

THE SYMBOLIC ATTRIBUTES OF THE WITCH

'"The witch" is largely a symbolic personality.' -- Jean Buxton.

A large proportion of the definitions of witchcraft and sorcery that have been offered by Africanists in the last forty years are based on what can be termed "Evans-Pritchard's distinction", the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery that is made by the Azande. The clearest statement of this distinction is the following:

Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines. Azande distinguish clearly between witches and sorcerers (1937:21).

From Evans-Pritchard's statement we can see that method is a major basis upon which the Azande distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery. Yet there are many African witches who use medicines. Focussing on the use or non-use of medicines, therefore, is not the best way to distinguish between witches and sorcerers. The clarity, simplicity and authority of Evans-Pritchard's statement have meant that ethnographers have tended not to ask whether the Azande distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery on any other grounds, and if they do, whether some of these other grounds would be better for general definitional purposes.

If we examine Evans-Pritchard's work it can be seen that Azande witches and sorcerers are contrasted in at least five ways:

<u>Witch</u>	<u>Sorcerer</u>
1. Power to do evil lies in innate physical substance inherited unilineally.	1. Power to do evil lies in the use of medicines, ritual, spells.
2. Can sometimes (but not usually) act unconsciously.	2. Must always act deliberately.
3. Produces slow wasting illness.	3. Produces sudden and violent illness.
4. Very important sociologically to Azande commoner. Not important to nobility	4. Tends to exist outside social system of commoners. Very important to nobility.
5. Characterized by an image of inverted symbolic attributes.	5. Not characterized by symbolic attributes.

In societies with two types of evil practitioner, the difference that occurs most frequently is the fifth. I would suggest that it is impossible to define witchcraft until it is recognised that the definitional problem is a problem of symbolic classification. Witchcraft beliefs are united around the image of the witch, an image made up of a number of different symbolic attributes, and it is these attributes that should be used in defining witches and witchcraft.

The similarity of these attributes has been recognised by many anthropologists (e.g. Richards 1964; Mair 1969). Whether one examines the beliefs of the Navaho in the United States, the Cebuano of the Philippines, the Mapuche of Chile, or fifteenth to seventeenth century Europe, one finds readily identifiable features in the image of the witch. Although witchcraft beliefs involve many elements, these elements always constitute a system for the personification of power and evil and are always found combined in a particular pattern, one of symbolic reversal and inversion, a pattern first isolated by Middleton (1954) and to which each society 'adds its own embellishments' (Mayer 1954:4).

On this basis we may say that the witch is a person who is thought capable of harming others supernaturally through the use of innate mystic power, medicines or familiars, and who is symbolized by inverted characteristics that are a reversal of social and physical norms.

What is interesting about the similarity of witchcraft beliefs wherever they are found is that, despite the wide variety of symbols, human beings have chosen time after time similar ways of expressing and personifying power and evil. We shall now examine these symbols in detail and attempt to show why they are so appropriate for constructing the image of an evil and anti-social person who possesses a great deal of supernatural power.

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A. Symbols of Power - Fire and Heat Symbolism

The major way in which the witch's supernatural power is symbolized is by some form of fire or heat symbolism. Fire is one of the most important "natural" symbols. It is also the type of symbol to which Turner has applied the term 'polysemous' (1967). It has several qualities linking it with other objects which tend to assume a similar symbolic value by virtue of their association with fire. Fire is hot, and it is therefore linked symbolically with other things that are hot or considered to be heat producing. Fire is red or yellow (a colour which tends to be classed with red) and is therefore linked symbolically with other things that are red such as blood. Fire also casts a light so it can be considered a symbol of light as well as heat. In the literature one sees that witches are said to either 'emit a bright light' as they fly through the air or to be seen as a 'ball of fire' in the sky. Heat and light are mentioned together so often in the same context in connection with witches that it seems safe to consider them as aspects of one another and not as separate symbols.

In many cases heat and light are associated with those who possess good spiritual power. These symbols can also be associated with those who possess bad spiritual power however, a fact for which there is abundant ethnographic evidence in the many forms of association one can find between heat, light, and witches. In fact there would be enough evidence for one to be able safely to say that any form of extraordinary or supernatural power, good or bad, can be, and often is, symbolized by or associated with, heat or light in some manner.

An excellent example of such an association between sorcery and heat can be found in Sorcerers of Dobu. Fortune states,

the sorcerer engaged in sorcery believes that he must keep his body hot and parched; hence the drinking of salt water, the chewing of hot ginger and abstention from food for a while (1932:295).

