

“See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”

commenting on five papers on evil in contemporary Africa

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[for Walter van Beek & William Colson, eds, collective work on the anthropology of evil in Africa, in preparation]

The five papers in this section, by René Devisch, Walter van Beek, Diane Ciekawy, Léocadie Ekoué with Judy Rosenthal, and Ulrika Trovalla are intriguing in that, from methodologically and theoretically very different angles, they show different yet surprisingly converging and recognisable images of evil in contemporary Africa. To review these papers in detail and point out their strengths and weaknesses has been the editors' privilege, and I am sure they have discharged it with acuteness as well as ethnographic and theoretical competence. I see my present commission rather as an invitation to try and articulate the implied, even hidden implications of the pieces in this cluster from my own specific point of view as, in that chronological order, an Africanist anthropologist, an African diviner-healer in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition, an intercultural philosopher, and a long-range transcontinental cultural historian focusing on Africa. Given the limitations of space and time my argument can only be extremely selective and truncated, largely relying on my own experiences over the years and implicitly referring to my published work on the subject as listed in the attached bibliography.

In the recently decolonised sub-Saharan Africa to which I shifted my oral-historical and ethnographic research in the early 1970s (after earlier, similar work on North African popular Islam), *evil* stood out in many ways as the greatest puzzle confronting me as a researcher. Brought up a Roman Catholic in an urban West European society at the very threshold of secularisation, I had often listened, with a mixture of adolescent scepticism and childish fascination, to the stereotypical stories about the continuous and heroic battle against sorcery and witchdoctors, with which missionaries returning from Africa would, at that time, captivate West European audiences. Such stories were usually narrated in terms of the missionary's personal *encounter with evil* in the shape of a village diviner-healer ('witchdoctor'). Encounters with evil and dreams of the devil had been a daily feature of my childhood, and I was less than nine years old when precocious rationality came to my rescue, enabling me to conclude that the devil was merely a personification of evil and had no independent personal existence – and that children, including myself, were incapable of sinning.

Organised around spectacular rural central places of pilgrimage and animal sacrifice, and with such unhesitating reliance on a transcendent Being ('Rabbi' rather than 'Allah') as the nominal, folk Islam of my research hosts in the Tunisian Eastern Atlas could afford in times of great misfortune and bereavement, 'evil' had played a relatively small role in my first, North African fieldwork. The obvious central focus of evil was human infringement of divine law, through evil (*harām*) deeds. Beyond that vast theistic realm, rather amorphous, unfocused and fragmented evil was lurking in the shape of *jenūn* (plural; sing. *jinn*) around wet and marshy places outside the inhabited hamlets especially there where once powerful hamlets had gone extinct; evil was moreover suspected and obliquely identified in the putative malice of neighbours casting the evil eye (*al-ʿayn*) or magically stealing (*shleb*; cf. Creighton 1981) milk – an absolute life's necessity – from animal's udders and mothers' breasts; evil was suspected again in the terror that, at the end of the ecstatic dance in favour of the local saints residing in their nearby graves, seized the adept *fūqra* / derwishes as if overcome by far-from-saintly forces (explicitly conceptualised as dark) from across the Sahara (whence, in Mali, the *bori* cult had exerted considerable influence on the ecstatic forms of North African popular religion); and finally, and as another *spirit of the wilds* next to the *jenūn* but far more formidable, the ominous mythical being of Ghrbān, who would suddenly materialise in lonely places on the mountain slopes, and strike you with his fingers – leaving you with as few days to live as he left dark bruises on your skin. Most misfortune, meanwhile, was not even interpreted in terms of such evils, but as the result of perfectly rational and justified vengeance by invisible local saints with whom the living villagers had entered into contract

(e.g. ‘Sidi [the formal mode of address for saints, and elder brothers] , let my flock multiply and I will sacrifice every newborn *male* animal to you’), usually only to fail to honour their end of the deal. Against the background of comparative mythology, much of these fragmented, non-theistic hints at evil suggest very ancient layers of conceptualisation and cosmology for which North Africa stands out in comparative mythology.¹ These layers probably predate the arrival of Islam (late 1st mill. CE) by millennia. Anyway, the demonisation of unintegrated relicts of the past is a shaky basis for a wholesale *cosmology of evil* as an ethnographic construct.

