

In the following translation I have refrained from rendering the term `toverij' into *sorcery* as it creates a plethora of different problems, the anthropological distinction between innate *witchcraft* and learned *sorcery* not being the least of them. Instead, both terms, *toverij* as well as *hekselij*, are translated as *witchcraft*, following the early seventeenth-century translation of Reginald Scot's *The discoverie of witchcraft* into *De ondecking van Tooverij* (spelled as *Ontdecking van tovery* when reprinted in 1637 and 1638).

2.1 *Antropological influences*

With the exception of the witch in legends the current images of witches (Dutch: *heksen*)¹ are hardly related to the women who were taken for a witch (Dutch: *toveres*) in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and who ran the risk of becoming a victim of what now are called `witches' persecutions (Dutch: *heksenvervolgingen*). Even the name differed. During the early fifteenth century the term `heks' was primarily a Swiss dialect term; it took a few centuries to travel down the Rhine and become accepted in the Dutch language. The current word was `toveres' which could occur in several variants. Only since the middle of the seventeenth century, when the prosecutions had already faded away, the word `heks' was used more regularly; at first even its meaning was not completely synonymous with `toveres'. The verbal form `beheksen' (to bewitch) took even longer to become interchangeable with the indigenous `betoveren'.²

The acknowledgement that the word `hekselij' (witchcraft) originally did not occur in the Netherlands, is one of the reasons why researchers now use the word `toverij' (witchcraft) and even take resort to the neologism `toverijvervolging' (witchcraft persecution), when before they would have said `heksenvervolging' (witchcraft persecution).³ Another reason is that the influences of cultural anthropology broadened the field of research from *heksenvervolgingen* to *toverij*.⁴ It is now not exclusively concerned with witchcraft (*toverij*) as a crime and with reasons why so few criminal prosecutions have been initiated in `the Netherlands' against people suspected of witchcraft (*toverij*), but also for instance with the underlying complexity of bewitchments (*betoveringen*) and unwitchments (*onttoveringen*), accusations and reconciliations. The image of the witch in legends is part of that complexity as a provisional end point; the other images belong less to this development, especially because they miss the social interaction.

Unfortunately Levack did not elaborate on his thesis that witchcraft was in essence an ascribed crime.⁵ In this chapter this view will be central, however; witchcraft will mainly be considered in the form of denouncements. That way words like `toveres', `tovenaar' (male witch)

1 Translator's note: The previous sections contain a discussion of the fairy-tale witch, the legend witch, the academic witch, and the present-day witch.

2 Among others, see: Willem de Blécourt, *Termen van toverij* (Nijmegen 1990), 119-120.

3 Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, `Hoofdlijnen en interpretaties', *Nederland betoverd* (Amsterdam 1987), 256-279; Hans de Waardt, *Toverij en samenleving* (Den Haag 1991).

4 Willem de Blécourt, `Van heksenprocessen naar toverij', *Volkskundig bulletin* 12 (1986), 2-30.

5 Brian Levack, *The witch-hunt in early modern Europe* (London/New York 1987), 232.

and related forms are not more (or less) than labels which were put by some people on others. This approach enables linking possible images of witchcraft to specific persons in specific situations. To discover the meaning of those images one needs to know who was involved and what their backgrounds were.

'Western' historical research of witchcraft was one of the first academic subjects in which anthropological approaches were applied.⁶ "Earlier historical interpretation had relied on images of unenlightened persecutors projecting their fears of the unknown on to innocent victims, or on images of terrorised or hallucinating women confessing to events that never happened," Davis wrote. From the moment the results of ethnographic fieldwork were injected into the writing of history, attention grew for "a range of political, social, psychological, and sexual issues being fought out in witchcraft accusations between central authorities and local people and among the villagers themselves".⁷ The interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and observations mainly materialized in volumes of essays,⁸ but also in a growing series of monographs.⁹

