FROM LIVERPOOL TO FREETOWN:
WEST AFRICAN WITCHCRAFT,
CONSPIRACY AND THE OCCULT

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In this ethnography I examine the key features of occult discourses among middle-class Sierra Leoneans living in Britain, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Merseyside and Cheshire between 2001-2002. It is evident that the subjects of this study are quick to engage with the conspiracy-theorising besetting Euro-American popular culture in conveying their anxieties about the civil war, poverty and corruption that have ravaged Sierra Leone, coupled to the institutionalised racism and socio-economic problems that beset the black community in Liverpool. This despair has translated into a general trepidation about West African witchcraft that has become a global metaphor for the malcontents of modernity. In recent years these worries have been added to, fuelled by the heavy responsibility individuals experience to provide financial support and moral guidance to those relatives who have been forced to leave Sierra Leone during the years of civil strife. They are secretly mistrusted by the middle-class Sierra Leoneans living in Liverpool, who worry that their less-well-off relatives malign their good intentions through their accusations of witchcraft.

KEYWORDS African witchcraft; Liverpool; conspiracy; Sierra Leone

Witchcraft and Global Transparency

Far from disappearing as a relic of a superstitious and pagan past, West African witchcraft discourses, unlike their European counterparts, are lodged in the most modern of arenas, the capitalist marketplace (Parish 2001). Occult discourses allow individuals to critically reflect on the opaque power of the modern state that is believed to have aligned itself with evil (Moore and Sanders 2001:18). This is especially the case where small numbers of people enjoy great wealth and power at the expense of the majority, reflecting ‘peoples differential access to relations of production and consumption through occult means’ (Moore and Sanders 2001:16). Meyer (2003) reflects upon how the most popular West African films produced today are about vulture men and the stolen body organs of strangers that allow their audiences to fantasise about ‘money as blood’, evil and ‘Satanic wealth’ in the global economy. On the basis of their analysis of the
shattered aspirations of the young in post-apartheid South Africa Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) coined the phrase ‘occult economy’ to embody preoccupations with witchcraft and Satan in the global arena. Stories of ritual murder, economic corruption and hedonistic consumption feature in African witchcraft commentaries popular around the world and occult economies are characterised by a covert dark side of murder and abduction in which ‘new black bureaucrats, businessmen and politicians grow rich while the rest struggle to survive’ (1999: 292; see also Parish 2001).

West African occult discourses set among Sierra Leone’s translocal flow of people and information provide an interesting way of mapping an occult economy, contoured as it is by the endemic violence of the Sierra Leonean civil war. Rather than being an obstacle to forces of modernisation, occult discourse provides a commentary on power; secrecy and intrigue among Sierra Leoneans in Liverpool, an industrial port in North-West England with a long history of West African diasporic settlement. Between 1700 and 1807 Liverpool was Britain’s main slaving port and formed one corner of the famous ‘Golden Triangle’ along with North America and the Caribbean. Liverpool’s ships carried over half of the 3 million slaves transported to the Americas to be sold to plantation owners. Much of Liverpool’s wealth at this time came from slavery and almost all of its leading inhabitants profited from it. Many buildings, including the town hall, were built with the money accruing from the trade (see Liverpool museums.org). Like many West Africans living in Liverpool, Victor, aged 55, 1 who had for several years worked for a large voluntary organisation in Manchester, remarked how in his view, the city was built on ‘blood money’ and upon the souls of exploited slaves who were sacrificed for the pursuit of profit and greed. He described how the famous Liver Bird statues overlooking the River Mersey, gazing outwards towards the United States, resemble vultures picking off the flesh of the poor to feed the diets of the rich mercantile class in the nineteenth century and, likewise, venture capitalists in the twentieth century, a type of ‘gourmet capitalism’ (Scheper-Hughes 2000:211). Other Sierra Leoneans such as Elizabeth, a middle-aged woman who worked as an administrative assistant for the local council, repeated the popular tale in Liverpool of how the skeletons of slaves still remain in the many tunnels running beneath Liverpool, such as those connecting the waterfront and the Albert and King’s Dock to South Liverpool and beyond, through which Black slaves were transported to other cities in Britain and into Europe. She spoke quietly of how their haunted souls still linger and have since brought misfortune and suffering on the city and its inhabitants as revenge for their deaths. The economic decline of Liverpool as one of the world’s greatest ports and the failure in the late twentieth century of its once profitable manufacturing industry she took as proof of its terrible legacy. Evidence of Liverpool’s involvement in slave-trading can still be seen in the environs of the city centre where roads, such as Canning and Huskisson Street in Liverpool 8, a district in South Liverpool are named after slave merchants. There are families today in Liverpool who can trace their ancestry back to slave auctions held in eighteenth-century Liverpool.
West African seamen, the Kru, dominate maritime history between Liverpool and West Africa, being employed as merchant seamen on board British merchant ships leaving Freetown (see Frost 1996).

