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Witchcraft, riches and roulette
An ethnography of West African gambling in the UK

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ABSTRACT
This article builds on research carried out at western Ghana's anti-witchcraft shrines and on post-1996 fieldwork among Ghanaian gamblers in a major UK city-port, here named Northington. Unemployed or in a low-paid job, the gambler's pursuit of excitement, financial respite and hope via his furtive endeavours tends, self-defeatingly, to add to his anxieties and, when he is lucky, guilt over accumulated 'bad' wealth. He is terrified that a witch, usually a female relative, suspicious about his prosperity, will punish him for 'cheating' her and other relatives of much-needed cash by 'spiritually' taking away his winnings. Fearing that his 'illicit' gambling has undermined the efficacy of charms and talismans to ward off the effects of witchcraft, his engagement with more elaborate rituals in the hope of stronger protection represents his attempt to manage anxiety and bring events under control.

KEY WORDS
- gambling, uncertainty, talisman, wealth, West Africa, witchcraft

Northington,\(^1\) the locus of this study, experienced steep industrial decline throughout the latter part of the 20th century as the manufacturing industries on which its wealth had been built gradually shut down and the port lost major ship-building contracts, resulting in the loss of thousands...
of jobs in the late 1980s. Northington’s African community, a sizeable diaspora today, has been building for a long time: among others, migrating Kru seamen came from Sierra Leone in the early 17th century and, more recently, East Africans and refugees from Central Africa have made a home in the city, living, in the main, in newly furnished housing-association properties in crumbling Victorian terraces. Some of Northington’s Africans are able to trace their ancestry to the West African slaves who were shipped to the port on the way to the USA, and there are many extended families comprised of generations whose social networks include kin living in Ghana, the USA and Germany.

In Northington (as in Ghana) any discussion of witchcraft involves a delicate movement back and forth of insecurity and assurance, such is the fear and stigma of witchcraft accusation (Geschiere, 1997). Frequently I found in Northington that an initial discussion of witchcraft led to me being referred on to other, more knowledgeable, individuals in the social network, so that no one person assumes responsibility for speaking openly. This depended on those others trusting my discretion, though such patronage, once bestowed, could be readily revoked should my moral judgement subsequently be called into question. The person facilitating such an introduction stands to lose credibility and status should I thereafter speak indiscreetly about witchcraft, aware that I would thereby implicate those to whom I had been introduced. In other words, simply by talking about witchcraft, even to assert its absence, is to engender the anxiety and mistrust of others and so intensify the very conditions in which witchcraft thrives. This, of course, is one of the main reasons why witchcraft is rarely mentioned to others in one’s social network. A quandary is produced: on the one hand, a person worried about witchcraft is very unlikely to reveal concern to another in case what she says is interpreted as a covert accusation against a third party or even the identification of oneself as a witch; on the other, the mere mention of witchcraft, even to an outsider to one’s network, intensifies the very anxiety which the speaker is seeking to diminish.

Although I had encountered many people who refused to talk to me about witchcraft for fear of being associated with the practice or of inadvertently implicating another as a witch, this was certainly not the case among the gamblers I met. Such was their fear of a witch discovering their covert gambling activities and (illicit) winnings that they would disclose their involvement in gambling once informed of my visits to some of the most powerful anti-witchcraft shrines in Ghana, assuming that I had a close relationship with well-connected diviners and perhaps also that the secret of how to gamble successfully had been passed on to me. It seemed that they hoped, in particular, that I had access to powerful talismans made at possession shrines and designed to ward off witchcraft. One such individual was Zack.
I had been acquainted with Zack, a chef in a local arts complex, for several months, during which time we had spoken very generally about the poor fortune that had befallen over the years various family members of his. One day he asked me specifically about the anti-witchcraft shrines I had visited in Ghana, saying he had heard that I owned a powerful talisman which offered manifold protection. I referred to one such talisman – a Bic biro a local diviner had filled with ‘secret’ herbs and medicines designed to protect wealth and to ward off evil forces, in which he expressed great interest. He spoke of acquaintances who had purchased powerful talismans from African diviners whom they had sought out during visits to relatives in cities such as London, Paris and Copenhagen. Among these objects, he said, were necklaces and other body adornments that had been washed in ‘sacred medicines’. He himself had a charm that was composed of, among other things, special dried herbs, and he spoke also of vials of efficacious substances. (More often than not a talisman is, like that in my possession, a common consumer item or a part thereof, such as a matchbox or a piece of string or paper, that is believed to have been invested with ‘power’ by the diviner from whom it was purchased.) Zack enquired whether I had heard of an old man from Dakar who sold ‘ancient secrets’ in the Parisian suburbs to those ‘whose intentions were good ones’. He had on occasion purchased from this man a number of ‘fetishes’, believing them to have been blessed by some of the more powerful West African gods; he spoke of other men who, having purchased charms similar to his own, had gone on to become professional footballers, some playing for their national team.

