RECENT WRITING ON WITCHCRAFT

Interest in the belief in and supposed practice of witchcraft, and in the attitude of persons in authority towards it - questions which are not always as clearly distinguished as they ought to be - is at a high level at the moment, to judge by the number of recent publications on these themes. The ASA monograph[1] planned to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of Witchcraft among the Azande is introduced by Mary Douglas with an evaluation of the successes and failures of British anthropology in this field that all of us might not share. It includes new data and some discussion of possible new lines of enquiry. British historians, examining the records in the light of anthropological theory, have switched their attention from the wickedness of judges who sentenced condemned persons to death for impossible crimes to the social context of accusations. Keith Thomas[2] has traced the history of magical beliefs in England through several centuries, and offered other reasons than rational conviction for the virtual disappearance of practices directed against witchcraft. Like the French historian Robert Mandrou[3], whose theme is the Loudon trials and the parallel cases that followed them, he summarizes the story of attempts to draw the line between the natural and the supernatural; in France this debate was conducted largely by lawyers. Alan Macfarlane[4] in England and Etienne Delcambre[5] rather earlier in France have made detailed examinations of cases recorded in limited areas; the former is interested in the social context, the latter in the belief system which allowed accusers to attach a religious value to confession, and accused to suppose that they might in fact be guilty. Structuralists and cognitive anthropologists have had their say.

All we like sheep have gone astray.

We should begin with Mary Douglas's review of the state of our studies. As she rightly reminds us, Evans-Pritchard treated witchcraft beliefs not only as an explanation for every kind of misfortune, but as a system of ideas that tolerated discrepancies and closed doors to enquiries such as might have invalidated the beliefs. She rebukes us for failing to pursue his questions but turning instead ('every one to his own way') to micropolitics - a field in which, in my view, the study of witchcraft accusations has been richly rewarding.

Dr. Douglas does not mention what some of us would regard as the next advance in the study of witchcraft beliefs, Monica Wilson's[6] recognition that they are inherent in the logic of many religions. She telescopes the thirty years from 1937 as a period in which we were all led astray by the 'crude functionalism' that Evans-Pritchard, she reminds us, himself denounced; the statement that she refers to[7] is not made in the context of witchcraft and is so general as not to constitute any kind of argument. For her, however, we have been inhibited, rather like the Azande, from fruitful enquiry by following what she calls the wrong paradigm. In her terms the paradigm is simultaneously, crude functionalism, liberal philosophy and the 'homeostatic' theory which, according to her, has dominated this field because its data have been drawn from Africa and not from Oceania. Although I would not claim to compete in the field of philosophy with the new anthropology, I certainly had the impression that a paradigm was something more specific than a general theory or an attitude of mind.

How have these three defects in our thinking contributed to our failure to understand witchcraft ? First, one must try to distinguish crude functionalism from the more refined functionalism which Dr. Douglas herself professes. In its crudest form, now long since rejected, it asserted that every small-scale society had attained a state of integration to which all its institutions contributed something indispensable. A less crude functionalist might argue that institutions would not continue to exist if they did not have some value - some more than illusory value - for the persons engaged in them. I doubt whether anyone would deny this; the argument is between those who think that every institution benefits all members of a society and those who hold that they are maintained for the benefit of a minority. This type of functional argument can draw support from both Evans-Pritchard and Monica Wilson: people cannot do without some explanation of misfortune, which includes supposed means of countering it, and people 'need' an explanation of unjustified misfortune which will sustain a belief in a moral universe. Dr. Douglas rejects the first hypothesis. 'People can do without explanations of misfortune', she says[8], and refers to the Mbuti pygmies. Here her ethnography is at fault; the pygmies do not believe in witchcraft, but they think they suffer misfortune when the forest is angry with them.[9] In discussion she prefers to cite the Hadza, on whom we still have little published material.

Liberal philosophy led us between the wars to try to avoid ethno-centric judgments, and to see the rationale of beliefs and practices that administrators and missionaries condemned outright. I think this was not misguided, and that there is just as much room for it now that the 'developing countries' are ruled by alienated members of their own populations. The 1935 number of Africa devoted to witchcraft, the contributors to which were not all anthropologists, noted the complaint of Africans that they were at the mercy of witches now that they were not allowed to take action against them. The writers did not expressly say that action against witches should be permitted, but they called attention to the conflict of values.

