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Waiting for 'Beba':

Trust and alienation talk regarding super witch-catchers along the Kenyan coast  
Katsuhiko Keida (Kumamoto University)

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Witchcraft and trust

Peter Geschiere's new book, *Witchcraft, Intimacy and Trust* (2013.08), is to be released soon. I'm waiting for it and I can't comment about it without reading it, but when I saw the fascinating title of his book, three words came to mind, 'witchcraft, intimacy, and trust' which were also suggested in Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937). My idea about witchcraft and trust came through Evans-Pritchard's ethnography as well as my fieldwork living among the Mijiknedo people who live along the Kenyan coast. This study has been going on since 1986.

Martin Mills argued through his recent article, 'Opposite of Witchcraft', "in Evans-Pritchard's account, witchcraft (*mangu*) – emergent from the malice, jealousy, and pettiness of neighbours and affines – is a means to explain misfortunes of an unexpected or serious kin" (Mills 2013: 21). "The Malice, jealousy, and pettiness' are related to people's intimacy, but Evans-Pritchard's argument "...became circumstantially bound up with the question of belief in witches and Evans-Pritchard's fundamental assertion that witchcraft beliefs were about misfortune, a focus laid out in chapter 4: "The notion of witchcraft explains unfortunate event" (Mills 2013:21).

Also within the context of Japanese witchcraft, many anthropologists realized that Evans-Pritchard made an important contribution to the studies of witchcraft through his "notion of witchcraft explain unfortunate events'. As Mills pointed out, "in doing so, the rhetorical structure of Evans-Pritchard's account,

Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic* (1937) have been understood as a belief system which gives an explanation of misfortune." (Mills 2013:21) I think this interpretation of Evans-Pritchard's book is partially true, but it is very abridged, as well as his ethnography itself was abridged in 1976. Chapter 4 in the full version was just a part of his whole ethnography, and even in the abridged version, Evans-Pritchard wrote, "The Zande actualizes these beliefs rather than intellectualizes them, and their tenets are expressed in socially controlled behavior rather than in doctrines" (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 31-32). Toward the end of chapter 4 (chapter 2 in the abridged book), Evans-Pritchard stopped to discuss the subject of witchcraft with Azande, "for their ideas are imprisoned in action and cannot be cited to explain and justify action." (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 32) In short, Evans-Pritchard marginalized 'why me?' questions by himself, and he focused on who the enemies were and what were the sources of fear, as well as how people knew and treated their enemies and fears among the Azande.

In this paper, I want to detach from the argument of witchcraft as an 'explanation of misfortune' or a 'belief system of misfortune', and move to what people trust and distrust in witchcraft, and how people move between trust talk and alienation talk regarding witchcraft. I focus here on traditional healers among the Mijikenda because they have been not only needed but also alienated by local peoples at the same time. Trust talk in witchcraft is related to people's sense of 'spiritual insecurity'.

#### Spiritual insecurity and witchcraft in super-diversity

Adam Ashforth asserted that witchcraft is a problem of 'spiritual insecurity.' He said, "I will call the dimension of insecurity in Soweto pertaining to invisible or unseen forces 'spiritual insecurity'- the condition of danger, doubt, and fear arising from exposure to the action of unseen forces bent upon causing harm. The most pervasive source of spiritual insecurity in Soweto is generally spoken of as witchcraft" (Ashforth 1998:63). He also suggested, "in my view, the experience of misfortune in contemporary Soweto undoubtedly presents the famous question "Why me?" in an urgent and pressing fashion. But the experience of insecurity is not

reducible to explanations pertaining to the source of misfortune. For while the prevalence of suffering is certainly interpreted as evidence of something acting upon the world (and in the aftermath of apartheid, making sense of suffering has become infinitely more difficult), the practical question that arises in everyday life (although it is not phrased in this way) is "What, or Who, is that something that shapes the vicissitudes of life?" Now this is not primarily a matter of explanation, but rather one of establishing and managing proper relationships with unseen powers. (Ashforth 1998:63).

As mentioned above, Evans-Pritchard pointed out, "the Zande actualizes these beliefs rather than intellectualizes them, and their tenets are expressed in socially controlled behavior rather than in doctrines" (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 31-32).

