

Mathijs Pelkmans

The restlessness of doubt, and the tenacity of belief

**Article (Published version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation:

Pelkmans, Mathijs (2016) *The restlessness of doubt, and the tenacity of belief*. [HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory](#), 6 (1). pp. 499-503. ISSN 2049-1115

DOI: [10.14318/hau6.1.030](https://doi.org/10.14318/hau6.1.030)

Reuse of this item is permitted through licensing under the Creative Commons:

© 2016 The Author
CC BY 4.0

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/78751/>

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The restlessness of doubt, and the tenacity of belief

Mathijs PELKMANS, *London School of Economics
and Political Science*

Comment on Bubandt, Nils. 2014. *The empty seashell: Witchcraft and doubt on an Indonesian island*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Nils Bubandt's *The empty seashell* (2014) is a treasure. Its pages radiate knowledge about the topic of witchcraft and they breathe familiarity with the lives of inhabitants of Buli, a village located on the Indonesian island of Halmahera in North Maluku. The book describes in great detail and with nuance the ways in which witchcraft manifests itself in the lives of these villagers, meanwhile managing to draw out the relevant analytical implications, all of which is testimony to the many years of arduous fieldwork and reflection that went into the book's making. The author took time not only to document the multifaceted life of a group of people as they lived through a series of significant changes—the advent of Christianity, political decentralization, marketization—and how these interacted with witchcraft but also, and especially, took enough time to identify the relevant questions to ask.

Bubandt asserts that while witchcraft is often approached through the prism of “belief,” it is ultimately about fear and doubt; and while observers are inclined to emphasize the meanings of witchcraft, acts of witchcraft tend to be utterly meaningless to the involved. In making these claims Bubandt radically shifts an earlier perspective in which witchcraft was primarily understood to be a mechanism for providing meaning in the face of misfortune and as a pressure valve that served to release societal tensions. By instead emphasizing meaninglessness, confusion, doubt, and horror, Bubandt takes serious the views of his informants. Indeed, residents of Buli would agree that witchcraft is meaningless and a problem; time and again they have tried to get rid of it. They enthusiastically converted to Christianity



(2014: 77), they found themselves attracted to the New Order regime (146), and they have taken to stereo systems, 90-watt light bulbs, cameras, and computers (211, 224), all in the hope to shake off the *gua* (witch or witch spirit). But all these efforts have evidently been in vain—the *gua* continues to roam freely in people's dreams and desires, exploiting their weaknesses while planning and carrying out new attacks. Reasoning from these observations, Bubandt suggests that we should stop asking the familiar question “why is there still belief in witchcraft in these modern times?” but instead ask “why do people in Buli believe in modernity in times of witchcraft?” (239). It is a powerful perspectival technique, which allows Bubandt to illuminate aspects of witchcraft that often remain unseen.

One of the book's major accomplishments is that it manages to draw the reader into the frightening reality of witchcraft. Witchcraft, Bubandt suggests, is a mystery that cannot be solved, a puzzle that is “without a path,” an aporia. To me, the connotation is that of a “black hole” that sucks life and meaning out of this world and gives back nothing. A black hole, also, because in spite of its meaninglessness the *gua* is “awfully significant” (2014: 119), consuming the villagers' reflexive energy. The book instills a similar disposition in the reader, this one at least, as I started to think about the *gua* not from some external—“modern” disbelieving or skeptical—position, but as deeply intrigued by its treacherous ways.

The *gua* is a slippery being whose sly and deceiving ways instill fear and horror. I shivered when reading about how the *gua* operates. Apparently the *gua* acts in a manner comparable to the fruit bat who sneakily punctures the skin of unripe green bananas so that insects can enter and weaken the fruit, which then allows the bat to consume the rotten flesh upon return several days later. Similarly, “the hands of the *gua* dig into its victim, causing the victim to rot from the inside” (Bubandt 2014: 128). I marveled with the villagers about the intelligence of the *gua*, who neutralizes all attempts at exposure, basically by mimicking the signs that should prove innocence. Thus, the *gua* will pretend to be Christian, make donations to church, and even heal its victims if this is helpful to remain undetected. Most disturbingly, the *gua* infiltrates the minds of individuals without them even knowing that they are hosting a witch. While playing with these ideas I started to become slightly anxious about my own most private thoughts, thoughts in which I am more selfish, greedy, and vengeful than I admit to be in public, which suggests that I too am at risk of becoming or being a witch. Witchcraft, in this sense, is not only the “dark side of kinship” (Geschiere 2003, quoted in Bubandt 2014: 49) but also the dark side of the self. These are clear examples of the centrality of doubt in engagements with witchcraft, prompting not only suspicion about “opaque others” but also raising uncomfortable questions about ourselves.

