

## #2 - Witches

### Introduction

This is the 2nd part of a 3 part series about the creation of female 'monsters' as seen through different lenses. If you haven't seen the first part, please go find it now and just watch the first minute, because it provides some definitions and framework that we're using throughout the videos.

In this second part we're going to look at a couple examples through a political lens, and use this as a bridge between a lot of the themes and tendencies we see between the first and third parts. Note that everything we're discussing in this series is inherently political, but this part will address more blatantly political histories.

### Witches in Medieval Europe

Let's talk about witches (specifically medieval European witches, the kind that got roasted by the Inquisition). They are a Christian invention that evolved out of Greek and Roman culture. Christianity was spreading in Europe in what is now England and Germany at the turn of the 7th ce AD. In order to convert people, namely urban and upper-class people, Christianity played upon the people's distrust of the lower, peasant class. Their pagan rituals and beliefs, which largely focused nature, weather, and life cycles, were labeled as superstition. The Christians tied these activities to pacts with demons, saying that devils and demons were experts of nature. By villanizing pagan cultures, Christians created justification for wiping them out. A while later, in the 11 and 1200s, the church followed a reprise in Aristotle's thoughts. This era, called Scholasticism, resulted in more dogmatic theology, which viewed any surviving pagan fertility rites, divination, etc (which were often practiced by women), with increased skepticism. During the next couple centuries, the church ramped up their efforts at conversion in order to stamp out the chance of political dissent (at this time, the church and government were essentially one). Alongside those efforts came many scholarly works by monks and inquisitors that invented and demonized witches: their definition, proof of their existence, the dangers they posed, and how to identify and prosecute them. All of this was outlined in the *Malleus Malificarium* which was written around 1435 to 1450ish by Dominican monk/ inquisitor Heinrich Kramer. The *Malificarium* is notable in part because it was so popular (only 30-odd years after the invention of the printing press), but also because it blatantly correlated witches and women, characterizing women as A weak, lustful, stupid subcreation of man, and making Maleficium (which is defined as evil magic) a female crime.

If you watched the first part of this series, this might be starting to sound familiar - we can see how the Ancient Greek's 'leaky vase' metaphor, characterizing women as lacking sophrocyne or self-control, has been evolved here as a rationale for why witches tend to be female.

Artists made images of witches that would be understandable to most people regardless of their class - it was propaganda. One big signifier is riding a broom or flying backwards, suggesting that those depicted are against nature, that what they represent and what they want is antithetical to humanity - Kramer himself, for example, said that women wanted to create a barren, apocalyptic world (essentially defying their inherent role as life-givers). Another big indicator is animals and animality. Witches had wild loose hair, were

depicted nude and sometimes old and ugly, and were associated with different kinds of 'unclean' animals - goats, toads (as we saw with Baubo), and nocturnal (dark) creatures. All these visual indicators are meant to dehumanize - to simultaneously make witches something to fear and to scorn. Succubi are female demons that exemplify this - they were said to prey on men in their sleep, steal their semen, and then give it to incubi (their male equivalent) to impregnate women. They also caused impotence, infertility, weather-making, mind control, castration illusion, and infanticide. In essence, they were all of men's sexual anxieties given manifest form. So what is the point of criminalizing lower-class women in this way? It was a way to stamp out dissent from people practicing pagan religions or 'natural magic,' and a way to convert people to Christianity, by promising them that Christianity could provide the only protection against an invented enemy that represented all of patriarchal Christian culture's fears.

### **Witches in Ghana**

Belief in the supernatural and in witches is not particular to medieval Europe of course, but in many cultures witches or people in touch with the supernatural are not inherently viewed as sinister. Before the British colonized what is now Ghana (in 1821), traditional, spiritual practices had beneficial purpose, and traditional authorities judged and meted out punishments in any cases of the supernatural being used to cause harm. However, during the colonial era (lasted until 1957), British administrators were skeptical of traditional remedies. British documents show that such practices were defined not only as magical and superstitious, but sometimes also as malevolent acts. They outlawed these trials and all witchcraft-related practices, and in doing so wiped out indigenous methods of mediating violence, providing protection, healing, and divination. As a result, people found themselves without spiritual protection or a system to keep witches in check. During and after the colonial period, witchcraft-related violence was therefore perceived to be increasing, resulting in a rise in witch hunts. The British formulation of witchcraft as both illegal and violent changed people's views and behavior towards witches. Now, in modern-day independent Ghana, accusing someone (almost always an older woman) of being a witch is often employed as a tactic to place blame for a misfortune, to get rid of women that have outlived their usefulness, and to separate widows from inherited wealth. Any 'socially abnormal' action, including depression or mental illness as well as succeeding in a business venture, can cause a woman to be accused of being a witch.

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of witchcraft as both illegal and violent changed people's views and behavior towards witches. During and after the colonial period, witchcraft-related violence was therefore perceived to be increasing, resulting in a rise in accusations of witchcraft and the creation of witch camps, which those accused are sent to. In modern-day independent Ghana, accusing someone (almost always an older woman) of being a witch is often employed as a tactic to place blame for a misfortune, to get rid of women that have outlived their usefulness, and to separate widows from inherited wealth. Any 'socially abnormal' action, including depression or mental illness as well as succeeding in a business venture, can cause a woman to be accused of being a witch. In contrast, male fetish priests (also use magic/ supernatural) hold a high status in their communities, which suggests that it is not belief in witchcraft or the supernatural itself that is viewed negatively, but rather that women themselves are viewed more negatively within society, resulting in them being accused of 'evil magic' much more often than men. Just as with the construction of witchcraft by medieval Christians to influence and assert control, the British construction of witchcraft in Ghana and other parts of Africa sought to alter these culture's realities, with lasting consequences.

### **Conclusion**

The pattern these histories present shows us that the myth is always created with INTENTIONAL political purpose. By creating the idea that women, the poor, and the people of other nations are inherently lesser, the West has routinely created justification for conquering, controlling, even decimating them and their cultures. In the next and last part of this series, we'll take a similar look into the Western construction of mental health, and how that is also impacting other cultures.