Encyclopedia of Crime and Punishment

Witchcraft

Belief in witches and witchcraft has existed and the active pursuit and persecution of people accused of practicing witchcraft have occurred throughout human history and in many different types of societies around the world. Both the historical and ethnographic records are rich with accounts of witchcraft from the ancient Near East, in the early modern period in Europe, among Native American peoples, and in traditional and contemporary ethnic groups in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. While the specific meanings associated with witchcraft vary over time and place, a general definition (excluding the neopagan Wiccan movement) is that a "witch" is a person who participates in *maleficia*, the use of supernatural power to perpetuate harm against others. Witches are often accused of causing sickness, injury, or death (of a person or livestock), sexual impotence, adverse weather, or crop failure. From a sociological perspective, witchcraft can be explained as a form of scapegoating, a way by which to explain social misfortune or perceived injustice and to relieve community stress. Often, those who are accused of being witches are individuals who are different from others in the community and are viewed as disruptive to the social order: unmarried women, old women or men, hostile people, those who live apart from others, adulterers, and those from other religious or ethnic groups. Witchcraft **[p. 1711 ↓]** must be distinguished from the practice of sorcery. The key difference is that witches are inherently evil and possess supernatural power, while sorcerers are experts in harnessing supernatural power for good or evil. One of the main functions of sorcery is to reverse the harmful consequences of witchcraft.

Although witchcraft has been well-documented over time and across cultures, the most careful study has focused on only a few times, periods, and places, including the witch craze in early modern Europe, the Salem witch craze in Puritan New England, traditional and modernizing societies in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and traditional Native America, with special attention to the Navajo nation of the U.S. Southwest.

What Type of Woman is a Witch?

In early modern Europe, most people accused of witchcraft were women. But, as the famous witch-hunting manual, The Malleus Maleficarum, *makes clear, some types of women were especially likely to be accused of being witches*.

What sort of Women are found to be above all Others Superstitions and Witches.

As to our second inquiry, what sort of women more than others are found to be superstitions and infected with witchcraft; it must be said, as was shown in the preceding inquiry, that three general vices appear to have special domination over wicked women, namely, infidelity, ambition, and lust. Therefore they are more than others inclined toward witchcraft, who more than others are given to these vices. Again, since of these three vices the last chiefly predominates, women being insatiable, etc., it follows that those among ambitious women are more deeply infected who are more hot to satisfy their filthy lusts; and such are adulteresses, fornicatresses, and the concubines of the Great.

Now there are, as it is said in the Papal Bull, seven methods by which they infect with witchcraft the venereal act and the conception of the womb: First, by inclining the minds of men to inordinate passion; second, by obstructing their generative force; third, by removing the members accommodated to that act; fourth, by changing men into beasts by their magic art; fifth, by destroying the generative force in women; sixth, by procuring abortion; seventh, by offering children to devils, besides other animals and fruits of the earth with which they work much harm. And all these will be considered later; but for the present let us give our minds to the inquiries towards men.

And first concerning those who are bewitched into an inordinate love or hatred, this is a matter of a sort that it is difficult to discuss before the general intelligence. Yet it must be granted that it is a fact. For S. Thomas (IV, 34) treating of obstructions caused by witches, shows that God allows the devil greater power against men's venereal acts than against their other actions; and gives this reason, that this is likely to be so, since those women are chiefly apt to be witches who are most disposed to such acts.

For he says that, since the first corruption of sin by which man became the slave of the devil came to us through the act of generation, therefore greater power is allowed by God to the devil in this act than in all others. Also the power of witches is more apparent in serpents, as it is said, than in other animals, because though the mean of a serpent the devil tempted a women. For this reason also, as is shown afterwards, although matrimony is a work of God, but with the permission of God, by causing some temporary or permanent impediment in the conjugal act.

And touching this we may say what is known by experience; that these women satisfy their filthy lusts not only in themselves, but even in the mighty ones of the age, of whatever state and condition; causing by all sorts of witchcraft the death of their soul though the excessive infatuation of carnal love, in such a way that for no shame or persuasion can they desist from such acts. And though such men, since the witches will not permit any harm to come to them either from themselves or for others once they have them in their power, there arise the great danger of the time, namely, the extermination of the Faith. And in this way do witches every day increase.

And would that this were not true according to experience. But indeed such hatred is aroused by witchcraft between those joined in the sacrament of matrimony, and such freezing up of the generative forces, that men are unable to perform the necessary action for begetting offspring. But since love and hate exist in the soul, which even the devil cannot enter, lest these things should seem incredible to anyone, hey must be inquired into; and by meeting argument with argument the matter will be made clear.