Dr. Douglas does not make it very clear what she means by the homoeostasis theory. I cannot understand her reference to the 'crude, rigid, homoeostatic control model'[10] to which she refers. Do these epithets describe a total theory of society ? I should much like to know whose it is - or was. If the word 'model' means anything more than a dominant metaphor, I should have thought the model-makers would be more likely to criticise functionalists for not having a model. But perhaps homoeostatic theory is different from functional theory. However, I thought the concept of homoeostasis was inherent in the idea of a system as something which maintains itself through change, and that it presupposed nothing about the satisfaction, or even the observable benefit, that the individual members of a society derive from it. Can it be that Dr. Douglas identifies a homoeostatic with a consensus theory ? What is even more curious is her argument that work in Melanesia would have destroyed such a theory because of the appearance there of cargo cults. I am quite unable to follow this argument, the more so as all Africanists interested in religion are acquainted with the work of Sundkler[11] and Balandier[12] on prophet religions, the former published before anything had been written about the war-time cargo cults. Is it suggested that we think Africans like having witches among them ? The fact that the African millennium often includes the destruction of all witches is familiar to most of us.

There seem really to be two types of argument that trouble Dr. Douglas: that ordeals were 'not as bad as all that', and that only a successful accusation of witchcraft could provide a justification for the division of a descent group. On the first point the evidence of ethnographic data is inconsistent, though there is no reason to suppose that it is particularly unreliable; why should not different peoples have had different kinds of ordeal ? Dr. Douglas has argued that decision by ordeal is a matter of pure chance; there is no guarantee that the ordeal would 'cut out dead wood' by killing off the old men who clung to power in the lineage; and it could lead to many deaths, as is evidenced by the hundreds of deaths among the Lele when ordeals were reintroduced at independence (but who counted them ?) One of the latest discussions of this subject is Dr. Anne Laurentin's book[13] on the Nzakara, the next-door neighbours of the Zande. She introduces it with the comment that 'ordeals have been discussed as barbarous customs, but they must be understood in their historical context'. Liberal philosophy? One of her most illuminating observations is that, in this kingdom based on conquest, rulers and subjects whom the ordeal condemned were differently treated. A free man would be carried off as soon as the poison began to take effect and given treatment supposed to make him recover. A slave would be deliberately finished off and his body given to the soldiers to eat. Certainly in this case the ordeal could not lead to a bloodless revolution; but the result was not a matter of pure chance either.

What is interesting in such new material as has been published on the ordeal is the evidence that it was part of a judicial process often accompanied with much ceremony. Dr. Laurentin remarks that it supported the authority of the judge by placing responsibility for decisions on an impersonal force which could not be attacked. Her detailed observations of rubbing-board and chicken oracles - both operated among the Nzakara by specialists as part of the public process - show that both can be manipulated to give the result desired. They should lead to closer enquiry elsewhere into the possibility and extent of conscious manipulation; of course we know already that people can evade an undesired answer by consulting a different oracle.

The argument that witchcraft accusations - and therefore the beliefs that justify them - have the function of making possible the breaking of otherwise indissoluble kinship ties was certainly once accepted, by myself among others. Nowadays it seems very naive. Every study of a segmentary lineage system insists on the necessary and continual fission of lineages; every beginner in kinship knows that everyday factors such as population growth and the widening of the gap between cousins in each generation contribute to this. But Middleton's[14], and even more Turner's[15], studies in micropolitics made it perfectly clear that accusations of witchcraft accompany these factors; they do not even precipitate fission. I should have thought that by now this was an established part of our theory.

Dr. Douglas's own theory seeks to show how the belief in witchcraft is used by 'people trying to control one another'[16], and how the nature of the belief is related to the kind of control which it allows. Sometimes the witch is thought of as an outsider; in this case accusations contribute to the definition of boundaries, or what old-fashioned people might call solidarity. If the witch is an insider, there are various possibilities. If accusations are

directed against political rivals, they result in a redefinition of faction boundaries (people stand up to be counted, or what ?) or in a realignment of faction hierarchy (the outs beat the ins?) or in a split. In the unique case (so far) of the New Guinea Highlands an accusation has all these consequences at once. But what does it mean to say they are functions ? Sometimes accusations are brought against 'dangerous deviants', whether rich men or beggars. Here their function is to control deviants, one of the crudest uses, I would have thought, of the word function.

The ambiguity of witchcraft power.

