

# Making it up as we go along? Using unreliable sources for fun and profit in the social history of Africa.

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Writing 'history from below' always presents difficulties in finding and interpreting the voices of people who have been excluded from the writing classes. We hear the voices of 'moral economy' rioters in eighteenth century England through the words of their local magistrate; we hear the voices of popular witchcraft accusation in early modern Europe through the depositions of the inquisitor. Studying the social history of southern Africa during the early stages of white occupation presents particular problems, because African societies did not use writing, and did not use European languages. The written archival records are therefore two removes from the people we wish to study: Africans' lives have been recorded by people outside their culture, and using a language which was not designed to reflect or encompass their culture. This is why I consider these sources to be 'unreliable'. They may appear as empirical evidence about African social formations, but I suspect that often they are not - not if they are read as they stand. Whites knew very little about Africans, partly because they asked the wrong questions and partly because they didn't ask many questions at all. What they did know, they often misunderstood. My starting-point, then, is that you can't trust anything you read in the Archives - which is a bit of problem if you want to be a historian.

If you can't trust it, you can at least get a laugh out of it. It can be entertaining to wallow in the 'enormous condescension of posterity', noting the strange misunderstandings of white administrators and ethnographers in their pronouncements on African culture and society. For example, I am constantly amused and amazed by the 'native experts' stubborn insistence on perceiving twentieth century African farmers as bit-players in a drama from Classical Rome or the Pentateuch. Deuteronomy and Leviticus were frequently cited to shed light on local practices. The eminent Native Commissioner, S.N.G. Jackson, writing around 1905, used the Pentateuch to explain and describe contemporary African rules of succession, inheritance and marriage, as if it were part of the same legal system. Divorce, for example, 'may be tersely and at the same time fully expressed in the words of the 1st and 2nd verses of Chapter XXIV of Deuteronomy'. At about the same time, another Native Commissioner advised his colleague, W. Edwards, to 'Read "Leviticus" & you'll trace many customs to the original fountain.' The system of service marriage, which S.N.G. Jackson had equated with Jacob's service for Rachel (Genesis 24) in 1905, was still described in this way in the 1920s. Charles Bullock, a Native Commissioner and leading ethnographer of 'the Mashona', also used the parallel, if only to deny that anything as precise as a period of seven years would be contracted, since 'That is foreign to Mashona ideas, which are not distinguished by such definite bargains.' Bullock explicitly refuted claims of Semitic origins to Bantu culture, or attempts to find parallels between tales of royal sacrifice and the crucifixion story; yet even he quoted Leviticus, rather than an African informant, to explain harvest tributes and ancestral ownership of the land.

Bullock and his contemporary F.W.T. Posselt equated trial by emetic with the trial of jealousy by bitter waters in Numbers 5, v11-31. The fact that 'cattle were considered of great importance...in Biblical days' seemed to missionaries to be self-evidently relevant to a discussion about reducing the numbers of African-owned cattle in 1920s Southern Rhodesia. From my perspective, this all seems wonderfully strange and delusional.

Like Biblical parallels, classical allusions came easily to white writers. Again, there was no real attempt to demonstrate a genuine cultural connection between Africans and 'Classical' peoples. However, these references were already knocking about in their brains, and perhaps seemed to add an air of authority and learning to their work. Nielsen scoffed at 'half-educated men, suffering, as Cardinal Newman said, from that haziness of intellectual vision which is so common among all those who have not had a really good education.' Bullock even wrote an entire section of his 1927 book, *The Mashona*, in Latin, because it dealt with rather indelicate matters (touching on incest and sexual organs), which, presumably, one would not want one's wife or servants to read. Of course, such tactics also excluded the poorly-educated whites, predominantly of Boer origin, who had very little input into the formulation of 'native policy', despite, in many cases, having a good understanding of African societies and languages.

Ironically, whereas Biblical parallels came readily to hand in discussions of legal systems, classical allusions were often used to shed light on spiritual matters. Citing W. Robertson Smith's *The Religion of the Semites* (1901), Posselt observed that 'the words of an eminent classical scholar...are apposite to a study of Native religious ideas'. The relevance seemed self-evident to Posselt, who could say of those who died without offspring, for example, that 'As immature spirits they do not count as members of the lares or manes, but merely buzz about like flies.' Does this mean that 'mature' spirits did 'count as members of the lares or manes'? Posselt does not clarify. Bullock, typically, was more circumspect in his use of analogy. He observed that 'You will find a sort of manism, and you will notice that the idea of the *divum deus* is more strongly developed. You will also discover concepts similar to those of lares; and also, unfortunately, to the lemures.' However, he added, 'it will be analogy only, and not a true agreement'.

