Witchcraft as a Problem in the Study of Religion
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Witchcraft is popularly thought of as a subject for students of folklore. How are witches imagined, such students ask? Are they believed to fly through the air on broomsticks, or on some other means of transport? To have familiar spirits, and are these animals or something else? To act independently or in bands? How are they supposed to exercise their power, and how does one recognise a victim of it? Such matters of superficial description have been the subject of many books, and they appear to have a permanent fascination for the general public.

Most anthropologists working in Africa have found that the belief in witches is a fundamental part of the world-view of the peoples they have studied, and that it can properly be seen, not as a ridiculous superstition, but as a necessary part of their belief in the universe as a moral order. Such a belief is itself generally characteristic of peoples who have little knowledge of scientific causation, and who just because of this are unwilling to recognise the possibility of that accidental conjunction of causal factors that we call chance.

In a universe ordered in accordance with moral law, suffering—and in particular its most common form, sickness—should be deserved. An explanation of sickness is necessary so that the victim and his kin may take measures to remedy it, and for primitive peoples the explanation is commonly found in the displeasure of some non-human personalized being. The reaction of these beings is not thought to be arbitrary; if they punish, their anger must have been merited. Possibly the acts that incur their anger may not be such as would be strongly reprobated in western European society. An ancestor spirit may be angry because it has not received its due in sacrifices; to some observers a reaction of this kind may seem to bring the objects of worship too close to the level of their human worshippers. Never-
theless, to be negligent in making offerings to the ancestors is to fail in an obligation. The principle generally accepted is that all suffering is deserved.

But in practice this is clearly not so. A sick man may examine his conscience and find that he is innocent. The general opinion of his neighbours may not agree with him in some cases; but there are always some cases where public opinion will hold that he has done nothing to merit punishment. Then there must be some agency which inflicts undeserved suffering. The explanation is found in the activity of the witch.

This is why I have suggested that beliefs in witchcraft are part of the corpus of beliefs that we commonly call religion. Some explanation of undeserved suffering is a necessary part of any conception of a spiritual world which supports the order of society.

The effect of this whole belief system, however, is to make every case of sickness, and sometimes of misfortune of other kinds, the occasion for discussion of the sufferer's behaviour and the respects in which he may have offended. Such a discussion is as important in asserting the socially accepted norms of conduct as is the public reaction to offences recognised as such. In most African societies the central point of the discussions is the consultation of a diviner, whose skill is believed impartially to identify the agency responsible for the sickness.

In many societies the witch is conceived as a person who in the nature of things cannot be identified. In such societies the witch is not believed to use material substances to attain his ends; therefore there can be no question of seeking evidence of his activities. He is thought to have the power of witchcraft born in him; sometimes this is believed to be an actual physical substance, but one that could only be detected by an examination of his entrails after his death. Occasionally it is believed that the witchcraft substance operates without the witch's own volition.

In most societies people can describe the appearance of a witch as they imagine it, but often they believe that witches are adept at concealment, so that the person who looks least like a witch may actually be one. Thus an individual who is suspected has no valid defence. A belief system of this type is impervious to rational argument, and allows the person who thinks he is a victim of witchcraft to direct suspicion in whatever direction he chooses. The parallel with witch-hunts in western society is obvious.

In African society the accepted picture of the witch is the personification of the anti-social, and in this way also ideas about witches play their part in the system of social control. The witch is conceived as a person whom all dislike and whom none would wish to resemble.
When children are overtly taught to avoid witches, and particularly not to provoke their anger, they are actually learning what kind of behaviour to avoid if they themselves wish to be regarded as good citizens and not suspected of witchcraft. Witches are thought of as ungenerous, unsociable persons, envying the good fortune of others—as persons who lust after meat and therefore may actually consume the flesh of their victims, or cause them to die in order that a funeral feast should be held, or both at once.

