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To cite this article: Douglas J. Falen (2020) Alter(native) Magic: Race and the Other in Beninese Witchcraft, Anthropological Forum, 30:4, 360-376, DOI: 10.1080/00664677.2020.1847038

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2020.1847038

Published online: 22 Dec 2020.

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Alter(native) Magic: Race and the Other in Beninese Witchcraft

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ABSTRACT

In Benin, as in many postcolonial settings, views of foreign ‘Others’ figure prominently in local discourses about identity and morality. Most of these characterisations centre on whites or other foreigners, known as Yovó in the Fon language of Southern Benin. While Yovós are stereotypically and disapprovingly believed to hold a distaste for African food and culture, they are praised for their production of modern technology, such as airplanes, cell phones, and the internet. These technological innovations are described by Beninese people as fantastic, even magical, and are referred to as ‘White people’s witchcraft’ (Yovó àzé), in contrast to malevolent African occult powers. The racial discourse of good and evil draws on essentialised notions of whites’ and Africans’ knowledge and power, suggesting the maintenance of colonial-era, hegemonic identities. However, formerly colonised people’s interest in foreign customs can demonstrate ambivalence, and Beninese express both pride and criticism for indigenous supernatural powers, while voicing critiques of foreign knowledge systems. Furthermore, entanglements with a powerful Other can reflect local agency, as in Beninese people’s appropriation of European and Asian spiritual traditions in order to co-opt the Other’s power – a power that enterprising healers re-interpret as foreign witchcraft to add to their supernatural arsenals. In these examples, religious borrowings are not always externally imposed examples of cultural imperialism, but rather can be the will of local actors incorporating elements from abroad into conceptualisations of themselves.

KEYWORDS

Race; Benin; alterity; witchcraft; syncretism; exoticism; agency

Introduction

‘Yovó Yovó, bonsoir. ça va bien? Merci!’ This is the greeting every white visitor to the Republic of Benin receives when encountering small children. The children, addressing the white foreigner (Yovó) in French sing, ‘White person, white person, good evening. Are you well? Thank you!’ This is frequently followed by an outstretched hand and requests for money. Children who can barely speak their native Fon language are uninhibited and ceaselessly chant the song, or merely shout ‘Yovó Yovó!’ The chant demonstrates an immediate recognition of difference, in terms of race, nationality, language,
and wealth, and it indexes a history of alterity between Europeans and Africans, former colonisers and the formerly colonised. On first hearing it, it can feel like a quaint welcome, but if it follows you for days on end, it can become tedious, or even outright annoying when you can no longer carry on conversations or hear yourself think. I have been embarrassed to watch Peace Corps volunteers shout at children in exasperation, sometimes responding to them with the term Mewi (black person), the counterpart to Yovó. On occasion, I myself have grown frustrated as I unsuccessfully tried to devise responses that would prompt the kids to stop their chant. However, the discomfort is a small price to pay for the privilege white visitors and development workers enjoy when travelling to this poor, postcolonial nation, where foreigners are often admired, envied, and treated as honoured guests in recognition of their wealth, technology, and religious power. At the same time, Yovós are not universally viewed in a positive light, or as only an oppressive force. In the rest of this essay, I will outline Southern Beninese understandings of white and black identities, and how these figure into racial ideas about morality and supernatural power. For Beninese, whiteness is an ambivalent quality, representing selfishness and arrogance, as well as a source of foreign witchcraft to be appropriated.

The racial categories in Southern Benin are dichotomous but differ from standard Euro-American concepts of whiteness and blackness. In the Fon language, Yovó refers foremost to white Europeans, the focal meaning of the term. Scholars have speculated about the origin of the word Yovó, one idea being that it was a transformation of Onyibo, the Yoruba designation for Europeans (Segurola 1963, 622), and another claiming it derives from Xueda (Hueda) people associating Europeans’ skin with the colour of corn, known as yevou in their language (Quenum [1936] 1999, 7). Whatever its origins, today the word refers not only to white Europeans but to visitors from many other continents. For example, Yovó can include other light-skinned non-African visitors, including Arabs, East Asians, and South Asians, all of whom are regarded as lighter than Africans. However, moving away from its central meaning, Yovó is not simply equivalent to light-skinned foreigners, because I have witnessed albino Africans addressed as Yovó. Neither does the term solely index race or skin colour; in abstract terms, African-Americans’ skin puts them in the category of Mewi, but when they visit Benin they may also be called Yovó in recognition of their foreign culture and identity. Finally, even local Beninese individuals can be dubbed Yovós if their behaviour or values are seen to approximate those of white foreigners. Therefore, Yovó is a marker of one or more features, including skin colour, foreignness, racial identity, or cultural affinity. Although Yovó is a context-dependent, polysemous word, the quintessential Yovó is the former coloniser who is both white and foreign, in contrast to Mewi (me=person; wi = black).