A similar association between fire, heat and witchcraft can be found in many societies. One finds beliefs that the witch can be seen as a 'ball of fire', bright light, sparks, or a 'glow in the sky'. One reference for the Akan will give a good example of beliefs of this type:

"Witches go naked. Then they begin to glow. The extremities begin to glow, especially the mouth which glows like a fiery ball". They go out "emitting flames from their eyes, nose, mouth, ears and armpits" (Debrunner 1961:20-21).

Another type of association between witches and heat is for fire or light to be associated with the witch's familiar in some way. Perhaps the best explanation for this lies in the fact that the familiar is usually regarded as also having supernatural powers of one type or another, a fact which may be symbolized by some form of heat symbolism. Alternatively, the familiar, simply by association with the witch, may acquire similar symbolic attributes.

A number of writers have attempted to explain the witch's fire in a literal manner rather than attempting to discern the symbolism lying behind this particular attribute of the witch. Field, for example, tries to explain the 'fiery glow' of a Ga witch's susuma. She states,

This fire, though associated by every African with the activities of witches, has never been mentioned in the confession of any witch I have ever met. I have never seen such a fire, though I have stayed out for whole nights in places where they are said to appear. They are sometimes seen over water, appearing and disappearing, and on the seashore. The seashore is often a filthy place, strewn with human excrement and heaps of household refuse and decaying fish, so that the presence of phosphine and methane would not be too surprising (1937:146-147).

This sort of explanation is really not a satisfactory one for the association of light and fire with witches. Curiously no one has ever attempted a symbolic explanation for the witch's fire despite the large amount of descriptive material that is available on it. Hopefully the statement that it is a symbolic representation of the witch's 'heat', which is in turn a symbolic representation of the witch's supernatural powers, will be seen as an adequate and satisfactory explanation for the many forms of association between fire, light, heat and witches in systems of witchcraft beliefs.

B. Symbols of Evil

1) Symbols of Physical Inversion

The basic pattern of witchcraft beliefs being one of social and physical inversion one can say that inversions of one type or another are the most frequently used means of symbolizing the witch's evil. Having discussed this aspect of witchcraft beliefs in great detail elsewhere (Standefer 1972), here we shall focus only briefly on actual physical inversions.

Winter has commented that 'The behaviour of witches is not only thought to be different from that of ordinary people, it is the exact reverse' (1963:292). He states that among the Amba this fact

'is immediately apparent in the adoption by witches of postures which are in actual fact upside down' (ibid). The linking of the two facts, inverse moral behaviour and actually being physically upside-down, is significant. In addition to these upside-down symbols we can also find many "backward" symbols, another form of physical inversion.

a) Upside-Down Symbols

The "inverted" witch is often thought of as being quite literally inverted, i.e. upside-down. Debrunner cites a characteristic belief about Akan witches,

Before they leave the body, they turn themselves upside down ... They walk with their feet in the air, that is, with the head down, and have their eyes at the back of the ankle joints (1961:20).

In another text, describing what will happen to you if you acquire a witch's demon, it is said that 'You walk with the legs in the air and the head downwards' (Debrunner ibid:58). The Iteso 'say that witches dance upside down' (Nagashima 1970, personal communication). Kaguru witches are thought to travel upside-down, either 'walking upside-down on their hands' or by hugging their hyena familiars 'by the belly as they race through the sky' (Beidelman 1963:65). A witch may also 'turn the head of a person upside-down or may reverse the person's sleeping position' (ibid).

b) Backward Symbols

As another symbolic indication of their social inversion, there are a number of things that witches are thought to do backwards. The Ewe witch, for example, when it walks upright, has its 'feet turned backward' (Africa 1935:550).

Among the Bhaca a witch is believed to ride his baboon familiar with 'one foot on its back and facing the tail' (Hammond-Tooke 1962:284). He states that witches are always thought to 'Approach a kraal backwards' and gives the explanation that this is 'so that they can get away quickly if necessary' (ibid). Although the latter explanation for the backward behaviour of the witch is reasonable enough, it is far more likely to be simply another inverted symbol.

2) Natural Symbols

a) Body Symbols

Mary Douglas has said 'Most symbolic behaviour must work through the human body' (1969:vii). Although one may not agree with such a categorical statement (as there are many other types of symbols), it is certainly not difficult to find numerous examples of ways in which the human body is used symbolically in systems of witchcraft beliefs.