The formulation of the qualities of a witch is then partly a way of emphasising the kind of behaviour that is socially approved. From another point of view it is a way of symbolizing the contrast between the social order and the "savagery" that lies outside it. A witch as pictured by the Dinka of the southern Sudan is associated with those creatures and activities that are typical of the wild, uncultivated land, in opposition to the homestead, the symbol of the human community and its order. To the wild land belong animals and evil spirits, and the witch is assimilated to them. He is thought to do his work at night, the time when only evil-doers are afoot. He is associated with night-birds and venomous animals, and in particular the black cobra, the most dangerous of all snakes. This snake is sometimes referred to obliquely as "the thing of the wilds". A witch is believed to attack his victims by smearing the blood of a cobra on objects in the homestead which they will touch. Finally he is believed to excrete in the homestead, thus, again, behaving like an animal, and defiling the mud floor which is always kept smooth and clean.

Among the Lugbara of the Uganda-Congo border the concept of witchcraft is associated with the concept of God as a being of dual aspect. God in the sky is the creator of social order. God in the earth is connected with darkness and the uncultivated bush, and witches are associated with him. Other peoples imagine witches as walking upside down—a very obvious symbol of reversal of the natural order.

But it is highly significant that the "collective representation" of the witch is not evoked when a person thinks he is actually the victim of witchcraft. When this happens the victim and his friends do not ask whether a suspicious person corresponding to the ideal description has been seen around the homestead, or whether they have found cobra's blood on their cooking-pots. They ask who has a grudge against the sick man. Herein lies the greater social significance of the belief in witchcraft: Against whom are accusations of witchcraft directed?

Philip Mayer has offered as the essential feature of the witch that he is the traitor within the gates—a man from whom friendship should be expected but from whom instead comes injury. The victim does
not suspect someone with whom he could be openly at enmity; he would pursue his quarrels with such a man in the chief’s court, or even by directly assaulting him; the witch must be some member of the circle of neighbours and kin within which it is not decent to quarrel openly. As Mayer has put it, “Witches and their accusers are individuals who ought to like each other, but in fact do not”.

Accusations of witchcraft are not made equally in all African societies. Among the Dinka, Lienhardt tells us, people may complain that they have been attacked by an unknown witch, but they rarely name a suspect, since to do so would be to arouse the anger of his kinsmen and friends.

In other societies, however, accusations of witchcraft are made openly. It is interesting that where this is so witchcraft is conceived as being in some sense an involuntary activity, or one in which the person accused is not thought to be wholly responsible. This is one aspect of the belief that the power of witchcraft is inborn. The Zande of the southern Sudan, where Evans-Pritchard made the first sociological study of witchcraft, express their view of it in this way: A man cannot help being a witch. He may be quite ignorant that he is a witch and quite innocent of acts of witchcraft. In this state of innocence he might do someone an injury unwittingly, but when he has on several occasions been exposed by the poison oracle, he becomes conscious of his powers, and begins to use them with deliberate malice. It is thus possible on some occasions for a man to be identified as a witch without his being the subject of moral condemnation.

One might almost say that undeserved sickness is ascribed to an irrational principle operating through human beings but without their volition. It is reported from Ghana that many people, particularly women, voluntarily accuse themselves of witchcraft; but simultaneously they exculpate themselves by the argument that their witchcraft power was given them against their will, by some other person. The belief that a witch has a familiar spirit may partially exculpate the human agent held responsible for a sickness—or, more especially, a death. Thus among the Ndembu of Northern Rhodesia it is believed that it is the familiar spirit of the witch (a miniature creature in animal form) which actually kills the victim. But the spirit’s activities are set in motion when its owner is angry; therefore, it is dangerous and wrong to give way to anger—another context in which the belief in witchcraft acts as a sanction for the norms of conduct.

One must distinguish between those accusations of witchcraft which are made between individuals in the heat of an altercation and those that are made in cold blood when a diviner has identified the witchcraft of some individual as the cause of a specific case of sickness. The former are probably made in all societies. There must be some
connexion between the uttering of threats to bewitch and the making of accusations, in the sense that where people threaten they must expect to be accused, but I do not know that any anthropologist has worked this out.

But the administration of the poison oracle, or any other method of divination to identify the witch, does not operate in a vacuum. The diviner is asked to use his skill to choose between certain possibilities, and the possibilities are those that have occurred to the victim of sickness, to his friends and possibly to his enemies (this is a point to which I shall return later on). In the case of the Zande the sick man, according to Evans-Pritchard, is angry at his sickness, and he places before the oracle the names of all the people he most dislikes, whom he believes to have wronged him in the past and to wish to harm him further.