Several weeks later I met Zack outside a betting shop in the neighbourhood where I lived (he swore that the bet he was putting on was for a friend). He told me that since our meeting he had ‘come into’ a small fortune – I had brought him luck. Subsequently, over a period of months, I learned about his gambling habits and more about his fear of witchcraft. He described witches as usually women who are greedy and secretly envious of those relatives financially better off than them (he believed that there were a number of witches among his extended family) and he feared them, he exclaimed, for their power to steal his stash of wealth for themselves. More worrying for him, however, was his suspicion that he had undermined the efficacy of the talisman he had purchased by spending what little money he had on gambling, thus ‘cheating’ his relatives out of the small amounts they begged of him. What money he had won by his gambling constituted ‘bad’ wealth that the talisman would not protect – an anxiety to which he returned time and again, though it materialized fully only later, after I had met and carried out long-term fieldwork among the other gamblers to whom Zack introduced me.

Fieldwork involved accompanying individual gamblers to local casinos
and betting-shops as well as conducting semi-structured and unstructured interviews in bars and coffee houses. Two of these men, Mike and Matthew, stayed with friends in Northington for only a few weeks at a time and otherwise travelled around Europe looking for work. Thus, although I interviewed each many times, our meetings were spread over a period of three years. Others would meet with me only outside of Northington, in towns and cities where they were not known, and then would allow me to interview them only when they had gambled successfully!

In the course of this extended period of fieldwork, however intermittent my meetings with the individuals involved, I was struck by the gamblers’ ritualized actions. None of the men was able to say with confidence when and how these rituals began, and embarrassment was often evident when asked why they performed so many of them. They expressed surprise that I was aware of other individuals who practised similar rituals and to such an extent. These rituals were designed to supplement the power of their purchased talismans, augmenting the protection of their ‘illicit’ gambling. Ray, for example, a self-employed 34-year-old, would, I noticed, several times check that the oven was turned off before we left his house, fearing that it would be turned on by a witch. Mike, 40, who later returned to Ghana, would constantly check his wallet during interviews in case a witch had spirited away his credit cards. Isaac would always turn up to meet me 20 minutes early so that he could walk around touching specific nearby buildings to warn off evil spirits who might be watching. Zack would put sugar in a coffee he had just made, and then make a second cup (which he would drink) because ‘the witch might try to drug the first and discover where I keep my winnings’. At times, each of the men was willing to concede that his rituals appeared obsessive and faintly ridiculous, and that their content should be kept hidden from others. Indeed, all of these gamblers would admit that they were accomplished tricksters able to keep secret whole areas of their lives. Mike’s girlfriend had noticed his performance of certain rituals, though he believed her to be unaware of their full extent. He told me: ‘I lose sometimes thousands of pounds a month, and she doesn’t notice that either!’ When she would ask why he kept checking if the gas was turned off or the front door was locked, he simply told her that he did so because he loved her and their children so much and was concerned for their safety.

Gambling practices

Living in their depressed local economy, Zack, Ray and others gambled because it offered them at least some prospect of economic success – and also because they derived immense enjoyment from betting: hope allied to
pleasure. As Mike said, ‘It gives me hope that I can achieve great potential.’ Zack spoke of gambling as a source of the thrills and excitement otherwise lacking in the grind of day-to-day existence, especially that of a lowly paid or unemployed West African, in Northington. Isaac, 24, said: ‘The roulette wheel speaks to all men as long as they have the chips.’ Or, as Zack commented, ‘The casino will take your money whatever your colour.’ Each of these men would place at least one bet on any casino visit. In a single gambling session, in which a variety of games, from blackjack to poker, might be played, several hundred pounds might be wagered, and often lost; £30 to £40 would often be bet on a hand, and any winnings immediately cashed in for chips to allow the gambler to continue. Sometimes an individual would set limits on how much he would bet: for example, he might allot £300 to gambling for that week or even that afternoon! Invariably, however, he would overshoot his limit in the quest for ‘that one last bit of luck’. Inevitably (and, for the non-gambler, paradoxically), the more a gambler loses, the more he will be inclined to exotic wagers on outcomes about which he knows very little, such as horse-racing, which none of the gamblers in this study claimed to enjoy watching; he might bet on a whim in order to overcome the odds, which, he feels, are stacked against him, or, as one gambler put it, he will ‘try to trick evil’.

