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*Witches, Kings, and the  
Sacrifice of Identity  
or The Power of Paradox and  
the Paradox of Power  
among the Beng of Ivory Coast*

While living among the Beng in Ivory Coast, I became acquainted with a young woman named Affoué.<sup>1</sup> A friendly, good-humored, and very intelligent woman, she was more willing than many women her age to discuss serious questions of Beng society with me. I was shocked one day when her cousin Aia, who had introduced us, said to me, "You know she's a witch, don't you?" I asked Aia how she knew this. Aia responded, "Haven't you noticed that she's totally flat-chested? And she's never menstruated, so she'll never have children. She sold her menstrual cycle to the witches so she could buy witchcraft with it." My first reaction—as a Westerner rather than an anthropologist—was to mention to Aia that there are Western drugs, probably available at the dispensary thirty miles away, that could very possibly cure Affoué's condition. Aia responded, "But they wouldn't work for Affoué. Don't you understand? She *sold* her menstrual cycle. She will *never* menstruate."

On another occasion, my friend Aia surprised me again with information about witchcraft. Aia had been educated in Ivoirian schools but had been obliged to return to the village after her father's death, which

left her no base of emotional and financial support. She revealed to me that her father had died from being bewitched by his elder brother, who was now the regional king and had bewitched her father soon after taking office. She explained that it was the duty of every new king to bewitch three relatives within a year of assuming office, and Aia's father had merely been one of the victims of that rule.

What do these two types of witchcraft—one seemingly very personal, the other apparently political—have to do with one another? In the following pages I will suggest that both these kinds of Beng witchcraft indicate the witch's willful sacrifice of a crucial component or aspect of identity. The discussion will thereby explore how the Beng notion of identity is wide enough to include certain kinspeople in some circumstances (cf. Fortes 1973:289; Mauss 1938; Zahan 1979:9). The general power of the Beng witch, I argue, is based not on *external* symbols and techniques, as it seems to be in many other societies, but, in its most potent and archetypal form, on the sacrifice of identity. The power of the witch and the power of the king, though used for opposite ends, nevertheless make use of the same symbolic repertoire and hence are closely allied.

### *The Beng*

Before analyzing Beng notions of witchcraft, I will summarize the relevant aspects of Beng society. There are about 10,000 Beng living in the prefecture of M'Bahiakro in Ivory Coast and an undetermined number living in the neighboring subprefecture of Prikro. They speak one of the Southern Mande family of languages whose other speakers all live farther to the west and southwest in Ivory Coast. The Beng's immediate neighbors are the Baule to the south and west, the Ando to the east and southeast (both Akan groups), and the Djimini and Diammala (Senufo groups) to the north and northwest. In the precolonial era the Beng enjoyed trade relations, especially through their famous kola nut production, with these and other local ethnic groups.

Beng say that until the colonial era, the men hunted regularly in addition to farming (primarily yams and fruit and nut trees, including the kola trees), but with the introduction of cash crops by the French (especially coffee and cocoa), hunting has taken a secondary place to farming. Women continue to farm and gather (primarily vegetal products), as before. Beng social structure is based on double descent: there are matri-

clans and patrilineal clans, each type having its own functions and symbolic associations (Gottlieb 1988b). Patrilineal clans have less to do with witchcraft and politics and more to do with the transmission of food and other taboos, funeral ritual styles, the mechanics of marriage negotiations, and the afterlife, and for this reason they figure little into the present discussion.

The Beng area in the prefecture of M'Bahiakro is divided into two political regions called the Forest and Savanna (these designations are more symbolic than they are strictly descriptive of the actual ecology of the two regions), each containing localized matrilineal clans and nonlocalized patrilineal clans. Each of the two regions has a king and a queen presiding over it. Although the king is more visible in political affairs, he is said to consult the queen on all major decisions. She serves as his stand-in if he is sick or otherwise indisposed, helps choose an heir to the kingship if she survives her coruler, and is a co-owner of the mystically powerful objects that come with the offices of king and queen. The king and queen are always members of a single matrilineal clan and are classified as siblings (though they may be cousins).

Going down the political scale, there are several villages in each of the two political regions. Each village has a male and female chief (though nowadays the female chief's post is sometimes left empty). As with the regional king and queen, the male and female chief are viewed as corulers of their village and are "siblings" (or cousins) belonging to a single matrilineal clan. In the discussion that follows, I will discuss primarily kings, but it should be borne in mind that queens and male and female village chiefs hold much the same types of power as does the king, but in scaled-down form.

Each of the two kings is viewed as the sovereign ruler of the region over which he has jurisdiction; hence he has important legal powers. His court was traditionally the highest appeals court after a clan or village trial (there is now the possibility of using a nearby Ivoirian town court, but the Beng resort to this most infrequently). The king tries cases in the first instance involving problematic situations that transcend a single village, such as certain disputes or the violation of certain grave taboos. In addition to this judicial role, the king nowadays holds region-wide meetings to deal with affairs of modernization, such as proposals to build a new dispensary in the region or to admit loggers in to cut down forest trees for timber.

As with many African peoples, politics for the Beng are intimately tied to religion; indeed it is hard to distinguish the two as separate realms



at all. For in the Beng view, the king holds authority by virtue of his relationship to what anthropologists call mystical notions. Every king is viewed as an owner of the Earth, which is the primary focus for worship among the Beng. The Earth itself is seen both as a unity, and as refracted into several smaller, bounded Earths contained within the Beng region. In each of these forms, the Earth is said to hold great mystic powers over human life. Each village is associated with at least one named Earth, each of which has two Masters of the Earth (one primary and one deputy Master of the Earth) who offer sacrifices and prayers to that Earth on behalf of all who either wish to or are required to worship it. These Masters of the Earth are said to "own" the Earths that they are entitled to worship. Ultimately, however, the king "owns" all the Earths associated with the villages in his region as indeed he "owns" *everything* in his region. Hence ultimately he has jurisdiction over all the activities that occur in his region having to do with worship of the Earth.