Against such an utterly personal and accidental ethnographic baseline, my next and lasting fieldwork context, South Central Africa, appeared soon to be alarmingly (though, in the end, deceptively) close to Conrad’s (1899 / 1971) stereotypical *Heart of Darkness*; to be, in other words, a ‘*Witchbound Africa*’ (Melland 1923 / 1967, writing on the Kaonde of North-western Zambia). My initial entry into Zambians’ intimate worldviews and moral conceptions consisted in the urban networks and weekend rituals (ecstatic cults and female puberty rites) of the then somewhat despised Nkoya minority (an ethnic cluster from Western Zambia, Southern neighbours of the Kaonde) in that country’s capital Lusaka. This urban ethnographic focus soon expanded so as to include the Lumpa Church’s rising in Northern Zambia in 1963-1964 (at the time, the Lumpa prophetess Alice Lenshina was living her last years as a market vendor in Lusaka); royal cults, ecological cults and prophetic cults all over South Central Africa; the multitude of ecstatic cults of affliction among the Nkoya people and their neighbours in their rural setting – here and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa religion and therapy tend to coincide; Christian missionary churches, African Independent Churches and other syncretistic forms emerging in both urban and rural environments. The closer I came to my Zambian research hosts (and I have ended up as the adopted son of one of their kings, and as a sub-chief in my own right), the more it was driven home to me that, from their subjective perspective, the default perception of social life seemed to be that of a continuous battle against evil – an evil that, in the absence (for most people in most situations) of the existential reliance on a personal, transcendent Being, seemed to reside, in the first place, in, and to be projected from, the malice of fellow human beings incessantly competing for power, privilege and wealth with sinister, magical means whilst shunning public displays of violence; but at the same time a battle in which practically everyone seemed prepared to join with equally evil means. The concept of natural death proved surprisingly absent; or (when admitted as a theoretical possibility under the influence of modern biomedicine, education, Christianity and the media) yet tended to be dismissed in practice as a rationalisation under which the ulterior explanation persisted: that of humans perpetrating sorcery in a quest for power, wealth, and simple malice. Two main ways out of this tangle appeared to present themselves.

- (1) In the first place, a small minority of devout modern Christians believed to have found in their ardent faith (as a result of their first- or second-generation conversion) not only immunity from the sorcery of others – but even liberation from the evil inside themselves, and from the very concept of sorcery as the prime explanation of misfortune.²
- (2) In the second place, even though persisting right into post-colonial times,³ the default sorcery-centred conception of misfortune was challenged not only by Christianity (mainly in the course of the 20th century), but also by cults of affliction which spread like wildfire from the Indian Ocean coast into the interior of South Central and Southern Africa, from the late 19th century on. In the aetiology and diagnostics / divination methods (mainly through trance dancing) of these newly arriving cults, misfortune was no longer attributable to human malice (or to irate ancestors *punishing* human malice), but to the accidental, morally-neutral

¹ Breach of such human contracts with land spirits / land shrines (cf. the deceased local saints of North Africa) turned out to constitute the main interpretation of misfortune during my fieldwork among the Manjacos of Guinea Bissau (1981-1983).

² In South Central and Southern African studies of an earlier generation, similar analytical approaches to misfortune abounded, to be applied to urban migrants in a bid to explain their existential predicaments; e.g. Mitchell 1965; Hammond-Tooke 1970, Kiernan 1982, 1984.

³ And, according to some influential analyses, even acerbated under the latter conditions; Geschiere 1997, 1998; contra: van Binsbergen 2001.

contamination by non-anthropomorphous spirits – and consequently, the redress of misfortune was sought, not in the identification, social isolation and extermination of perpetrators of evil and the neutralisation / destruction of their material instruments, but in the identification, recognition and subsequent veneration of these vagrant spirits, and in the comforting, ritual care, and often elevation to ritual leadership, of those diagnosed to be possessed by them.

I found that both alternatives, (1) and (2), represented totally different cosmologies (the former hinging on salvation, the latter on contamination) as compared to the ‘evil-as-human-malice’ cosmology on which kinship-dominated life in villages appears to have thrived for centuries if not millennia.

