

The Reality of Witchcraft

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Is witchcraft real or is it unreal, just imagined, without any realistic background? This question puzzles me since I have been confronted with it when doing ethnographic fieldwork with the Mafa in North Cameroon.

In 1981 I visited the Mafa-land for the first time. I went there 16 times since and spent about 4 years of my life there, my stays varying between 1 and 7 months. I have a house in the village of Guzda without currency or water. I have been adopted at three occasions and I was given a premature infant for adoption. Thus I am affiliated in several parental contexts.

When I began my fieldwork I was equipped with the “normal” Western rational view of the world: I requested the women in the mountain villages to tell me their life stories. Soon I tumbled over the fact that almost every single vita contained at least one case of witchcraft.

European newspapers as well as the internet are full of atrocious stories concerning African witchcraft: families accused of witchcraft activities fleeing from being lynched, albinos being killed for the use of their body parts as magic medicine, children being abandoned by their parents because some clairvoyant identified them as being a witch. It is estimated that between 60 and 80 % of the sub-Saharan African population is convinced of the power of witches, irrespective of their ethnicity, social stratum or academic status. Sorcery¹ plays a role in the still powerful secret societies, in folkloristic mask-dances or in Satanist cults, in politics (even presidents require the féticheurs' advice), and in football, when for example the adversary's goal is being cursed.

„There is a lack of rational counterforce, Aufklärung (elucidation), reliable information”, can be read in *ZEIT online* (15. September 2005), and this is the current Eurocentric view on the prevalence of witchcraft in Africa. However, living among the Mafa of whom nearly a hundred percent are convinced that there is a permanent threat of ill-willing neighbors, I came to ask myself: is it perhaps us, the Europeans, who lack information? Do we really know what is happening between people in a society with totally different socialization processes, with a different accessibility to each other's mental state of mind? I got the information that the Mafa act on the assumption that 6 out of ten people are born with what they call *midè* (witchcraft, the power to have the second sight, to commit magic acts, or to consume the vitality of another person). Of those two are said never to use their ability, one becomes clairvoyant, divinator or healer, but three use their force to harm other

¹ In the English literature a distinction is made between witchcraft (a person's ill-doing by the mere force of one's mind) and sorcery (evil deeds committed with means of magic substances usually accompanied by ceremonies). In African languages this distinction is not made, that is why I use sorcery and witchcraft synonymously.

people. This means that about 30 percent of the Mafa population is held to practice evil magic.

I came to have my Copernican shift: I asked myself: Do I do ethnographic research among the Mafa because I already know everything the world is about or because I want to learn something new. I had caught myself as putting the information I was given into two drawers: the first one containing all the statements I believed as being true or real and the other one all that was unbelievable for me. If for example a Mafa woman being asked about her life story told me that she had left her husband because she was beaten too much, I believed her: in my society, too, women leave their husbands because they are beaten. If on the other hand a woman said she left her husband because all her babies died due to the fact that her husband's brother consumed them mentally, I nodded understandingly; but I lied at her, thinking by myself: 'Poor woman, you could have stayed if you only had known better.'

One day I could no longer tolerate my untruthfulness. I realized that I didn't take my interview-partners seriously. This contradicted my professional ethic which implied when doing research among people of another culture I had to meet them at face level. So I decided to change my approach towards them. Henceforth I adopted the following attitude towards my informants: 'What you tell me is your truth. I want to find out what general truth is in it and what its relevance is for me.' From that day on, I realized that my questions were answered much less reluctantly.

It was all but easy to face people of the scientific community with this new attitude towards my interview-partners' assertions – and till today I have most unfruitful (but at times also fruitful) discussions with colleagues of various academic disciplines. The normal "scientific" approach to the African traditional and in many respects still prevailing view of the world is to put statements on it into quotation marks or to add one of the attributes which are intentionally pejorative, like: "as-it-were", "supposedly", "allegedly" "believed to", "it is said" etc. Not holding the mainstream opinion on how to interpret witchcraft, sorcery, charms, fetishes, face-to-face-encounters with the deceased or with spirits, spirit possession and traditional healing ceremonies, I usually have to justify my approach of NOT adding one of those degradations when referring to my informants' experiences. Putting their statements as a matter of fact, I am quickly disqualified as irrational, unscientific, or esoteric - at the best.

