WITCHCRAFT AS A PRIMITIVE INTERPRETATION OF MENTAL DISORDER

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PREFACE

THE following facts concerning West African witchcraft were observed and recorded by the present writer while working as an ethnologist in the Gold Coast. The writer had not, at that time, any psychiatric experience, but has since worked in British mental hospitals long enough for the facts to invest themselves with psychiatric significance.

WEST AFRICAN IDEOLOGY OF WITCHCRAFT

Gold Coast witches, in contemporary African belief, are associated with a secret religious cult of their own. No such cult in fact exists, but the belief in its existence is probably based on fact and represents a garbled fragmentary tradition of a pre-agricultural religion, long superseded. It is believed that companies of witches, under a group-leader, hold secret nocturnal meetings in inaccessible places and travel to these gatherings by flying through the air or by riding on antelopes, leopards and owls. These meetings are cannibalistic feasts: the bodies of the witches' victims are cut up, cooked in a pot and eaten. The rank of a witch in the company determines whether he or she shall receive the head, the trunk, the hands and so on.

The fact that a witch has been demonstrably asleep on her mat throughout the night which she is supposed to have spent in feasting, and the fact that the corpse of the victim, slain supposedly by witchcraft, has clearly suffered no cannibalistic ravages, are covered by African dogma. It is the spirit (*susuma*) of the witch that leaves her sleeping body and flies to the meeting-place. It is not the victim's material body, but his vital *kla* which is eaten by the witches.

The *kla* is usually pictured as an invisible double and is the essence of physical life. Though a person's *susuma* may leave his body in dreams or in mind-wandering without ill effects, the *kla* cannot leave without causing sickness and death. If the witches steal away a man's *kla* and cut it up, he becomes mortally sick. If they then relent, re-assemble the parts and restore them to him, he recovers. If, however, they have already eaten, say a leg, and hence cannot restore it, he recovers except for a permanently useless leg. If the witches steal only that part of the victim's *kla* corresponding to the womb or the penis, the victim becomes either barren or impotent.

Besides causing illness, death and sterility, witches are also believed to blight crops and to cause accidents, financial disasters and ill-luck.

Witchcraft must not be confused with other supernatural and evil ways of causing trouble and death. Curses, charms, prayers and sorcery all have their place, but they involve ritual acts and sometimes concrete apparatus. The distinguishing feature of witchcraft is that it is wrought solely by the silent invisible projection of influence from the witch. Furthermore, she has no conceivable

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motive. She kills and injures, not those to whom it would be natural to wish harm or death, but those in whose well-being she may even have an interest. This is incomprehensible and therefore sinister. No one is surprised to find wickedness among wicked people, but to find it professed by hitherto good and kindly people is mystifying and appalling.

All this, however, is simply part of the body of African theory of witchcraft. What keeps the whole activity alive are the people who claim to be associated with it.

Activity of and Response to Gold Coast Witchcraft Today

Before attempting to describe any of those mentally disordered people who are the sustenance of Gold Coast witchcraft, it should be said that during the years 1920–1944 (and for aught I know during the past ten years as well) there was in the forest-country an enormous increase in preoccupation with witchcraft. This is attributable, firstly, to the sterility resulting from widespread gonorrhoea; secondly, to the almost universal poor nutrition and physical indisposition; thirdly, to the cocoa and mining industries which have in innumerable ways disturbed the even tenor of domestic and marital life; and fourthly, to the spread of literacy and literate occupations with consequent conflicting standards of behaviour, new insecurities and resulting neuroses.

Though we are not concerned here with the ecology of present-day witchcraft in the Gold Coast, it is interesting in the light of Hare's work on the ecology of mental disorder in Britain (1). Among the dwellers on the Gold Coast coastal plains, the Akwapim peoples, the Adangme peoples and the Northern territory tribes, who are all better fed, less diseased, more vigorous, more prolific and more cheerful than the forest peoples, witchcraft is comparatively rare. It is interesting also to compare Gold Coast witchcraft with that of the Trobriand Islands (2). Though the dogma of witchcraft is strikingly similar —the night-flying, the eating of the invisible double and so on—the Trobriand Islanders are a singularly happy, healthy people and the whole atmosphere of the topic is relatively light-hearted.

To meet the new preoccupation with witchcraft in the Gold Coast forest-country, innumerable shrines of a completely new kind have been set up. Each of these is in charge of either a single owner who works as a private practitioner, or of an elder appointed by the community which, by public subscription, bought the shrine. The private practitioners' shrines are the more interesting, for they are often in remote parts of the forest and are virtually native mental hospitals dealing with both out-patients and long-term voluntary in-patients.

