1.6

CONSPIRACY THEORY AS OCCULT COSMOLOGY IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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Introduction: Disciplinary foundations

Modern social and cultural anthropology – hereafter simply anthropology – developed in the historical context of colonialism as a study of non-Western people. Participant observation became the essential fieldwork technique, in large part due to the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski. He worked on the Trobriand Islands during the First World War and published many works that are still read and appreciated. To immerse oneself in the lives of people in a – for the anthropologist – strange place for a long period of time became the ideal guiding research. Fieldwork that extended over a long period of time was conducive to a holistic understanding of the society under scrutiny. What was, for example, conventionally classified as economy and politics or religion, kinship and rituals, should not be studied in isolation, but instead as interconnected and forming a social and cultural whole. By immersing oneself – by observing and participating – in the daily lives of the people, the researcher aims to understand the natives’ point of view. This, so called, emic perspective (Malinowski 1922: 1–25) is in contrast to an etic, or outsider’s perspective. Early anthropologists underlined that it was important to study what people said they were doing, and at the same time study what they actually were doing. Often there was a gap between the two, pointing to particularly interesting areas to understand and analyse. From the beginning, anthropologists also emphasised that nothing human is strange, and that all phenomena, all beliefs and all relations are interesting, and worthy of research and analysis.

Developed more than 100 years ago, these methodological ideals were rooted in anthropological fieldwork in small-scale societies, where relations were generally based on the possibility to have face-to-face relations and where the anthropologist could follow the flow of everyday life. Since then, anthropology has developed enormously as an academic discipline. Anthropologists have critically scrutinised the role of the discipline in different colonial projects, and the, often, naïve assumptions of cultural and social homogeneity in, so called, small-scale societies. Today, fieldwork is conducted all over the world, and anthropologists also come from all over the world, enriching the discipline.

Anthropologists have, furthermore, moved from research in settings where personal, or face-to-face, relations form the basis of social life, to research also in highly complex contexts with a myriad of impersonal social relations. Contemporary anthropologists carry out fieldwork in, for
example, NGOs, the E.U., nuclear plants, tea plantations, refugee camps, investment banks and courts of law. Some anthropologists physically follow informants – interlocutors – from one site to another, while others work through the Internet. Some work with many informants while others base their research on a few. Some utilise audiovisual aids, while others still mainly use paper and pen. However, the historical roots of anthropology based on immersion, personal engagement, holism and emphasis on the context of human behaviour and action still guide those who practice the discipline inside, and outside, of academia. For anthropologists, hence, conspiracy theories must be understood in the light of other social and cultural phenomena. Until today, anthropologists have seldom focused mainly on conspiracy theory or related phenomena. These topics have rather emerged while doing fieldwork, and thus been analysed as part of society as a whole. An exception is Jaron Harambam (2017), who researched various arenas of conspiracy culture in the Netherlands. But, as conspiracy theory takes on increased public interest, and urgent concern, we can expect more research focusing on this, and related, phenomena.

The classical genre for anthropological texts has been ethnographies, detailed accounts of, for example, a particular group of people, a village, an urban quarter or an organisation. Such monographs, with what Clifford Geertz (1973) called thick description, have been essential for the development of anthropology as a comparative and cross-cultural discipline. Detailed ethnographies become the common empirical and analytical pool on which others can build. Anthropologists frequently turn to research of colleagues and reinterpret or reanalyse material of others, or simply use this material to compare with their own. In some of the works discussed below, the researcher has also been engaged in a particular field for a very long time, reassessing their empirical material. Anthropologists are thus constantly in dialogue with ethnographic material from situations, places or times, which might be far removed from that of the current analysis.

Participant observation, and the immersing of oneself in a field, has been a particular anthropological contribution to many other social and human science disciplines. Anthropologists are, of course, in turn, influenced by developments in other disciplines. Sociology, ethnology and anthropology have in many ways common historical roots and common ancestors. Sociology developed as the science of Western societies in the modern industrial era, ethnology as the discipline capturing the European peasant societies at the verge of their disappearance and anthropology as the study of non-Western societies. Today, such boundaries are no longer equally relevant, and sociologists, ethnologists and anthropologists can be found in similar locations, studying similar phenomena. There is also considerable exchange and overlap between research in anthropology and religious studies, gender studies, cultural studies and media studies. (See, for example, Chapters 3.2, 3.9, 4.1 and 4.7.) In the formative stage of anthropology, cross-cultural comparison was seen as a tool to develop laws about human societies and human behaviour. Today, anthropologists – like other social and cultural scientists – have given up on trying to – even wanting to – formulate universal models. The aim of research is rather to understand the contingency of meaning-making, both that of the interlocutors and that of anthropology.