As in many postcolonial settings, views of foreign ‘Others’ figure prominently in Beninese discourses about identity and morality. Most of these characterisations centre on white Yovós. Although fieldworkers in Africa probably recognise that race shapes their relationships and research, Jemima Pierre (2012) points out that it is tempting for scholars to think that, in racially homogeneous African societies, racism has little impact and that race is irrelevant, a fact that she observes may explain the relative absence of studies about race and the effect of white supremacy in contemporary Africa. Throughout Africa, the words for Europeans are not merely neutral descriptors but important markers of identity and status. These terms – Toubab in the West African Sahel, Onyibo in Yoruba-speaking areas, Anasara in North Africa, Mundele in the Congo, and Mzungu
in East and Central Africa – all indicate racial and cultural otherness, often implying privileged wealth, power, and colonial oppression. Therefore, racial identity is one crucial component – along with the associated traits of wealth, education, language, occupation, and country of origin – that shape relations of alterity in Benin.

In addition to these meanings, a key feature of alterity in Benin is the comparison of white and black forms of witchcraft, where these colours refer to both race and morality. The argument I lay out here is that whiteness in Benin is associated with foreign forms of supernatural power that can be used for positive ends. This power is credited with white people’s technological achievements, such as airplanes, cell phones, and the internet, all of which are known locally as *Yovó àzè* (white people’s witchcraft). White people are also believed to cultivate powerful esoteric and spiritual tools, such as Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, which allow them to thrive and to protect themselves from malevolent witchcraft (Falen 2018). Although Beninese take pride in their own indigenous witchcraft, they denounce African malice and express an exotic desire for alternative forms of power that lead them to seek out foreign religions and mystical practices. While the admiration of foreigners and the appeal of their spiritual traditions could be read as internalised racism, I contend that whiteness, as an overarching quality, is not necessarily valued more highly than blackness. The cultural borrowing that I report is a longstanding feature of religious life in Benin, a pattern of cultural appropriation that predates colonialism and does not automatically reflect a simple racial hegemony. Despite the obvious status hierarchies between whites and blacks, and the impact of global racial and political-economic inequalities, Beninese express ambivalent views of whiteness and blackness and ultimately demonstrate agency in selectively co-opting supernatural powers of foreign origin.

**Whiteness in Southern Benin**

In Benin, my appearance means I am unmistakably a *Yovó*. Travelling in villages, my white skin immediately attracts attention, especially from children chanting *Yovó*, *Yovó*. However, adults are also curious about me; they approach me to ask who I am and what I am doing, often assuming that I am a missionary, development worker, or tourist – all categories enjoying high status and presumed wealth. Even long-time friends sometimes show me an undeserved level of hospitality by offering a choice seat or preferential servings at mealtime. I have managed to mitigate some of these differences in status by dressing in casual clothes rather than the suit and tie that people associate with Beninese university professors. Furthermore, unlike most *Yovó* s who live in luxury villas, frequent pricey restaurants, and drive air-conditioned vehicles, I stay with families, eat ordinary foods, and ride on the backs of *zemijans* (motorcycle taxis). Although these strategies cannot disguise my race or status, they disrupt stereotypes and help to reduce the otherwise yawning disparities between me and the Beninese people I interact with, most of whom live modest lives, even by the standards of Benin’s poor economy. One of my long-time Beninese friends laughed as he told me that people do not know what to make of me. He said he received queries from people asking about this American who seemed different from the typical *Yovó*.

As an adoptive member of several families, I join them in making financial contributions for family expenses, and, especially when I was younger, I would prostrate
myself when greeting an elderly household head. This allowed me to shed some of my privilege. One elderly man once addressed me, at the age of thirty-one, as ‘petit’ (‘little boy’, in French), and then he ordered me to carry out a small task for him. I have often heard my Beninese friends refer to me and other foreigners as ‘our Yovó’, a phrase which objectifies and possesses foreigners, and which unsettles their presumed status, but in a way that shows affection and that may also elevate Beninese hosts through their privileged access to, and control of, a foreigner. Unlike most of the tourists, development workers, and other Yovós, I speak the Fon language, a fact which never ceases to provoke surprise and laughter from incredulous people. Even my imperfect Fon has prompted Fon-speaking airport officials in various airports to allow me to skirt regulations in transporting liquor. This is another kind of privilege I enjoyed, but one arising from their pleasure that I have taken the time and effort to learn their language. My language and behaviour are paradoxical because people have difficulty reconciling the image of a Yovó who speaks and acts (somewhat) like a local. This has led several people independently to dub me a Yovó-Mewi, a black-white person. This paradoxical moniker suggests the complicated meanings of the terms Yovó and Mewi, racial labels that also index cultural and moral dimensions.

Being anomalous afforded me a useful vantage point to learn about Beninese views of Yovós, because people often compared me to other foreigners they met. Yovós are observed to possess certain stereotypically European behaviours that carry both positive and negative connotations. At the most positive, Yovós are regarded as innovative, industrious, and efficient. They are credited with possessing consumer products and comfortable lives, aided by technology, high levels of production, and social-economic organisation that produces what people consider an ‘advanced’ or ‘developed’ society. Yovós are also believed to enjoy harmonious kinship relations, without the jealousy and betrayal that, in Africa, lead to malevolent witchcraft attacks. People often lamented that African families are rife with conflict and envy, whereas they said white families appear cooperative. As in many African countries, skin lightening products are popular, and people refer to light or reddish-skinned people (mévɔvɔ) as attractive (Glenn 2008; Pierre 2008). White people’s skin and hair is also the subject of attraction and curiosity, and many people openly dream of marrying a Yovó, often as a ticket out of Benin and out of poverty (see Bulloch and Fabinyi 2009; Gross 2015).

