By Michela Wrong

Fourteen years ago, Mbitini was a nondescript village in eastern Kenya with no electricity, rutted roads and a solitary bar. It still has no electricity, but today it boasts five bars, 10 guesthouses, a dozen butcheries, two markets and seven churches, while its brightly-painted stores do so much trade the village needs its own police station.

This is all thanks to Dr Kilungya, the most famous witchdoctor in Ukambani, a hilly region famous for its wizards, holy men, enchanted rocks and strong connections with the supernatural world. Dr Kilungya is the reason scores of vehicles wend their way up the Yatta plateau from Nairobi every weekend, their passengers filling the guest-houses and packing the bars. He and his apprentice sons sells a commodity modern Kenyans can't seem to get enough of in these uneasy times: peace of mind.

Back in 1992, Dr Kilungya came up with an astonishingly effective formula. Called *ng'ata*, it was a potion made of a goat's arterial blood, neck and intestines. Those arriving are allotted numbers – "it's just like a clinic" explains a barman – and wait to be summoned for a consultation. One by one, they lick a stick dipped in the fluid and listen to the incantations pronounced by Dr Kilungya and his sons.

If they dabble in the dark arts they will, locals say, swell up to five times their normal size and their intestines will fall out. But if they are innocent, ordinary mortals, they will depart having received a form of supernatural vaccination, protected for life from the spells and curses of those who wish them harm.

"Everyone visits our place," boasts Mac Kilungya, one of the great man's apprentice sons. "We get MPs, government people, university graduates, devout Christians – although those come in secret. They come from all over Kenya, they even come from Tanzania and Uganda. *Ng'ata* is very powerful."

Nominally illegal, abhored by the established churches, witchcraft is alive and kicking in Kenya today. Dr Kilungya, who operates largely untroubled by the authorities, is no aberration. Even as east Africa's most sophisticated nation urbanises and modernises, even as mobile phone masts sprout on remote hillsides, internet cafes open in two-donkey towns and graduates man keyboards in Nairobi's urban high-rises, the country's appetite for the supernatural grows.

What's true of Kenya is true of much of Africa. You will rarely see it mentioned in the Western press, nervous of a story which might be seen to pander to colonial stereotypes, but magic permeates contemporary African society. MPs quietly use it before elections, football teams secretly apply it to psyche out their rivals, middle-class students resort to

it before exams. Men do it to keep wives faithful, shopowners to destroy rivals, AIDS-sufferers in a bid to save their lives. Founded on the fundamental conviction, common to many African cultures, that everything happens for a purpose, it fills the same spiritual niche as the thousands of fundamentalist churches mushrooming in the continent's teeming slums, a need clearly not being met by the established churches.

"Here in Africa it is much more obvious than in the West that we cannot control the universe or even understand it," says development consultant Professor Cyrus Mutiso. "Magic seems to explain the unexplainable – why your business is collapsing, why your children lose interest in school -- and that is why people feel we need it."

For Professor Mutiso, however, what he calls the "new magic" differs radically from the traditional variety practised in African villages before Europe's missionaries arrived, which involved an entire community and aimed to maintain a subtle harmony between mankind and natural world. This was the rich universe of sprites, evil demons, night-runners, jinis wizards and succubi vividly captured in Nigerian author Ben Okri's Booker Prize-winning "The Famished Road".

The "new magic", in contrast, echoes life as it is experienced by millions of Africans, with all its crushing economic pressures, personal concerns and solitary anxieties. "Magic is changing to fit the urban mess. It's now all about the individual, the community doesn't come into it, and it tends to focus on money issues."

Ng'ata illustrates the depressing nature of the new magic perfectly: here's a charm based on the assumption that the outside world, whether in the form of lover, boss or parent, is secretly out to get you. It's a potion premised on paranoia, a terrible insight into how hostile many Kenyans, who have seen living standards plummet since independence, believe their surroundings to be.

"The whole thing is based on fear, and capitulation to fear," says Father Paul Healy of the nearby Kitui Catholic diocese. "It does nothing to enhance the dignity of the human person. *Ng'ata* is not going to protect anyone from the real evils of this country, the only thing that will is education and empowerment of the people. Instead of lifting people up, ngata subjugates them."

Those same economic and social strains may explain the spate of violent exorcisms of "bewitched" children seen among central African families in London, which last year preoccupied the British media. Asylum-seeking families tend by definition to be families with problems. One way of releasing those tensions is to shift responsibility onto the shoulders a naughty child, then lance the boil with exorcism.

They certainly lie behind a much-noted phenomenon in Democratic Republic of Congo, where growing numbers of "witch" children are

being abandoned by families desperate to shed a mouth to feed. The saddest thing about these cases is that the street children themselves believe the calumny, accepting that they are indeed witches.

While church and state authorities may fret over mysterious ceremonies conducted in smoky huts, it's safe to predict that witchcraft will prosper as long as Africa's crisis endures. Pragmatic in the extreme, most Africans seem as skilled at running a belief in witchcraft concurrently with their official faith as they are at juggling tribal and national identities, rural and urban personas. Why buy one lottery ticket, is the unstated attitude, when you can invest in a range?

After all, magic usually works if you believe in it. An entrepreneur who has paid a witchdoctor to bring him good luck will be more aggressive in business, a student who believes he cannot fail will do better in exams. A woman who has bought a love charm will believe herself irresistible, and lure her victim into bed.

The self-fulfilling nature of the experience is amply demonstrated in the case of the Kwa Matingi Cooperative Society near Matungulu, on the road heading back from Ukambani to Nairobi. When the coffee cooperative started being plagued by thefts, with equipment stolen, beans going missing and bushes set alight, directors suspected dissident members of plotting a takeover.

By 2003 things had got so bad they took a step others might regard as unusual, but seemed entirely natural to them. They applied to the local district officer for permission to administer the *kithitu*, a cursing oath so powerful it is said to last seven generations, killing spouses, children, grandchildren, even livestock. A holy man was summoned and the night before the ceremony, missing equipment miraculously reappeared. The cooperative's members were all then administered *kithitu*. "Since then, we have had no trouble," smiles George Munyoli, administrative manager. "I really recommend this technique to any manager."

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