'Nor No Witchcraft Charm Thee! '

In his article, 'Two Styles in the Study of Witchcraft' (1973), Crick mentioned three recent publications (ed. Gluckman 1972; ed. Douglas 1970; Mair 1969) as examples of the style he condemned. Even Douglas, suggesting that 'As far as witchcraft studies are concerned, the field is open to anyone who cares to enter it' (1970: xxxvi), seems to imply that 'witchcraft' should continue as an isolable subject for comparative study. After making some pertinent and down to earth remarks about this point of view, Crick proceeded to lay out a series of ideas which were indicative of the direction he would like to see anthropology advance. With regards to his alternative style, Crick might be correct in predicting that some will find his paper wholly unsavoury and metaphysical. It is to be regretted if his image of an articulated moral space is considered by few, but this may be because he kept his discussion to the abstract and offered no evidence to substantiate his claim that witchcraft can be lost in a 'shared conceptual and moral space'. No doubt he envisages a wider application of his scheme than the dissolution of the theoretical concept of witchcraft and the real purpose of the paper was as a vector of certain critical ideas. But to move on, he would chance leaving witchcraft bobbing in his wake. First, he should relate his work to ethnography, thereby attending to a point implicit in his paper, that the conceptual categories of another culture must be exhaustively examined before our distinctions are imposed on them. For as he says, "We can never be sure exactly how odd our own categories of thought are" (1973:21).

Sharing this sentiment, I have selected the ethnography of a particular society, the Konkomba, for close examination. This should exemplify the risks of entering fieldwork with certain anthropological notions which have the power to predetermine what will be found to a remarkable degree. Whereas Crick's concern was to dissolve witchcraft in a larger conceptual framework, my more pragmatic approach is to show how witchcraft can beguile the ethnographer.

In fact it is sorcery that has been reported among the Konkomba, but, as Turner emphasised ten years ago (1964), we can now assume that there is no useful distinction to be made between sorcery and witchcraft to any other than the ethnographic level. Even there, its appearance must make us suspect the diffusion of Zande ideas, (by routes that we can plot with the accuracy of aeroplane schedules). In terms of Saussure's chess analogy, attempts to discriminate between witches and sorcerers seem like exacting comparisons, sometimes even oppositions, between bishops and knights (and in some cases, between king's pawn and queens). What we really need is knowledge of all the pieces on the board, what Crick calls the 'person field'.

The Konkomba are a Ghanaian people who speak a language belonging to the Gurma group of the Voltaic family. Their segmentary lineage system has been described by Tait in Tribes Without Rulers (eds. Middleton & Tait 1958: 168-202). For our purposes, it is sufficient to know that they are made up of a number of distinct tribes, each consisting of several clans, the largest autonomous units of social control. Clans of one tribe are linked by ritual and other relationships and will come together in the event of inter-tribal fighting. Tribes never unite.

In his paper on Konkomba sorcery, Tait enumerates the possible ways a sorcerer (osuo) can attack. The two main forms he distinguishes are the use of medicines (suoanjog); and transvection, whereby the sorcerer flies by night to his victim in the form of a moving light called suonmi, 'sorcerer-fire' (1967: 156). In addition, a sorcerer may send snakes to lie in the path of the victim or send his shadow to eat that of the victim, but these techniques are rarely employed. From another, though less detailed, source, there is general corroboration of these features (Froelich et al 1963: 157); but whilst Froelich talks loosely of sorcerers who kill by eating the souls of their victims (1949: 163), Tait emphasises that attack by suoanjog is far more feared and that greater precautions are taken against its administration. I shall be returning to suoanjog later.

Tait isolated three general beliefs about sorcerers:

i. That anyone can be a sorcerer, sorcery is not related to descent;

ii. "....that sorcerers attack anyone. They are evil and attack for the sheer joy of destruction.

iii. On the other hand, it is also believed that sorcerers may kill in order to inherit from an older person and that men may even kill in order to inherit wives, goods, and status, and sisters kill their older sisters in order to inherit goods," (1956a:338).

The first two general beliefs made Tate suppose that patterns of sorcery-accusation would be random, the third, that accusations would fall within the family (ibid: 340). But, on analysing the twenty cases known to him, he discovered, much to his consternation, that

"....accusations seem to be made by the older unmarried men either against young women married into a minor lineage other than the accuser's but of the same major lineage, or against the husbands of such women" (ibid :339).