In Zande country, however, the consequences of being identified as a witch are not serious. A person so accused is expected to express regret, to deny knowledge of his own witchcraft and to cancel its effects by the simple rite of blowing cold water from his mouth. Anyone so accused will go through these stereotyped actions, but many of them are privately indignant, deny the possibility that they are witches, and hint that the accuser has not really consulted the oracle at all.

The key point in Evans-Pritchard's discussion of this situation is that people ascribe the responsibility for their misfortunes to enemies who dare not harm them openly. He did not develop this theme so far as to ask the question in what kind of relationship this kind of hatred develops, but this has been a central question in many later studies.

It has been remarked that an accusation of witchcraft may be the means of bringing to a head a conflict of the kind that accepted norms do not permit; this is another way of putting the point that I quoted from Philip Mayer. It provides a reason for the secession of part of the population of a village, in face of the accepted ideal that members of a village should remain united and that division is the greatest misfortune. The greatest of evils, the presence of a witch, provides a valid reason for it. Thus accusations of witchcraft play their part in the rivalry between members of a lineage for control of their dependent kin, and so in the competition to build up a following that is characteristic of traditional African society.

A people whose beliefs in witchcraft have been very fully described are the Nyakyusa of south-western Tanganyika, the subject of several volumes by Monica Wilson. Their conception of the witch might be said to be the classical African type: a witch is born with a snake in his entrails; thus he has an innate disposition to envy, hate and destroy his
neighbours. If a body is opened up after death—as seems to have been regularly done in pre-colonial days—the snake, it is said, can be seen (in the form of some kind of swelling of the bowel no doubt). Witches lust after meat, and kill their neighbours in order to share the funeral feast: they also magically feast on the flesh of the living and cause them sickness. Also they drink the milk of cattle, causing them to go dry. They envy anyone who is unusually prosperous: and this belief may perhaps be called a social sanction in an egalitarian society.

Nyakyusa believe that it is the snake, flying through the air at night, that attacks people and cattle: and that there are certain other people who also have snakes inside them, though these are beneficent snakes. Such persons they call “defenders”: they are able in dreams to see the attacks of witches approaching, and they send out their own snakes to fight them off. Any person may be a defender, but a village headman must be a part of the *rite de passage* which headmen go through before their installation is treatment with medicines to give them the power of defence against witches.

Among the Nyakyusa accusations of witchcraft do not seem to be made at critical moments of conflict. The conflict that ends in lineage fission is not endemic to their society, because residence is based on generation and not on descent, and because the social system provides for expansion in the division of the chiefdom into two in every generation.

An example of such conflict may be given from the Yao of Nyasaland, studied by Mitchell. The Yao believe that witches operate only against their own matrilineal kin—that is within the unit which ideally should be completely solidary. The mythology of witchcraft here asserts that witches kill their kinsmen in order to feast on their flesh along with their fellow-witches. For preference they kill those relatives whom they have reason to hate. This belief is a sanction for amicable relations between lineage mates.

But it can also be appealed to in justification of a breach of those relations. It is a commonplace of lineage organization that members of a lineage, though they may be solidary against outsiders, are often divided among themselves by rival claims. These may be claims to a share of lineage property or to autonomous control of one’s recognized share. Or they may be claims to independent authority over a section of the lineage. The latter form of rivalry is characteristic of the matrilineal peoples of Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, and a number of British anthropologists have shown how the belief in witchcraft is used to justify the secession from the village of a section of the kin group. Such secession is deplorable by African standards. The unity of the village is the ideal, and it is the responsibility of its head, the senior man of the matrilineage, to care for its members in such a way that there
will be peace and contentment among them. But it is every man’s ambition to have his own village, in which he holds authority over his sisters and their children. For a younger brother, this is not a permissible ambition: he should wait till he succeeds to authority when his elder brother dies. He cannot compete with the head of his own village; he can attain authority only by leading a secession. He may be able to attract a number of the villagers to himself because they do not like the headman, but this fact by itself would not justify a division of the village. The ultimate justification is given when sickness in the village is ascribed to the witchcraft of the headman.

