Willem de Blécourt

(partial translation of *Termen van toverij*, 1990)

WORDS OF WITCHCRAFT

Chapter 1

II USAGE OF WORDS

With the interdisciplinary fertilization between history and anthropology, a process which even in its early stages was labelled as `the most fertile twentieth-century seedbed of novel approaches to witchcraft' (Monter 1972: 444), the confusion of speech has increased. According to Van der Geest `witchcraft' was `one of the most bewitched terms in anthropological jargon, as elusive as the beings that are considered to practice it' (Bleek 1977: 128) and Macfarlane had already written about the `overall state of confusion' (1970:3). This linguistic confusion is closely related to the question of witchcraft's universality versus its uniqueness.

From historical and anthropological studies on witchcraft three positions can be discerned. One may consider the subject as universal and claim that its main features are always and everywhere the same. A diametrically opposed view is that what is generally presented as witchcraft is always something different in each cultural system and that the encompassing category is only an academic construction. Between those extremes a position can be discerned that, either tacitly or explicitly, takes the universality of witchcraft for granted, but nevertheless stresses diversity within different cultures. To me, it seems only sensible to start from the assumption of witchcraft's uniqueness. This seems to imply a contradiction, as it would make it impossible to refer to much anthropological and historical research as research on `witchcraft'. I will present my solution to this dilemma at the end of this section. At first, I will clarify my choice by discussing the use of words by anthropologists and historians.

Studying witchcraft as a special theme has strong comparative connotations (Macfarlane 1970: 211-253; cf. Larner 1981: 5). That is why many authors start their presentation with a reference to the almost universal occurrence of witchcraft. 'All over the world, people's ideas of what witches do, and what they are like, have a great deal in common' (Mair 1980: 228). Collections of papers on witchcraft contain contributions about times and places that are far apart from each other (Douglas ed. 1970; Marwick ed. 1970, 1982; Newall ed. 1973; Lehmann & Meyers eds 1985; Geschiere & Van Wetering eds 1989). When someone remarks that 'witchcraft ideas are

widespread without being universal' (Mayer 1970: 46), then the exceptions become interesting, which betrays the global scope even more (cf. Douglas 1970).

A rather generally accepted point of view has been brought forward by the late Scottish historian Larner: 'pre-industrial European witchcraft has enough in common with contemporary primitive forms to be accounted as the same phenomenon' (1984: 80; cf. Behringer 1987: 90-91). She described this form of witchcraft using the concepts *maleficium* versus healing, that is to say, harming by witchcraft (to bewitch) versus unwitching. To this she remarked that 'the lowest common denominator is very low and (...) divergences are very great' (1984: 80). Disregarding the fact that anthropologists have become very sensitive to the label 'primitive' and would rather avoid it, one can ask whether Larner's common denominator is not too comm/on to make any sense. As regard to research which mainly focussed on bewitching, the notion of unwitching surely implies some progress, but that is not sufficient. 'It is even this universal, summarizing meaning of the concept that prohibits the differentiated investigation into its origin, into its historical development, as well as into the different ways in which it occurs in the different sources' (Kovács 1977: 241). Every specification immediately brings differences to the light: 'the assumed uniformity of witchcraft rapidly erodes when one begins to compare popular traditions from different parts of Europe' (Monter 1972: 449). Even authors who presume witchcraft to be an almost universal phenomenon realize that its specific meanings and interpretations are bound to place and time. 'One has always to specify the interpretation of these phenomena, to account for specific circumstances: a certain period, a certain place, certain people involved... Their meaning will not be the same in present-day France as in Africa. (...) it will appear hard to present one single interpretation and declare it of value for the manifestations of witchcraft in Anjou and in the Vendee' (Gaboriau 1987: 136, 137; cf. Demos 1983: 13).