(i) Nakedness

Nakedness is often thought to be one of the attributes which identifies a person as a witch. An Abaluyia informant told Wagner that a particular person was known to be an omulogi (witch) 'because he has been found outside all night without wearing any clothes' (1954:41). The Fipa image of the witch is that 'of an old man who goes around his village naked at night ... and his wife also naked, who carries her husband upside-down from her shoulders' (Willis 1968:3-4). The Kriges state that Lovedu who have seen witches 'always

describe them as naked, perhaps because people always sleep naked wrapped in their blankets' (1943:251). This is another example of a literal attempt at explaining a symbolic attribute - and not attempting to see what lies behind the symbolism itself.

There seem to be two major ways of explaining the witch's nakedness. First, it is a reversal of normal behaviour because normal people usually do wear clothes of some type. Even in societies where there is a tradition of nudity or near nudity, there are rules governing the degree of nudity permitted, what parts of the body can be exposed and to whom, as well as very definite concepts of modesty. Beidelman makes a number of interesting points about this in 'Some Notions of Nakedness, Nudity and Sexuality Among the Nuer' (1968).

In discussing Kaguru beliefs, Beidelman sees the supposed nakedness of the witch in terms of inversion:

A witch's nakedness is a further inversion. Kaguru are traditionally prudish regarding exposure of the genitals. One's exposure is an insult to those who see him (1963:67).

That people we would normally regard as naked are still expected to wear something is well illustrated by the following quotation which also has an interesting association with witchcraft. Munday, in a discussion of Lala witchcraft, states that a child

is taught never to go out of the hut stark naked, a small piece of string will do, but he must wear something; this is not from motives of modesty, but to prevent him from being mistaken for a witch (1951:12).

This quotation provides an illustration of the important distinction between "nudity" and "nakedness", a distinction of the utmost importance for understanding the emphasis upon nakedness in witchcraft beliefs. The best explanation of the difference between the two is given in Sir Kenneth Clark's The Nude. He states,

The English language, with its elaborate generosity, distinguishes between the naked and the nude. To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenceless body, but of a balanced, prosperous and confident body: the body re-formed (1956:1).

(ii) Eyes

The eyes are used symbolically in four major ways in witchcraft beliefs. Witches can be said to possess the "evil eye" or to have special or extraordinary sight. The eyes of witches may also be described as 'red' or as 'bright', 'gleaming', or 'emitting fire'. The belief that witches have extraordinary sight which enables them to see things ordinary mortals cannot see is often mentioned. The Mandari believe that 'those with the Eye and witches see liquid passing into the stomach', for example (Buxton 1963:106). A Cewa witch is said to have red eyes which are thought to result 'from staying up all night' (Marwick 1965:74).

A possible explanation for the emphasis on red eyes (which can only be interpreted as the whites being reddened) is that a great deal

of symbolic significance can be attached to the fact that something ordinarily or usually white has turned red. The change of a bodily substance from a colour signifying purity, goodness and innocence to one that can symbolize danger and evil is a very effective way of symbolizing the negative, evil character of the witch.

(iii) Excrement

Another type of body symbolism associated with the witch is the belief that the witch uses human excrement (usually in medicines) or has filthy habits. This association with excrement can also be regarded as an association with something 'black', which, as we have seen, is a colour often associated with witches.

The Dinka witch is believed to defecate in public places. Lienhardt states that

He excretes in the middle of the homestead, urinates in the cooking-pots, and leaves silently. If he is caught about these tasks, he is an outlaw and in danger of his life ... The excretion of the witch in the centre of the homestead is ... a subversion of the values which the Dinka attach to the human community, an invasion of the homestead and the human order by the unregulated behaviour of the wilds (1951:307).

Douglas explains the symbolic use of excreta by the Lele witch as a form of complementary dualism:

The idea of the sorcerer, as the epitome of badness, is contrasted with the idea of the good man who is sensitive to bahonyi /shame/. The sensibilities of the sorcerer are blunted and his ingrained malice drives him to heap grief and shame on his fellow man. The concept is based on the full range of paired opposites. His lethal charms are supposed to be concocted with foetal matter. Disgusting things rouse no revulsion in him, and are the hall-mark of his trade (1955:399).

(iv) Blood

In order to understand the symbolic use made of blood in witchcraft beliefs, it is useful to consider concepts about blood and the values attached to it in a few tribal societies.