Bullock's partner in ethnographic adventure, the Jesuit missionary Alfred Burbridge, constantly used Classical references, both to describe and to differentiate Shona beliefs. He connected spirit mediums with 'pagan oracles of classical times', and cited Plutarch to shed light on why woodpeckers were used by healers. He, too, made the analogy with manes, rejecting it in favour of 'the classical "gods"' as an analogy for mudzimu spirits .

It is noticeable that Burbridge never looked to Christianity for parallel or contrasted ideas of an afterlife, but to Greek and Roman accounts. In epic language, he recounted the story of Chiremba, a great diviner who was given his powers after a visit to an 'underworld abode of the spirits' in the bottom of a pool. Chiremba's refusal to eat sadza with these spirits 'is reminiscent of Persephone's experience'. Chiremba was rescued by his relatives driving an ox, and 'Again we are reminded of sacrifices to Pluto made identically in this fashion in the Sicilian pool nearly 3,000 years ago.' However, insisted Burbridge, 'The Mashona will have none of your Plutonic gloom'. Rather, 'This underworld abode of the spirits is the Mashona's Elysium...The Mashona Hades

is the abode of the blessed - his heaven.' The Classical world seemed to have a robust reality for Burbridge, to the extent that even local Africans seemed here to use it as a yardstick to describe their afterlife.

While Burbridge's Africans were only required to speak in epic language, Posselt's unshriven spirits actually spoke lines from the Odyssey, albeit not in the original Greek:

The tribute of a tear is all I crave,  
And the possession of a peaceful grave.

The words, as Posselt scrupulously footnotes, are from Pope's translation of Odyssey. Like the Pentateuch, Pope would be familiar territory to the grammar-school educated boy. It belonged in the same category as Grey's Elegy and the declension of miles, militatis, m, soldier. Posselt also translated praise poetry in a pastiche of Tennysonian romanticism.

This brings me back to the question of 'the African voice'. Listen to these Africans, speaking in the 1920s in Southern Rhodesia: "Out, foul spot!" our native patient says; "...Out, lest you further excite the ire of my ancestors, and I grow no better but rather worse!". Interesting that the average African in a mission hospital makes a habit of citing Shakespeare, isn't it? Or how about these examples, from the same essay, describing a man's encounter with water spirits who imbue him with powers of divination: 'Pluck not the fruit nor shake the bough'; 'Quit we this place with all speed'; 'Come, bring hither a fine ox'. Or consider this example, in a piece about 'barbaric' living conditions: 'See the assegai and the spear. Are they not always by, to meet the powers of evil?' For people who are presented as the antithesis of 'civilisation', these rural Africans seem to have a remarkable grasp of the English literary tradition and its cadences. How much more poetically they seem to speak than their contemporary counterparts in the English countryside of, say, D.H. Lawrence.

Reading this ethnography as literary text rather than as empirical description reveals how an amorphous bundle of linked ideas - ancient peoples, Biblical times, the history of the eastern Mediterranean, Roman soldiers, Greek gospels and Oxford Greats - collided in a grammar-school education or a missionary's training, and emerged, oddly enough, as an explanatory framework for African societies. Speaking with Southern Rhodesian Africans in the 1920s, administrators and missionaries heard echoes from somewhere in the Mediterranean, sometime between the birth of Homer and the death of Christ. And, it seems, they then represented these Mediterranean voices as they had been represented to them in their childhoods. The 'native experts' in Southern Rhodesia found many ways to slot African people into their existing worldview, but most of them seem to refer back to a world of inky fingers and wooden desks, Sunday School, their "White and Riddle" Latin primers, and the works of Rider Haggard. This, surely, is not 'the African voice'.

What strikes me as particularly odd about this way of recording African voices is how different it is from the ways of recording working class voices in England. A quick survey of my colleagues working on British social history revealed a predominance of 'Gor blimey guv' and 'We the People', rather than 'Out foul spot', in the words placed in the mouths of working people by those who have left us a record. While missionaries in Southern Rhodesia seemed to be representing their 'field' as full of noble savages, their counterparts in London seemed to be working among characters from a Dickens novel.

