ANTHROPOLOGISTS' WITCHCRAFT:
SYMBOLICALLY DEFINED OR ANALYTICALLY UNDONE?

Standefer's recent paper in *J.A.S.O.* (vol. X, no. 1) on the symbolic
attributes of the witch has tempted me to return to a field previously
visited six years ago. Her paper does not refer to her earlier contri-
bution to *J.A.S.O.* (Standefer 1970) nor to subsequent articles on witch-
craft in this journal (Crick 1973; Price 1974). In my 1973 paper (later
incorporated in Crick 1976: 109-27) I spoke of 'two traditions' in the
anthropological analysis of witchcraft. These traditions were, briefly,
the functionalist 'social strain' approach, and the semantic approach
based on the general shift from 'function' to 'meaning' and concerned with
an explanation of symbols, boundaries, categories, and the like. In that
paper my basic criticism of the approach Standefer adopted in 1970 turned
on the issue of how to define a problem or topic. Standefer's latest
article, though not so explicitly about a definitional problem as was the
earlier, is nonetheless still within the same framework. She is concerned
with symbolic attributes, that is, with the image which defines the witch.
I am not aware of whether Standefer has read my contribution to *J.A.S.O.*;
I had hoped in 1973 to make some suggestions for a rather new approach,
but these do not appear to have affected how Standefer approaches the prob-
lem nine years after her first analysis. It may therefore be useful if I
here reiterate certain points.

My disagreement is not on the importance of symbolism or meaning as
such; rather, my argument is with the dimensions or scale of the frame-
work within which we can most profitably approach a phenomenon. Standefer
is concerned to use symbols to define the witch. I have endeavoured to
use semantics to define away a phenomenon, that is, analytically to dis-
solve it. Standefer has claimed (1970: 11) that it is very important for
anthropologists, especially before attempting a comparison, to define
their terms. In her view the analysis of witchcraft has suffered because
of inadequate attention to the matter of definition. She went on:

> It is not possible to define witchcraft until it is recognized
> that the definitional problem is a problem in symbolic classi-
> fication. Witchcraft beliefs form a special category of classi-
> fication to which a great many varying elements or components
> may be assigned. The solution to the definitional problem is
> implicit in the literature; the problem has not been solved
> because no one has ever thought to ask the right questions.
> The main question we must ask ourselves is why does the *image*

of the witch take the form it does from society to society
throughout Africa and indeed throughout the world.

(Standefer 1970: 12)

Standefer's stress on 'image' and her statement that 'the definition-
al problem is a problem in symbolic classification' are important. Of
course, in one sense the latter is tautologous, for what is a definition
but an agreement to use symbols (normally linguistic) in a certain way?
But what Standefer does not see and explore is that symbols are defined
by semantic fields. Reading her latest article (1979) one has a strange
sense of Victorian *déjà vu* as clusters of strange symbols are gathered
around eyes, excrement, fire, necrophagy, and so on. Certainly these are
rendered in modern discourse as 'inversion', 'reversal', and so on, but
her approach takes it for granted that 'witchcraft' is a problem that can
usefully be studied *per se*. Her symbolic approach merely reifies 'witch-
craft' as a category, and I suggest that this is a case where analytical
convenience falsely generates ethnographic 'realities'. I repeat: 'witch-
craft' can perhaps best be understood by being defined away in a larger
classificatory framework than simply being defined by the symbols that
supposedly constitute it as a category.

This remark about definition is relevant because Standefer in her
first paper (1970: 11) cites the work of Leach on marriage, Lévi-Strauss
on totemism, and so on, as instances where advances are made by paying
attention to the defining of a phenomenon. Marriage has since been
analytically undone (Rivière 1971); indeed the brilliance of Lévi-Strauss's
analysis of totemism (1964) lay in his dismantling of the phenomenon, not
in constructing it — in fact in showing how it was conceptual naivety on
the part of the anthropologist that had invented the phenomenon in the
first place. Whether there is any temperamental nihilism involved here
on either an individual or collective level, it is the lesson in several
areas tackled in modern social anthropology that considerable advances in
understanding can occur when a phenomenon disappears, to be seen in a new
way in some very different framework. Some still argue that our first
task is to define witchcraft, and then by comparison to see what the
phenomenon really is. But it is vital to locate the nature and dimensions
of the field by which 'witchcraft' is constituted. Such a location can
then define the phenomenon away. Studies of witchcraft — let alone com-
parative studies — would then appear a semantic nonsense, and the mark
of our better comprehension would be a decreasingly frequent employment
of the term.