Some of the men would make at least two visits each week to casinos, membership of which is easy to obtain in this city. Venues tend to be rather drab, smoke-filled and in need of refurbishment, quite unlike the state-of-the-art casinos of Las Vegas. In the centre of the gambling floor are the roulette and blackjack tables, the surrounding walls lined with slot machines. The clientele is decidedly mixed, ranging from local celebrities, stag- and hen-parties with one-night passes, to the habitué gamblers, predominantly middle-aged Caucasian or Chinese men.

When betting, some will play their hunches; others will have sought the advice of psychics prior to their casino visit (Palmer, 1984). Some favour the use of lucky numbers, those of the month, birth-dates and auspicious days or years in their lives (Crump, 1990); others use astrology as a guide to the dates on which to gamble. Levez indicates that some gamblers employ ‘scientific’ systems purchased through the classified sections of national newspapers, while others invent their own systems, such as doubling their bet following a loss or adapting a technical system based on the law of averages – for example, betting on a number that has yet to feature in a given session. ‘Some may sit for hours marking the numbers of a particular wheel in the hope of discerning a pattern’ (1995: 40). Certain players claim to have the entire record of a wheel’s outcomes from which they try to detect the bias so that a gambler can record a wheel’s performance over sessions (Levez, 1995).

The most significant practices of individual gamblers tend to be rehearsed
away from the casino, however, and in the section which follows I consider the economic pressures that persuade individuals to engage in such practices, as well as factors that render gambling a seductive prospect.

Wealth and the kinship network

Economic decline in the 1990s, both in Ghana and in Northington, heightened anxiety about the distribution and consumption of wealth between trans-located kin. The cedi, the national currency of Ghana, nose-dived and the country’s economy and infrastructure suffered a deep decline; inflation in Ghana is rampant still today. As a result young people, particularly those of school age, were sent (as they are today) to Europe to live with their more prosperous relatives, themselves family-units under considerable pressure to act in loco parentis for their deprived relatives in Ghana (Parish, 2000). Such pressure is acutely felt among diasporic Ghanaians living in a climate of economic and personal insecurity. Of those gamblers I met there were quite a few who, during their adult lives, had been employed in a succession of jobs from which, one after another, they were made redundant, as industrial plants were closed down or relocated at a distance. Adam, a young man who for five years had lived in Hamburg and then London, and was now unemployed, remarked that his relatives in Ghana believe Europe to be ‘full of gold’ while expressing his great concern at his diminished prospect of well-paid employment. He had gambled his small redundancy payment because in doing so he’d experienced, if momentarily, a hope of ‘turning the corner’ and having money. A sporadic attender of a local Pentecostal church, Adam believed that God frowned on illicit gains and the accumulation of ‘bad’ wealth, hence his desolate outlook.

Twenty-nine-year-old Richard’s economic position was not dissimilar. He had come to Northington in the mid-1990s, leaving behind a wife and three children who, of necessity, had moved in with relatives living in a small village in eastern Ghana. Richard, who worked as a sales assistant for a large retail firm, managed to send money to them. While he felt that the amount sent was generally insufficient to meet their needs, he complained that he experienced too many economic pressures to be able to save regularly. His wife was an avid Pentecostal and Richard had himself recently experienced ‘rebirth’. His faith brought on feelings of guilt whenever he gambled, feelings that were intensified by his other relatives’ periodic pleas for money. One day he said that he had received such a request in that morning’s post: his brother needed money in order to enter a business studies programme in the United States.

