Religion and Witchcraft: Spanish Attitudes and Pueblo Reactions

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It has for many years been recognized that the witch beliefs of present-day Indian inhabitants[1] of the Southwest parallel to an extraordinary degree those common in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. The question of parallelism versus borrowing is an important one, although not central to this paper. Our primary purpose is rather an investigation of Pueblo supernaturalism (both witchcraft and religion) as it must have appeared to Spanish colonial administrators and churchmen, and the extent which this interpretation guided the policy of ecclesiastical and civil organs of the Province of New Mexico. But it is first necessary to review some of the findings relating to Pueblo witchcraft, for it is the theme of this small study that European ideas of witchcraft provided a frame of reference for colonial action.

Parsons (1927: 116; 1939: 1068) enumerates the traits which she considers to be of Indian origin and those which she regards as adapted from the superstitions of the Spanish colonists who first came into contact with the aboriginal peoples

[1] By witchcraft we understand those supernatural practices carried out for essentially malevolent purposes. In the long run, what is regarded as witchcraft depends on the distinctions that the group makes between social and anti-social uses of supernatural power. Functionally, all forms of witchcraft have much in common, although the methods and techniques change from group to group. It is important to note that the similarities that existed between European and Southwestern witchcraft were not only in function, but also in content and form.

In dealing with the Southwest we have restricted ourselves to the settled Pueblos which lived in close and continued contact with Spanish colonists, that is, those Pueblos of the ancient Provincia de Nuevo Mexico. In dealing with these groups, some generalizations have been inevitable. Navaho and Apache conceptions of witchcraft also show a number of similarities with those of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, but these manifestations are outside the scope of this paper. (see for example, KLUCKHOHN 1944)

of the Southwest. She gives as elements of European folk belief such traits as the witch doll, transformation into domestic animals, the conviction that witches travel on balls of fire and that their footsteps are inaudible. The idea that the ware-animal which is wounded is subsequently found as a wounded person she classifies as European, as also all beliefs relating to the magical import of hair cuttings and nail parings.

As distinct from the above, some traits appear to be both aboriginal and Spanish and thus present before contact in the folk practices of both groups. The general concept of animal metamorphosis is apparently one such case, while the organization of witches into societies may be another: the witch societies of the Pueblos finding their counterpart in the coverns of the European witches, Sicness, crop failure, and storms are catastrophies which appear to be independently attributed to witches in both Spanish and Indian folklore.

A number of elements present in Pueblo religion — as distinct from recognized witchcraft — also struck the Spanish as smacking of witchcraft. The wearing of masks at katchina dances must have looked especially diabolical, for we know that the witches of seventeenth century Europe were reputed to array themselves in skins and ritual masks. The same is true of the whole kiva complex, the similarity between Indians performing secret rites in underground chambers and the witches' sabbat held *in loca subterranea* is apparent.

The curing societies of the Pueblos are primarily devoted to fighting witchcraft, but such groups, even if their true function had been recognized, might not have fared better than regular witches, for in orthodox opinion no leniency must be shown to theurgy. Furthermore, it is also true that some of these societies, especially the clown ones, are not always free from witchcraft. (Parsons 1927: 116)

It will perhaps suffice to mention one other factor that must have influenced Spanish authorities: the question of narcotics as part of the witches' pharmacopoeia. The European witch was believed to possess special knowledge of herbs and drugs. Some of these drugs, such as those derived from hemlock (*Conicum*

maculatum), may have been used as potions to harm the victims of the witches, others, likes belladona (*Atropa belladona*), were probably self-applied by the witches in order to produce hallucinations of flight and vascular excitement. (Wickwar 1926: 37) The effects of belladona and similar drugs are akin to the results produced by certain narcotics used among various North American groups. In northern Mexico and the Southwest the usual narcotic plant is peyote.[2]

Early Spanish sources on New Mexico comment on the demonic nature of peyote. The reports of Father Perea, agent of the Holy Office in New Mexico during the years 1631 and 1632, mention that the taking of this plant enables the person to have visions, hallucinations of flight, and predict the arrival of voyagers from New Spain. (Scholes 1935B: 220) All the evidence, therefore, indicates that Spanish missionaries and administrators in colonial New Mexico felt that they were dealing with a known phenomenon; a form of witchcraft very similar in pattern to that encountered in their homeland.

It need hardly be stressed that for the majority of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans witchcraft was a very real and dangerous thing. Even in Catholic Spain, a country with an enviable record of objectivity and clearheadedness in matters of witchcraft, there was never a denial of the existence of witchcraft, but rather the operation of a strict code of evidence for determining guilt.[3]

A question of great importance in understanding Spanish behaviour in the Southwest has to do with the differences in

[2] Peyote (from the Aztec peyotl) is a small cactus, *Lophophora willamsii*, which grows wild in the Rio Grande valley and to the south. Nine psychotropic alkaloids are contained in natural peyote (generally taken in the form of the dried "peyote button"); some of these are strychine-like, others, notably mescaline, hallucinogenic. (for details on the status of peyote studies see LA BARRE 1960: 45) The fact that peyote is not habit forming has led some investigators to regard it as not being a true narcotic, the question appears to be primarily one of definition. (BARBER 1959: 641)