I am suggesting that witchcraft does not exist any more than totemism.
This is not the positivistic stance 'there are no such things as witches';
it is a semantic perspective. I find Standefer's latest article as defi-
cient as her first on this basic matter. It is my view that witchcraft
has been treated in anthropology as a problem because of a conceptual lazi-
ness and an ill-conceived parallel drawn with the witchcraft of European
history. This latter is the less excusable given that Evans-Pritchard
claimed forty years ago (1937: 64) that the 'witchcraft' found in 'primi-
tive' societies is not at all like that in our own past.[1]

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1. E-P accepted that the differences could perhaps be recognized by our
not using the one word 'witch' for the two different types of culture, but
in a comment to me on my 1973 paper he put it that he had to find a term
for the Zande witch and since he was writing the book in English he chose
the word 'witch'.

My proposal to dissolve the problem of 'witchcraft' is not a purely negative one. The suggestion is to put in its place a larger analytic framework which would consist of an articulated moral space of two dimensions: a system of concepts of human action and its evaluation; and a system of person categories, that is, a classification of person-types with attributes. This model was derived from Strawson's ideas on individuals, Austin's ideas on performative utterances, and de Saussure's structural ideas, especially his use of the chess-board analogy. These may not be the 'right' questions, but I feel these notions combined have considerable explanatory power.[1] I admit however that they cannot easily be put into operation at the ethnographic level, although this is ultimately the criterion which would establish whether the framework is fruitful or not. I would point to Price's paper in *J.A.S.O.* (1974), in which he gives a detailed ethnological and linguistic analysis of Konkomba data; he concludes that what ethnographers have previously said about Konkomba sorcerers has falsely unified concepts round an imposed category and has therefore done semantic violence to the conceptual fabric of the culture the ethnographers set out to describe

I shall now turn to criticise Standefer's 1979 analysis of witchcraft:

(1) Standefer begins her 1979 statement by quoting Jean Buxton's remark, '"The witch" is largely a symbolic personality'. One is tempted to ask whether there is a personality which is not largely symbolic? Is not any ordinary person a symbolic construct, generated by self — and other — perception? Nothing is strange here about either 'primitive cultures' or the 'witch' within such a culture. The U.K. is now governed by Mrs. Thatcher — an 'Iron Maiden'. To spell out the definition in long-hand would yield the proposal that the first woman to be elevated to this position refrained from sex and had an abnormal ferrous content in her make-up. What is the essential difference between this and saying of a Zande witch that he has abnormal sexual practices and has *mangu* in his stomach? Anyone could be regarded as a walking 'symbolic cluster'. The point is that to define the 'witch' we need to constitute all the persons in the field who are 'non-witch'.

(2) Standefer's 1970 paper advocated the symbolic definition of the 'witch' because among other things she complained (quite rightly) that anthropologists had gone witch- and sorcerers-mad (1970: 12). Evans-Pritchard's Zande distinction between the psychic injurer and the manipulation of material had been elevated to a universal mould, though early on (Evans-Pritchard 1929: 1-2) he had tried to warn against such a development. The distinction was used (Middleton & Winter (eds.) 1963) even where the ethnography showed it did not exist.

It is a pity in view of her earlier attitude to this matter that in 1979 Standefer begins by presenting us (p. 31) with a table based on the witch/sorcerer distinction. The difficulties we then get into are many. Item 1 of her table speaks of the Zande witch whose 'power to do evil lies in innate physical substance'. Above on the same page (and quoting from Evans-Pritchard) we have 'An act of witchcraft is a psychic act' (1937: 21). A table similar to that used by Standefer is presented by Pocock in his introductory book on anthropology (1975: 204). But he begins by drawing the reader's attention to a 'tireless point of terminology'. This tireless point (ibid: 193-5) is that the terms 'witch' and 'sorcerer' are

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1. Full bibliographical references are in both Crick 1973 & 1976.

being used in exactly the reverse way to that employed by Evans-Pritchard.
He proposes a series of opposed characteristics (motivation, victim, method,
etc.) but his attitude seems to be that whether you call a witch a witch
or a sorcerer and a sorcerer a sorcerer or a witch, it does not matter pro-
vided that you distinguish and remain consistent. So much for any argument
which speaks about universal symbolic attributes of the witch!

I do not deny that the kinds of distinctions both Standefer and Pocock
list are often found. If you take our classifications of crime, for in-
stance, we have a distinction between premeditated murder and the activi-
ties of a homicidal maniac. The conception both outside and within prison
of an embezzler and a child molester are not the same. So some of the
witch/sorcerer distinctions — such as unconscious/deliberate, sub-human
characteristics/social motivation — are evidently of wide application.
The trouble is that in drawing up such a chart we are only presenting some
of the performers. Talking of just witch and sorcerer is like trying to
describe a game of football only in terms of forwards and goal-keepers.
Those persons only make sense in the context of the other positions and
'the rules', and the point of the rules which make up the game.

