WITCHCRAFT, SORCERY, RUMORS, AND GOSSIP

This book combines two classic topics in social anthropology in a new synthesis: the study of witchcraft and sorcery and the study of rumors and gossip. It does so in two ways. First, it shows how rumor and gossip are invariably important as catalysts for accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. Second, it demonstrates the role of rumor and gossip in the genesis of social and political violence, as in the case of both peasant rebellions and witch-hunts. Examples supporting the argument are drawn from Africa, Europe, India, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka. They include discussions of witchcraft trials in England and Scotland in the seventeenth century, witch-hunts and vampire narratives in colonial and contemporary Africa, millenarian movements in New Guinea, the Indian Mutiny in nineteenth-century Uttar Pradesh, and rumors of construction sacrifice in Indonesia.

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Foreword

In this book we explore two intertwined themes: the study of witchcraft and sorcery and the analysis of rumor and gossip. While there is a considerable amount written on both themes, generally they have not been brought together systematically. It is illuminating to do so for several reasons. One is that gossip and rumors play an important part in the processes leading to accusations of "wrongdoing," which include witchcraft and sorcery accusations. Also, when witchcraft and sorcery ideas are not overtly at work, rumor and gossip may work as a covert form of witchcraft against persons. This leads to conflict, violence, and scapegoating in the same way as witchcraft accusations do. The two themes of our book are intrinsically, not casually, linked together. Both belong to the broader study of processes of conflict creation and resolution. In particular, they focus on the sources of tension in social relationships and the use of cultural themes and historical ideas in transforming these relationships. Witchcraft, sorcery, rumors, and gossip, which have been separate forms of stock in trade for anthropological descriptions, are in fact important general topics of social and historical analysis at large.

The sort of model of social action that we employ in our discussion of the topics is *processual*. We see witchcraft ideas not only as a set of cultural symbols expressing a mode of thought about the world, but also as deeply implicated in sequences of action. Such ideas both contribute meaning to action and draw their meanings from it. Witchcraft suspicions emerge

into specific accusations in response to rising social and interpersonal tensions and are colored by broad historical circumstances. The same is true for rumor and gossip. They flourish in certain circumstances and in turn give further impetus to these circumstances. One can make linear representations of these processes over a period of time. But the processes may also be circular and recurrent. Fear of witches or sorcerers may reach a crescendo, only to die away later and then recur. The same is true of rumor generally. In all instances, patterns of communication between people over time and space are crucially involved. Suspicions, fears, resentments, and grievances enter collective discussion because of current conflicts and also shape and transform the conflicts themselves.

We pursue this general argument through a range of ethnographic contexts, providing some guidelines on the overall literature on our two themes and drawing on this literature to strengthen our approach to the topic. The ethnographic examples range across the world from Europe to the Pacific, through Africa and India, and belong to different time periods. We do not trace any history in detail. Our aim is to show common or overlapping patterns and processes that can be applied in many contexts. Using this method of presentation, peasant insurgencies in nineteenth-century colonial India will be seen to share certain vital processual elements with witch-hunts in Africa and community discussions on witchcraft and sorcery in New Guinea. In all these contexts, communication – by signs, actions, and words – is central (see Fig. 1).

There is a risk, in presenting materials of this sort, of overexoticizing the picture that is given of people's lives. In Africa, just as in England or in Papua New Guinea, people may spend most of their time going about the business of their lives without reference to ideas of witchcraft or sorcery. But in terms of conflict or tension, these ideas, or their contemporary replacements, may tend to emerge whenever people feel suspicious of one another and find untoward events hard to explain and cope with.

Here is the reason why we link witchcraft and sorcery with rumors and gossip. In all societies rumor and gossip tend to form networks of

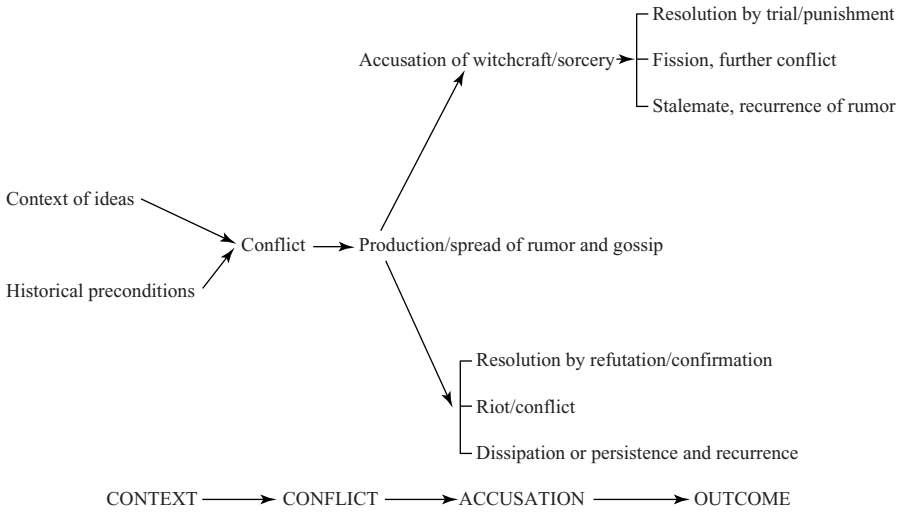

FIGURE 1. Parallel sequences in processes involving witchcraft and rumor.