The practitioner, though his explanations are provided by his theory of witchcraft, is frequently a psychotherapist of no mean order, and his results are such as our own psychiatrists might well envy. Nearly every day a party of clients come to see him bringing their witchcraft problem in the shape of what would in this country be regarded as a patient. These patients fall into several distinct categories:

(1) The confessed witches, moaning of the evil they have wrought. These are depressives and it is their own affirmation of guilt and unworthiness that initiates the proceedings.

(2) People complaining that witches have stricken them with such ills as sterility, blindness, excessive bereavement and misadventure. These regard themselves as suffering from what I shall call simple bewitchment. They seldom seem to be neurotic.

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(3) Terrified, anxiety-ridden people, who, though protesting that they have never yet done any harm, feel themselves being converted into witches against their will. I shall call their plight malignant bewitchment.

(4) Healthy people who seek, in return for a very moderate fee, to receive supernatural immunization against besetting evils.

The practitioner conducts the first hearing of any case ceremonially before his shrine. The accompanying ritual need not concern us here, except in its function of enhancing prestige, strengthening suggestion, and fortifying reassurance. He then most thoroughly investigates the family history and the stresses to which the suppliant is subjected. He ferrets out the envies, spites, rivalries, marital troubles, kinship disputes and temperamental clashes. Ruthlessly he lays bare everyone's secrets. Astonishing tales of guilt and misdemeanour often emerge. Then he sums up the situation as he sees it—and as the suppliants have now to see it. He announces who should confess and apologize and to whom. He admonishes, he advises, he knocks heads together. He cleanses, he reassures.

Sometimes he keeps a suppliant for a long stay of treatment in his forest compound, giving daily psychotherapy, daily ritual at the shrine, good food and a change of scene. Between him and the suppliant springs up a striking transference situation which he handles with masterly skill, referring his own influence over the suppliant back to the deity of the shrine, to whose permanent protection he is now commended.

Healthy people, seeking immunity from witchcraft, take ritual drinks before the shrine. On these people the practitioner impresses the indubitably sound doctrine that it is futile for any man to expect health and prosperity if there is rankling in his heart secret spite and resentment towards any fellow-man, and he takes appropriate steps to ensure that the suppliant cleanses his mind of any such rancour.

The Witches

When the abject witch tells her self-abasing tale before the shrine, it is noticeable how often there is a history of bereavement, sickness and worry ushering in her conviction of sin.

One witch said, "When my mother was dying I sat behind her and held her and gave her water and she breathed her witchcraft into me with her last breaths. I was ill for some time then without knowing the cause but after a few moons I became certain that I was a witch."

Another said, "I inherited everything that belonged to my dead sister and as she was a witch I inherited that too." Inheritance in the Gold Coast means mainly the inheritance of obligations, and among women such responsibilities as the care of children.

Another witch said that her dead mother sent the power of witchcraft upon her because she was discontented with the inheritance this parent had left her.

Yet another witch said of her evil genius, "It was given me by my brother. He told me that my daughter had got him into debt and that some day he would make me suffer for it. I didn't know at the time that he was going to make me a witch."

Especially is it noticeable that the loss of children is a frequent feature in the history of self-confessed witches.

One said, "Seven of my children are dead: one remains alive . . . The members of our company have to make contributions in turn. When my turn came round from time to time I brought them to be killed by my company."

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Another declared, "I have borne seven children. Four of them are dead. I killed them . . . I have lately killed one grandchild." Observe that this woman is now at the age of grandparenthood.

Yet another affirmation ran, "I have borne ten children. Five are alive. I killed the others myself."

And yet another, "I have killed seven children of my own, and eaten them with my company."

Another typical witch asserted, "I have killed five of my own children and my grandson."

And yet again, "I have killed three of my own children and seven of my kinsmen's children."

One witch who seemed unusually disposed to set a limit to her self-reproach said, "I have given to my company my own six children and no more."

Another asserted, "I have put a sickness into my brother's belly and into that of his wife so that they shall have no more children . . . When they get any money I cause them to lose it and thus I keep them in want."

Notice also that the depressive conviction of sin is apt to crystallize out of a matrix of family strife as well as family misfortune.

One witch averred, "I and my company have killed many and spoiled everything. We spoiled people's tempers in our family."

Concerning kinship tensions, it has long been fashionable among anthropologists to dismiss witchcraft as a mere expression of such tensions (3), and to perceive blame being fixed where envy and spite would naturally fix it. This view can seldom be taken of Gold Coast witchcraft. The background of family strife is certainly often there and contributes to neurosis, but the blame is claimed in no uncertain terms by the last person on whom anyone would conceive of fixing it.