In subsequent decades, I have had the opportunity of revising the above sketch in a number of ways. I came to reject the ‘heart of darkness’ stereotype as racist and essentialising; and I likewise came to reject the notion of ‘evil’ as a *fait social total* (Mauss 1923-24 / 1966) – an integrative *i.e.* centrally relevant and heuristically illuminating ethnographic datum). Among the Nkoya, power figures (kings, diviner-healers, entrepreneurs, blacksmiths; may I add ethnographers?) have proved to be considered exceedingly good and exceedingly evil at the same time – the ambivalence of (locally conceived) evil appeared as a typical African elaboration of Durkheim’s ‘ambiguity of the sacred’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960; Isambert 1976). This suggests that – somewhat at variance with more or less explicit *emic* (*i.e.* explicitly locally articulated) models of evil that circulate in, *e.g.*, Nkoya society (where witchcraft *emically* oscillates ambivalently between wilful act and innate condition), evil is not an intrinsic quality but a *socially elaborated relationship* – perhaps in the sense of my (2001) definition of witchcraft as ‘virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order’. In witchcraft eradication movements at a local, regional (*e.g.* the notorious 1930s witchfinder Tomo Nyirenda a.k.a. Mwana Lesa, *i.e.* *God’s Son*; Ranger 1975; Fetter 1971) or even (*e.g.* Chitawala / Watchtower throughout South Central Africa in the first half of the twentieth century CE) supra-regional scale, communities would periodically cleanse themselves of witchcraft often with iconoclastic and homicidal means, as if evil could be acerbated in certain persons and objects but in fact would be present in everyone and everything; the rationale of anti-witchcraft action lying perhaps primarily⁴ in the very *act of violent confrontation*, while the attribution and identification of *evil* might be secondary, a mere pretext, a tautology given the assumption that reality was permeated by both good and evil.

This inkling concerning the secondary and derived nature of witchcraft and evil remained primarily theoretical for me, until, in Botswana in the late 1980s, in the course of fieldwork into urban culture I became a fully-fledged local diviner-healer myself. Then I had to come to terms with the fact that it is *the diviner’s* (including, often, my own) *explicit enunciation in terms of evil* in his apparently supernaturally-sanctioned rite of divination, *that produces and perpetuates an explicit social idiom of evil* which, until then, had tended to remain implicit, dormant, ambiguous, allusive rather, in the mind and the statements of the client as local actor, and of the latter’s kinsmen and neighbours. There is almost a vicious circle here: as a locally recognised, greatly feared manifestation of evil in his / her own right (while at the same time vindicated as good and as healing, through evil’s ambivalence), the diviner-healer *creates* the evil that he or she names, and thus is not so much ‘beyond good and evil’ (Nietzsche 1886 / 1966) – as we would hope especially *anthropologists* to be, of all people – but the very focus of evil, of a web she or he spins herself. The fascination with evil as a specialist’s construct has tempted many African ritual specialists to display the locally conventionalised symbols of evil and menace, in attire, gestures, and statements, and to train their apprentices accordingly. The *sangomas* parading through the neighbourhood in full ceremonial dress with leopard and snake elements and overlaid by black cloaks, having their ecstatic séances in public places, publicly drinking the sacrificial blood from the very necks of their animal victims while emitting raucous cries – in all these ways they are deliberately conjuring up locally recognised images of transgressive evil that lend awe, authority and credibility to their other professional manifestations, which (as a result?) tend to be highly paid for. It is an explicit view shared by such specialists that in order to confront evil in divination and therapy, one must personally be fully conversant with the practice of evil – even to the extent that some senior diviner-healers have come to be excluded (on the grounds of their practices involving child murder) from the very High God shrine that confers the highest confirmation upon their priestly office. I repeat,

⁴ As Girard would have it; Girard 1972, 1982; Deguy & Dupuy 1982; van Beek 1988; Simonse 1992; also reminiscent of Freud 1913 / 1940.

evil is not a condition or a quality, but a social relationship.

Some of my early explorations into an anthropology of African concepts of evil were triggered in the context of 'The Problem of Evil in Central Africa', an abortive book project started by Terence Ranger, the seminal historian of African religious system in the 1970s CE. At the time, Ranger's incisive though document-based explorations (e.g. Ranger 1973) into South Central African witchcraft and witchcraft eradication made a deep impression on me. There was nothing wrong with Ranger's project's title, apparently, until we realise that *the problem of evil*, as conceived in the European tradition, reflects a puzzle of Christian and post-Christian theology which we cannot simply project onto African cultural history without very serious ethnocentric, Eurocentric distortions. From an accepted Christian point of view (e.g. Niven 1908-1921), *the problem of evil* is the apparent contradiction between the Christian tenets of an omnipotent, loving, all-good God, and the undeniable and inexplicable prevalence of 'evil' in the world as we humans know it – how could a loving and omnipotent God condone such evil? This problematic is specific in time and space, peculiar to the Christian North Atlantic region, and its proposed solutions (notably: qualifying the extent to which God is good, loving or omnipotent, or qualifying the extent to which evil is really evil; etc.), however much a gauge of evolving Western thought since Late Antiquity (St Augustine) and Early Modern times (Suarez, cf. Gracia & Davis 1989; von Leibniz 1710 / 1874 with his idea of *theodicy*, 'God made the best possible world'), can in no way be considered a human universal through space and time. For one thing, before the advent of Christianity (and more recently Islam), the South Central African High God, variously called Nyambi, Lesa, etc., appears as a *deus otiosus* whose mythical interaction with the world and with humans was confined to the early times of creation.