Richard was reluctant to commit his money to his brother’s venture, given the ongoing costs of a course of study, but felt strongly obligated to
help. This brother, it seems, used to wire money home each month so that family members in Ghana might buy a new car, though after several months he’d found out that the money had been squandered and no car purchased. Richard was in no position to take on extra work: his workload at the time was demanding enough – the positions of several of Richard’s colleagues had not been filled since their recent departures to jobs in other companies, and he had himself to maintain and the rent on his apartment to pay. Nevertheless, he was mindful that, by denying the support requested by his brother, he risked being perceived as mean and greedy; moreover, he was fearful lest his refusal set off a reaction that would result in a witch covertly bringing about heavy gambling losses for him in the coming months. Indeed, that is what happened. A number of ‘dead-certain’ bets went down, and Richard soon found his position to be one of spiralling debt; he was also behind with his rent. This debt served only to persuade him into larger wagers on the roulette wheel; at the same time he engaged in more elaborate rituals to cloak his gambling activities. As it happens, a relatively large bet did pay off one lucky day, though it gave Richard only temporary respite – and a couple of months later the familiar cycle of anxiety and losing bets restarted.

**Talismans and anxiety**

To supplement the ‘magical’ powers of their talismans purchased from native doctors, especially during losing streaks, gamblers like Richard have developed their own private rituals. During these rituals, particular actions are performed which the gambler regards as necessary to secure some degree of control over his life. Each action becomes a marker or clue that brings the known and unknown together in a fusion of possibilities, certainties and doubts. While surface appearances may indicate that all is going well, the anxious gambler is aware that without his detailed planning and calculation confusion will predominate. Repetitious action becomes the key, as he attempts to hold his world together.

Ray, to whom I was introduced by Zack, travelled frequently on business between the UK, Ghana and Nigeria, and had purchased many ‘fetishes’ (his word) from itinerant diviners in West African cities. The fetishes were believed to bring him good fortune by affording him spiritual protection, on the days when he gambled, from the ‘bad’ thoughts of particular relatives; in addition, they gave protection from the wrath of the Holy Spirit – many of his family, both in Europe and in Ghana, were members of Pentecostal churches, although Ray himself rarely went to church, fearing that Jesus would try to kill him there unless he revealed his gambling secret. Aside from these anxieties, he was worried that he had promised too much
money to aunts in his home village who wished to rebuild the family compound. On his last visit home, Ray had spent a considerable sum on drinks and gifts in an attempt to impress his relatives and show them what a ‘big’ man he had become; a favourable exchange rate had at the time helped him to give the impression that he was cedi (rich) when, in reality, he had many debts, some of them to credit-card companies. Moreover, he was aware that he had not always been entirely honest with the diviners from whom he had purchased talismans: he had not disclosed to them his intention to use his winnings primarily for his own benefit, and was therefore concerned that his business would suffer and his wealth would disappear. Ray believed that the ‘cheated’ diviner would eventually track him down to retrieve what was morally his since he had not disclosed his gambling habit to him.

Ray likened his rituals, although more elaborate, to a ring of garlic or crucifixes that are believed to prevent vampires or Satan from entering a house. Mike, on the other hand, compared the effect of his rituals to a spider’s spinning of a web in which its prey (in this case, a witch who wished him spiritual harm) becomes entangled and immobilized. Matthew, an acquaintance of Ray, referred to his own rituals in terms of the film The Matrix, where the witch exists in a dimension beyond the consciousness of ‘ordinary’ humans, the purpose of Matthew’s rituals being to keep her confined there, beyond his own world.

Each ritual, repeated time and again, is believed to plot an expanding series of connections and currents that cannot be penetrated by the witch. This is illustrated by Isaac, whose sister worked as a cashier in a local betting-shop where he also helped out. He described to me his sense of failure at being unable to obtain a full-time job; having lived in several European countries over the years, he had recently come to live with his sister in Northington, where he hoped to find permanent work. He spoke of having gambled from an early age and of his enjoyment of the money he sometimes won – money which supported his own lifestyle, not to mention a needful mother living in Canada. Isaac was concerned that another sister, who lived with her husband and children in Accra, expected him to contribute much more readily to the family finances. Thus, his sister’s mother-in-law recently had fallen ill during a stay with relatives living abroad, and, having no medical insurance, had run up a bill of thousands of dollars; Isaac’s brother-in-law expected him to help out. Isaac believed that there were particular female relatives who regarded him as greedy and who had always worked to hinder him in business and in gambling; he believed, moreover, that several of his uncles had used up the family’s store of good luck by selling contraband goods in Accra.