This suggests two things to me. One is to do with the white 'native experts' of Southern Rhodesia. They clearly had a tendency to romanticise and exoticise their lives. Even Charles Bullock, who deplored purple prose, could not resist describing a divination session in terms which he admitted sounded like 'some parchment written in the Dark Ages, [or] a novel by Haggard', and then confessing that he had a starring role: 'I was the judicial officer'. William Longden, NC for Melsetter District in the early years of the twentieth century, used to tell a story of how he cowed a delegation of chiefs by claiming he could make rain, just before the onset of the rainy season, and promising to stop it when it became particularly heavy. 'As it happened the rains ended rather suddenly with the natural conclusion of the wet season. The new "rain-maker's" reputation was firmly established.' The trick comes straight out of the Rider Haggard genre, and betrays an inability to distinguish between fictional Africans and real ones.

If Africans were characters out of a Boys Own Adventure, rather than peoples of antiquity, then traits and behaviours appropriate to that genre could be ascribed to them. This seemed to have a special appeal for white settlers, who perhaps spent more time than missionaries with popular fiction. Cannibalism and human sacrifice were well-known elements of the genre. One Legislative Assembly member entertained the house with stories of a gang of cannibals he had had working for him in Central Africa:

They were very docile people and well behaved I must say. I asked them if they were cannibals; they said, "Oh, yes"; that people were much better than cows, and to my enquiry as to which part they liked best, they said it was all good, but they preferred the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet and the ears.

Human sacrifice was also presumed to be ubiquitous in African societies. Burbridge had particularly vivid fantasies, straight out of penny dreadful set in Darkest Africa:

Again would parents make bonfires of their children to condense the clouds. Again the rain-prophet would fashion his drum-heads from the skins of human victims...and jet-black maidens once more be flung into the pool of Chirorodziva as a sacrifice to induce the sky-gods (vokudenga) to break the drought.

Entertaining though this stuff is, this man was one of the most influential ethnographers of his day. This seems quite important to remember when reading respectable archival sources about African life and society.

The second thing suggested to me by this strange use of language in Africans' mouths is that most archival accounts of recorded speech are, in some sense, literary fictions. Even in verbatim testimony, in the days before recording equipment, there was inevitably a process of editing and a choice about how to represent speech. It seems to me that it is always worth asking why a person has been represented as speaking in a particular way. What does it tell us about the perceptions of those whose records are we using, and how does it affect our understanding of their relationship with the people whose voices we want to hear? The Southern Rhodesian case is so extreme that it cries out to be noticed; but having noticed it in this context, I would urge historians to take more account of it in other contexts.

This problem - that the lives we want to study have been recorded by those from another culture - is not unique to African history. The social gulf between magistrate and poor in an eighteenth century community was large enough for it be legitimate to ask whether words such as 'justice' or 'hunger' have the same meaning for both.

In general, though, even though the meaning might have been different, the words attributed to the poor were in a language that the poor might credibly have used, or at least have understood. In the African context, the words themselves were different. African voices in the archives have been translated. Translation is, of course, only a specific form of interpretation. All communication across social groups raises the question of how ideas are interpreted cross-culturally; but studying encounters that involve translation forces us, more than any other situation, to think about how we know what people actually said, and what they meant by it. It is the methodological questions that translation raises, about reading evidence and about claims to 'know' about the past, that I want to focus on next.

My particular interest is the translation of words from African vernaculars into English during hearings in the law courts. I have been using court records as a means of understanding African experiences in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) during the period 1890-1930 (the first two generations of white occupation), for almost twenty years. For the first ten of those years, I was delighted and overwhelmed by the rich detail of African life and experience that court records presented. They capture the everyday - the day when everything was normal until a crime occurred, or the day when someone violated everyday norms about proper civil relationships. They reveal social judgements about what is and is not just and appropriate behaviour. Most importantly of all, from my perspective, they recorded 'the African voice': verbatim accounts of Africans' testimonies, reflecting their complaints and defences in their own words.

For the last ten of those years, however, I have spent more time thinking about how we can be misled by court records than I have spent thinking about what they could teach me. Cynicism often follows the innocent love-affairs of our youth. Happily, my demand that the records be more honest with me has, in many ways, been more fruitful of 'hidden histories' than my early, simple-hearted empiricism.

My doubts began with the realisation that court records do not, usually, at least in my period of study, record 'the African voice' at all. What I was actually reading was not a verbatim account of the African testimonies, but an account of the English version of that testimony, presented to the court. This is not 'the African voice', but 'the interpreter's voice'. Before we continue to use court records as a source of African viewpoints, it might be necessary first to consider what they tell us about white viewpoints, in order to avoid conflating and confusing the two. Court records no longer interest me primarily for the stories they tell. Of much greater interest is the way in which the stories are structured, recounted and recorded. In particular, I am interested in the words which the BSACo officials used to translate what Africans said in court, and what they seemed to mean by those words.