Other witches present a more "mixed picture" than that of the classical depressive, but we still observe that it is the witch herself who voluntarily comes forward with her load of self-blame. The picture always contains a "depressive element". Whether there is ever present an additional element of obsessive fear, I have not enough information to know.

The following two cases I witnessed while staying in a village which possessed a publicly-owned shrine.

Case 1

Affua O., a woman in the later child-bearing age-group (no illiterate African knows his own age), gradually became more and more ailing and upset. She became deaf, then she became unable to stand. At length she called her mother and confessed that she was a witch. She said she had caused thirteen deaths among her own kinsmen, and five among her husband's, and was planning to kill him also. She belonged, she said, to a company whose meeting-place was far away and her spirit was in the habit of travelling there in a big motorcar—a new variant of the flying dream and the animal-riding dream. She it was, she said, who had caused an elder's wife to have a long and difficult labour, not in order to injure the wife, but to make the husband call in expensive medicine-men and so become impoverished. It was she, she declared, who was "holding the wombs" of all the barren women in the district. She had offered—in the spirit, without physical communication—to sell her own child's leg to another witch. The offer was refused and the leg remained well, but, had it been accepted, material money would have come to the seller as an apparent windfall, and when the purchaser invisibly removed the spiritual counterpart (*kla*) of the leg, the child would have lost the use of his material limb. The self-accused woman was further planning, she said, that her husband should be killed by a log while helping to load a timber-lorry. The husband, however, had drunk protective medicine at the shrine, so the medicine had turned up on the plotting wife on the eve of the day she had marked for his death, had made her mortally ill and forced her to confess.

She was forthwith carried—being unable to walk—to the shrine. There she repeated her confession and added that she was on bad terms with her husband, who kept her short of money and clothing. She said she had been born a witch and that the seat of her daemon was in her head. The elder in charge of the shrine said that, this being so, she could be only partially cleansed, though her power to do harm could be removed.

She was then required to perform the ritual of beheading a fowl before the shrine. The

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fowl, dying breast downwards instead of breast upwards, indicated that her confession was incomplete. Thereupon she added that her own baby gave her no pleasure at all as it cried without ceasing, so she had been planning to kill it by witchcraft. She then beheaded another fowl, which died in the manner indicating complete confession. She immediately recovered her power of walking and walked home.

Case 2

Ama G., again exhibits a "mixed picture". Her witchcraft history began shortly after the death of her two-months-old child, when she fell ill and said that it was she who had killed, not only this child, but four earlier ones. She asked to be taken to the shrine to complete her confession and be cleansed.

At the shrine she said that her daemon abode under her eyelids in the form of a centipede. She said that she had a secret song that she silently sang to it. When she sang, her daemon became active and did destructive deeds. It had killed her own five children, her sister's four children, and her sister.

At this point in her public confession she grew highly excited and sang her song aloud to the assembled populace. She then said that her parents, her brothers and her sisters were in poverty and that this was her fault.

She also said that she had transformed the main street of the village into an invisible river and that everyone who crossed it lost threepence for each crossing, with the result that everyone in the town remained poor.

She further said that it was she who had prevented the European diamond-mining industry from coming to the village and enriching it, for she had, in spirit, dug up all the diamonds and hidden them in the river. She had also taken away the resolution of those who would otherwise have started the diamond industry.

She added that her husband had never pleased her and that once, years before she became a witch, she had ritually cursed him.

After a few more confessions she was fined one goat, which was sacrificed before the shrine.

The principal outcome of the incident was that her husband divorced her, an event they had both long desired, and which, when accomplished, made them both happier.

Simple Bewitchment

The people who on account of gratuitous misfortune look around for witches to blame are relatively few. So long as people are mentally stable, they suffer grievous disasters without complaint. Even children's deaths are borne with fatalistic fortitude, a cruelly high infant mortality rate having for centuries seemed inevitable. It is mainly in retrospect, at the age of involutional melancholia, that the witch looks back and feels that she has killed her children.

One man, deemed to be a victim of simple bewitchment, was a literate schizophrenic whom I saw undergoing treatment (not at one of the new shrines but by a long-established old leech). He was regarded as afflicted and mad—for which latter term I believe every language has a word and every culture a concept. He was pitied, not persecuted, just as a blind man would be. No frenzied hunt for the author of his ills, so far as I know, had been instituted, for it was held natural that he, a literate, should have malicious enemies. His wife and his mother were together looking after him and they too were objects of neighbourly compassion. But they were looking worn and worried, and should his mother have thrown, as well she might, a reactive depression and announced herself the cause of his plight, this unnatural avowal would have brought the hornet's nest about her head.