Those who expect a fundamental discussion about the contradiction between witchcraft's diversity and its universality will be disillusioned. Almost every author sticks to an area of research that is confined in time and space and remarks about the uniqueness and the special character of its witchcraft do not usually meet with any contradiction. This changes as soon as concepts are used outside their area of research which is clearly the case with translations, for instance. This is shown by both the anthropological debates about the validity of the distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, as by the more recent clashes among historians about the usefulness of the concepts *Hexerei* and *Zauberei*.

In his trend-setting study about the Sudanese Azande, Evans Pritchard (1937) presented the indigenous distinction between the concepts *mangu* and *ngwa*. Somewhat superficially portrayed, the distinction runs as follows: *Mangu* is an inherited trait of which the bearers are not aware themselves and which serves to harm others. *Ngwa* has similar effects, but as opposed to *mangu* it is

conscious and its practitioners thus use tangible aids. Evans Pritchard translated *mangu* as 'witchcraft' and *ngwa* at first as 'magic' and later as 'sorcery'. Although he had some doubts about the applicability to other societies of the distinction worded in those terms (1970: 24; Crick 1979: 140), especially anthropologists who specialized in the study of African societies have been convinced that they have uncovered these two kinds of witchcraft in several societies. Especially in comparative research, the dichotomy is essential, Middleton and Winter claimed, although they indicated one small problem: '(...) in some societies the distinction may not be clear-cut in the minds of the people themselves' (1963: 2). Later Marwick also stressed the importance of the dichotomy. Most anthropologists applied it to their advantage, he concluded (1970: 12-13). He totally ignored the critique of Turner, amongst others, who in a reaction to the volume by Middleton and Winter already had remarked 'that there is little general agreement on the criteria which distinguish sorcery from witchcraft' (1964: 322). Imposing the dichotomy, he argued, could even be very misleading, and it only obscured the diversity of 'mystical harmful techniques'. The obsession with 'the proper pigeonholing of beliefs and practices as either "witchcraft" or "sorcery"' distracted attention away from actual behaviour in its social context (ibid. 323-324). In the Netherlands this same discussion was repeated some years later (Van Wetering 1975; Bleek 1977).

Following anthropological studies Macfarlane distinguished between *witchcraft* (harming with implicit means), *white witchcraft* (healing and the like with explicit means) and *sorcery* (harming with explicit means) (1970: 4). How this compartmentalization in every instance relates to the speech of those investigated remains unclear. As he himself stated, 'there was immense confusion and variation' (ibid. 310-312). Only a few authors further applied this distinction on historical European witchcraft, albeit in a rather careless fashion.[1] To most historians this discussion did not provide useful insights. Thomas, for instance, did notice different forms of witchcraft, but he did not think it mattered much in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trials by what means someone was bewitched: '...it does not seem that any very illuminating distinction can be drawn on the basis of the presence or absence of magical techniques' (1970: 52; cf. Thomas 1973: 551-554).

The decisive difference between the concepts *Hexerei* and *Zauberei* as used by historians is based on the respective presence and absence of the devil. Many authors consider diabolical elements to be typical of European witchcraft. It should even have hindered anthropological analysis. 'From a sociological point of view,' wrote Thomas, the problem presented by the concept

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1 Although in European witchcraft it is possible to distinguish both innate witchcraft -- indicated, for instance by the to be discussed notion of `witches families' -- and bewitchment with the aid of material objects (examples among others in: De Blécourt & De Waardt 1990), authors such as Horsley (1979a, b) and Henningsen (1980: 10; 1983: 143-144) have deemed it proper to use *witchcraft* in the sense of bewitching and sorcery for *unwitching* (cf. Henningsen 1989: 106). In that way they selected mere aspects of a dichotomy that was questionable anyway and did not contribute to any clarity. A more creative and analitical use of Evans-Pritchard's dichotomy can be found in Jenkins' study on Ulster (1977).