Taking into account that for a Konkomba, status and authority are acquired only upon marriage and that, as polygyny is practised, the men marry rather late, Tait explains his findings by concluding that,

"The accusations made by men against the young women married into their major lineage can be regarded as an expression of hostility between the in-group and the out-group. The accusations by young men against their seniors can be regarded as an expression of hostility towards men who exercise some authority, are possibly wealthy in cattle, and who, at the same time, are not yet senior enough to enjoy the privileges and ritual protection of elderhood" (1967: 167).

So what have we really learnt about sorcery? Sorcery itself has been discarded in favour of the readily observable, the quantifiable, sorcery-accusations; and the apparently inconsistent beliefs about sorcerers have been skipped over. By this reductive process, the problem has become that of eliciting the patterns of sorcery-accusation (in terms of the social structure), then relating these patterns to the social structure. Inevitably, a relationship is found and this is then explained in crude functional terms. This procedure is in accordance with Tait's maxim that,

> "It is now well established that accusations of witchcraft and sorcery tend to be directed within the framework of the social structure" (1956a: 337).

This tautologous point of view is characteristic of the approach of the British structural-functionalists of the 1950's and early 1960's and still prevails. Its appearance suggests that Tait's perception of Konkomba sorcery and the way he directed his research might have been influenced more by the prevailing theories of witchcraft, derived from a misreading of Evan-Pritchard's Azande book and Kluckhohn, than by his own experiences in the field. Fortunately, it may be possible to test the validity of this thought as, though he subscribed to such a mechanistic type of approach, Tait seems to have sensed its limitations and, in his writings, he has supplied rich and varied details, both ethnographic and linguistic. With these, it may be possible to attempt a construction of a clearer picture of the location of 'sorcery' in Konkomba thought.

The following can be split into three sections. The first seeks to show that Tait wrongly translates osûo as 'sorcerer', and that this leads to his inability to make sense of sorcery beliefs. By examining linguistic material, it can be shown that osûo is a generic term which refers to those who make a conscious choice to utilize the powers of 'evil', specified by a central moral distinction which contraposes what may be best translated as 'good' and 'evil'. With the elimination of the false category of sorcery, it is possible to see this moral distinction at work. We can then discern relationships between semantic systems, built upon a moral dimension, which has previously been obscured. To exemplify this, the two following sections explore the semantic fields of beer and kola and their interpenetration through their common reference to the moral dimension. Beer and kola have been chosen because they are the principal media in which súoanjog are secreted.

So I shall first examine the available linguistic data concerning the word 'osûo'. Though Tait has made some extremely valuable notes about this word (1955a) he invariably translates it as 'sorcerer'. However, osûo is an unusual word in several respects. Here are two points concerning its morphology. First, it ends in a nasalized diphthong and this is rare among Konkomba nouns. Those that do so have a ritual or magical significance. Second, there are two plural forms, besûom and isûo. Besûom indicates that it belongs to the concord class that has 'o-' and 'be-' as the singular and plural prefixes, and in particular, it belongs to the subclass which comprises solely nouns applicable to human beings (e.g. 'man', 'woman', 'chief', 'diviner', etc). On the other hand, the class with 'o-' and 'i-' as the singular and plural prefixes consists of animals. Included in this class are 'onamu, inamu', an animal which is dangerous in life and death, and 'otuwe, ituwe', a one-legged, one-armed spirit of the bush. Another feature of osuo is that were-animals, were-plants, inamu, ituwe and benekpib (dangerous spirits of the bush) can all be called osûo.

Already, here is enough evidence to discredit the unqualified translation of 'osûo' as 'sorcerer'. Moreover, Tait admits that

> "There is no noun that can properly be translated as 'sorcery'" (1967: 155).

It would appear that this category of beliefs and actions labelled 'Konkomba Sorcery' was indeed an import and may have misled Tait into directing his research along the narrowing lines of sorcery-accusation. But, to continue,

> "...there is a word kesûo, which refers to a class of phenomena that are evil, a class to which the activities of sorcerers belong" (Ibid.).

Again, by a change in prefix, the word has shifted to another concord class, and again its meanings are several, ranging from sûoanjog, sorcerer's medicine, to, more generally, 'something bad' or 'evil'. In this class, the word has a more abstract quality than the other two forms which seem to refer to what may be crudely glossed as 'user of evil'.

There are two words, kenjaa and onjaa, which appear to be conceptual counterparts of kesûo and osûo. Onjaa can be used to describe a good or worthy person and kenjaa is best translated as a 'good thing' or just 'good'. The crucial distinction between kesûo and osûo, and also between kenjaa and onjaa, is, I believe, the element of choice. For instance, kesûo is frequently used as a synonym of sûoanjog, and sûoanjog is made from the exuvia of dead bodies - therefore it is inherently bad. On the other hand, a man eats sûoanjog "... in order to gain power as a sorcerer /osûo/" (Ibid: 166), and he does this of his own free will. Moreover, whereas kesûo and kenjaa are mutually exclusive and fixed, the transformations of osûo into onjaa, and vice versa, are possible. What we are dealing with is thus a moral dimension. The forces of 'good' (kenjaa) and 'evil' (kesûo) are absolute; and to achieve one's objectives a conscious choice is made as to which shall be drawn upon.