The article on "Blood" in Hastings' Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics states that in tribal societies it is thought that 'life is the blood and vice versa: when the blood left the body, it carried the life with it' (Robinson 1908:715). Though this may be a little overstated, it would still appear to be the case that a large number of societies do regard blood more or less in this manner, considering it to be vital to life, associated with life or even symbolic of life itself.

Blood is an ambivalent symbol, however. Among the Kaguru, for example, it can be associated 'with life ... fertility and the perpetuation of the descent group' but it can also be associated with 'death and danger, passion and the uncontrollable'. 'The redness of blood is sometimes compared to fire which, with all its many uses, can also be dangerous' (Beidelman 1963:328).

The most thorough examination of concepts about blood in an African society is to be found in Turner's work on the Ndembu. He states, 'The blood of a healthy person "wanders about" ... in his body' (1962:148). There are "good" and "bad" sorts of blood for the Ndembu, and indeed redness is a highly ambivalent concept' (ibid). The blood of a healthy person is thought to be 'clean and white'. White is here being used 'metaphorically in the sense of "pure", to describe blood that is untainted by disease' (ibid:147). Blood that has been attached by disease is considered to be 'bad' or 'black' (ibid:148). Turner found that red symbols stood for 'the blood of witchcraft/sorcery' because that was the type of blood 'which is seen when witches eat human meat' (ibid:155).

There are many examples in Africa of societies in which it is thought that the witch is a vampire who can kill 'by sucking the blood out of a person' (Africa 1935:553; describing beliefs about Akan witches).

The Akan have some very interesting beliefs about what witches are thought to do with the blood they acquire through vampirism. They do not appear to keep it and digest it in their own bodies right away, or use it to increase their own vitality (a belief found in many societies). Rather, it is thought that they store it - either in a communal pot or a witch's own individual pot (Debrunner 1961:38), or in a bottle or bucket which they conceal somewhere (ibid:27).

One Akan woman who confessed to being a witch referred to the witches' meeting place in a tree. She said that

it was there that they boiled their meat and that was why they were keeping salt in that hole. She said that the other bottle contained pure blood which served as oil for them (ibid).

The witches' pot was thought to be a significant part of their witchcraft apparatus. Debrunner reports that it was said that the pot "must always be filled with blood or all their undertakings will be nullified" (ibid:29).

The Wolof doma or witch is thought to be a vampire addicted to drinking blood. 'He is thought to be particularly attracted to the 'blood associated with childbirth and circumcision' (Ames 1959:265), both of which are rites de passage marking changes in personal status (which are traditionally thought to be dangerous times for the person undergoing the change in status). It is significant of course, that these are the two main rites de passage at which blood is shed.

Familiars are sometimes thought to be vampires who drink or suck blood. The Bhaca mamlambo, a snake familiar, is thought to suck 'while the victim is asleep and he dies without being sick' (Hammond-Tooke 1962:285). Although Ndembu familiars do not appear to be thought of as vampires, they are nevertheless associated with blood in Ndembu thought. Turner states that tuyebela or familiars 'are commonly supposed to be kept in the menstruation hut' (1967:78ff.), which is of course a very appropriate symbolic association as menstrual blood is classed as "bad" and "black".

Finally, Yoruba believe that the witch is able 'to prolong her own life ... by drinking the life blood of numerous victims' (Prince 1961:798). Prince adds that 'it is for this reason that old people are suspected of being witches' (ibid).

(v) Sexual Symbolism

Another type of body symbolism associated with witches is sexual symbolism. There is a tremendous amount of data on the association of witches with one or another types of sexuality. In African witchcraft beliefs the main emphasis is on sexual perversions, something that contrasts rather markedly with the sexual emphasis in European witch beliefs where witches are thought to take part in orgies, to copulate with the devil or an incubus or succubus (spirit familiar). African witches are said to commit incest or acts of bestiality, homosexuality or lesbianism, or to co-habit with spirit familiars.

The major purpose of an African marriage being that of producing children, it should not be too surprising to find that one of the most usual activities of the witch is thought to be that of preventing conception in some way. There are two ways in which sterility and impotence in men and barrenness in women can be associated with witchcraft. The more usual belief is that witches cause the above maladies; the other is that people with these maladies are witches. A sterile man is 'often regarded as a sorcerer' by the Ndembu (Turner 1957:107). The Dinka associate monorchids with witchcraft. The link is made partly because they are abnormal human beings, but also partly it seems, because of the belief that they are impotent. In a number of societies a barren woman is thought to be a witch. The Luo believe that if a couple is sterile one of the pair must be a witch, for it is believed that a union between a witch and non-witch will be unproductive (Whisson 1964:15). There is also the belief in many societies that witches can make birth difficult for a woman.