It will be clear from the above that I consider *The empty seashell* to be a major accomplishment, a book that has rightly been declared a “tour de force” by one of its back cover endorsers. Each chapter is both thought provoking and empirically grounded, and through this accomplishment the book provides important boosts to the study of witchcraft and the study of doubt. And yet, even though the book makes important and significant contributions, in my view it does not realize its full potential. In the remainder of this comment I will make some suggestions about the book's conceptual framework, which might open up new lines of inquiry in the study of restless doubt in times of witchcraft.



For this purpose it is important to first reflect on the author's deployment of the concepts "belief" and "doubt." When Bubandt argues that local attitudes to witchcraft are characterized by doubt, I am left wondering what this really means and what the analytical implications might be. Certainly, doubt is a key aspect of people's engagement with the *gua*. In fact, there is very little that the villagers assert with certainty about the nature or the ways of the *gua*. As the book documents in case after case, the villagers worry and wonder about who is or isn't a *gua*, about how to distinguish *gua* attacks from genuine illness, how to best treat the *gua*'s victims, and indeed about the possibility that they themselves might be a *gua*. However, these acts of doubting never extended to a questioning of the reality of witchcraft. The *ways* of witchcraft were doubted, but the reality of witchcraft was, apparently, beyond doubt.

Accepting that this is the case for most Buli residents I was reminded of Ludwig Wittgenstein's arguments about the limitations of "radical doubt" and the impossibility of doubting everything. Bubandt hints at these ideas when he cites Wittgenstein that "one doubts on specific grounds" (Wittgenstein 1969: 458, cited in Bubandt 2014: 63) but then quickly directs the reader into a discussion of mythology instead of linking it to Wittgenstein's larger point that "the game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (1969: 115). That is, the act of doubting stands on a foundation that—at least for the duration of the act of doubting—is not being called into question. Extending this logic, and applying it to our discussion of witchcraft, it appears to me that by being so concerned about the techniques of the *gua*, villagers (unwittingly) strengthened and affirmed its (unquestioned) reality. The implication is that if witchcraft is all about uncertainty as Bubandt asserts, then by definition it is also all about certainty or, perhaps more correctly, about the interplay between certainty and uncertainty.

Bubandt embraces the concept of doubt, but he rejects the concept of belief. He does so on the basis that "belief" would problematically impute certainty to witchcraft where this does not exist (2014: 237, 243) and would invoke "a meaning-making system of belief" (10) that is incompatible with the "meaninglessness" of witchcraft in Buli. I share Bubandt's viewpoint that assumptions of certainty are problematic and that an emphasis on functionality becomes easily distortive, but I don't think that these problems are inherent in the concept of belief. Nor do I agree with the suggestion that witches are "too ephemeral and contradictory to be an object of belief" (236). After all, aren't God and Satan, or democracy and modernity for that matter, just as ephemeral and contradictory as witchcraft is? In each of those instances people are able to develop strong affective and intellectual attachments to the involved ideas, turning them into objects of belief. So why would witchcraft be different? Ironically, although Bubandt runs away from the concept of belief, he is unable to escape it. This becomes particularly clear when he argues that Buli people have "belief in the police officers' beliefs in witchcraft" (43).¹ In other words, the villagers suspect the police officers to (secretly) have the same attitude to witchcraft as they themselves have. But logically this can only mean that the

1. The line "belief in belief" is based on Latour's (2010) argument that Westerner's belief in their own modernity is dependent on their belief in the irrational beliefs of nonmoderns.

villagers believe in their own belief in witchcraft. I do admit that I'm not entirely certain what this means.