The Sierra Leoneans in this ethnography such as Ann, Angela, Victor and others had been living in the UK for at least fifteen years, having left Sierra Leone during the years of economic decline overseen by the All People’s Congress (APC). While many in Liverpool’s Black community comment that a consequence of the enduring racism found there is that there is no Black middle-class to speak of, the Sierra Leoneans I interviewed (aged in their late forties to early fifties) are owner-occupiers living in predominantly White, affluent suburbs throughout Merseyside and Cheshire. They are aware of both their incongruous Blackness in Liverpool and their relative prosperity in a city where institutionalised racism on the part of the city council and private housing agencies has served to segregate the Black population into the south of the inner-city, in Liverpool 8. It is here, in the Granby, Abercromby and Arundel wards, that levels of Black unemployment and the concentration of socio-economic deprivation is at its highest. In contrast, the Sierra Leoneans interviewed are employed in a variety of professions, including health and local government, professional and voluntary organisations, enjoy a relatively affluent lifestyle and describe themselves as comfortably middle-class and as having some measure of economic security as a result of hard work. All of them have made efforts to support their relatives in terms of both finance and guidance: as a consequence of the recent civil war in Sierra Leone, individuals (usually young) have been sent to live with family members settled in Liverpool. Many of these settled Sierra Leoneans see themselves as pillars of their local communities, balancing the demands of employment with family commitments. It is here in northwest Britain that occultism thrives as a moral commentary, capturing the middle-classes’ escalating anxieties in the face of the uncertain terms on which Sierra Leoneans relate to one another and to a White local populace.

While many of the Merseyside settlers I interviewed enjoyed the material benefits of capitalism, they spoke of the difficulty they experienced in Britain in clarifying their own moral values amid contradictory structures of economic and cultural capital. Judith, a retired health worker referred to the reluctance of White neighbours to invite them into their homes. Judith remarked: ‘I am the only Black woman in the street … People ask, “How can she afford to live here?”’ One man stated that among his neighbours there were those who expected West Africans to live in ghettos, not in the suburbs; West Africans, in their eyes, were exotic and morally corrupt creatures. Victor reflected on the reasons why he had never been invited to the home of one colleague: he felt that he was considered ‘not [to] have the manners of a White man’, and would appreciate neither the ‘taste of good food’ nor the quality of the surroundings.

This situation is compounded by the institutionalised racism that all of the Sierra Leoneans interviewed have encountered and which they consider a consequence of Liverpool’s colonial heritage which they believe to have not been
properly confronted by the White population of Liverpool. All gave examples of the racism they believe dominates the public sphere in Liverpool and beyond. One told me that he had been stopped by a policeman while driving his new BMW and physically attacked. Angela, a 51-year-old teacher, described being sexually taunted by an immigration official on her arrival in the city; her aunt had blamed Angela herself for this because, in her eyes, she had dressed like a Westerner and had been wearing an expensive watch and jewellery. Ann, a 47-year-old probation officer, recalled a council housing officer refusing a flat to her daughter, supposing that she would not take care of it; as a result, the insulted young woman ‘left Liverpool suddenly to live in London’.

Their discourses encompass an acute awareness of the problems suffered by the West African and African-Caribbean community in Liverpool 8. Ann referred to the use of European funding intended for economic development in Liverpool 8 that she felt had been wasted by city councillors, spent on social projects which had never seen the light of day. She said that she had heard of the considerable fees paid to consultancy agencies, predominantly staffed by White people from London who knew little about the intricate politics of the diverse Black communities in Liverpool (and also in Manchester). Angela commented on the fragility of community confidence in institutions such as the police that had never been fully regained since the Toxteth riots in 1981. The Black community in Liverpool 8 had, many suggested, become a dumping ground for those anti-social individuals the housing associations chose not to re-house in White areas, thus worsening the lot of the already vulnerable. Judith spoke of predominantly Black areas of Liverpool having become, in his view, ‘no-go areas’ for the police and crime going unchecked despite the protests of local residents, while young Black men were frequently harassed by the police in the more affluent White neighbourhoods of south Liverpool.

