

Early Modern Witchcraft Trials: Are There Lessons for Sorcery Accusation-Related Violence Today?

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What is the relevance of witchcraft trials in early modern Europe for contemporary sorcery accusation-related violence in Papua New Guinea (PNG) today? Despite superficial parallels, it is highly contentious to make comparisons between the two. Historians and anthropologists are understandably wary of any argument that places present-day Melanesian beliefs and practices in an evolutionary schema equating them with those of Europeans of a past era.

However, recent advances and revisions in understandings of both early modern European witchcraft trials and contemporary sorcery accusation-related violence make this a useful time to revisit this question. Accordingly, the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Queensland held a [workshop](#) in August 2018 that brought together historians, anthropologists, lawyers and artists to discuss the end of witchcraft persecutions in the context of early modern Europe and the South Pacific.

Four key points emerged from the workshop.

First, in recent decades historians have overturned the established notion that witchcraft trials in Europe ended with the Age of Reason and its associated rational, scientific and secular worldview that denied the reality of witchcraft. Mindset changes brought about by the Enlightenment did not permeate through the population until quite some time *after* trials of witches had substantially declined (Levack 2008). We now know that state-sanctioned violence against witches may have stopped, but fear of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations remained widespread. For contemporary policymakers, this suggests that overcoming sorcery accusations and related violence does not necessarily first require changing entire belief systems or introducing 'rational' ways of thinking into a population; instead, it directs attention to considering far more specific questions about what leads to the identification of individuals as sorcerers and decisions made to harm them on that basis.

Second, historians today largely attribute the decline in witch trials to increased scepticism by judges and magistrates about the possibility of proving witchcraft in a state court. This scepticism included concern about the veracity of confessions obtained under torture, the main source of evidence in many trials. Factors identified as significantly impacting on reducing the trials and the numbers of convictions include increasing oversight of local courts, limiting confessional evidence, providing the accused with access to lawyers, requiring prosecutors to first rule out 'natural' explanations of deeds said to have been done through witchcraft, and requiring accusers to pay an initial bond to limit accusations (Davies 2008). The difficulty of establishing credible proof of witchcraft in particular cases was therefore a particularly useful regulatory focus in ending witch-hunts. It did not require denying that witches exist, merely that great dangers lay in convicting someone of witchcraft on the basis of evidence given under torture. As torture is widely used in vigilante 'trials' of those accused of sorcery in PNG today, this is a potentially useful focus. The task of convincing those using extra-legal violence to be sceptical of confessions is, of course, likely to be harder than with official judges and magistrates in Europe.

Third, particular stories or narratives can have catalysing effects on entire communities and provoke sporadic outbreaks of violence. In early modern Europe, a particular witch stereotype developed from a combination of folklore and Christian beliefs in the devil (Satan). Stories about this new witch figure were transmitted across Europe, often by travelling pastors, causing widespread fear and provoking witch panics that often led to witch trials (Hutton 2018). This also challenges popular understandings about witchcraft beliefs, both historically and today, as deeply embedded cultural traditions. It suggests all populations can potentially be susceptible to contagion by new and terrifying narratives, particularly where they resonate with existing prejudices or ways of thinking. Today in PNG and many other places, new or revised narratives of sorcery

and witchcraft are infecting populations and leading to what some describe as ‘epidemics’ of violence. These narratives are spread by word of mouth and, increasingly, social media. In tackling their impact, it is important to recognise these are new (or modified) stories in many places rather than entrenched cultural traditions. Framing them as ‘foreign’ can potentially help to undermine arguments that such violence is justified by culture and can also prompt attention to countering the transmission of such narratives.

Finally, there are some helpful insights as to the role that the law played in addressing the harm arising from the fear of witchcraft in early modern Europe. The role of law in addressing contemporary sorcery accusation-related violence is a contentious one. There are debates for and against creating specific forms of crime – such as accusing someone of practising sorcery or specific types of violence directed at those accused of witchcraft – to deal with the problem. For example, in India, the Assam Witch Hunting (Prevention, Prohibition and Protection) Bill 2015 was enacted in 2018 after being debated for several years.

Legislation criminalising witchcraft in Europe was eventually repealed and replaced with legislation criminalising those who tried to trick or deceive others through pretending to use witchcraft. This legislative change signalled to the population that witchcraft no longer existed as a threat that needed to be addressed through the state justice system. Although many people claimed the new legislation was effective in stopping the belief in witchcraft, the historical record clearly indicates this was not correct. Davies (2008: 230) argues that even after the abolition of the crime of witchcraft in England in 1736, ‘numerous other violent expressions of communal and individual witch belief occurred over the next two centuries.’

However, history also shows a more modest role for legislation in this area. The new legislative stance made it much easier for people to talk openly about their scepticism about witchcraft, and made the public defence of witch beliefs increasingly socially unacceptable in educated circles. While legislation alone cannot change belief systems, the early modern European experience suggests legislation has a potentially valuable role in facilitating public discourse about witchcraft and officially condemning violence as a response to fears of it. For this to be effective, however, it is essential that changes in the law are clearly and unambiguously communicated to the public. Unfortunately this did not occur with the repeal of the PNG Sorcery Act 1971, which has resulted in widespread confusion about the law.

Of course, real limitations exist in what can be learned from early modern Europe. To date, historians have focused on state-sponsored witch trials and associated court records rather than the popular justice enacted against people accused of witchcraft in Europe, which is the main form of violence used against those accused of sorcery or witchcraft across the globe today.

It is crucial to acknowledge these differences. We have to be careful not to suggest that witchcraft is the same everywhere across time and place – even within PNG, what people know as witchcraft or sorcery or ‘poison’ takes on radically different forms in different parts of the country – or that care does not need to be taken with making comparisons. However, the threat of violence stemming from prejudice and fear has historically been ever-present throughout the world, and is something no culture has effectively overcome. Reviewing new understandings about what ended witchcraft trials in Europe is useful to see what, if anything, can be gained from the conversation.

Author notes

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References

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