The problem of definitions

Debates over terminology frequently erupt in anthropology. How should, for example, witchcraft be defined? Is witchcraft the same as sorcery? Is witch-doctor a concept that obscures more than clarifies? Should the occult be closely tied to ideas of evil? Should anthropologists use local concepts only, rather than translate them into the languages we frequently use in academic texts? Such questions have no definite answer, but contribute to reflections on important issues in the
practice of anthropology. Peter Geschiere, for example, notes that the English *witchcraft* – or the French equivalent *sorcellerie* – has been taken up as a common concept in many parts of the world (2013: xviii).

Generally speaking, anthropological research on conspiracy theory has developed in tandem with research on witchcraft, sorcery and evil forces. It can be summarised in two, often interrelated, lines of inquiry. In the first, anthropologists underline that occult cosmologies – perceptions of the reality of secret and hidden dimensions behind the running of the universe – are phenomena found also in the contemporary world, including the generic West, rather than phenomena human beings have left behind by reaching some stage of economic, social, and cultural development. Occult cosmologies, many argue, even seem to proliferate in the contemporary world and often appear as conspiracy theories. In the second line of inquiry, anthropologists focus on belief systems, on theories of being, and knowledge, among the groups of people we study. In both these lines of inquiry, anthropologists are interested in the ways interpersonal, as well as impersonal, relations are shaped and perceived among our interlocutors. As will be discussed later on, there are also anthropologists who underline that we should abandon the concern with belief and meaning-making of our interlocutors. They argue that, instead, we should analyse their doubts, gaps and inconsistencies in discourses, and in practical action.

**Witchcraft as ordinary and extraordinary**

The starting point for much anthropological discussions on occult cosmologies is E.E Evans-Pritchard’s extremely influential text on witchcraft. In 1926, as a graduate student in anthropology, he conducted fieldwork among the Azande in the southern part of Sudan. Witchcraft was not a topic he had meant to study, but since this was what the Azande were interested in, even obsessed by, and incessantly talked about, it became the focus of his monograph *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic* (1937). Evans-Pritchard undertook his work on the Azande at a time when ideas of the primitive and irrational non-Westerners were firmly in place. To counteract such ideas, he stressed the rationality of Azande behaviour. Witchcraft accusations, and combating witchcraft with the help of witch-doctors, helped to contain conflicts and to maintain the overall stability of social relations. Such functionalist explanation constituted the dominant theoretical paradigm in, especially British, anthropology into the 1960s. In *Customs and Conflict in Africa*, a book published in 1956, based on BBC lectures for a general audience, Max Gluckman writes how witchcraft beliefs are a reasonable answer to explain misfortune. Witchcraft has its own logic.

The Azande, according to Evans-Pritchard, did not believe in coincidence and instead explained misfortunes, accidents and death by witchcraft. He explained, at great length, that the Azande did not deny that accidents happen. But witchcraft was the answer to the question of why a person was afflicted by misfortune, accidents, illness or death at a specific time, and in a specific place. This reasoning – connecting the dots so to speak and denying the possibility of coincidence – is quite similar to beliefs in conspiracies, as noted by many anthropologists. However, unlike conspirators who scheme in secret and are fully aware of their involvement in conspiratorial activity, witches among the Azande were humans who typically were not aware of being witches. Instead, they were identified by magical means, or with the help of oracles. Witches were responsible for their acts but could not really be blamed, and through various kinds of rituals the witch could repent and be forgiven. Among the Azande, according to Evans-Pritchard, accusations of witchcraft were not randomly distributed. Women did not accuse men, and men did not accuse men of higher status. A witch was typically a person with whom the afflicted (or dead) had personal relations, and he or she was a member of the local community.
Evans-Pritchard notes that some of the more respected members of the community were identified as witches. According to him, the Azande were quite preoccupied with the occurrence of witchcraft and spent time and effort on oracles to find out who bewitched them, or to avoid being bewitched. But they were angry with, rather than afraid of, witchcraft.

