

## The Magic of Transgression

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Recent anthropological literature in Britain has devoted considerable space to witchcraft and sorcery. Most of the time, lurid accounts of the maleficent use to which magic is applied have claimed attention. If ever the writer wanders into the field of explanation, it is to theorise on the significance of the tensions and mediations to which magical practices give rise, or on the personal conflicts which they are supposed to express. As a field worker, his sometimes total absorption in the practical problems they raise is more germane to the preoccupations of the government official which he is not, than to the self-questioning of the scientific inquirer which he is. While for the former the obstinate search for correlations between social function and the various aspects of witchcraft or sorcery is quite understandable, it is apt to blind the latter to the fact that witchcraft and sorcery belong to a cultural complex which, on the whole, is yet most imperfectly understood.

Cases of poisoned food, lingering illnesses or sudden death promise to be better understood when viewed from a distance than when subjected to closer scrutiny, surrounded by a wealth of distracting details – provided, of course, that the investigator is theoretically prepared. Would he not be in a better position if already equipped with an explanation of the role of impurity in magic, of the relation between black magic on the one hand, and incest, cannibalism, and necromancy on the other, of the fact that twins are often regarded as sorcerers themselves, and that, in the case of sacrifice, a blood-kin is the preferred victim? Can it be maintained that, because such knowledge is acquired through theory, it is therefore irrelevant to a correct interpretation of the various aspects which the current practice of witchcraft reveals?

The problems posed by witchcraft cannot be elucidated unless detached from local contingencies, viewed from a higher level of generality than that at which they express themselves in daily practices, and considered in the more general context of magic, as a complex of objectively misguided activities motivated by imaginary beliefs. Thus, the beliefs governing the preparation of love potions or the theft of exuviae cannot be dissociated from those,