Yet, how can I explain "magic"? - to resume all these various transcendental that is on a different level of reality acting or so-called extrasensory phenomena in one single term. The effects of them astound nearly every European, whether an academic or not, who spends a long enough period among the African native population.

Ethnologists as well as other researchers whose concern it is to understand and to describe other cultures immanently, that is from the point of view of the others' world outlook, lack a basis of understanding, if confronted with phenomena which from their own point of view seem irrational or which, according to their comprehension, cannot possibly have happened

at all. Rationality, the explanation of things by means of ratio, is not offering an instrument of their analysis. The question remains: Are those experiences many Europeans go through or about which they learn from people they trust real or are they unreal?

Take the German translation *Wirklichkeit* for reality. *Wirklichkeit* implies that something *wirkt*, i.e. that it is **effective**. When we witness effects deriving from mental processes or are told about them by people we trust, e.g. a person falling ill or dying after some ritual has been performed in order to achieve this, are we not obligated to find an explanation for it – instead of saying this has not happened? Many academics agree with me, but in order not to lose their rationale, their ratio as the supreme judge about reality and imagination, they have invented a number of explanatory patterns, each of them meaning in consequence: What I have seen or what my vis-à-vis described to me may function for them, because they are part of a system in which the reality of such phenomena is consensus, magic works where everybody believes in it, but for me enlightened individual, this has no relevance unless I “go native”.

Let us consider these explanatory models in some detail:

1. The British social anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard published in 1937 his highly influential book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford University Press). He was to set the standard for the **functionalist interpretation** of witchcraft. According to him, witchcraft has to be considered a mechanism to solve social conflicts. Maladjusted members of a society wanting to harm a person or the community by committing mischievous deeds are identified by supernatural means, i.e. by divination, and then punished by the community. Social peace is thus reestablished. The oracle, which in Azande society is playing a substantial role in regulating social affairs, is interpreted by Evans-Pritchard as one possible way of organizing one’s everyday life, just as a European uses his notebook. In 1965 he writes: “Most important ... is the usefulness of witchcraft in explaining why an event occurred. Science cannot tell us what happened, beyond mentioning the laws of probability.” He gives an example: A person is killed by a collapsing hangar. The hangar collapses because its pillar was damaged by termites. So far the European and Zande interpretations are congruent. But the Zande add: The reason why this specific person was sitting underneath the hangar and got struck is due to witchcraft. Or: Why a serpent bites this specific person and not another-one can only be explained by the ill-will of a sorcerer. Evans-Pritchard continues: “The Azande find both comfort and an opportunity to retaliate in their explanation of why an unfortunate and unusual event took place.” He states: “It is an inevitable conclusion from Zande descriptions of witchcraft that it is not an objective reality.”² Somewhere else, however, Evans Pritchard reveals his being puzzled by a phenomenon which he finds hard to reduce to coincidence:

² Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1965: *Witchcraft explains unfortunate events*, in: Lessa, William A. and Evan Z. Vogt (eds.): *Reader in Comparative Religion*, New York: 328-332

"I have only once seen witchcraft on its path. ... I was walking in the garden ... when I noticed a bright light passing at the back of my servant's hut toward the homestead of a man called Tupoi... I followed its passage until a grass screen obscured the view. I ran quickly through my hut to the other side in order to see where the light was going, but I could not regain sight of it. I knew that only one man, a member of my household had a lamp that might have given off so bright a light, but next morning he told me that he had neither been out late at night nor had he used his lamp. Shortly afterwards, on the same morning an old relative of Tupoi and an inmate of his homestead died. This event fully explained the light I had seen. I never discovered its real origin, which was possibly a handful of grass lit by someone on his way to defecate, but the coincidence of the direction along which the light moved and the subsequent death accorded well with Zande ideas."³