The Earth shapes the daily lives of the Beng in intimate and far-reaching ways. In particular, it lays down a large array of taboos that must never be violated. Violations of the most important "taboos" concerning the Earth automatically result in punishment and atonement (via sacrifice) approved by the king of the transgressor's region. Such sins would include a couple who illicitly have sexual relations in an area allied to an Earth shrine (see Gottlieb 1988a), or any individual who directly transgresses an Earth shrine—for instance by talking to, staring at, or touching it. These violations are considered to endanger the entire region, and therefore must be dealt with by the king of that region.

The king has other mystic abilities not directly linked to his custodianship of the Earth. For instance, he is said to have visionary powers—he will foresee dire "natural" calamities before they befall the region, if such calamities are interpreted as punishment for sins committed, and will warn the region of such calamities. About once a month he sends a representative to consult with a distant diviner who will reveal any immoral activities that may have occurred in the king's region and need to be ritually rectified. Furthermore, the king of one region inherits with his office the knowledge of how to stop a baby from choking. I interpret this as a symbol of his responsibility for ensuring the well-being of his people, as represented by an infant (the epitome of fertility) literally gasping for life. Additionally, the king may offer occasional sacrifices to "bush spirits" or to spirits of ancestors causing misfortunes such as droughts or excessive infant and child mortality in the villages. In gen-

eral, then, the king is responsible not only for the legal but also the moral and spiritual well-being of the people living in his region.

All this is in direct contrast to the power of witches. Beng witches, like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa, are viewed as immoral: in the Beng case, they "consume" their relatives with whom they have the most in common symbolically and emotionally—that is, their uterine kin—to assuage their personal "hunger" for "meat."<sup>2</sup> In so doing, they threaten to undermine the symbolic foundation of a significant component of the Beng descent system. For the matrilineal system is based on what I term a fund of shared "identity" (Gottlieb 1988b). Uterine kin are viewed as emotionally close, to the point of symbolic equivalence and sociological interchangeability (see below). Bewitching a matrikinsperson is, then, an act of ultimate immorality.

One is inevitably led to the question of motivation. I often asked informants why a given witch had killed a particular matrikinsperson. Sometimes my informant would offer a trivial excuse as a motivation—the victim had borrowed a dish the week before and hadn't yet returned it to the witch, the victim had refused to lend the witch money until two months hence, at harvest time—but invariably my informant explained that these "reasons" were merely pretexts. Ultimately, no one can really know what lies in a witch's heart, my informants explained, what motivates him or her to bewitch a matrikinsperson. This feature underscores the immorality of witchcraft for the Beng: not only does a witch kill a matrikinsperson—with whom one has so much in common symbolically and sociologically—but there is no knowable reason for the act. In times past, witches were killed if proven guilty by an ordeal.

At least two kinds of ordeals existed. First, suspected witches might have a mixture of pounded chili peppers smeared all over their faces and then be chased into the forest. If they returned to the village, they were considered innocent; if not, they were presumed guilty. A second method was more indirect. A sacrifice was performed using a chicken. As in all Beng animal sacrifices, after being killed, the chicken was opened up and the officiating priest inspected the ovaries or testicles. If they were white, it indicated the good intentions (*i.e.*, innocence) of the person donating the chicken (the suspected witch), but if black, it indicated that the chicken donor was lying about his or her innocence and was indeed a witch. In this case, the now-convicted witch would be escorted to a spot in the forest. Here, at least in one village, a certain Djimini man (see Beidelman 1982) would beat the witch lightly with a

wooden club and then toss him or her into a pit in which there was a boa snake that would consume the witch. To my knowledge, neither of these ordeals has been practiced for some time, because of modern Ivoirian law. Nowadays, witches are socially ostracized to varying degrees—they often have few friends and are generally shunned while walking through the village.

In the remainder of the article, I will discuss aspects of witchcraft as they emerge in both the personal and political spheres, basing the latter discussion on the brief sketch of the Beng sociopolitical structure provided above. I will begin by treating the personal type of witchcraft carried out by private citizens and then move on to the political type brought about by office-holders. I will conclude by suggesting that both types of witchcraft partake of the same symbolic structure and constitute the two extreme and opposite versions of a single symbolic mode, which has to do with the Beng philosophy of identity.

In this discussion I will not refer directly to the notion of "power," because for the Beng, power itself is in many ways defined by what I term "identity." As many recent writers have argued for West Africa and elsewhere (e.g., Etienne 1987; Bledsoe 1980), power in this small-scale society rests ultimately in people. This view of "wealth [or power]-in-people," as it has been called, has been taken to mean that people represent the economic potential of their labor. However, people also represent the *sociological* potential of role replacement. The notion of "perpetual kinship," introduced some time ago in African studies (see Cunnison 1956), is relevant here. As Cunnison understood it for the Luapula of Zambia, however, "perpetual kinship" was based on a further notion of "positional succession," in which, as Poewe (1981) has written of the same people: "Upon death every individual must be succeeded by a living matrikin. The successor is said to assume the identity, names, titles, and relationships of the deceased. According to Luapula philosophy, he is the deceased. Relationships of the past are therefore lived in the present and perpetuated into the future" (p. 54). This view of perpetual kinship thus rests on an idea of collapsed time: past social roles are re-created in the present and into the future, and individuals are considered nothing more than transitory occupiers of those roles. (For a similar view of time among the Avatip of Papua New Guinea, see Harrison 1988.)

For the Beng, I suggest that the situation is related, but not identical. The emphasis here is not so much on given individuals occupying permanent, atemporal sociological roles as on a group of (matrilineally re-

lated) individuals sharing symbolic attributes, or what Schneider (1968: 52 and *passim*) would call "substance," by virtue of membership in the particular group. In other words, I stress the symbolic underpinnings of the sociological situation, whereas Cunnison stressed the sociological underpinnings of the symbolic situation, perhaps because of differences in both the ethnography and our own theoretical predilections.

In short, I suggest that for the Beng, political power is based ultimately on a notion of identity, and identity in turn is based on a certain understanding of symbolic "substance" as it is shared by uterine kin. How such "substance" or "identity" is manipulated for both personal and political gain is explored below.