Given the meltdown of Sierra Leone’s social fabric, the shifting expectations of those leaving their home for this country exacerbates the social alienation and racism they experienced in Liverpool. Many of the Sierra Leoneans already settled in the city and its hinterland suspect that are in a no-win situation. They feel that the positions of authority and influence they had achieved, in spite of the difficult circumstances they have overcome in Liverpool, are looked on, both by relatives and by their wider social networks, with some suspicion. These individuals worry that their good intentions are furtively maligned by those less well-off than themselves who regard them as financial opportunists neglectful of their obligations. Mistrust clouds all aspects of everyday life, to the extent that individuals begin to doubt their own motives, while an anxiety persists that by speaking out they will attract attention to themselves and become scapegoats for someone else’s grievances. Invisibility structures relations of inequality, cunningly disguised as an evil plot; or, as Werbner (2001: 190) remarks, the feature of witchcraft with which academic discourse concerns itself is the ‘Magritte principle’, according to which everything visible conceals something visible.
Occult discourses and the Sierra Leonean middle-class

While drawing on the links between the occult and a critique of modernity and capitalism, occult discourses represent an attempt among the Sierra Leonean middle-classes to imaginatively move doubt and suspicion around an institutionally racist landscape in the United Kingdom, and a devastated Sierra Leone whose rapidly changing landscape they have had to comprehend from afar, using a variety of sources including weekly international telephone calls, letters, the internet and a maze of information passed by word of mouth. In the ten years of civil war, conflict and mayhem, nowhere is such speculation about corruption and conspiracy more apparent than at Gatwick Airport, the meeting point for many of the two million-plus migrants displaced during the civil war and scattered over thirty different countries. The airport becomes the hub of news and conjecture as family members gather to meet new arrivals off the ‘Sierra Leonean plane’, and many joke that Gatwick airport has now become the social club par excellence. It is here, amid the presence of relatives not seen for a while that social anxiety seems most acute among the most settled members of the West African diaspora. For those middle-class Sierra Leoneans who have been settled in Britain for some time, the unsettling turmoil of the political situation in Sierra Leone and the wave-on-wave of conspiracy allegations of clandestine activity going on there that swirl around the global economy have led to a search for some ‘transparency of communication’ itself (Vattimo 1992; Cooper 1997). Their occult discourses between displaced relatives and themselves reflect a world of endless cultural production of fantastic plots, myths and explanations, a particular style of dissemination, belonging to and cutting through a world of dislocation, connecting and questioning people and theorising events. Suspicion enables individuals to co-operate and celebrate in forming ‘the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure’ into a secret that ‘is all too visible and is entirely soluble in information and communication’ (Baudrillard 1994: 14).

Between streams of new information about diasporic movement and the relocation of family around the globe occult discourses carry a reflexive critique of the clarity of their own position and extend beyond the immediate locality to reach kin through the West African popular press (Bastian 1993) and a virtual space, the world electronic media. Tales of secret political organisations, religious cults and witches feeding off the blood lines of the poor, zap around the globe and function as an imaginative framework for understanding and rationalising the invisible workings of the global marketplace (Geschiere 1997; Meyer 1999; Parish 2000; Sanders 2001). For example, James (aged 46, and an acquaintance of Victor), told me of how he as a social worker had been amazed at the stories he had heard several years ago among his White colleagues about the Satanic abuse of children in England and the Scottish Isles in the mid-1980s (see La Fontaine 1998). The electronic media fed his anxiety as day after day he read internet postings about the Satanic abuse of children in the USA. He had considered such stories unbelievable flights of fancy until he encountered reports of the ‘ritual’ murder
of a young Nigerian boy, Adam\textsuperscript{2} and the alleged removal of his reproductive organs in order to make ‘secret medicine’. This story supported many rumours he had heard from relatives in Sierra Leone of the proliferation of ritual murders for magical ends (a feature of Caribbean \textit{vodun}) in West Africa (see also Scheper Hughes 1996 and 2000). He had also heard sinister tales of diviners who appropriate body parts in return for smuggled diamonds (Shaw 2001), while combatant Revolutionary United Front (RUF) leaders, as well as government soldiers known as \textit{sobels} – part-soldier and part-rebel – were said to be involved in ritual murder in their attempts to control access to the diamond mines (see Ferme 1999; Shaw 2001). Popular witchcraft commentaries by migrants use the phrase ‘politics of the belly’ to refer to the so-called leaching on citizens’ money by the Sierra Leone State and its siphoning off by business tycoons into overseas bank accounts (Shaw 1997: 857). This calls to mind images of entrepreneurial werewolves and patrons in Sierra Leone whose wealth accumulates through the commodification of exploited young people and wealthy patrons, steeped in witchcraft, who practise cannibalism and sacrifice using so-called ‘human leopards’ (Shaw 2001: 64). In Liverpool there were others though, who denounced such stories and referred to the local White Catholic tendency to facilely lump together all Africans as followers of ‘Voodoo’, a historical perception of witchcraft the Sierra Leoneans thought most evident during, for example, International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition (23 August). This intriguingly complex positioning of the Sierra Leonean middle-classes in Liverpool and among their extended kinship network mean that occult narratives provide an interesting means of negotiating sensitive issues of the abuse of power between contrasting social settings (see Englund 1996).