What I want to show in this paper is how I have attempted to turn an apparent difficulty into an opportunity. Once I began to mistrust all the words that I was reading, I began to use the knowledge that I was reading a translation to attempt to learn something about social life and relationships in early twentieth century Southern Rhodesia that I could not have learned without that awareness. By looking at the translation process, I hoped to reveal how the whites interpreted African culture. The interpreters in the court rooms that I was studying were not ethnographers or 'native experts', but local white settlers. I tried to read their words, which are ostensibly

African words, not as empirical evidence of African culture, but as white interpretation. I would learn something about whites in Southern Rhodesia in the early twentieth century, but at the expense of what we 'know' about Africans.

The archival records are littered with references to 'dowry', 'witchdoctors', 'witchcraft' and so on. These terms were used to describe practices within the African communities. There is good reason to doubt whether the terms used by the whites actually corresponded to the terms used by Africans to describe the same practices. White missionaries and administrators, as we have seen, frequently imagined and misunderstood what Africans were doing. Translation of key terms in the courts may have distorted the meaning intended by African witnesses, and this may, in turn, distort our historical understanding. If we are not sure that we know what the whites meant by their translation-words, we cannot be sure whether they misunderstood. A close analysis of the uses of the terms as translations of African testimony, where we know that an attempt is being made to find a direct correspondence between words in English and vernacular languages, may help us to reconstruct what exactly the whites meant by these terms, and how far they reflected a genuine understanding of African communities. There are several key areas where cultural misunderstandings occur, notably around marriage arrangements, ethnicity and power, and witchcraft, divination and healing. This paper focuses on the last three.

Before I look in detail at how I have examined translations related to witchcraft, divination and healing, it is first necessary to explain why they appear in court records. In the eastern half of Southern Rhodesia, one possible explanation for calamities such as sickness and death is the malevolent influence of a *muroyi* (usually translated as 'witch'). Such an explanation was not acceptable to European jurisprudence, which did not admit the possibility that witchcraft could have material effect. Consequently, the highly-respected and socially-valued work of the *n'anga* or 'witch-finder' was outlawed in Southern Rhodesia by the Witchcraft Regulations of 1895, confirmed with harsher penalties by the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance in 1899. This legal position regarding witchcraft was directly inherited from the Cape Colony, and many of the ideas of Southern Rhodesian whites about witchcraft also have their roots in the long history of white settlement to the south.

I have looked at court records in what was then called Melsetter District (now Chimanimani). Melsetter District was not a 'typical' district in Southern Rhodesia. The local people belonged to a language-community which was barely represented at all within the Southern Rhodesian borders, although it was a major dialect within Portuguese East Africa. Its border with Portuguese East Africa meant that Africans came into contact with alternative European legal systems. Moreover, it meant that those who were vulnerable to prosecution or persecution by the BSACo state could find refuge over the border. The legal records abound with references to consulting 'witchdoctors' (a translation of the *chiShona* word, *n'anga*) who live over the border. Again, this may be circumspection on the part of those testifying, or it may reflect a sensible decision by diviners to operate out of the reach of the BSACo police. In any event, the border ensured that witchfinders operated openly within a few days' walking distance of most Africans in the District.

The studies of English witchcraft by A Macfarlane and Keith Thomas, published in the early 1970s, drew attention to the complexity of the term 'witchcraft'. They underlined the importance of popular beliefs in the

persecution of witches, even where the issue to be explained was the witch-hunts of the elite, rather than the witch-beliefs of the peasantry. A variety of approaches were developed to investigate whether the court records revealed a clear distinction between elite and popular concepts of witchcraft. Popular accusations of witchcraft could be distinguished from inquisitorial accusations by the format in which they were framed ; manifest differences in the descriptions of ostensibly diabolic rites between inquisitors and confessors suggested that the two were talking at cross-purposes. Moreover, in at least one historian's view, the issue of language difference between peasantry and educated was crucial to studying how far there was a significant difference in popular and elite concepts of witchcraft. R Kieckhefer noted that popular accusations were recorded in the accusers' own words, that is, in the vernacular; the court, meanwhile, deliberated in Latin.