A very different situation to that of the Azande is described by Jeanne Favret-Saada in *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (1980). She started fieldwork in a rural area in western France in the early 1970s. Evans-Pritchard did not have witchcraft in mind when he started his fieldwork, but was compelled to study it, since the Azande were constantly talking about it. Favret-Saada, on the contrary, who was very interested in the topic, had enormous difficulties in approaching the subject, because it was publicly seen as superstition. She writes, comparing Azandeland to the Bocage, that in the former bewitched persons act as part of an accepted idiom, while in the latter they shut themselves off from social life. When afflicted by misfortune, like broken machinery or a sick cow, they do seek the advice of a mechanic or a veterinarian. But these specialists only cure the symptoms. To get to the root cause, they need the help of an unwitcher, in secret (Favret-Saada 1980, 1989). In the Bocage, witchcraft is centred on words that wage a war, and ultimately intend to kill the victim.

The Bocage, as described by Favret-Saada, is a peripheral part of France, far away from the philosophical debates among intellectuals in Paris. But, villagers were still part of a world where the impact of both the Catholic Church and secular education intersected. Priests, teachers, doctors and other experts teach not only villagers in the Bocage, but people all over the world, that witches and beliefs in conspiracies and evil powers have no role – should have no role – in the modern enlightened world. Yet, such beliefs persist or make their appearance in many places. Among the Azande and in the Bocage, the anthropologists make no reference to the link between accusations of witchcraft and conspiracies. In the cases below, however, such a link was commonly made.

**Fear of satanic cults in the U.K. and elsewhere**

In the late 1980s, allegations appeared in the U.K. that a great many children were being abused, and even murdered, as part of witchcraft, or of satanic cults. Some towns in the Midlands seemed to be particularly stricken, and social services took a number of children from their parents to rescue them from the clutches of these cults. No evidence for these satanic cults was ever produced, yet the accusations persisted for quite some time. Jean La Fontaine spent years looking into these allegations; interviewing social workers, police, victims, scrutinising official reports, court records and mass media. In *Speak of the Devil* (1998), she traces the development of this scare and puts it into a larger social and political context. She also uses anthropological research into witchcraft and witch hunts in other parts of the world, as well as analyses of the history of witchcraft accusation in early modern Europe. La Fontaine, Evans-Pritchard, Favret-Saada and other anthropologists are concerned with witchcraft in the contemporary world. Their research is, however, indebted to the long and rich tradition in history and ethnology studying witchcraft in the West in the medieval and early modern period (see Walker 1998 for useful references).

La Fontaine traces three phases in these allegations. In the first phase, the influence of discourses originating in the U.S.A. was very clear. Accusations of devil worship and satanic cults started among Pentecostal and charismatic preachers in the U.S.A. Religious activists and self-styled experts began to claim that children were in great danger by such cults. These ideas then spread to the U.K., not least because preachers and activists could speak directly to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. The U.S. influence waned in the second phase when particular cases
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of satanic cults involving children were exposed, especially by social workers. They claimed to have collected testimonials from children pointing to the occurrence of rape, ritual murder and even cannibalism. A scrutiny of these testimonials revealed that they were never made by the children themselves, but instead constructed by adults, typically by social workers or therapists.

In this phase, the media was important in spreading sensational allegations and accusations, as well as in spreading doubt and counter-claims. Some social workers were adamant in their campaign to, as they claimed, protect children. Those opposing the reality of these cults were reproached for not taking the problem seriously. There was also a gendered aspect where female social workers accused male police officers of not looking into the charges. Sometimes the police, and other sceptics, were thought to cover-up and conspire to protect important men in high places, who were accused of participating in these vile acts. None of the accusations could be substantiated, and no perpetrator ever was brought to court. This, however, only added to those convinced of cover-ups and conspiracies. In the third phase, it was instead adult victims – survivors – of satanic cults who came to the fore, typically through the support of therapists. Here, they remembered and recounted what they had been exposed to as children when they had been part of satanic cults. Again, developments in the U.S.A. foreshadowed that in the U.K. La Fontaine sees the development, the peak and the fading of these allegations as akin to witch-finding movements. She also underlines that the national and local contexts are very important to understand how this satanic scare could gain momentum.

Another context of a satanism scare is provided by Nicky Falkof. She uses press material between the early 1980s to the early 1990s, the decade before the fall of the South African apartheid regime, to analyse how satanism appeared ‘within the white imaginary’ (Falkof 2019: 134). In this imaginary, Evangelical Christianity played an important role in depicting a religious war between God and the devil. In the cases discussed by La Fontaine above, adult survivors of a cult claimed to have been abused. Here, instead, the victims claimed to have been possessed. Interestingly, this satanism scare mirrored apartheid’s ideology of keeping whites and blacks separate. The scare involved whites only and existed in parallel to, but apart from, black occult forces.

