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PART 3

The Witch, her Victim, the Unwitcher and the Researcher: The Continued Existence of Traditional Witchcraft

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THE RESEARCHER'S POSITION

One of the most outstanding differences between historical and present-day witchcraft research is the incorporation of the present-day researcher in the witchcraft discourse. When in the field, talking to the main protagonists, it is impossible not to become part of the witchcraft triangle, impossible not to take sides. This is most eloquently expressed by Favret-Saada (1980), who has become famous for her research in western France (originally published in 1977). Having established that in witchcraft words are crucial, she criticises the mere collection and storing of these words for academic purposes; words 'are power, and not knowledge or information'. Although the publishing and translation of her book is by itself a betrayal of this principle (even if its style and structure are not, cf. Jonas, 1993), what she is concerned about is how the researcher communicates with her subjects of research, with her interlocutors. 'In witchcraft, words wage war. Anyone talking about it is a belligerent, the ethnographer like everyone else'. What counts is not only the position of the researcher but her mental and emotional attitude. 'There is no room for uninvolved

observers,' she categorically states. 'A mere desire for information is the sign of a naïve or hypocritical person who must be at once frightened off' (Favret-Saada, 1980: 9–11). The crux is one of understanding; to stay uninvolved is to fail to 'grasp what is at stake in a witchcraft crisis' (Favret-Saada, 1980: 227).

The choice presented to Favret-Saada was clear. Either she would have to be 'caught', that is gripped, by the witchcraft discourse, or 'not caught'. For a responsible researcher the latter was out of the question, the more so since the people she wanted to investigate would not talk to her if she remained an outsider. As she later revealed: 'they started talking to me only (. . .) when reactions escaping my voluntary control showed them that I was affected by the real – often devastating – impact of certain words and ritual acts' (Favret-Saada, 1990: 191). When 'caught', she could either be bewitched or be in the process of becoming an unwitcher (1980: 17). Wanting to understand the witchcraft discourse, the position of the 'alleged witch' was closed off to her. This was hardly regrettable, 'since witches always claim that they do not believe in spells, object to the discourse of witchcraft, and appeal to the language of positivism'. Witches and bewitched do not communicate (Favret-Saada, 1980: 20).

Vis-à-vis the unwitching expert, the position of the researcher resembles that of the bewitched. Both the bewitched and the unwitcher partake in the witchcraft discourse; both belong to the same party, aligned against the witch. Here there is some flexibility. Favret-Saada was either regarded as a victim of witchcraft, or as a pupil of her unwitcher (cf. Camus, 1988: 20). When the expert is interviewed by an interested outsider he will only yield trivial answers. There is 'a barrier, then, of silence and duplicity: the diviner can only admit "*dealing with that*" in front of someone who puts forward a personal request for divination' (Favret-Saada, 1980: 21).

As an anthropologist, Favret-Saada raged at folklorists who favour their own theories above the explanations of the believers. Folklorists, in the words of the title of one of the appendices to her book, had 'ignorance as a profession' (1980: 227ff). In general, they are indeed a welcome target for anthropological scorn. Their only asset is to have collected information that would otherwise have been lost (as we will see below), even if they have made the wrong selections and have obstructed rather than enabled insights into contemporary witchcraft. There are, of course, exceptions which, with the development of folklore into ethnography and cultural studies, may well turn into the rule. After all, Favret-Saada's folklorists are French and from a previous period (see, e.g., Jalby, 1974).

The Tübingen (Germany) folklorist Inge Schöck, whose book appeared only shortly after Favret-Saada's, preferred to take sides with the witch. Addressing the isolation witches experienced within a community of witch believers, Schöck points out that this can become unbearable. 'How

difficult and depressing such situations can get is signalled by the legal complaints against witch believers, by the attempt to escape the unbearable cohabitation, or, more drastic, by suicide as a last resort' (1978: 17). This was impossible to ignore. Her own basic attitude towards witchcraft could only be rationalistic. 'We should take seriously the veto of people accused as witches against the role witch believers generally try to impose upon them' (Schöck, 1978: 18). This had grave consequences for her fieldwork. Frau N, one of the accused witches whom Schöck discovered, declined an interview as she did not feel strong enough to relive the events. Schöck also refrained from interviewing local believers in this case, for the allegations against the woman were still rampant. 'The gossip about the case and the discrimination against the family would very probably have grown in force again' (1978: 179). Indeed, earlier investigations by a student in the Allgäu had resulted in a new eruption of witchcraft rumours (Schöck, 1978: 41; cf. Favret-Saada, 1980: 59).