Although I have occasionally heard people praise whites, I have found that friends are comfortable enough to share criticism of whites and to mock them in my presence, and this has afforded me insight into negative portrayals of Yovós. For example, whiteness is associated with selfishness and antisocial eating habits in Yovós’ relations with Africans. Given the importance of meals and food sharing in generating the solidarity and commensality that offsets jealousy in Beninese kin relations, it is significant that people think Yovós do not want to eat with Beninese people and do not enjoy Beninese food. The use of utensils and a separate plate was a commonly criticised aspect of Yovós’ eating etiquette. Frequently, when being served by people I had not previously met, I was asked if I wanted utensils, but my Beninese friends would quickly intervene saying, ‘Oh no, he doesn’t eat like a Yovó, he eats with his hands from a communal dish like us’ (see White 2011). Moreover, people stated that Yovós do not like to eat wɔ (corn meal paste), the staple dish in Southern Benin; stereotypically, they are said to prefer rice, pasta, potatoes, and especially bread, which Beninese claim is tasty but
less filling than Ṽ. My friends always reported proudly to people that, unlike most Yovós, I eat Ṽ with pleasure. However, white behaviours can extend to Africans as well. For example, Beninese people are criticised for putting on airs, or ‘acting like a Yovó’ by only eating Yovó foods or by eating Ṽ with a fork. Acting like a Yovó also means being selfish or arrogant, such as failing to offer financial support to friends or family in need. People hold more neutral views of Yovó customs like wearing slacks, button-down shirts, and manufactured prêt-à-porter dresses, which are common fashion choices that people alternate with customary dress. I have occasionally heard friends refer to Christianity as the religion of white people, and they acknowledge that education and literacy were introduced by Yovós, but these are not categorically viewed in a negative light.

In political and historical terms, Yovós were criticised as colonisers who unjustly overthrew native rulers and implemented an abusive regime. People said that Yovós continue their exploitative business practices by taking advantage of development projects for their own benefit while distributing little aid to the local population. My friends have wondered aloud how Yovós can justify coming to Benin, ostensibly to bring resources and economic development, when they are the ones who benefit from expensive housing, nice cars, and generous salaries, without bringing any visible assistance to Beninese. As James Ferguson (2015) has pointed out, the development industry may be well-intentioned, but the efforts are often misplaced because Africans might be better off with direct cash payments rather than development projects with mixed results. Furthermore, in Benin suspicions abound about western pharmaceutical industries capitalising on African illness to generate profits for Yovós. Some conspiracies reported to me suggest that Western pharmaceutical companies intentionally spread HIV in order to sell drugs and condoms to Africans. Although whites were collectively blamed for exploiting Africa, not all whites were treated the same; I often heard especially scathing rebukes of French people, not only for colonialism, but for later sabotaging the country’s industries immediately prior to its independence in 1960. Many Beninese said that they would have been better off being colonised by the British instead of the French (see Miles 1993). In sum, people marvel at the privileges and freedoms that white foreigners enjoy, but they also resent inequality and exploitation, and they chafe at the fact that whites do not necessarily want to be a part of Beninese society.

**Race and the Morality of Magic**

As I have indicated, racial stereotypes cover many characteristics in different domains of life, but in the rest of this essay, I focus on the occult, colloquially known as ‘sorcery’ or ‘witchcraft’ (French: sorcellerie) in Southern Benin. The Fon language has two terms, Ṽẹ and bō, for the occult powers we might call witchcraft and sorcery, respectively (Falen 2018; see Evans-Pritchard [1937] 1976). Here I will consider Ṽẹ, which was frequently described as the most powerful force in the world.³ For Beninese, Ṽẹ is the African equivalent of technology that harnesses the powers of nature, and this explains why it is frequently called a science (Falen 2018). It can allow people to perform spectacular feats, such as teleportation, shapeshifting, healing, and the creation of wealth. However, Ṽẹ is corrupting; envy, greed, and jealousy motivate witches to bring illness, death, and other misfortunes to their rivals. In interviews with people across the social
spectrum, I learned that Beninese consider themselves, and Africans generally, more inclined to use witchcraft to attack others and cause harm. In a poor country like Benin, financial resources are viewed as a zero-sum game, which means that jealousy and envy are rampant as people compete for limited wealth. The importance of jealousy and economic rivalry, and the value attached to supernatural protection, are borne out by the prevalence and amounts of Beninese expenditures on magical services (LeMay-Boucher, Noret, and Somville 2013; Lang, LeMay-Boucher, and Tomavo 2019). The spread of capitalism in Africa has given rise to heightened inequality, which can exacerbate the tensions surrounding witchcraft fears and accusations (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). People fear their envious and jealous family members and business partners who might use witchcraft to bring them down. Wealthy people suspect that their poor kin are envious individuals who will use witchcraft to dispossess them of their wealth, leading the rich to seek their own supernatural means to protect themselves from magical attacks. At the same time, poor people suspect that rich and powerful individuals used witchcraft to achieve success at the expense of their less fortunate relatives. In the end, everyone is a potential victim and perpetrator. Although we might view poverty, jealousy, and inequality as the legacy of colonialism, or as the products of Benin’s unfortunate position in the current world economic system – and Beninese also acknowledge this – my informants tended to blame their fellow citizens for these negative emotions and actions. According to this view Africans, and Beninese in particular, are preoccupied by kinship rivalries, such as those involving family land sales and inheritance disputes. A poor man who regards his wealthy brother as stingy may seek occult means for making his brother lose his money, get sick, or have an accident. This is what people mean by destructive àzé, which they claimed demonstrates an African mentality that is particularly developed in Benin. A number of people voiced these critiques of their fellow Africans, saying things like, ‘It’s the African who has this idea to kill his neighbour’ (Falen 2018, 66–67). Informants described Africans as selfish and malicious, predisposed to killing one another through mystical means (Piot 2010, 125).