‘Virtual conspiracies’ weave throughout local social networks and provide explanations for the unaccountable wealth observed by visitors to Sierra Leone who report on the internet about the heaps of garbage and filth found on the pavements of Freetown, alongside increasingly high numbers of sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and expensive four-wheel-drive cars. Civil strife has led to the criminalisation of the Sierra Leonean State, the police preying on and executing the very civilians they are employed to protect, and a profound mistrust envelops the populace as financial institutions falsify their own accounts (Ferme 1999:163). Many spoke in hushed tones of relatives who had mysteriously disappeared or who had been killed during rebel fighting. All of those settlers I interviewed expressed revulsion at friends’ and relatives’ reports of occult medicines circulating among secret societies in the then-ruling APC, and the poverty and inequality that resulted from the draining of Sierra Leone’s wealth and resources. Ferme (1999) shows how, during the 1986 parliamentary elections in Sierra Leone, politicians enhanced their reputations by circulating rumours about their superior occult powers and their opponents’ involvement with ‘bad’ medicines. Further evidence of the ‘unbelievable’ state is in the widespread use of dangerous medicines procured from native doctors who sell their wares over the internet and advertise in the press throughout Europe and North America. Judith spoke of a rich
young woman living in Britain who was regularly sent ‘special’ medicines by a relative now living in New York. Since receiving this medicine she had financed the building of a new house just outside of Freetown, while her relatives had to beg for food from passers-by. Ann had been telephoned by a close friend in Canada who repeated the gossip that furtive covens of witches were believed to deploy magic rituals involving the mutilation of body parts to acquire economic power (see Ferme 1999: 163). Popular hearsay circulates concerning the deployment of witchcraft and occult forces in political settings, illustrating ‘the fundamental ambiguity of political practices, intentions and agencies at different levels of state and civil society in Sierra Leone’ (1999: 183).

Popular conspiracy theories add to occult discourses. A Euro-American popular culture dominated by conspiracies and occult discourses (Fenster 1999; Knight 2001; Parish 2001) is devoured by the settled Sierra Leonian community. This trend of plots, schemes, secret codes and hidden messages, the Knights Templar, Freemasonry, the Heaven’s Gate suicides, Waco and the New World Order, among others, has been a source of fascination, while the best-seller lists for the past decade have featured such topics as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, *The Turin Shroud*, *Secrets of Freemasonry* and *The Da Vinci Code*, not to mention new editions of the predictions of Nostradamus (Parish 2001). Witchcraft fears among the Sierra Leonian community in the UK draws on this popular conspiracy theorising and can be viewed as an attempt to condemn the politics of a corrupt postcolonial state and to denounce individuals’ positions of authority and the hidden economic and social rewards of capitalism enjoyed by them (see Rowlands and Warnier 1988).