Certain rituals performed by Isaac were intended to create an impenetrable barrier of repetitious routine and predictability against the
unexpected, and, as such, were believed to be effective in combating the
witchcraft spun by evil female kin. In one of the interviews I conducted with
him he told me:

I do these ... plans ... routines to travel safely in life. ... They are kind of
like a route (laughs). Sometimes they ... will change ... a little – maybe a
weenie bit – but that is because I think of something or other which has
escaped me, not ... because I win or lose. That is not the point. ... Routines
enable me to feel totally at ease about playing [gambling]. That is what is
... important, girl – get it? – that I feel relaxed and can concentrate. Yes?
So, I get up at the same time everyday – it's always at 8.10 exactly. If I wake
up before this, I will not get out of bed until 8.10. Sometimes, I wake up in
the night ... and want a glass of water, but I cannot leave bed. So I always
keep a glass of water by the bed – yes, man, I cannot get out of bed to reach
this, of course: it has to be within arm's length. The glass ... has ... to be
filled ... to a particular level. And it always has to be the same glass. It cannot
be the same glass that I use for my lager. It also has to be water. No other
drink.... If I do wake up for a drink it is usually at the same time – between
3.00 am and 4.53 am. I take three sips at a time. No more, man, no more.
I do this three times. If I wake up at any other time, I will not drink, man.
No way. Why? Well, I believe that I am in a strange world. Something will
happen or will be about to happen which I am unready for. At first, I don’t
know what this will be. Then I focus in on specific occasions ... and believe
that something will happen which is a sign that I should not gamble. If I lose
my gut instinct, something will happen which I am not prepared for.... As
long as I follow these routines I don’t worry ... don’t care ... I cannot – will
not – play unless everything is alright and I feel ... OK. This gives me the
guts to play. Without this, I will not play. No man, no.

Isaac uses objects as an extension of himself and will make an infinite
number of connections between objects and events in an attempt to locate
security in an unfamiliar, unpredictable world. In so doing the strange
becomes the familiar and a chain of certainty is generated. This blinds the
witch, he claimed, and she is led into making false turns, ending up in a cul-
de-sac of her own making. Routine is one part of the gambler’s network,
though it cannot of itself completely connect the many components of
modern life. As Zack pointed out, the gambler never quite achieves real
control because everything can be interpreted in a number of ways, and
there remains a possibility of unforeseen, and unseen, actions by other rela-
tives wishing him spiritual harm. Zack was often exasperated by the time
demands of his ritual performances, especially those he felt impelled to
undertake prior to a big night out. He spoke of the anxiety besetting him
when we met for a drink one evening. After a whole series of indecisions
about the meaning of recent omens, and whether or not these were a
warning to stop his gambling for the time being, Zack mentioned that his uncle’s eldest daughter had come from Ghana to stay with his family. She was, he said, using a powerful talisman, one ‘made only for witches’, to prevent him from winning – because, he believed, she wished him ill-will and wanted his money for herself. He was nervous because he’d recently spent a considerable sum on a new music system, though he’d pretended that it was a gift from a friend. He knew that his ‘jealous’ cousin expected him to take her out and buy gifts for her to take back to the family in Ghana:

The other day . . . I was checking that I had the correct . . . money . . . to buy the Mirror [a British National newspaper] – did it three times instead of four because some foolish man . . . interrupted me . . . I worried about this . . . and thought maybe I shouldn’t play the tables tonight . . . so I stayed away. The next day, I thought this was a mistake, Zack – you should . . . have played and could have won . . . Why did I stay away? And then . . . I remembered that I had checked my change three times instead of four . . . [I was thinking] things will go wrong now . . . will happen now . . . and they did – because today I locked myself out of the house. So tomorrow . . . hey, I’ll check my . . . change four times again, on the hour every hour, just to keep things . . . running smoothly, just like so . . . I’m not as bad as the others . . . Shit! . . . rules don’t run my life (laughs).

Questioning financial security

Many of the men I met displayed an apprehension and uncertain grasp on their lives and appeared compelled to question every aspect of their financial affairs. As rituals to constrain uncertainty become more widespread and increasingly complex, so the world – for those engaging in rituals – is visualized as consisting of ever more minute possibilities for witchcraft. Prior to his arrival in Northington, Zack had worked for an uncle who then owned his own restaurant business in Ghana. The business had gone downhill because of the inflated price of foodstuffs, many of them available only on the black market, which his uncle had great difficulty in meeting. According to Zack, the move to Northington had not transformed his lot: he claimed that he had been passed over for promotion on several occasions, and he considered his lowly position to be due largely to the racism he encountered in the UK. His uncle in Ghana was disappointed that Zack did not own his own business by now, but he did not comprehend the realities of life here, Zack said. He felt hopeless when confronted by the unrealistic expectations of relatives. His uncle had supported him financially through school and then college, and now possessed little with which to
support his family. Prevailing economic conditions, both in Ghana and in the UK, were pulling his family towards a state of impoverishment. Zack had considerable debts to credit-card companies – testimony to his attempts to help keep his uncle’s business afloat – and no means of repaying the money, interest on which was accumulating by the week. Zack spoke of the different consequences of economic hardship in Ghana and in Europe. His life in the UK was ruled by the business workings of large capitalist interests; he felt himself subject to low-wage jobs or unemployment in Europe and inflationary pressure alongside greater taxation in Ghana:

Banks base their forecasts on the past, on what interest rates … are likely to do on the basis of what has gone before – this year … last year. Even if … the market crashes, it has done so before…. This is big stuff … not about me…. There is nothing unpredictable about this … nothing amazing about this…. It’s not new. Oh no, no! … It’s a cycle of boom and bust…. OK, I … have my own ways of dealing with this mess…. There’s things that I’m not even fully aware of … in my mind…. I deal with, like, difficult stuff…. These are not big or sudden life-threatening … not major … very small details … may happen without thought if one is not careful…. My ways are … always … unfinished business … see them as signs of something else … like looking back…. So I make up even more … routines.

Gamblers also doubt the resolutions apparently brought about by their routines. Zack likened the financial uncertainties just described to the kind of misfortune wrought by witchcraft: money can be made to suddenly disappear, whether through witchcraft or through the machinations of capitalism’s ‘market forces’. He referred to a fellow-gambler who, using a series of ‘secret’ accounts, had placed several complicated bets worldwide only to find that his funds had disappeared overnight; the man believed that a ‘known’ witch had managed to access his accounts and spirit away his money (see Parish, 2000). Such occurrences make extra precautions necessary; more links have to be forged so that every strategy devised points to an escalation of other, yet unlabelled, nascent repercussions. Zack favours rituals that depend on the ordered touching and positioning of certain items to prevent relatives from using evil medicines to harm him:

As I walk to work there are things I must touch…. Like when I was a kid … I touch the wall three times and walk on the left-hand side of the path … which leads to the main road. Here I walk, looking at the lamp-post to my right five times. When I am doing this, I must not see anybody else…. Maybe, if I look right ahead, there is some empty tin can or some trash in my way, and I must touch it twice. If it is red, I must kick it behind me…. I touch the ticket office once. I put the ticket in my right pocket. I check it seven times before I get on the bus…. I always sit on the right hand side of
the bus, three seats back from the front.... If my place is taken I kick the floor three times and sit in the middle. I check my ticket again.... When I get off the bus I make sure that both my feet touch the ground at the same time. I pick a stone off the ground and kick it with my right foot.... I open the door to ... work, touching the door handle twice. I have to sit at my desk five times before I can start work.... I touch items on my desk in a certain ... a particular order.... This is secret. I cannot open one drawer without ... opening the filing cabinet. I take nothing out of here unless I have opened the drawer three times ... I'm not sure what the day ... will bring ... happen ... if ... I don’t do this.... But I don’t feel easy about putting on a bet.... Anything is possible today.

Each ritual action is designed to reduce the anxiety that the threat of witchcraft brings, though these men would remain concerned that any gains made by gambling constituted ‘bad’ wealth: such money bought them misfortune in other areas of their lives because it was derived from a selfish and immoral activity, one that the witch would seek to correct via, as one man aptly put it, ‘spiritual redistribution’.

Mike had lost his son’s birthday money backing an unplaced horse in the UK’s Derby race, and felt sure that a witch would be aware of this and so would seek to bring him bad luck; Matthew had similarly gambled away money his sister intended to use to relocate from West Africa to the USA and had given him for safe-keeping. Both men felt sure that their luck had run out, and it would be discovered that, to all intents and purposes, each had entered into a pact with the Devil from which neither could escape (see Meyer, 1995). Matthew, in particular, grew apprehensive about the shame this would bring on him, though he was nevertheless unwilling to stop gambling, and refused to discuss his habit in any detail for fear of being overheard by a witch. Real control remains just beyond reach, for each gambling strategy issues in the very consequences that it is designed to surmount – every insurance policy produces yet more unforeseen possibilities which in their turn require yet more defensive strategies.