Nor is South Central Africa the only place in the world where radically different notions exist from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic cosmology of evilcentring on a personal and active god. Already the Ancient Iranians, whose considerable influence both on Ancient Greek thought and on Ancient Judaism is generally acknowledged, had yet fundamentally different conceptions of good and evil, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman constituting *two irreducible principles of good and evil*, whose continuous interplay would provide, *prima facie*, a much more convincing, dualist or 'Manichaean' (i.e. Late Iranian) solution for 'the problem of evil' than anything Christianity has had to offer (Boyce 1975). Distorted and attenuated traces of this dualism may be found in the *Old Testament* (e.g. *Job*, where the devil appears as God's notary; or *Genesis* 3, where the snake represents evil on its own). In Ancient Mesopotamia, evil was not in the first place conceived as the result of human or supernatural malice but as a breach of natural order threatening the king and the state, and manifested by freak phenomena which gave rise to an extensive *omina* literature (Leighty 1966; van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999). Such examples could be multiplied *ad libitum*. It is not as if some universal, converging notion of 'evil' can be argued to be constitutive of the human condition in general.⁵ Evil does not even have to be a predominantly moral, agency-centred category – as we have already seen in the case of the South Central African cults of affliction. Moreover, in many societies across space and time, misfortune has been interpreted not so much as resulting from malicious human agency or from human agency in general, but from offences, however unintended and accidental, against a natural order which specifically reveals its existence by punishing the offence. 'Taboo', instead of 'sin', as the local concept of evil – but still sacrifice as a likely expiation. Plato in some of his works (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Timaeus*; 4th c. BCE / 1975) discussed evil and already distinguished between evils springing from nature e.g. disease and earthquake, and those springing from human volition, e.g. avarice, murder.

If evil can be considered a social relationship (inevitably tending to ambivalence), it would hardly constitute a human universal of cosmological and moral conceptualisation, but should only have a specific scope in space and time – culturally defined and ethnographically or textually to be ascertained. This, however, is not what the linguistic evidence suggests. Admittedly, the presence of specific lexical items for 'bad, badness' and 'witch, witchcraft' in various reconstructions of proto-

⁵ Among many dozens of universals of human culture, Brown (1991) lists 'good and bad distinguished' – but the actual conceptualisation of such difference will vary enormously through space and time, and it may be an exception rather than the rule that 'evil' is conceptualised as a separate ontological category in its own right – as in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic 'cosmology of evil'.

Bantu (Meeussen 1980; Guthrie 1967-1971 and n.d.) already suggests a common basis for thinking about good and bad in a large part of Africa (Table 1).

author	root	semantics	ID / noun class	root	semantics	ID / noun class
Gurthrie	-bé DP/14	bad/badness	CS = 97			
	-béép-	to become bad	CS = 133			
Meeussen	-gàg-	to go bad	CS = 769 ?			
	-bí-p-	becoming bad,	2.2.	-ce, -cia 3,7	kindness (nice, good), also pity,	3.3.
	-/bú/	bad,	2.2.	-ji, -já	good, nice	1.2.

Table 1. 'Evil' and 'good' in proto-Bantu

As a linguistic phylum within the – presently exclusively African – Niger-Congo macrophylum, Bantu comprises no more than 7 % of today's global human population. A much more comprehensive category is that of the subset of all languages spoken today in whose reconstructed proto-vocabularies the presence can be argued of reflexes of so-called **Borean* – a theoretical language construct supposed to have been spoken in Central Asia in the Upper Palaeolithic.⁶ Nearly all languages spoken today fall in this category, and in the reconstructed **Borean* proto-vocabulary the distinction between 'good' and 'evil' is very conspicuous (Table 2).