**Witchcraft, Satan and Community**

In this cosmopolitan environment there is no straightforward idea of witchcraft causality. Rather, witchcraft, as Ashforth (2002: 126) notes about South Africa, is only part of a more general condition of insecurity which encompasses beliefs about many spiritual forces, some of which may be terrifying while others are ridiculed, and a great variety of ethnic and religious traditions and languages that together refuse categorisation as a single belief system. For many Sierra Leoneans living throughout Merseyside and its surrounding hinterland, the witch is part and parcel of a whole array of occult agents, *Ju-Ju* medicines and Satanic forces commonly known as *krifi*, and is to be feared. Some treat witchcraft with a healthy respect, but would not actively seek it out, while others have no use for the medicines and talismans associated with magic, and pity diviners for trying to sell ‘mumbo-jumbo’. There are those who believe that witchcraft perpetuates myths of a kind popularised by, for example, such television programmes as *The X-Files*, in which, as Victor observed, ‘everything turns out OK in the end’. Still some see the West African witch as the epitome of all that is wrong with modernity, others see this figure as one who simply responds to the evils nascent in modern, urban life. In this sense, they regard the native witch-catcher or diviner
as more a hands-on practitioner than the church preacher or pastor in Britain, whose view of inner-city life, they sometimes consider naïve.

This is not to say, however, that an African diviner may be openly sought out in the UK. Powerful diviners are frequently rumoured to be living in this country and in Europe and, indeed, many Africans can be found advertising their spiritual services throughout Britain’s Black press. Often, however, it is only when an individual travels to Sierra Leone to visit relatives that divination is secretly sought. In these instances, an object known as a talisman which offers spiritual protection against all types of evil is purchased. For example, James had heard from his sister of a powerful female diviner who worked in Freetown selling talismans made up of ‘secret’ ingredients which offered powerful protection against diverse illnesses, including Aids, bowel cancer, drug addiction and infertility. His sister’s son had fallen in with a bad crowd who sat around all day smoking marijuana. In the event, she had taken her son to another diviner as she believed her son to be bewitched by demonic forces, who revelled in his educational failure. The diviner had removed ‘the curse of Satan’, given the boy a ‘sacred’ amulet to wear around his neck and the boy is now said to be working harder at school.

While belief in witchcraft is quite common, middle-class Sierra Leoneans tend to use Christianity, predominantly Pentecostalism, to distance themselves from such an occult viewpoint as underlies the story about James’ nephew, labelling the diviner ‘a man of the past’ and ‘not a man someone of my generation would consult’. Yet the flip-side of the Pentecostalism they practise is a popular narrative that eschews supernatural signs, particularly in relation to the accumulation and consumption of wealth (see Meyer 1995). They believe that the popularity of witchcraft is both a symptom of hedonistic consumption and greed (see also Meyer 1999). Members of Pentecostal churches speak of the workings of Satan in everyday life in the UK, and of how God will hunt him down. Unlike the stereotypes, found in Euro-American popular culture, of Satan as a pre-Christian symbol of nature imbued with virility, care is needed in delimiting this word’s reference as it is used in this paper (see La Fontaine 1998). This caveat follows from an awareness that Satanism, for West African Pentecostals, is not a credo, but rather an attempt to escape from the intellectual problem posed by the reality of suffering in God’s good creation by blaming it on an evil progenitor and the witches who work for him. Satan is believed to look over the shoulder of those, like the witch, who see their behaviour as beyond reproach, who abuse their wealthy position and do not contribute to the welfare of the wider community.

The importance of continued self-surveillance is preached by individuals, usually female (Meyer 1999). The witch, like the selfish sinner, can save herself only through recognition of her own failings, and by confession. As one woman told me, only we ourselves can know our true being. At its heart, in the United Kingdom, witchcraft becomes ‘a matter of permanent suspicion’ (Lienhardt 1951: 312), and it flourishes because any denial of its actuality can be taken as indicative of the desire to conceal that which is important. To begin any discussion of witchcraft will be referred on to other acquaintances, so that no one person
assumes responsibility for outright social acceptance/rejection. The anthropologist can be introduced to preliminary talk on witchcraft only if others in the social network accept her or him. Even if patronage is bestowed, an individual is taking a risk that his or her moral judgement will subsequently be regarded as suspect. However, the interlocutor who arranges for the anthropologist to interview someone known and trusted will be aware that such familiarity and trust would be threatened should the anthropologist at some later date speak indiscreetly about witchcraft. Again, the interlocutor will worry that the person to whom he or she refers the anthropologist is thereby implicated in witchcraft and Ann and Angela worried a great deal about how their friends and family would respond in this respect to talk about corruption, wealth and their own socio-economic status. In other words, by simply talking out loud about witchcraft, even if asserting its non-existence, is to perhaps engender the anxiety and mistrust of others in a community. It is more likely to be discussed with an outsider who has no intimate connection to the network, but even so concern would exist over the outsider’s discretion. This produces a quandary in respect of any discussion about witchcraft. A person worried about witchcraft is very unlikely to reveal this to others in case what she says is interpreted as a covert accusation against a third party or, indeed, the unwitting identification of oneself as a witch. Yet, occult narratives are precisely so popular today because they are seen as an expression about a growing worry about secret power (Parish 2005). To not speak out at all would also be to risk suspicion that one is concealing something (see, for example, Favret-Saada 1980). In either context speculation about witchcraft thrives (Geschiere 1997). In these circumstances, the erosion of trust makes vigilance against witchcraft advisable as individuals become caught in a constant private framing of events for fear that a thousand plots remain to be uncovered, so producing the very anxiety and the discussion of witchcraft that they seek to avoid. Or as Furedi remarks, ‘we leave it to the imagination to think the worst’ (1997:39).