Much of the other recent writing is concerned with that body of theory that has not yet been generally found unsatisfactory. In line with present trends in anthropology, there is more emphasis on symbolism and the place of witchcraft beliefs in a wider ideology embracing all the various objects which are associated with witches in different cultures. One study of this kind has been made by Alan Harwood[17], who applies a structuralist analysis to the Safwa of Tanzania. Like many other peoples, they believe that witchcraft is the mode of attack of members of an in-group, sorcery that of outsiders; the in-group in this context is, of course, a descent group. He suggests that any society which recognised two major categories would believe that witchcraft was used within categories and sorcery across them; one might find that members of the same sex were supposed to bewitch one another while cross-sex 'mystical aggression' would be sorcery.

Harwood also argues, with evidence from a number of ethnographies, that the power used by witches is not conceived as inherently evil; it can be used in defence against witches. But this is not the same as saying the act of witchcraft is not inherently evil in a way that no other form of aggression is. One answer to his contention is given in an article by Luc de Heusch, which uses linguistic evidence, as Harwood himself does. de Heusch starts from the case of the Kongo, who use closely related words for the illegitimate action of sorcery/witchcraft and the curse which elders may legitimately call down on disrespectful juniors. Nevertheless they make an important distinction; they would not use the verbal form to describe the justifiable use of this 'power to act and not be seen', as Harwood calls it. Harwood's own material actually shows the existence of a similar distinction. The Safwa word for witchcraft power and its possessors is not derived, as are those of so many peoples, from the 'Ur-Bantu' root -dog-. They refer to itonga, which they categorize as good or bad, and to 'men of itonga' BUT, like their neighbours the Nyakyusa and like the Kongo, they have a verb which applies only to the evil use of this power: '-ly-', to eat, in the sense of mystically consuming a person's life-force. de Heusch goes on to give a neat structural opposition between

'Kindoki': an act of illegitimate sorcery/witchcraft (envoûtement) performed by a maleficent person, outside the bounds of law, against a victim who has social value and is protected by society

and

'Nloko': an action of legitimate sorcery/witchcraft performed by a beneficent person (elder) against an object (his junior) without social value, who has deliberately set himself outside the bounds of law. [18]

Is all this in the minds of the people who use these words, or are we again being shown how much cleverer they are than they realise ?

Pitt-Rivers' contribution to the ASA monograph describes a situation that has parallels in two of the ethnographies that I regard as classical, Monica Wilson's of the Nyakyusa and Middleton's of the Lugbara. The Nyakyusa believe that the power to bewitch and the power to defend reside in pythons which are mystically projected from the bodies of their owners and fight a continual nocturnal battle. The Lugbara have no such symbolism, but they hold that an act which is described in the same words in both cases is the invocation of ghosts to punish a malefactor, or witchcraft, according as it is or is not held to be justified. The Chiapas believe that everyone has a mystical animal counterpart, a nagual. The possessor of a powerful nagual can injure his fellows, and threats to do so are expressed as threats to punish. The threatened action would be called witchcraft if it came from someone who was not held to have the right to punish his victim. Unfortunately Pitt-Rivers does not give us the linguistic details. It seems that very large numbers of people are accused of witchcraft (unjustified 'mystical aggression', as Mary Douglas and Esther Goody would call it) and then assassinated.

The Gonja as described by the last-named believe that individuals can acquire the power to leave their bodies at night and attack others in animal shape. Like the Nyakyusa, they believe that this power can be used for defence as well as for attack. And they have their own way of discriminating between the legitimate and illegitimate use of witchcraft power. In their eyes it is universally employed by men in the process of competition for political office. One is reminded of Fortune's account of Dobu sorcery[19], which seems to have its counterpart among other New Guinea peoples; they take it for granted that everyone is practising sorcery against his neighbours. The sorcerer there is not a sinister being with peculiar mystical powers, but an ordinary man who knows the use of medicines. In Gonja no distinction is made between sorcery operating with medicines and witchcraft, without and logically for them a man who employs his mystical powers against a rival for office is also one who must have sacrificed one of his close kin so as to become able to turn into a lion, etc. Whenever a holder of political office dies, he is assumed to have been bewitched by a rival. Yet no attempt is made to identify, still less punish, the person responsible. In part this reflects the belief that the holders of political office need to have this mystical power in order to defend their subjects against its illegitimate use by others.

