieties I have just described, some whites expose themselves more rather than less to indigenous metaphysics, usually through the services of waganga (diviners and healers). These whites are typically younger, in their twenties, thirties and forties, though Stephen is exceptional, being in his early fifties. While most in the older generations adhered for decades to Christian forms of worship, it seems that younger
generations not only have closer contact with natives, but are also more willing to entertain alternative forms of religiosity. This flexibility may stem from several factors, including the western vogue of ‘new age’ religious improvisations, new forms of western appropriation of global exotica, and the special pressure younger generations feel to develop an ‘authentic’ Kenyan identity in the absence of colonial justifications for their presence in the country.

Naomi, in her mid-thirties, has used the assistance of waganga for several years, ever since she had a terrifying near-death experience. Naomi had been running a non-profit research project in a small village on the south coast where she was the only white individual, overseeing several African staff members. One of her employees had been, she said, a particularly irresponsible worker. Unfortunately, he was also the son of an important public figure, so when she ‘sacked him’ she grew ‘quite afraid’ of the social consequences. A couple of months later Naomi was walking alone near the seaside when she was run down by a hippopotamus and badly mauled. She hovered between life and death for several weeks. While she was in the hospital, some of her staff came to visit her. They told her that they had found an arrangement of bones on her property, a clear sign that someone—most likely the former employee—had bewitched her. In deep alarm, Naomi had her staff put her in touch with a local mganga to undo the witchery, and she recovered her health, slowly but fully. In recent years, Naomi has continued to use the help of a mganga, this time someone from upcountry—a man named ‘Nelson’. (Naomi was the only white Kenyan I spoke to who actually named a mganga; the others either did not know the names of those who had helped them, or did not bother to mention them. Her use of her mganga’s name bespeaks a level of familiarity with ritual practitioners that is almost unimaginable among those in the oldest generations.) She was referred to Nelson by a white friend around her age who told her, ‘If you ever need someone to help you, to protect you, I know a guy.’ When one of her staff members stole a vital piece of research equipment, she brought Nelson to the coast and ‘recovered the equipment’ through a combination of supernatural appeals and ordinary searching. On other occasions, Naomi calls upon Nelson for assistance when she feels that her affairs are going awry in an ‘unnatural’ way.

Some whites further narrow the gap between ‘African’ and ‘mzungu’ (white) by enlisting waganga to bewitch other whites. Frederick describes a friend of his wife’s who wanted somebody in his office to be transferred out of Kenya to a branch in another country.
... the person involved came along with a photograph of the person who should be transferred, and we went to see the witchdoctor, and uh wanted a black chicken, wanted it slaughtered on the spot, and [the] person actually didn’t want the chicken killed, so the witchdoctor said okay, I won’t kill it right now but we’ll make it go to sleep. So. Held the chicken and stroked its head, chicken played dead. . . . And he did his uh bit of talk and extra money changed hands, and at the end of the month, [the] person was transferred. But not the person that SHOULD have been transferred, but the person who WANTED them to be transferred. [Laughing] So it kind of backfired.

The fact that a white Kenyan here enlists a *mganga* to disempower another white Kenyan is noteworthy. So, too, are the ambiguities in Frederick’s telling. It isn’t clear why the client ‘didn’t want the chicken killed’—this may have been a humane impulse, but it may also have reflected an aversion to the goriness of certain indigenous rituals that for many white settlers constitute a central horror of ‘uncivilized life’.¹⁶ Also ambiguous in Frederick’s telling is whether the ritual ‘backfired’ by chance, or because its occult powers were weakened because it had to be carried out in half-hearted fashion; the *mganga* was forbidden to kill the chicken as he normally would, and the chicken merely ‘played dead’, perhaps resulting in a ritual infelicity and an unstable outcome. Frederick leaves open the question of whether he thinks actual supernatural forces were at play in the ritual—a theme to which I will return shortly.

