AFRICAN WITCHCRAFT BELIEFS: THE DEFINITIONAL PROBLEM[1]

In any comparative study the initial problem to be faced by the analyst is that of defining the phenomena he has selected for examination. This is rarely an easy task. Whether one focusses on totemism (Goldenweiser 1910; Levi-Strauss 1964), marriage (Leach 1961), incest (Fox 1967), matrilineal descent (Richards 1950), ancestor cults (Kopytoff 1968), or age sets (Eisenstadt 1956), usually one of the first things to be found by the analyst is the fact that a single term has been used to cover a number of often widely varying, although related phenomena. When this happens one may well be tempted to invent a number of new terms to cover all the possible refractions and manifestations of the phenomena being studied, but as Leach has so well demonstrated, this can only lead to the excessive development of terminological classifications, an effort that he has so aptly termed 'Butterfly collecting' (1961:2). He strongly suggests that we must seek other methods of organizing and defining our phenomena.

Needham has indicated an awareness of this problem as well, and has pointed out that:

> ...social anthropology is in a state of conceptual confusion expressed in proliferating technical taxonomies and definitional exercises, each new field study offering enough 'anomalous' features to lead to yet more typological and methodological pronouncements. (1963: xli).

It would probably be a fair statement to say that the tackling of definitional problems is one of the most basic tasks to be faced in our discipline today. Real advances in our understanding of social phenomena can only be made through intensive comparative analysis aimed at establishing workable definitions as well as the essential features and range of variability of the particular phenomena being examined.

The study of witchcraft beliefs is one particular example of a field of study that has suffered from a lack of adequate definition. Although we do not find in the literature on witchcraft beliefs that they are divided into 'Main type... Sub-type... Sub-sub-type', (Leach 1961:3) the way some social phenomena have been, there is, nevertheless, a certain amount of conceptual confusion about what witchcraft really is, and the grounds upon which it may usefully be distinguished from sorcery.

Turner (1964:322), in a review of Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa (Middleton and Winter 1963), refers to the 'terminological wood (or jungle)' one encounters in reading professional accounts of witchcraft beliefs. After surveying the literature on witchcraft beliefs in a number of African societies, he concludes, 'It would seem, therefore, from the various usages which I have discussed that there is little general agreement on the criteria which distinguish sorcery from witchcraft.' (1964:322).

Turner is not entirely accurate in making the above statement however. Most Africanists base their distinction between the two on the one made by Evans-Pritchard for the Azande, despite the fact that many systems of belief do not easily fall into the polar opposites characteristic of the Azande system. Evans-Pritchard states:

> 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).

Although Evans-Pritchard does not indicate in the Azande work that the witch-sorcerer distinction has any wider application beyond Azande society, the distinction has been widely adopted by Africanists. Examples of its use can

be found in the work of Schapera (1934a:293-4, 1934b:43); Hunter (1936:275); Wilson (1951:307-8); Gluckman (1955:87); Mitchell (1956: 153); Beattie (1963: 29-30); Douglas (1963:220); Marwick (1963a: 7-8, 1963b:264, 1965a:69, 1965b:21-5, 1967:232); Middleton and Winter (1963:2); Reynolds (1963:14) and Mair (1969:21-3).

Careful research and analysis will show that in many cases the use of Evans-Pritchard's distinction has, however, been highly inappropriate. Although many writers do appear to appreciate the fact that their material may not easily fit into the Azande framework (see for example Schapera 1934a:294, and Marwick 1963a: 7-8), they nevertheless feel they must adopt the terminology, and if a witch in their society uses medicines, they tend to 'fall into line' as Douglas (1967:72) has put it, and the witch becomes termed a 'sorcerer'. Examples of this usage of terms can be found in studies of the Cewa (Marwick 1965a), and Yao (Mitchell 1956) as well as Douglas's own ethnography of the Lele (1963).

Douglas states that 'Evans-Pritchard... vigorously disavowed the intention of foisting a terminological straight-jacket on future generations.' (1967:72) This has, however, been the effect of his distinction. Use of the Azande model has imposed a straight-jacket of thought which has blinded people for many years and kept them from seeing what the essential characteristics of witchcraft beliefs are.

Implicit in this criticism of the use which has been made of Evans-Pritchard's distinction, is the conviction that it is the image of the witch that is important for definitional purposes, not the use or non-use of medicines, or unconscious use of evil power. When we ask ourselves what it is that many of the African systems of belief have in common, we find the witch image occurring in a large number of cases - combined with the use of medicines as well as the possession of innate mystical ability to cause harm.