Spiritual insecurity viewed as witchcraft is common among the Mijikenda group along the Kenyan coast among which I've conducted my anthropological fieldwork since 1986. The Mijikenda group is made up of nine closely related linguistically and culturally but distinct tribes: the Giriama, Chonyi, Kauma, Kambe, Ribe, Jibana, Rabai, Duruma and Digo. The Mijikenda are inhabitants of the hinterland along the Kenyan coast from the border of Tanzania in the south to the border of Somalia in the north. People talk about 'spiritual insecurity'- the condition of danger, doubt, fear, malice, jealousy and evilness arising from exposure to the action of witches as unseen forces. In the Mijikenda, everyone has the possibility of becoming a witch and witches live near victims, even inside victim's homesteads as unexpected or seriously closed kin. The most trustworthy person, such as a father or a brother, could be a witch - the most untrustworthy enemy in people's daily life. A witch is imagined as an extremely evil person among the Mijikenda, and the danger of witchcraft as spiritual insecurity is embedded in human and social relations among the Mijikenda. They have no doubt that witches are a real presence among the community or the family. So they need traditional healers, who can treat spiritual insecurity with witchcraft, in various aspects of everyday life. Healers of spiritual insecurity are generally called '*aganga*(*si.mu*-)' in the Mijikenda.

In this paper, I have categorized '*aganga*' into three types in terms of spiritual

insecurity. First, I'll address the '*aganga wa utasi* (healers of witchcraft). '*Utsai*' is translated into witchcraft or sorcery, and '*mutasai*' is a witch or a sorcerer. A witch attacks persons or a person's relatives, properties etc. by using some harmful medicines. A witch is an evil human agent that is captured by his/her own desire, particularly 'jealousy or envy', as an essence of a human being, and this evil desire can't be controlled by him/herself. Everyone is a potential witch because of human jealousy or envy, but a witch is a person who is completely dominated by evil desire. In the Mijikenda, a witch and witchcraft are imagined as absolute evil and the cause of disease and death. Among the healers of witchcraft, there are charismatic healers who can eradicate witches and their harmful magic. Sometimes they organize anti-witchcraft movements and travel to eradicate witches who live in the homestead along the Kenyan coast. Here, I'm focusing on charismatic healers among the Mijikenda.

Second, are the '*muganga wa pepo* (healers of spirit possession)'. 'Pepo' is identified with 'evil spirits' that sometimes possess or enter into and invade a person's body, then make them physically or mentally ill. Evil spirits are the agents of spiritual insecurity that are also jealous of the person's virtue, beauty, or goodness. Healers of spirit possession are usually diviners in Mijikenda's daily life and they often hold rituals for spirits or spirit possession-*ngoma za pepo* in the night.

Third, '*muganga wa mudzi* (healers of homestead).' Some disordered or 'contaminated' conditions in the homestead arise from transgressions of sexual behavior or seniority such as '*mavingane*', '*kirwa*', and '*vitiyo*'. The sense of 'mixed up' or 'intermingling' of normal sexual behavior inside the homestead is the source of spiritual insecurity. In general, it seems that the domains of death and life are mixed up, is as much that at funeral rituals people try to restore the disordered homestead. There are '*agang wa mudzi*(healers of homestead)' who bring back the normal homestead order through rituals with special medicines. In addition, those '*agana*' treat the ancestor spirit, '*koma*'. '*Koma*' is not an evil agent, but it often brings misfortune or disease to its descendant. '*Agana*' who take care of spiritual insecurity of the homestead, are elders and the guardians of the Mijikenda. The most powerful guardians of the Mijikenda are well known as '*kaya* elders.' They

have protected the Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests, which was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008 as the cultural property of coastal Kenya in East Africa. It was also designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009.

In this paper, although I focus on 'utasi (witchcraft)' as spiritual insecurity, the issue of the Kaya and Kaya Elders is quite interesting in terms of the spiritual insecurity of the Mijikenda in super-diversity.

