Magic and Witchcraft: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies

Michael D. Bailey  
*Iowa State University, mdbailey@iastate.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_books

Part of the Cultural History Commons, History of Gender Commons, History of Religion Commons, History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons, Medieval History Commons, Medieval Studies Commons, Modern Literature Commons, and the Technical and Professional Writing Commons

**Recommended Citation**

https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/history_books/10

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Books by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
Magic and witchcraft have been important topics in historical scholarship for as long as history has been a professional academic discipline. They have also attracted the attention of scholars working in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies. One could argue, in fact, that they have attracted academic attention of a sort for many centuries, having been the focus of sustained work by theologians, demonologists, canon lawyers, and even political theorists in both the medieval and early modern periods. Modern scholarship on these topics, however, began in the mid to late 1800s. A number of famous anthropologists and sociologists of religion, some of whose work is presented in Volume 4 of this collection, were drawn to study the ritual practices and supernatural beliefs of non-Western societies. They sought to establish magic as a viable academic category by developing stable and universally applicable definitions that would differentiate what they regarded as magical practices from other major conceptual categories, mainly religion and science. Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871), James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890), Marcel Mauss’s “General Theory of Magic” (originally with Henri Hubert, 1902), and Émile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) all made important contributions along these lines. At roughly the same time, historians began to look afresh at the magical practices in Europe’s own past. Their efforts resulted in such foundational studies of witchcraft as Jules Michelet’s *La sorcière* (1862), Henry Charles Lea’s *History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages* (1887), which included long sections on “Sorcery
and the Occult Arts” and “Witchcraft” in its third volume, and Joseph Hansen’s *Zauberwahn, Inquisition und Hexenprozeß im Mittelalter* (1900).

This early scholarship, although now superseded in many ways, already indicates two basic approaches to the topics of magic and witchcraft that have remained evident, to different degrees, in almost all subsequent academic studies. Either scholars might focus on what constitutes magic on a conceptual level, attempting to identify the general characteristics of rites and practices that they deem to be magical, generally for purposes of cross-cultural comparison, or they may focus on how certain rites and practices were understood and labeled in specific contexts, and how particular societies responded to such practices either socially or legally. Since scholars’ early attempts to establish universal definitions of magic all proved inadequate in one regard or another, most recent historical studies have generally favored the latter approach, although of course almost all studies operate in both ways at least to some degree. Moreover, calls to establish broader comparative frameworks have never entirely disappeared. Most basically, scholars have continued to employ the terms “magic” and “witchcraft” to describe the practices they study, even when these words are not the labels used in contemporary records. Calls have been made for the construction of a new, less freighted academic vocabulary to address issues of ritual performance and power, to useful effect. Nevertheless, most scholars still rely on such terms as “magic,” “witchcraft,” “sorcery,” “superstition,” and other related (and generally Western European) vocabulary to describe practices in both the premodern and modern worlds, and in both Western and non-Western societies.

The broad application of such terminology can raise problems, but it also calls attention to some sweeping similarities across human societies. For example, witchcraft is a term that can carry very Eurocentric and deeply negative connotations. During the period of Western Europe’s
major witch hunts from the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, witchcraft came to mean not just the performance of harmful magic but also the far more terrible crimes of apostasy and devil-worship. This definition of a witch is in a strict sense entirely inapplicable in non-Christian societies, and it is not fully applicable even in many Christian ones. Ideas of witchcraft and dynamics of witch-hunting developed differently in Orthodox Eastern Europe, for example, than in the Catholic/Protestant West. Nevertheless, many societies in Europe and beyond have shared the general notion that some forms of harmful magic are deployed not just by individual sorcerers for personal gain but by agents of dark spiritual forces that conspire to harm society more broadly. The ancient Babylonians developed a ceremony known as *Maqlû* (burning) as a general response against the harmful rites of a *kaššaptu*, generally translated as a “witch,” who came to be seen as an almost demonic being herself. Studying the Azande of the Upper Nile in the early twentieth century, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard developed an influential distinction between the performance of powerful rites that could be learned by anyone, which he designated “sorcery,” and practices that drew on an evil power inherent within certain people, which he designated “witchcraft.”

