

Witchcraft: fact or fantasy?

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“Many meanings have been attached to [...] the words witch and witchcraft. Although the belief in forms of witchcraft, such as night flying and spiritual cannibalism, is found in many part of the world, [...] witches] seem to be simply a creation of the imagination ... despite confessions and modern so-called revivals, there were no witches”

Geoffrey Parrinder, M.A., D.D., Ph.D.
A dictionary of Non-Christian Religions.
London, Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1971

WCPRR Jul/Oct 2006: 152-156. © 2006 WACP
ISSN: 1932-6270

INTRODUCTION First, I must explain why I chose to address this not particularly fashionable topic of witchcraft at this conference. Since retiring a few years ago, I have been working on an autobiography (Prince, 2006). When I received Goffredo’s invitation, I had just begun a chapter entitled “Yoruba Witches are Real”. (The Yoruba occupy large areas of South West Nigeria). In this witchcraft chapter, I describe how I was surprised to discover that Yoruba witchcraft involved *real live women* (and some men); Yoruba witchcraft was not just a kind of cultural delusion to explain illness and misfortune as most anthropologists at the time believed (and still do as far as I know) (Note 1).

As I was thinking about Yoruba witchcraft, I began to wonder whether the famous Euro-American witch persecutions and burnings between 1400 and 1800 could have been justified. Since the Yoruba had real witches – identified themselves as such, ate human flesh and Mafia-like, extorted money and goods from patients by promising dubious cures, could the witches in Europe have been equally real and perhaps have warranted burning after all?

Here I will briefly review my own evidence that Yoruba witches were real and examine evidence implicating Euro-American witches. For this latter, I will refer for the most part to the well-known 600-page, late mediaeval compendium, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*) by Catholic German clerics, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger (translated by Summers, 1971).

Evidence for the Reality of Yoruba Witches

I worked with the Yoruba for some three years (Note 2). During my period of study of indigenous Yoruba healers (1961-2), my first inkling that witches were real people was when one of my best informants, Chief Jimo Adetona, confessed that he, himself, was a member of a witch cult!

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Received May 26, 2006. Accepted July 11, 2006.

He showed me a scar on his right inner arm that was token of this fact. It suddenly became clear why there were so many old women in evidence among his visitors. After this revelation, I began to ask the right questions about witches of other informants and the reality of witches gradually emerged.

Most important was my introduction to a prominent member of an Ibadan witch group. She was an elderly woman (perhaps 80 years old), highly tattooed and not unpleasant in manner. Before meeting her, I was required to send her through the healer who introduced me - a goat, a bottle of palm oil and a dozen eggs. Our dealings were always conducted in a darkened room and I was cautioned to the greatest secrecy. Whenever I met her or when I was leaving, she always shook my hand and tickled my palm. I thought at first that I must have been mistaken about the meaning of this gesture, but later she made it quite clear that she wanted to have intercourse with me. That this proposal was not merely her personal idiosyncrasy (or my personal charm) was supported by the remarks of one of my healer informants to the effect that although at one time he used to consult the witches, he discovered that no matter how old she was, the witch always wanted to have intercourse with him and he found that unpleasant (Note 3). Other healers had similar complaints.

My witch acquaintance finally offered to initiate me into the witch cult. I would be required to eat some special soup, do exactly as she instructed and pay her thirty Pounds. Of course I believed at the time (and still do) that the soup she was offering contained human flesh. From an extensive set of newspaper clippings collected during my Nigerian stay, I found many reports of mutilated human remains found by police. These remains could very plausibly have provided the human flesh for witch soups.

I never returned to see my witch after her proposition. I sometimes regret this. In any case I must recount a rather interesting event that occurred soon afterwards. As noted, my witch cautioned me to complete secrecy about our transactions. But as soon as I was out on the street, I forgot all about secrecy. Indeed just a few days later, when anthropologist friend, Bob Levine, visited me in Ibadan, I told him the whole story of my discovery that witches were real. That same evening, I wakened in the middle of the night and heard bats twittering in the eaves of the house. The thought passed through my mind, "Those are the witches after me for telling their secrets". I wakened the next morning with the worst pain in the neck I had ever suffered! It persisted for a good week. I can only assume that at some half conscious level, I myself feared the retaliation of the witches!