So while particular methods of tracking down the witch have been discarded in favour of the power of prayer and repentance, parishioners nevertheless remain constantly on the lookout for sinners who work for Satan, believing that evil hides potentially everywhere. For example, evil is believed to infest inner-city urban underground spaces in particular – the by-pass, the subway – as epitomised by the pedestrian underpass: dimly lit and dank with stagnant water, the recesses in its graffiti-lined walls affording cover to the mugger who preys on the hapless passer-by, beggars’ extended palms at either end. Here Satan is in his element, claimed many interviewees, preying on the morally and economically corruptible who are envious of others and who want a quick ‘magical’ fix to their problems. James had heard rumours of criminal gangs operating in Europe who tempted young girls into working for them, promising them material rewards and threatening to use occult magic against their families in West Africa if they failed to earn enough cash (see also Van Dijik 2001). Victor spoke of how young relatives both in Europe and in Sierra Leone had lost sight of God. They wanted instant gratification and material goods – cars, widescreen
televisions and designer clothes— and had signed their souls away to the devil in pursuit of them. As a Pentecostal, he wanted to socially distance himself from demonic forces, but at the same time knew that this was not possible. More to the point, he worried that if he voiced these doubts, his own social position and the conspicuous wealth he enjoyed was open to malicious innuendo as to its origin (see also Meyer 1999).

Suspicion, Favour and Kinship Obligation

Witchcraft discourses are particularly pertinent in revealing the tensions surrounding unlawful wealth and its illicit accumulation; in other words, although money may be liberating for the individual, it may also lead to asocial tendencies and a denial of community (Van der Geest 1997). The material advantages that the middle-class Sierra Leoneans enjoy are considered luxuries they feel that the less advantaged associate with the politics of scandal and corruption. In this paradoxical situation, Ann, Angela and others said that they attempt to distance themselves from too much talk of the occult, especially in public, lest it be thought that they have obtained their legitimate fortune through illicit medicines and ‘secret’ powers. However, some were also afraid that by not engaging in speculation and gossip about the occult, it possibly might be felt that they had something evil to conceal. Events can turn on a whisper. This leads to a reconceptualising of sociality as people’s tendency is to be always on their guard, wary of their fellows, and invisible victims appear everywhere. In this same fashion, witchcraft narratives among the affluent classes comprise questionings of many institutional scandals and deceptions around the world, and private doubts about the extent in such circumstances of one’s own responsibility – perhaps also one’s culpability.

Individuals are therefore keen to stress how they use their wealth and position in a responsible fashion. But, unfortunately, because many wealthy people in Sierra Leone have abused their position and thereby given rise to mistrust, the settlers felt that their own good intentions were tarred with that same scepticism. Shaw (1997: 97) repeats a popular commentary circulating in Freetown that to send money abroad is to send it to ‘big men’ who ‘turn proper circulation into improper accumulation’. In this instance, the middle class Sierra Leoneans in the UK worry that others suspect them of similar immoral activity.

