

Chapter 4
Witchcraft and Sorcery
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Chapter Summary

The focus of this chapter concerns the way traditional peoples see the world. Almost all traditional societies recognize a category of people who are believed to systematically harm those around them by psychic power. The various names given to these people translate as “witches” and their powers as “witchcraft.”

In African societies ancestral ghosts are often regarded as agents of disease. Other psychic forces, such as curses, are also recognized as important facts that govern life. Thus curses are known to be as real as if someone stabs another person with a knife. Curses can be used and are considered just only when someone has done another person real harm.

Another psychic cause of disease is the “evil eye.” Someone with such power has only to look at another person to cause illness and death. Where beliefs of this nature flourish, it is logical to believe that some people have powers they can use to cause evil to those around them. Such beliefs are the basis of witchcraft.

Witches and sorcerers are found almost universally as male and female although male witches dominate in some cultures. Witchcraft is an innate power which can be used only to do harm to others. In sharp contrast to witchcraft, which is psychic in nature, sorcery involves the use of material objects and is usually intended for evil purposes although it can be used for good.

Under British and other forms of colonial rule in Africa, the practice of witchcraft and bad sorcery was made illegal and those accused of either were punished. Some writers suggest that however much witchcraft and sorcery may have been feared, they nevertheless served a definite social function. For example, the fear of a curse often served to impose a degree of respect within a family. It was wise to fulfill one’s obligations to a neighbor, otherwise they might employ witchcraft or sorcery to get their rights. A suspected witch should not be offended lest he/she retaliate with their mysterious powers. Beliefs in psychic forces as the cause of evil in a society offer the opportunity to blame others for one’s misfortune, thereby relieving the frustration which misfortune inevitably brings.

Although traditional societies attribute misfortune to psychic causes, this does not mean they do not or cannot recognize the material causes of such (e.g., a mosquito bite is the recognized cause of malaria and patients are sent to a doctor/hospital). However, for the person schooled in traditional thought the question remains: “Why did the mosquito bite me and not the person next to me?” or “Who sent the mosquito to bite me?” The logical answer for those living in traditional societies is that the psychic cause must be dealt with before material medicine can take effect.

Traditional African societies recognize the “natural causes” of death (accident, disease, war, old age). Yet in every case—even among some who call themselves Christian—no satisfaction is felt unless an act of sorcery or the ill will of a particular individual can be invoked to explain why this natural cause produced death at this particular time.

In attempting to comprehend this difference between the “physical” cause and the “psychic” cause of misfortune, it is necessary to grasp that those living in Western societies tend to emphasize the importance of general laws and therefore attribute their unique effects to impersonal causes. On the other hand, Africans and those living in traditional societies tend to be more concerned with the uniqueness of things and to think in terms of personal causes. Accordingly, the latter is concerned with divination or the attempt to discover the psychic aspect of events.

Despite cultural differences, people are remarkably alike whether they live in the modern West or in traditional African societies. Thus, rather than viewing African religions as “exotic,” “primitive” or “strange,” we need to view them in comparison with similar traditions in our own society. Even members of Western societies refer to “bad luck” or to someone as being “accident prone.” Many charismatic Christians in the West suggest that routine illnesses can be caused by evil spirits. Thus, there is a logic to the beliefs of traditional societies that is not very different from the logic of certain religious groups in the West.