The social context in Falkof’s research is the fear among whites at the end of apartheid. La Fontaine brings up the fears and anxiety over changing family dynamics that were rife in both the U.S.A. and the U.K. before the start of the scare. In the U.S.A., the children/victims came from well-off families and accusations were directed against non-family members. In the U.K., on the other hand, children came from deprived families and family members were typically those accused. La Fontaine also places the emergence of the satanic cult scare in the context of growing class differences, and in a situation when politicians frequently accused their opponents of cover-ups and conspiracies. At the time, links between high police officers, the Freemasons, and secret deals and conspiracies, were also common media narratives in the U.K. There are also clear parallels between these stories and historical European antisemitic conspiracy theories in which Jews are depicted as molesters of innocent Christian children (see Chapter 3.8).

Many of the themes discussed by La Fontaine – children versus adults, women versus men, the dangerous family and the dangers to the family, the enrichment of some and the impoverishment of others, cover-ups versus uncovering, courts and legislation, the role of mass media and new religious movements, as well as how ideas and tropes travel across space – reoccur in much of the research discussed below.

The ambivalence of close relations

When Peter Geschiere did his first fieldwork in southeast Cameroon in the early 1970s, he, like Evans-Pritchard four decades earlier, had no intention of studying witchcraft. Rather, he was
interested in modern development issues in a post-colonial state in Africa. But, like Evans-Pritchard’s depiction of the Azande, witchcraft was a local idiom he could not ignore. In *The Modernity of Witchcraft* (1997), he discusses preoccupations with the presence of evil forces and the perception that witches and witchcraft have increased. Why did not modernity do away with them? In the following decades, Geschiere kept returning to this issue, and to the difficult question of how to analyse occult cosmologies without depicting his interlocutors as the exotic, superstitious and irrational Others. In *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (2013), he reassesses his own material by contrasting and comparing it, in time and space, to the cases of other researchers.

Analyses of contemporary and historical witchcraft underline that accusations are typically made against people who are close to the afflicted. Among the Azande, close kin were typically suspect; in the Bocage, it was the neighbours; and in the British case discussed, parents or other close family members were thought to subject children to satanic abuse. The danger of intimacy – kinship relations and relations in the family – and its connection to witchcraft, is a central theme also for Geschiere. He uses Freud’s concept of the uncanny – *Unheimlich* – as a point of entry to understand why people who are close to you can also be people you fear. In Freud’s analysis, the uncanny is closely related to *Heimlich*; the homely and the secret. There is a constant risk that the homely and familiar turn into the uncanny. Geschiere discusses how modernity, urbanisation and transnational migration in the post-colonial period has not decreased the importance of family and kinship links. On the contrary, these relations are grafted onto new social elements. This, he cautions, should not be understood in terms of ‘African culture’ but rather as a product of a particular history. The colonial period wreaked havoc in Cameroon, as in most other places in the world, and expectations were great that independence would usher in a new and better era. These expectations have remained unfulfilled, and family and kin – the *Heimlich* – has developed an elasticity ‘to bridge ever deeper inequalities and ever greater distances’, making relations ‘stretched to a breaking point’ (Geschiere 2013: xxviii). This ever-increasing gap between demands for help and support, and the possibility or willingness to act on them, leads to increasing accusations of witchcraft.

**From secret to public accusations**

A dramatic change over the last decades is that talk of witchcraft has become open and public. Witchcraft accusations used to be secretive and were seldom made against persons outside the local community. The management of witchcraft – un-witching – was also typically locally grounded. Now, family members and kin live in many places and local witches have migrated too, even to Europe. Those better off fear the demands and the witchcraft of the less fortunate, who in turn may suspect that the better off have used occult means to enrich themselves. The worst accusation used to be that witches were cannibals who ate their victims. But, now, they turn people into zombies who work for them, making the witches ever richer and politically powerful.

But, accusations and fears also go beyond family and kindred. Mass media have played, and continue to play, a large role in the ‘uncovering’ of evil forces. Not only newspapers, radio and television spread news of witchcraft, but in films produced for a mass audience witches and occult forces were (and still are) a popular topic. Geschiere also discusses the role of the Christian revivalist movements, epitomised by Pentecostalism, in the affirmation of evil forces. Just as in La Fontaine’s case, Pentecostalism has played a major role in establishing the reality of the devil. In the vocabulary of charismatic Protestantism, ‘witchcraft is part of a cosmic battle between God and the devil’ (Geschiere 2013: 182–3). In the minds of his interlocutors, this
battle is, however, typically located in the intimacy of the family. Cases of witchcraft also make it to the courts. In the early post-independence period, courts were loath to take up such accusations. These were seen as traditional superstitions and not to be part of modern legislation. Now, because witchcraft is so publicly debated, it has to be taken seriously also by the courts. This, in turn, feeds into ideas of the prevalence and strength of witchcraft.