However, although these studies were useful in that they underlined the variety of meanings which are covered by the English word 'witchcraft', they do not address the specific issue raised here. This is the problem of reconstructing what the white administrators understood Africans to mean by the words which the whites translated as 'witch', 'witchdoctor' etc. In the Southern Rhodesian case, there is no question about whether there was a difference between popular and white judicial concepts of witchcraft - the whole basis of the relevant laws is that the whites denied the possibility of witchcraft, while the Africans regarded it as a serious offence. It is precisely because there is this disjunction of beliefs that the topic is fruitful. Language difference becomes important, because the courtroom situation forced the whites to find English-language equivalents for what Africans were telling them. From this, we can attempt to reconstruct what 'sense' they made of African belief-systems, and how far they had to absorb elements of African epistemology to be able to speak about them.

One way of finding out what court interpreters meant by the words they used was to look at how those words were defined in the contemporary cross-lingual dictionaries. One of the most important words about witchcraft to be used in the courts was the word 'witch'. A first assumption would be that this is a fairly straightforward translation of the word 'muroyi'. However, an examination of the chiShona-English and English-chiShona dictionaries which were published at the time of these court cases reveals that whites' use of the word 'witch', and their understanding of the word 'muroyi', were rather more complex and confused than this assumption would allow . Springer, Biehler, and Louw all have 'muroyi' or 'murowi' as their translation of 'witch'. In other words, if they wanted to discuss witches with Africans, this is the word they would use. (Significantly, Buck does not have a translation for 'witch'. The Anglicans did not, it seems, want to discuss witches with Africans.) But when one looks at the opposite process, the translation of the word 'muroyi', it becomes clear that whites were rather unsure what they meant by the word when they used it, and would be equally unclear about its meaning if an African used it to them.

In several cases, there is evidence of confusion and slippage between the concepts of 'witch' and 'witchdoctor'; that is, between those who cause calamities and those who divine the reasons for calamities. Biehler, for example, translates 'muroyi' as 'a sorcerer, wizard, witch'. The word 'sorcerer' is significant, since he also defines 'nanga' as 'witchdoctor, doctor, sorcerer, physician' (my emphasis). Louw makes the same conflation,

applying the word 'sorcerer' both to her translation of 'nanga' and her translation of 'muroyi'. Buck, as noted above, has no translation for 'witch', but translates 'muroyi' as 'witchdoctor', and, conversely, for 'witchdoctor', gives 'muroyi': a serious error which could have had severe consequences both for evangelism and for the administration of justice . It is interesting, however, that Buck does not appear to think of 'nganga' as meaning 'witchdoctor', but only 'a doctor, a medicine man'; in other words, the divination role of the n'anga is simply disregarded .

An alternative translation is 'wizard'. This word is frequently used in the courts where it seems certain that the original word was muroyi, simply as an alternative to the translation 'witch'. This is reflected also in the dictionaries, where Springer, Biehler and Louw all state that 'wizard' and 'witch' have the same meaning. The grounds for using the word 'wizard' rather than 'witch' seems generally to be based on the gender ideology of the white community. The term is used exclusively to refer to men . This gender differentiation was explicitly acknowledged in the quasi-official dictionary produced by the Rev Bertram Barnes in 1932, which defines 'muroyi' as '(male) wizard; (fem.) witch; anyone dealing in black (i.e. malevolent) magic' .

Given that the interpreters and 'native experts' seem a little confused about the meaning of the words 'witch', 'wizard' and 'sorcerer', then, we must tread carefully when we see the words used by court interpreters in the court records. However, this can be a fruitful exercise. By looking at the translations in the courts, it is perhaps possible to reconstruct something more of what the whites understood and believed about African 'witchcraft'.

The term 'wizard' as a translation for muroyi is interesting because the word had a variety of meanings in English. In one case where the term was used, it is clear that the exact meaning needed to be made explicit: 'M'boko jumped up and said to me "You are a Wizard (Muroyi)"' . Some clarification must have been required in court as to exactly what was intended by the interpreter when he used the word 'wizard', in order for this parenthesis to have been inserted in the record. In English thought, no doubt because of their gender associations, wizards seem more powerful, and not necessarily as malevolent, as witches. Keith Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic* suggests that, in early modern England, members of the lower class generally made a distinction between so-called 'cunning men/women' (or 'white' or 'good' witches, or wizards) and genuinely malevolent, anti-social witches.