### Personal Witchcraft

Some Beng are "born" witches, but others must acquire their knowledge themselves (although unlike the Azande and others, the Beng make no terminological distinction between these two types of witches: both are called *brunā*).<sup>3</sup> All born witches inherit their witchcraft talents from the matriline, generally from the mother. (See below how this is relevant to the political use of witchcraft.) For the nonhereditary witches, there are two means to acquire knowledge of witchcraft: one may either be taught witchcraft, again by the mother; or one may buy the knowledge of the craft. But the price of buying this knowledge from another witch is quite high: one informant estimated its cost as perhaps 500,000 CFA, which is anywhere from 2½ to 5 times the average annual salary of a Beng villager (the exchange rate fluctuates from about 200–400 CFA to the dollar). It would clearly be unusual for a villager to have this amount of money available. But there are other means to purchase witchcraft, using even more valuable resources as currency: one may purchase the knowledge of witchcraft by selling either a vital spiritual or physical part of a human being. The victim may either be the person who is buying the witchcraft or any member of that person's matriclan (usually a close relative such as a child or sibling).

A prospective witch may sell a matriclan member's name (*to*) or soul or spirit (*niniŋ/wru*) (see Note 15); or may sell his or her own arm or, if a woman, her menstrual cycle and breasts. If the witch chooses the first method, as soon as the victim is deprived of either name or spirit, he or she immediately starts dying a physical death if the spirit was stolen or a



mental death—that is, madness—if the name was stolen. The latter is illustrated in the following case:

T went mad suddenly. The day he went mad, he publicly announced the cause. He said it was his own mother, A, who had bewitched him. A wanted to be rich and so she “took” her son’s name and “carried” it up to some Muslim witches in a northern village who bought the name and then later sacrificed it. In return, they guaranteed A that she would be rich: all her crops would always be abundant. The minute they sacrificed the name, T immediately went mad, while his mother started getting rich.

Every three months for a period of about a month he would hit anyone for no reason, or walk around naked and try, unsuccessfully, to seduce or rape women he encountered, or enter a woman’s kitchen and eat everything in sight while she tried to chase him out. At times he would have to be tied up for a few weeks in his house, being fed there and using a chamber pot. Once he wounded a man with a machete and a village elder called in the police, who took him to be cured at a psychiatric hospital; but when he was released and returned to the village, he was still mad.

In this case the woman, A, merely sold her son’s name in exchange for economic advantage. Apparently she committed no further acts of witchcraft against other matrikin, although it is uncertain whether she could have if she had wanted to.

But some other would-be witches sell their matrikin victim’s spirit to practicing witches, and in these cases the victim immediately falls sick and later dies bodily. As they have spiritually killed the victim, however, it is said that such witches—along with the witches to whom the victim was sold—may immediately begin “eating” the victim’s *body*, even if the sick victim is not ostensibly dead to the world (see Note 15). The witches and the prospective witch feast invisibly on the victim’s body, or “meat” (*son*), together, and within three to four months at most, the victim’s external body indeed dies. With this method, the prospective witch always gains some techniques for committing future acts of witchcraft against his or her matrikin, such as receiving invisible poisonous leaves to put in a victim’s wash water or invisible poison to put in a victim’s food.

It is significant that in both forms of buying witchcraft—selling the victim’s name and selling the victim’s spirit—the victim is always a close matrikinsperson of the prospective witch—generally a parent, child, or sibling.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that such close matrikin comprise on one level a portion of an individual’s own identity, so that by selling an aspect of a close matrikinsperson, a prospective witch sells part of his or her own identity.

The second mode of buying witchcraft consists of a prospective witch selling a central aspect of his or her own bodily identity. One may sell the use of an arm/hand,<sup>5</sup> which is essential to performing all kinds of physical labor (especially if it is the right arm/hand, used more than the left in physical labor). The result of “selling” the arm/hand is that the body part becomes totally and permanently limp, making it effectively useless. As in any labor-intensive society, the arm/hand is a primary source of individual self-esteem, economic self-sufficiency, and general social status, in addition to its direct social and economic value to those to whom one owes a certain amount of yearly labor (especially one’s parents, spouse, and elder siblings). This perceived value is evident in linguistic usage. One of the euphemisms for menstruation is the expression *a wo tro*, literally “her arm/hand is low.” When a woman works in the forest (chopping wood) or in the fields (farming), her arm/hand is constantly “raised,” that is, in motion. When she is menstruating, she is forbidden to perform work in any area connected to an Earth shrine, which includes all the fields and the forest (see Gottlieb 1988a). So a menstruating woman cannot perform any work other than cooking and cleaning inside the village. The expression “her arm/hand is low,” referring to incapacity for labor while menstruating, highlights the Beng view of the arm/hand as symbolizing the human capacity for labor. “Selling” the use of one’s arm/hand in exchange for the power to perform witchcraft is tantamount to renouncing the ability to perform some or all forms of labor. Apparently, the labor power that one thus renounces is more than made up for by the different sort of power that one gains: the power to bewitch other matrikin with the ultimate goal of eating their “meat,” thereby avoiding hunger despite the lack of a good working arm.<sup>6</sup>

Prospective female witches may also buy witchcraft by selling their menstrual cycle and breasts. In this case, the woman will never again menstruate, develop breasts, or have children, as with Affoué. My informant on this subject assured me that there were many other women who chose this route to acquiring witchcraft. Here the woman sacrifices a central part of her identity as a female—her potential maternity, and all the symbolic, social, and economic power that this implies—in exchange for the power of bewitching others, again to eat their “meat.”<sup>7</sup> (For another perspective on the Beng view of the female body, see Gottlieb n.d.)

In both the above cases, the would-be witch sells an essential component of his or her own personal identity—the ability to perform labor, or to be fertile though producing children—in exchange for acquiring a destructive power over others in his or her own matriclan. The next sec-

tion will explore a type of *political* witchcraft that also requires a willful sacrifice of a component of identity, in the form of matrilineal members.