A common example of simple bewitchment which raises no hue and cry is that of the schoolboy who has failed in his examinations, and complains that illiterate relatives, envious of his advance in life, have by witchcraft spoilt his brain.

Another man who had lost, through death, several wives and nineteen children, shrugged and said resignedly that he supposed it was the work of some witch. He made no attempt to pursue the matter further.

Again, a man who suffered agonizing jumping pains in his head at night attributed them to witches' use of his head as a football at their nightly revels.

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On the whole, people with whom fate has dealt very harshly accept their lot philosophically and seldom is witchcraft invoked to explain it.

Malignant Bewitchment

Far more common, and far more interesting, than the people who feel themselves bewitched are those who believe that the power of witchcraft is being thrust upon them. Witches can do worse than killing and injuring: they can turn other people into witches like themselves, no matter how unwilling the recipient of the evil power may be to possess it. And when frightened people begin to think that witches are after them they think of them as doing their worst. They seldom claim to be simply bewitched.

In this group again there is ample room for an obsessive element but I have not as yet any firm evidence of its existence.

Many of these people are first led to suspect themselves of being incipient witches by seeing "witches' fire" in front of their eyes—flashing lights and sparks which, from their descriptions, may well be the fortification spectra of migraine. Others feel frogs, snakes and worms crawling inside their bodies and limbs, particularly in their throats.

Case 3

Kofi A., a farmer, was received into a practitioner's compound for long-term treatment. When I first saw him, he was miserably thin, terrified and haggard. His malady began, he said, with sleeplessness, short intervals of unrestful sleep being filled with nightmares during which his *susuma* was drawn unwillingly away to join a band of witches. He developed daily periods of blindness and became unable to hear anything except the urging voices of the witches. He also had abdominal pains and his belly was scarred where he had made cuts to let out the evil. He consulted one leech after another and in despair even travelled to a coastal town and saw a European-trained doctor, who could find nothing wrong.

After a few weeks in the practitioner's compound with appropriate ritual and psychotherapy, he recovered his sight and normal hearing, though he was still languid and spent, sitting about on the ground, afraid to go out of the practitioner's sight. But in his presence he felt a sense of safety and the belief that he was to be rescued.

He stayed about a year and I saw him many times, gradually getting fatter, losing his hunted look and gaining the confidence to go out alone. At the end he was a different creature, with the normal African loquacity and sense of fun. He went home energetic and confident of his power to remain well.

Case 4

Kodzo S., a literate clerk and a long-term patient, said that his relatives had long been trying to destroy him and had finally decided to make him a witch. They first took away, he said, the use of his right hand, which made him a failure as a clerk. When I first saw him, the hand was, under the practitioner's treatment, improving, though it trembled severely, especially when he talked about it. He was a weak-looking personality with a quivering lower lip. He had been to many medicine-men and to one Government hospital. At the latter he was told that nothing was wrong with him, which strengthened his conviction that it was no natural power destroying him.

After a few months of native psychotherapy in the practitioner's peaceful compound, with nightly purifying baths before the shrine, the daemons were drawn out of him and he went home well.

It might well be supposed that the purposes of Kodzo S. would have been amply served had he merely lost the use of his writing hand through simple witchcraft. There was, however, no *belle indifférence* about him: he was terrified, and nothing short of malignant witchcraft satisfied him.

Case 5

Akua O., a young woman, felt herself being made against her will into a witch. An older woman came forward and confessed to be doing this. They were both brought to the shrine, where I saw them together. The girl was skeleton-thin and far too weak to walk. She had been ill for four years and had not walked for the last two, but she seemed alert and interested in the proceedings. After formal confession, the witch was purified and made to bless her victim, who was also bathed and purified. After this she was given a room in the practitioner's compound. Gradually she improved, put on flesh, learnt to walk again and to do her own cooking. She went home quite well and happy.

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Witchcraft in Britain

It has been well established, mainly by the scholarly work of Murray (4), that the concept and ideology of witchcraft in Britain had its original basis in the survival of a pre-Christian religious cult of great—probably pre-agricultural—antiquity, practised as a persecuted, "underground" movement concurrently with Christianity.

But long after this movement had died out and secret meetings and rites had ceased, vague and fabulous ideas about the evil supernatural powers of witches continued to prevail. It became the custom, when cows aborted, swine took fever, crops failed, floods rose and people perished, to look around for a witch.

It has been a matter for much modern bewilderment that the guilt was almost always laid at the door of some lonely, poor and wretched old woman, hitherto submerged in humdrum insignificance.

