

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the Other



Devil worship, black magic and witchcraft are the subjects of discussion in this book. The approach that informs them shows its anthropological nature in three basic elements. First, in various ways the chapters all display the comparative method, the long-accepted means by which anthropology has drawn conclusions about particular societies, tested generalisations and theories against this ethnography and thus contributed to the body of theories that explain society in a general sense. Secondly, they consider the anthropologist's perpetual problem, which is that they are members of a particular society themselves and cannot entirely divest themselves of its ways of thinking and feeling in order to achieve the neutral, unbiased approach to their material that is the profession's ideal. Despite themselves, they may distort their understanding of their subject matter by an ethnocentric attitude to the other societies they study. Finally, the chapters share a subject matter that exemplifies culturally shaped but changeable ideas and behaviour, and the way in which both of these react to the social, political and economic background that forms their context.

It is well known that anthropological research has long been based on comparisons, which sets ethnographic descriptions beside each other in order first to understand the individual societies, and second to contribute to more general and abstract theories of society. The comparative method has characterised the subject since its inception and has been accepted as a parallel to the scientific methods being developed in other branches of knowledge. Indeed it is described by Peel as *Anthropology's Charter* (forthcoming). Durkheim was an early example; he called the comparative method 'the only one suited to sociology' (Durkheim (1895) 1938: 125),¹ by which he meant all social sciences. Half a century later, Goody wrote: 'comparison is an essential means of testing propositions and theories about mankind' (Goody 1969: 8; see also Fortes 1953: 130).

Comparison was first used by the evolutionists to construct a hypothetical development of social man, but when later their theory was rejected, the method was not. Since then it has been used by proponents of a variety of theories in anthropology that differ from each other, making clear

the independence of this method from any determination by the character of the theories that were based on using it. The comparative method has continued to support anthropological work since then, but the collection of data for it has been much developed since its original use in the nineteenth century. In particular, research in the field was introduced and is now essential to it.² One of the earliest to use field research in the study of witchcraft was Evans-Pritchard (1937) It was only his daily observations among the Azande that allowed him to draw the important conclusion that ‘the Zande actualises these beliefs rather than intellectualises them, and their tenets are expressed in socially controlled behaviour rather than in doctrines’ (ibid.: 82–83). He thus initiated a whole new approach to ethnographic research by making clear that observation of behaviour as well as information about the ideas that motivated it was necessary to understand other societies, and in particular their concept of witchcraft. Beliefs must be studied in action and in context. Today this precept may sometimes be ignored, to the detriment of the analyses concerned. In the chapters that follow, the importance of the relation of action to ideas will become clear.

Research in the field has faced some anthropologists with serious dilemmas as a result of the confrontation between their own modes of thought and those they are studying. Gilbert Lewis, a medical doctor as well as an anthropologist, called his account of the terminal illness of Dauwaras, a New Guinea villager, ‘A Failure of Treatment’. His medical knowledge and that of the local clinic could not account for, or cure, this fatal illness (Lewis 2000: 99–101), which the villagers attributed to several different malevolent spiritual forces.³ The death left Lewis with a sense of failure, and he wrote: ‘Some of the insights came out of interactions which were not easy or uncontested. The question of how far to go [in intervening] was occasionally distressing, for example in cases where I thought (or think) about things that could have been avoided or should not have happened. That question, sadly, hangs over Dauwaras’s illness and his death’ (ibid.: 16).

Some years later in South Africa, a totally different social context, Isak Niehaus (2013) observed his Western-educated research assistant and friend, Jimmy Mohale, gradually come to believe that what they both knew was AIDS had been inflicted on him by the witchcraft of his father (2013: 163, 168). Despite Niehaus urging him to seek Western medical treatment, he refused and eventually died. It is clear that, like Lewis, Niehaus felt the pain of an outcome that was, to in his eyes, unnecessary. The situations of these two anthropologists, perhaps more extreme than those of others who have reflected on beliefs in magic as they have encountered it, derived from the intimacy of research in the field. Both anthropologists,

however, retain their own culture's thinking, and this inability to adopt local understandings of the events adds an extra poignancy to their feelings.