There is a great deal of emphasis in systems of witch beliefs on the fact that witches have intercourse with improper categories of persons. The major illustration of this type of belief of course is the emphasis on the supposed incest of the witch. This can be father-daughter incest, mother-son incest, brother-sister incest, father-in-law - daughter-in-law incest, or simply clan incest. One often reads that witches are thought able to increase their power or the strength of their medicines through incest.

Prohibited categories of relatives are not the only categories of improper person however. Sometimes it is believed that the witch will have sexual relations with an immature girl or a very old woman, or very young children.

Sometimes nymphomania or excessive sexuality is believed to be a characteristic of a female witch. The Ndembu 'strongly condemn excessive sexual desire and associate it with propensities to sorcery and witchcraft. Like witchcraft, desire ... is "hot" (Turner 1957:151).

b) Animals

Animals comprise another category of natural symbols associated with witches. This association can take a number of forms. Animals can either be the familiars of witches or creatures into which the witch is said to become transformed. Sometimes certain animals are simply said to be 'associated' with witches, with no particular type of association specified.

The animals most frequently mentioned as familiars of African witches are snakes, owls, hyenas, and leopards. These are primarily night animals, a fact which would make them "naturals" for the role of witch's familiar. They have other characteristics as well which makes their choice as symbols appropriate.

Hunter refers to the ichanti or snake familiar of the Pondo witch and states that it 'has great eyes with which to stare at people' (1936:286). Crawford states that 'animals such as snakes are dangerous because they can kill; owls are feared because they fly when all other birds sleep' (1967:71).

Explanations have also been advanced for the selection of the hyena as a witch's familiar. Beidelman states 'A hyena is considered to be the epitome of all that is objectionable and unclean' (1967:299). The hyena has characteristics of a particularly obnoxious type that make it a fairly obvious natural symbol. It is active at night, is greedy and filthy, is a scavenger which feeds on dead meat and has also been known to dig up corpses from graveyards (an activity quite commonly associated with witches).

The association between snakes and witches is fairly easy to explain with or without any discussion of phallic symbolism or Freudian suggestions about the fear of snakes. First of all, obviously, snakes are extremely dangerous to man and are therefore animals to be feared, despite their lowly position as 'creatures which creep and crawl'. Although snakes do move about during the day, they are far more active at night, at which time they are twice as dangerous because they are more difficult to see and can be stepped on - sometimes with fatal results - more easily. They also have prominent eyes, a characteristic of some animals which seems occasionally to have been related to their selection as animals to be associated with witches and the power to harm others. Finally, some snakes are black, a fact which makes them a very appropriate natural symbol for witchcraft beliefs.

c) Colour Symbolism

The colours most frequently associated with witches are black and red. These of course, along with white, are the primary "social" colours, to which symbolic values are attached far more than any other colours. Although one cannot make a categorical statement to the effect that only black and red are used to symbolize witches (for there are a few examples of white being associated with witches as well), nevertheless the instances in which black and red predominate are far more common than those in which white is used. It would therefore appear safe to say that black and red are the "colours of witchcraft". It is interesting to ask what association these colours have.

Turner has made many careful analyses of Ndembu colour symbolism. Most of what he says about black, white and red symbolism for the Ndembu is applicable to other African societies (and non-African societies) as well. The cluster of values associated with these colours seems to have a widespread, if not almost universal, reference among tribal peoples.

Whiteness is all that is open, honest, generous, pure, responsible and pious. It stands also for social unity, and for concord between the dead and the living, between traditional precept and actual behaviour (1962:145).

Black objects, on the other hand, in ritual 'often stand for witchcraft and death and sickness it produces' (Turner 1968:188). Black 'is the colour, not only of death, but also of sexual lust and adultery (which sometimes lead to murder and sorcery) in the idiom of Ndembu colour symbolism' (1962:134-135). Turner also discusses a particular type of tree which has black inedible fruit and states that its blackness is said by Ndembu to represent death, badness, impurity, misfortunes and trouble (1968:188).