***Malleus* Evidence for Real Witches**

The authors of the *Malleus* certainly believed that witches were real – they and their inquisitorial contemporaries burned large numbers of them according to reputable historical sources. My task here then is to examine the evidence presented in the *Malleus* that witches were real and decide whether we would agree. To what extent does *Malleus* "evidence" stand up to our contemporary scrutiny?

The first general point about evidence in the *Malleus* is its ubiquitous appeal to authority as the basis for its assertions. The authors frequently quote as factual (and requiring no further confirmation) statements about witches from the Holy Bible (Note 4); or from the writings of St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Alexander of Hales (Note 5) or other Medieval authority. For example, one of the first questions raised in the *Malleus* is whether there are in fact real witches (Summers, 1971; p 35-6). The authors phrase the question rather oddly by asking whether it is heretical not to believe in witches. In any case they affirm that there are witches and cite as one piece of evidence (among many), Deuteronomy, Chapter 18. I looked up this reference in my King James Version of the Bible and found, verses 10-12: "There shall not be found among you anyone

... that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord”

But even when following up *Malleus* references to the Bible, I quickly ran into difficulties. The authors were clearly not using the same version of the Bible that I was! On Page 37 for example, when the authors refer to a statement made in “IV Kings”, my version of the Bible has I Kings and II Kings but not IV Kings! And the *Malleus* authors refer to “1. Paralipomenon, 10” - which doesn’t even exist in my Bible! But in any case, in our contemporary view of things, such appeals to pre-scientific authority bear very little weight indeed.

Another favorite form of evidence for witches in the *Malleus* is to provide highly detailed case examples. There are literally scores of these. A couple of examples must suffice here:

- (1) *“In the town of Ratisbon [today’s Regensburg], a certain young man who had an intrigue with a girl, wishing to leave her, lost his member; that is to say, some glamour was cast over it so that he could see or touch nothing but his smooth body. In his worry over this he went to a tavern to drink wine; and after he had sat there for a while he got into a conversation with another woman who was there, and told her the cause of his sadness, explaining everything, and demonstrating in his body that this was so. The woman was astute, and asked whether he suspected anyone: and when he named such a one, unfolding the whole matter, she said: ‘If persuasion is not enough, you must use some violence, to induce her to restore to you your health.’ So in the evening the young man watched the way by which the witch was in the habit of going, and finding her, prayed her to restore to him the health of his body. And when she maintained that she was innocent and knew nothing about it. he fell upon her, and winding a towel round her neck, choked her, saying: ‘Unless you give me back my health, you shall die at my hands’. Then she, being unable to cry out, and with her face already swelling and going black, said: ‘Let me go and I will heal you.’ The young man then relaxed the pressure of the towel, and the witch touched him with her hand between the thighs saying: ‘Now you have what you desire.’ And the young man, as he afterwards said, plainly felt, before he had verified it by looking or touching, that his member had been restored to him by the mere touch of the witch.”* (*ibidem*, p 263)
- (2) This second example (*ibidem*, p 267) even includes a gleam of humour: *“And what, then, is to be thought of those witches, who [...] sometimes collect male organs in great numbers, as many as twenty or thirty members together, and put them in a bird’s nest, or shut them up in a box, where they move themselves like living members, and eat oats and corn, as has been seen by many and is a matter of common report? It is to be said that it is all done by the devil’s work and illusion, for the senses of those who see them are deluded [...] For a certain man tells that, when he had lost his member, he approached a known witch to ask her to restore it to him. She told the afflicted man to climb a certain tree, and he might take which he liked out of a nest in which there were several members. And when he tried to take a big one, the witch said: You must not take that one; adding because it belonged to a parish priest.”*

I think all would agree that as a form of evidence, such examples would hardly be convincing to the critic of today. They seem rambling and amusing anecdotes such as one might expect to hear in a pub! They contain little that would convince us of the reality of witchcraft and certainly could not serve as evidence in a contemporary court of law.

As a third type of evidence that an individual is a witch, I will describe the remarkable practice of shaving an individual’s bodily hair and searching for “devil’s marks” on the skin. Such marks were what we would call moles or scars but were often also discovered inside the anus or other bodily orifice. Although the *Malleus* authors do mention this practice (*ibidem*, p 479), for a more extensive description, I consulted R.H. Robbins (1959), *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*.