'bad'		'good'	
*Borean reconstructed root		*Borean reconstructed root	semantics
*CVKV	bad, harm		
		*HVCV	good, take care ?
		*HVJV	love, good
*HVKV	bad	*HVKV	good
		*KVVN	to fit, be good
		*MVRV	good, new
		*NVKV	good
*PVCV	bad, evil		
		*TVKV	good, fit
*TVRV	bad, dirty		
		*WVNLV	good

Remarks: 1. **Borean* reconstructed roots have the format X₁-V₁-X₂-V₂, where X is any specific consonant, and V is any undefined (and undefinable) vowel; 2. Apparently comprising any value in the total range from 'evil' to 'good', **HVKV* is the kind of 'range semantics' I discussed elsewhere (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: 142 f.; van Binsbergen 2012: 205 f.); 3. source: Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, 'long-range etymology')

Conclusion: apparently, the concepts of 'good' and 'evil' were already very widely available, at the semantic level, in the Upper Palaeolithic. Note the complex and heterogeneous semantic field of 'bad': extending to 'harm', 'evil' and 'dirty'; and likewise that of 'good', extending to 'to take care', 'to love', 'to fit', 'to be good', 'to be new'.

Table 2. The **Borean* lexicon of good and evil

⁶ Fleming 1991, 2002; Starostin 1989, 1999, 2000, 2007; Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008. Kaiser & Sheveroshkin 1988 consider Niger-Congo to belong to the same **Borean*-centred cluster, as a form of 'Super-Nostratic'. My own research in progress brings out that in nearly 30% of proto-Bantu roots could be considered reflexes from **Borean*.

The findings of Tables 1 and 2, however, cannot obscure the fact that, across the world's linguistic phyla and macrophyla of the past and the present, there is an immense variation and extreme semantic heterogeneity among the lexical expressions for concepts more or less reminiscent of the present-day, Western, Christian or post-Christian semantics of 'evil' (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, 'all data bases combined, meaning = "evil" ').

To my mind, the fascination which the concept of evil clearly retains for modern scholars, Africanists and others, resides not in its unmistakable and widespread *emic* significance on the ground, but in the fact that, as a concept, it is importantly constitutive of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic worldview and its secularising aftermath, and as such it belongs to the extensive package of narrowly Western traits that deceptively pose as universal, thus revealing their Western-hegemonic nature – in other words, it belongs to the ideology and mythology of present-day globalisation (van Binsbergen 2003, 2004).

For the ethnography of evil the above, however succinct and one-sided, has some consequences. Before we can speak of *evil* in reference to a specific socio-cultural situation defined in space and time (e.g. an African city, the Mijikenda people around the turn of the 21st c. CE, etc.; examples taken from the papers under review), we need to ascertain what lexical and otherwise symbolic means locally exist for the expression of semantics that in North Atlantic present-day academic discourse are often associated with the concept of evil, and how these semantics are mediated (no doubt, in ambiguous and contradictory ways) in everyday life, ritual contexts, myths, dreams, etc. Several of the papers in our section do just that (Devisch, van Beek, Ciekawy), but not all. Here the above distinction between *emic* and *etic* comes in handy (Headland *et al.* 1990; Devisch explicitly employs the distinction in his argument) – as long as we realise that our 'etic' rendering, in terms of the concept of 'evil', of complex *emic i.e.* local semantics and practices, implies not the objective representation of one African local system in terms of an objective, 'scientific' universal *etic* equivalent, but rather the biased (for, partisan) comparison of two *emic* systems focusing on 'evil' – of which one is locally African, the other (deceptively posing as *etic* and universal) locally North Atlantic. In representing the African *emic* side, we need to postpone any meta-analysis until the polyphony of African voices has sounded long and loud enough, and in its own tongue. We must show explicit awareness of the potentially hegemonic nature of our attempts at ethnography, all the more so, because the colonisation of the mind through formal education and Christian conversion over the past century and longer must have profoundly informed both apparently local *emics* of 'evil', and the cosmopolitan ethnographer's own perception of the latter. We need to realise that, in a globalising world tending (that is, until quite recently!) to North Atlantic hegemony, the locus from which the ethnographer speaks, is a major problem in its own right; all the more so, if that locus is suggested to be entirely self-evident, and self-sufficient as the centre of the world ('Place de l'Italie [where? which city? oh, of course!] , drinking coffee') or appears (by the absence of any local voice, any local utterance) to be lacking profound first-hand knowledge and global context ('a Nigerian city before it was rocked by unprecedented Christian / Muslim violence – *puzzlingly, only four days prior to the, structurally similar, event that shook the contemporary world more than anything else, notably: 9/11!*)

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