WITCHCRAFT, the supposed capacity to harm others or to affect the course of happenings, usually in antisocial ways, by supernatural or magical means. In Christian belief this power for evil has been thought of as associated with and derived from the devil.

History. In the early Middle Ages witchcraft was condemned by the Church, but it was not until the 14th century that it was proscribed as heresy and persecuted as such. Witchcraft accusations and trials took place throughout the Middle Ages, varying in frequency and severity from region to region and period to period. In the 15th century prosecutions sponsored by the Church began in earnest, and a number of prominent persons in Western Europe were executed as witches. The most famous was Joan of Arc. In this prosecution the issue was not whether she had done harm, but whether the voices she claimed to have heard, and which commanded her to wear man’s garb and to lead the French armies, were sent by God or the devil. Several years after her death in 1431, a second trial was held at which she was exonerated, and in 1920 she was canonized.

About 1486 two German Dominican inquisitors published the Malleus maleficarum (The Witches’ Hammer), then the definitive theological and legal statement on witchcraft. According to it, witchcraft depends on a pact with the devil, whether explicit or tacit. The Malleus maleficarum indicated what witches were expected to confess concerning their evil-doings, their secret meetings, their pact with the devil, the devil’s mark on their bodies, their giving of unbaptized children to the devil, and other horrors, as well as the identity of other members of their groups, or covens. Many thousands were arrested, tortured, tried, condemned, and executed.

During the principal period of witch persecutions during the 16th and 17th centuries, large numbers of people were killed. Estimates of the men, women, and children executed by hanging or burning range from 300,000 to as many as 9,000,000. In America the most famous outbreak of witch persecutions occurred at the end of this period, in 1692, at Salem, Mass. The last trial for witchcraft in England took place in 1712 and in France in 1718.

Explanations. In spite of the great number of documents on witch trials, confessions, theological writings, and historical analyses, the phenomenon remains poorly understood. One authority, George Lyman Kittredge, holds that the belief in witchcraft centers on the attempt to explain untoward events as the expression of the ill will of some particular person. When misfortune occurs, its victim, trying to understand how it happened and seeking intent rather than looking for natural causes, explains it as the deliberate act of some enemy or some person of generally evil intent. Under these circumstances one can always recall some veiled threat, some envious person, or someone of seemingly evil aspect who is in general an object of fear. This person is then accused of witchcraft. Kittredge considers that belief in witches’ sabbaths, flying on broomsticks, horned devils, pacts with the devil, and so forth, were mainly accessory folklore.
In line with this view is Geoffrey Parrinder's explanation of witch hunts as symptomatic of the hysteria of people confronted by tragedy which they cannot understand. Parrinder interprets much of the folklore surrounding witches in terms of Freudian dream psychology and symbolism.

A totally different interpretation of witchcraft is offered by Margaret Murray, an anthropologist. She holds that witchcraft is the remnant of an old pre-Christian religion with preagricultural rites centered on a horned deity dating back to prehistoric times. The followers of this cult met in secret groups (covens) in nocturnal gatherings (sabbaths). They were thought to have secret knowledge and various powers capable of influencing the health of man and beast and thus were considered witches. But these witches were not antisocial, and their rites were maligned by the Church, which persecuted the witches in order to destroy their ancient religion. Still other writers, Montague Summers, for example, hold to the truth of the witches' confessions and the other materials described by the authors of the *Malleus maleficarum*.

Whatever the truth may be, it remains that a great many people in Europe and America believed that witches were people who were members of a secret society of evil-doers who had a pact with the devil, whom they worshiped at night in obscene rites in the form of a black man or a black goat. Witches were feared, and civil and ecclesiastical authorities did everything in their power to destroy them. Historically it is interesting to note that the height of the persecutions came at a time of much social and economic change and disruption, and that the new Protestant churches of the Reformation, as well as the Catholic Church, actively participated in witch persecution.

**Witchcraft Today**

Beliefs. Belief in witchcraft has existed, and still exists, among a great many peoples. In Africa we find two beliefs side by side. There is a belief in harmful magic, practiced by people who must learn this art and who consequently may be referred to as sorcerers. Like European witches, they may be members of secret societies. On the other hand, there is a belief in witches as people who are thought to possess certain powers which reside in them as individuals, often by virtue of heredity. Sometimes these powers are thought to exist inside the witch's body in a tangible form, as in the form of a python. Witches may cause harm unintentionally. A person may even be a witch without knowing it. Witches can be ferreted out by various means, such as the poison ordeal. Among certain tribes witches supposedly harm only particular persons. Among the Nupe of Nigeria, witches are always women, and they harm only men. Among some of the Nuba hill tribes of the Sudan, on the other hand, a witch attacking a man is always his mother's brother. Anthropologists have shown that the belief in witches indicates an area of stress in a given society, as between men and women among the Nupe and between uncles and nephews among the Nuba. Furthermore, as with the closely related case of magic, belief in witchcraft helps explain all sorts of unfortunate events.
In Underdeveloped Areas. While witchcraft today is largely a matter of only academic interest in Europe and America, it is still a vital concern in Africa and among many of the peoples of other underdeveloped areas of the world. European colonial authorities formerly attempted to eliminate both belief and practice by arresting those accused of witchcraft. This, however, only served to strengthen the belief. Because traditional methods of identifying witches in these areas have been outlawed, new methods of discovering them have developed. And since the traditional methods of clearing one's self of the accusation of witchcraft are no longer available in these areas, it is often more difficult to establish one's innocence. Consequently, social stress resulting from the increasing destruction of such tribal customs has led only to an increase of insecurity and suspicion and thus to an increase of fear concerning magic and witchcraft.


Erika Bourguignon, The Ohio State Univ.

See also DEMONOLOGY; FAMILIAR SPIRIT; MAGIC; SORCERY; VOODOO CULT.