Kramer, Heinrich, and James Sprenger ([1486]1971). *The Malleus Maleficarum of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger*. New York: Dover Publications., pp. 47–48.

[p. 1712 ↓]

The Harm That Witches Cause

This description of witchcraft among the Zande people of the southern Sudan, by famous British anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, makes clear how much harm and disruption witches were thought to cause.

In such a state a man is vexed. Some one among his neighbors wishes him ill and has bewitched him. Misfortune and witchcraft are much the same to a Zande, for it is only in situations of misfortune or of anticipation of it that the notion of witchcraft is evoked. In a sense we may say that witchcraft is misfortune, the procedure of oracle consultations and presentation of owls wings being the socially prescribed channel of response to misfortune, and notion of witchcraft-activity giving the requisite ideological background to make the response logical and coherent. A man's ground-nuts are blighted. What

does he say? He says, "It is witchcraft. Witchcraft has spoilt my ground-nuts.' A mans wife falls ill. What does he say? He says, 'Witchcraft has injured my wife.' A man is told by the poison oracle that his journey is inauspicious. What does he say? He says, 'Witchcraft has spoilt my journey.' A man has a nightmare. What does he say? He says, 'I have been bewitched in a dream.'

Now, when a Zande says that witchcraft has done him harm he means that a witch has done him harm, and he seeks to discover a witch upon who to vent his vexation. He hopes, moreover, to check the harm which is being done to him, or which will happen to him in the future, by approaching the witch with a fowl's wing. In such situations his first thoughts are of his personal enemies.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. (1937). *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande.* Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, p. 100.

Europe

Fear of witchcraft in early modern Europe resulted in an estimated 100,000 people tried for the crime of witchcraft between 1450 and 1750. What separates the early modern European witch from others throughout history are the prominent role of the devil as the source of her magical power and her participation in the perceived flourishing conspiratorial war between the devil and Christendom.

Although the belief in witches traces back to the ancient world, the first hunts began in the fourteenth century, as an infrequent tool of political leverage and scapegoating of heretics, lepers, and Jews (among other groups), escalating by the sixteenth century into widespread charges of diabolic activity. During the first two periods of development, 1300 to 1330 and 1330 to 1375, the cases were political in nature, yet trials were relatively rare and seldom involved the charge of diabolism. However, in the first period, the victims were almost always prominent people in society, while those victimized in the second were often commoners. Two significant changes occurred between 1375 and 1435: The number of trials steadily increased, and the charge of diabolism became more common. Finally, during the final stage of development, in 1435 to 1500, Europe experienced a decidedly heightened number of trials and a higher prosecution

rate. This development can be attributed to certain intellectual interpretations, judicial legislation, and social conditions that mutated and blended into a pervasive climate of great anxiety.

Most significantly, witch-belief found its intellectual culmination in the idea that a witch made a pact with the devil when she (witches were almost always women) renounced Christianity in exchange for magical power. This pact served as the basis for the accusation of diabolic heresy. The pact was, to the educated class, the most telling sign of an imminent cataclysmic war between good and evil, and witch-hunts reached their size and magnitude because the ruling class believed that there was an extensive conspiracy threatening the world. Commoners were less likely to understand the nuances of the theology and legal theory, but many understood and accepted the notion that witches engaged in subversive activities that affected their daily lives.

In addition to the heretical relationship with the devil, intellectuals and commoners alike believed that witches attended "sabbat gatherings." These were secret nighttime meetings, the activities of which symbolized a world order turned upside down. It was said that witches gorged themselves on food and wine, often practiced cannibalistic infanticide, desecrated the Eucharist, and ended the evenings with dancing and orgies. Condemnation of the sabbat was a major force driving the wholesale accusations of witchcraft and the torture of those accused in order to force them to name others who attended the festivities. The witch was believed to have the power to fly and morph herself into animals or to look like other people. She was commonly associated with a familiar or pet who assisted her in performing evil deeds. Finally, it was said that the witch often had a "mark of the devil" (usually a birthmark), a contrivance which Protestant demonologists added in the sixteenth century.

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Beginning in the thirteenth century and adopted in Continental Europe by the sixteenth century, legal changes aided in the spread of accusations and increased logistical capacity for the burgeoning witchhunts. Both secular and ecclesiastical courts adopted a new, inquisitorial system of criminal procedure in which the court could initiate a criminal procedure (as opposed to the accusatorial system, whereby the victim had to launch it); the court took a proactive role of investigation; and it began the use of

professional prosecutors (rather than the victim) trying the case. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV authorized the use of torture as a means of extracting confessions. Methods included the *strappado* (a pulley that raised a person off the ground by his arms, which were tied behind his back), the rack, the ladder, thumb or leg screws, trial by fire or water, and forced sleep deprivation. Also, secular courts acquired new legal jurisdiction over witchcraft. With little interference from central or national lawmakers, these local and regional courts were much more susceptible to public opinion, as well as skilled at manipulating it. The trials played out as public dramas filled with emotional fear and vengeance, resulting in a substantial increase in the number of guilty verdicts.