A case recorded by Mitchell from the Yao illustrates this point. A woman and her two children fell sick. The village headman, the woman’s elder brother, should, as their guardian, have consulted a diviner to find the cause. But he did not do so, and presently their mother, who was also living in the village, sent for a younger brother, who was living elsewhere with his wife’s kin. This man asked the headman why he had done nothing about the sickness in his village. The headman replied that he was too busy working in his garden to go looking for diviners. The younger brother then offered to consult the diviner. The verdict of repeated divinations was that the headman was killing his sister and her sons by witchcraft. When the woman actually died, the younger brother announced that he was taking the lineage members away to a new village: and the original headman was left with only his own children and some lineage kin of his wife.

At various times in the course of these events, attempts were made to hold the village group together. But what finally made the division possible, at the same time as making it seem necessary, was an actual death, which was ascribed to witchcraft.

But accusations may be symptoms of social conflict and yet not have the cathartic effect of precipitating a final division. As Turner has described them among the Ndembu of Northern Rhodesia, they are made on the occasion of some natural disaster such as an epidemic of sickness, but they are directed in such a way as to express the rivalry of sections of lineage for control of village.

In the village where Turner did his ethnographic work, a division appeared to him to be inevitable, but the inhabitants themselves were not aware of this. They felt, rather, that the presence of witches among them was destroying amicable relations, and that these might be restored if a witch was identified and driven out: and eventually an old woman was expelled.

Why are old women so often suspected of witchcraft? For the Ndembu Turner answers that old women often have grievances against their own kin, who fail to maintain them adequately, and above all do not give them meat. In many African societies witches are believed
to be greedy for meat, and Monica Wilson has remarked that this can be correlated with the intense interest in meat characteristic of people who eat it rarely. The Ndembu do not own cattle; their source of meat is hunting. There are strict rules about the distribution of the meat caught, and many of the most serious quarrels arise when these are broken. In such situations the claims of old women without close kin are not strong. So they may often be heard grumbling that no one gives them meat; moreover, they have no one to defend them by identifying someone else as the witch. Therefore an old woman is apt to be made the scapegoat when the village has been angered by a death.

Of particular interest are those peoples among whom the witch and the agent of deserved punishment are thought to derive their power from the same source. Such a people are the Lugbara of the Nile-Congo divide who have been described by Middleton. They are an acephalous, patrilineal society, recognizing no authority other than that of the heads of kin groups, a type of authority that in the nature of things is supported by moral and ritual sanctions and not by force. Their religious system includes belief in the existence of a number of different supernatural agents of misfortune, and particularly of sickness. Unlike many African peoples, they do not believe that death itself can be attributed to the work of evil agents: for the Lugbara it is God who decides when a man is to die, and this decision is not in the nature of punishment. (Perhaps it is worth mentioning here that those peoples who ascribe deaths to witchcraft do not always hold rigorously to this explanation; for example, Turner records an occasion when an ambitious man, accused of bewitching the village headman in the hope of succeeding him, replied that there was no reason why he should do so, since old men die in the course of nature. And we learn of the Luhya of Kenya that at funerals it is the duty of one of the elders to prevent people quarrelling and accusing one another of witchcraft by reminding them that all men must die. Theories of witchcraft are not treated as objectively valid laws which hold good at all times; they are appealed to when they provide a way of pursuing human conflicts.)

Returning to the Lugbara, although they hold that God himself is responsible for death, they do not make him the centre of their religious cult. This is concerned with the ancestors, and it is to the ancestors that the Lugbara ascribe their existing social order. God created the world, but the ancestors prescribed the customs of the Lugbara. Shrines are built at which offerings are made to the ancestors collectively. But the more recent patrilineal ancestors, those whose names are known and their personalities remembered, have their individual shrines; and it is they who are thought to be directly interested in the behaviour of their living descendants, and to punish actions of a nature
to destroy the unity of the kin group. The remoter ancestors may
send sickness as a protest against the neglect of their shrines. "We
have waited many years, a Lugbara quotes the ancestors as saying,
our hunger conquers us, our child has not given us food."