Turner says that red symbols also stand for the 'blood of witchcraft/sorcery. This is the blood "which is seen when witches eat human meat"' (1962:155). Turner found that there was a mixture of red and black "things" in the symbolism of Ndembu witch beliefs. Such a statement would be true for the witch beliefs of many African societies. The two colours occur in a wide variety of contexts.

Red or black medicines are often thought to be used by witches. Levine states that poisons 'allegedly used in witch killings', which he has seen unearthed from Gusii houses, 'are usually black or red powders concealed in small reed tubes' (1963:227). Turner states that the Ndembu allege that witches 'make use of material considered "black" and "impure" such as the feces of their intended victim, cindered fore-skins stolen from circumcisers, and the like, as ingredients of death-dealing "medicine"' (1967:80). Nyakyusa say that "'a person has a black heart" or "has black blood" or is "black in his face towards us" when he is thought to be a witch, eating his fellows, or when he is a thief, or a liar, or an adulterer, or dirty' (Wilson 1959:141).

d) Night and Darkness

There are many references to the nocturnal activities of witches. Among other things, witches are said to fly by night, to leave their bodies at night, to appear naked at night, to belong to a coven whose members 'meet at night', or to be associated with 'night creatures'.

The association of witches with night and darkness is not really very difficult to explain. First of all, it is the most frightening period of the day, when human beings are able to see far less than when it is light. The dark holds many unknown terrors for the tribal person, terrors that can be in the shape of wild animals, evil spirits, angry ancestors, sorcerers or witches, and few except the most intrepid seem willing to venture away from the relative safety of the homestead at this time. People cannot carry on their normal daytime activities at night for three important reasons; first because it is difficult to see to do one's work properly, secondly because the dark is frightening, and thirdly because it is the time for sleep. This makes the night even more dangerous however, because man is particularly vulnerable and defenceless when he is asleep. It is an ideal time, therefore, for witches to attack. Levine for example, states that 'The fear of witches and witchcraft among the Gusii is associated with a general fear of the dark and its denizens' (1963:249).

Because night is a time of insecurity, it really seems only natural that witches would be thought to be most active then. The witch's nocturnal activities can be regarded as a reversal of the usual way of doing things. Normal people stay near the homestead and go to bed at night. Witches, on the other hand, fly away to meet with other witches, dance, and take part in necrophagous feasts.

Finally, nighttime is dark, or classificatorily black, with all the associations going with this colour. Witches are often associated with black things so the use of black symbolism, combined with the belief that witches work at night, helps the symbols to reinforce one another and heightens the impression of the witch's evil and anti-social nature. Dinka witches, for example, are closely associated with night creatures and the night:

Working by night is working secretly. Night is the time of concealment ... A Witch dare not be seen at his work, and works alone under cover of night. He is therefore associated with some of the commonest night-creatures ... the owl and the night-jar, birds of the night(Lienhardt 1951:309).

One might well say that night and darkness are natural symbols that have made an impress on the human mind as things to be feared. In constructing the image of the witch, therefore, it is only to be expected that witches would be symbolized as working primarily in night and darkness.

3) Anomalous Symbols

Sometimes an anomaly of a particular type will brand an individual as a witch. Physical deformities of one type or another can be associated with witchcraft. Among the Lugbara 'Often men with some physical disfigurement, such as a missing eye or nose, are thought to be witches' (Middleton 1960:241).

Sometimes events which do not conform to the usual order in which it is felt that they should occur can be associated with witchcraft. An example of such a practice can be found in the Azande fear of someone who 'cuts his upper teeth first'. Evans-Pritchard states that Azande say of such a child:

"Oh, what a child to have his teeth appearing above. It is a witch. Oh protect my first-fruits lest that possessor of evil teeth goes to eat them" (1937:57).

Twins are another type of anomaly that can be associated with witchcraft. It is a fairly common practice in Africa to expose one or both of a pair of twins, although the reasons for doing so vary from tribe to tribe. Beidelman notes that among the Kaguru, twins are 'sometimes spoken of as being witches' (1966:363).

4) Symbols of Parody

Witches are often thought to parody normal forms of behaviour. The giving of feasts, practicing the principle of reciprocity, singing and dancing, the playing of games and even fighting of wars, are all thought to be the activities of witches. In systems of witchcraft beliefs however, these are usually given an appropriately macabre twist. The organization of a witch's coven can parallel the normal social organization of the society, and the tools, vehicles or equipment used by witches are often similar to those used in the normal world, although again, they may be given a macabre touch.