The most curious feature of Standefer's chart is the distinction she
regards as most common 'in societies with two types of evil practitioner'
(are there any?), the distinction between a witch, who is 'characterized
by an image of inverted symbolic attributes', and a sorcerer, who is 'not
characterized by symbolic attributes'. I confess I am unable to grasp
what it means for a person not to be characterized by symbolic attributes.
Actions, emotions and motivations are all cultural classifications, so
everyone is a symbolic entity. Granted, witches are spectacularly defined,
but even the mediocrity is no less defined by symbolic attributes than the
witch. Freud reminded us in his psychoanalytic studies that the neurotic
is not 'other', he is our brother; or alternatively, we are all, to some
degree, neurotic. Similarly, with witchcraft, if we mapped out a full
field of person types and their characters we should see the relationships
between the witch and everyone else more clearly, for the continuities as
well as the contrasts which such a field would establish. One of the
commonest characterisations of the witch (or sorcerer) is one who acts out
of greed, envy, malice, spite. Who is this except all of us?

Standefer claims you can define witchcraft when you have recognised
that it is a problem of symbolic classification. She goes on to say that
witchcraft beliefs 'are united around the *image* of the witch' (1979: 31).
The image is made of attributes and these attributes define witchcraft.
But again — to use the classical Saussurean analogy — if you want to
understand chess you cannot do it by telling someone a queen can go side-
ways, diagonally, backwards and forwards. Even an ability to map out all
the possible moves of *all* the pieces still would not enable one to under-
stand. For this one has to grasp the point of the whole rule-cluster.
No analysis of the symbolic attributes of certain chess-pieces would make
the game intelligible.

(3) Standefer claims (p. 32) that witchcraft beliefs 'constitute a
system for the personification of *power* and *evil*', and she goes on to de-
fine a witch as 'a person who is thought capable of harming others super-
naturally through the use of innate mystic power, medicines or familiars,
and who is symbolized by inverted characteristics that are a reversal of
social and physical norms'.

There are several points, basically of an ethnographic nature, that
should be made here. First, by specifying the use of psychic power *or*
medicines, her 'witch' now includes both witch and sorcerer as normally

defined. She also speaks (ibid) of the heat symbolism of the Dobuan sor-
cerer, having on the previous page claimed that sorcerers are not symboli-
cally defined. On the matter of reversals and inversions, of course these
are common, but it is not always clear-cut for ambiguous symbols are also
found, as are many symbolic traits no different from the elements which
define non-witches. As for 'evil', if one looks at some ethnography, for
instance the case of mystical male aggression among the Gonja (Goody 1970),
what one finds is that what the ethnographer labels witchcraft is not evil
or disapproved of but one of the accepted moves in political struggles.

One last point: Standefer uses the concept of supernatural and extra-
ordinary powers (1979: 32). Again we must ask, what is the system in which
such power is not natural or ordinary? How are these terms defined in any
culture? How are human powers and attributes characterised, and how are
they distributed? It does not make any sense to talk of '*extra*ordinary'
unless we are informed about the rest of the system.

(4) Under 'Symbols of Power - Fire and Heat Symbolism' (ibid) Standefer
makes a number of dubious assertions about symbols of different kinds.
Heat and light are said to be not separate symbols but aspects of each
other. Yellow tends to be classified with red. No consideration of these
symbols outside the witchcraft context is made. No doubt Standefer is
interested in universals, and there may well be some good grounds for
thinking that not all in the symbolic world is arbitrary in Saussure's
sense. Certain person specifications or articulations of moral space may
well be common to a vast range of cultures. However, in her remarks which
seem to point the way to symbols which reveal 'natural associations' of
the human mind, there is no reference to the literature seeking ethnological
justifications for such assertions (for instance Needham 1964 & 1967) nor
to well-known psychological analyses of symbols like fire (for instance
Bachelard 1964).

It is not clear in any case what are the direct manifestations of
fundamental structures in the human mind; certainly Standefer does not
adduce any of the literature one would have thought relevant in talking
about images found in a vast number of cultures. Moreover, some patterns
seem far less than 'universal'. Flying/heat/light elements are common,
but there are ethnographies of witchcraft where they do not appear.

(5) The bulk of Standefer's paper is taken up with ethnographic cita-
tions of symbols of evil — all the inversions and reversals with which we
are now very familiar in our studies of symbolic classification. Witches
walk on their heads, act at night, are sexually perverse, have familiars,
are motivated by envy, crave for excessive power, and so on. In his famous
study of inversion in Lugbara thought, Middleton (1954) made it clear that
inversion was a character of the whole spatial and temporal dimensions of
the native cosmology. There is, then, nothing very peculiar in using re-
versals to define witches. The Lugbara scheme can in fact without much
trouble be used to structure our own experience. Tories have no hearts;
Socialists crawl on their bellies; etc.