By contrast, whites were described as using witchcraft and magic for benevolent purposes, to bring progress and help humanity. Yovó àzé (white people’s witchcraft) takes the form of cell phones, computers, airplanes, and the internet (Piot 2010). One informant explained that white people’s magical abilities resulted from whites being ‘researchers who democratise their discoveries’ (Falen 2018, 67). People said this benevolent àzé contributes to ‘development’, but they claimed that Beninese people, in contrast to Yovós, rarely employ àzé for such purposes. Nevertheless, I did collect examples of the kinds of benevolent àzé that people wish were more widespread. Perhaps the most common use of benevolent àzé is when traditional healers use it in treating and combatting witchcraft illness. However, one healer told me he also uses àzé to bring rain to his farmland. People told me stories of fantastical medical phenomena that occur in Benin, such as a man whose heart condition was cured by àzé. I heard another story of a woman whose European doctor performed a sonogram and determined she was not pregnant. She visited a priest of the traditional Vodún religion who said she was pregnant and that she should return to the doctor, who confirmed, with surprise, that she was, in fact, three months pregnant. My interlocutors asserted that such occurrences can only be explained by reference to powerful indigenous àzé, which they proudly called an ‘African science’ and equated it to biomedical imaging devices, electrical energy,
modern transportation, and, in one case, to Einstein’s $E = mc^2$ equation (Falen 2018). Despite these potential productive uses, people nearly universally portrayed Yovós’ use of witchcraft as more altruistic and less governed by antisocial emotions like jealousy and envy (see also Friedson 1996, 52). Although people acknowledged that Africans are capable of using àzé for productive purposes, such as generating wealth, spiritual healing, and instantaneous travel to anywhere in the world, such good àzétó (‘witches’) represent a small minority of Beninese àzétó. In fact, the positive, so-called ‘white witchcraft’ (àzé wewe) is considered extremely rare in Benin, in part because initiation into its secret society is so costly (thousands of dollars), as compared to the nearly free ‘black witchcraft’ (àzé wiwi). People said that even those who obtain benevolent àzé are seldom capable of resisting the corrupting influence of àzé’s power. Nearly everyone I spoke to acknowledged that àzé is like a super-power that seduces people into exploiting it for selfish and vindictive purposes. Moreover, in one conception of àzé, it is an involuntary power that compels people to attack and consume the souls of others; even if àzétó occasionally perform benevolent acts, people say, they must eventually kill victims in order to retain their power, or risk dying themselves. This means that àzé is inherently ambivalent, with potential good and evil uses, though most people concluded that Africans are more inclined than whites to use it for evil.