This can be further illustrated by the word 'benekpib'. Tait gives three meanings for this word.

> i. "Senior persons or lineage elders"; ii. "ancestors or ancestor spirits"; iii. "spirits of the bush (probably spirits of evil ancestors)" (1953).

Recalling that Tait mentioned 'spirits of the bush' as being referred to as osûo, we can see that the benekpib of Tait's gloss 'spirits of ancestors' become osûo by the simple addition of the adjective 'evil'. However, if certain beliefs about benekpib (third meaning) are examined, further elaborations are uncovered.

Spirits of the bush cause mental stress in adolescents. To overcome them, it is necessary to perform rites called the 'catching of the spirits'. These may last 2-3 years before suffering is alleviated. By invoking the forces of good, the victim is able to control the benekpib who are now friendly and act in a sort of advisory capacity towards their former victim. Tait actually says that the spirits are now kenjaa as opposed to kesûo (ibid: 16), and it is certainly true that from the viewpoint of the adolescents, they now represent 'good' instead of the 'bad'. As for the benekpib themselves, they have been transformed from besûom into benjaa and can take their place with the 'good' ancestors and the living elders.

In passing, it seems worth mentioning that there is no evidence of a plural form of onjaa, injaa, which like isûo, would refer

to animals. This might simply signify that it is only by resorting to the forces of evil that the human status of a man can come into question.

Tait tells us that the two principal ways in which the sorcerer's medicine, or rather sŭoanjog, can be transmitted are in beer and in a kola-nut (1967: 156-7). To understand why this should be so, the place of beer and kola in the Konkomba world must be examined. It should become apparent that the substitution of the idea of Konkomba sorcery by the kesŭo-kenjaa moral dimension not only facilitates this task, but is crucial if we are to comprehend the fit between parts of a system which otherwise would seem arbitrary and fortuitous.

Let us begin by thinking about beer. In reading the principal sources on Konkomba material - Cornevin, Cardinall, Froelich and Tait - one is struck by the frequency with which they refer to beer. However, it is not an everyday drink, but one that is brewed for particular, though numerous, occasions. Work parties are provided with beer, it is an essential component of funerals and Konkomba ritual, and most people at Konkomba markets are there to share beer with friends rather than to trade. In every instance, beer emerges as a symbol of friendship or solidarity; it is kenjaa, a 'good thing', par excellence.

In discussing interpersonal relationships, Tait (1961: Ch XI) stresses the importance of, and the value which is placed upon, voluntary friendship relations which cut across the structure of the lineage system. Konkomba are hostile towards strangers and this category includes all those who are not members of the clan, or clans, putatively linked by agnation. Friendship ties transcend these limits and help obviate recourse to violence between clans. Friendships and the mutual obligations they entail are not entered into lightly:

> "... in any lengthy rite that requires a heavy expenditure in foodstuffs and beer, material help is given between friends. Any man who is celebrating, for example, the Second Burial of his father, receives perhaps the bulk of the beer he distributes from his friends rather than from his agnates" (ibid: 215).

This passage continues

> "Since all the Second Burial rites of a clan are carried out simultaneously, clearly clansmen cannot help each other. The material help comes therefore from matrilateral kin and from friends."

Tait is implying that friends supply beer because clansmen are unable to. However, the interest lies not in the genesis of this custom; it is sufficient to note the identification of beer with friendship. Friends are beer-givers, and vice-versa.

At another level of the social structure, an analagous relationship to personal friendship can be perceived between clans of the same tribe. There are two major links between clans, the parent/filial relation and the reciprocal relationship of being ritual partners (mantotib). The latter is formed at a rite to end feuding between two clans of the same tribe. Called Bi sub kedza, 'They bury the fight', or Bi sub tibwar, 'They bury the words', it was first recorded by Sir Alan Cardinall in 1918. The essential details he gives are in accord with those observed by Tait in the 1950's (ibid: 147). In brief, the elders of the two feuding clans meet with those of a third. Libations and sacrifices are made, words are uttered, then

> "The ceremony is completed and piteau [beer] is freely drunk, both villages fraternising and drinking out of the same calabash at the same time" (Cardinall 1918: 50-1).