The experiences of these anthropologists would seem to confirm the view that 'Witchcraft is a notion so foreign to us that it is hard for us to appreciate ... convictions about its reality' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 540). Similar statements of unbelief have been made repeatedly over the years that followed (for example: Middleton and Winter 1963: 1; Douglas 1970: xxxiv; Macfarlane 1985, pb. 1989: 57). Recently, however, there have been suggestions that some anthropologists have come close to believing that witchcraft was an empirical reality (Favret-Saada 1980 and Stoll and Olkes 1987 cited by Niehaus), but it has not been argued that witchcraft cannot be understood without accepting the validity of its tenets.⁴ On the contrary, Niehaus has stated that 'believing is not a prerequisite for understanding' (2013: 21–22) and clearly both he and Lewis understood the beliefs of the communities in which they were involved. What is being said is that it is possible to take a detached view of the beliefs of other societies and still come to a complete understanding of them.

It is also general knowledge that in the past beliefs in witchcraft did characterise European societies. Historians point out that they did not completely die out until the end of the nineteenth century although the incidence of accusations declined greatly (Thomas 1970: 70). One response to the apparent absence of modern material on Western beliefs to compare with beliefs in witchcraft is thus to go back three hundred or more years and use material on the witch beliefs and witch-hunts of the early modern period.⁵ A conference held by the Association of Social Anthropologists in 1968 brought historians and anthropologists together for the first time to consider such a comparison.⁶ Thereafter, historians began to use anthropological theories of witchcraft to illuminate their own material, with which comparisons were also made by anthropologists subsequently (see essays by Brown, Cohn, Macfarlane and Thomas, in Douglas 1970).⁷ By comparing members of these twentieth-century societies with the communities of three hundred years earlier they were in fact close to confirming the view of evolutionists that magic was primitive thought which was superseded by religion (Frazer 1922) or by science (Tylor 1871).

When the juxtaposition of magic with science or religion was first used it was to demonstrate the superior intellectual claims of the latter and to show that an evolutionary distance separated 'modern' thinking from such erroneous beliefs as were found in 'primitive' society. Levy-Bruhl in his early writings (e.g. 1920) supported the idea that magic exemplified 'primitive thinking' which was 'pre-logical'. Evans-Pritchard's demonstration⁸

that the Azande thought quite logically, although on some questions they started from different assumptions, was written in part to refute this view. Today, despite changes in theoretical approaches, the passage of centuries may still be ignored in order to compare the similarities between the witch-hunting in the past of Europe and the witchcraft in the present of other countries without taking into account the passage of time, with its changes to the context of both. Among the public in general, the relegation of belief in witchcraft to 'superstition' continues to come close to classing it as 'primitive'.⁹

The first historical comparisons were flawed by the selection for comparison of only those features of past European culture that seem to resemble, in their form, witch beliefs in the (much later) Third World. In those early studies, (the Christian) religion was excluded from consideration. Thus, in his discussion of 'The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft', the historian Keith Thomas argued that the concept of the Devil as the god of witches was never central to English ideas, although he also acknowledged that an accusation of witchcraft might be perceived as one of Devil worship "by interested lawyers or clergy" (Thomas 1970: 49). Nevertheless he explicitly excluded these ideas that derived from contemporary Christianity, which were more wide-spread in Europe, in order to distinguish witchcraft from religion (ibid.). His argument, detailed elsewhere (1973), was that both witchcraft and magic were superseded by the development of medicine, law and the Church that offered more effective solutions to individual problems of illness, misfortune, wrongdoing or conflict.