of ritual devil worship is not the same as that is raised by popular belief in the existence of people capable of doing harm by occult means'. In England this problem was hardly important, however, as the idea of devil worship was marginal there and 'English witch beliefs are thus more suitable for comparison with African ones than is sometimes appreciated' (ibid. 50). This, however, is more a justification of the European way of studying witchcraft than a reflection of the actual situation. The idea of devil worship formed the basis of most criminal prosecutions, and was an academic interpretation of opinions of witchcraft that were prevalent among most Europeans (Clark 1984; Schwerhoff 1986). 'Left to themselves, peasants [?, WdB] would never have created mass witch hunts - these occurred only where and when the authorities had become convinced of the reality of the sabbat and of nocturnal flights to the sabbat' (Cohn 1976: 252). Interpretations of ritual devil worship made witchcraft in Europe more complex than elsewhere. This does not imply that anthropological analyses could not also prove their worth on the continent, both on the level where the devil was less influential, as on the level of the prosecutions (cf. Burke 1989).

Thomas' argumentation is hardly convincing, the more so as two different, although mutually influencing opinions about witchcraft can be discerned in England as well, especially where it concerned the difference in motivation between judges and accusers. As a anthropological critic of Thomas and Macfarlane wrote: '...the legislators, judges and villagers very possibly meant different things by the word witch". Then, insofar as they were talking about different things, their accusations and prosecutions cannot have been motivated by the same fears, or directed to the same end. Perhaps those who were hung as *witches* were killed because they were unfortunate enough to get caught in an intersection of belief-systems, victims of homonymy' (Keynes 1972: 151).

When researching European criminal proceedings on witchcraft, it is surely necessary to acknowledge 'two discourses that were totally strange to each other' (Muchembled 1978: 299). But when historians concentrate on prosecutions, they tend to underline the diabolical elements more than can be justified, and to consider the rest as more or less universal. 'Charming the dead, harmful witchcraft, soothsaying, magical colored quackery - all these forms of *Zauberei* and consequent *Zaubereiprozesse* long existed in Europe before the *Hexenprozesse*,' Schormann explained (1977: 1). According to him it is only possible to speak about *Hexenprozesse* when the documents report such elements as the devil's pact, sex with the devil, the devil's dance or participation in the sabbath, and harmful witchcraft (1977: 2; 1981: 23). The flight to the sabbat is sometimes added as a fifth element (Cohn 1976; cf. Spierenburg 1988: 110-112). For those who subscribe to the dichotomy, *Zaubereiprozesse* are far less interesting than *Hexereiprozesse* and the former consequently disappear from their view. The documents which deal with *Zaubereiprozesse* can be easily excluded, even if that would be unjustified. But not every trial fits into this schema. 'In the practice of the investigation it is totally impossible to apply only the full witchcraft concept, as in

this way all forms of witchcraft that would not contain the five elements mentioned, would be excluded.' The boundaries are extremely fluid (Behringer 1987: 16-17; cf. Roeck 1988: 384).

The dichotomy used by historians differs from the anthropological one as it is used to define the object of study. The trauma of the, from a rationalistic point of view unjustified killing of 'innocents' has dominated the selection and has even left traces in the explanations. *Hexenprozesse* are defined by the criteria of only one group involved, to wit the prosecutors. This, however, implies a (perhaps unintended) sharing of the demonological views, the more so when the documents from which the opinions of the persecuted can better be distilled are pushed away as not belonging to the object of study proper. This can hardly aid an understanding of historical processes of interaction and domination (cf. Frijhoff 1983).

Labels are not autonomous. A discussion about the right terminology remains fruitless as long as the way the different indigenous concepts are categorized is not specified every time. This applies to historical speech, as well as to present-day speech. The anthropological dichotomy which at first was only used to convey specific results of research, has become part of an academic jargon. As an 'analytical tool' it has been taken out of its original context and used to describe witchcraft from when- and whereever. Somewhat odd seeming remarks about the absence of an equivalent of the pair (f.i. Geschiere 1980: 296; Favret-Saada 1977: 27) are thus be understood as relicts of the anthropological discussion, which in the meantime has retracted itself. When the of the structural-functionalist paradigm faded away, on which most of the anthropological studies on witchcraft were based, and which also inspired Macfarlane, anthropological interest in witchcraft waned as well (cf. Marwick 1972). With his critical remarks at the end of Douglas' volume of essays, Beidelman closed off a period. He asked among others: 'how many (anthropologists) have compared different interpretations of the same case by the various protagonists, such as the accused, the accuser, the reputed victim, the various relatives and neighbours concerned?' (1970: 354). A plea thus to push the petrified anthropological theory to the side and to start to listen to the informants. The object of study needed rethinking.