A claim can be made that conspiracy theory is the impersonal equivalent of witchcraft. But the issue is more complex and ambiguous. Contemporary conspiracy accusations seldom involve family members or neighbours, that is people with whom one has intimate or face-to-face relations. Instead, such accusations are often made against named and known others, such as political figures and economically successful individuals, but they are also typically directed at vaguely defined groups of people far away. In his analysis, Geschiere connects the tension between Heimlich–Unheimlich of the family and kin, to the increasing intimacy also in the public sphere. In this way, witchcraft and conspiracy theory can be linked in an analytically fruitful manner. That is, close and personal relations – entailing both positive and negative intimacy – have changed into impersonal bonds, and concomitantly public and more distant relations are expressed in increasingly intimate ways. Witchcraft accusations and conspiracy theories feed into each other at this entangled intersection.

Occult cosmologies and globalisation

Many researchers focusing on witchcraft and conspiracy theories discuss the impact of modernity, globalisation and political upheaval. In such critical narratives, capitalism is closely associated with evil forces. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, for example, characterise the late twentieth century as an age of futilarianism where the promises of late capitalism are coupled with postmodern pessimism (1999: 279). In this age, there is a widespread allure that money can be made from nothing, coupled with a widespread fear that those who have made money, have done so by occult means. Comaroff and Comaroff delve into empirical material from South Africa, and analyse the gap between the enormous economic and political expectations in the post-apartheid period, and the reality of new inequalities. This gap has given rise to an occult economy characterised by ‘pursuit of new magical means for otherwise unattainable ends’ (1999: 284). In Comaroff’s and Comaroff’s material, accusations of evil deeds are directed against the rich and the powerful, but they note that persons hunted, maimed or killed as witches are typically old and defenceless (1999: 287). Like Geschiere, they underline that ideas of witchcraft, sorcery and conspiracies are not new, although they recognise that the manner in which they are voiced in public, and find their way into mass media and courts, as novel. The close connection between money, commodities, and evil – even the devil – is of course found in many cosmologies and ideologies (see e.g. Taussig 1977).

Zombies, ghosts, evil spirits and the work of the devil seem to have proliferated in many parts of the world. In the introduction to an edited volume, Harry C. West and Todd Sanders (2003) draw attention to the paradoxical connection between transparency and conspiracy. Since the late 1990s, transparency has become an international buzzword in the world of development and governance. At the same time, however, the world has become opaquer, leading to increased conspiracy thinking on the part of many people. In case studies from Indonesia, Korea, Nigeria, post-soviet Central Asia and the U.S.A., the authors analyse how their interlocutors grapple with increasing, and large-scale, economic and political inequalities, as well as with personal misfortune. Occult cosmologies and beliefs in conspiracies can provide answers to such dilemmas. In analysis of material from Timor-Leste, Judith Bovensiepen (2016), for example, underlines that visions of prosperity and visions of conspiracy are two sides of the same coin.
Middle-aged and elderly people in a small town in Georgia articulated their experiences of deprivation in the post-Soviet period, according to Katrine Gotfredsen (2016), by implicating the political leaders in national and international conspiracies. In such accounts, clarity and opacity are simultaneously present. The workings of the powerful are hidden, yet it is clear ‘what is really going on’ (2016: 43). Opacity represents the conspiracy, and clarity represents the conspiracy theory.

It is not difficult to find a link between capitalism, neo-liberal governance and the occurrence and even strength of belief in witchcraft and conspiracies. But, as underlined by Heike Behrend, it is important to ‘pay close attention to witchcraft in specific social and historical settings’ (2007: 43) rather than assume that it is a simple response to current economic and political developments. Her own case concerns increased instances of A.I.D.S.-related deaths from the late 1990s in western Uganda, and how these were blamed on the nefarious activities of witches. Since the 1950s, anthropologists have noticed a link between outbreaks of epidemics and witchcrazes. In the case discussed by Behrend, information campaigns have been successful in medicalising A.I.D.S. People accept that the disease is spread by sexual contact with an infected person. But this explanation is ‘perfectly compatible with witchcraft accusations’ (2007: 46), since witchcraft provides an answer as to why a particular person is infected or dies. Behrend also discusses local perceptions that the A.I.D.S. epidemic is caused by the West, in an attempt to reduce or even destroy the African population. She also analyses how lay organisations of the Catholic Church in western Uganda took up witch-hunts in which cannibals and witches were identified and given a chance to be healed and cleansed (2007: 52). It was these activities that made many people comprehend the enormity of evil in their midst. Paradoxically, the witch-hunt reinforced the belief in, as well as the power of, witches and evil occult powers.

