This paper is an appreciation of Nadel’s article “Witchcraft in Four African Societies.” (Nadel 1952) Using data from my own field work among the Abron of the East Central Ivory Coast I shall attempt to show how certain unique structural features of Abron society differentially affect witchcraft beliefs for men and women. Thus while Nadel supports his thesis through a comparison of four tribes, I shall support it, with certain reservations, by drawing on material from a single social system which is bisected by a particular form of residence. This form of residence I have called parallel (Alland 1963). It consists, with certain exceptions, of permanent patrilocal residence for men beyond puberty and permanent matrilocal residence for women, even after marriage.

Nadel bases his analysis on two assumptions:

“1. that any one relevant cultural divergence entails further, concomitant divergencies in the respective cultures; and 2. that witchcraft beliefs are causally related to frustrations, anxieties or other mental stresses precisely as psychopathological symptoms are related to mental disturbances of this nature.” (Nadel 1952: 18)

These assumptions are tested through a psychological and structural analysis of Nupe, Gwari, Korongo, and Mesakin societies. Moreover by comparing these four societies Nadel attempts to eliminate diffusion and child training as the major independent variables in the etiology of witchcraft. Diffusion is eliminated because the Korongo have no witchcraft beliefs while the neighbouring Mesakin, with whom

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the Korongo have considerable commerce, are "obsessed with them." Child training is eliminated because witchcraft beliefs are expressed differently by the Nupe and Gwari, although both have identical child rearing techniques; and because the Mesakin and Korongo also have identical child training with witchcraft appearing in the former but not in the latter group.

Nevertheless my major quarrel with Nadel rests on his minimization of child training practices in the etiology of witchcraft. While I would agree that it is psychological stress on adults related to structural features of society which ultimately determines the expression and direction of witchcraft, I would suggest that child training often contributes to a general covert orientation which is highly amenable to witchcraft beliefs. Moreover Nadel does not present enough data on child training in his article for the reader to make an intelligent judgement of this phase of his argument. My data will show, I think, that early socialization is an important aspect of the etiology of witchcraft beliefs in Abron culture.

Again I agree with Nadel that witchcraft beliefs are projections of hostility outward from an individual to significant others, but this argument does not, nor can it, show why witchcraft is the preferred mechanism where other covert choices are possible (ghosts or demons for example). I would therefore suggest that diffusion of an available projective mechanism from one tribe to another plays an important part in this choice when structural features are such that hostility must be handled, at least in part, through some projective device. This, of course, only pushes the problem of origins back one step, but I think that it does help us to understand the process under discussion.

It is, perhaps, my American bias in favor of historical and psychological processes in cultural analysis which leads me to restore child training practices and diffusion in a limited way to the understanding of the etiology of witchcraft. This does not mean, however, that I minimize the role of structure in the entire process. In cases where projective mechanisms are concerned I think that structural, psychological and historical factors must all be considered.

**ABRON CHILD TRAINING**

The Abron love children and show them great affection. The newborn is attended by all the female members of the mother's household. It is constantly fondled, kissed, washed when necessary, and fed when hungry. A crying baby is immediately swung onto the breast of the nearest female. Until the age of one, this is likely to be the mother; later, it is more often another female member of the
ABRON WITCHCRAFT AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

household. Babies are not confined to a feminine world, even though they spend most of their time on their mother’s back. Fathers and other male relatives frequently visit the women’s courtyards, especially when there are infants or young babies to play with. Men love to bounce their own children, young siblings, nephews and nieces on their knees and to carry them proudly around the village. If a baby cries while it is under the care of a man and there are no women present he will attempt to quiet it by playing with its genitals. If this does not calm the infant he will seek out a woman to feed it. Infants rarely feel discomfort, except when ill. They are kept warm either on their mother’s back or in a soft bed, and if they soil themselves, they are quickly cleaned. When hurt, they are comforted by whatever older person is around, including older siblings. They are allowed to play with almost anything they can get their hands on, and if a dangerous object is taken away from a child, something else is usually substituted. The only routine event in the daily life of an infant or young baby which might be unpleasant is the bath. This is given by the mother or some other adult woman and consists of a very vigorous scrubbing with hot water and soap. Sick babies may suffer further discomfort from strong enemas, usually laced with red pepper, and since dysentry is common, no infant entirely avoids this experience.

ABRON men may not sleep with their wives until their children walk. Infants therefore remain the center of attention for a considerable period. The idyll is interrupted by weaning, usually rapid, which takes place in the third or fourth month of a new pregnancy. Many children remain on the breast longer, however, since their mothers may not become pregnant until the normal weaning period is past, sometime between two and three years of age.

While mothers always take their babies with them to the farm or to fetch water, the infant’s experience with others develops rapidly. In addition to the attention of male relatives, babies are often carried on the backs of their older siblings.

After the child has learned to walk, it receives less attention than younger children in the same household and begins to learn that its needs may not be immediately satisfied. Furthermore, a child’s first frustrations are compounded by a lack of sympathy from adults and other children. For the Abron, all-at-once is time enough to learn, at least as far as simple deprivations are concerned.