The period in Europe leading up to and during the witch-hunts was one of great upheaval and uncertainty. The Protestant Reformation energized the growth and tenacity of the witch-hunts by stressing the role and force of the devil in Christianity. In addition, bloody religious wars between Catholic and Protestant factions produced continuing political instability across much of Western Europe. Larger social transformations, including advances in science and technology, population migrations, the evolution of mercantile and agricultural capitalism, and changing roles of authority, eroded tradition and the sense of stability. Finally, periodic and uncontrollable famines and plagues increased social stress. The witch, with her supposed ties to the devil, became a target on which to focus attention and blame in an attempt to explain and control what seemed to be a world spinning out of control.

A multitude of treatises on witchcraft, whose circulation drastically increased with the invention of the printing press, disseminated the worldly threat of the witches to the elites. The *Malleus Maleficarum* ("Hammer of the Evil-Doers"), repeatedly published after 1486 by Dominican friars Sprenger and Kramer, served as a handbook "proving" the existence of witches and describing ways in which to deal with them. In 1513, the fifth Lateran council banned the preaching that the Antichrist was imminent (though the ban was subsequently ignored). Martin Luther associated the Papacy with the Antichrist; conversely, the Papacy characterized Luther as the Antichrist. Public morality plays, pamphlets, and artwork—from woodcuts by Albrecht Dürer and Hans Baldung Grien and illustrations from Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* ("Careful Weighting of the Evil-Doers") to church wall paintings in Denmark—stressed the imminent battle between good and evil and promulgated the perceived danger to commoners.

By the mid-fifteenth century, trials had occurred in France and Switzerland, and they continued to spread unevenly throughout Europe, with a large concentration of trials in Germany and the Low Countries, spreading up into Scandinavia, expanding through Eastern Europe, and spreading west through the Iberian Peninsula and south to the Mediterranean. The phenomenon also crossed the English Channel to the British Isles, although due to different legal practices—including the jury system and the infrequent use of torture—and belief systems, England's witch-hunts were distinctively mild compared to those in Scotland and on the Continent.

The size of individual hunts in communities varied from one witch accusation (which was most common in England) to 525 indictments in Rouen in 1670. The nature of the witch, for the most part, followed a definite archetype: Most people accused of practicing witchcraft were older, single women (however, in both Iceland and Hungary, the majority of those accused were men). Most lived in rural agricultural villages, were in the low socioeconomic class, and were viewed by their neighbors as being morally or religiously deviant. Many of the women whom society targeted as witches were employed as cooks, midwives, or healers. As their professions involved herbs and potions, incantations or prayers, and dangerous pregnancies and sickly people, they seemed obvious suspects.

Just as the hunts began sporadically, so too did they begin to randomly decline in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Again, it was a combination of legal, intellectual, and social changes that affected the hunts. Courts now demanded conclusive evidence regarding *maleficium* and the pact with the devil before conviction. Rulers passed decrees and edicts curtailing the use of torture, which lessened or altogether eliminated prosecutions. Especially within elite circles, possibly to separate themselves from superstitious commoners, intellectual ideology embraced scientific skepticism, which promoted natural explanations for **[p. 1714 ↓]** mysterious occurrences rather than scapegoating someone perceived as a witch. Finally, social conditions improved, increasing economic, political, and religious stability, and lessening social stress and discord.

Salem, Massachusetts

Roughly half a century after the witch-hunts peaked in Europe, British colonies in North America experienced several single victim outbreaks. The first hanging of a witch in New England was in Connecticut in 1647, and numerous others took place from the 1640s to the 1680s. However, the best-documented and largest outbreak took place in 1692, in Salem, Massachusetts. Salem—where nineteen accused and convicted witches were hanged and one, Giles Corey, was pressed to death—clearly exemplifies the complex web of circumstances that often produces a witch-hunt.