[3] After 1614 accusations of witchcraft were seldom lodged in Spanish religious courts. This was due mainly to the efforts of an enlightened *visitador*, the Inquisitor Salazar Frias, who was responsible for investigating a witch scare in Navarre. The report which he compiled for the Suprema in 1612 became the basis of a future policy that made it impossible to lodge accusations of witchcraft without the strongest of evidence. (LEA 1907: 233)

attitude of the colonial clergy towards what was considered witchcraft and what was regarded as paganism. Although it is easy to oversimplify the evidence, it is probably fair to state that the pagan was regarded more as an individual to be pitied than one to be punished. Although wrong in his beliefs, the pagan could not be held responsible for his error and it was the duty of the missionary to convert him to Christianity by example and gentle persuasion. It is stressed many times in colonial documents that the civil and ecclesiastical authorities should not use force in bringing about this conversion. This attitude remained the official policy of the Church during the whole course of Spanish dominion in the Americas.

The witch, though, was to be dealt with in a completely different manner. For one thing, witchcraft and heresy were often equated and as such endangered both the Church and state. It was considered vitally necessary to root out such practices with the utmost severity at the command of the authorities.[4]

It should not be thought that out of the way places like New Mexico were considered less prone to witchcraft and the evils resulting from it, the very opposite in fact would be nearer the truth. Frontier areas where control — civil and religious — was less firmly established were regarded as being in special danger. In such regions, according to a newly appointed custodian of the missions (1661) "the poison is more powerful." (Scholes 1942: 98)

This important difference between witchcraft and paganism as a factor in the formation of Spanish attitudes towards the Southwestern Pueblos appears to have been insufficiently investigated. It is the thesis of this paper that many of the differences in outlook that can be recognized between missionaries in Mexico and those in the Southwest have their origins in this distinction.

[4] Not all heresy involved witchcraft, nor did all witchcraft involve heresy. Heresy should have in it an element of religious error. For instance, attributing powers to Satan (and through Satan, witches) was not heretical so long as the assumption existed that Satan could do only what God permitted. If, on the otherhand, the perverse individual assumed that Satan could exercise power in his own right, then heresy was involved (WILLIAMS, 1959: 89).

The accounts of the missionary efforts in Mexico, including the many *relaciones* compiled by both laymen and priests, the official reports of bishops and heads of monastic houses, and even the letters of viceroys to the Spanish Crown, give a completely different picture of the state of the missions, relations between missionaries and natives, and the ends to which the work of the missionaries were directed, than do similar documents dealing with the New Mexico establishments.

The Spanish in Mexico came into contact with a highly organized and flourishing religion. The hierarchical framework, impressive edifices, elaborate rituals, and so forth, must have produced a strong effect on the *conquistadores* and the religious that shortly followed after them. With certain very important reservations, the differences in the two religious systems did not preclude the drawing of camparisons between the religion of highland Mexico and the Catholic system in Spain. It should also be remembered that of all Christian countries, Spain, because of its 700 years contact with Islam in the Peninsula, had greater experience in interpreting non-christian religious systems.

It is therefore not surprising to find that just as Spanish chroniclers refered to the political and administrative organization of the Aztecs in secular terms, Sahagun and others refer to the religious officers in ecclesiastical terms. A further indication that the Spanish considered the bulk of Aztec religion heathenism rather that witchcraft may be seen in their treatment of Mexica temples. The great temples of Tenochtitlan, before their final destruction in the siege of 1521 and the aftermath of conquest, were more than once converted into centers of Christian worship. This treatment is comparable to what happened to Moorish mosques after the Spanish *reconquista,* but these, having survived the transition, and being more amenable to the necessities of Christian worship, have in some cases remained churches and cathedrals to this day.

The question of Spanish attitudes regarding the indigenous religions of Mexico has been gone into in some detail because of the fundamentally different attitudes manifested by the same people in the Southwest. In New Mexico it appears that attemps to suppress native ceremonies were accompanied by the

wholesale use of repressive measures and physical punishments. (Spicer 1954: 667; Reed 1944; 67; Scholes 1942: 16)

The evidence seems to indicate considerable toleration of native ceremonial in Mexico, and it is perhaps significant that Aztec-derived dances are still performed within the cathedral enclosure in Mexico City. On the otherhand, we read that the efforts of the clergy in New Mexico were directed to the suppression of kachina dances, masked rituals, and all forms of ceremonial expression that did not strictly conform to Catholic ritual.

The detection and burning of ceremonial paraphernalia must have taken up a good deal of the missionaries' time. In 1660 it was reported that within a short period more than 1600 masks, prayer sticks, and figures of various kinds were collected and destroyed. In the kiva of Isleta alone, twelve "diabolical masks" (Scholes 1942: 98) were found and promptly burned. The adjective "diabolical" and the mode of destruction are certainly indicative.