The anthropological influence was not restricted to the opening of new fields of attention, an epistemological evolution took place, too: the way witchcraft was approached changed. This shift can best be illuminated when it is seen as a change in the bridging of the distance between researchers and researched. Anthropology, it can be argued, has made strangeness more familiar. As appears from the quotation of Davis above, witchcraft (and especially its persecution) had long been framed by rationalist thinking. Intellectuals wrote about witchcraft from their own, 'enlightened' perspective. Because they regarded witchcraft as a 'stupid superstition' rather than something that existed in its own right, their explanations first and foremost answered the question why people were 'guilty' of the persecution. In Dutch historiography the answer could even assume a negative form. The general findings, even though not completely justified, were that the persecutions here started later, finished earlier and were less severe than in surrounding countries.¹⁰ Thus there developed the somewhat curious tendency to indentify causes for the (supposed) absense of the persecutions, among others by emphasising the 'enlightened' mentality of the authorities. Historians used the circular argument that witchcraft and its persecution arose from of a lack of 'civilisation'

6 In this context 'western' refers to Western Europe and European colonies elsewhere, especially on the North-American continent.

7 Natalie Z. Davis, 'The possibilities of the past', in: Rabb & Rotberg, *The new history* (Princeton 1982), 267-275, cit. 269-270.

8 Mary Douglas (ed.), *Witchcraft confessions and accusations* (London 1970); Max Marwick (ed.), *Witchcraft and sorcery* (Harmondsworth 1982).

9 See the following bibliographical essays: E. William Monter, 'The historiography of european witchcraft: progress and prospects', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1972), 435-451; H.C. Erik Midelfort, 'Witchcraft, magic and the occult', in: Steven Ozment (ed.), *Reformation Europe* (St. Louis 1982), 183-200; Wolfgang Behringer, 'Erträge und Perspektiven der Hexenforschung', *Historische Zeitschrift* 249 (1989), 619-640. For the Netherlands and Belgium: Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra, 'Recent witchcraft research in the Low Countries', *Historical research in the Low Countries* 1985-1990 (in press).

10 De Blécourt, 'Van heksenprocessen naar toverij', 2-6.

and that the same 'civilisation' explains the absence of such phenomena. Explanations for the absence of events contributed little towards systematic archival research and explanations of historical events. Traces of this approach can be found even in recent publications by authors who analysed the conditions for persecution in areas where they hardly happened. Instead of giving priority to acquiring a better understanding of what historical actors did or thought, these studies focus on finding general historical rules and judge the past through the prism of the present.

The application of an anthropological focus changed this researcher centered approach and resulted in an enhanced sensitivity of historians to other aspects of witchcraft. More attention was paid, for instance, to the relation between accuser and accused and to the role of unwitchment specialists.¹¹ The inclusion of the results of research of 'witchcraft' in contemporary, non-European societies also led to a broadening of perspectives for those who studied witchcraft in historical European societies and thus in a more appropriate description of what happened in the past. Or to put it differently: the knowledge of the exotic from outside of Europe caused a better appreciation of the exotic inside. This also applies to historical-anthropological research in general. Thomas recently stated "that cultural history achieves most coherence and makes most sense when it is viewed as a kind of retrospective ethnography in which the historian studies the past in a frame of mind similar to that of an anthropologist studying an alien society". He added that it implied "a complete state of open-mindedness", "a decision to take nothing for granted".¹² The anthropological perspective, however, did not only move the exotic past into the limelight, "but also the effect of cultural differences and contrasts as an important impetus for historical change, perception and representation of history".¹³

In practice, this means that a method is needed for situating historical events can in the first instance into their contemporary contexts rather than judging them from a present point of view. As today's witch images cannot be used to understand the past, they will have to be replaced by (reconstructed) historical images. For when the past – in this case the past of witchcraft – is supposed to be known, historical research is not necessary anymore.

From: Willem de Blécourt, Typen van toverij, in: Peter te Boekhorst, Peter Burke & Willem Frijhoff (eds), *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland 1500-1850* (Meppel en Amsterdam/Heerlen: Boom/open Universiteit 1992), 319-363.

11 Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London 1970); Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

12 Keith Thomas, 'Ways of doing cultural history', in: Sanders (ed.), *De verleiding van de overvloed* (Amsterdam 1991), 65-81, cit. 74.

13 Hans Medick, "'Missionare im Ruderboot?'" Ethnologische Erkenntnisweisen als Herausforderung an die Sozialgeschichte', in: Alf Lütke (ed.), *Alltagsgeschichte* (Frankfurt 1989), 48-84, cit. 50.