The link between A.I.D.S. and witchcraft has been noted in much research in Sub-Saharan Africa where the disease has reached catastrophic proportions. However, according to Niehaus and Jonsson (2005: 181), in a village in the east of South Africa, people thought that deaths were either due to A.I.D.S. or to witchcraft. But, while relatives of the deceased claimed that witchcraft caused the death, in an effort to avert the shame related to the disease, outsiders would say that A.I.D.S. was the true cause. They also recorded great gender differences in how H.I.V./A.I.D.S. was talked about. Women ‘were committed to biomedical explanations’ (Niehaus, Jonsson 2005: 187) and blamed the spread of the disease on oppressive and unfaithful men because of their personal experiences. Men, instead, typically linked the disease to conspiracies outside the local community.

Female and male idioms and explanations

In much of the material discussed above, conspiracy theories and ideas of witchcraft and sorcery co-exist, intermingle and even seem to reinforce each other. Similar themes and tropes may appear in both conspiracy theories and in witchcraft accusations. In other parts of the world, however, they seem more like parallel systems of belief or explanation. In the Mediterranean region, a masculine idiom of conspiracy is related to national or international politics where every event, no matter how trivial, is seen as planned by powerful and secretive conspirers (Rabo 2014: 222). Masculine talk of conspiracies involves public powerful figures, who are typically men, with whom one mainly has impersonal relationships. In parallel, there is a female idiom in which misfortunes for both women and men are expressed through ideas of sorcery, the evil eye and witchcraft. Such an analysis has, for example, been undertaken by Eva Evers-Rosander (1991). She started fieldwork in the middle of the 1970s, focusing on women and identity in the north of Morocco, in a region close to the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.
Women took it upon themselves to manage and both internalise and externalise problematic, and conflict ridden, interpersonal relations in the local patriarchal community. Both women and men can be afflicted by various representations of evil. But talking about the afflictions and their causes is a female genre, where women come to evaluate other women’s behaviour. Through such talk, they reaffirm a gender ideology where women can be blamed for the misconduct, or misfortune, of men.

The importance of gender and age in who is either accused or afflicted by sorcery, witchcraft and conspiracy has been shown in much of the research discussed above. Among the Azande, for example, women never accused men of being witches. Children were the main victims in the accusation of satanic cults analysed by La Fontaine, and women were central in trying to protect them, and also accused men in authority of cover-ups and conspiracies. Adults who remembered childhood participation in satanic cults, where sexual abuse played a major part, were often supported by female therapists. In the U.S.A., most who see themselves as abducted by extra-terrestrials are women. Preoccupation with sex, sexuality and gendered identities is found everywhere, but it is expressed in a variety of ways. In the conservative Russian Parent’s Movement, studied by Tova Höjdestrand (2017), for example, both foreign and domestic liberal schemers are perceived to deliberately pervert ‘natural’ sexuality in order to undermine healthy and traditional family relations.

The U.S.A. and the transfer of conspiracy theories

The uncanny makes its appearance, not only in Peter Geschiere’s work, but also in Susan Lepselter’s ethnography of ‘vernacular American poetics’ (2016: 1). She follows the often ephemeral, muted and incoherent narratives of U.F.O.s, abductions, cover-ups and conspiracies as expressed by her interlocutors. Lepselter uses apophenia – the experience that unrelated objects or phenomena are connected – not to underline faulty perception in a person (as done in mainstream cognitive psychology), but instead to point to an ability to start to discern the unseen, to make sense of things seemingly senseless. She undertakes a concrete journey in the U.S.A., stopping in places particularly charged with meaning for those who can, or strive, to connect the dots, such as in Rachel, Nevada, located close to a large military complex. In such places, her interlocutors share narratives and memories in which the homely and familiar and the uncanny are mixed and mingled. She notes that abductions by extra-terrestrials and contact with the unseen are simultaneously loathed and embraced.