These others are almost invariably women. Women are thought to use witchcraft-power in ways for which there can be no justification, and extremely cruel punishments were sometimes inflicted on them in the past. So that if 'witchcraft' were defined as 'mystical aggression by women' one could still say it was 'unambiguously evil'. Women have no authority to punish, therefore their attacks on others can never be justified. They are, as Esther Goody puts it, 'beyond the bounds of tolerance'. A woman informant said to her 'We are witches because we are evil' - i.e. because we are aggressive without justification. Women's roles as Goody remarks, does not permit aggression; a hypothesis that might be added to the current ones about the frequent ascriptions of witchcraft to old women - that they are poor, so have to beg, so

may be spiteful, that they have nobody to defend them against accusations.

Mandrou writing of France, and Keith Thomas of England, have traced the progress of discussions among the educated minority which essentially concerned the status of the Devil - the question whether it was possible for him to confer powers of evil on his human subjects. This was a theological question, the answer to which must have affected the teaching of popular religion. It certainly affected the attitudes of judges and juries. But villagers, like Africans today, resented what they saw as a denial of justice when the repeal of the witchcraft Act in 1736 made it impossible to bring accusations. Again like Africans today, they turned to 'informal violence, counter-magic and the occasional lynching'.[20]

It is in connection with the decline of recourse to counter-magic that Thomas is able to offer confident explanations of a change in attitudes. He notes that from the sixteenth century onwards visitations of disaster that had been ascribed to witchcraft were either becoming less frequent or could be better provided against. Famine and plague were less common (though, as he remarks elsewhere, and as would also be true of Africa, these generalized disasters were not usually ascribed to witchcraft). Communications improved, and with them the possibility of identifying thieves and recovering stolen goods. Insurance against business risks, against fire, against death, gave a new kind of security. A greater general sense of security, then, led to a general decline in recourse to magical precautions (including counter-magic against unknown offenders). The magical practices were forgotten as much as discredited by argument. One may expect to see a parallel process in Africa, if someone ever finds the key to that improvement in living standards that we have been seeking ever since the march to independence began. But we can hardly expect a parallel in Africa's intellectual history. The discussion is over now, and Africans have been presented with the result by teachers whom they have had reason to regard with suspicion. Dr. Douglas's attempt to draw a contrast between the decline of witchcraft fears with economic development in England and the alleged increase in similar circumstances in Africa simply does not work (it may not be true, as is so often asserted, that they are increasing, but they certainly are not declining. A possible question to ask, if the answer could be found, would be whether events that used to be imputed to witchcraft are coming to be ascribed to natural causes; the fact that one could make a longer list of possible disasters tells us nothing about the amount of fear). Where Keith Thomas does offer us a parallel is in his reference to the popular reaction to the Witchcraft Act and to the effect of the Reformation in 'drastically reducing the degree of immunity from witchcraft which could be conveyed by religious faith alone'. [21]

Macfarlane's examination of the Essex records follows the anthropologist's principle that the status and status-relationship of accused and victim must be established in order to find what sort of relationships typically give rise to suspicion or accusation. He endorses the theory that this indicates what relationships are sources of tension, to which I would make the reply that an adequate analysis of social structure should indicate where tensions can be expected without the need of such a roundabout procedure. What is more interesting in his book is

his demonstration that the decline ~~first in convictions~~ and then in accusations of witchcraft predated such advances in knowledge as might logically be supposed to invalidate the belief in it. He notes that no explanation in general terms can account for the particularity of individual disaster, and asks whether circumstances had changed so that loss was more bearable. Here, in so far as material loss is concerned, he refers, like Thomas, to the possibility of defence against such loss by insurance. He ascribes the change in attitudes also to changes in social structure which in his view led first to the increase in accusations and then to their abandonment. Here he follows the line first suggested by Lienhardt[22], that witchcraft is suspected between persons whose relative status - I would prefer to say whose mutual obligations - is/are not clearly defined. This explanation accounts of course for the belief that people bewitch their kin; the mutual obligations of kin are in theory unlimited, but in practice individuals have to judge priorities. In the same way there was in an English village an undefined principle of charity towards the needy, which, as the acquisitive society emerged, began to conflict with the new principle that charity begins at home. The guilty conscience of the man who failed in charity led him to attribute his misfortunes to the poor old woman whose request he had refused. As values changed and it was no longer considered to be the duty of the individual Christian to succour the unfortunate, but rather of representatives of the collectivity such as Poor Law Guardians, no more guilt attached to the refusal of alms.

Confessions

Possibly it is in our attitude to confessions that we have been most ethnocentric. That anyone would voluntarily confess to patently impossible acts seems at first sight absurd. But we have to take care what actions the accused person is confessing. The later developments of European witch beliefs include the manifest impossibilities - to us - of the pact with the Devil and the Black Mass. It is certainly hard to believe that people could be persuaded by suggestion - as opposed to torture - that they had met on a mountain top and danced naked with numbers of their acquaintances. But supposing one seriously believes in the Devil? Supposing one believes that dreams reveal truth, or that in some mystical way one has actually experienced what one dreams?