Apparently Spanish authorities had considerable evidence not only of what they regarded as witchcraft among the Pueblos, but, something perhaps considered a greater danger, practices of Indian origin that would be broadly described as "witchcraft" at the time seem to have been borrowed by the Spanish colonists from their Pueblo neighbours. Writing to the Holy Office in 1661, a Franciscan remarked on the evil effect that *catzina* ceremonies had on the hispanic colonists, especially those of "humble estate, such as *mestizos* and mulattoes, in whom the Faith is not firmly grounded." (Scholes 1942: 98) Commenting on this aspect of Indian-Spanish acculturation in the Southwest, a modern investigator writes that "the influence of the Indians was apparent in many ways, but none more strikingly than in the prevelence of superstition, in the practice of which they were apt teachers." (Scholes 1935A: 99)

In order to investigate such practices, and in general to elevate the moral tone of the colony and keep an eye on the administrators, the Holy Office was established in New Mexico in 1626. (Scholes 1935B: 205) As in all other Spanish

dominions in the Indies, this tribunal restricted itself to the investigation of Spaniards, although this category might at times be interpreted to include mestizos and mulattoes. But never did the Holy Office have jurisdiction over indigenous peoples. (Bandelier and Bandelier 1923: 26) Nevertheless, the documents relating to the Inquisition are important in that they give accounts not only of native life, but also shed much light on how Spanish colonists of the seventeenth century were influenced by the close proximity of the Pueblos.

One of the most energetic investigatiors for the Holy Office was Father Perea, agent for the Province in the years 1631 and 1632. He sent periodic reports to his superiors in Mexico City, and, even if some of them may strike us as unduly alarmist, he was probably correct when he wrote that in a "people [reared] from childhood subject to the custom of the Indians [and] without discipline and schools" moral disintegration and all forms of witchcraft were prevelent. (Scholes 1935B: 223)

Even if the majority of the practitioners of what was regarded as witchcraft, and those who patronized them, were to be found in the lower brackets of society, there are also indications that people of high station were not by definition free from suspicion. For example, one of the accusations made against ex-governor Sotelo, was that one day in 1627 (when he was then holder of the highest civil and military offices of the Province) he sent one of his servants to the Pueblo of San Juan to bring an Indian woman versed in magic and the black arts to Santa Fe in an attempt to save the life of a soldier who had been bewitched. (Scholes 1935B: 219)

Much of the evidence which resulted from the thorough investigations of Father Perea deals with the preparation and use of herbs, powders, and other concoctions, for the purposes of winning back a husband's love. A considerable number of the potions are clearly of European origin. This is probably true of all those that make use of food or are drunk or eaten, for it appears that this system of magic is not native to the Pueblos, although it is a recurrent theme in European folklore. (Parsons 1939: 1109) Conversely, techniques which include the manufacture from local plants of ointments and pastes to rub

on the body, can with some assurance be regarded as Indian in inspiration. The documents reveal a common knowledge on the part of the colonists of both types of formulae and a dependence on Indians, especially house servants, as a source of knowledge. (Scholes 1935B: 219)

An interesting sidelight which may be indicative of why the missionaries did not seem to differentiate at all clearly between the formal religion of the Pueblos and witchcraft is provided by examples of Spaniards taking part in *catzina* dances. Scholes sites the example of a high official, the *alcalde mayor* of the Picuris-Taos jurisdiction, who was accused of having danced the *catzina* to the scandal of both clergy and colonists. (Scholes 1949: 62) Such a performance would easily be interpreted as witchcraft, even perhaps by the very dancer in question. Apparently this was not an isolated case.

So far we have examined the problem of the interpretation of Pueblo religion and witchcraft from what we might call the Spanish viewpoint. There seems to be little doubt that the body of Indian witch beliefs are indigenous and only parallel those current in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. (Parsons 1939: 1067) But this similarity is certainly more than a superficial one and refers to a whole set of shared beliefs having to do with the methods, powers, and roles of those regarded as witches. These similarities in form and function would favour the borrowing of traits in both directions; Spanish elements finding their way into Pueblo witchcraft, and Pueblo traits penetrating the folk practices of the colonists. The dangers involved in this situation — given the setting in which they took place — were clearly recognized by the Spanish Church and civil authorities.

Turning from recognized witchcraft to religion, we find that because of certain elements in Pueblo religion, which also appeared to be witchcraft from the Spanish position, no clear distinction was made in many cases between witchcraft and religion, as for instance, had occured in Mexico where indentification was easier.

The failure of the Spanish to distinguish clearly these two seperate elements, what we may term the social and the anti-

social, led them to treat both alike. One important result of this situation is that it drove Pueblo religion, and with it Pueblo culture, into a more esoteric (one might almost say "underground") position and helped to implant the persecution complex which continues to be an outstanding characteristic of much of Pueblo life.

It will not to over argue the point or even pretend that this religious factor was necessarily the most important one in framing Pueblo acculturation patterns. The role of the civil authorities in Colonial times, the inherent attitudes of the Pueblos themselves to change and foreign intrusion, the somewhat mediocre personnel that seems often to have been sent to this outpost of the Spanish empire, all these and many more factors must be taken into full account in any appraisal.

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