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In English, the term 'wizard' is broadly synonymous with the term 'sorcerer', which, as we have seen from the dictionaries, could apply to a diviner as much as to a witch. Such a conflation would be in keeping with the populist perception described by Thomas, where wizards are not malevolent, but associated with 'cunning' or wisdom. When a white interpreter heard 'muroyi', and said it meant 'wizard', the court may not have understood that to have been a bad thing; when he heard 'n'anga', and said it meant 'wizard', the court may not have understood that to have been a good thing.

The confusion in white minds between a good sorcerer and a bad one seems to have run deep. In 1900, a blind diviner named Dzotsera admitted in court that he habitually made his living from divination. His admission was translated as 'I am a doctor...I have...got a living by being a doctor'. The word 'doctor' was almost certainly a translation of the word 'n'anga'. Despite this, the Magistrate declared that the man was 'evidently in the habit of practising witchcraft', illustrating that he made no clear distinction between divination and witchcraft. The translators, too, had difficulty in distinguishing between the two. In a civil court case heard in 1911, a complaint was brought by someone complaining that he had been accused of being a 'witchdoctor'. As a n'anga was a respected member of the community, the only way to make sense of this case is to assume that he had actually been accused of being a 'witch', and that the translator confused 'witchcraft' and 'witchfinding'.

Given their confusion between witchcraft and divination, it is significant that the word 'witch' is rarely used to describe a diviner. This is because the whole thrust of witchcraft trials was to deny the reality of 'witches' and prosecute diviners. There is, instead, a variety of terms employed by the white interpreters to refer to diviners. This provides a noticeable contrast to the consistency with which muroyi is only translated as either 'witch' or 'wizard' in the courts. It suggests a degree of confusion amongst the white interpreters about what exactly a diviner was. Given the legacy of the European witch-hunts, the name of the ordinance as the 'Witchcraft Suppression' ordinance, and the use of terms such as 'practising witchcraft' to refer to divination, it is perhaps to be expected that the terms used tend to imply a degree of supernatural power.

Rather than looking at what whites meant when they translated muroyi as 'witch', then, it is perhaps more instructive to look at what they meant when they translated n'anga as 'witchdoctor'. Interestingly, in defining n'anga, most of the dictionaries emphasize the 'doctoring' or healing, role, rather than the divination role. Although divination was a specialised task, this conceptual distinction still only really makes sense within post-Enlightenment European concepts of health and healing. Springer has 'witchdoctor', but Biehler, as noted above, adds to this 'doctor, sorcerer, physician'. Buck, again as noted above, conflates 'witchdoctor' and muroyi, but describes a n'anga as a healer. Mt Silinda similarly only sees a n'anga as a doctor, while Louw offers both 'doctor' and 'sorcerer'.

Within the courts, there is some variety of terms employed by the white interpreters to refer to diviners. This provides a noticeable contrast to the consistency with which muroyi is only translated as either 'witch' or 'wizard'. Nonetheless, the term most commonly used in the court cases for a diviner is a 'witchdoctor'. This strikes me as significant on three levels. Firstly, the term is not 'witch-finder', which would seem a clearer and more accurate description. The term 'witchfinder' is used only once, by Meredith, and then not in a court case but in a quarterly report, noting that a woman had been prosecuted for employing one. To describe someone as a 'witchfinder' implies that there are witches out there waiting to be found: a conclusion which the Southern Rhodesian state was anxious to resist.

Secondly, the term is 'witch-doctor'. There is a strong recognition here of the African perception of the diviner's work - as someone who heals social rifts and seeks out causes of social and physical imbalance. The fact that this term was used seems to suggest some appreciation, if not acceptance, of the African understanding that

there are links between spiritual and physical well-being. Indeed, there is an intriguing distinction made in the 1895 Witchcraft Regulations between 'witch finder' and 'witchdoctor', suggesting some understanding that divination in witchcraft cases could involve more than simply accusation.

Finally, the term is 'witch-doctor'. This suggests that the main part of the diviner's work was to do with witches and witchcraft. It contributes to the conflation between witchcraft and divination. In fact, this was far from the truth. Witchcraft might be only one of many possible explanations for calamity. The agency of an aggrieved spirit was just as likely to be the explanation. Diviners were not primarily employed to find witches, but to find explanations - a very different task. The presence of the word 'witch' in translations of testimonies where diviners had had nothing to do with witches seems to reinforce a general conflation of witches with anything 'supernatural', and a suggestion of malevolence in all encounters with the spiritual world. This is a clear legacy of the European witch-hunts, and bears very little relationship to the beliefs of the local Africans.