The growing child soon finds that he is on the bottom of the ladder or privilege and is obliged to serve practically everyone in the village. When an elder asks a child to do something for him the child must obey. Siblings enjoy this privilege as well as full adults. An elder may borrow and often keep the possessions of his juniors: the child
must learn that none of his belongings are safe from the demands of others. This sudden shift often leads the child to strike out against his tormentors. Anger in children is not condoned, however, and aggressive acts are quickly punished. There is no one to turn to, and perhaps as significant, no one to turn against. The child must be good to babies and obey older siblings. His one possible outlet for aggression, the peer group, is blocked by the overall taboo on fighting, and, in any case, aggression within this group would bring little palliation since these equals rarely frustrate each other. Serious fights between Abron children are rare. A child who has been fighting for any reason is not only beaten by its parents but is also humiliated before its peers and subordinates. In fact one of the sanctioned outlets for aggression in Abron society is punishment of children who have broken some established rule. The fury of adults and the violence of their punishment appear to be more than just a simple desire to correct deviant behavior.

All children spend their early years in their mother’s house, and many of their first tasks are considered women’s work. Normally as soon as the male child is weaned, he begins to eat in the house of a male, usually his father’s sometimes his maternal uncle’s. This is his first shift toward a male orientation. The second comes when he moves into a men’s house at puberty, though this is not always possible. The third step, full identification as an adult male, privileged to sit on the village council, comes only with marriage, which may be delayed several years for a poor young man who cannot afford the high bride-price. In any case there are tasks which young men perform, but which young women do not. These include drumming at ceremonial dances, house building, and the planting and harvesting of the major crops, yams and taro. After the age of five or six, play-groups gradually become exclusively male or female. The boy begins to play first with the boys of his own male household and later with other boys of the village. One of their favorite pastimes is hunting with sling shots or participating with their father, older brothers and uncles in a group hunt. On these occasions the young boys act as beaters, fire starters or, themselves, hunt with clubs.

By the time full adult status has been achieved, men have had wide contact with both sexes in their own and other villages. They have listened to discussion of village affairs both in their male households and at village councils, and they have participated in village activities (hunting and ceremonials). They are familiar with feminine tasks, but have also mastered those of men, and have learned that the man’s role requires the ability to be outspoken in village affairs. Their play-groups have been wider ranging than those of the girls, and they are at their ease in a variety of situations.
Girls begin in their mother's household, and there they remain. Their early contact with men is limited to bringing food to the compounds of their male relatives after which they immediately return to their own houses to eat. Since eating is the major time for free socialization and discussion, they miss most of the important conversations which take place in the men's houses. Women's work (cooking, steady gardening, child care, housekeeping) is more demanding and time consuming than male tasks, and women consequently spend less time outside their mother's courtyard. Girls do not have to learn new roles since they do not shift either their tasks or their domicile, and they come to prefer habitual contact with their full female relatives. Their status as adult females does nothing to change their limited role in village affairs, and they are usually content to run things in the microcosm of their own household where they may dominate if and when they become senior females.

The Abron, for all their love of visiting, feel most at home in their own houses or in those of their close relatives. It is in these places that the structural ties of the family are reinforced through affection, mutual obligation and economic support. It is in these places also that specific tensions develop out of the conflicts provoked by inequality of status and authority. The patterns established in childhood among kin become effective as structural models for adult behavior.

**Social Structure**

Abron social structure is characterized by a rift between residential groups for men and the remnants of corporate matrilineages which I call matriline. These groups have lost most of their corporate functions and are made up of close matrilineal kin only. They do not own land nor do they have chiefs, but sentimental attachments to this group remain strong and it is to this group that a man returns when the patrifocal household is passed on in the system of inheritance to a matrilateral cousin. The major corporate function of the matriline is participation in, and the sharing of expenses at, funerals.

Residence for females does not conflict with their sentimental ties to the matriline since they live with their mothers, mother's sisters, their own sisters and maternal, female, parallel cousins. Males, on the other hand, live with their close patrilineal relatives, and the patrifocal household is the major economic and cooperative group for men. Hence for men there is a definite strain between allegiance to one's male centered household and one's own matriline. This situation is aggravated by the maintenance of matrilineal inheritance in a situation where all property is privately owned and wealth is unevenly
distributed. A man may work hard for his father only to see the fruits of his labor pass on, according to custom, to his patrilateral cross cousin. On the other hand a father may prevent such a situation through the donation of legal gifts to his sons. All property with the exception of houses may be given by a man directly to his sons although, after death, matrilineal rules must be followed. This, of course, leads to jealousy between male cross cousins.

A woman inherits property directly from her mother or her older sisters. The residential, economic and property holding unit is the same. The ties between women in the same household are as strong, if not stronger, as the ties between a woman and her own husband. Overt social antagonisms between women are almost exclusively directed toward the families of father's other wives or one's own co-wives.