### *Witch-Kings*

Many others working in Africa have noted that political authority is sometimes closely allied to what might be called the "dark side" of power. De Heusch (1982) and Adler (1982), for instance, have both shown how African kings sometimes reveal two contrasting sides to their image and their behavior: they may appear as benevolent protectors of their land and people, but they are also capable of despotic acts of terror. Art sometimes reveals this ambiguity. For example, of the king of Benin, Fraser (1972a), citing Dark, *et al.* (1960:35), has written about "the depiction of the Oba [king] holding the tails of a pair of crocodiles or leopards, one on either side of his head. . . . This motif, known as the 'Animal Master' or *dompteur* . . . express[es] graphically the idea of a leader's control over various forces, good as well as evil. In Benin, the design serves in part to underscore the Oba's own power, because the leopards he holds are symbolic of himself" (p. 263). The forms such "dark powers" take vary considerably. In some societies, the malevolent aspect of a king's power may be confined to periodic public ritual, as Smith (1982) has argued is the case among the Swazi. Elsewhere, the immoral side to power may take the form of privileged royal incest and "endocannibalism," as Muller (1980) has described among the Rukuba of Nigeria. Of Benin, Ben-Amos has written (1976), "The right to kill is *the* defining characteristic of leadership" (p. 246). This model approaches the Beng case; the Beng are pacifists in that, with rare exceptions, it is taboo to kill people outright, but as I have shown, they do "kill" people through witchcraft. In Beng society, "royal transgression" takes the form of witchcraft practiced systematically by newly installed kings.<sup>8</sup> (For another case of witch-leaders, see Douglas 1975:24 on the Lele of Zaire.)

When a man accedes to the kingship, he and his subjects know that he has one year within which to live up to the challenge of his office and bewitch three close relatives. One relative may be anyone in his matrilineal clan; another relative must be someone in his immediate uterine family (often a sibling); and the third relative must be either his own child (see Note 4) or his sister's child. There are similar requirements for newly installed queens and male and female village chiefs.<sup>9</sup> My informant assured me that the rule is carried out in every case.<sup>10</sup> I was told of only one case

in which a newly installed office-holder had "defaulted" on the requirements of the office, leading to dire consequences:

A newly installed female village chief of village R tried to kill her own son by witchcraft but she couldn't bring herself to complete the act. [It may be significant, my informant mentioned, that this village chief had only two children.] Finally, she said that she herself would rather die than have to kill her own son. So the male chief of village R [with whom she jointly ruled] obligingly bewitched her, and she soon died.

Thus the new office-holder takes the obligation to bewitch close matrilineal very seriously; default on the requirement is made at the cost of his or her own life.

I heard of a related incident on another level, concerning a particular village matrilineal. In village P, there is a revolving village chiefship, in which each of four matrilineal is supposed to contribute alternately the village male and female chiefs. Earlier in Beng history, however, one of these four matrilineal decided to withdraw from the revolving chiefship.

Long ago, when it came matrilineal X's time to contribute a member to be the chief of village P, the clan elders refused to do so because they did not want to have other clan members killed in witchcraft by the new chief. One clan elder said, "Before taking someone from our clan they'll have to make a tree in the forest into the village chief!" A long and bitter dispute resulted between clan X and the rest of village P, but to this day X has not contributed a member to the village chiefship.

Recently some moves have been made to remedy the situation. Thus some elders in village P preliminarily sacrificed a cow to the founder of village P to apologize for clan X having removed itself from the chiefship rotation cycle. But at the time I left the field about four months after this first cow sacrifice, none of the necessary follow-up sacrifices had yet been done. The king of the region in which village P is located commented to me that P "could not be a good village" until clan X reinstated itself back into the village chiefship rotation cycle.

For our purposes, the significance of this situation lies in the king's statement that P cannot be a "good village" until matrilineal X is brought back into the village chiefship cycle—and, by implication, permits clan members to be killed through witchcraft by the new chief. Thus there is a conflict between what we might term a pan-human valuing of life and the official ideology of Beng chiefship (which requires certain deaths), which



has not yet been resolved. To this, the king views only one solution as satisfactory: reinstating clan X into the revolving chiefship and permitting the new village chief from clan X to bewitch specified matrikin.

One should not assume that this conflict between "pan-human" and cultural values is by any means universal among individual Beng, who seem to take it for granted that matrikin will be killed within a year of a king assuming office. My friend Aia, for instance, as mentioned earlier, had a father who had been killed in witchcraft by his brother when the latter became king. Aia seemed to harbor little resentment toward the king for having killed her father, because, as she told me, she recognized his action as an obligation of office. She and I regularly visited the king, and she served as my translator/assistant on these occasions.

In addition to the new king's own witchcraft, when a king or queen accedes to the position, every village chief is required within a year's time to bewitch one uterine kinsperson and "send over" the spirit to the new king or queen for the latter to "eat." In this case, the required category of matrikinsperson is not specified: any one will do. This obligation is a clear symbol of the chiefs' political loyalty to the new king or queen; that they can sacrifice an aspect of their own uterine identity demonstrates that they are willing to cooperate in putting the interests of the state, and its new head, above their own narrow kinship interests.

Before I analyze why matrikin alone must be bewitched by the newly installed king or chief, it should be noted that there is also some witchcraft activity at the other end of the king/chiefship cycle: at the funeral. Here, one notices a similarity to kingship systems elsewhere in Africa that have been described as exhibiting a certain kind of chaos—even to the point of civil war—at a king's death, and possibly during the entire period of interregnum (Gluckman 1954b, 1956; Goody 1966; Uzoigwe 1973). In the Beng situation, such "chaos" is confined to the king's or chief's funeral, and it again takes the form of witchcraft. At a Beng king's funeral, all mourners are considered especially vulnerable to witchcraft, which is easiest to perform on these occasions. Although witches are normally restricted to bewitching a fellow matriclansperson, at a king's funeral, they may bewitch people in *any* matriclan so long as a witch from the intended victim's matriclan is present. Thus the bewitchings at a king's funeral take on a certain random quality. (Mourners at a king's funeral invariably include people from virtually all villages and all matriclans, not just members of the king's village and matriclan.) Many parents do not bring their children to such funerals, as children are considered especially vulnerable to witchcraft. Many adults do not go to

a king's funeral unless they can obtain adequate protection against witchcraft, in one of two forms: either by bringing certain plants to carry around, which are said to repel witchcraft,<sup>11</sup> or by coming accompanied by a "good witch" (*brunā gey*) who could personally ward off witchcraft attempts. Thus at the end of a king's reign there is let loose a kind of free-for-all witchcraft to which anyone present at the funeral is vulnerable. Such a period of malevolent license might be seen as a metaphor for the political situation, also a period of malevolent license: the onset of the interregnum period (generally one year) with no king to lead the state.<sup>12</sup>

This is in direct contrast to the kind of witchcraft deaths that take place at the beginning of a king's reign.<sup>13</sup> As I have mentioned, these deaths are conducted only at the hands of the king himself, and two of the three victims must be in specified kinship relationships to the king. Although death, especially by witchcraft, disrupts the attempt of society to create order, the form of witchcraft killings by the newly installed king is a relatively orderly version of death, as it specifies both who the witch is and, to some extent, who the victims must be.