The second most common term used by the court interpreters to define a n'anga was 'bone throwers', referring to a method of divination. This, at least, acknowledged that it was the divination, rather than witches, which lay at the heart of the diviner's work. However, the term is even more replete with ideology than the word 'witchdoctor'. Diviners did not 'throw bones'. If they threw anything at all - and not all of them did - they threw hakata, which are wooden divining sticks. The confusions and absurdities which arose from the tendency of white interpreters to use the term 'bone throwing' to mean divination are illustrated in the statement made by Dzutsera, the blind diviner: 'I am a doctor and I throw the bones...I have never thrown the bones'. Dzutsera had other methods of divination, including the 'basket ordeal'. In his first sentence, the term 'doctor' clearly means n'anga, while the term 'throw the bones' means 'carry out divination'. It seems probable that it was Meredith who interpreted this statement, but the other interpreters use the term in the same way.

The term 'bone-thrower' is an odd translation of a word which has no connotations of 'throwing' or of 'bones'. It clearly had very wide currency in the white administration, and appears in official reports as well as in casual correspondence, so it was not a slang word. It is not exclusive to Southern Rhodesia, but is also found in Botswana and South Africa. It seems to have been brought into Southern Rhodesia from South Africa, where the whites had observed real bones, as well as ivory, being used in divination (Christopher Lowe, pers com, Paul Landau, pers com). While the term 'doctor' at least gave some indication of the status and role of the diviner in the African communities, the term 'bone thrower' is a product of the white imagination. It lacks entirely the implications of healing, knowledge of herbs, and support at times of calamity, which formed the mainstay of the work of the n'anga. It is a highly emotive term, suggesting barbarism, savagery and superstition.

The term 'doctor' is the only other term to describe diviners which appears with any regularity. It is mostly used by Meredith and by the 'colonial native' who was sacked in 1899. As a translation which comes close to the African conception, it is significant that it was these two, rather than the other interpreters, who use the term. Nonetheless, it is still an inadequate interpretation in many instances. It misses out the spiritual and divinatory aspects of the diviner's work. It also implies that all indigenous healers were primarily diviners, which was not the case. Some were more skilled in the use of herbs than in divination.

In Europe, one of the primary roles of the doctor is to prescribe medicines. In his capacity as NC, Longden referred to the healing work of the n'anga, but he used the term 'witchdoctor', and clearly had little faith in its efficacy:

Natives here readily accept medical attention and medicines from Europeans when offered, but they get very few opportunities and usually resort to their witchdoctors and their concoctions.

There is a significant distinction implied here between European 'medicines' and African 'concoctions'. This is not a distinction we find in the court records, where the term 'medicine' is used as a translation for an interesting range of Africans' 'concoctions' .

It is the use of the term 'medicine' which provides the clearest evidence of how whites were interacting with the Africans around them and absorbing elements of African culture. There is a readiness to use the word 'medicine' in a way which is very close to the African usage of the word muti. Muti does not translate simply into our English word 'medicine'. In fact, translated literally, it means 'tree'. This literal meaning, and the translation to mean 'medicine', is spelled out very clearly in the records of a case where claims were made that something called rufimbi had been left in a white woman's house to stupefy the residents so that crime could take place: 'It is a tree, and the tree is medicine' . It is not clear from this account, then, whether rufimbi is actually made from a tree, or from some kind of plant. It appears rather that some kind of clarification was being made by the court, glossed over in the record, about whether the word muti was being used to mean a type of tree, or to mean something else, translated by the court interpreter as 'medicine'.

This readiness to use the term muti also seems to have a long pedigree, and to have originated in South Africa. When we look at the range of contexts in which the word 'medicine' is used, we see how far it has drifted from the conventional English meaning of a concoction, usually liquid and usually rather nasty-tasting, designed to have a symptomatic impact on specific aspects of an illness. Sometimes the word does at least refer to imbibed substances. In one court case, an emetic administered in ordeal was translated as 'medicine' throughout the hearing . Poison, which was very closely linked to witchcraft, is also translated habitually as 'medicine' - which is particularly striking given the easy availability of the English word, 'poison' . However, the unfortunates in a fraud case, who failed to effect their release from gaol through the use of 'medicine', had to first chew the root, but then spit it out and rub it on their faces . 'Medicine' need not even be consumed at all. In an abduction case, it was thrown on the fire to stupefy the inhabitants of a hut . In the record of this trial, the interpreter - or the clerk - eventually gave up translating muti as 'medecine' (sic), and simply noted, 'You just came into the hut & threw "muti" on the fire'. In the rufimbi case, the 'medicine' was inserted into plaster in the wall of the woman's bedroom. And in a shooting incident, the 'medicine' was left in a gona (or 'medicine horn', as it is described in the record) . A gona could be a bona-fide container for medicine, but it could also act as a charm, and produce malevolent effects.