Of all my informants, the one who most routinely and dramatically uses the assistance of *waganga* is Stephen. Stephen has done much to traverse forbidden boundaries between black and white. At the time I met him, he was cohabiting with a Kikuyu woman (‘I’ve gone bush’, he said sardonically), and was deeply proud, he told me, that he does not share the racist attitudes of many white Kenyans. Not coincidentally, Stephen is also regarded with a degree of suspicion by many of his white peers, who regard him as somewhat unhinged and socially dubious. After learning more about the depth of his involvement in *uganga*, I began to see why Stephen would unnerve many in the mainstream white community. By Stephen’s account, he first began to seriously entertain the possibility of witchcraft while horseback riding with a colleague of his, a German woman also in an interracial relationship (she was married to a Swahili man). Stephen has three horses, his pride and joy, and his favorite steed, Malaika, had been repeatedly felled by illness and accidents.

My German friend said to me at that point: Stephen this is not normal . . . maybe someone is putting witchcraft [on your horse]. And I said Sabine, that only happens to people who believe in it. It doesn’t happen to—and she said no no, not necessarily . . . she said if I were you I’d go and see this *mganga* somewhere WAY up in the hills—a Giriama, on your way to Malindi.
In Stephen’s initial refusal, we see again the ambiguous treatment of ‘belief’ detectable in other white narratives—does witchcraft afflict those who believe in it because of psychosomatic forces, or because belief makes a person vulnerable to real witchly forces? Regardless of how he conceptualized it at the time, Stephen did eventually go to visit the mganga his white friend recommended, and recounted the event to me in great detail. He was awestruck when, during her divination ceremony, she seemed to make a bottle embedded in the soil before her rise up from the ground without cause—movement that as far as he could tell was wholly without a natural explanation. He was astonished by the accuracy of the diviner’s assessment of his problem; she knew without his having to tell her that he was having trouble with a ‘large animal’ that kept falling ill. Finally, the diviner gave an distinct description of the workers at Stephen’s stable, and instructed him to fire one of them, a Giriama worker who she said was jealous of an upcountry worker:

[The diviner said:] Get rid of that short one. He’s the one that’s causing your problems . . . I said no, I can’t do that. You have to tell me how you know this. So she said: He came with a beetle and ground [up] the beetle and put it amongst the hay. And he did witchcraft on that horse because he doesn’t want the upcountry man to be in charge of the horses; he wants to be the boss of the horses . . . She knew everything. She knew EVERYTHING.

Stephen went straight home and pinned the accused employee against a tree:

And I said to him in Swahili: Kimbe [Oh wow], it’s you who’s been doing all this to my horse, eh? Is it true you’ve been the one that’s damaging my horse? Because I’m going to do EXACTLY to you what you’ve done to my horse, in fact I’ve already organized it. Frightened him like that . . . [I said:] I’ve just come from a mganga and I know: you’re the one who’s been doing this. That’s right . . . He knew immediately. Without me having to tell him. I said: You’re the one who’s been doing this, and he started shaking.

Later Stephen returned to the mganga to discern which of his staff members had killed a valued pet of his; once again, Stephen went straight home and fired him.

Eventually Stephen became bound in a tangled web of black magic involving his first cousin, Alger. Alger and Stephen had been close until Alger began borrowing money without paying it back, preying upon Stephen’s good nature until the relationship was strained to the breaking point. When Stephen tried to collect the money, Alger accused Stephen of spending too much on his ‘black girlfriend’ while shutting out his family. Eventually, Alger sent his own staff members to put him
in contact with at least four ritual practitioners, whom he hired to put a spell on Stephen and some of Stephen’s associates. Around the same time, Alger also hired a born-again Christian Giriama, John, to assist Alger in selling some items from his home, but Alger had failed to pay John for his services. John knew that Alger had contacted waganga to curse Stephen, and decided to intercede. John wrote to Stephen to explain that he, John, could not stand by and allow this malevolence to take place without warning Stephen first, in God’s name, of the treachery of his relative. John writes to Stephen: 17

When we started . . . selling [Alger’s things], getting money, things started to change abruptly. He used the money instead to go to witchdoctors to force [your] girlfriend Dorothy to part ways with [you] or kill her completely because she is the one who . . . contributed a lot to the disagreements between [you] and [your cousin]. So [Alger] went to the witchdoctor . . . he wants to finish Dorothy and [your] relationship so that he can live happily again. But because of my strong faith in Christianity . . . I could not keep quiet while all the plans of evil were going on. I decided to inform [you] about the whole story about and plans against [you] but only after getting enough evidence.