In all ritual, beer appears as both libation and in communal drinking; for instance, the New Food Rites, which take the following form. They open with the ritual drinking of beer, the elders drinking two at a time from one calabash. Libations are then made while the names of ancestors are called. Next, sacrifices are performed, followed by further libations, then general sharing of beer. Tait notes that libations occur at Van Gennep's état de séparation' and 'état d'agrégation'. Froelich has transcribed in French the following, which was chanted during the 'état de marge' of a New Food Rite. Significantly, he reports that such a rite is called 'La fête de la nouvelle bière'.

> "Woumbôr [God], protect us, give us abundant harvests, keep away fever and sicknesses of the head,[1] enable us to drink beer without any hitch, make our seeds good and fertile" (1954: 221, my trans.).

In this passage, we find a clue to the importance of beer in Konkomba thought and the suggestion that there is no real difference between the use of beer by men, lineages or clans. For to share beer is to make oneself vulnerable. It places a person in a liminal situation and is an expression of trust. By entering a relationship that entails the sharing of beer, one is exposing oneself to constant danger from that quarter. There is the ever-present risk of drinking beer that has been spiked with sûoanjog and thus transformed from the category of kenjaa to that of kesûo. Furthermore, beer is invariably drunk from a calabash. Not that this is surprising, but it so happens that calabashes symbolize ungwin, a word which may be translated as the spirit or soul of an individual as it is described as "that which God gives a man" (Tait 1961: 137). To drink from one calabash, therefore, expresses the bond between the drinkers. The calabash signifies the shared soul or spirit of the participants, a soul filled with kenjaa, beer. Yet the beer might be contaminated or the sould devoured by an osûo. The danger is great and the meaning of the act of sharing the beer enhanced.

It is now possible to view libation, not as another category of events in which beer is used, but as an extension of these same ideas to the relationship between men/lineages/clans and ancestors/spirits/God. Libation only appears different to the anthropologist because one party is incorporeal.

Kola is a nut which is chewed extensively in West Africa for its stimulative properties. Like tea and coffee, kola contains caffeine.

Apart from kola in the context of sorcery, there is little mention of its use among the Konkomba in the literature. That it was bought from traders and chewed by Konkomba can be inferred from a few references to it in Tait's work. We may suppose that the paucity of data concerning kola reflects its exclusion from their ritual, but, as I hope to show, this fact may be of importance in itself. To the visiting anthropologist observing its everyday use, it would not appear to have much significance, no more than the drinking of Coca-Cola in his own society. In fact Tait recommends that "... if you are tired and thirsty, stick to the excellent kola-nut" (1956b: 77). As a carrier for sûoanjog, he says this of kola:

> "The kola-nut splits down the middle. Sorcerer's medicine can be put into this split and so passed to the victim. The Konkomba do not eat kola-nuts given to them by strangers. They accept the nut, thank the giver, and, later, throw it away" (1967: 157).

In order to appreciate the association between kola and sûoanjog in Konkomba thought, it is necessary to understand what kola means to them. This is nowhere expressly stated, but certain insights may be gained by looking at their relationship with their neighbours, the Dagomba.

The Konkomba have suffered two series of invasions from the mounted Dagomba, first in the 13th-14th centuries and later in the 16th century. These were part of the general spread of the Mole-Dagbane-speaking peoples. The Konkomba eventually found refuge in their present homeland which was unsuitable for the Dagomba cavalry. However, there was no clear boundary between them, and the Dagomba made frequent raids to obtain slaves for their annual tribute to the Ashanti (Tait 1955b; Froelich et al 1963).

Serious fighting between the two peoples has now ceased, but the mutual hostility has remained and the distinction between them is still strong. Indirect Rule enabled Dagomba chiefs to appoint Konkomba sub-chiefs in the Konkomba area but their influence has been minimal. The traditional elders have retained their authority, and the Konkomba still despise the Dagomba and guard against their intrusion. This is not to say that there is no contact between them. The Konkomba markets have for long attracted Yoruba and Hausa traders, and Mossi butchers and weavers. Konkombaland lies on the overland trade-routes which lead from the kola-producing areas of Ashanti to Kano. Of late, the markets have grown in importance and the traders who now come to buy in bulk are mainly Dagomba. Nevertheless, it is significant that, according to their genealogies and myths of origin, time began for the Konkomba with the 16th century Dagomba invasions. For them, the Dagomba have remained their archetypal enemies, and they have always resisted the Dagomba way of life as they have Dagomba rule. Though the threat is no longer of violent invasion, the Konkomba now have to guard against moral subversion and loss of identity through the incursion of Dagomba values.