In witchcraft incidents among the Mijikenda, people's trust talk with skepticism is related to healers (*aganga*), not to 'witches (*atsai*)'. They believe that witches are living with local people, but usually they are invisible because they are merely living as their family members or neighbours. So, people are always questioning who are the witches and what kinds of magic they are using. These questions are not a matter of belief but of truth and trust because people have to investigate and prove who is a witch and what he or she did to the victims.

Harry West talked about a 'real lion' (just an animal) and a 'fabricated lion' (sorcery lion) in Mozambique, and he tried to explain the 'fabricated lion' by using V. Turner's 'symbolic' interpretation in front of local peoples. People listened to West's talk with curiosity, but after his talk they told Harry that he misunderstood 'fabricated lion' saying that, "it is not symbol but real!" Then people began talking about the 'fabricated lion' in detail as real and so West could collect a great deal of rich ethnographic information within a couple of hours. (West 2007, cf. 2005). Before this experience, West was thinking of 'real' insecurity or problems such as food and education after the civil war in Mozambique, but he realized that the 'fabricated lion' as sorcery is a source of spiritual insecurity and this kind of insecurity is 'real' for local people.

But how do people control or manage spiritual insecurity as witchcraft? As mentioned above, the Mijikenda people depend on '*muganga wa utsai*' to manipulate witchcraft as spiritual insecurity, and in witchcraft cases the climax is the ritual of 'catching witches (*ngoma za kugwira mutsai*)' by super witch-catchers or charismatic traditional healers (*aganga wa kuvoyra*). The question remains, do

local people trust them?

### Trust Talk and Alienation Talk regarding Super Witch-Catchers

In 1987 I was waiting for Kahindi wa Kadzomba at a local homestead in Kakoneni, a sub-location near Malindi, who had been a charismatic traditional healer (*muganga wa kuvoyera*) or a super witch-catcher (*muganga mbomu wa kugwira mutsai*) between the 1980's and the early 1990's among the Giriama of the Mijikenda group along the Kenyan coast. People were looking forward to attending Kahindi's ritual (*ngoma*)-a ritual with drums and dances to catch a witch- (*ngoma za kugwira mutasi*) in front of hundreds local people. At that time, one of the homestead members accused his younger brother of being a witch because he wanted to monopolize his success and blocked the other member's success through harmful medicines and magic. Before calling a super witch-catcher, Kahindi wa Kadzomba, the accuser sought three different diviner's opinions to make sure the accused younger brother was a witch. People told me that Kahindi was not informed about the result of divinations and that he was to find and catch witches in the crowd using his own super magical power, supported by powerful spirits.

Some statements about Kahindi wa Kadzomba showed their trust in his anti-witchcraft power. And he is a charismatic healer, belonging to the group of authentic traditional healers such as the Kaviha wa Mutama, Changa wa Ishirini or Sharif wa Katsui near Malindi and its hinterland such as Baricho and Mwadunguni. Through the colonization of Kenya, only some charismatic 'traditional healers' such as Tsawe Konde (1940s) and his son Kabwere Wanje (1950s), were 'licensed' or 'certificated' by the British colonial government. Also after the independence of Kenya, Kajiwe (= uncrushable little rock)'s 'licensed' anti-witchcraft movement was very famous in Kenya. In the Malindi area, Kaviha wa Mutama, Changa wa Ishirini, Kahindi wa Kadzomba, Sharif wa Katsui and Ali Beba were well-known licensed healers of anti-witchcraft or witch-findings. Since the 1970's, every 'herbalist' or 'healer' who makes treatments for patients and who are attacked by witchcraft, have been required to have a 'license' or 'certification' as 'experts' issued through an authorized herbalists society via the government, such

as Mithi Shamba.

People have said, “his ritual power is not fake, and Kahindi can see a witch’s face on the water surface of a small water-pot placed in front of him. Also if he shakes people’s hand, he can know whether the person is a witch or not! He is amazing. We can find witches today through Kahind’s traditional witch-catching ritual with drums and dances. If you watch his dances carefully, you can find who is a witch. Please look at his swinging buttock when he is singing and dancing with drums. If his swinging buttock stops at the face of a person for a while, he or she is a witch. Finally, Kahindi will break wind to the witch’s face! How embarrassing!” The people gathered to see Kahind’s ritual were excited and were talking about how Kahindi wa Kadzomba was the most trustworthy traditional healer of witchcraft near Malindi.