John appended several notes and lists in Alger’s handwriting of ‘wishes’ he had given to the waganga. In one of these, Alger writes that he suspects Stephen of hiring witchdoctors of his own to bewitch Alger and Alger’s children: ‘. . . it seems they are winning. We have to do all we can to stop them from harming us.’ In another, Alger enumerates fourteen desiderata, including that he be able to ‘sell all my things’, that he win a ‘court case in Nairobi’, that his bills be paid (presumably by Stephen), and that his family be ‘kept safe from any more evil’. The last item on the list: ‘For Stephen to be very very upset when we leave town, and for his whore to leave him.’

Stephen freely shared all of these documents with me, as well as copies of his own letters to his cousin. In one of these, he refers to Alger’s belief in witchdoctors as ‘pathetic’, and repeatedly urges him that he is wasting his money on quacks and that he must turn to God:

Alger, unless you help yourself you are going to end up in worse problems than you are already in because of your obsession with witch doctors, my advise to you [sic] is to stop seeing these people who are only doing to you what you are doing to me, milking your money for nothing in return. Start going to church and ask God for forgiveness for all the wrong you have done to others and to ask God for help . . . hopefully we will meet one day in heaven if you ask God for forgiveness.

The irony of these exchanges serves as a salient transition into the final phase of my discussion. Although Stephen himself has already crossed boundaries between Christianity and black magic in dramatic fashion,
he performs the role in this letter of a good Christian who can see through the quackery of local witchcraft. Also ironic, of course, is that Alger’s nefarious doings in the domain of Giriama witchcraft were brought up short by a Giriama who had internalized the ‘Christian values’ once considered the sole province of Europeans. In Stephen’s world the line between white and black has become blurred, yet at times, apparently, the world of witchery is simply too threatening to be assimilated to white identity. Stephen attempts to re-draw the line by strategically mobilizing standard Christian attitudes toward African ritual practitioners. I turn next to the varied narrative strategies used by white Kenyans to hold black magic at a distance.

**Strategies of equivocation, statements of belief**

A number of the utterances I describe above implicitly or explicitly outline the dominant white ideology that as ‘educated’ moderns, whites are not ‘supposed’ to believe in black magic. This, for instance, is the presupposition to Lucy’s expression of shock that her friend who was ‘a sophisticated woman’ believed herself to be the target of witchcraft. Her friend Letty articulates the tension felt by many of their peers:

...honestly there is something in us: that half BELIEVES or WANTS to believe, but we know we SHOULDN’T believe in this sort of thing... because that’s the way we’re brought up that you’re not SUPPOSED to believe in things like that.

The dilemma Letty describes is particularly acute for those white Kenyans, most of them in the younger generations, who consider affinity with their African neighbors to be part of their justification for belonging, and thereby tend to have more exposure to and more interaction with the very metaphysical approaches they are supposed to eschew. Accordingly, many narratives about witchcraft and magic are fraught with peril and ambiguity as the tellers flirt uncertainly with the possibility that witchcraft might be ontologically potent and the discomfiting sense that this standpoint threatens the pragmatic self-possession is an important component of white identity. Several of my interlocutors caught themselves in contradictions (with no overt prodding from my end), indicating their awareness that their putative skepticism runs against the grain of their own experiences. Richard, for instance, equivocates in the midst of a rather long stream-of-consciousness monologue, in which he cycles back to the themes he had touched on in the opening vignette of this article:
I believe it is the mind... I do I think that most of it is the mind... I believe a lot of it is the mind, BUT, and now I'm sort of contradicting myself. There is still a lot out there that no one really knows about how it works. And so it it's difficult to gauge.

Stephen, too, catches the tension in his own narrative when, having just implied that black magic has its force by virtue of a psychosomatic link between ‘belief’ and its physical consequences, he goes on to say:

Actually, I think I’m going to contradict myself now, because that [bewitchment] happened to an animal. I mean an animal doesn’t [have] the right to believe or not to believe. The witchcraft actually [tapping his desk for emphasis] went against my animal.

