ON THE NATURE OF THE DEMONIC:
AFRICAN WITCHERY

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I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of witchcraft has been generally treated as peripheral to the phenomenological study of religion. Indeed, it has often been explicitly excluded from serious consideration as mere "magic" without genuine "expressive" content. It is one aim of this essay to demonstrate the "expressiveness" of witchcraft practices, and to show that they not only are directly related to the essential realities of the religious life, but that they disclose new meanings and aspects in those realities.

At the same time, I think, one cannot help but misunderstand witchcraft if one applies to it traditional phenomenological methods and categories. It is not merely a matter of the inanity of the intellectualistic term "magic", which so effectively separates knowing from doing. It is a part of phenomenological method itself to locate the unitary "essence" behind all historical appearances of a phenomenon. This in itself is valuable, and this essay will attempt much the same thing, but it has not been sufficiently understood how easily this approach tempts the researcher to ignore actual cognitive contexts, and to separate insight from action, "religion" from life. The result has been that the researcher is quick to disregard the unique contexts shaping and determining such a phenomenon as witchcraft in order to assimilate it to some other more "spiritual" or congenial "essence" as its perversion, degeneration, or meaningless "application". The whole problem of "survivals" has not yet been adequately dealt with in the research into the history of religions, due to this manner of understanding essence.

The same basic structures can express many "essential meanings": this does not mean that only one of them is "the true one" and the others are "degenerations"; each must be understood on its own terms from within the particular structure or patterned meaning it creates or sustains. Witchcraft can be shown, for example, to possess structures
relating closely to the most archaic hunting-and-gathering religions known to us, and again to such explicitly religious phenomena as divination or ancestor reverence. Yet these essential contributory structures do not “degenerate” into witchery or lose meaning, but take on quite different and profound meanings in their new context. The context determines meaning, and it may be the context is so meaningful, so well understood, it needs no consciously philosophic or “spiritual” indigenous interpretations. This is the case with witchcraft, which integrates such intimately experienced realities as sexuality and ingestion, bodily exuviae and human social existence, into a meditation on ultimate matters concerning Self and Other, freedom and evil, and the limits of the human condition.

All this is likewise so basic to us that we, too, ignore it while reactualizing it constantly. Witchcraft ideologies have deeply affected the West. It has been estimated that over one million “witches”, most of them women, were killed between 1500 and 1700, the vast majority in Germanic lands, using methods quite similar to those adopted by the Third Reich against the Jews and Gypsies. 1) Country and mountain folk in the U.S. and Europe still cling to witchery practices, and various youth cults in America center on a Romanticized “witchcraft”. But the most penetrating studies of witchery have been done in Africa, to which this study turns.

II. AFRICAN WITCHERY

A. Functionalistic Interpretations

There are many African societies in which witchcraft, or witchery, a word I use to include both sorcery and witchcraft, 2) is practically non-existent or quite unimportant. There are many others where such ideas have profound consequences.

Most of those who have studied witchery in Africa are British


2) The distinction between sorcery and witchcraft first made by E. E. EvansPritchard merely for the Azande in his Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), was extended into a dogma by later social anthropologists, but is now admitted to be inapplicable in many cases. See, for example, Victor Turner, The Forest, of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 118-24.