Audrey Richards, in a review of Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa, has commented on the fact that 'The similarity of the witch image in all these societies is striking.' (1964:188) She points out that:

> Essay after essay describes imaginary figures, usually with hereditary attributes, thought to be able to fly by night, to produce a glow in the sky, to eat corpses or the entrails of human beings, to be accompanied by familiars and to act contrary to all moral rules. The similarity of these images is not of course limited to East Africa. (1964:188).

It is somewhat remarkable to note however, that in all the African literature on societies with witchcraft and sorcery beliefs (of which there are at least sixty-five available accounts), not one writer has ever thought to focus on this image as the defining characteristic of witchcraft. Unfortunately, it does not appear to have been as clearly evident as it might have been that the features associated with this image themselves form a category of symbolic phenomena worthy of investigation. Once the pattern had been set by Evans-Pritchard, it was all too easy for others to follow what had become established categories of classification, despite the all too obvious fact that the categories were often inappropriate.

It is not possible to define witchcraft until it is recognized that the definitional problem is a problem in symbolic classification. Witchcraft beliefs form a special category of classification to which a great many varying elements or components may be assigned. The solution to the definitional problem is implicit in the literature; the problem has not been solved because no one has ever thought to ask the right questions. The main question we must ask ourselves is why does the image of the witch take the form it does from society to society throughout Africa and indeed throughout the world. Following that, we must ask ourselves why does this image occur so universally.

The solution to the first question was found by John Middleton and its earliest statement can be found in two articles, 'Some Social Aspects of Lugbara Myth' (1954), and 'The Concept of Bewitching in Lugbara'. (1955),

In analyzing Lugbara mythology, Middleton found that 'one of the general characteristics of Lugbara myth is the inverted character of its actors and events'. (1963:195).

The theme of inversion is found not only in mythology, but in witchcraft beliefs as well. To the Lugbara the normal is 'good' and the abnormal is 'bad', and this dichotomy is related to the distinction they make between what is social and what is anti-social. The difference between the two is expressed in terms of inversion. The image of the Lugbara witch is that of a being characterized by inverted attributes.

> A witch has the characteristics of an abnormal person. His face is grey and drawn, 'like a corpse', he may have red eyes or a squint, he may vomit blood, he walks at night, and is associated with night creatures. (1955:258).

A witch is also associated with incest, cannibalism and filthy behaviour (Middleton 1960?248), and 'may be visible as a light on the top of a hut, or as a light moving rapidly across fields.' (1955:255).

What is most inverted about witches however, is the fact that they have perverted normal kinship and authority relations. Middleton states:

> ... a witch is the embodiment of those attributes that are in direct contrast to those ideally possessed by elders or senior kin. Senior kinsmen... should be 'slow', understanding, gentle, generous, angry only when the interests of their family clusters are concerned and not on account of their own personal pride. A witch behaves in a diametrically opposite manner. (1960:244-4)

From the above we can see that witchcraft for the Lugbara is a conceptual category, one that is bound up with the anti-social. It tends therefore to find expression in inverted symbols that are opposed to what the society values and considers normal. Knowing this provides an element of predictability. We would expect that other elements associated with witchcraft by the Lugbara would be somewhat abnormal or unusual. The following confirms this suspicion,

> Certain animals are associated with witches; they are both omens of witchcraft and may be vehicles for witches, and they are also used as ingredients in sorcery-poisons. They include the jackal, the leopard-cat, the bat, the screech monkey, snakes, the owl and several other birds, the water tortoise, if it leaves its riverine home and comes to the compounds, and certain frogs and toads. All these creatures are 'like witches' and are much feared. If a man sees them at night, and especially in a dream, he is seeing a witch or the soul of a witch. All are night creatures or, like the water-tortoise, out of their normal habitat. Indeed any animal away from its usual home may be suspected of being something to do with witchcraft. (Middleton 1960:241).

All of the above is somewhat reminiscent of Chapter Three of Purity and Danger, 'The Abominations of Leviticus' (Douglas 1966:41-57). Douglas is able to demonstrate that Hebrew dietary laws stem from a system of symbolic classification. Traditionally Jewish people have considered certain animals to be either 'clean', and therefore edible, or 'unclean' and therefore unfit for human consumption. The usual rational has been that certain animals such as pigs, lobsters and other shellfish were scavengers, and therefore 'unclean'.

By looking at the relevant selections from Leviticus and Deuteronomy in a new way, however, Douglas was able to offer a completely new and highly satisfactory interpretation, one that is expressed in terms of symbolic classification. She finds that 'Any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness.' (1966:55) Therefore anything in the water that does not have fins or scales is unclean, or four-footed creatures capable of flying are unclean and so on.