It seems that there are two possible explanations for this cavalier use of the word 'medicine'. One is that the Africans themselves were using a neologism based on the word 'medicine', so that there was no need for the interpreter to think of an appropriate English translation. Although this adoption and adaptation of European-

language words was commonplace, the evidence from the rufimbi and muti cases suggests that it was not what was happening here. In that event, the only other explanation is that the whites had expanded their understanding of the term 'medicine', to include a whole range of things which were not actually part of the post-Enlightenment European tradition. They had absorbed the meaning of muti. The whites were going native.

By looking closely at the words used by the interpreters in 'witchcraft' cases, then, it is possible to learn what whites understood of the culture around them, and also how much they did not fully understand, even when they were fluent in the local languages. However, I would make further claims about this methodology. By understanding how whites listened to these cases, I would argue that it is then possible to read the archives to identify what they heard, but did not listen to. Once I have worked out what the whites were listening for and expecting to hear, I can then begin to recognise significant points of African testimony that the whites overlooked. In particular, I would argue that I can see evidence of a parallel system of criminal justice operating against witches, with its own rules of evidence and due process.

The Witchcraft Regulations of 1895 and the Witchcraft Suppression Ordinance (WSO) of 1899 did not recognise the reality of witchcraft. A 'witch' was never really a 'witch', but the victim of false accusation. The difficulty then, for Magistrate, was in distinguishing between the serious accusations of witchcraft, likely to lead to severe consequences for the accused, and the more trivial accusations, reflecting no more than spite and dislike on the part of the accuser. In witchcraft accusations, in particular, the use of English terms such as 'accused' and 'pointed out' were blunt instruments that could not distinguish between trivial and serious charges. Similarly, the claim that someone had been 'bewitched' could refer to a serious incident of poisoning, or could be no more than an insult. Inadequacies both of language and of imagination made it difficult for whites to distinguish between serious and trivial accusations, all of which were outlawed. Meredith expressed 'every confidence of being able to put a stop to witchcraft if I can succeed in effecting captures of such renowned doctors as "Gesifan" '. He hoped that his prosecution of the 'notorious bone-thrower' Gesifan in 1900 would deter others from making witchcraft accusations; but it seemed to have the opposite effect, and he found himself deluged with 'trivial' cases. The same complaint, about the number of trivial witchcraft accusation cases, was still a problem for his successor as NC fourteen years later.

Because they did not have a full understanding of 'witchcraft', the white authorities never resolved this problem. However, a close examination of African testimonies suggests that there were recognised procedures governing witchcraft accusations, and local people had clear guidelines about when an accusation of witchcraft was serious enough to lead to a ban on the accused, and when it was not. These procedures were invisible to the white criminal justice system. In part, this invisibility arose because the whites were looking for particular words to describe accusation, and did not pick up on the significance of other things that were being said. The words which the whites thought significant were words which suggested accusation, indication, or pointing-out. However, it appears that phrases translated by interpreters as, for example, 'Gesifan...condemned Jenya' or 'The witchdoctor...declared that Marange was killing Jim' or 'The bones told me that Mudido was the cause of the illness of his child' are not the clear-cut indications of accusation through divination that they might at first

appear. European thought tends to see accusation as an event - one is either accused or one is not. In African thought, accusation through divination is much more of a process, which English vocabularies of 'condemnation' and 'declaration' fail to capture. In particular, testimonies in the court suggest that the accused had to accede in some way to the imputation - by accepting a token, or through self-incrimination in the course of an ordeal.

There are numerous examples in the court records of the importance of self-incrimination in witchcraft cases. The seriousness of the accusation of witchcraft was indicated, in one case, by the accuser producing a bracelet as evidence, asserting 'this token you gave me when you said that you wished to kill your father-in-law'. Accusation through divination also required a degree of self-incrimination. A diviner's opinion about the involvement of a putative witch in a calamity was not necessarily enough, in itself, to constitute a proper accusation (never mind proof of the accuracy of that accusation.) Correct procedure had to have been followed. All those involved in the case, including the accused, had to be present at the divination. The accused had to take part in the divination, and accept by some token the imputation put upon them.