But as "orderly" as the required acts of witchcraft by a king might seem on one level, a basic paradox is inherent. Unlike some other African societies in which a new king must kill his rival predecessor to obtain office (e.g., Vaughan 1980), the new Beng king must kill his potential future supporters, those in his matriclan, some of them quite close. Why should this be an obligation of each new king? The answer has to do with what the matriclan represents to an individual Beng in general, and to a Beng king in particular. In certain crucial ways, matrikin are viewed as a sociological component of an individual's own identity, and the sacrifice of a matrikinsperson is a sacrifice of part of oneself.

### *Identity and the Matriclan*

On a sociological level, matriclan members are considered interchangeable in many contexts. Four examples will be given, although many others might be added. The first concerns beliefs about infant development. If a baby is born with teeth, or if an infant cuts its upper teeth first, these are anomalies and considered bad omens. In the old days, such babies were killed.<sup>14</sup> If the baby was not killed, someone else in the baby's matriclan would soon die, in replacement of the infant.

A similar situation has to do with a certain kind of sacrifice to the Earth. If one is desirous of obtaining something (either material or so-



cial), one can offer a sacrifice to the Earth, called *dolɛ ló*, to request it. In this case, one is obliged to offer a second sacrifice to the Earth, called *tō bolɛ*, three years later to thank the Earth (whether or not the Earth in fact granted the request). If the petitioner neglects to thank the Earth three years later with the second sacrifice, someone else in the petitioner's matriclan will be killed by the Earth. If the second sacrifice is still not done, another matriclan member will be killed by the Earth, and so on, until the petitioner finally offers the required second sacrifice to the Earth. Any person in the matriclan is eligible as an unwilling victim of the Earth, so long as the original petitioner refrains from offering the Earth its due sacrifice.

One may ask why the Earth does not simply kill the delinquent petitioner directly as a punishment. In this case, the Earth would not obtain the required sacrifice (*tō bolɛ*) and thus would only succeed in gaining punishment but not, as it were, restitution. By killing a matrikinsperson of the negligent petitioner, I suggest, the Earth gains both punishment—by killing an aspect of the petitioner's identity, a matrikinsperson—and, presumably, restitution—in the form of guilt and/or fear now instilled in the sinner, which will finally lead him or her to offer the second sacrifice to the Earth. (The petitioner would know of his or her responsibility for the matrikinsperson's death because diviners determine the causes of all deaths.)

Matrikin are vulnerable to being killed by an angry Earth in a related circumstance. The most sinful activity in Beng cosmology is for a couple to have intercourse outside the village, where no kapok tree has been planted ritually to legitimate human sexual activity (see Gottlieb 1988a). Should a couple transgress this rule, they must first confess, then are semipublicly punished, and then must offer a sacrifice (*pɔ gba*) to apologize to the Earth for having polluted it by their action. But if the couple does not confess, they may not be punished; even so, the Earth has been polluted and demands restitution. In this case it is said that the Earth may make the couple ill, but if they continue to avoid confessing and expiating their sin, it is said that the Earth may kill relatives of the guilty couple, especially any of their matrikin, until the couple finally confess, are punished, and, by their sacrifice, apologize to the Earth. Again, I suggest that the couple themselves are not said to be killed by the Earth for the same reason as was offered in the case of the *tō bolɛ* sacrificer above. Killing the guilty party would rule out obtaining the necessary apologetic sacrifice, but killing matrikin results in both punishment and, some time later, the required sacrifice.

Lastly, a similar principle operates in the sphere of funerals. A range of kinspeople is required to contribute different items as sacrifices (*sraka*) to the cadaver, depending on their kinship relationship to the deceased. In some cases, only the eldest of a uterine group of terminologically identical kin is held responsible for the contribution. For instance, an old woman, A, died, leaving behind only an adoptive son and a co-wife's son. The co-wife's son, K, was required to contribute in his dead father's name: one hand-woven cloth—for burial with the cadaver; one chicken—for sacrifice and eating; and one goat—for sacrifice and eating. However, K had an "elder brother," T—really, a matrilinear parallel cousin—and so this man, although he was not *genealogically* related to the dead woman as her co-wife's son, was *terminologically* the eldest in this position, and thus he contributed the most expensive item on the list, the goat. In this case, then, two men shared one kinship role as they shared one kinship category via the shared symbolic "substance" of matriclan "identity." Thus in the four circumstances discussed (as well as several other cases)—baby teething anomaly, Earth sacrifice default, sexual pollution of the Earth, and funeral donations—matrikin are viewed as sociologically interchangeable as well as symbolically identical, and one may be punished or killed instead of another by mystical means.

Concerning symbolic "substance," a more positive attribute shared by matrikin has to do with an inherited mystical or spiritual property. Each human being is born with a soul (*niniŋ*), present from the moment of conception. It is significant that the soul is always inherited through the matriline. This soul, as we have seen, is essential to maintaining life; if it is killed through witchcraft, the victim soon dies in body as well, for the spiritual soul is deemed necessary to physical human life.<sup>15</sup> Because the soul is inherited through the matriclan, all matriclan members may be seen as sharing a type of "mystical substance" with one another. In contrast, patriclan members share no such "mystical substance."<sup>16</sup>

A more trivial and pejoratively viewed attribute that may be inherited through the matriline is body odor (*mia gbiŋ*). Not all individuals have body odor, but those who do invariably inherit it from the matriline; this form of "substance," too, may be shared only by matrikin and not by patrikin.

Another level of social relations relevant here is friendship. An informant told me that one cannot be friends (*gwe*) with a fellow matriclan member—one's friends are either unrelated to one or they are fellow patriclan members. My own informal observations of friendship patterns certainly bore out this observation. My informant expressed a combina-

tion of amusement and shock at the idea of being friends with a matrikinsperson. The reason for this is clear: for two people to be friends implies some structural and psychological distance between the two people that is bridged by the friendship (cf. Brain 1976:15-16). But there is no such distance between *matriclan* members, who are viewed as sociologically interchangeable at many levels, and so the possibility of friendship between them is precluded.