An important difference is that the Dagomba are Moslems, whereas the Konkomba never have been. Trimingham selects their insusceptibility to Islam as a distinguishing feature of Voltaic peoples (Gur language group) (1959: 15). Interestingly, he has also noted an identification commonly observed between Islam and kola (ibid: 198 -9, 156n). Kola has an important ceremonial function in West African life and frequently replaces beer in ritual, as is the case among the Dagomba (Rattray 1932: 463). It also forms part of Dagomba marriage payments. In addition, kola nuts were formally presented to officials and lesser chiefs by the Nas (Paramount Chiefs). At his death, a similar distribution of kola would be made on behalf of the Na and some would be received by mallams for reading verses from the Qur'an. When the new Na was enstooled, he would give kola to the chiefs who would serve him (ibid: 460, 570, 573, 580, 586). We can thus infer that among any other meanings kola might have for the Dagomba, to accept kola was a sign of subservience in certain contexts, and kola was also symbolic of the Dagomba Islamic beliefs as opposed to beer and paganism.

That kola does not appear in Konkomba ritual probably reflects the fact that it is not indigenous. It could not have entered the Konkomba universe until foreign traders had begun to visit the markets. As Dagomba started to dominate the market trade, so Konkomba were faced with a problem of how to maintain this desirable trade whilst continuing to resist the Dagomba threat. In resolving this quandary, they accept kola from a stranger so as not to insult him, thereby establishing a trading relationship. Later, they throw it away as a revocation of the possible connotations of their acceptance, i.e. subservience.

The Konkomba rationalize this action by terming kola a possible carrier of suoanjog, in other words, badness, and in particular, the badness they associate with Dagomba. Yet they accept kola from Konkomba friends and relations. I don't think that this is contradictory. It is only in a context where the giving of kola could be taken as a symbol of superiority that it is thrown away. Among the Konkomba, power and authority are prescribed and inevitable and do not have to be asserted. The threat of suoanjog remains though, but as Tait's patterns of sorcery-accusation have shown, it is those, or the wives of those, who enjoy more wealth, power and status than they should in the eyes of the accuser, who are the candidates for sorcery-accusation. Moreover, the accusations come from the men who feel they are lacking the status they deserve, i.e. the older, unmarried men.

What I hope this exegesis has achieved is to dissolve the category of Konkomba sorcery. The particular beliefs and practices which approximate to the anthropological concept of sorcery are not a group at all, but have been severed from an expressive system, built around and reaching out from a moral dimension which contraposes the forces of good and evil in Konkomba society. The extensions of the metaphorical use of kola and the metaphorical use of beer over a range of phenomena are facilitated by the grouping of the phenomena through their mutual association with

this moral dimension. Kola enters as a nexus between two semantic systems, Dagomba and Konkomba; beer, as a metonym for special kinds of relationships which are entered into out of choice and are kenjaa. However, it should not be thought that suoanjog necessarily conveys the same meaning in beer and kola. In kola, it tends to emphasise the dangers from the outside, epitomized by the Dagomba; whereas in beer, it is the dangers from the inside, from those in whom trust has been placed, though the extent to which this is so depends chiefly on context, and the possible conceptual range in each case would appear to be the same.

Ethnography should aim at expressing native conceptual structures as accurately as possible, for it is the foundation of our theory. Before theory is fed back into fieldwork, it must be exhaustively tested in order to seek out those a priori assumptions which may distort interpretations of the field material. Witchcraft is such a notion and its limitations as an interpretative framework are apparent in Tait's writings. By labelling events that have a dim family resemblance to our image of witchcraft, derived from our own cultural experience, we run the risk of obscuring, or even excluding, those connections between different realities, which, being outside or out of phase with our own conceptual boundaries, are the ones that should be concerning us. An approach like that advocated by Crick, broader in scope and more systematic in application, would seem to offer greater potential. Certainly, Konkomba sorcery can be lost in a 'shared conceptual and moral space' and a system of person catagories, one of Crick's primary articulations of moral space'; emerges from the linguistic evidence. Osuo takes its place with 'man', 'woman', 'diviner','chief', etc. and also with a group of supernatural animals, though the material is insufficient to attempt a more complete construction. As for his other articulation of moral space, that of 'action and evaluation concepts', we have uncovered a central moral distinction in Konkomba conception which serves as an important parameter in the structuring of their universe and from which certain actions - for instance, libation or the sharing of kola - derive their meaning.

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Note:

1. 'Sicknesses of the head', (orig. les maux de tête) refers to the mental stress in adolescents caused by the spirits of the bush mentioned earlier.

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