Perhaps this unexpected return of belief in the book can be used as a starting point to explore and illuminate the contradictory workings of both doubt and belief. Instead of contrasting and juxtaposing belief and doubt, I would argue that they need to be seen as inherently and intimately related. Assertions of belief are particularly potent when they are aimed to prove a point; that is, when they try to overcome internal doubts about, or neutralize external challenges to, a particular notion of truth. But if, as I maintain, doubts (and other challenges) are an integral part of belief, then the reverse is certainly also true. Doubt and belief are relational: the act of doubting (at one level) presupposes certainty (at another level). Moreover, the relationship is dynamic: the act of doubting often animates the search for certainty without ever fully reaching it. I make these comments not in order to repeat what I have argued more elaborately elsewhere (Pelkmans 2013) but rather because more attention to the interlocking of belief and doubt—which fits so well with the presented ethnographic materials—should be able to advance insight about the restlessness of doubt. I will do so in relation to two issues that reading *The empty seashell* prompted.

The first issue concerns the stability of *gua* reality for the inhabitants of Buli. Bubandt shows that Christianity “left intact the original problem of witchcraft” (2014: 117) and that the heavy-handed New Order modernization reified witchcraft in its attempts to eradicate it (171, 178). Did this perhaps suggest that “beliefs” in witchcraft were strengthened at the moment when their integrity was challenged? The examples suggest as much, and it would certainly fit in nicely with the argument about the interrelatedness of belief and doubt that I have advocated above. But doesn't it fit a little bit too perfectly? Did these powerful religious, political, and commercial interventions really fail to destabilize the reality of witchcraft even in the minds of their own devotees? What about the local notables, the priests, and the police officers? In relation to this I was disappointed with the quickness with which statements of nonbelief were brushed aside. When Buli residents mention that “there are no *gua* anymore” and that witchcraft was “something that their ‘backward’ ancestors believed in,” Bubandt's response (to the reader) is: “frankly these statements annoyed me” (242). I can see why one would want to treat such denials of witchcraft with a dose of skepticism, but do they not suggest something beyond or parallel to the subjunctive (*ought to be*) mode that Bubandt invokes to account for the denials?² Sure, the denials *could* be a form of wishful thinking just as they *could* be a form of pretense, of hiding behind the cloak of a modernist denial of witchcraft while actually being thoroughly immersed in its reality. But is it really possible to be trained in the logic of the state (in the case of police officers) or in the logic of the church (in the case of priests) while remaining by and large impervious to it? Could it not be possible that such individuals simultaneously believe and disbelieve in witchcraft? And would this not add to the restlessness of

2. Bubandt suggests that villagers' denials of witchcraft should be understood to be phrased, implicitly, in the subjunctive mode: “there are no *gua* because there should not be; the *gua* is a thing of the past because it ought to be (2014: 243).



doubt? I am asking these questions because they proved highly productive when applied to the pluralist contexts of the former Soviet Union that I am familiar with.

This then brings me to the second issue—which is related to the ingenious question of “Why do people believe in modernity in times of witchcraft?” (Bubandt 2014: 239). Bubandt convincingly answers, based on numerous examples, that it was hope in the end of witchcraft that kept the belief in modernity alive. But although convincing, I think that the argument would have been stronger if belief and doubt were seen as being part of the same dynamic; a dynamic in which the alteration between relative certainty and uncertainty provides boosts of energy, pushing people to find answers, to collaborate with the state, and become involved in church life, even if only hesitantly and temporarily. Such a pairing of belief and doubt could have demonstrated the fluctuations in the ideational power of the state, of Christianity, and also witchcraft; fluctuations that indicate both the restlessness of doubt and the tenacity of belief.

References

- Bubandt, Nils. 2014. *The empty seashell: Witchcraft and doubt on an Indonesian island*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Geschiere, Peter. 2003. “Witchcraft as the dark side of kinship: Dilemmas of social security in new contexts.” *Etnofoor* 16 (1): 43–61.
- Latour, Bruno. 2010. *On the modern cult of the factish gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs. 2013. “Outline for an ethnography of doubt.” In *Ethnographies of doubt: Faith and uncertainty in contemporary societies*, edited by Mathijs Pelkmans, 1–42. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Mathijs Pelkmans
Department of Anthropology
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
 UK
m.e.pelkmans@lse.ac.uk