There are certain political implications of this situation. All kings, queens, and village chiefs are chosen by reference to matriclans. That is, a particular matriclan may have a monopoly on a given political office (chiefship of a certain village or the regional kingship), or, alternatively, the office may be filled from two or more given matriclans, as with village P, above. There is no competition for such positions, I was told often, as the jobs themselves are dangerous and therefore undesirable. Only "strong" people would even consider holding such positions, for they would need the powers of witchcraft to protect both themselves and their constituents from witchcraft attempts, but also to carry out the necessary acts of installation witchcraft; and they would need moral rectitude to render judgments fairly without being tempted by bribes, which would anger the Earth (which "likes the truth") and leave themselves vulnerable to being killed by the Earth as a punishment. Potential heirs to a newly vacated throne must be ritually begged to accept the position by a formal delegation (cf. Gilbert 1987:314 on a parallel custom among the Akuropon of Ghana). Lesser candidates who do not feel up to the job, though selected, may pass it over for these reasons. The Beng insist that this rules out any rivalry among matrikin for the position.

Accordingly, Beng political succession rules are quite explicit and allow no scope for competing candidates, unlike many matrilineal regimes of succession (Douglas 1969:129). With all Beng political offices, succession operates laterally: the next younger classificatory brother/sister (or, if this generation is exhausted, nephew/niece) of the previous office-holder is chosen, according to complex rules concerning alternation between lineal groups. The significant point is that all heirs are designated according to quite specific rules, permitting no institutionalized rivalry among a group of potential candidates.

These political factors, combined with the symbolic and social attributes of matriclanship enumerated above, indicate that a king's, queen's, and village chief's own identity is combined with his or her matrikinspeople's identities even more than is true for non-officeholders.

For all these reasons, when a king bewitches a matrikinsperson, I suggest, he is sacrificing an aspect of his own socio-symbolic identity.

### *Witches and Witch-Kings, Identity and Power*

In discussing African kingship, many writers have explored the nature and extent of divine kings' powers (e.g., Arens 1979). Specifically, recent authors have demonstrated how kings rely on and manipulate publicly recognized external symbols, such as stools, umbrellas, and drums, as well as rituals, to legitimate and even enhance their own positions (Beidelman 1966; Beier 1982; Ben-Amos 1976; Brain 1980; Crowley 1972; Fagg 1970; Fraser 1972b; Gluckman 1954a; Kyerematen 1969; Lebeuf 1969:135-67, 261-81, 295-312; Rudy 1972; Smith 1982; Thompson 1972; Vansina 1972; Willett 1972; also cf. Geertz 1977, 1980). This new emphasis on the primacy of symbolic objects and actions in legitimizing political authority is a welcome development in political theory. The present article has provided a variation on this theme. Rather than examining individual symbolic objects or actions, I have explored what might be termed an indigenous *ideology* of kingship. In particular, I have focused on a type of apparent disorder—witchcraft—that is practiced normatively by a newly installed king. But I have emphasized that the power of such witchcraft constitutes not so much a material symbol as an ideological one, that of "identity." In the Beng view, power appears to devolve from relations between certain categories of persons, as they are conceived symbolically. The nature of this symbolically based power has been the subject of this article.

It may be argued that a king's sacrifice of uterine kin after he takes office is a symbolically expedient means for him to demonstrate his commitment to the office. That is, by willingly sacrificing three uterine kin, he demonstrates to the polity that he agrees to do what is necessary for the state to prosper, even to the point of harming those he personally holds most dear. His action might be seen as the ultimate sacrifice. As with the bewitching of uterine kin by village chiefs for the benefit of a new king or queen, the king shows by his own action that he is capable of holding the needs of the kingdom above his own family interests. As an Akuropon of Ghana explained his society's traditional custom of anointing the new stools of newly installed kings with the blood of a sacrificed matrikinsperson, "Something which is valuable is used, not something



useless . . . someone from the family is more valuable than anyone else" (Gilbert 1987:308). Moreover, on a functionalist level, one might argue—as Bohannan (1958) has done for a similar situation—that this action demonstrates to the citizenry how powerful the king is: he commits the ultimate act of destruction, the sacrifice of identity, and yet the polity not only does not fall apart, it prospers. As Douglas (1975) has suggested for the Lele of Zaire, witch-chiefs demonstrate through acts of witchcraft their transcendence of ordinary notions and standards of morality, "giving sinister power to the idea of chiefship" (p. 24). As such, witchcraft committed by a king can convince even a native cynic of the king's powers and thus enhance his prestige.

But once this is accepted, another issue concerning the question of identity as it pertains to Beng political thought must be broached. On the one hand, the king's bewitching of uterine kin shows that he can be *independent* of those kin, and thus rule fairly. On the other hand, the same act also demonstrates that he has ultimate *control* over those kin. As uterine kin comprise an aspect of one's identity and as kings owe their position to membership in the matriclan, it is logical that they should be obliged to demonstrate their power over the uterine aspect of identity by the ultimate mystical means: witchcraft. In sum, there seems to be a certain dialectical relationship between these two models of witch-kings. In fulfilling their duty to practice witchcraft, kings show both their *control over and independence from* their uterine kin, who constitute a sociosymbolic aspect of their own identity. These opposite models of a king's witchcraft underline the paradoxical foundation of a king's power, as revealed by the requirement for him to bewitch three uterine kin: he must demonstrate simultaneously by this act that he controls uterine kin, but for the ultimate purpose of destroying a select group of them. A king thereby represents the potential of encompassing all: protection and destruction, kinship and its denial, devotion and disloyalty. As Gilbert (1987) has written of the Akuropon, the king has "the characteristics of all men" (p. 328); similarly, Bloch (1987) has shown how Merina kings of Madagascar resolved all contradictions caused by ideology and oppositions.

