

GLOBAL AND LOCAL: THE LOCUS OF SORcery IN FAR EASTERN JAVA

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In 2002, I was busy undertaking fieldwork in Banyuwangi regency, on the eastern tip of Java. I was researching the practice of killing sorcerers and what this can tell us about state-society relations. Local residents often related stories of 'sorcerers' featuring everyday giving and receiving; requesting and denying; and lending and paying. The story I was told about Sukardi was a case in point. A woman named Ainah lent Sukardi a small amount of money as an interest-free loan. Afterwards, Sukardi returned the money to Ainah, but also gave her what is euphemistically referred to as an 'abnormal' illness. In 1998, Sukardi's neighbours gathered together to kill Sukardi, but he managed to escape. Sukardi was one of the luckier ones. Around 100 other people, accused as sorcerers, were killed by their family, friends, and neighbors in 1998.

Since the 1980s, one idea has strongly influenced anthropological research concerning ghosts, witches, sorcery and the like. It is called the 'modernity of witchcraft'. This holds that evil, 'supernatural' phenomena express the contradictions, despair, and inequities of capitalism and modernity. The rise of this theory provided a profound new insight into witchcraft and related phenomena. But the theory risks overlooking the local and reciprocal elements of the supernatural. In what follows, I outline the modernity of witchcraft idea. I then introduce my fieldwork village, Tegalaring, in Indonesia, outlining patterns of sorcery in relation aspects of the economy of that location. I conclude that sorcery emerges from 'traditional' bonds and reciprocal economy; and that part of the appeal of capitalism and modernity is the possibility of escape from this.

Modernity of witchcraft

The preeminent anthropological studies of witchcraft in the 1980s and 1990s argued for what could be called the 'modernity of witchcraft'. Ghosts, spirits, witches, and sorcerers using supernatural powers for their own gain,

not to mention to cause the suffering of others, are integral to globalisation. Indeed, such 'supernatural' phenomena, scholars have argued, provide an accurate way of understanding the machinations of capitalism and modernity. So, the argument concludes, rather than dying out, magical beliefs become increasingly relevant as societies undergo transformation.

Geschiere (1997; 1998; 2001), who coined the term 'modernity of witchcraft' demonstrates, for example, that for many in Africa the idea of witches flying across the globe provides an understanding of the flight of international capital in a global economy. Just as witches fly through the night sky, money flies from one country to another. The Comaroffs (1993) see magical ritual partly as a way of getting access to the wealth associated with modernity, especially in areas "where 'modernity' has failed to deliver on its promises". Taussig (1977) maintains that Colombian peasants understand capitalism as an evil supernatural force – for example, to be a productive laborer one must make a pact with the devil. Finally, Ong (1987) argues that when female factory workers in Malaysia are possessed by spirits, this is actually a "protest against the loss of humanity" brought upon by factory work (Ong 1987:8). They fall in a fit on the floor when possessed; Ong analyses this as a form of protest. Thus, beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural are not remnants of traditional thinking, but rather, according to the 'modernity of witchcraft' idea, are integral to the experience of the contemporary world.

Limitations of the Critique

This 'modernity of witchcraft' research has stressed the importance of global flows and capital in understanding magic. And, to the extent that the mundane has been affected by global flows and capital, the research provides a valuable corrective to the idea that magic is merely traditional. "Nobody", writes Geschiere (2016), defending himself and the Comaroffs from his critics, "ever maintained that witchcraft was only about people's struggles with modern changes". Nevertheless, with its close focus on globalization, modernization and capitalism as a

way to approach magic, the 'modernity of witchcraft' theory obscured the local nature of magical beliefs and practices. In my fieldwork location, I found that analysing sorcery in terms of local economic and social relations paints a different picture of capitalism.

Banyuwangi and sorcery

Banyuwangi Regency (population 1.4 million at the time of fieldwork) is located on the eastern tip of Java. I undertook fieldwork for 12 months in the years 2001-2002 in an Osing village called Tegalgaring village studying what might be called the 'problem' of sorcery. I lived among 'sorcerers' and their attackers. Initially people I spoke to denied holding 'superstitious' and 'backward' beliefs about sorcery. By their accounts, they were 'good Muslims', and Islam clearly forbids the use of sorcery.

Rather than focusing on what people said they believed about sorcery, my ethnography focused on cases of perceived sorcery and recriminations for it. Clear contrasts emerged. Notably, almost everyone I met who initially denied believing in sorcery in fact demonstrated a sincere belief in the threat of this evil force. They put up amulets to repel sorcery, mourned the death of a relative at the hand of a sorcerers, identified people they were intimate with as sorcerers, or even took part in recriminations against 'sorcerers'. Such recriminations included infrequent actions against those so accused. These ranged from stoning their roofs, to ostracism, to attacking and even killing them.

Another contrast emerged in the distance at which sorcery works. For instance, my informants stated that sorcery can work over hundreds of miles even on different continents. If a sorcerer wanted to, he or she could reach me in Australia or America; nowhere was safe. Actually, in every case I studied – and I conducted over 150 interviews throughout Banyuwangi regency in addition to my village-based ethnography – the identified 'sorcerer' was another local person. Rather than miles, I would say that sorcery occurred over several hundred yards at the most! In the sense that interviewees talked

about such people as their own uncles or even spouses; the sorcery was extremely intimate.