communication in which fears and uncertainties emerge and challenges to existing power structures can be covertly made or overtly suppressed. Rumor and gossip form the substratum from which accusations of sorcery or witchcraft may be made, if such notions are culturally present or enter into people's life-worlds. Ideas about witchcraft and sorcery have often been pointed to by anthropologists and social historians as markers of social stress (notably by Marwick 1965). Our point is that rumors and gossip enter into the early stages of the development of stressful circumstances and so lead into later stages that may crystallize in accusations. Where centralized authorities hold power, these accusations may then lead to witchcraft trials or witch-hunts. Such trials have the special purpose of identifying the "evil wrongdoers" and not just punishing but purging them from society, in an attempt to remove "evil" or "pollution" and recreate "purity" (Douglas 1966). Contemporary accusations of abuse, especially against children, function in much the same way as witch trials did in Europe and North America in the seventeenth century.

The theme that links all of our chapters together, then, is the theme of how conflict is generated and dealt with in social life, and the special role that confusion and uncertainty play in this process. Historically, in small-scale or community-level contexts, gossip about neighbors, always tinged with hostility arising from specific incidents of conflict and misfortune, or jealousy and resentment of the fortunes of others, has led to accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. Such local-level gossip has been influenced by more free-flowing rumors spreading from one community to another and reflecting wider historical changes. Witch trials represent the confluence of these local and interlocal events, culminating in acts of expurgation or scapegoating, usually directed against those who are socially weak or marginal. Often, the malign powers attributed to those who are socially weak can be interpreted as resulting from a fear that the weak will try to take revenge on the strong. Guilt mingles with outrage in these circumstances. While the witch or sorcerer is seen as the source of evil or wrongdoing, it is the accusers who can be seen as playing the aggressive role. In a more complex way, there is an interplay of aggressive acts between people that may polarize them and become transformed into acts of punishment or expulsion. The mobilization of public opinion is an important catalyst, and in this process rumor and gossip again are crucially effective. They may be called on by the powerful against the disempowered or vice-versa. They may also emerge in conflicts over power between equals. Leaked memoranda about governments or individual politicians act as a form of printed rumor or gossip, often leading to the "demonization" of those attacked and their resignation or removal from office, unless the rumor can be overwhelmingly refuted.

Rumor and gossip therefore form the common link between processes of conflict belonging to different places and historical periods. The materials in this book cover a wide geographical and historical range. We employ a selection of materials so as to summarize their main points that are relevant to the argument of this book. Our purpose in using the selected examples is to illustrate the pervasive and tenacious role of

rumors and gossip in the production and outcomes of accusation that hit on fundamental, but often badly defined, arenas of morality and are classically enshrined in witch trials.

We emphasize the political context of our materials. It is this context that makes the topics we cover amenable to comparison and generalization. In the widest of terms, witchcraft and sorcery are seen as forms of special power, beyond that of ordinary people, that can be attributed to those who are either less or more successful than others. Wealth or poverty are themselves interpreted as signs of the effects of the actions of spirits. Those who are politically powerful may fear those they have subjugated and suspect or accuse them of using subversive counterpowers. Mutual fears of pollution operate between a colonial power, such as that of the British in India, and the Indians whom they ruled. In contemporary African contexts, as Peter Geschiere and others have shown (Geschiere 1997), postcolonial indigenous politicians fear the retributive witchcraft of jealous kin or constituents whom they have not assisted, while their constituents themselves may attribute the politicians' power and success to the use of magic and the support of spirits. In Papua New Guinea witchcraft accusations may reflect altering patterns of tension between women and men or between land-owners and incomers. In seventeenth-century Essex in England, some observers (e.g., Macfarlane 1970b) have argued, tensions centering on the obligations between neighbors produced patterns of local gossiping that could emerge into witch trials. Rhetorics associated with Christianity and its depiction of the world as divided between good and evil entered into both seventeenth-century discourse in Europe and the contemporary world of Africa and Papua New Guinea.

In the succeeding chapters of this book we pursue these themes at greater length. Our main purposes are to follow a processual and historical approach throughout, to highlight the importance of rumor and gossip, and to point to the dimensions of power that are involved in the cases we discuss.

Foreword

One caveat: it is not our aim to produce a new overall theory of witchcraft or of gossip and rumor. Our aim is more modest: to *relate* discussions of witchcraft and sorcery to the discussion of rumor and gossip and to show how the symbolism and practice of violence is tied in with both of these themes.

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