In the Beng case, the king's embodiment of all oppositions is even more dramatic than I have indicated thus far. Not only must he bewitch three matrikin, but it is said that he is the owner of everything in the kingdom. When he accedes to the throne, he is "given the country," and because of the weightiness of this responsibility, he ritually weeps at his installation. Henceforward he has responsibility over not only all material objects, all domestic animals, and all people, but also over abstract con-

cepts such as causality. This makes him ultimately responsible for all illness and misfortune, all crimes and sins—and all acts of witchcraft. If a witch wishes to kill someone, he or she first must gain the approval of the king. If he agrees—which is rare—the intended victim will soon die. If the king refuses, he must provide a substitute, who must be a member of the king's own matriclan. Once again, the principle of identity lies at the heart of political power.

As mentioned above, a new king's three victims must be: (1) a real or classificatory (uterine) sibling; (2) a real or classificatory (uterine) child; and (3) anyone in the matriclan. The first two victims constitute the whole range of significant relationships within the matriclan: siblingship, for one's own generation, and the MB-ZS or the parent-child relationship, for two adjacent generations. The third victim is not specified and thus leaves any other person in the matriclan available for the role of victim. That the king should be required to engage in the bewitching of this set of people—which represents the entire possible set of matrikin—reveals the wide scope of his potential for violence. Paradoxically, such violence is dramatically limited: the three required victims are *metaphors* for a larger set of people, but they are also only three individuals. That the king is limited to three, and only three, victims thus constitutes yet another paradox—it reveals both the enormity of his potential for violence and, simultaneously, a certain limitation on his actual practice of that violence. Likewise, the king's "ownership" of everything in his kingdom, including all acts of witchcraft, is premised on a paradox. He is pledged to protect his subjects from witchcraft, but the king may save a potential victim only at the expense of one of his own matrikin. Once again, it is identity that forms the basis of the paradox. (For other paradoxes and contradictory values evident in Beng society, see Gottlieb 1986b, 1989.)

It should now be clear that private witches and witch-kings comprise two ends of the Beng dialectic that defines symbolic power. For the Beng, power is based on the use and sacrifice not so much of material techniques and objects as of an aspect of one's own sociosymbolic identity. A private witch benefits in personal power and in mystical "meat" consumption but loses in public status; a king comes out even further ahead by benefitting politically as well. It is the sacrifice of identity that gives both private witches and, even more so, kings—who by Beng definition are witches—their power.

I will conclude this discussion by briefly comparing the Beng case with the Amba of Uganda, with whom on the surface the Beng seem to

have much in common. Winter (1963), in an impressive and subtle article, has analyzed Amba beliefs about witchcraft. The Amba bewitch only covillagers, who represent the extent of the moral universe. Bewitching a covillager is, therefore, a symbol of the most immoral action imaginable, and this explains why witches are viewed as immorality incarnate.

This view of witchcraft as absolute evil is typical in Africa. But the Beng replicate the Amba case in more specific ways: both define witchcraft as an "endogamous" activity (although the Amba use residence and the Beng use descent as the criterion for inclusiveness), which is the reason that witchcraft is the epitome of immorality in both societies. Yet the Beng have refined the Amba view of witchcraft considerably. The highest Beng officials make use of the power of witchcraft; indeed, the legitimacy of their rule depends on their obligatory (though circumscribed) practice of witchcraft. But other witches, who do not hold political office, are reviled and were at one time killed. Witchcraft for the Beng does represent the height of immorality, but it is not only practiced by immoral people, for all that. Kings as well as witches use this power, but witches use it unrestrictedly for their own benefit, whereas kings use it only for the political "good"—to demonstrate control over, and independence from, their own socio-symbolic uterine identity. Ultimately, political authority is based on such control over identity. Put another way, kings gain their *legitimacy* from their use of uterine identity, while witches gain their *illegitimacy* from the same source; it is the context—political versus personal—that determines which type of power shall prevail, as Weber observed long ago (1947). Unlike many other centralized African societies, the creative source of power among the Beng is not so much external symbolic objects and actions as the psychosocial fund of uterine identity that underlies Beng social relations.

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### Notes

1. Names of all Beng individuals, villages, and clans in this article are changed or otherwise coded to impede identification of those who may not wish to be identified publicly.
2. Beng phrase the goal of witchcraft in the food idiom of "meat" (*soŋ*), but this does not appear to be a metaphor for other, more mystical types of "substance," per se.
3. For this reason, following the Beng lead, I use the word *witch* simply to refer to both types of practitioners, those born with the knowledge of witchcraft and those who acquire it later in life. Rather than making much of this distinction, Beng instead emphasize another dichotomy that for them is more significant: that between "good witches" (*brunā geŋ*) and "bad witches" (simply, *brunā*). Most "bad witches" have been taught by their mothers, though some are born with the power, and some buy it; in contrast, most "good witches" are born with their power, though some buy it (none is taught it). (See below for details.) Unless otherwise indicated, when I refer to "witches" in this article, I am discussing "bad witches"; this follows Beng usage, in which *brunā* ("bad witch") is the unmarked category and *brunā geŋ* ("good witch") the marked category.
4. The individual witches of a given matriclan are said to be in league with one another and feast jointly on their victims' bodies. To bewitch an individual of a matriclan other than one's own is difficult and thus very rarely done. To do so, the aspiring witch would first have to gain the permission of the witches of the potential victim's matriclan, who would agree to share the "meat" of the victim with the witch outside their matriclan. Such permission is generally not granted, which explains for the Beng why witchcraft is almost always aimed against matrilin.
5. For these reasons, a male witch might bewitch his own child only if he has married a woman within his own matriclan, in a matriclan-endogamous marriage. (For other reasons, however, matriclan-endogamous marriages are considered one of the ideal types of marriage; see Gottlieb 1986a). Similarly, one may bewitch his or her father only if he has married a kinswoman.
6. The Beng word *wɔ* refers both to the arm and the hand; as with many African languages, there is no handy linguistic way to distinguish what English speakers regard as two distinct parts.
7. For a similar though more cosmologically oriented view of the hand, see Willis (1972:375) on the Fipa of Tanzania.
8. Amba women of Uganda are also reported to "bewitch" themselves by making themselves barren, but in that patrilineal society, it is said to be done as revenge against a husband to avoid bearing children for his patrilineage (Winter n.d.:58–60). As the Beng have a system of dual descent, this motive would not be relevant for them.
9. The idea that the power of witchcraft itself may be ambivalent is not new in anthropology. Monica Wilson (1959) explored the possibilities of such ambivalence in her subtle discussion of the Nyakyusa and Ngonde of South Africa—the same word describes both the nefarious type of witchcraft practiced solely to ex-



press jealousy and to eat "meat," and the more productive type of witchcraft used to express one's justified anger and/or desire for revenge. Wilson pointed out that this double aspect of witchcraft reveals how the same kind of "energy" can be used for both legitimate and illegitimate ends.