The more recent ancestors, however, are so close to the living that
they can read their thoughts, and thus it is possible for a living man to
call on them to punish an injury to himself. Only certain men can do
this: in fact, it is possible only for heads of descent groups and par-
ticularly elders. By elder in this context is not meant any old man,
but the particular old man who is recognized as the senior in a descent
group of wide span, the man whose moral authority the members of
the group should obey. He must be the senior living member of the
group: as such he is closest to the head—"he is near his father who told
him the words of the ancestors." Within such a descent group there
are subdivisions, each with its own head: they too may invoke the
ghosts of their immediate ancestors. But no man whose father is alive
may be the custodian of a shrine, and no man who does not have a
shrine can invoke the dead. The older a man is, the more effective his
approach to the dead is believed to be.

The process which Middleton calls "invocation" is not quite what
the ordinary connotations of that world would suggest. It is not
public: in fact no words are spoken, for it is believed that, if an elder
were actually to utter his indignation in a spoken complaint to the
dead, their reaction would be so fierce that the object of his anger
would die. The actions that are held to justify an appeal to the dead
are actions contrary to the norms of kinship: flouting the authority of
an elder, striking a senior kinsman, quarrelling openly with a kinsman,
stealing from him or deceiving him, failing in one's duties in the distri-
bution of a dead man's property or the guardianship of his widows and
children. All these kinds of act provoke indignation in right-minded
persons, and the indignation of a man who is close to the dead can bring
down their anger on the offender.

But the indignant elder does not display his indignation. He says
nothing, but sits near the shrine thinking about the offence that has
angered him. The dead become aware of his thoughts and punish the
offender—as he intends they should. Although he does not speak, he
does more than merely feel angry while he goes about his everyday
affairs: he is deliberately concentrating on his anger in a way that
should make the dead aware of it.

It is to be noted that there need be no publicity at any point in
this procedure. Although a man may threaten to invoke the dead, it
is only when someone is sick and a diviner consulted that the question
arises whether his sickness was sent by the dead in response to an
elder's anger. At this point the offended elder usually comes forward
and says he did indeed invoke the dead. If his invocation proves vain, nobody need ever know that he made it. But there is so much sickness among the Lugbara in their cold mountain climate that this kind of failure is unlikely.

Now what is particularly interesting about the Lugbara is the way they describe the state of mind that leads people to invoke the dead. Their word for it is *ole*, and in the context of the kind of situation I have been describing this could reasonably be called righteous indignation. A sense of outrage is one of the equivalents that Middleton gives. But it is also used by the Lugbara for feelings of a much less elevated kind. The say, for example, that a man feels *ole* when another's dancing is admired while he is neglected: or when he sees another eating good food which he does not offer to share. This kind of sentiment would be more aptly called "envy"; and here we find ourselves right in the field of motives attributed to a witch. Nor is this surprising, for in Lugbara opinion witches too are prompted by *ole*; and the word used for the process of setting the power of the dead in motion—*ole ro*—is the same that is used for the activity of witches.

A consequence of this way of looking at things is that for the Lugbara witches are not a distinct class of persons; the same individual may be regarded as an elder calling on the dead in support of the social order and a wicked man using occult power, and such conflicting interpretations are by no means unusual. (This again bears out the point that I made earlier, that there need be little relation in practice between the popular image of a witch and the characteristics of the individuals who are accused of witchcraft.) For the Lugbara the crucial question is whether a man is, or is not, entitled to use a power, the nature of which is ultimately unexplained, to bring harm to others. Here, therefore, the direction of accusations must be closely correlated with the social structure. Typically they are brought against senior men claiming authority, by juniors who wish to repudiate this authority and establish their own autonomy; and Middleton has shown, as have Mitchell and Turner, how accusations flourish at a time when descent group is about to split in two.