These characterisations are troubling racial stereotypes to observe in a poor, postcolonial African nation. We cannot ignore the hegemonic influence of colonial-inspired, essentialist images that disparage Africans while elevating Europeans, but I argue that it may be too simplistic to call this a case of internalised racism (Falen 2016). To be sure, the self-deprecating statements are unsettling, and I have one close Beninese friend with whom I often debated his claims that Africans should respect Yovós for their superior ingenuity. Yet at other times, this same man demonstrated a more critical appraisal of whites. A devout practitioner of the indigenous Vodún religion, he once lamented that whites introduced Christianity to Benin, arguing that it was a foreign, imported religion that was incompatible with African culture. Likewise, many people expressed pride in Vodún’s Fà divination system, recounting stories of French colonial officials who were stunned by its accuracy. Others defended Beninese àzé as an indigenous knowledge that allowed the last precolonial Fon ruler, King Behanzin, to elude and resist the French conquerors. In addition, as noted earlier, there is plenty of critical discourse about manipulative and exploitative white people and their business practices. The evidence suggests that Beninese, like other Africans, do not view white people and whiteness in purely positive, admiring terms (Pierre 2012). Similarly, Ira Bashkow (2006) and Wolfgang Kempf (1994) have argued that for some Papua New Guinea peoples, whiteness is a label with ambivalent social value. It can be deployed strategically and critiqued by locals, often in the absence of actual white people. These authors argue that the idea of whiteness is appropriated and applied in local settings for local purposes rather than being purely an imposition. In Benin, whiteness can refer to both Africans and Europeans, as a way of staking a claim to a particular version of morality. With respect to eating etiquette, whiteness can index antisocial behaviour performed by Beninese. In the case of white people’s perceived solidarity, cooperation, and technology, whiteness is contrasted to antisocial jealousy and destructive witchcraft. In both cases, the locally valued trait of solidarity is highlighted through the racial comparisons, but whiteness is not universally superior. Whiteness is marshalled by Beninese to reflect local moral
values, and indeed to reflect what it means to be Beninese. In this regard, evaluations of white others have everything to do with Beninese cultural ideals and constructions of the self. Whiteness is a sort of mirror that people hold up in evaluating themselves and their neighbours. They use this mirror to criticise the rampant and destructive antisocial emotions, like jealousy and envy, that prompt Beninese to compete and tear down one another, especially family members. Although Beninese would acknowledge that these same emotions must exist among Yovós, their limited experiences with seeing white people in family settings means that they are unaware of Yovós’ family rivalries. Furthermore, because most whites who travel to Benin are already relatively wealthy, their Beninese hosts are unlikely to witness among Yovós the kind of deceit and treachery that occurs between people fighting for survival in desperate circumstances (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). At the same time, the discourse on whiteness reflects a critical view of exploitation and of antisocial behaviours associated with snobbery and arrogance. Alongside these negative assessments derived from reflecting on whites, the comparisons of African science and white people’s witchcraft bring into relief the unique capabilities of Africans’ occult powers. For Beninese, this evokes a postcolonial sense of pride in indigenous knowledge, often believed equal or superior to white people’s knowledge. Many Beninese healers, religious specialists, and amateur researchers of the occult derive a genuine sense of satisfaction that their science makes them ‘coeval’ with Yovós (Fabian [1983] 2014).

Exoticism in Beninese Witchcraft

In addition to incorporating ideas about others into their own sense of pride and into moral judgments of themselves, Beninese integrate foreign supernatural traditions into their spiritual life. I have already described how technology is cast as western witchcraft, but many people claimed that there are additional forms of witchcraft in the West. When a Vodún priest friend told me about this, I thought he was referring to the Wicca religion, but he eventually told me that Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and Eckankar are European varieties of witchcraft. Like the new age mystical ideas in Nigeria described by Rosalind Hackett (1992) as ‘spiritual science movements’, they are both foreign and familiar. These esoteric traditions all bear a resemblance to àzé, in that they require initiation into a secret society, involve night-time soul travel, and bring heightened spiritual consciousness that provides protection from witchcraft and worldly success to their members. Although àzé is mostly a destructive magic, many people said that if you have the money and the disposition, the witch society will grant you knowledge of the benevolent, white form of àzé, the proper control of which can bring health, success, and good fortune, much in the way that foreign esoteric societies do. These resemblances pave the way for the conceptual merging of àzé and foreign spiritual traditions. Through travel and correspondence with Europeans, and more recently through meetings of local associations, Beninese people are exposed to these European forms of ‘witchcraft’, and many find them attractive alternatives to the volatile option of local àzé. According to respondents, initiates into the European esoteric societies deny that they are practicing witchcraft, claiming instead that the groups involve positive magical training. However, critics often pointed out the similarities to witchcraft, arguing that like all forms of witchcraft, they must rely on the consumption of human souls, and ultimately murder.
Aside from secret societies, other forms of foreign practices regarded as witchcraft are taking root in Benin. These include Hindu mysticism and sometimes Chinese healing (Falen 2018). Although both of these traditions come from the East rather than Europe, Beninese do not necessarily draw a strong distinction between non-African races, who are all generally considered Yovós. This is changing somewhat because Chinese immigrants are beginning to establish a separate identity as they settle throughout Benin to conduct trade. Indians, even though their skin may be darker than most indigenous Europeans, are classified as Yovós. Most importantly, they were described as spiritually potent, and people said Hindu mysticism is the most powerful witchcraft in the world. A number of informants reported that India’s national soccer team is not permitted to compete in the World Cup because their magical talents would render the competition unfair. Hindu mystics enjoy widespread popularity on television and in travelling seminars where they teach meditation and healing techniques. Traditional healers in Benin are one category of individuals who are especially interested in acquiring Eastern spiritual power. Because healers are charged with combating witchcraft illness, and because witchcraft is the most powerful force in existence, healers must inevitably acquire witchcraft in order to enrich their professional toolkits. In fact, many healers openly declared to me that they possessed benevolent, healing witchcraft to oppose the evil witches. As self-proclaimed researchers into herbs, religion, and mystical arts, healers are eager to learn new supernatural techniques from distant countries. Many healers I met apprenticed in neighbouring Togo or the Aja region of Southwestern Benin; Aja is known as the source of anti-witchcraft deities, called Ajavodún, which are sold to Vodún priests and healers in other regions of the country.4