Later historians of the witch-hunts such as Ankarloo and Henningsen (1990) established that it was not the spread of rational thinking – that is, a change in intellectual culture, or the advent of 'science' – that ended the witch-hunts, but the actions of the authorities, both of Church and State (see Henningsen 1980). It was the Church that had spread the belief that the wise men and women who offered healing charms and other magical answers to common village problems were in fact the servants of Satan and worshipped him in secret rituals that included the most abhorred of crimes. It was also in its power to bring an end to the search for these and other 'witches', which eventually it did, though slowly and piecemeal. In this the Church was supported by the political authorities who finally ended the hunts.¹⁰

Historians such as Norman Cohn had already criticised the comparisons that had been drawn between the present and the past. In his essay in the volume edited by Mary Douglas (1970), Cohn states: 'At the heart of this fantasy [of witchcraft] is the figure of Satan himself'. He shows how malleable the fantasy has been and how it was *'quite different from*

[my italics], and vastly more lethal than, the witchcraft beliefs that anthropologists find and study in primitive societies today' (ibid.).¹¹ European witchcraft is distinguished from most other similar beliefs by the fact that Church and State were not only involved in the hunt for witches but introduced the ideas that inspired and justified it.

The comparison between the European witch-hunts and the witch beliefs of Africa, New Guinea and what is now Latin America, was, in fact, artificially created by ignoring the role of Church and State. It was based on only one aspect of the beliefs in witchcraft that were part of Europe's culture at that time, those that were characteristic of the villages. This was done in order to show their comparability with manifestations in other parts of the world, but the village beliefs did not cause the witch-hunts. They were encouraged by the authorities who linked devil worship with the village beliefs, and forced confessions that confirmed this association.¹² Similarly, as will be shown in the second half of this volume, the influence of Christian doctrine has encouraged the hunt for witches in the twenty-first century; Chapter 8 demonstrates how this may happen.

The idea that magic and science are mutually incompatible is no longer important in modern anthropological thinking. The conviction that science itself is somehow culture-free and totally rational has also been seriously undermined. The work of Thomas Kuhn (1962) established that scientific research itself is a social activity and subject to the influence of the social structure of the research community. Theoretical conclusions established by the research of its senior members are accepted as orthodoxy until the challenge to them becomes sufficiently strong to undermine their position.¹³ Nevertheless, differences between religious or magical thinking and science remain: in particular, a challenge to orthodoxy in science is not unthinkable nor a reason to exclude the challenger from the scientific community, and, secondly, the strength of major theoretical conclusions still depends on the evidence supporting them. Spiritual dogmas are not based on evidence in this way, but on faith, and are not thought to be subject to change like scientific theories; the ideas in magic and witchcraft do not form an orthodoxy, although they are generally shared within a community, but they are not subject to challenge on the basis of new evidence. Nevertheless the nature of faith can also be shown to be subject to alteration, as changes in modern witchcraft beliefs documented in several chapters in this book will show.

Over the years since Evans-Pritchard published his classic monograph, anthropologists have studied occult beliefs in the field, recording a mass of ethnographic data on witchcraft, magic and sorcery in their field research, which has allowed them to explain it. They have documented the patterns of accusations, the political, economic and domestic conflicts from

which they derive, the relationships that are most liable to such conflict and, latterly, the symbolism in which the fundamental ideas supporting the beliefs are expressed. It has become clear that a full understanding of these beliefs depends on considerable knowledge of the society, its structure and culture. Beliefs in witchcraft are no longer treated as though they were discrete objects in a cultural storehouse, easily extracted to interpret and compare with other beliefs as though they were discrete units of culture. The amount of detail needed for a satisfactory analysis of a single society results in some practical problems in engaging in comparisons. It is now difficult to attempt a cross-cultural comparison that is wider, let alone global, in scope. Hence anthropologists have tended to discard such comparisons.