I mentioned earlier the official Christian attitude towards confession as an act which, though it must lead to a person's death, could yet save him (more likely her) from an eternal torment that all believed in. Delcambre in his articles on witch trials in Lorraine makes the illuminating comment that the torture of accused witches was conceived as a form of ordeal, which God would enable an innocent person to resist (though not without feeling the pain); of course this belief has its counterpart in the idea that the Devil too could give his followers strength against torture. Nevertheless, some accused offered to undergo torture, as Africans submit themselves to the ordeal, in the confidence that it would prove their innocence. Few resisted physical maltreatment which was greater than anything known in Africa, but many recanted later, fearing damnation for perjury.

Yet some seem to have made sincere confessions, some no doubt in the abnormal mental conditions to which Margaret Field[23] ascribes all confessions of witchcraft. Some begged the pardon of those they were supposed to have harmed. Some admitted to part of the charges

against them while denying the rest. One is on record as saying that she had 'no wish to put any livestock to death but only people who were angry with her'.[24]

It is here that we find the point of contact with African confessions. At any rate in the field where it is believed that witchcraft can be involuntary, depending on no deliberate action (and this field is geographically so wide that one cannot abandon the analytical distinction between witchcraft and sorcery), accused persons must always be uncertain of their own innocence. Evans-Pritchard has made this point himself, though not in the context of confessions. Morton-Williams' account of the Atinga witch-finders[25] refers to old women saying 'If they all say I am a witch I suppose I must be'. Hilda Kuper's play[26] - in which the protagonist is a childless young woman accused of bewitching her co-wife's child to death - ends convincingly with the line 'I am a witch in my heart'. Few of us can honestly disclaim any ill-will towards the people we quarrel with.

Special cases of confession discussed in the ASA volume are those of the neighbouring Banyang and Bangwa, both of whom believe in witchcraft through the activity of were-animals. In both these belief systems it is the sickness of the supposed witch (believed to have been injured in were-form), and not of a victim, that calls for confession, which is held to be the only way to recovery. The Bangwa ascribe these were-animals to children, and if a child is ill in any of the ways that are supposed to indicate injury to the were-animal, he is badgered to confess. That some do claim responsibility for the sickness or death of siblings or fathers would surprise no psychologist. But others are clever at thinking of more or less innocuous adventures of their were-animals. Banyang confessions are often made in extremis, in the hope of escaping death. They are admissions of the possession of were-animals, not of causing specific damage - 'a kind of blanket guilt'.[27] They are not sought in order to explain misfortunes suffered by others, nor associated with particular quarrels.

Repentance and Reform.

The ASA volume ends rather inconclusively with an article by Beidelman suggesting new lines of study. Like Mary Douglas he thinks functionalism has put us on the wrong track, but his criticism is the contrary of what hers appears to be. In his view we have thought the belief in witchcraft needed explaining because of its dysfunctional consequences. He seems to be arguing that this is why we ask why people hold these beliefs, and certainly we do not ask in quite the same way why they believe in other non-empirical beings or forces. But in the main what he is recommending is a closer scrutiny of a larger number of case-histories, and more attention to the social psychology of attitudes towards aggression. We should also seek parallels with our own ideas of mental illness and treatment, and consider more carefully 'the delusional aspects of behaviour associated with witchcraft and sorcery';[28] and should ask how the minds of witches are supposed to differ from those of saints on the one hand and madmen on the other. And finally 'our analytical notions regarding witches, sorcerers and other malevolent beings require a re-assessment which will take considerably more account of moral ambiguities'.

All these new questions are to be welcomed; I am less sure than Dr. Douglas and Dr. Beidelman that the answers will make it necessary to scrap everything that has been done in the last thirty-five years.

Lucy Mair.

Notes

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10. Witchcraft Confessions, p.xxv (not directly quoted).
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16. Witchcraft Confessions, p.xxv.
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18. Pourquoi l'Epouser ? 1971, p.173.
19. Sorcerers of Dobu, 1932.
20. Religion and the Decline of Magic, p.583. The repeal of the Witchcraft Act did not, as Gluckman states, make accusation a crime as did colonial legislation in Africa. It simply removed witchcraft from the catalogue of crimes.
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