Other healers claimed to be conducting research into Hindu mysticism or Chinese healing, and one healer told me that he spent years in Asia learning Eastern mystical arts in order to bring these skills back to Benin where he combats witchcraft illness and malevolent witches. Healers suggested that àzé is constantly evolving, implying that mastery of àzé is an arms race, and therefore a good healer must keep acquiring new powers from different places. This phenomenon of seeking foreign spiritual traditions reveals an exoticism among Benin’s healers. It seems that the more distant the origins, the stronger the power and appeal of the spiritual tradition (see Harrison 1993). In fact, Peter Geschiere (2008) has noted Cameroonian’s interest in Eastern mystical traditions, arguing that exoticism may be a universal feature of witchcraft (Geschiere 2013). Wyatt MacGaffey (1986) claims that witchcraft in Kongo is fundamentally an otherworldly power, and Beninese àzétó were described to me as inhabiting a different, parallel world (Falen 2018). As I discuss below, there is also evidence that foreign cultures are associated with power more generally, including political and spiritual power.

Although the inclusion of Eastern and Western spiritualities into the category of witchcraft is a relatively recent phenomenon, exoticism has played a role in the religious life in this part of West Africa for centuries (Allman and Parker 2005; Falen 2016, forthcoming). This exoticism is one factor in the development of religious syncretism. Various writers, including nineteenth-century travellers, anthropologists, and historians, have noted that the precolonial kingdom of Dahomey was a site of religious borrowings (Burton 1864; Le Herissé 1911; Maupoil 1943; Mercier 1954; Herskovits [1938] 1967; Tall 1995; Bay 1998, 2008; Noret 2008). As archaeologist Neil Norman (2009) contends,
seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Vodún shrine assemblages demonstrate that practitioners were incorporating a diverse range of foreign and local objects into their rituals. This was a deeply cosmopolitan culture area shaped by interactions between various African and European peoples. This sense of cosmopolitanism has been a longstanding pattern in both religious and secular domains (Bay 1998, 24; Rush 2013). Religious faith in West Africa has never been dogmatic or exclusive, but rather exhibits a deep commitment to openness and inclusion, two of the factors contributing to Benin’s syncretism. For example, Vodún priests and diviners have told me that they accept the coexistence of Jesus and Christianity, and the deity Tron has reportedly embraced and co-opted Christianity, Islam, and other religions, and even celebrates Christmas (Bay 2008; Falen forthcoming).

It is noteworthy that, contrary to predictions based on hegemonic relations, the adoption of foreign gods and religions was internally-driven and did not necessarily result from more powerful societies imposing their gods on others (though Graeber and Sahlins 2017 emphasise the role of power in cultural transmission). On the contrary, Dahomey’s rulers even invited war captives from the neighbouring Yoruba to import their deities into Dahomey (Bay 1998). Likewise, in Togo, the gorovoudu gods were transferred from subordinate to dominant groups through the efforts of Ewe to co-opt the gods of their former slaves (Rosenthal 1998; Montgomery and Vannier 2017). These deities eventually made their way into Benin as part of the Tron pantheon of anti-witchcraft deities, another example of the quest for new supernatural weapons to combat witchcraft (Tall 1995). Furthermore, Tron is explicitly, though paradoxically, described as a Muslim vodún (spirit), reflecting the way that local religion adopted and incorporated foreignness. Another transnational deity is the female spirit Mami Wata, who is a hybrid forged out of European mermaids, African water spirits, and images of Hindu gods (Drewal 1988, 2008). She is a quintessential example of the romantic appropriation of the other into West African religion, and unsurprisingly she is sometimes considered an anti-witchcraft deity (Henry 2008a). In these examples of imported gods, we witness the same process in the divine world as occurs in the human world. While ordinary Beninese people use images of white others in constructing notions of morality and self, their religions are performing a similar act with foreign peoples and spirits. Tron, Mami Wata, and the domain of magic and witchcraft demonstrate that alterity is a key source of supernatural power. Muslims, Christians, Europeans, Asians, and former slaves and captives are incorporated into spiritual entities and expressions, highlighting that foreign others contribute to local religious identity. It seems both gods and people derive satisfaction and enhanced power through appropriating foreign influences.

In the literature on exoticism and cultural borrowing, ‘mimesis’ is a dominant theoretical framework to describe this phenomenon (Taussig 1993; Rosenthal 1998; Graeber and Sahlins 2017; Montgomery and Vannier 2017). Mimesis refers to a kind of mimicry or imitation that does not constitute an exact duplication, but is rather a re-production that can be a respectful homage, an ironic burlesque critique, or perhaps something in between (Stasch 2009). On the respectful end of the spectrum are the ways that Ewe practitioners of Vodu adopt the deities of their ancestors’ former slaves as a way of atoning for the sins of their slave-holding ancestors, a sentiment that they freely express (Montgomery and Vannier 2017). The examples I have presented here about Beninese
exoticism regarding foreign religions are further illustrations of benign mimesis, although Beninese do not describe it as explicitly as the Ewe do. On the critical side, Paul Stoller (1989) has pointed to the way that the religion of the Songhai of Niger has co-opted colonial figures, such as doctors, soldiers, and governors, through possession performances that parody those figures. The Songhai of West Africa and the Tumbuka of East Africa worship deities with foreign identities as a way of taking control of foreign others, making mimesis a form of resistance (Stoller 1989; Friedson 1996; see also Luedke 2011).