Yet in some of the narratives I elicited, speakers seemed to tack between confessions of fear of the occult and disavowals of belief with no apparent sense of contradiction. Listening to them, I sometimes found myself both vexed and tantalized by their lack of resolution: did my informants believe in occult forces, or not? After all, the post-Enlightenment western ideologies to which I assumed they subscribed generally treat ‘belief’ as the commitment to the truth value of a certain proposition. Such ideologies not only hold that beliefs should be ‘rational’ rather than superstitious; they also assume that a rational person’s belief states will be logically coherent and consistent (Luhmann 1989: 308; Gellner 1974). Furthermore, although psychological anthropologists such as Luhmann note that belief is in fact subject to contextual impressionability and ‘drift,’ most western folk ideologies of belief tend to be cut-and-dried; either one believes in something or one does not, irrespective of context. In retrospect, although most of my informants were clearly trying to differentiate themselves from ‘Africans’ while asserting their pragmatism, I may have been operating with these folk ideologies of belief more than they sometimes were.

Indeed, some of my informants found particularly creative strategies to deal with the tensions between experiences of the occult and white identity. One strategy for performing the distance between ‘whites’ and ‘Africans’ without necessarily denying the existence of mysterious forces is to use spatial and physical metaphors to hold local ontologies at bay. Just as some of my informants express their aversion to having a ‘village’ on their compound, so too do they often model uganga and uchawi in terms of a kind of topography of involvement.18 Giriama, I was told over and over again, are ‘steeped’ or ‘mired’ in witchcraft, implying an almost physical permeation of their bodies by these beliefs and practices. White Kenyans, on the other hand, report they are not enveloped by local beliefs and practices because they keep their distance; ‘I don’t
delve into these things,’ as several of them put it. This sort of attitude is not merely a statement of lack of interest; it can be a way of protecting white identity from occult forces and mitigating one’s fears by refusing to actively engage them. Richard, for instance, asserts that there’s ‘something there’—something efficacious, it would seem, about local witchcraft and magic—but that ‘we’—white Kenyans—tend to keep a distance:

There’s SOMETHING THERE, but we are not integrally part of it because we don’t court it, we don’t go to [local rituals]; you understand what I’m saying. I HAVE thought about going to a mganga, but I’ve stepped back... I stepped back 'cause I don’t like the idea.

The one time Richard did use the services of a mganga, as described in the opening vignette, he paid his servant to go. Avoiding the areas associated with witchcraft, keeping a distance both geographic and metaphorical, seem ways of holding the occult at arm’s length even in the face of one’s own fear that it exists.

White Kenyans did use the term ‘belief’ frequently (and often, they invoked the term unbidden by me), but sometimes their use of the concept stretched it beyond standard western formulations. Several times, for instance, Stephen shared with me his perspective on the beliefs of his peers. When I remarked how many in his social circle seemed to fear African religious forces, he replied: ‘Well of course they do; they’re here in Kilifi, in the thick of a great band of witchcraft that runs up and down the coast. Trying not to believe is like going to a bar and trying to just drink water.’ In Stephen’s vivid metaphor, the coastal terrain is so suffused with witchcraft that believing in it has a kind of intoxicating lure. Anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (1989: 322) has given the appellation ‘interpretive drift’ to the cognitive process by which people exposed to new situations can change their beliefs, engaging in ‘the slow slide from one form of explanation to another, partially propelled by the dynamics of unverbalized experience.’ But in a separate conversation weeks later, when Stephen and I knew each other much better and I had begun to understand the depth of his involvement in local religious practice, I learned that in Stephen’s view, mere psychological impressionability is not the only reason for the ‘drift’ of belief. ‘The Giriama have bats who can follow you and put a spell on you to believe’, Stephen insisted. ‘Once you’re out of range they can’t get to you any more, so you stop believing it.’ In this formulation, the supernatural forces in question are ontologically real, but operative relative to a particular territory; the strength of one’s belief in these forces
thus waxes and wanes relative to one’s distance from that space. Beliefs shift, then, not because people change their minds through exposure to new ideas, but rather because their minds can be changed for them by occult forces. In this perspective, it is not clear which stance Stephen might frame as more naïve or credulous; belief in the occult (which is instilled in one by forces of witchery, rather than arrived at rationally), or disbelief (which operates in denial of occult forces that are nevertheless real).