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This practice of shaving the suspected witch and searching for devil's marks was largely used on suspects awaiting trial or during torture proceedings aimed at forcing a witch to confess. "*The suspect might conceal tiny charms or amulets in the hair, as well as under the nails, in the mouth or ears or any other body orifices, to confer taciturnity or insensibility to the pain of torture*" (Robbins, 1959; p 468). If a suspected witch had no such obvious marks, she might still have "invisible marks", to be discovered by "pricking". It was believed that if a long pin were stuck into them, no pain was felt and no blood would flow.

Another view of the reason for this search and pricking procedure was that the devil himself might be hiding within the hairs of the witch. The devil could then advise the witch what to say and do during her trial and thereby thwart the judges. Sometimes, according to Robbins, "A wig would be placed on the head of the possessed and when the hysteria came on, it would quickly be snatched off and put into a bottle, along with - one hoped - the devil." (*ibidem*, p 469).

Needless to say, we of today would not accept evidence such as this to identify witches.

CONCLUSION Although I may be somewhat biased, I do feel that my own evidence for the reality of Yoruba witches is considerably more convincing to the contemporary critic than that provided in the *Malleus*. I hope at least some of you will agree.

NOTES

1) Of course the Yoruba subscribe to many beliefs about witches that *are* "collective delusions". For example, they believe that witches cause bodily weakness, wasting diseases or death by sucking the blood and eating the spirit of their victims; that witches could change their hearts into birds and damage others while in the form of these witch birds; and that they can destroy the power of the healers' medicines.

2) I worked for two periods among the Yoruba: 18 months as clinician at Aro Hospital, Abeokuta (1957-9); and 20 months in research on the management of psychiatric disorders by indigenous Yoruba healers (1961-2). I should say that even during my work as a clinician, I heard many accounts of witches and their powers and wrote an extensive paper on the subject (Prince, 1961).

3) It would seem that this sexual activity of the witches had to do with their attempt to gain control of the sexuality of the community. Yoruba witches are thought to be especially involved in interference with reproductive matters. Impotence is common among Yoruba males and it is a prevalent view that this is the work of witches. A witch is said to be capable of taking the penis of a man and using it to have sexual intercourse with the man's wife or other women. The witch will then return the man's penis but it will be altered in some way and may not function properly. The woman who is visited in this way may become barren. It is a not uncommon dream for a man to see someone come to him and tamper with his penis or testicles. A woman will dream of someone having intercourse with her - the visitor may be either in the form of a man or of a woman with a penis. All this is considered to be the work of witches. Witches also control the menstrual flow of women. They can prevent menstruation or cause excessive flow. They may obstruct the expulsion of the baby from the womb. There is some obscure fundamental relationship between witchcraft and menstrual blood. The menstruating woman and the witch both have power to render the traditional healer's medicines powerless. It is interesting that these beliefs of the Yoruba are in many respects highly similar to those of the Mediaeval inquisitors we have just been considering.

4) I do not know what sort of Holy Bible would have been available to the authors of the *Malleus*. Would it have been written in Greek or in Latin? One thing is clear: the vast majority of the public would not have been able to read in any language and indeed, printing only became widespread after 1500.

5) Alexander of Hales (died in 1245) was an English schoolman, known as the "Irrefragable Doctor". Originally an ecclesiastic of Hailes, Gloucestershire, he became a professor of philosophy and theology in Paris, and later entered the Franciscan order. His chiefwork was the *Summa Universae Theologiae*.

6) To help understand why these momentous witch preoccupations emerged in Euro-America when they did, it might be helpful to note some of the important events that occurred just before or after the publication of the *Malleus*.

- 1415 Jan Hus, Bohemian religious reformer burned at the stake. He was influenced by the writings of John Wycliffe (1329-1384) who also attacked Catholic doctrines and practices
- 1440 The invention of printing with movable type in Mainz, Germany by Johannes Gutenberg. The Bible was an early production
- 1492 Columbus' discovery of the new world
- 1517 Martin Luther, founder of the Reformation posted his 95 theses on Wittenberg church door
- 1500 Birth of the Renaissance in Florence, Italy

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