With the Lugbara, however, the accusation of witchcraft is not simply a justification for hostility between people who ought to be friends. For them authority is bound up with the claim to be able, and entitled, to invoke the dead in the interests of the social order; therefore a man who is seeking to assert himself as an elder, and one who has the backing of the dead, will openly claim the responsibility for sickness among his kin group, and this will be described as witchcraft only by those who dispute his claim to authority. In essence, for the Lugbara, the distinction between the elder invoking the dead
and the witch is that the first is using occult power in the interests of
the kin group, and the second in the pursuance of his own personal
quarrels. But the question whether a man is a witch is itself decided
by the question who is subject to his authority: if he is the head of his
victim’s descent group he must have been acting with justification.
If he is an outsider to his victim’s descent group—because they have
established their autonomy under their own elder—he must be a
witch. Old men—men who are getting too old to exercise their
authority effectively—are most likely to be slighted by their juniors,
or to consider themselves so; therefore, they have most occasion to
appeal to occult powers, and their right to do so is most often disputed.
Middleton has remarked that when Lugbara appeal to divination two
conflicting theories of the cause of the sickness are usually put forward,
one being that it has been caused by invocation, the other that it has
been caused by witchcraft.

A further point can be illustrated from the beliefs of the Lugbara.
Since in their eyes witchcraft is the illegitimate use of a power which is
not of itself evil, they must have an idea of some other type of act
which is in all circumstances evil. They find this in an activity which
in most African societies is not thought to be unambiguously so. This
is the use of material substances to cause harm by magical means. In
most African societies it is thought that this may sometimes be done
with justification—for example, as a means of redress against an
unknown thief. But in the eyes of the Lugbara this is the activity
that can never be justified; it is prompted by pure malice and strikes
indiscriminately.

The Nyakyusa do not explain many cases of sickness by the anger
of the ancestors. But they have an explanation that in some ways
resembles the Lugbara invocation of the dead. It is that if someone
flagrantly breaks a social norm, people will whisper comments on his
action, and the actual wind of their voices—the “breath of men”—
will attack him with a chilling and eventually fatal sickness. Here
we have in its clearest form the conceptual opposition between deserv-
ed and undeserved suffering and their different causes. But at the
same time the effect of the “breath of men” is linked in Nyakyusa
thought with the power of witches. Sometimes the guardians of
morality, the defenders, are believed to call on the witches to attack
people who offend against the norms of society in various ways. One
way is by failing in the obligation of sharing food, or in the duty to
provide a feast when the occasion of a death or a marriage calls for it:
one can tell why the witches, with their greed for meat, could be called
in to attack such a man. But other actions too may lead to this
mystical punishment by public opinion: want of respect to elders, or
from a wife to her husband, or any other manifestation of pride—of
attempting to exalt oneself above one's station, to "surpass" one's seniors as the Lugbara would put it.

The Nyakyusa do not resort immediately to divination to discover the source of sickness. The first measure to be taken is for the village headman to denounce the unknown witch. This is thought to be sometimes enough to make him desist from troubling his victim: but if the sick person does not recover, an accusation is made by one of the "defenders" who are believed to see the witches in dreams. If the accused person is guilty, he ought to admit the charge: this is tantamount to repentance, and the effect of the admission should cancel the effect of the witchcraft. Naturally most people indignantly deny it, and in the old days they offered to undergo the ordeal of drinking mwafi, a medicine which an innocent person was supposed to vomit. A man who failed to prove his innocence was driven out of the village.

But here we come to another of the ambiguities in witchcraft beliefs. To have been convicted of witchcraft does not make a man an outcast. Not only will another village receive him, but after a little time his own village may ask him to come back. The neighbouring village, neutral in the case in which he has been condemned, accept him with the reasoning that they have nothing against him. His own fellow-villagers argue that one who has been shown to have the power of witchcraft is by that very fact well placed to be a defender of the village against other witches.

The two-faced image of the witch appears in even more striking form in Nadel's account of the Nupe of Northern Nigeria. Here it is believed that the most dangerous witches are always women, and that they are organized into a guild comparable to the human cult associations so common in West Africa. The members of this guild, of course, are unknown; when they are engaged in their evil work they make themselves invisible. But their leader is known; and she is in fact the head of the market women, the arbitrator in their quarrels. Or this was so in the remembered past. This woman is said to have been formally appointed by the chief of the town to restrain her fellow witches and prevent them from carrying their anti-social activities too far. When a witch was believed to have been active, it was for this woman to identify her and offer her up for punishment. This is perhaps the most striking example that we have of the identification of witch and defender.