Attempts made in the past to undertake the broadest comparisons display some of the problems that prevent success in this endeavour. A very early example was that of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890), which produced a compendium of similarities and differences, relying heavily on classical sources, but without what today would be considered a sufficient understanding of their cultural significance or context. In such an approach, conclusions drawn from one example become a yardstick for all such beliefs; similarities are noted and differences fade into the background. A single feature becomes the 'cause' of witchcraft accusations or beliefs. Such a single-issue focus allows much broader comparison across a large number of societies but the result wrongly implies that the aspect considered is the only relevant one. To take a modern example, if an accusation of witchcraft is the end result of rumour and gossip within the community, as it is in many societies, this may be all that is considered. The prevalence of accusations within a household or between close kin, which may entail jealously concealing suspicions from the neighbours, may be largely ignored.

Other difficulties that made the broadest cultural comparisons unacceptable were amply demonstrated by the distortions produced by G.P. Murdoch's use of a statistical method to establish correlations between 'items' of culture in his Human Relations Area Files (he published, in 1957, a cross-cultural data set that consisted of 565 'cultures', coded for thirty variables). There were problems in determining the limits of 'a' culture; what was one distinct culture among several geographically and culturally related peoples? Other difficulties arose in classifying 'items' of culture that were to form the coded variables. For example, the label 'polygamous' might conceal considerable variation in marital arrangements, let alone ignore its social significance. Arguments over the definition of variables ensued. The statistical correlations that were produced could be misleading and disappointingly superficial. They might indicate

some possibilities for comparison but they did not constitute satisfactory comparisons in themselves or lead to sound theoretical developments.

To point out the danger of misleading superficiality resulting from the attempt at universality is not a new claim. Where the analysis of witchcraft was concerned, it was the necessity for the inclusion of much ethnographic detail that made comparison cumbersome as it did with many other aspects of anthropological analysis. The anthropologists of the 1950s such as Schapera, Fortes, Richards and Nadel used regional comparisons to yield theoretical conclusions that might be tested elsewhere. Using such methods made it possible to set aside some of the common structural features of the societies under study to concentrate on the detail of similarities and differences in the aspect under consideration. This approach produced a wider regional interpretation that could then be set against similar general conclusions from other areas.¹⁴ Nadel's work (1952) is particularly relevant here as he used this method to construct a theory of witchcraft comparing related and neighbouring peoples in the Sudan. His conclusion was that witchcraft was one of a number of alternative ways of explaining misfortune has become widely accepted, but his view that these alternatives were mutually exclusive was subsequently shown to be mistaken; beliefs in witchcraft may co-exist with beliefs in other causes of misfortune as I.M. Lewis showed (1970).

Ethnographic comparison as a method, whether between two societies or within a region, appears to be falling into disuse in recent anthropological works. However, this change does not mean that anthropologists no longer use comparative thinking. Anthropology is no more culture-free than science; its practitioners are all creatures of the cultures in which they were brought up. Implicit in their thinking there is always a framework of concepts and convictions that is derived from the thinker's own culture and that provides a comparison, unexamined and therefore uncontrolled. The distortion that is produced in this way has been labelled ethnocentricity, the bias that may distort anthropological analysis by an imposition of ideas that are not to be found in the material under review, but are derived from the anthropologist's own thinking. Julian Pitt-Rivers once remarked that the history of anthropology consists of a struggle to rid itself of ethnocentric thinking and he was probably right.¹⁵ It is, of course, notoriously easier to detect this flaw in writings of the past and in one's colleagues' work than in one's own. However, making a comparison explicit and presenting evidence for one's conclusions are both essential as precautions and should never be ignored. This is particularly so where one of the societies in a comparison is one's own, as is the case in what follows.

Pocock suggested (1985: 43-44)¹⁶ that it is necessary to consider the total context of a society's morality that structures understanding of the

world and the people in it, rather than merely attempting to understand the meaning of its symbolic manifestations. All societies recognise a moral universe although it may not be formulated in terms of a binary distinction between good and evil as is the view derived from Christian ideas. With a comparative approach based on the underlying view of the world, parallels emerge that are not evident when the focus of the comparison is more narrowly defined. Thus the presence or absence of beliefs in witches and witchcraft is less important than the nature of the ideas represented in them. These chapters explore the similarities and differences between English¹⁷ beliefs and those of some of the Africans living in London.