The major activities of witches, aside from the harming of their victims and the general causing of trouble for others in their society, would appear to be feasting and dancing. Almost everywhere that there is a belief in a coven it is also believed that members of the coven feast and dance when they meet. These activities are distinguished from normal feasting and dancing, however, in that it is believed that witches eat human flesh at these feasts and dance naked, upside-down or back-to-back.

The social organization of the witches' coven often parallels normal forms of social organisation. Winter states that 'The manner in which these witch teams are conceived is very reminiscent of actual groups in the society' (1956:150). The Sukuma would appear to believe that witches parody normal forms of social organization as well. Tanner states:

Every form of activity in Sukuma life has its society with graded ranks, specialized knowledge, and meetings; and witchcraft is no exception with its dark secrets and night meetings in which the members dance and sing in lonely places (1956:439).

There can be ranking within witch companies - usually based on the amount of power that a particular witch possesses. Evans-Pritchard states, for example, that among the Azande there are thought to be

status and leadership among witches. Experience must be obtained under tuition of elder witches before a man is qualified to kill his neighbours. Growth in experience goes hand in hand with growth of witchcraft-substance (1937:39).

Witches are sometimes thought to have a system of apprenticeship whereby one must train to become a witch. Like many ordinary human groups, the witch coven also sometimes requires an initiation fee before allowing someone to become a full member. The macabre twist usually given in the case of the witches' coven however, is the fact that the initiation fee is often believed to be a human life, usually that of a relative of the witch himself. Among the Gonja, for example, 'A part of the initiation is the bringing by the novice of one of his or her own kin to serve as the first meal of human flesh and the admission price to the coven' (Goody 1970:209).

There can be a distinctly commercial aspect to some witchcraft beliefs. Kopytoff states that Suku witches sometimes operate by 'special magical means that, like all magic, is purchased from others. Not unexpectedly, witches want to be paid in flesh which is their currency' (1968:2).

Witches are believed to play games like ordinary people, including football. In order to do so, however, they may, like Cewa witches, "'cut off a person's head and play ball with it'" (Marwick 1965:76). Akan witches are also said to 'engage in ... harmless pleasures such as dancing and playing football where they are said to use a human skull' (Debrunner 1961:31).

Other forms of parody can be found among the Tiv,

It is said that for everything that is owned by man the mbatsay have their equivalent. They have a lamp, which they call ishan, and the oil which is burnt in their lamp is human fat (East 1965:248).

Although witches are most often believed to ride familiars when they fly off to join the coven, sometimes their vehicles are direct parodies of vehicles in the normal world. Some interesting examples of cultural change can be found in the witch beliefs of the Cape Nguni, Bakweri and Tiv. Modern vehicles such as cars, bicycles, lorries and planes have obviously made an impression on the minds of those constructing systems of witch beliefs. Hammond-Tooke, in discussing Cape Nguni witch beliefs, states:

Informants stressed that witches ... were extremely active in the community and that of latter years they had developed more sophisticated techniques. There was much talk of "flying machines" used to spirit away victims (1970:28).

Akiga provides the following description of the vehicles of modern Tiv witches:

since the white man came, and the mbatsay have seen the bicycle, they have made bicycles for themselves to ride by night, and motor bicycles too, and cars - nothing is beyond the power of the mbatsay (East 1965:248).

Ardener states that the Bakweri believe that witches have 'a town and all modern conveniences, including ... motor-lorries' (1970:147).

Symbols of parody can be, and often are, used extensively in witch beliefs. Perhaps their major purpose is to provide convincing details about the parallel world in which witches operate, a world that may become more believable if witches are said to do things that normal people do (in their own macabre way of course).

5) Necrophilous Symbols

Many of the symbols used in witchcraft beliefs are symbols that can be termed "necrophilous", symbols of death and decay. There is such a marked emphasis on necrophilous symbols in witchcraft beliefs that we may say along with certain natural symbols and symbols of reversal and inversion that they are one of the major categories of symbols associated with witchcraft.

The morbid dwelling on the supposed necrophagy of witches (or the eating of the dead flesh of their victims), the belief that many if not all deaths in the society are caused by witches and the belief that witches may use parts of a dead body in making medicines all provide examples of necrophilous symbolism.

Fromm, in The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil, has written at length about the 'necrophilous orientation'. As he uses the term it includes something rather wider than a simple preoccupation with matters relating to death and the dead.