It is little surprising that millenarian movements and apocalyptic cults resurfaced at the turn of the twentieth century. In response, research focusing on such phenomena also emerged. Kathleen Steward and Susan Harding (1999) draw attention to the co-production of research on, and occurrence of, apocalyptic ideas. Christopher Roth writes about the intersections between the study of extra-terrestrials and unidentified flying objects on the one hand and academic social science on the other. In doing so, he points to the preoccupation with race, and that classification of race is found in both ufology and early anthropology. He also underlines that the Internet has ‘facilitated a convergence between ufological and conspiracy-theory discourses that is now nearly total’ (2005: 57). Debbora Battaglia (2005) situates the American concern with E.T. cultures in a context of economic and political insecurity, but also in a context of hope for a better future. Possible worlds out there in space might, after all, have the solutions to the problems that plague us on earth and here and now. The context for Lepselter is the ambivalence with which Americans view the state. Her interlocutors tap into the American trope of freedom: Freedom from the state, freedom to roam and to fulfil one’s own dreams.
Another apocalyptic narrative emerging in the U.S.A. towards the end of the twentieth century was that of chemtrails. Since then, it has appeared in many parts of the world. In Greece, for example, it gained momentum after the economic crisis in 2009. Alexandra Bakalaki has followed this narrative through online forums, interviews with activists and discussions with Greeks from all walks of life. She frames the narrative in terms of a cosmological discourse where ‘multiple relations between different scales of geography, power, and time,’ is established (Bakalaki 2016: 13). In Greece, she notes, people are not only attacked through economic and political weapons, but also from the air, by planes. The chemtrail narrative, in which all organisms on earth are threatened, can be understood as part of broader concerns of human existence in the contemporary world. What makes it unique, she claims, ‘is the depth of its pessimism’ (Bakalaki 2016: 20).

Anthropologists, like other researchers studying the U.S.A., are clearly in dialogue with Richard Hofstader’s study (1964) *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. George Marcus, for example, introduces the edited volume *Paranoia within Reason* by noting that ‘a paranoid understanding of a social field … is both detectable and manifest in different ways’ (Marcus 1999: 2). It is, for example, important to realise that the Cold War era thrived on, and developed, paranoid ‘social thought and action’ (Marcus 1999: 2). More recently, Ulf Hannerz has analysed U.S. politics as entertainment, which may find manifestations in conspiracy theory. He writes that ‘the suspicion that things are not what they seem to be, or are made out to be, continues to find new expressions’ (2017: 114). Hannerz calls the U.S.A. a theatre state, connecting his observations to Clifford Geertz’ analysis of Bali’s political history. Theatre politics entail not only a public front stage, but also the secret back stage. Subversive readings of everything connected to politics has been noted by anthropologists and others working in especially countries with totalitarian regimes. The entertainment aspect and theatrical performativity of conspiracy theories or conspiracy talk can be found also in other parts of the world (Rabo 2014: 223).

**Conspiracy theory and social theory**

In much of the research discussed above – in much social science research in general – sorcery, witchcraft and conspiracy theory is understood as one particular way to handle and explain misfortune on the part of people lacking power and influence. But, powerful people are equally involved in using, spreading and constructing discourses of witchcraft and conspiracies. Critique against the emphasis on the sense-making aspects of conspiracy theories – a lingering functionalism – is raised by Mathijs Pelkmans and Rhys Machold. They argue that we also need to interrogate ‘the links between power and truth’ (Pelkmans, Machold 2011: 68). There is, thus, a need to be cautious when explaining witchcraft and conspiracy mainly as a response to illness, adversity or increased inequalities.

Anthropologists, like other researchers in the social sciences and humanities, have also found parallels between conspiracy theories and social theory. George Marcus reminds us that a paranoid style of thought is ‘close to the surface’ (1999: 3) in game theory and the so-called prisoner’s dilemma, commonly used in political science. Martin Parker argues that ‘contemporary theories of conspiracy share a narrative structure with much of human science generally’ (2000: 191). The resemblance between conspiracy theories and sociological theories is also analysed by Stef Aupers and Jaron Harambam. They draw attention to the deep concern of social scientists to draw boundaries between their own theories and forms of knowledge, which can be labelled ‘inferior, irrational’ (2019: 58). Many elements in contemporary conspiracy theories such as chemtrails, extra-terrestrials or the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 involve scientific material. In his study of the Dutch conspiracy milieu, Jaron Harambam (2017) found that his interlocutors were
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deeply sceptical of mainstream scientific claims about such phenomena. But, at the same time, they were actively seeking, or producing, their own claims by leaning on, or developing, alternative sources of knowledge, believed to represent better science. Ufology, for example, mirrors the practices of established academic science (Roth 2005). There are great conflicts over claims of truth in, what Harambam terms, our age of epistemic instability. Yet, rather paradoxically, many propagating, what is commonly called, conspiracy theories, claim that true knowledge is possible. *The truth is out there*, in a popular and popularised phrase.

