

## SPECIAL SECTION

# Witchcraft in Local and Global Perspectives

## Introduction

STEPHEN A. MITCHELL, DEREK COLLINS,  
and TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI

(Constructions of witchcraft, and accusations of its practice, occupy places of central importance in most cultural belief systems. Popularly viewed in contemporary Western societies mainly as the stuff of early modern European history (e.g., Kiteledge 1929), our conception and understanding of witchcraft outside that particular temporal and geographical box has grown substantially in recent decades, and we now understand witchcraft and magic as wide-spread phenomena in human history and human geodiversity. And the social and academic need for a clearer understanding of witchcraft has rarely been greater, both in Western contexts and in non-Western ones. The rise, particularly strong in European, Australian and North American venues, of neo-paganism, including various strains of witchcraft practices (e.g., Gardnerian Wicca, Feminist Dianic witchcraft, hedge witches, Faerie witchcraft), makes this form of nature-oriented worship one of the quickest growing and most vibrant, if still numerically small, of religious groups. In reaction to such growth, some traditional institutions have sometimes felt—and been—threatened, not least constitutional ones, such as the right to freedom of religion, which can occur when practices outside those associated with “The People of the Book” are encountered.<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, mainly in non-Western contexts, we have in the past ten years witnessed a precipitous rise in the identification and persecution of people accused of practicing malefic magic, clearly a different behavioral category than that espoused by Western neo-pagans, yet a group tied to them by the bonds of history, the often-shared perceptions of their larger societies, and their own

attempts to exploit these connections (cf. Purkiss 1996, Ellis 2000). From sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia, the Far East and Latin America, most prominently (but also true to a lesser degree in North America and Europe) exorcisms, vigilantism, and mob violence—frequently including executions—have looked to resolve the perceived problem of witchcraft. In short, although we have now entered the 21st century, we are far from having learned all the lessons about collective hysteria and intolerance that need to be drawn from the study of witchcraft.

True to this sense of the largely unbounded temporal and geographical concern with witchcraft, the case studies in this volume of Western Folklore, arranged chronologically, explore witchcraft beliefs and accusations in a number of cultural milieux—4th-century B.C.E. Greece, 19th-century England and Denmark—and look to investigate the relationship between learned, “global” discourses on witchcraft, on the one hand, and local folk belief, on the other. In addition to assessing available methodologies for the study of witchcraft, a central concern for each of the essays is how, for example, the elite community may appropriate local belief for its own ends (or directly reject it), or how it reinterprets local belief through its own, implicitly invidious, premises, simultaneously to attack and to distinguish itself from such local belief (cf. most recently, Clark 1997). Given their prominence in many cultures, belief in witchcraft and the existence of witch-hunting—and historical European constructions of them in particular—are topics that have attracted much scholarly attention in a number of different fields in the humanities and social sciences. Most of this energy, however, has focused on what modern-day Wiccans style “The Burning Times,” that is, when witch-hunts in Western Europe reached their zenith in the post-Reformation era (roughly 1550-1650). Attention to these historical events has, however, not been without reference to the phenomena observed in a variety of living cultures. Particularly after Evans-Pritchard’s classic study of Zande witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937), functionalist approaches to witchcraft in one form or another dominated discussions of the topic (cf. the review in Douglas 1970a), as they do in several cases in the present collection of essays. Although Kluckhohn (1944) shares Evans-Pritchard’s homestatic view of witchcraft, he has an otherwise quite different interpretation of witchcraft’s functions in society. Kluckhohn argues that among the Navaho, accusations of witchcraft contribute to the “maintenance of personal and social equilibrium” through a series of manifest and latent functions (e.g., entertainment, displacement of aggression).

Of particular interest in the context of the current volume, the differences between the functionalist approaches taken by Evans-Pritchard

and Kluckhohn to the topic of witchcraft provide one of the principal examples for those who would argue against what they view as "undisciplined trespass" outside one's own field, which, it is suggested "in the end produces more obscurity than it does creative inspiration" (Gluckman and Devons 1964:241). In this controversial view, Evans-Pritchard succeeds because he hews close to the sociological model, whereas Kluckhohn fails due to his attempts to incorporate psychological dimensions into his interpretation.<sup>2</sup> The deluge of scholarship on witchcraft throughout the past 30 years soundly rejects this minimalist approach to a topic as sweeping and complex as witchcraft—from the cross-disciplinary dialogue represented in the articles in Douglas (1970b) and Ankarloo and Hemmingsen (1990) to the synthetic approaches of Demos (1982) and Purkiss (1996), one finds researchers learning harmoniously from neighbors in adjacent fields about new theoretical approaches, conceptualizations, and methodologies, and employing these tools in their own work.