Other white Kenyans struggle to locate their center of gravity somewhere on the murky terrain between the credulity that is ‘supposed’ to attach to the natives and the skepticism that is ‘supposed’ to be the domain of whites. Take Agnes, who admits to being ‘quite colonial’ in her attitudes but does not dismiss uanga and uchawi out of hand:

Agnes:
It might be all hocus-pocus, or it might indeed work. And it obviously—although, I personally don’t believe in it, there are those who do. And for those who do, it is obviously a potent weapon or a potent cure. Whichever way it’s going to be.

Janet:
... What do you mean when you say ‘I don’t believe it’? Do you mean: I think it’s impossible that any sort of supernatural something could be going on? Or what do you=

Agnes: no no no no. I I I grant that [she clears her throat] supernatural things do happen. But [she enunciates each word distinctly] I personally cannot believe IN the supernatural.

In this complex formulation, Agnes begins with an ambiguous statement: ‘It might be all hocus-pocus, or it might indeed work’, but she ‘personally doesn’t believe in it’. When I press her to clarify what she meant by the latter claim, she ultimately grants the existence of ‘supernatural things’. What seems most crucial to her is that she ‘personally cannot believe IN the supernatural’. On the face of it, this might seem a contradiction; according to the standard western ideologies I have described, either one believes that something exists or one does not. But Agnes draws a distinction between acknowledging that a force exists and ‘believing in’ that force, the latter being a formulation linked to the kind of belief she may associate with commitment, faith and identity (see Ruel 1982 for a discussion of such distinctions in the history of Christianity). Her emphasis on the words ‘personally’ and the indexical ‘IN’, furthermore, suggests that locals are located somehow ‘inside’ of—or inextricably from—these modes of thought, whereas she would prefer to keep her person distant from them. The key distinction in
Agnes’ formulation of belief is not so much about who subscribes to the truth-value of the occult, but rather who is willing to live in an intimate relationship with the ontology in question.

In other, related formulations, white Kenyans seem to essentialize occult beliefs to Africans, even as they themselves flirt with and occasionally admit to the possibility of these supernatural powers. Take Frederick, who uses several narrative strategies to maintain an identity distinct from his staff. Some of his stories are tantalizingly equivocal, seeming at first to attest to the strength of local magic, but often ending with a punchline that takes the stuffing out of it. The story related earlier about the white Kenyan who tried to get a fellow worker transferred and was himself transferred instead is one such example. In another narrative, Frederick relates the story of a ritual his staff commissioned at his place of work to bring in more clients so the staff could keep their jobs. More clients eventually came, but Frederick adds uncertainly: ‘So whether it was lucky or what, I don’t know. But anyway it DID work.’ He continues with another series of equivocations:

But I know that the local people themselves I mean, amongst the Giriamas and some of the upcountry people really believe very strongly… And if they are bewitched, they’re BEWITCHED, and that’s it. You can’t do anything about it. So they REALLY believe in them. (2) I believe that—in it on a fact for THEM.

I was unsure how to interpret this. ‘You believe in it how?’ I asked. Frederick continued:

For THEM. Yeah… the Giriamas amongst themselves they’re often um, well, for instance one of my staff, they said he was uh, uh bewitched because he didn’t share meat which I had given to him amongst his community. So he was bewitched and uh [Frederick switches to a lower voice] maybe he was even poisoned, indirectly. [Frederick returns to his regular register] And he died! Three days later! So, if they believe, this is what happens. So I believe that they amongst themselves believe it. But I don’t believe, or (3) I wouldn’t get myself involved in anything of their spirits and such because actually I think I have maybe my OWN stronger power.

Frederick indicates that he believes in the power of witchcraft, but only ‘for them’, an ambiguous statement—does he mean that this is a culturally specific belief that he does not share, or, perhaps, that the supernatural powers in question are real, but effective only relative to a particular people? As he describes the bewitchment of one of his staff members, Frederick shifts into a lower register to speculate that ‘maybe he was even poisoned, indirectly’, as if to suggest he is aware of the empirical possibility that the man’s death was due to biochemical causes rather than mystical forces alone (though the term ‘indirectly’ is
tantalizingly unclear—what is ‘indirect’ poisoning? Could it happen through supernatural means?). His final sentence is telling: first he says ‘I don’t believe’, but after a pause he revises that statement, saying he wouldn’t involve himself in local metaphysics ‘because . . . I think I have maybe my OWN stronger power’—a contention that presupposes the existence of local powers. While he is reluctant to admit ‘belief’ point blank, several of Frederick’s statements seem to assume that African mysticism has potency, potency he refuses to ‘get involved’ with. When I asked for clarification about the nature of his ‘own’ power, he informed me that ‘it’s a Christian thing’. Frederick is not the only white Kenyan to suggest that Christianity supernaturally trumps local witchcraft. Stephen tells me that his business has defied the bewitchment of his landlord because his belief states prioritize the forces of Christianity over those of local witchcraft:

I strongly believe that [my surviving in business] is because I’m not brought up to believe in mgangaism. That I do REALLY BELIEVE IN GOD and I REALLY DO PRAY with Jesus. I honestly believe that Jesus has more strength than the witchcraft.

Stephen’s announcement invokes a theme that resounds in many of these narratives: the metalinguistic import of belief statements themselves. The very act of stating what one does and does not believe—sometimes, regardless of what one does or experiences—seems important to the performance of white identity. Agnes’s vehement assertion that she, ‘personally, cannot believe IN the supernatural’, for instance, and Frederick’s evasive statement that ‘I believe in it . . . for THEM’ suggest that to make an unambiguous belief statement about the African occult is an act to be avoided. Stephen revealed the same aversion in our first conversation, when I initially raised the topic of uganga:

Janet: So one thing I want to know is since you’ve lived on the coast for so long, what do you know about uganga? There’s a huge amount; it’s much bigger than I can= Stephen: =I don’t believe in it. But these people have been brought up with mgangaism [sic] right from the word go, and it’s rather like being brought up on mother’s milk or goat’s milk, you know.

Stephen interrupts me to emphatically assert that he doesn’t believe in uganga, and essentializes it to ‘these people’ (Africans) using biological metaphors. Yet within half an hour of conversation it became patently clear that, at least in the standard western sense of ‘belief’, Stephen did indeed believe in uganga, drawing upon the skills of Giriama diviners to hire and fire staff members. To be sure, he also expressed skep-
ticism about the occult, telling his cousin Alger he was ‘wasting his money’ on witchcraft and periodically suggesting that bewitchment takes effect through psychosomatic means. But if consistency per se did not seem to be Stephen’s priority, distancing himself from direct statements of belief was clearly important to him.

In fact, such evasions suggest that belief statements themselves may have taken on a talismanic quality in this cultural group, many of whom concede that occult powers exist but seem to fear that the wrong sort of utterance may open them up to vulnerability in both the social and occult domains. Both of these possibilities are highlighted in a metalinguistically rich discussion I had with Priscilla. When I asked what she ‘knew’ about uganga or uchawi, she replied: ‘I know that it’s extremely common. I know that it—absolutely common, and it does exist, for sure.’ I pressed her, revealing (gracelessly) what had become my own fixation on belief states: ‘Do you believe in it, or do you just believe that they believe in it?’ Priscilla responds reflectively:

Let’s put it this way, that with them I would never admit to them that I could believe in it. Because, when they try to involve me in this kind of thing... my reaction is: I’m a mzungu and I do not believe in this kind of thing... because I don’t want them to think you can become vulnerable. Because the moment that they think you (1.5)—you never know. You know? You never know... We don’t have the power to, to control this kind of magic forces, whatever you want to call them.

If her staff members were to know that Priscilla believes in uganga, she would incur both a loss of face and a kind of threat; if they know she is vulnerable, she implies, they might actually wield their magic upon her. The appearance of fearlessness, apparently, is important in deterring such attacks, and avoiding admissions of belief while invoking one’s racial category—‘I’m a mzungu’—is meant to draw upon (and perhaps to further entrench) the popular notion that wazungu categorically consider local magic to be impotent. Priscilla goes on to admit her ambivalence, reframing her response as she mulls over her options and seeks the right linguistic frame for her stance:

I prefer not to say that I believe or I do not believe. I remain a bit uhm (3) I’m quite scared of it. I’m quite scared. 1—(1) So it means that I probably do believe in it... I presume that magic uh power, d- it does exist and uhm:: (1) it’s not a joke, let’s put it that way. I do respect it but I::—I’m quite, yeah, it’s something I don’t want to...
that this is a strong probability). Indeed, when she voices her preference 'not to say' what her belief is, she follows this immediately with an admission of fear, perhaps implying that bald statements of belief can lay the person open to the occult forces in question. As her words fade away, Priscilla is reduced to mere gesticulation: she points her fingertips to the ceiling and makes blocking motions with her hands as if to fend off an invisible adversary or create a boundary between herself and the forces she finds so frightening. Perhaps her disfluency is a result of an inchoate sense that one's very utterances can give one protection from—or lay one open to—black magic. After a final pause, Priscilla recovers her voice, and achieves clarity about one thing: 'We westerners are pretending to be rational. Rationalize everything.'

A number of the common themes in white Kenyan narratives can be summed up in Naomi's attempts to carve out her stance toward black magic. Like others, she suggests that the strength of native belief may be a precondition of the efficacy of witchcraft in that community: 'Within this community, it really works. If you believe in it, then it works.' She also floats a psychosomatic theory of the mechanisms of uganga, saying: 'I firmly believe a lot of these waganga are very clever psychologists and psychiatrists.' Yet the fact that she herself uses waganga to catch thieves and undo curses suggests that—like other white Kenyans—she concedes that uganga has potency that goes beyond the purely psychological. I presented her with this tension, and she struggled to explain herself with a compromise: the suggestion that the strength of a person's belief may psychosomatically magnify the supernatural effects of magic. As for her involvement with her mganga, Nelson, she may use his help but she is adamant she doesn't want to 'become dependent' upon him:

Sometimes Nelson has called me out of the blue. I find it uncanny, just uncanny, that he so often catches me at a moment when difficult things are facing me. But it's very important to me that he not control my life. I don't want to be unable to act without consulting him first. It's like having a psychiatrist; it's not good for people to have to consult their psychiatrists before they do anything. I need to be the one steering my life... I don't want to DWELL in this stuff.

Although her use of uganga may sometimes resemble those of locals, Naomi sustains an identity she is comfortable with by retaining a degree of distance from native practice. Suggesting that there is a 'psychiatric' and psychosomatic component to magic and witchcraft helps Naomi maintain the upper hand over these powers, for by refusing to let her mganga 'control her life' with his 'clever psychology', she remains the one 'steering her life'. The 'uncanny' powers in question, then, have
some degree of supernatural reality, but she keeps her distance—‘I don’t want to DWELL in this stuff’—and, in her narrative at least, retains her self-determination.

Yet Naomi added something else that startled me for its novelty in the context of these narratives, and for the possibilities it speaks to. I have suggested that white Kenyans are under pressure to sustain an image of themselves as competent and level-headed managerial personae. This pressure often translates into renunciations of ‘belief in’ indigenous religion, or other efforts to distance the self from it. But at one point, Naomi actually finds a way to reconcile her use of uganga with her identity as a competent manager. She admits to using Nelson’s assistance to solve her quandaries in the workplace, and says with a pragmatic air: ‘It’s a way of having someone on your side. You’re running an organization, see? And you need all the help you can get. It’s a management tool.’ Magic, in this formulation, stands not for the antithesis of rational social organization, but instead as a kind of corporate facilitator. Naomi’s astonishing formulation suggests that the role of magic in white Kenyan life will continue to be refigured. As the generations turn over in Kenya, will we see a revolution in thinking, such that ‘black magic’ is no longer overtly marked as black, or at least no longer so strictly counterposed against white identity?

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NOTES

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2. To preserve the anonymity of my informants, I have altered names and other identifying markers, including, sometimes, their town of residence.

3. See Hufford (1982) for a lengthy discussion of cross-cultural accounts of so-called ‘sleep paralysis’ and the imputed presence of supernatural beings while in such states.

4. Nearly all quotations in this paper are transcribed from audio recordings. I indicate paralinguistic cues using the following transcription conventions: capital letters indicate the speaker’s emphasis. Numbers in parentheses such as (3) denote the number of seconds of a pause. An equals sign, ‘=’, indicates the ‘latching’ or overlapping of one speaker onto another’s speech. Sequential colons, ‘::’, indicate a prolonged sound. Italicized terms are in Kiswahili, Kenya’s lingua franca.