Outside of Africa, there are other examples of supernatural abilities emanating from external societies. Harrison (1993) and Knauft (1985) report that Papu New Guineans believe that neighbouring peoples possess supernatural powers that are exchanged between groups. According to Graeber and Sahlin (2017), in many ethnographic settings, power and inequality are key factors driving mimesis, such that cultural ideas, in the form of gods and goods, often flow from more to less powerful peoples. This suggests that power asymmetries between core and periphery create a kind of electric potential that pushes or pulls cultural elements from one society to another. Graeber and Sahlin explain how foreign ‘stranger-kings’ were often imbued with exotic supernatural powers that helped them establish rule in a new land. (Southall [1956] 2004) suggests that the European colonial encounter in Africa was like the arrival of stranger-kings who were feared and admired for their supernatural abilities, leading the local population to submit to colonial rule. However, subjugated groups are not monolithic, nor always submissive, and some may have self-serving motives for inviting foreign rulers, suggesting an element of agency in subordinate peoples’ appeal to foreign powers (Graeber and Sahlin 2017, 162). Furthermore, Graeber and Sahlin argue that mimesis can involve co-opting a foreign power as a strategy for resisting the domination and conquest of a powerful group, an acknowledgement that power differentials do not always determine the direction or motivation for cultural transfer.

In Benin, I argue that the spread of foreign spiritual and supernatural ideas reflects a range of motives and relationships. On one hand, it is an attempt to appropriate exotic powers, frequently those originating among dominant groups. This may help explain why Christianity became popular and has spread so rapidly. On the other hand, I have demonstrated that dominant groups can also adopt the spirituality of subordinate others. Thus, cultural transfers are always a potential two-way street (Turton 2000, 25–26; Graeber and Sahlin 2017, 368). When powerful peoples adopt the practices of subordinate groups, this appropriation is sometimes regarded as a kind of cultural theft, an unjustified exploitation of a minority’s culture. This is a politically charged issue when it occurs across racial divides, but it is worth asking if all cultural appropriation is ‘wrong’, or if the relative power of the groups, or some other factor, changes our assessment. Do mimesis and cultural appropriation only occur along lines of asymmetric power relations? In the case of Benin, while power is evident in the forms that mimesis takes, I maintain that the desire for the Other is not necessarily the product of imperialism. Seeing mimesis as an expression of dominance is one possible interpretation, but I contend that mimesis can be an expression of admiration and respect, as well as of resistance and independence. In fact, one could argue that mimesis can be both imperialistic and deferential, as people often possess simultaneous and contradictory attitudes toward the Other.
The romantic perception of foreign spirituality that has been documented historically continues to the present day, making Vodún a dynamic and cumulative religion (Rush 2013). Henry Drewal (1988) has argued that West Africans study the other, seeking whatever religious elements can be adapted and applied to local problems. I contend that today’s most pressing problem is witchcraft, driving people to find whatever supernatural assistance can protect them (Henry 2008b). The result is a religious borrowing focusing either on new gods or new forms of witchcraft that can overcome evil àzé. As long as Beninese continue to experience anxiety and fear over the dangers of witchcraft, the Other will remain a key symbol and source of supernatural power. While hegemony helps explain why Christianity, Freemasonry, and other foreign spiritual traditions might be attractive to Beninese, we have seen that West Africans also pursue foreign gods from less powerful peoples, and in the case of Hindu mysticism and Chinese healing, Beninese are adopting spiritual ideas from people without a colonial history in Benin. In short, Beninese take an exotic interest in the Other, and rather than merely reinforcing hierarchy, their practice of adopting foreign religions can be an empowering act. For healers and others who seek out foreign spirituality, these cultural elements are assets in two senses of the term. First, they represent valuable knowledge that allow healers to attract clients and increase revenue. Secondly, as with Chinese people’s acquisition of English described by Henry (2020), they allow people to project a self-conscious worldliness and a cosmopolitan identity that augments their prestige. Many of the healers I spoke with expressed pride in their knowledge of foreign spiritual traditions, and their ability to incorporate a piece of the Other to build their power along with their personal and professional persona. Their actions demonstrate more than the appropriation of foreign powers; through mimesis, Beninese healers are incorporating a piece of this foreignness into their own identities.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways that my Beninese friends and informants construct racial categories, and how notions of otherness shape their constructions of themselves. As a white foreigner, I would be foolish to think that I am not also part of these constructions. Although I have developed many lifelong Beninese friends over the years, for some people I am a representative of wealthy, colonial whites. I am reminded of this every time I hear children chanting Yovó, Yovó, and asking for money. Even among my friends, my status as an educated Yovó is an inexorable facet of our relationship that often prompts them to treat me with deference. This means that the information I have collected about whiteness is filtered through my lens as a privileged white person, a fact that could have reduced their willingness to express the antipathy that they might hold for Yovós. However, in interviews and other contexts, people spoke openly about colonialism and their anger at the French and other Yovós. On one occasion, my presence was overtly challenged by someone voicing hostility towards me. I was with friends at a Cotonou drinking establishment when a stranger at a nearby table raised his voice and asked in a threatening tone why whites like me should be in his country now that colonialism was over. My friends intervened and succeeded in calming him down, but they told me later that they feared he could have become violent. Although this confrontation was an exception to the overwhelming hospitality
that I received, it shows that, in some people, strong racial resentment may be lying just below the surface. This shows that, in spite of the potential impediments to candid conversation, I did not hear exclusively flattering views of whites. The result is an ambivalent picture of racial categories and the role of the Other in shaping people’s lives.