9. Newly installed queens must also kill three victims. Male village chiefs must bewitch two kinspeople—the first, a sister's child and the second, any other matriclan person. A female village chief must bewitch only one person—either a child of her own or a sister's child. In the remainder of the article, for the sake of brevity and because kings represent the extreme version of this subject, I will refer simply to kings when discussing this type of witchcraft; but such references also apply to queens and to male and female village chiefs, in what might be called a "political office-holder/witchcraft complex."

10. That such deaths should actually occur in every instance and not merely be an ideal rule followed only occasionally, should not be surprising. Cannon (1942) broadly outlined the physiological mechanisms of how fear causes death, without external physical-biological provocation. In the Beng case, one might postulate that because it is commonly known that three victims within the matriclan must die within a year of a new king assuming office, anyone in the king's matriclan—and particularly anyone fitting the two specified kinship statuses—who falls ill during the king's first year is bound to be convinced that he or she has been chosen as the king's victim, and will become worried; such anxiety will worsen the illness, which perpetuates the worry, and so on, until he or she finally dies—in Cannon's term—of "fright." Likewise, any matrikin person with whom the king was not on good terms would consider him or herself to be a particularly likely victim and might fall sick from worry and eventually die, as above.

It is also possible that this process may work in *ex post facto*. A diviner (who always pronounces upon the cause of death) will say that any member of the king's matriclan who dies within a year of his accession was one of the king's victims.

11. One such item is a lemon stick (*lomle pléplé*) that is chewed on during the funeral. The lemon leaf from the same tree, which is used for medicinal purposes exclusively, is also used to protect against a disease called "mouth" to which new crops and new infants are both vulnerable. If an admirer compliments either a field of new crops or a new infant, the crop or the infant immediately begins shrinking and, unless treated soon with other medicines, will soon die. Lemon leaves are also burnt in a corpse room to absorb the odor of the cadaver, which is considered to harbor a potentially fatal disease called, metonymically, "corpse." Another item used to protect against witchcraft at kings' funerals is the leaf called *nonu pléplé láná*, which has an aroma similar to that of the lemon leaf. During a king's funeral, a mourner may put some *nonu pléplé* leaves behind the ear or (for a woman) tie them up in a knot tucked into the waist of her skirt fabric. This leaf is also burnt in the corpse room, along with lemon leaves, also to protect against "corpse." Thus the various parts of the lemon tree, as well as similar-smelling *nonu pléplé* leaves, are all used to guard against mystically activated diseases, of which witchcraft unleashed at a king's funeral is but one example.

A third item used by cautious mourners at a king's funeral is the *vowlo bay*, a

liana. Before taking her children to the funeral, a concerned mother bathes them in a rinse made with the leaves from this liana.

12. However, during the interregnum period, a deputy is chosen until the real heir is selected a year after the king's death and later installed. Because of this, the interregnum period itself, apart from the king's funeral, which marks its beginning, is not as disorderly as it might be (*cf.* Goody 1966:10–12).

13. Fortes has aptly observed (1968:6) that a king's installation and funeral ceremonies are often in symbolic opposition to each other, which is certainly true of the Beng.

14. The Ivory Coast government now prohibits such killings, but an informant mentioned cautiously that they may still take place occasionally. The practice is done elsewhere in Africa—for example among the Venda (cited in Zahan 1979:9, 159).

15. The soul that is formed in a fetus from the moment of conception is called *niniy*. At death, the *niniy* goes somewhere—my informants did not know where—and the *wru* of the dead person—which might be translated as its spirit—goes off to *wrugbe*, or "spirit village," where all but a few spirits go in the afterlife. Informants did not rule out the possibility that the *niniy* becomes the *wru* at death, but they seemed skeptical of it.

When discussing witchcraft, most informants said that the witches eat the victim's *wru* (spirit), but one informant said that they eat the victim's *niniy* (soul) (see Note 17).

16. Two other "mystical" attributes are inherited: "blood" (*way*), and "character" or "personality" (*sié*). But "blood" is inherited from both the mother and the father; in contrast, one's "character" or "personality" is inherited from either the mother or the father. Thus unlike the "soul," neither "blood" nor "personality" constitutes a source of "substance" that is necessarily shared among only one type of clan member (patrikin or matrikin). It is true that patriclan members share a food and/or other taboo item, and that this might be construed as a source of shared "mystical substance." However, I would contend that among the Beng, these food taboos in fact do not produce among patrikin anything like the feeling of "shared substance" that the notion of the matrilineally inherited soul does among uterine kin. (See Gottlieb 1983, 1988b for more on the differences between matriclans and patriclans.)

17. Moreover, as in Note 15, if it is the matrilineally inherited *niniy* (soul) that the witch eats (and not the *wru* [spirit] which is created at death), the system would be even more self-referential: a witch gains knowledge via the matriclan, and then consumes the matrilineally transmitted substance (*niniy*) of fellow matrikin.

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Victoria Ebin

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*Transfers of Power:  
The King and the Secret Society  
in a Time of Crisis*

*Beyond Hierarchy*

Anthropologists' studies of hierarchical societies in Africa have tended to focus on formal authority structures, categorizing levels of power as either political or religious. However, the use of these categories creates rigid dichotomies that bear little resemblance to the way in which real societies exist on an everyday level. As Leach (1977) has noted, conceptual models are necessarily models of equilibrium systems, and real societies can never exist in equilibrium.

These studies have ignored the internal dynamic of societies in which authority is diffused throughout the community and the exercise of authority is never either wholly political or religious in nature; in fact, chieftaincy usually has aspects of religious power, and priesthood is a position of considerable political influence. Such broad distinctions between types of authority become useless when one considers individuals whose power is only occasional and who have little or no formal ties to political or religious leaders.



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**POWER**

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