The explanation suggested by the witchcraft of West Africa is that the old woman voluntarily asserted and insisted upon her guilt.

This is further supported by facts which confront us in the mental hospitals of Britain today. There is no more familiar figure in the admission wards than the agitated depressive, weighed down with extravagant and unshakable self-reproach.

Case 6

Mrs. H., a married woman of 69, was admitted to hospital with a six-months history of increasing depression, sleeplessness and loss of weight. She was in great distress but was rational and gave a moderately good account of herself. She said she could hear accusing voices telling her that she was not fit to live. She said of her mother, who had died 45 years earlier, "I think I broke her heart", and of her husband's poor health, "It is my fault. He has been a lovely husband and I have been a rotten wife." She said that for her misdeeds she would be hanged. She also declared that she had brought harm to the whole hospital.

She was treated with a short course of E.C.T. and made a dramatic and complete recovery.

Case 7

Mrs. B., a widow of 55, was admitted in an agitated depression. She was retarded, speaking slowly in a whisper. She covered her face, wrung her hands and moaned. The content of her speech was exclusively self-abasing. "I have brought destruction . . . I'm ashamed . . . I did it without thinking . . . I've defied the Lord . . . No one else has been so wicked as I have . . . Why should all these people have to suffer for me? I don't know how to put my head in the air at all . . . I'm not fit to speak to you . . . All the floods and all the war: it must be me to blame."

She was treated with a course of six E.C.T. shocks. After three she was able to smile, speak freely and help with the ward work, but when told that she would soon be well still replied, "I don't think so: I've done harm to so many people." After three more shocks, she had completely recovered and was discharged.

It needs but little imagination to picture the reception of such self-accusations three centuries ago.

Another probably relevant type of case which crops up sporadically in our own mental hospitals is that of the patient who believes that he or she can kill or harm others by means of an ill-defined influence. The picture differs from the depressive picture. The patient is predominantly alarmed, even panic-stricken. He does not claim to have done harm, but he feels that he could do harm and is terrified lest he should. I am not now referring to the obsessive-compulsive with his impulse to strangle or stab, or his delusion that he is spreading pestilence by means of his own ill-gotten germs. Such a patient postulates an acceptable mechanism of harming, a weapon, a material agent or a violent act. There is no implication of any mysterious means of destruction, though there is indeed a mysterious force which he feels to be impelling him.

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Unlike the depressive, the patient afraid of his own potential destructive influence has enough insight to know that his belief is absurd. He may even have enough to suspect its relation to a guilty unacknowledged wish.

Case 8

Mrs. M., a married woman of 49, was admitted to hospital with a three-weeks history of anxiety and fear. The illness began when her mother-in-law fell ill of a paralytic stroke and it seemed likely that Mrs. M. would have to nurse her, possibly through years of helplessness. Mrs. M. harboured a wish that her mother-in-law would die. She felt guilty, not because of the wish itself, which could reasonably be regarded as a humane one, but because of her own disinclination to undertake the arduous nursing. She felt that the devil had put the wish into her head and she began to hear his voice. She began to feel that she had an influence over other people and could do them harm by making them do wrong things and make disastrous mistakes. Whenever she went to see her sick mother-in-law she felt that her bad influence was going to harm her. She felt no impulse to harm her directly. She became tormented and frightened by the devil's voice, which jibed, answered back her thoughts and taunted her, saying—"You've had it", meaning that she was going mad. She was soon weeping with fear and panic. The mother-in-law resolved the conflict by dying, whereupon Mrs. M. began to recover, and had, in fact, much improved by the time she entered hospital.

On admission she was correctly orientated, co-operative and pleasant, and she gave a clear, straightforward account of herself. Her hallucinations had almost died out and no longer distressed her. She was not noticeably depressed and recovered within a fortnight with no treatment beyond simple explanation and reassurance. Objectively, there was nothing wrong with her at any time except her distress at the subjective experiences which she clear-headedly described.

We have thus in our midst today at least two types of people who proclaim as a spontaneous unlearned response, unconditioned by—indeed flying in the face of—their encompassing culture, that they are the very stuff of witchcraft.

Summary

In parts of the Gold Coast today, neurosis is displayed, not only by depressed "witches", but by persons believing themselves bewitched.

An increase in neurosis, attributable to social and economic changes, has led to an increased preoccupation with witchcraft.

The untutored response of Gold Coast Africans to this neurosis includes a primitive but effective form of psychotherapy.

The affirmations of guilt that are a feature of severe depression suggest the postulate that many "witches" of Britain instigated their own punishment.

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