These 'sorcerers' attacked were thought to cause 'abnormal' misfortune in their victims—illness, poverty, madness, and so on. They are normally accused 'after the fact'. Specifically, if an altercation arises among friends, family, or neighbours, one of the parties might subsequently suffer a misfortune. Suspicions will be aroused such misfortunes occur frequently enough after altercations (or even perceived altercations) with the same person. A 'witch-doctor' (*dukun*) or a Muslim religious specialist (*kiai*) might confirm the suspicion.

As for those accused of 'sorcery', they were actually few in number. Tegalgaring had a population of about 5,000, but, as far as I could tell, only about 15 were suspected of sorcery. I had no evidence that these people identify themselves as 'sorcerers'.

We can see accusations of sorcery and subsequent killings closely related to relationships of reciprocity in several examples. I spoke once to an elderly man named Turok. He recounted, that decades earlier, a local man named Tajeri approached his wife, asking for some left-over cloth, but she refused. After this, Turok became sick. Turok 'knew' that Tajeri was a sorcerer 'according community information' and that Tajeri had caused his illness. He eventually took part in, and probably led, a violent attack on Tajeri.

A local doctor took me to a village near Tegalgaring to visit a terminally ill patient, Susi. Susi's stomach was enlarged. She attributed the malady to her sister-in-law, who was a prostitute. She lived next door. She needed, I was told, a lane for her clients to drive into to access her services. The lane she proposed would run across Susi's property, but Susi denied her this access. Subsequently, Susi developed the enlarged stomach. This was explained to me by Dr Nyoman as being due to ascites – the accumulation of fluid in the abdomen – usually caused by hepatitis. The dying woman ascribed her swollen stomach to sorcery. Indeed, swollen

stomach was one of the most common effects of sorcery.



Woman with enlarged stomach 'caused' by her sister-in-law.

Misradin had once been a village official. He had married his cousin; an atypical marriage in Banyuwangi. Misradin's mother-in-law, Asemi, was also his aunt. But Asemi, he told me, was a sorcerer. Twice he had reported her to the army. Twice, also, local residents had exiled Asemi from the village. She had used sorcery against her own brother, Misradin's father.

Misradin's father owed Asemi money. When she came to collect, he couldn't repay. Then Misradin's father had a dream that he was being sprayed with water. (Spraying people with water is a common way to use magic on them in Banyuwangi.) Misradin's father woke to find his stomach swollen.

Although he was jailed for the killing, he denied any role in it. Nevertheless, he maintains, Asemi, and in fact boasted that he had turned her over to the army on two occasions. Moreover, he told me, Asemi had been banished from the village twice. A case Misradin focused on was her using sorcery against his father.

Eventually Asemi became one of the victims of the outbreak of sorcerer killings in 1998. The perpetrators were, Misradin explained, local people. Misradin himself was jailed for the murder, but denied any involvement.



Neighbours (and clients) of the landowner harvest chillies.

The Intimacy of Sorcery

Relatives, friends, and neighbours are closely involved in the everyday give-and-take of life. The economy has capitalist and reciprocal elements. Crops grown in the fields around the village; local bamboo handicrafts; labourers working the tourist strips of Bali; roadside sellers of snacks – these services and goods are tied up with a national and international flows in the market. But alongside these, ties of give-and-take also take priority. The labourer on the field might be a client of a local landowner; the bamboo handicraft workers are hired by their uncle; the labourer; friends and family are obligated to buy their snacks from their aunt. The principle of maximizing profit coexists, uncomfortably, with a principle of building and reinforcing emotional and social ties.



Soy bean harvest: again neighbours (and clients) of the landowner at work

Reading the ‘modernity of witchcraft’ literature, one would expect that the market flows and capitalism might be expressed in sorcery accusation and victimization. However, it seems that local ties are just as important, if not more so.



A group of friends—all bachelors—in Tegalgaring.

This shows in ritual meals. Famously described by Geertz as ‘*slametan*’, in these a host provides food and friends, and neighbours provide blessings. But it is exactly these neighbours and friends who attend ritual meals who might accuse one among them of being a sorcerer. Indeed, I recall often hearing of the killers and the bereaved family joining together in ritual meals as part of the mortuary rites of a slain sorcerer. This makes sense from the perspective, outlined above, that it is usually friends, neighbours, and family – the very people who would be invited to a ritual meal – who identify

one among them as a sorcerer. Nevertheless, the fact possesses a larger theoretical significance. That the giving and taking of everyday life – ritualized and sacralized in the ritual meal – is the nexus from which sorcery fears and recriminations are born.



Neighbours plucking a chicken for a ritual meal



Author (centre) flanked by religious specialists at a ritual meal

Conclusion

‘Modernity of witchcraft’ authors have described international capitalism and globalization as an ‘evil’ and ‘supernatural’ force in the lives of local people. However, my research in Banyuwangi indicated that the ‘evil’ and ‘supernatural’ force of sorcery was tied up in local, reciprocal relations. Indeed, from a local perspective, capitalism and the market offered some reprieve. Many people have a sense of being pulled towards, and yet wanting to escape from the people they interact with from day to day. For such people, the underbelly of dependence and com-

fort is feelings of suspicion and sometimes fear; being shackled and condemned, they seek to break the ties that chain them to those around them.



Neighbours eating leftovers from a ritual meal

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