5. I entirely agree with Ranger that whites in post-colonial territories have tended to fade into scholarly insignificance, but unlike Ranger, I would not frame them as ‘powerless’. Indeed, a premise of this article is that whites retain certain forms of power in the post-colony, but they must take pains to defend the authority that justifies their advantages.

6. For a colonial novel set in an Indonesian context that sounds many related themes, see Louis Couperus’s The Hidden Force (1992 [1900]).

7. Performing certain kinds of personhood was a longstanding colonial concern as well—see, for instance, Stoler’s (2002) documentation of the colonial Indonesian obsession with asserting superiority not through race or color alone, but additionally through particular dispositions and sentimental patterns.

8. In fact, I hold dual United States-United Kingdom citizenship, but I am culturally, linguistically, and usually residentially American, which, from the point of view of my informants, largely obviated the significance of my UK passport.

9. The relatively elite economic status of South Asians in Kenya, and majority resentment of their economic success, also has a complex history, one too involved to discuss here.

10. Such discussions not infrequently extend to servants’ cooking habits, such as their idiosyncratic interpretations of recipes. See Hansen (1992b) on the importance of cooking as a colonial gauge of more general sophistication.

11. Kikuyu made up the core of the Mau Mau insurgency (1952-1960) against the British settlers. Although only a few dozen whites were killed while hundreds of thousands of Africans died or were incarcerated in ‘rehabilitation camps’, the movement struck absolute terror into the hearts of many settlers. Ultimately, the rebellion set the stage for Kenya’s independence.

12. See Pels (1999: 239-245) for a discussion of the displacement of the term ‘magic’ in anthropological discourse in favor of the term ‘witchcraft’ in the 1930s.

13. Ciekawy (1989, 1992) has demonstrated that the witchfinding movement in coastal Kenya by the Mijikenda witchfinder Kajiwe helped to facilitate the notion that witch-
14. Historically, upcountry areas like the ‘white highlands’ near Nairobi have been the focus of the most famous contests over land in Kenya; early white settlers displaced thousands of Kikuyu and members of other ethnic groups from those regions, which became the focus of Mau Mau efforts to reclaim land just prior to independence. But land struggles have taken place elsewhere; in 1913-1914, to give one example, the Giriama staged a rebellion against colonials attempting to displace them from coastal land north of the Sabaki river. More recently, in 2004 the upcountry region of Laikipia became the focus of a widely publicized land reclamation struggle, as Maasai attempted (unsuccessfully) to hold whites to the expiration dates on their 99-year leases on land once occupied by Africans. On the coast, many whites own valuable beachfront plots purchased from the colonial and post-colonial governments, while many if not most Mijikenda (including Giriama) on the coast squat grudgingly on territory owned by the government, Swahili, Arabs, Asians and those of European descent.

15. As Pels has noted, spiritualism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—including the use of Ouija boards, séances, and the like—confounded any neat European effort to define itself as monolithically opposed to the occult (Pels 2003b). There is surely fruitful work to be done on potential links between these movements in Europe and religious beliefs and practices in the colonies. Nevertheless, older colonial generations in Kenya generally report that they were enrolled in strict Christian schools from a young age, and venturing outside of Christian practice was highly discouraged.

16. This horror came to a head in the 1950s, when Mau Mau freedom fighters became notorious among whites for using animal sacrifice and bodily fluids to consecrate their loyalty to the cause (Elkins 2005).

17. John repeatedly refers to Stephen in the third person rather than the second person, even though Stephen is the addressee of the letter. I have changed the relevant proper nouns and pronouns for ease of comprehension.

18. One white Kenyan, when he found his servant smearing chicken blood in his courtyard to protect his family members from uchawi, said ‘Kahengi, you’ve got to bring your family back to the village and sort this mess out.’ Such ‘messes’ have their place, apparently, and that place is not on the white home compound.

19. Priscilla’s acknowledgement of her performance of control resonates with that of the colonist narrator in George Orwell’s ‘Shooting an Elephant’, who kills an elephant largely to demonstrate his resolve and authority in front of the natives: ‘A sahib has got to act like a sahib’ (Orwell 1970 [1936]: 269).