Anthropologists have an ability to make the strange very familiar,
and it is an ability to which they should perhaps pay more attention. To
illustrate the point that witchcraft should be dismantled and seen in a
larger context, I shall now take the familiar symbolism of witchcraft and
suggest some parallels with any university department or a situation where
anthropologists gather to discuss witchcraft. Corridors of academe are
often tunnels of spite and malice, and places for the exercise of illegi-
timate power. Just as some witches remain fat while other villagers grow
lean, so it often happens that some academics work their fingers to the

bone while others seem to get on very well without doing very much. Perhaps, say their colleagues, it is because they have a way of tapping secret powers that no-one else knows about. Competitiveness and backstabbing are daily fare. There is wizardry enough, fratricide is common in the cause of promotion. Malcolm Bradbury entitles his satire on university life *Eating People is Wrong*. How often, indeed, has a gathering in the tea-room been little more than an opportunity to stick pins in the ones not present? Abnormal is the word one uses for witches; eccentric is the one normally chosen for academics. Witches physically cut a pretty strange figure — if not deformed, they are are often strange, shabbily dressed or remarkable; many an absent-minded professor fits such a mould very well. For years, and often through the night, the initiate plods away on some D. Phil. paying abnormal attention to minutiae, concentrating all his psychic powers, only, after a strange ceremonial with hats and gowns resembling women's night attire, to bury the monstrosity in some dark library vault or to bring it to public notice with a vain hope that the spell will transform the world.

I make no apology for this description. If anthropology cannot be related to one's own experience then it is hardly worth beginning. I have been parodying, of course, but as Standefer recognizes (1979: 41), many of the symbols of witchcraft are parodies of social life. That this is so makes inadequate her definition of the witch image (ibid: 32) in terms of inversions and reversals.

(6) In the final section of her paper, Standefer returns to some of the concerns of her 1970 paper. She states that 'the basis of anthropology is *comparison*' (1979: 44) and laments that not enough comparative work has been done: anthropologists should

> look for recurring patterns in the phenomena they are
> studying and then just sit quietly for some time and
> think about it all. In this way, it may be possible
> to make some new and interesting discoveries, and, in
> the process, add to the "theoretical capital" of our
> discipline. (Ibid)

I must confess that if Standefer's article were multiplied a hundred times in length it would remind me somewhat of Frazer's volumes on totemism. There is something curiously nineteenth-century in this advocating of comparison and the collection of symbols of fire, eyes, excrement, men walking on their heads, etc. It is the sort of stuff that made the armchair a fascinating place to be. I return to the first point I made, that the rub really lies in the 'think about it *all*' (my emphasis). What is the 'all' in terms of which witchcraft becomes intelligible? The focus on symbolism is now very old hat. No doubt one could do a survey of witch images in all cultures but, in the light of Lévi-Strauss's demolition of totemism, do we regard Frazer's vast compilations as of any theoretical value? The problem with the nineteenth-century comparative method was that it ripped examples out of context and brought them together for generalisation. Comparing items which, because they were not originally understood, are incomparable, is a sure way of getting wrong the 'all' in the 'think about it all'. Standefer, unlike the Victorians, does think seriously about the problem of definition. But her energy goes to defining a category without examining whether it is a meaningful subject of study. Getting the 'units' right (or the framework) is important and no amount of compilation adds up to sense if the original framing of the scale of the inquiry was defective. It is not enough to concentrate on recurrent

patterns in the phenomena; one must also be aware of the degree to which the phenomena have themselves been constituted by unexamined patterns in the thinking we have applied to a problem. Comparative religion to a very large degree deals with entities created by the assumptions of those western academics practising the discipline. The history of anthropology contains many similar cases where our categories of thought have generated our anthropological problems. It is no doubt difficult to shed initial models, but if you define wrongly then comparative gymnastics do nothing to justify the starting point, as much of the history of nineteenth-century anthropological theory testifies.

The note on which I should like to end is, I think, relevant in the context of talk about new 'theoretical capital'. Standefer says:

> What then has the analysis of witchcraft beliefs told us about the human mind and the way it works? It would seem that the main thing we have learned is the fact that man has the mental ability to create many diverse forms of "collective representations", selecting items from his social and physical environment, which he then combines according to a number of different possible patterns existing in potential at all times. (Ibid)

It remains merely to quote Chomsky, whose verdict on *The Savage Mind* was that all that Lévi-Strauss had shown us was that 'humans classify if they perform any mental acts at all' (1968: 65) — to which he had added nothing. I cannot envisage what kind of theoretical advance Standefer expects to emerge from her approach to witchcraft.

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