A very common explanation for witchcraft condemnations is the assessment that it serves to identify an outsider or an outsider-group for an anti-social deed. This is known as **scapegoatism**. A community, not being able to explain draughts, destructive storms, epidemics like cholera or pest in terms of causality accuses some marginal group as being responsible for the calamity. They persecute those alleged culprits. As time goes by, the emergency diminishes the persecution as a result as well, and social peace is restored. This way of interpretation, still prevalent concerning the reasons for the so-called European witch-craze, is also functionalistic in character.

2. In a similar way witchcraft is described by structuralists as a **symbolic system** which represents power and powerlessness, in which people adhering to this system roam about. The powerful are disempowered by the powerless or enlarge their power at the cost of others.

Thus the British anthropologist Roger Needham argues that culture is largely a consequence of imagination, rather than of cognitive processes. "It is the result of a natural imaginative impulsion to symbolize social statuses and their attributes in particular ways. Witchcraft is a complex of images and organizing ideas that occurs almost world-wide. The witch's behaviour is an inversion of normal conduct and the structure of witch-beliefs is a relation of conceptual opposition – the complex is used to symbolize the antithesis of morality."⁴ To Needham, the witch-image is an archetype, a primordial mental image, a psychic constant produced by the human brain.

The German ethnologist Michael Schönhuth puts it this way: „Witches embody, what a human being by definition of culture is not supposed to be. They are inflicted with attributes which are not in fact available for humans, and act out what man should definitely not do. They are, ontologically speaking, a negative category of existence, they are, morally

³ Evans-Pritchard 1957: A Seance among the Azande. in: Tomorrow, Quarterly Review of Psychological Research, New York, Vol. 5 n°4: 13

⁴Needham, Roger 1987: Primordial Characters, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 47f

speaking, the perversion of societal ethics, and they are, symbolically spoken, the embodiment of the inverted world.”⁵

Schönhuth walks in the footsteps of the famous French anthropologist Claude Lévy-Strauss: “Only the history of the symbolic function can allow us to understand the intellectual condition of man, in which the universe is never charged with sufficient meaning and in which the mind always has more meanings available than there are objects to which to relate them. Torn between these two systems of reference - the signifying and the signified - man asks magical thinking to provide him with a new system of reference, within which the thus-far contradictory elements can be integrated. But we know that this system is built at the expense of the progress of knowledge. ... We must not permit the individual, whether normal or neurotic, to repeat this collective misadventure.”⁶

The structuralists state in fact: As a symbol represents something and is not the thing itself, witchcraft is not considered a real phenomenon, but one that only takes place in imagination, in the heads of those adhering to this system, and – as Lévy-Strauss puts it unmistakably: “... this system is built at the expense of the progress of knowledge.”

3. The most frequent explanation for the functioning of witchcraft is the psychological interpretation, which I would call **psychologicistic** to emphasize that it overdraws psychological effects. The argument goes: People believe in something, so it will happen: the so-called “self fulfilling prophecy”. The literature is full of examples which seem to justify this assessment. Someone learns about someone else’s bad intention or a curse towards him, so he becomes ill or even dies. Yet what about all the other examples (of which I have heard many) when the person doesn’t know about a planned attack against him and before long he dies nevertheless? It well happens that someone announces to his enemy: “You will see!” Then the respective person may well be killed by the mere fear of an attack. But usually ceremonies as acts of witchcraft or defense from witchcraft are performed clandestinely, and even so the results are most frequently as predicted. The Mafa for example know a form of counter-sortilege where a sorcerer is commissioned to kill someone (whose identity may be known or not) in order to protect the client’s family. He puts some charms (magic plants, stones or other substances) in a black bowl filled with water. Then he summons the person who has committed this evil to his client. After a while a voice answers out of the bowl. The sorcerer pulls something out (invisible to those who are not witches themselves) and intersects its throat. The attendees see the water adopting a reddish color. A day or so after a person in the village (who now is identified as the aggressor) dies from a sore throat or of suffocation. Can it be interpreted as coincidence?