But Nupe traditional organization also provided for a purpose that has come to be associated in other parts of Africa with the tension created by social change, and with the refusal of colonial rulers to countenance the traditional methods of identifying and dealing with witches. This purpose is the final cleansing of the community from the evil of witchcraft. This was the responsibility of an actual asso-
ciation with known membership. The initiates of this association were believed to have power over the ancestor spirits and to be able to make them appear; and they were able to mobilize the power of the ancestors not, as in some other societies, to punish ordinary evil-doers, but to punish the witches themselves. The head of this society was appointed by the king of Nupe himself. The cleansing ceremony consisted in a day-long dance by masked figures representing the spirits. All the women were gathered in the market-place, and from time to time a spirit-figure would bend over one of them, thereby identifying her as a witch; the witch might buy herself free, but otherwise she was killed in the bush.

A community which believed that it was afflicted by the activities of witches could appeal to the head of the association to hold a cleansing ceremony for it. But this man might himself propose to do this on his own initiative, of course with the approval of the king. This latter procedure came to be nothing more than a way for the members of the association to enrich themselves by the money that was offered to buy them off. It seems that in 1921 the whole economy of Nupe was upset by their exactions and it became impossible to collect taxes; after which their activities were forbidden. But although Nupe people realise that they were exploited by the association, they nevertheless say regretfully that they no longer have any protection against witches.

It is not surprising, then, that so many persons who claim to be able to get rid of witchcraft once and for all have appeared in Africa in recent years. Their activities have been described most fully in the matrilineal area of North-Eastern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, and notably by Audrey Richards and Marwick. Both writers have shown how the people integrate the messianic beliefs that they have learned from missionaries with their own conception of a world free from evil. Even if the purveyor of protective medicine himself disclaims miraculous experiences, it seems to be inevitable that they will be attributed to him; in particular he is usually believed to have risen from the dead. The technique of protection usually consists in offering medicine which both protects the innocent and destroys the guilty, in a sense a development of the ordeal motif. The "prophet" or "doctor" typically claims that his medicine, once drunk, will kill anyone who resorts to witchcraft at any time in the future.

The final elimination of witches is often among the promises made to their followers by the prophets of millenarian religions. This is not surprising if one accepts the interpretation of the belief in witches as a way of giving concrete form to the conception of evil. When in Africa these religions take on the form of a total reaction, as Balandier has so well described them, the theme of resistance to the colonial
ruler becomes central and the fight against witches is temporarily forgotten. But since it is not really possible to achieve the golden age, the fight against witches is liable at any time to be renewed. It is, I think, of interest that some of the millenarian leaders have been closely associated with the detection of witches, or, if this has not been part of their original message, it has come to be ascribed to them by their followers. Balandier has noted that some of the followers of Simon Kimbangu claim that witches who seek to enter their church are detected by the fact that the baptismal water runs out of their hair. Millenarian prophets in other parts of the world have adjured their followers to desist from witchcraft. In both these attitudes one sees how the attempt to create the ideal world must involve the elimination of the principle of evil.

The proliferation of movements directed entirely to the elimination of witchcraft has characterised Central Africa for at least the last thirty years. Their success has usually been shortlived because in the nature of things they cannot do what they promise. Some have attributed the enthusiasm with which they are received to the tensions created by the rapid social changes through which Africa is passing, others to the fact that the traditional recourse of accusation and punishment of witches is not countenanced by governments which do not believe in their existence. It would not be easy to demonstrate that the African of today more often supposes himself to be a victim of witchcraft than his grandfather did—although the South African anthropologist, Marwick, has said that witchcraft is suspected in all the new competitive relationships that this century has created, particularly where there is rivalry for the approval of a superior whose values are not fully understood, such as an employer or an agent of government. Certainly it has been recorded from Ghana that people who are dismissed from employment for drunkenness complain that witchcraft has made them drunkards. But perhaps the fundamental reason for the prevalence of new devices for the detection of witches is simply the human need to feel secure from ills against which there is no defence.