

Michele Stephen, ed., *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia*. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987. Pp. 310, 10 illustrations. \$35.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Marty Zelenietz, Saint Mary's University

Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia continues the struggle of Melanesianists to overcome the dominance of African-based models in anthropological analysis. In this effort, the book follows a familiar path: a quarter century ago, Barnes's landmark paper (1962) provided Melanesianists the wherewithal to begin breaking the hold of African models on studies of kinship and descent. Now the papers in Stephen's volume, based on a 1982 symposium, extend recent efforts to free the study of sorcery and witchcraft in Melanesia from the constraints of long-established African-based paradigms. As sorcery and witchcraft do not occupy the central focus in anthropological analysis accorded to social organization, there is little hope for their immediate liberation: the African perspective will probably be with us for a while yet. This volume, however, represents an important step in the right direction.

In *Sorcerer and Witch in Melanesia*, we have what amounts to two separate, but related, works. A rich ethnographic collection of case studies forms the first part. These studies constitute a valuable contribution to our knowledge of witches and sorcerers in Melanesia and insure the lasting value of the volume. The contributors could have, however, better integrated their studies with the already available literature on the topic.

Stephen's lengthy concluding essay comprises the second section of the book. In her analysis of the social roles created by beliefs in sorcery and witchcraft, Stephen seeks to provide the distinctive and defining criteria that will allow us to clearly delineate the sorcerer from the witch, and settle once and for all this recurrent and nagging anthropological issue. That this attempt falls somewhat short of the mark is due more to the complexity and depth of the data than to any other factor.

The relationship of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs to other aspects of culture and society forms the dominant theme running through the ethnographic essays. The authors eschew the narrow conflict model "sociological" approach that focuses attention on sorcery accusations. Instead, each contributor relates sorcery and witchcraft beliefs and practices to some salient feature of social life. In his essay on the Garia, Lawrence places sorcery in its total cosmic framework, examining it as an aspect of Garia religion and theology. Stephen provides us with an insider's view of Mekeo sorcery by comparing the sorcerer to the shaman, the mediator of sacred power between the living and the spirit realm, and then looks at the experiential aspects of doing sorcery.

Several essays feature the intertwining of sorcery, witchcraft, and

social conflict. Reay relates sorcery and witchcraft to Kuma warfare, showing that sorcery practices underlie human physical conflict and that the witch represents the "enemy within." In his discussion on Wola conflict management, Sillitoe demonstrates how retributory divination ceremonies, which manipulate otherwise inimical ancestor spirits, stop the debilitating and depopulating effects of revenge-fueled conflict without undermining the revenge principle. Bowden documents the role of Kwoma sorcery beliefs in contributing to the resolution of conflict: in a society where tropical diseases are endemic, and where everyone believes that others practice sorcery but no one every admits it, attempts to cure illnesses become attempts to restore social harmony.

Chowning's essay on the relationship of the Kove quest for shell-money and power brings to the fore a long-established, but oft ignored, fact of Melanesian sorcery: supernatural or occult powers, at the disposal of local leaders, can act as powerful conservative forces in the maintenance of a social system. In the final ethnographic essay, Reibe provides a historical overview of changing Kalam attitudes toward witchcraft and correlates the changes to changing ecological and economic circumstances in Kalam society.

Stephen's concluding paper addresses a number of issues in the study of witchcraft and sorcery that arise from these essays. She dispels some commonly held assumptions about sorcery and witchcraft in Melanesia. The African influence, she argues, led Melanesianists to reverse the indigenous perspective on sorcery: instead of seeing those attacked by sorcerers and witches as victims, the etic perspective rendered those accused of making such attacks as victims. By reversing reality, the African perspective of sorcery and witchcraft as socially condemned behavior has come to predominate over the Melanesian reality of sorcery (if not witchcraft) as often socially acceptable, necessary, and even desirable. As essays by Reay and others indicate, sorcery techniques are often valued as a means of attack against external enemies. Even internally, people such as the Kove (Chowning) and Mekeo (Stephen) may regard sorcery as a necessary and acceptable part of social behavior.

Stephen also argues that witchcraft is far more widespread in Melanesia than commonly assumed. Indeed, the essays demonstrate that witchcraft practices are not restricted to insular southwest Melanesia, being distributed throughout the area of Papua New Guinea.

The argument that sorcery and witchcraft are *not* basically the same phenomenon forms the heart of Stephen's essay. She contends that observers can readily distinguish sorcery from witchcraft on the basis of the social roles created by the beliefs people hold. Sorcery becomes an

attribute of powerful men, a way of gaining social influence, maintaining group order and security, and insuring gift returns. The sorcerer is a socially responsible actor (at least occasionally), the epitome of a human being. Community members can understand the sorcerer's excesses: when a sorcerer goes too far and exceeds acceptable bounds of behavior, his motivations are all too human. In sharp contrast stands the witch, the antithesis of a human being. The witch is the enemy within: a dehumanized member of the community; a vehicle of inhuman, destructive power. Community members attribute witchcraft to those who are outcast and condemned, those who are marginal to society's existence and who threaten that existence. Sorcerers choose their calling: the community chooses witches to fulfill a social role. Sorcerers and witches present two contrasting images of power.

Perhaps the literature does not warrant such sharp distinction between sorcerer and witch. Indeed, Stephen's analytical perspective encounters immediate problems from some of the data presented in the book. Kalam witches, in at least one period of their historical development, served the same social role as sorcerers: the witches who killed you or members of your group were evil, but those who killed for you were not. They defended the community. The Kwoma, on the other hand, seem to have sorcery beliefs but no sorcerers: never an admission of responsibility, no one claiming to be a practitioner. Who, then, gains social influence and power from sorcery?

The analysis also suffers from its Western psychological underpinnings, needlessly invoked to try to explain aspects of symbolism in terms of social processes. Stephen chooses to downplay symbolism in favor of social reality to distinguish between sorcerer and witch. Why, then, analyze that unimportant aspect using an alien viewpoint? It leads only to complications and contradictions: once we see the sorcerer as a projection of power and punitive authority, "the father figure writ large," it becomes difficult to accept and rationalize the notion of female sorcerers without getting further into discussions of symbolism and more removed from social reality.

Anthropological theory making is an inductive process, rooted in the experience of ethnography. In the course of doing fieldwork anthropologists internalize, to some degree, the outlook of the people with whom they work. We empathize with the distinctions made by our host populations. Such distinctions "make sense" to us. When we see them in other populations, we identify. When we don't, we are puzzled. Clearly, the perspective of each contributor to this volume reflects the views of the people studied. Our acceptance of the generalizations

drawn from the volume's essays will ultimately depend on how well those generalizations accord with our own experiences and "feel" for the subjects of sorcery and witchcraft.

In all, despite some of its drawbacks, the book makes a valuable contribution to the literature. The essays represent an important addition to the ethnography of sorcery and witchcraft in Melanesia, and Stephen's analysis is sure to stir up lively debate in the years to come.

REFERENCE

Barnes, J. A. 1962. "African Models in the New Guinea Highlands." *Man* 62:5-9.