In Benin and many other countries, even remote, rural communities have deep ties with, and strong views about, foreign people and countries (Piot 1999). Although some might assume that an ethnocentric repudiation of the other is a universal feature of relations between foreign peoples (see Lévi-Strauss [1952] 1987, 19; Viveiros de Castro 2004, 8), my evidence shows that for Beninese people, whiteness and racial alterity is not exclusively positive or negative, but rather a source of comparative information and power. People gain power through the appropriation of foreign religious ideas, a phenomenon that is not limited to the spiritual realm. As noted, Beninese hosts also acquire power and prestige through the symbolic possession of ‘their’ Yovós.

Beninese constructions of the Other contain essentialist and inaccurate views, but these views are both critical and flattering, reflecting as much about Beninese moral evaluations of themselves as they do about attitudes toward white people. It is clear that colonialism, global inequality, and hegemony have played a role in shaping some of my informants’ more troubling, self-deprecatory ideas. We cannot deny the impact of racism and global white supremacy in producing the familiar stereotypes of African witchdoctors practicing black magic, in contrast to benevolent, ‘civilised’ whites. These images have likely fuelled the misrecognition by which Beninese blame their own moral failings for their interpersonal conflict, rather than attributing conflict to Benin’s poverty and the precariousness generated by the unequal world system. At the same time, we should acknowledge African people’s resistance or outright agency in shaping their own religious lives out of the raw materials at hand. The focus on resistance became popular after the publication of Scott’s (1985) work, but some scholars have suggested that contemporary research should return its attention to resistance and more positive topics, after the dominance of studies on suffering and other negative topics of ‘dark anthropology’ (Robbins 2013; Ortner 2016; Rodseth 2018; Knaaft 2019; see Falen Introduction, this issue).

In light of this recommendation, I have stressed that priests’ and healers’ adoption of foreign religious ideas represents an element of control as people apply these ideas to suit their purposes of establishing cosmopolitan identities and seeking power to serve their spiritual needs. Of course, these processes do not rectify longstanding global imbalances in wealth and power; racism, poverty, and other inequalities derive from historical relationships of alterity between the global North and South. Nevertheless, we must be equally cognizant of the creativity and resourcefulness of people in postcolonial settings. I emphasise the agency in Beninese images of powerful others, pointing out that West Africans have been appropriating exotic supernatural elements since long before contact with Europeans. Today, this cultural appropriation, or syncretism, results in foreign magic and gods being domesticated and assimilated in the hopes of empowering people, protecting them from witchcraft, and projecting new forms of identity.

Although the pattern of admiring and mimicking foreign religious ideas, and the more general exoticism of the Other, is well documented, it does not explain why the exotic is valuable and powerful. It is widely accepted that people construct their identities through contrasting themselves to others (Barth 1969) but this does not tell us why the Other,
regardless of power, should be a source of admiration and desire, rather than solely a figure of contempt, or even indifference. The answer to this question is beyond the scope of this essay, but if the exoticism found in Benin is widespread, it may tell us something about humanity’s ability to view difference as a positive quality. Although xenophobia and racism have been on the rise in Europe and the United States, we have seen these sentiments stoked by politicians and pundits hoping to enact their agendas. We may take hope in the idea that these essentialist, xenophobic ideas are not innate or universal, and that positive impressions of cultural Others are just as likely as negative ones.

Notes
1. American Peace Corps Volunteers are also exceptions because they live in relatively modest houses, ride on zemijans, learn local languages, and are more integrated into the local community. Nevertheless, they still enjoy the privilege and power of foreigners (see Pierre 2012).
2. In 2017, Benin’s per capita GDP was just $2300 (US), ranking 201 out of 228 countries (CIA World Factbook 2020).
3. For more on bó, see Falen (2018).
4. Predictably, many people claimed that Ajavodún are also a form of witchcraft, because the only thing that can compete with witchcraft is witchcraft itself.
5. The capitalized ‘Vodún’ refers to the religion, whereas the lowercase ‘vodún’ is a Fon word that means ‘spirit’.
7. In Kongo, the origin of foreign kings is also symbolically linked to the spirit world (MacGaffey 2003).

Acknowledgement
I wish to thank Agnes Scott College for research support that made this work possible.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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