Gambling and West African witchcraft

During an economic blight, as anxiety deepens into a desperation to escape looming impoverishment, the gambler’s pot of gold may well appear to be the answer to accumulating debt. For Zack, Mike, Matthew and the other men, gambling is the route leading to a secure life. An acceptance that they will never find well-paid jobs fuels the hope of achieving moderate comfort in life through gambling – not riches, perhaps, but winnings big enough to sustain a secure existence. Nevertheless, risk-taking ventures, financial and
otherwise, are harshly exposed to winds of change and unpredictable currents; and the gambler, no less than the investment banker, makes use of the protection available to him.

Zack was keen to point out that some of his relatives in Accra travel to the rural regions where, in the small villages and towns, they consult over monetary crisis and dilemmas powerful diviners working at anti-witchcraft shrines (see, for example, Parish, 1999). The ‘magical’ approach to economic risk-taking has a long history in countries such as Ghana. In the 19th century, entrepreneurs wishing to take advantage of a changing economic climate commonly consulted diviners in order to prevent the interference of malignant forces, such as those accessible through witchcraft (Fortes, 1987; Goody, 1957). Meyer (1995) gives an account of a Ghanaian businessman, his business in decline, who visited a fetish priest and was required to undergo a number of special rituals (see also Bascom, 1969; Griaule, 1965). Likewise, as I discovered during fieldwork in western Ghana, young Ghanaian entrepreneurs look to the power of talismans, sold at anti-witchcraft shrines (abosom-brafo) in western Ghana, to protect their wealth and to prevent witches from siphoning off money from international bank accounts (Parish, 2000).

The activities of Ghanaian gamblers in Northington are indicative of a flourishing market of occult medicines and talismans supplying consumers eager to access and manipulate unseen forces by whatever means are available. As Sanders (2001: 162) remarks, ‘thanks to the free market the occult itself has become . . . commodified’. Today, African diviners sell a variety of spiritual medicines to a free market extending far beyond Africa. Whether in downtown New York or the suburbs of cities in the north of England, native doctors are to be found among migrant West African populations providing them with an array of diverse solutions to ‘unpredictable’ events.

This is especially true of major European capitals. In Amsterdam, I learned from Isaac that recently, in response to demand in Holland, a major Ghanaian anti-witchcraft shrine had recently set up a branch specializing in, among other things, spread-betting and the American world series baseball league. For a fee, an individual is able to ask the forecasts of the shrine-priest on a range of events, including national soccer-league games, horse races in Dubai, ‘lucky’ roulette and lottery numbers, and extending even to fluctuations in international exchange. Correspondingly, a range of ‘lucky’ talismans to ensure favourable gambling conditions or the state of the turf in particular race meetings may be purchased, including ‘lucky’ T-shirts, and shoes and socks infused with the essence of sacred spirits. The more expensive talismans are reserved for combating witchcraft, for, as Isaac observed, ‘if a witch spies winning money, she will always steal it’.

The increasing demand for a betting-cum-shrine forecaster comes from Isaac and his peers who map West African witchcraft narratives onto
western gambling practices. Both activities are illicit and hidden, embedded in social and moral pressures surrounding the consumption and distribution of wealth, and are used in a novel way to articulate private anxiety about economic accumulation. Witchcraft discourses thrive where the desire of individuals to accumulate and consume is seen to conflict with kinship obligations (Meyer, 1995; Parish, 2000). This is especially the case when the desire of individuals like Isaac to wager large sums of money is at the expense of the needs of family members (Meyer, 1999). The perception of the Ghanaian family as a source of need during times of economic insecurity and a drain on the wealth of prosperous relatives results in ‘quick wealth’ being seen as both a blessing and a curse (Lentz, 1998; Parish, 2000). In other words, although money may have a liberating effect for the possessor, it can lead also to an asocial disposition and a denial of community (Van der Geest, 1997).

Ghanaian gamblers create their own space for debate about the morality of accumulated winnings which they protect through the enactment of complex rituals. Interestingly, the women suspected – by gamblers such as Ray and Richard – of practising witchcraft are also practising Pentecostals, and they draw a very definite line between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ wealth. In Ghana’s capital, Accra, narratives among Pentecostals tell of satanic bank notes put into the pockets of their intended victims by envious witches to spirit their wealth away (Meyer, 1995). Mike repeated to me a popular story of a diviner who carries out the work of God, and satanic ritual specialists who offer diabolic reward, the money of hell (see also Shaw, 2001: 67). Meyer describes how Pentecostals dream of possessing the wealth of a ‘big man’ while at the same time viewing newly accumulated, individual riches as the preserve of the Devil (Meyer, 1995). Self-confession among Pentecostals is common and people openly seek deliverance from witchcraft (Geschiere, 1997; Meyer, 1999). These religious discourses allow them to reflect on the ‘evil’ abuses that plague contemporary Africa (Meyer, 1999: 211) in a world in which individuals apparently consume with abandon while the majority live far less comfortably.