**Witchcraft**

Violence against consanguineal kinsmen is strictly taboo in Abron society. The idea of such violence, or even envy which might lead to violence, is generally suppressed in daily life. The outlets for aggression in Abron culture are strictly limited and are, I should think, unsatisfactory to handle the amount of antagonism which is generated within the social structure. This is particularly true because, with the exception of co-wives, none of the sanctioned forms of aggression may be directed against those with whom the most friction would be expected. Siblings may place unfair demands upon their younger brothers or sisters, teen-agers may indulge themselves in mock battles, parents may over-punish their children, any Abron may kick the family dog (and this is frequently done) and some hostility is undoubtedly relieved in humor.

Direct aggression, however, is blocked beyond these simple mechanisms to the point where even supernatural attack is handled unaggressively through countermagic rather than through direct action. As the Abron explain it, countermagic used against one's enemies works only to turn an evil spell back on its perpetrator. Thus, essentially, the villain is killed through the action of his own magic.

It is my conclusion that aggressive feelings which are generated by strains in the social system, but which are suppressed during socialization, find their outlet in beliefs associated with witchcraft. Witchcraft beliefs in Abron culture are a perfect example of psychological projection. No one ever admits to being a witch, and no one is ever caught in the act of performing witchcraft. In a real sense the status "witch" is an empty category in Abron culture. Few living people are ever accused of witchcraft and, then, only by outsiders (non-Abron) specifically hired for that purpose. The belief
in witches seems to focus overt aggressive feelings and channel them toward the unseen, unknown power of evil which every Abron believes to exist in anonymous others among the inhabitants of the village. Interestingly one fears the direct attack of witches only from within one’s own family. Thus the ambivalent feelings which develop among members of the same close social group are partially expressed in terms of witchcraft beliefs.

All social systems exhibit some areas of tension and conflict, areas in which conflicting interests are a product of the system itself. Projected aggression, when it exists as a psychological mechanism generated by the culture, should find its focus in those segments of the social system within which tension is greatest. It is there that resistance will be lowest because of the ambivalence created by conflict. The form and direction taken by witchcraft beliefs in Abron culture appear to be determined by tensions growing out of inheritance rules and social groupings which produce, at least in men, divided family loyalties. Rattray (1929) cites the inherent tension existing in Ashanti society between a man and his maternal uncle from whom he will eventually inherit property. The fact that a good percentage of Ashanti males eventually take avunculocal residence, however, creates a bond of affection between these men which seldom has a chance to develop among the Abron where avunculocality is rare and where lineage sentiment is overridden by loyalty to the patrilocal household. The tensions which exist between matrilineal and patrilineal allegiance are increased for a male Abron because authority is divided between his house owner and the matriline to which he might return when his household unit is destroyed through matrilineal inheritance. This, plus the fact that a man can give gifts of property to his sons but must eventually leave the residue of his estate, including his house, to his sister’s sons, creates strong tensions between a man and his sister’s sons, a man and his own sons, and between cross cousins. Under the old lineage system and before the introduction of coffee and cocoa production, an individual could feel reasonably sure of gaining an equal share in the wealth of the community through a place in the matrilineage. Today the combination of substantial but capricious patrilineal gift-giving, the breakdown of lineages, and the sometimes enormous differences in wealth make the kindred a warring camp for males. On the other hand the system of inheritance for women has not changed at all. A woman leaves her property to her oldest surviving sister and then to her oldest daughters in turn. The pattern of residence for women does not create tensions between the matrilateral and patrilateral sides of the kindred.

This brings me back to my original point: that witchcraft beliefs for men and women are different and that these differences reflect
the unique position of each sex within the Abron social system. All Abron informants agreed that witches kill their victims out of envy or jealousy, but male informants invariably listed property as the primary cause of envy while females listed fecundity. A woman who has many children may be killed by a jealous witch, a member of her own family who is barren. A high infant mortality rate combined with frequent abortions and infertility leads to a situation in which some women have many children and others few or none. Women prefer to have daughters because they become both helpers and housemates. A female who has filled her house with daughters is a prime target for envy from other women, particularly those in her own kindred who are not members of her household.

Following Nadel's hypothesis I would say that witchcraft occurs in Abron society primarily as a result of tensions among males. Areas of strongest tension are between a man and his sons, a man and his sister's sons, and between a man and his cross cousins. Hostility may extend to a man's brothers who may also wish to gain property due to them through the matrilineal system which makes them first heirs. When a man gives property to his sons he deprives his brothers as well as his nephews. Ambivalent feelings toward close kinsmen and the need to project aggression outward which develops during the socialization process apply to females as well as males. But since there is little tension among females over questions of property the expressed rationale for aggressive feelings among women is turned elsewhere.

Belief in witches is widespread in West Africa, particularly on the Guinea Coast. In the Abron case the socialization process and adult attitudes toward aggression fit a general pattern which appears to be in harmony with witchcraft beliefs. The way in which strains develop in the social system and the fact that these may not be expressed in overt behavior leave witchcraft as the prime means of handling aggressive impulses. Among the Abron, structure affects the direction and expression of the projective mechanism, but it does not override it. Sentiment (in this case attitudes toward kin) develops out of the socialization process and the structural network of individuals arranged in a role system. In my example the form in which aggressive sentiments is expressed appears to be borrowed from an available cultural vocabulary, conditioned by socialization and directed by social structure.

REFERENCES