The academic study of folklore should, of course, occupy a central role in this exchange between its vigorous institutional neighbors, even if its practitioners have sometimes been reluctant partners in this dialogue (cf. Stevens 1989). Historians themselves have long recognized the place of folklore and the factor of popular tradition in the maintenance and transmission of witchcraft beliefs (e.g. Kittridge 1929, Thomas 1971:666). Nevertheless, historical treatments of witchcraft have only recently begun to confront these processes more directly (e.g., note the remarks of Barry 1996:25-27; cf. the recent contributions in Briggs 1996 and Davies 1999). Yet even so, the dynamics of popular tradition, whether we define popular inclusively to mean a universally-held set of beliefs, or exclusively to mean beliefs held by a non-elite group or groups (for this distinction, see Barry 1996:92), have tended to be subordinated by historians to psychological—and often quasi-Freudian—explanations of witchcraft (e.g. Roper 1994). By reducing the phenomenon of witchcraft to a basic set of psychological impulses directed primarily on the part of men toward women, however, these scholars tend to downplay the question of the agency and transmission of witchcraft beliefs within popular tradition. At the same time, a reductionist psychology introduces the associated risk of overlooking the more complicated interplay of gender constructions within a given society, particularly since they may inform the way in which women themselves (re)produce negative stereotypes directed at other women (cf. Hester 1996, *pass* Briggs 1991:443). In our view, this state of affairs presents folklorists with a rare opportunity both to supplement the important and irreplaceable documentary work of the historians, while at the same time offering the folklorist's own distinctive perspective on the dynamics of tradition

to the approaches that have already been advanced. The present issue of *Western Folklore* extends folklore's role in this regard through its insistence on taking up witchcraft in a variety of temporally and geographically mixed contexts, and proposing answers to such questions as: What, in the context of the culture(s) and the timeframe(s) of the study, is understood by witchcraft? How do witchcraft or accusations of witchcraft function in the culture(s) being addressed? How does the construction of witchcraft relate to the elite and non-elite belief systems of the culture(s) involved?

As the following essays make apparent, folklorists bring many tools and diverse resources to their academic workshops—philology, ethnography, history, archival research, fieldwork and so on. Witchcraft as a topic of academic scrutiny cries out for just this sort of careful transdisciplinary dialogue (cf. Bauman 1996). Indeed, it remains an ideal topic for folkloristic inquiry exactly because of its heterogeneous nature (for an excellent recent example of the folklorist in this role in contemporary America, see Ellis 2000). In fact, folklorists in particular have the opportunity, even the responsibility, to continue contributing to the ongoing research on witchcraft into the new millennium that is now led—although we do not yet know how well—by contemporary historians in England, Germany, and France. There is, of course, no single unified approach to witchcraft which one might call "folkloristic," but these studies, focussing on constructions and interpretations of witchcraft in 4th-century B.C.E. Greece and 19th-century northern Europe, underscore how a transdisciplinary approach, that is, a folkloristic approach, can assist us in understanding witchcraft beliefs in local and global perspectives.

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# The Trial of Theoris of Lemnos: A 4th Century Witch or Folk Healer?

DEREK COLLINS

While belief in witchcraft and magic abounds in Greece during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E.,<sup>1</sup> actual trials for witchcraft are extremely rare, though not nonexistent during this period.<sup>2</sup> The exception that proves the rule is the case of Theoris, an alleged witch (*pharmakis*) from the island of Lemnos, who was prosecuted in Athens before 338<sup>3</sup> allegedly for casting incantations (*phōntai*) and using harmful drugs (*pharmaka*).<sup>4</sup> The evidence of her prosecution gives us the most detailed account of a trial for witchcraft<sup>5</sup> from this period in Greece, though by the standards of late medieval or early modern witchcraft trials the details as we have them are very slim. The practice of singing incantations and administering harmful drugs had existed in the Greek popular imagination at least since the eighth century; the era of Homeric poetry, and so we shall have to consider what this exact combination of charges signifies for Theoris in the fourth century. From the point of view of late fifth- and fourth-century intellectuals (physicians, philosophers), the prejudice against Theoris and her alleged magic sounds similar to those of contemporary American physicians toward folk healers and their remedies. Many of the same differences between modern physicians and folk healers toward illness outlined, for example, in the work of David Hufford (1988 and 1992), bear striking resemblances to the attacks on magic by Plato and Hippocrates. Ultimately, as I hope to demonstrate, Theoris's demise can be attributed to a legal apparatus for the most part uninterested in magic, except where magic could be shown to be responsible for serious injury or death. What Athenian law was less equipped to deal with, however—and here is the crack in the system through which Theoris fell—was whether magic was intended for healing or harmful purposes. Hence those of Theoris's ilk played a dangerous game in which they were free to offer magical services