West African witchcraft has become a popular moral commentary on inequality of opportunity in a global economy (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Geschiere, 1988, 1997; Moore and Sanders, 2001; Parish, 2001). Witchcraft discourses that circulate globally are used to invoke an ethos of social tension and uncertainty over the accumulation and distribution of wealth (Fisiy and Geschiere, 1996; Geschiere, 1992). In Northington, as elsewhere in Europe, there is a further twist: as individuals have come to feel increasingly unable to exert control over their financial situation, the diasporic witch has used her powers of surveillance to become knowledgeable about both gambling strategies and international money, in contrast to the witch living in Ghana who has not travelled and so is believed to have
little comprehension of the boom–bust nature of western capitalism (see Parish, 2000). Thus Matthew had heard about a witch active in Sun City, South Africa, who, disguised as a supermodel, had seduced a croupier. Under her power, he fell into a trance and helped her to win hundreds of thousands of dollars by revealing to her the secrets of the roulette wheel. Here, in the eyes of Matthew, the witch can be seen to personify the prime objective of the capitalist system, namely to extract by whatever legal means as much money as is possible from its ‘poor’ victims. Her winnings, unlike those of the gambler, are carefully invested in off-shore bank accounts until the time is right to make another bet – usually in Monte Carlo – which invariably pays a huge dividend.

The witch who breaks the bank at Monte Carlo, said Ray, is impervious to the power of even the most powerful talisman bought by another player to protect himself from her. As well as the casino’s bank, she will ‘capture every account of those she sees playing and call on other witches to join her’. Naturally, talismans purchased in gambling centres such as Las Vegas and Sun City are considered extremely desirable objects. By personalizing an object and investing it with the owner’s desire the talisman is thought to acquire power to control hidden forces which, in a gambler’s eyes, dictate whether he wins or loses (Brown, 1987). Reith (1999) records how gamblers in Las Vegas feel able to generally control events by concealing about their person a good-luck coin or rabbit’s foot. Rituals can accompany the successful control of an event. Reith (1999) identifies how a player who ‘gets to know’ a slot-machine well enough to give it a name and make it his or her favourite may shout at it commands and messages of reassurance, as if the machine had assumed human traits (Reith, 1999: 165). Thus Reith describes how one roulette player, with a bet riding on the turn of the wheel, would collect her chips and make it appear that she was leaving the table before the ball had stopped rolling, believing that this action tricked fate into pretending she had lost (1999: 166).

However, according to Ray, it is the witch, not fate, who is ultimately able to upset the balance of play and manipulate the mysterious market mechanisms of capitalism (Parish, 2001). Rather than being defeated by technology and rationality, witchcraft has become an integral component of modernity and its climate of exploitation (Scheper-Hughes, 2000). Repetitive ritual actions are designed to blind and trick the witch. Through the rituals enacted, gamblers like Ray believe that they will prevent the witch from entering his life. In this sense, the discourses of Ray, Zack, Isaac and others can be interpreted as wider commentaries on the vulnerability of men like themselves to the invisible workings of the market (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993; Englund, 1996). To circumvent familiar moral imperatives and their own feelings of guilt about how money is obtained and hidden away, each of them will continue to adapt their
knowledge of West African witchcraft, divination and talismans to suit their gambling practices and the specific social and economic nexus in which they find themselves.

Notes

1 All of the men mentioned in this article are ‘secret’ gamblers who try to keep the extent of their activities hidden from family and friends, for the reasons given. At their request, and to preserve their anonymity, I have renamed them; the same applies to the city where fieldwork was conducted.

2 I had found through talking to diviners during my fieldwork among anti-witchcraft shrines in Brong-Ahafo region, Ghana, witchcraft is commonly thought to be an evil substance hidden in the vagina of the witch, a greedy woman, who is secretly envious of others, especially her kin. Witchcraft is believed to be spread onto unknowing recipients, via spiritual contamination achieved through objects such as books, clothes or food. The witch, under the cover of darkness to disguise her ‘real’ identity, attacks the soul of her victims, causing an endless number of ailments and misfortunes.

References


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