The person with the necrophilous orientation is one who is attracted to and fascinated by all that is not alive, all that is dead; corpses, decay, feces, dirt. Necrophiles are those people who love to talk about sickness, about burials, about death. They come to life precisely when they can talk about death (1964:39).

Among other characteristics 'The necrophilous person is attracted to darkness and night' (1964:41). Fromm also states that

The necrophilous tendencies are usually most clearly exhibited in a person's dreams. These deal with murder, blood, corpses, skulls, feces (1964:42).

The parallels between the necrophilous orientation and witchcraft beliefs are clear and the following statement by Wagner about Abaluyia beliefs is a good example of the necrophilous content of witchcraft beliefs:

all poisonous plants and roots, crawling animals (snakes, lizards, worms, etc.), all birds that feed on carrion, faeces of men ... and any decaying matter, eggs (because they rot) and objects of a similar nature are looked upon as "evil substances" which are used, or alleged to be used, by witches and sorcerers in the preparation of their evil magic (1954:52).

A necrophilous orientation 'is the most morbid and the most dangerous among the orientations to life of which man is capable. It is the true perversion: while being alive, not life but death is loved: not growth but destruction' (Fromm 1964:45).

Among the social conditions which produce a necrophilous orientation, Fromm suggests the following:

Perhaps the most obvious factor that should be mentioned here is that of a situation of abundance versus scarcity, both economically and psychologically. As long as most of man's energy is taken up by the defence of his life against attacks, or to ward off starvation, love of life must be stunted, and necrophilia fostered (1964:52).

Fromm's description of the necrophilous orientation and his attempt to describe the social conditions under which it arises have a great deal of relevance for the understanding of witchcraft beliefs.

Fromm's really major contribution, however, is his suggestion that the necrophilous orientation arises under conditions of stress and acute deprivation. Many explanations of the existence of witchcraft beliefs in African and other societies offer a similar perspective.

* * *

The symbols of witchcraft beliefs are chosen through the working of a variety of symbolic processes. The basic symbolic pattern is one of reversal and inversion, but a number of other symbolic patterns can also be identified, including the use of appropriate "natural symbols" of various types, symbols of parody, anomalous symbols and necrophilous symbols.

Having analysed the symbolism of witchcraft beliefs, I should like to comment briefly on the value of comparative studies. It would be fair to say that, although the basis of anthropology is comparison, anthropologists to date have not made as full use of the comparative method as they might have done. There are many problems in ethnographic literature that can only be solved by intensive comparative analysis. It is essential for the good health of our discipline to make room for more large-scale comparative studies. This means encouraging both established academics and graduate students to attempt such studies despite the enormous amount of time they may take. Today when opportunities for field work are, in any case, drying up, it would be a very sensible thing for a small proportion of scholars to be diverted from field studies in order to read widely in a particular problem area, look for recurring patterns in the phenomena they are studying and then just sit quietly for some time and think about it all. In this way, it may be possible to make some new and interesting discoveries, and, in the process, add to the "theoretical capital" of our discipline.

What then has the analysis of witchcraft beliefs told us about the human mind and the way it works? It would seem that the main thing we have learned is the fact that man has the mental ability to create many diverse forms of "collective representations", selecting items from his social and physical environment, which he then combines according to a number of different possible patterns existing in potential at all times. Given the nature of man's mental capacities, his basic concerns with food, health, reproduction, and social security, a threat to any of these may be regarded as "evil". A potential pattern exists which could be invoked at any time to personify this threat by creating the image of a witch. Not all societies take advantage of this potential pattern however. It usually is found in societies of a particular type, primarily small-scale agricultural societies. In societies of this type, difficulties in any of the

major areas of human concern can be attributed to the machinations of human agents, witches and sorcerers, rather than to the gods, spirits, ancestors, ghosts or simply chance or bad luck as in our society.

Man, in his anger, fear, and desire for vengeance, finds a scapegoat upon which he is able to project a number of negative, inverted symbols indicating extreme evil. Having created such an image for the scapegoat, it then becomes easier to direct his vehemence, fear and anxiety upon it, for, if one believes, who could not hate someone as terrible as the person who is symbolized by the inverted image of the witch? In so hating witches and taking action against them, man relieves some of the stress and anxiety created by the misfortunes they have supposedly caused - as well as the stress and anxiety created by living in a society which believes in the existence of human beings with such dreadful powers.

Roma Standefer.

EDITORIAL NOTE

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