The above example demonstrates that analysis of ethnographically puzzling practices in terms of symbolic classification can sometimes be extremely illuminating, or as Needham might put it, be successful in terms of 'rendering many aspects of social life intelligible.' (1963:xliii) Needham has demonstrated in several papers that this can be an effective analytical technique particularly in 'The Left Hand of the Mugwe' (1960), and 'Shiva's Earings' (1966).

Use of the concept of symbolic classification can also be an effective technique for one attempting to understand and define witchcraft beliefs. If we adopt the symbolic approach in attempting to define witchcraft, we find that the category witch can be expressed as the following:

> A witch is an individual thought capable of harming others super-naturally through the use of innate mystical power, medicines or familiars, and who is associated with inverted characteristics that are a reversal of social and physical norms.

Adoption of such a definition immediately rids us of one difficulty, that of attempting to classify the inverted being who consciously makes use of medicines. As well, it explains the image of the witch, an image which consists of characteristics that are inverted, reversals of the norm, or simply things that are defined by a particular society as bad, harmful, unusual or abnormal. Witchcraft beliefs form a category of classification in which a great many varying elements or components may be found. Turner has shown an appreciation of this point. He states:

> Many African societies recognize the same range of components: 'innate', 'acquired', 'learnt', 'inherited' skills to harm and kill; power to kill immediately and power created by medicines; the use of familiars, visible and invisible; the magical introjection of objects into enemies; nocturnal and diurnal hostile magic; invocation of ghosts by a curse; and so on. But as between societies, and often in different situations in a single society, these components are varyingly clustered and separated. (1964:324)

He suggests that 'Clues to their clusterings and segregations may be found if societies are analyzed in terms of process-theory'. (1964:324) What he fails to realize however, is that these components are always found combined in a particular pattern, and that it is more useful to analyse their symbolic elements than it is to look at them in terms of process-theory. If we concentrate on the symbolic approach it is impossible to find a workable definition for the term 'witchcraft', and find our way out of the 'terminological wood (or jungle' Turner has indicated.

While it may be said that we are determining what witchcraft is 'by definition', the point is that we can find a large number of examples of the phenomena so defined throughout the world. These phenomena form an interesting category of associated elements that we may study quite usefully and profitably. The definition of witchcraft beliefs that has been offered is applicable to a wide number of cases both within and outside of Africa and it can certainly be applied to European witchcraft beliefs as well.

If the form of witchcraft beliefs is determined by the fact that they are a reversal of social and physical norms, it is only to be expected that certain features of this form will vary from society to society. There is one constant however: the witch is always thought to do what is most abhorred by other members of the society. The witch is the ultimate anti-social being, a fact which is symbolized by the inverted attributes making up the image of the witch. This latter point provides the answer to our second question, 'Why does the image of the witch occur so universally?'

In concluding, it should be mentioned that one of the reasons many writers have given for separating witchcraft from sorcery on the basis of use or non-use of medicine (for example Wilson 1951:308, and Mair 1969:23), is the fact

that sorcery is something which can actually be practiced whereas witchcraft (at least as it has usually been defined), cannot. Mair feels that the fact that:

> ... the sorcerer uses material objects and the witch does not... is by no means insignificant, since it is possible to find evidence of sorcery, and indeed many objects used for that purpose have been found when people are accused... But there can never be evidence of witchcraft, and so accusations of witchcraft can only be pursued by means as mystical as the supposed offence. (1969:23)

Wilson stresses the distinction as well and says it:

> ... is an important one; for sorcery, as I have defined it, is practiced, that is people use medicines (which are sometimes poisons) with the object of harming others, while few anthropologists would admit the reality of witchcraft - the exercise of an innate power to harm others directly. (1951:308).

While it is true that the distinction may have some importance legally, as Reynolds (1963:14) for example, has shown, this is an importance that may ultimately be significant only to Europeans - and not to the people concerned. It does not really essentially matter that one may be practiced and the other not, what does matter is that both are thought to exist and be practiced. We have no right to presume that just because something may matter to us legally, that it has any relevance whatsoever for the members of an African tribe. This is, in effect, imposing our own categories of classification upon those of the people we are studying, a far cry from the cultural relativity and unprejudiced accuracy of reporting and interpretation which is supposed to be the hallmark of anthropological research. We must keep what matters to us legally, separate from those things which matter to the people themselves. It is only by looking at the latter that we will be aided in the task of understanding how they do in fact order their universe and conceptual categories. Once we have done this it becomes clear what a witch and witchcraft are.

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References

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