The involvement of the researcher can also cause confusion. This is shown in the case of Johann Kruse, a north-German campaigner against witchcraft and particularly against cunning folk. With the rise of his public profile, suspected 'witches' sent him letters to ask for his help against their superstitious aggressors. He also occasionally received letters asking his advice as a witch-doctor (Schöck, 1978: 129, 195; Hauschild, 1980: 149–50, 1981: 556). Far from being an entertaining anecdote, this instance shows the dominance of the witchcraft discourse. In view of Kruse's motives the error may have been a total misunderstanding (Baumhauer, 1984: 75), but for the bewitched it was only logical, since the newspapers portrayed Kruse as a powerful expert on witches (cf. Gijswijt-Hofstra, 1997: 119). The French anthropologist Dominique Camus found himself in a similar situation when he was asked to operate as a magical expert by a woman whom he had told about his anthropological work. In her opinion, studying witchcraft could only result in becoming its practitioner (1988: 187). The witchcraft discourse did not allow a neutral attitude.

How then should we consider a combination of the two opposite positions of witch and bewitched? Does support for the witch automatically lead to a failure to understand witch-believers, bewitched and unwitcher? Or more important, is there any possible justification for ignoring the plight of the ostracized witch? French researchers seem to consider the last question irrelevant since they do not address it. When Favret-Saada discusses the position of the witch, she ends by stating the unlikeliness of the existence of actively operating witches. 'No one (. . .) calls himself a witch; it is not a position from which one can speak,' she explains. 'The witch is the person referred to by those who utter the discourse on witchcraft (bewitched and unwitchers), and he only figures

in it as the subject of a statement' (1980: 24). In a system in which the witch is only identified by the bewitched, it is implied, her place in the community does not change while she is still alive. Consequently, one does not have to take it into account.

The neglect of the witch as a social being is one of the weak spots in Favret-Saada's otherwise unsurpassed approach (cf. Beck-Braach, 1993: 85–6). Possibly peasants in western France resorted to a different, less sociable witchcraft system than elsewhere in Europe, one in which it was not absolutely necessary to identify the witch in order to make her withdraw her spell. 'In recounting an unbewitching, typical stories omit the methods used in identifying a witch, but they always describe the ritual aimed at overcoming him, the great scene of the magical clash' (Favret-Saada, 1989: 44; we will look at this problem in more detail later on). It may also be that the witch's invisibility followed from the fact that she did not belong to the same discourse as the unwitcher (Camus, 1988: 15). The witch was nevertheless created by that very discourse. Without her, the witchcraft discourse would have lost its foundation. And in France as elsewhere, the witch was not only a 'projection' (Gaboriau, 1987: 106), but also the result of a label projected onto 'some familiar person (a neighbour, for example)' (Favret-Saada, 1980: 8).

The witchcraft discourse of the witch believers seems to be incompatible with the rationalistic way 'witches' define themselves. To expect otherwise, however, would imply that a witch should comply with her role. Her use of the rationalistic discourse can be seen as a defence (Favret-Sasda, 1980: 187), as a denial of the accusations levelled at her. She may even be a believer herself. As a German researcher wrote: 'In most cases the witch is as superstitious as the other villagers – only with the restriction, made by herself, that she is sure about not being a witch herself. She does not doubt the existence of witches' (Schäfer, 1959: 60). In a similar way, the anthropologists' interlocutors may switch between the two discourses, as we have seen from the example of the diviner. Why should this eventually be an impossible feat for the anthropologist? Initially she is an outsider, pigeonholed as a representative of the 'press, television, the Church, the medical profession, all the national organs of ideological control'. The people she wants to study dislike being ridiculed for their unsurpassed 'backwardness and stupidity' (Favret-Saada, 1990: 191). Perhaps they fear being criminalized and prosecuted. Therefore, the anthropologist needs to be initiated, to learn the peasant discourse in order to communicate on the same level as her interlocutors, without external power constraints. This takes time and it may never be totally accomplished. But does it preclude discourse switching? Does it prohibit any conciliation with the other side?

At least for the purpose of this essay the dilemma can be surmounted.

The evaluation of twentieth-century witchcraft research is similar to that of historical witchcraft research as it is one step removed from fieldwork experience. Reading texts only creates a distant involvement. As for the criteria of assessment, however, there is still a choice. Either all research that is not informed by the witchcraft discourse can be declared worthless. Or we can attempt to recognize possible traces of the discourse in the reports of people who did not submerge themselves so completely in it, even if this implies the disadvantage of missing its hidden, ambiguous aspects.

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