⁵ Schönhuth, Michael 1992: Das Einsetzen der Nacht in die Rechte des Tages. Hexerei im symbolischen Kontext afrikanischer und europäischen Weltbildes, Münster Hamburg, LIT-Verlag: vii.

⁶ Lévi-Strauss, Claude 1967: The Sorcerer and his Magic, in: John Middleton (ed.): Magic, Witchcraft and Curing, University of Texas Press Austin and London: 40

Academics speak of witch-believing societies: Those are societies in which it is consensus to believe in the force of magic acts. A person can become ill or die just because she or he believes she will. Those scholars' assumption is that it is the belief which has such a strong effect on a person. But what exactly causes the person's becoming ill and dying? The term adopted to describe this phenomenon is **self-suggestion**. Witchcraft, however, works also through suggestion by someone else: Someone is becoming ill or dying because someone else has influenced him without his knowing. This then it is a form of **suggestion**.

We deal with autosuggestion and suggestion in our everyday life: Just presently there is an appeal in the Leipzig trams for people suffering from severe back-ache to volunteer for a "blind study". It is explained that half of the test persons will receive a new medicament and half of them will be given "placebos", that is pills without any medical ingredient. It is well known that sometimes patients given a placebo treatment will have a perceived or actual improvement in his medical condition, a phenomenon commonly called the **placebo effect**.

People explaining witchcraft in the psychologistic way don't ask the question the question of whether witchcraft functions or not, but they suppose that it functions because a person or the community believes that it does. But does this explain **how** it works, by what mechanisms it can be explained in terms of natural science? What about animals that go mad or die through witchcraft attacks?

4. Scholars attempting to go beyond the psychological interpretation of witchcraft – which they do not accept as sufficiently explaining what is actually happening when some magic act is being performed - attempt to approach the phenomena of witchcraft in a new way: they call it **constructivism**: Witchcraft is considered to be culturally produced, i.e. constructed. It functions because common sense has agreed on a common view of the world. Here witchcraft is considered as real, it is recognized as existent and effective, an illness being caused by a person's magic act is not reduced to be the victim's state of mind. The Swiss ethnologist David Signer represents this view. He says that witchcraft functions only in a certain socio-cultural system. He writes: „it is insufficient to interpret witchcraft psychologically as an individual's projection, as imagination, paranoia or regression. Witchcraft may be inexistent from a materialist point of view, but to declare it as phantasmatic, and as it were not comprehensible in terms of social science, does not do justice to the African societal reality and thus turns out to be ethnocentric. Witchcraft is a reality – not a material one, but a social.”⁷

This point of view admits that magic does have effects – not only by internalizing someone's intents or one's own suggestions, but it works on a social level. Yet, I ask– as before – does this really explain what it is that works?

All four different interpretations of the effects of magic on an individual or on a community by European (or let's say Western) scholars come to the same point: The effects of magic

⁷ Signer, David 2003: Hexerei und Heilung in Westafrika. Habilitationsschrift

acts as such are recognized. But as this admission does not accord with the main-stream rationalistic view of the world, there has to be found a way of explaining them away. They are regarded as belonging to a belief system that has no relevance to Western modern society. It is restricted to the OTHER society; it is ANOTHER way of thinking or seeing things. In the last consequence all the cited Western academics mean to say: MAGIC IS NOT REAL, it is IMAGINED.

One reason why I came to rethink the relevance of the main-stream interpretation of magic was the following: I was puzzled by the question: Why is it that the conceptions of witchcraft are so similar in societies which cannot possibly have adopted their ideas one from the other? We find a great deal of congruence in this respect between different parts of the world and across various historical epochs. I will list but a few of those striking similarities between the assertions of non-Western societies of today and those prevalent in Europe at the period of the witches' persecution:

1. Witchcraft is a **craft that some-one is born with** or not.

2. Transmittance

In order to practice it, the adepts either have to be seduced or they are taught how to use their forces or both.