Larner's definition of *maleficium* may be of value in a superficial, formal way, but it does not seem to be fit for ethnographic purposes. 'It can include both sorcery - physical manipulation of objects and/ or incantation of words - and witchcraft - harming through the release of power activated by hatred' she explained (1984: 80). In her definition the anthropological dichotomy has become rationalized, decontextualized and so devoid of meaning, that when one leaves out the explained terms, witchcraft dissolves totally. Moreover, *maleficium* is linked to a Latin concept that as part of a theological language in any case contains the demonological connotations that both Larner and other historians have set apart for a certain period in European history. 'English witchcraft existed in a culture which possessed such categories as "natural philosophy" and a

theological system upon which witch beliefs were partly parasitic. Great violence must be done to the conceptual structures of another culture in speaking of witchcraft if its lacks those environing categories which defined it in our own' (Crick 1976: 112), a remark that also applies to the continent (Crick 1979: 140). Words of witchcraft can not be transposed from one semantic field to another without loss of meaning. As Crick put it earlier, 'English society possessed a word 'witchcraft", but anthropologists have committed a possibly grave error in using the same term for other cultures, of which historians certainly must be aware when they use anthropological writings' (1973: 18). This obvious critique of the universality of witchcraft, prepared by Beidelman, also implies a disregarding of witchcraft's usage within present-day academic conceptual systems, British structual functionalism in particular. As an alternative Crick proposed `to locate the nature and dimensions of the field by which "witchcraft" is constituted' (1976: 112). What is needed in every case is to discover two broader frames, an indigenous system of ideas about human actions and their evaluation, as well as a system of person categories; '(...) in order to define a "witch" we should need fully mapped out the different symbolic definitions of those sort of person categories normally translated as "sorcerer", "diviner", "prophet", "priest" and so on' (ibid. 116).

The paradox which was pointed out at the beginning of this section can be dissolved when one attaches a dual indicative value to the concept 'witchcraft'. In the present study witchcraft therefore has two general meanings, which indicate two opposite movements. The first one is the academic indication of the object of research as `witchcraft'. Opposed to that are the meanings of the words of witchcraft to the indigenous participants. The semantic field as pointed out by Crick has at least to be recognized in both processes. The labelling of diverse phenomena as 'witchcraft' mainly remains an activity of the researcher. In this way witchcraft becomes a scientific labelling process instead of a universal cultural item. Superfical, formal likenesses do not prove the existence of a phenomenon that rises above particular cultures, but refer to a system in which the different observations have been put. Only in this sense, witchcraft is a overall term.

It is impossible to answer the question about the general and universal meaning of witchcraft (cf. Terrail 1979). Witchcraft can only be known as language, as a way of communicating actual people in an actual situation. The specific meaning of that communication can not be known a priori. As transmitted parts of historical processes of communication, these meanings can nevertheless be reconstructed and become knowable. This approach implies that I will refrain from a definition of 'witchcraft' right here. It is an open concept that can only become somewhat clearer at the end of this book.

In a practical sense, the object of research is thus not characterized by content, but by material form. It is not composed of phenomena that we could nowadays consider as 'witchcraft' (whatever they are), but of a group of words that can be classified under the indigenous category of

witchcraft (i.e. *toverij*). Although the selecting and classifying can be considered as a present-day activity, the student could try to take the best possible lead from indications transmitted from the past.

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