However, other people talk about him as being not trustworthy in super-diversification. Vertovec said, “the variables of super-diversity themselves are not new, nor are many of their correlations. But, as described in this article, it is the emergence of their scale, historical and policy-produced multiple configuration and mutual conditioning that now calls for conceptual distinction.” (Vertovec 2007: 1026)

The Mijikenda have experienced diversification through Swahilization, colonization, re-tribalization after independence, and current globalization via neo-liberalism. Also traditional healers have been challenged by various aspects of diversification in multi-dimension such as religion, economics, politics, culture and science. Through diversification, the sources of skepticism to witchcraft are becoming diverse. In Kahind’s case, some people who realize themselves as completely converted Christians or modernized Kenyans, would not come to the witch-catching ritual from the beginning. Even though they knew that being absent would cast them as possible witches in the region. So, Christians, Muslims, outsiders, policemen, politicians, scientists, NGO members, modern medical practitioners and local intellectuals, including anthropologists, usually attend the witch-catching ritual with some worry of being labeled a witch. But for local people, witches are not

objects of discussion - real or fiction. Witches are living as evil persons in everyone's daily life - such as the 'fabricated lion' in West's case. People are uncertain who evil persons or witches are and what they do with their harmful magic because evilness or malice are invisible for the most part. Therefore, people need traditional healers such as Kahindi wa Kadzomba or Beba to see the invisible malice of the person through their special techniques in order to find witches. Anyway, local people need traditional healers but they don't trust them blindly. Charismatic traditional healers such as Kahind or Beba are not sacred persons to believe or pray to but are secular and trustworthy charismatic heroes for eradicating witches as spiritual insecurity in the region.

### Conclusion

In 2007, a local family of the Mijikenda peoples near Malindi were waiting for Ali Beba who emerged as a new super or charismatic witch-catcher along the Kenyan coast. But one year later, trust talk about Beba had changed rapidly into alienation talk about his eradicating power over witches. Beba means 'to carry' or 'to transport' in Swahili language and it became Ali's nickname because he could find witches and then carry them on his back for all the public to see. One of my Mijikenda friends said, "Beba is amazing! When Beba found and caught a witch, the witch started to climb on Beba's back by himself automatically. Beba can make a witch feel ashamed in public! It is widely known that Beba is the most trustful healer along the Kenyan coast and also his grandfather is (was?) Kajiwe who worked as a legendary witch-catcher in Kenya. So, we are waiting for Beba in order to kick out witches from our homestead." After a while, Beba's reputation declined because he could not beat witches after all and people started talking doubtfully about Beba's magical power. In the end, his medical centre at Malindi closed down.

Yes, this story overlapped the story of Kahindi wa Kadzomba in late 1980's, and Beba's story is not new, but there is something new. For example, the term of validity of trust talk about super witch-catchers has become very short. In the past, even in Kahindi's case in the late 1980's, the trustworthiness of Kahind's power had been present for a decade at least. But it seems that Beba lost his trustworthiness



rapidly. To add to the suspicion, he also had a couple of new mobile phones and his own car in addition to building a medical centre near the Malindi town. He did his practices for witchcraft with new technology as if he were a global businessman. However, he was needed by local peoples to eradicate witches and he was trusted as a charismatic witch-catcher in super-diversity, but then his reputation as a super witch-catcher declined rapidly.

But why do people move between trust talk and alienation talk regarding witch-catchers? As far as witch-catchers unmask the power of witches, people talk of them as trustworthy. But if they fail to unmask the power of witches, trust talk quickly transforms into alienation. Although the super witch-catchers have been challenged by various kind of skepticism in super-diversity, people are still waiting for them. The danger and fear of insecurity are also becoming more diverse and complicated in everyday life, so spiritual insecurity as witchcraft will continue to be real for people because they are living with trustworthy families and neighbours who could be transformed into evil enemies. In fact, after Beba's movement, people began talking hopefully about the emergence of Kahindi's son as a true and trustworthy witch-catcher in super-diversity, even though he was taken as a madman and chained in a homestead by Kahindi wa Kadzomba.

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