3. Gender

Women are more frequently witches than men, but men are usually the more powerful and more vicious practitioners of bad magic.

4. Leaving the body

Witches can fly: i.e. they leave their bodies via the solar plexus (the body staying behind like being lifeless) and surmount long distances with their astral corps or their vital force. They can enter closed rooms and harm their victims. Witches having left their body can be seen as an oval or round light. They can meet and hold congregations either to just amuse themselves or to plan communal evil acts. This is also known as Hexensabbat or esbat.

5. Animal metamorphosis

Witches can metamorphose into animals like leopards, wolves, mice, cats, birds, toads, in order to move around and to commit their un-deeds in the shape of this animal.

6. The capabilities

- Witches can influence the weather. They can send storms or draughts to damage the field fruits, or they can send the necessary rain or sunshine.

- They are capable to bring about someone's poverty or wealth.

- By means of specific plants or inorganic materials and in connection with prayers or dicta they can summon diseases or healing.

- They are capable of banning and binding: arresting thieves at their site of crime or they can inflame or cool down love-passions.
- They can cause fertility or sterility of man and animal.
- With their evil eye they can send diseases or death to man and animal.
- Body-excretions – sweat, menstrual blood, hair, nails, dejection or urine – are used for magical medicines or witches appoint them to harm people by hiding them somewhere (dirt-charm).
- In order to strengthen themselves witches consume the vitality force of other persons, most often of children of their relatives or neighbours.

7. Countermagic

- People who are afraid of witchcraft attacks wear amulets or commit a sorcerer to perform a counter-magic ceremony, with the intention of causing the attacking person's death.

There is one assessment **unique for Europe** at the epoch of the witches' persecution which can only be interpreted from the then valid view of the world: Witches were supposed not to act on their own behalf but as the Devil's agents. Their goal was said to be the annihilation of Christianity. The European "witch-craze" came about at a time when the Catholic Church was threatened by severe crises (heresy, schisms, anti-popes, reformation).

The epidemic persecution – with the densest incidences of killing those being defined as witches between 1489 (the appearance of the *Malleum Maleficarum* by the Dominican monk Istitoris) and 1630 (during the 30-year war) - was legitimated by both the Catholic and the later existent Protestant Churches by the claim that Christianity had to be liberated from the Devil and his agents. At the end of this wave the result was the suppression of the pagan view of the world namely a pantheistic and animistic religion in which a great number of spirits or deities inhabiting the Heaven, the Earth, the water, the plants or rocks etc. were worshipped, in which customary law was valid, in which medicine was practiced by popular healers, in which knowledge of nature was won by observation and experience - just like in traditional African religions and world concepts today (of which I know the one of the Mafa).

Yet, the witches' persecution aimed at achieving more than just converting the pagans. It is until now often misunderstood as a dark chapter in the Middle Ages. Its main impact was in the early modern era. The stakes on which the "witches" were burning went along with the birth of modern science, the emerging universities, with centralistic state systems, with enlightened philosophy (Descartes 1596 – 1650) with the questioning of the heliocentric world view (Copernicus) and so forth. The end of witches' accusations came about as late as the 18th century, but there were also condemnations at the beginning of the 19th century. The goal of the witches' persecution can be derived from the results which it has brought about. The world had changed, and I will state only very briefly a few of the transformations:

Concerning **religion**: The centralistic churches of both confessions were the only authorities to judge which spiritual experience is God's gift and which is Devil's deception.

With regard to the **political** system: Power is centralized, the tribal societies have been abolished.

With regard to **law**: Jurisdiction is entirely in the hands of the Ruling Authorities.

With regard to **science**: Only what is taught at universities is recognized as knowledge, neither an individual's personal experience nor people's empiric attainments are acknowledged.

With regard to **medicine**: popular medicine is forbidden or has at best become discredited (until today).