During this time, Salem Village was undergoing a number of social, economic, and political changes. Salem Town was a prospering port, and a new merchant class was gaining financial and political status, while some of the older families (geographically furthest away from Salem Town, and therefore least benefited by the growing trade) who were farmers found themselves losing social, political, and economic power. The situation was made worse by some inhabitants of Salem Village who wanted to establish a parish in Salem Village, which would serve as the first step toward the village becoming politically separate from the town. It was an issue of much import as taxes were then to be paid to the village rather than the town, and inter-city commerce would levy a tax on the goods that crossed town-village lines, thus removing the economic advantage of farmers who lived closest to the town and benefited from access to the port.

The precipitating event in the craze was the discovery that some of the village's young girls were practicing the art of the occult with Rev. Samuel Parris's West Indian slave, Tituba. Shortly thereafter, the girls "became afflicted" by fits. When, several weeks later, the girls continued to display the odd behavior, they were questioned by adults, resulting in three local women being accused of witchcraft and of causing the girls' odd behavior. The accused were interrogated by local magistrates, and Tituba confessed to practicing witchcraft (therefore avoiding hanging), whereas the two who staunchly professed their innocence subsequently were killed. The accusations continued, producing a full-blown witch-hunt, with 150 jailed.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's (1974) analysis of the location of homes of those involved in the craze (whether for or against) suggests its basic cause. The vast majority of the accusers lived the furthest from Salem Town and were in the pro-Parris faction. The majority of those accused of witchcraft were anti-Parris, were opposed to the town-village split, and lived closest to the town-village division line. Thus, the craze seems to have been a complicated entanglement of church and political politics, changing economic roles, social dynamics, and manipulated children, where the accusation of witchcraft became a tool by which to explain injustice and promote personal ideology and economic and political gain.

Africa, Asia, Native America, and the Caribbean

Surveys of witchcraft beliefs in non-Western cultures suggest that such beliefs existed in about 60 percent of societies in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—most commonly in societies bordering the Mediterranean Sea and in sub-Saharan Africa and among descendants of people from those regions in the Americas, and least often in East Asia. Cross-culturally, people believe in two types of witches—everyday and nightmare. Everyday witches are people who live in the community (although they are typically considered to be deviant in some way) and cause misfortune to others out of envy. Nightmare witches are far more evil and more greatly feared. They operate at night; take non-human forms; cause widespread illness, death, or misfortune; and come from the supernatural world or from places where humans do not live, such as the forest. In cultures with a belief in witchcraft, people take measures to protect themselves from witches by wearing protective amulets, saying prayers, performing public rituals, avoiding places where witches go, and avoiding people who are known to be envious (and, therefore, might be witches). When preventive measures fail, people take action to reverse the witchcraft, using either a sorcerer or healer to reverse the witch's work or to identify the witch so that compensation can be sought or the witch punished or killed.

Although belief in witchcraft in the non-Western world is probably less common today than in the past (or, perhaps, just less talked about in front of outsiders), it remains an important social construction in both rural and urban areas, often serving as a means

of explaining misfortune. Each individual community has distinct **[p. 1715 ↓]** particulars with regard to their belief systems. For example, the Lovedu tribe in South Africa believe that witches are most often women who are born with the powers and meet at night; the witches in Ewe in southeast Ghana are believed to be women who wander at night on their hands or feet turned backwards, who can blow fire from their eyes; and the Gwari in northern Nigeria believe that witches can be either males or females who learn their trait of digesting souls of the innocent to obtain power. Yet, there is an overlying similarity among all of these, as shown by E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his work among the Zande peoples of the Congo: Within each community, there is a bond between the living and ancestral spirits who respond to human needs; all communities have supernatural specialists; there is the belief that witchcraft can create conflict within a society; there are prescribed rituals that act as the means to undo any damage caused; and, finally, there is a means to resolve the conflict and reconcile the community (usually through a transfer of property or livestock). Therefore, the use of witchcraft in these societies can often be seen as intended to force a person to take action that will reveal the person's conflict to the entire community in a manner that could ensure its eventual resolution.

Witchcraft and Witch-Hunts Today

Witchcraft continues to serve as a valve by which to explain perceived injustice— sometimes in seemingly benign fashion (for example, in 1998, Mozambican soccer fans accused the opposing goalkeeper of practicing witchcraft to prevent their team from scoring). However, in politically unstable areas of Africa and Southeast Asia, there remain sporadic outbreaks of deadly witch-hunts, with local vigilantes hunting people (usually the socially marginal) and either torturing or murdering them. In 1998, men in Papua New Guinea were charged with hacking or strangling five women whom they believed had caused mysterious sickness and deaths by witchcraft; in April 2000, five accused witches were burned alive in Southern India; and in the Congo, between June and July, 2001, more than 200 people accused of witchcraft and believed to have caused rampant disease were hacked to death.

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See also

- Religious Deviance

Further Reading

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