My interlocutors, who were familiar with this rumour, evidently took great pride in being Sierra Leonean and expressed despair at the corruption and warfare undermining their homeland’s political and public infrastructure. They described how state power has been eroded in recent years by the malicious occult practices of officials in Sierra Leone. Such upheaval, however, allows innuendo and speculation to flourish and the weight of ensuing insecurity puts relatives settled in Liverpool under great social strain. Sierra Leone’s wealth, according to Angela is in the hands of corrupt soldiers and politicians who, she believed, hide behind terrifying occult powers, while vast numbers of the population lived in abject
poverty. This majority, she said, regards public servants as corrupt, believing them to use occult medicines, and she considered this innuendo to extend even to herself, although she lives and works in the UK. It was possible, she said, for people to make her a scapegoat because they believed that her wealth gave her unlimited power. Ann thought allegations of witchcraft to be most prevalent among the rural poor in Sierra Leone where the effects of political ineptitude, corruption and poor governance were most keenly felt. Such allegations, said Ann, were wrongly directed at middle-class individuals like herself, and those working in the public sector, both in Sierra Leone and in the UK, had become for the politicians and the public alike ‘whipping boys’, accused of dishonest working practices:

I have worked a great number of hours and made many sacrifices so that I may enjoy a good and gratifying career … and yet, still, I am aware that there are those who treat me with suspicion …[and consider me] to be unscrupulous … I am blamed for all the social difficulties … welfare cheques that go missing … government monies that do not arrive … One of my cousins in Freetown … was refused permission by the authorities … to build … He blamed me too.

Victor said that he felt guilty at not wanting to return to live in Sierra Leone after years in exile. He would not know where to start, he said, in putting right the wrong doings perpetrated over the many years of civil unrest. There was too much confusion in Sierra Leone for him to feel comfortable in returning there. Victor, in concurrence with Shaw (2001), felt that he should have given more financial help to relatives internally displaced by the civil war, and he sensed that they gossiped about him behind his back:

Many relatives perceive me as holding great power … They give me the ability to change things in their lives for them … passports or visas to leave the country … They want to profit from corruption … but they say in private …[that] I am untrustworthy and conclude that I am the cause of their ills … I cannot win … I am cursed if I help them and cursed if I don’t.

Occult narratives enabled Victor to privately assemble new possibilities and information about the economic and political conflict that cast a shadow over the moral prospects of ‘good’ citizens. He wished to expose the secret machinations of corrupt elites, but the proliferation of conflicting reports and myths made it difficult for him to see how do so. Elizabeth described how she was inundated with relatives’ requests for favours. Her non-compliance with one such request, she felt sure, had prompted a female relative to allege that Elizabeth practised witchcraft. Meanwhile, she believed that others gossiped about her office secretly housing witches who stole public money and kept it in off-shore bank accounts in order to illegally buy diamonds, a natural resource of Sierra Leone. Even though she was a practising Christian, she felt personally vulnerable to witchcraft innuendo and unable to rebuke this. She thought that evil gossip could not be countered without bringing the issue of witchcraft out into the open, but that this
was up to the church and not individuals who were powerless in the face of such widespread public opinion:

...are all tarred with the same brush ... I like my job ... but I am in no way responsible ... I have no influence here at all ... I have no secret stash of money ... I earn a little ... less than you perhaps think ... Family do not take time to find out what it is I do. I cannot help them even if I wanted to. ... Sierra Leone is awash with disrepute ... it is very common ... It is no wonder that I am asked to help ... they do not comprehend my actions.

Suspicion clothes everyday activities to the extent that no one felt at ease talking about witchcraft: as one woman claimed, it causes ‘too much trouble among us and opens debates about things we would rather forget’, though there is endless questioning in private of the politics of the country they have left behind. John, for example, who in the last few years had left his job as a civil servant to set up his own business, had a strong conviction that there is witchcraft often working against him, claiming that relatives of his did not want him to succeed and so used witchcraft powers against him. He spoke of having a responsibility, financial and social, to his wider kin network both in Sierra Leone and in Britain, and relatives forever pestered him for money, and it was hard for him to refuse them, particularly as he was the eldest son. He told me of how his own son often visits native diviners in his homeland and of how popular they are, particularly in predicting lottery numbers. John’s son, who was visiting his father from London, spoke of having bought a talisman on his last trip abroad from a woman who was selling them outside a bus-station in northern Sierra Leone. She promised him that the talisman would help make him a millionaire. He, in turn, gave the talisman to John’s youngest brother, whose business was not going well and who John thought privately resented him for not being able to financially sponsor him through university. John added that as individuals such as his brother search ‘for an easy life’, men like John himself will increasingly fall victim to the vengeful motives of those who want material wealth immediately but are not prepared to work for it.