**Clarity, opacity, belief and doubt**

A common theme in the research discussed, as has already been stated, is the tension between what can be seen and that which is under the surface. People seek clarity but, instead, encounter opacity. Signs are searched and interpreted. Even hidden urban infrastructure – pipes and electricity lines – may become a site for divination, for finding clarity and answers to the stress of city life (Trovalla, Trovalla 2015). In the realm of witchcraft, evil cosmologies or in encounters with the uncanny, we may find un-witchers, therapists or support groups, working to find the hidden causes of an individual’s suffering or misfortune, as discussed above. In the realm of conspiracy theory, there are experts who devote their life to explaining the unseen connections. There are also similarities between the anthropologist, the un-witcher and the conspiracy expert. The researcher takes note of the observable and then draws conclusions of what really is going on, and of what it all really means, or at least, gives plausible or insightful interpretations.

Participant observation generally entails intense and often personal, and sometimes stressful, relations with interlocutors. Working in an environment of witchcraft, sorcery and conspiracy accusations involves both ethical and epistemological dilemmas for the fieldworker. To representatives of churches and organisations for whom the devil and evil forces or scheming conspirators are very real, the anthropological stance of suspended disbelief can be very provocative (see Geschiere 2013). Decades ago, there were debates among anthropologists about the need to analytically distance oneself from the field and refrain from going native. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, for example, underlines that witches do not exist. But, he also explains that he found it very practical to follow the Azande habit of keeping and consulting oracles to see if ill will, or witchcraft, was afoot. Paul Stoller, on the other hand, not only studied witchcraft as a dispassionate observer, but, rather, between 1976 and 1984, enrolled as an apprentice among Songhay sorcerers in Niger. This had terrifying consequences when he was caught in power struggles between different sorcerers (Stoller, Olkes 1987). For Jeanne Favret-Saada, who did fieldwork in rural France in the 1970s, witchcraft was a highly secret affair among those afflicted, as discussed. But, being caught in its web became a powerful and frightening way for her to understand the forces and emotions at play.

An important shift in anthropology is the move away from belief to doubt when analysing religion, cosmologies and conspiracy theories. Mathijs Pelkmans argues that ‘doubt connects belief and disbelief, action and inaction’ and it ‘is always on the move’ (2013: 15). The anthropology of doubt, mistrust and un-belief reflects developments within the academic discipline where we are less and less certain of most issues. But it also reflects the complexity of social life in many places where, when listening carefully, anthropologists discern that people may claim to believe, to have found the truth, but simultaneously express doubt.

‘I have never seen a cannibal witch. The closest I have ever come to seeing one was in June 1992.’ These are the opening lines of Nils Bubandt’s book (2014: ix) on witchcraft and doubt on a small Indonesian island. Instead of seeing the witch, he rather heard it scratching on the roof of his hut. Bubandt, like Stoller and Favret-Saada, discusses not only how their interlocutors fear
witchcraft and sorcery, but how also he became afflicted by this emotion. Bubandt’s fieldwork on this small island stretches across almost two years over a period of two decades. Like Favret-Saada, he is critical of the stress on belief and meaning among anthropologists and others when analysing witchcraft. For Favret-Saada, belief and disbelief in witchcraft cannot be separated, but are instead intertwined (see Kyriakides 2016) and, although cannibal witches are feared, doubt is the prevailing mode of thought among the islanders Bubandt lived with. Witchcraft accusations and witchcraft hunts in Europe, he argues, did not disappear through the spread of doubt and scepticism. On the contrary, such modes of thinking ushered in witch crazes. As has been discussed, fighting witchcraft makes the reality of witches credible. In the same vein, denying conspiracies reaffirms their reality and importance in the minds of – for lack of better and more sensitive vocabulary – conspiracy theorists.

**Conclusion**

Anthropological research on occult cosmologies including conspiracy theories is, as discussed, wide-ranging and moves from an analysis of intimate relations to relations connected to political power and the global economy. A basic tenet in anthropology is that all people are united by a common humanity, but how we organise our societies and our life worlds differ. And these are the differences that interest us. Illness, adversity and misfortune are always present in the lives of human beings everywhere. They must be handled, explained and solved in ways that are socially and culturally meaningful. When analysing such heterogeneous and complex phenomena as conspiracy theory and occult cosmologies, it is important to contextualise their particular manifestations. Anthropological research points to the enormous versatility and adaptability of these phenomena, and to the possible connections between them. Thus, they are, paraphrasing the famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, good to think with because they point to fundamental concerns for humanity.

**References**


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