In the chapters that follow, the main comparisons use ethnographies of two aspects of modern England. The scale and diversity of the nation state presents serious problems, both of research and conceptualisation. Neither of the sets of beliefs that form the focus of my comparisons can be said to be universally held, as they are representative only of subsets of the population, although many of the ideas might well be shown to be more widely accepted when more research is undertaken. The first ethnography describes the movement concerning beliefs in a mythical satanic cult that were current at the end of the twentieth century;¹⁸ and the second, accusations of witchcraft made against children, largely African in origin, which came to public notice in the very early twenty-first, although it is likely that cases which involved less violence had occurred before that time.¹⁹ The former, as will be seen, reflects a long-lasting belief that is deeply embedded in English culture; the latter, though based on its own traditions, has emerged in its present form in recent years and results from the interaction of Christianity and the varied African beliefs in witchcraft. At first view the differences seem to have remained very striking, but these chapters attempt to reveal their similarities as well.

The next four chapters discuss the central ideas that reveal modern British beliefs in evil. The first of these focuses on the notion of hidden enemies of society – the fear of a secret conspiracy that aims to undermine the whole of social life. This fantasy as Cohn (1970: 3) pointed out, is flexible and can be directed at different groups of people at different times. As far as the twentieth-century belief in the prevalence of Satanism was concerned, its holders explicitly and publicly denied that they were Christian; if that were so, then their views showed that the ideas had become embedded in the whole culture rather than being restricted to their source, the Christian Church. There have indeed been secular versions of this idea (Roberts 1974); there may also be a real enemy that is the source of the conspiracy, or equally the enemy may be imaginary.

In the original Christian formulation human sacrifice and cannibalism were believed to be practised by witches at the Witches' Sabbath, their

gathering to worship Satan. Chapter 3 suggests that contemporary killings, real or fantasised, may be wrongly interpreted as human sacrifices, thus providing evidence of the alien nature of other societies. It discusses the killings to procure human body parts for a form of powerful magic, not referred to in the same terms as witchcraft or sacrifice, that has been reported in Africa. These killings have frequently been referred to as human sacrifices. By comparing them with the former use of human body parts in European healing practices until the late eighteenth century and in folk healing up until the nineteenth century, they can be seen for what they really are. Occasional uses have been reported until the early twentieth century, and a contemporary form has been discovered recently in Korea. Together with the preceding chapters, chapters 3 and 4 display the differences between sacrifice, magic and witchcraft that cannot be properly understood when the label 'human sacrifice' is applied to them all without careful ethnographic investigation and comparison.

None of these ideas of human physiology has survived without changes and nor have ideas about human nature and behaviour. As chapters 6 and 7 show, the twentieth-century revival of new forms of fundamentalist Christianity is spreading the ideas of original sin and the concept of evil spirits owing allegiance to Satan as the cause of human evil in adults and children. A major change in views about the nature of children and of their displays of original sin has resulted in the adoption of extreme forms of corporal punishment that, in the United States, have been declared a form of child abuse (Heimlich 2011). Firth (1994), in his epigraph to Hobsbawm's book on the twentieth century, remarks on 'the change from a relatively rational and scientific view of things to a non-rational and less scientific one', by which he means the revival of religious influence on thought. The transformation of African ideas that has been achieved by the missionary efforts of Pentecostal Christians is also described in chapters 6 and 7.

Chapter 8 analyses the dynamics that underlie the efforts of pastors of independent African churches, created in the wake of the introduction of Pentecostalism, to identify and exorcise the evil spirits that are believed to cause witchcraft, particularly in children (Parkin 1985). Their aims are ostensibly to fight evil and so purify society, but from the observer's point of view their efforts seem to be a means of attracting a larger congregation and thus attaining personal success, which will be interpreted by the laymen as God's support and approval of them.