Their multiple perceptions of witchcraft allow a reflexive distancing of individuals from any such abuse of power while simultaneously permitting the expression of concern should such innuendo stick. As ‘hidden talk’ about witchcraft gathers force in the form of tales of political corruption and economic malpractice (Geschiere 1997), the intention of the middle-class settlers is to openly deny the presence of witchcraft in order to avoid the taint of suspicion. However, they remain quiescent and so allow the power of witchcraft accusation to secretly flourish.

**Global conspiracy**

The private questioning of motive and responsibility in Liverpool becomes woven into a conspiracy theory that extends to the illicit and invisible power of the
modern state and its exclusionary violence (Moore and Sanders 2001: 18). As I have illustrated, recent discussions about West African occult discourses can be to form an important moral commentary not only on sociability but on the opacity of modernity and the rhetoric and dangers posed by the global economy (Rowlands and Warnier 1988; Shaw 1997). Like the patterns created by a child’s cat cradle, conspiratorial information about occult activities is woven and then passed between different people. Faced with a staggering number of conspiracies and ‘secret’ knowledge that is impossible to verify, occult narratives move both towards and away from closure and coherence, where there is no definitive answer, only more speculation amid a plurality of interpretations (see Cooper 1997). In the absence of trusted authorities, and in the face of overwhelming speculation, individuals try to ascertain more and more about the uncertain forces confronting them.

The narratives of Sierra Leoneans embraced the contradiction of where endless streams of information means less knowledge (Parish 2001). Their discourse is a fascinating hybrid combining whispers and talk about the occult economy. Interlocutors spoke, in confidence, of evil powers being secretly used against them as a weapon, in the face of discriminating social processes, by those who felt most aggrieved and betrayed by the capitalist system and needing a visible scapegoat. Faced with social dislocation, individuals take out their frustrations on their kin – including, sometimes, those innocent victims, like the Sierra Leoneans reported on here, whose anxieties stem from the possibility that they themselves are perceived to covertly profit from the very aspects of capitalism which keep others in destitution. Victor referred to his brother who had, several years earlier, left Sierra Leone for the USA, where he experienced great difficulty securing the well-paid employment he felt he deserved. Victor privately suspected him, he told me, of using ‘bad’ medicine to improve his finances, but felt unable to intervene lest his motives be questioned:

We all search to find hope ... A man will do whatever he must to keep his future alive ... Men become very frightened when they cannot find work ... and [do] not have [sufficient] funds to support his family ... Give a man his hope back that he will become rich and happy.

So witchcraft comes to function as an ungraspable gesture towards ‘understanding the unknown, provisional forms of representation that can only approximate the deeper and less detectable wellsprings of power’ (Knight 2000: 233). Here also lies the paradox of the position of the middle-class Sierra Leoneans in Liverpool. On the one hand, witchcraft is referred to in order to draw attention to the wider public crisis of confidence and the particular historical conjuncture within which individuals live their lives and which contributes to a mood of postcolonial disillusionment. On the other hand, it is necessary for an interlocutor to distance himself or herself from any gossip about wrongdoing lest they become tarred with the same brush. While the middle-class settlers may invoke the occult to explain the unjust hidden mechanisms behind the principalities and elite
powers suspected of fraudulent activity, they used it also to direct accusations away from themselves and on to others.

Conclusion
Occult discourses provide a cosmopolitan framework that enables the middle-class members of the West African diasporic community to render their actions transparent to others against a backdrop of esoteric knowledge and accumulated conspiracies about hidden agendas that traverse geopolitical divisions. Here, witchcraft innuendo among kin can invoke unspecified threats inherent in the opaque workings of global capitalism. In this context, to deny the reality of witchcraft is to imperil the delicate sense of obligation that is the basis of any informal moral network, and to open oneself to allegations of involvement in that very practice. In attempting to remove any ambiguity from the performance of their own responsibilities, the middle-class settlers divert witchcraft discourses away from themselves. In so doing they make a critical comment about the varied inequalities and discriminatory social forces experienced both in Liverpool and in Sierra Leone. However, in the face of global conspiracies and occult narratives about nameless individuals and the hidden face of institutions it is still rumour about one’s own failings that is feared most and is most clearly manifest in anxiety about occult discourse. The reality of witchcraft can never be veridically denied, and insecurity and uncertainty remain.

NOTES
1. Names have been changed in order that each interlocutor remains anonymous.
2. In 2001 the mutilated torso of a young Black boy, Adam, was found floating in the River Thames, London. Investigations by the police over the next few years suggested that his murder was part of a witchcraft ritual.

REFERENCES