With regard to **psychology**: Individualism has arisen as opposed to the former group-ego.

Individuality, however, means being isolated from the group and is not necessarily followed by the individual being the author of social action. Personal experience concerning the knowledge of nature including human nature which does not go conform to the main-stream thinking is considered as irrelevant and notably wrong, unless it is authorized through officially recognized studies at universities or institutes. The individual is **other-directed**.

A very important branch of modern economy does nothing else than figuring out ways of making people buy or do things which do not correspond to their very own needs or wants. And – which goes with it – people believe that they desire what they are made to want. Do we here find just another mechanism of suggestion, i.e. witchcraft? Would the industry spend billions of Euros for advertizing, if the leading heads were not convinced of the power of suggestion? The established science of psychology studies the mechanism of suggestion which influences a person's thinking, feeling, wanting and acting in bypassing the person's ratio. Is our society as a whole really governed by ratio, as those scholars propose who bewail the system of witchcraft believing societies as being built "at the expense of the progress of knowledge"?

Psychic illnesses which are hard to identify and even harder to heal, are treated in making conscious emotions which a person has repressed as non-acceptable. Therapy-concepts propose to take patients away from their social surrounding where the ill-making factors or persons are to be found. The power of the gaze everyone knows; we "feel" when someone is looking at us from behind. What, if people learn to concentrate upon various ways of influencing someone directly and if they direct it willingly and consciously towards other persons? Would they declare it, if they did? Do we share the toddler's belief that things we do not see or know about don't exist? There are textbooks and clandestine schools teaching magic. There are secret societies whose members are implementing supernatural means to achieve their ends – and they are most powerful. We know from historians that Roosevelt was member of the Free Masons – and the US-Dollar-note still is signed with the Free

Masons' symbols (the pyramid and the eye at its top) . Are we sure present day leading politicians or industrialists are not members of some secret society? Indian Gurus amaze their audience by demonstrating their art of dematerialization and rematerialization. Is this all humbug? Or do we find a solution in particle physics which teaches us that all material is vacillation? What consequences do we draw out of modern physics and philosophy for our everyday view of the world?

What exactly is witchcraft or what is happening, when someone performs a magic act? "**Magic or sorcery** is an attempt to understand, experience and influence the world using rituals, symbols, actions, gestures and language", thus Wikipedia defines. If we can accept that the human mind is capable of influencing other people, there is no principal difference to agree to the possibility to enlarge those forces by exercises.

One of the very puzzling phenomena "dirt magic" – i.e. the permanent grip on a person by possessing some "dirt" of hers – may find an explanation with reference to the holistic order of the universe which the physicist David Bohm elaborates. In a hologram the whole exists in each of its particles and each particle contains all aspects of the whole. Thus a person capable of it may well make use of it.

The witches' persecution in Europe was brutal and effective. Since then all spiritual experience – at that time defined as the Devil's delusion – has been suppressed. Children are taught to mistrust their inner voices and sensations which do not go conform to what is considered as normal. The witches' persecution has desensitized the European population. It is also a consequence of this that one's natural defense mechanisms against heteronomy are weakened. This renders people susceptible to authoritarian systems.

In view of other cultures we can learn to open ourselves for other levels of perception. It is totally wrong to believe that witchcraft on other continents is only recognized as functioning by backward peasants. On the contrary: non-European scholars, judges and politicians are seriously dealing with it and emphasize that offenders and victims come from all social strata. It may be uncomfortable for the ruling class and for the Churches to have to deal with autonomous individuals who do not ask what of their very own perception and thinking is acceptable and what not. The main-stream view of the world has not gone beyond that of the end of the witches' persecution: There is the Newton concept of natural science on the one hand which is taught as classical physics at school, and the Churches on the other which teach people what they have to believe. Particle physics come to incredible results, yet no attempts are made to integrate those findings in the everyday view of the world. Neither a person's own spiritual or holistic perception nor the very advanced physics and philosophy – apart from a scientific community acting in an ivory-tower - are applied to interpret the world anew. Why?