The second half of the book thus highlights the changes that have taken place in African beliefs in witches since the nineteenth century; the most important is the introduction of the idea that children, even as toddlers or babies, may be witches. This change comes from a fusion of Christian

and traditional beliefs and is discussed in Chapter 5 which is a rewritten version of one of the two in the collection that have already been published.²⁰ The subsequent chapters, 6 and 7, consider various aspects of these new beliefs and the way in which they are publicised and spread by the self-appointed pastors of charismatic African churches. Actual cases of children being accused of witchcraft are analysed in Chapter 8. In conclusion, the final chapter returns to the comparison between English and African forms of evil that retain their differences. The central claim of this chapter is that while beliefs in occult evil may vary in form from one society to another, the underlying ontologies allow comparisons to be drawn with each other and with Western beliefs, despite the varied spiritual entities which seem to offer different solutions to the problems of everyday human existence.

Notes

- 1 Durkheim was using the term to include the study of all society, so his use of it includes anthropology.
- 2 This type of research has been a defining characteristic of anthropology since the work of Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands during the First World War.
- 3 On two return visits, Lewis recorded changes in the villagers' views. See his final chapter, esp. pp. 244–51.
- 4 Evans-Pritchard made an implicit distinction between his attitudes to witchcraft and to religion later in his life when he made public his conviction that no one who had no religion could understand the religion of others. This view has not been generally accepted among anthropologists.
- 5 An early example is A. Macfarlane (1970).
- 6 The volume edited by Mary Douglas (1970) contains the papers presented at the conference.
- 7 Compare my, rather different, use of this comparison to understand the anti-satanist movement of the late twentieth century (La Fontaine 1998).
- 8 In later life Levy-Bruhl changed his views, apparently under the influence of Evans-Pritchard and other anthropological writing. In his notebooks published posthumously in 1949 he identified what he had termed 'primitive mentality' with creative thought and feeling, and called it 'something fundamental and indestructible in the nature of man' (cited in Tambiah 1981: 87).
- 9 'Superstition', as used today, denotes ideas and practices that are considered relics of earlier times or are thought to be irrational and untenable by most people; it is a distinctly derogatory label.
- 10 Although the activities of witch-hunters did cease, the beliefs, whether traditional or Christian, persisted. In England, for example, a woman was killed for alleged witchcraft as late as the nineteenth century. I owe this information to the research of James Nice, who kindly lent me his manuscript on *The Law and the Occult*.

- 11 In fact witchcraft beliefs have turned out to be just as lethal in the Third World as those that inspired the European witch-hunts. Independence has weakened the enforcement of colonial laws that made the killing of witches illegal, and post-colonial problems have encouraged the search for the human causes of distress.
- 12 The men and women who were known as 'wise' because of their occult knowledge might also be accused of witchcraft.
- 13 Gilbert Lewis (2000: 11–14) also points out the intermingling of cultural ideas with medical ones in concepts of illness.
- 14 Of these four, only Nadel was directly concerned with magic and witchcraft; the others wrote of political organisation or of kinship systems, but the methods were similar.
- 15 I have been unable to find a reference to this in his writings and think that he said it in conversation, perhaps in Chicago where we were both temporary members of the Anthropology Department at the university.
- 16 The citation is from the paperback edition 1986.
- 17 I use 'English' rather than the more usual 'British' because on this topic there are differences in the component parts of Great Britain and I have only done research in England. However I have noted that the cases involving allegations of Satanist activity in Scotland were very similar to those in England.
- 18 There is evidence that, as with the early modern witch-hunts, the beliefs are still held by former anti-satanists, though action on them is less frequent.
- 19 They continue to occur, although are largely ignored by the media.
- 20 One of these is Chapter 5, which is an updated version of my article entitled 'Child Witches' in *The Devil's Children : From Spirit Possession to Witchcraft, New Allegations that Affect Children* (2009). The other is Chapter 2, which is a slightly amended version of an article published in *Etnofoor*, republished by permission of the editors.

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