While magical practices may be conceived as beneficial as well as harmful, in either case they have often been regarded as illicit in some way, or they have been held in some degree of ill-repute within the societies that believe in them. One might therefore try to define magic as any kind of rite, ritual, or practice that aims to manipulate either spiritual or natural forces which moral or legal authorities in a given society have condemned. This would serve to differentiate magic from religion and science, which could be defined as rites, procedures, beliefs, and knowledge that enjoy moral and intellectual approbation within a given society. But still this definition would not cover all historical uses of the terminology in question. Even in medieval
and early modern Europe, for example, when religious, legal, and intellectual authorities almost uniformly condemned magic and especially witchcraft as deriving from the devil, there was a category of “natural magic” that was held to be non-demonic and potentially legitimate.\textsuperscript{10} Also in the Middle Ages and then more famously in the Renaissance, learned mages in Europe practiced not only natural but spiritual forms of magic that they deemed to be entirely legitimate and irreproachable (needless to say, some other authorities disagreed).\textsuperscript{11} In the modern Western world, occultists of various kinds have practiced what they regard as powerful and spiritually elevating magical rites. Similarly, modern witchcraft, or Wicca, is now an officially accepted religion in the United States, but its practitioners engage in rites that they consider explicitly magical. One could argue that their understanding of magic and witchcraft breaks dramatically with historical conceptions, but one cannot simply dismiss their appropriation and use of this terminology.\textsuperscript{12}

This collection presents a range of scholarship, some of which explicitly tries to define magic and witchcraft or considers the problems of such definitions, some of which examines specific contexts and usages (although generally ones that have broad ramifications or resonance), and some of which proposes new frameworks through which to engage with these perennially fascinating and difficult issues. An enormous amount of territory must be covered, geographically, chronologically, and in terms of the various methodologies that historians and other scholars have used to study magic and witchcraft. In each section, my main goal has been to present a sampling of scholarship that illustrates major trends, offers perspectives on enduring themes or questions, or points in what I regard as promising new directions. Even as a sampling, this collection is enormously limited and must exclude far more than it can gather. Hopefully,
however, it will provide a useful point of entry and offer some helpful guideposts for those seeking to orient themselves in this tremendously rich and varied field of study.


2 Selections 39-41.


5 E.g. by David Frankfurter, as in selection 3 in this volume.


9 This is largely the approach I took in Michael D. Bailey, *Magic and Superstition in Europe: A Concise History from Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, Md., 2007).


12 See selections 25 and 26 by Diane Purkiss and Jo Pearson, in Volume 2.
For a word with such a charged history, the origin of “magic” is in one sense quite clear. The term derives from the ancient Greek *mageia*, which originally designated the practices the Persian priestly caste, the *magoi*. This etymological origin points to the blurry distinction between magic and religion in antiquity. The polytheism of most ancient Western civilizations, including that of the Greeks, allowed them to accept the gods and spirits of other cultures as real and powerful. But ancient peoples also tended to regarded foreign beliefs and practices with suspicion, especially in comparison to the official temples and cultic rites of their own culture. As Matthew Dickie points out in “The Formation and Nature of the Greek Concept of Magic,” however, this basic framework contained many complexities. The Persian *magoi*, for example, did not always perform rites that we, or even the ancient Greeks, would regard as “magic.” Moreover, the Greeks often employed the term *mageia* to describe home-grown but nevertheless still unofficial, secretive, or otherwise questionable rites. Furthermore, *mageia* was not the only term the Greeks used to describe practices that might now be considered magical. Another common term was *goeteia*, often translated as “witchcraft.” This word originally designated rites and ritual laments performed for the dead, and so came to cover a gamut of practices that often (although not always) carried sinister connotations and associations with the underworld. Another term was *pharmakeia*, which described the manufacture of drugs and potions. From the
very beginning of the Western tradition, therefore, some degree of confusion always pertained to what magic was, how and by whom it was performed, and how it should be designated.

Many authorities in the ancient Western world, both moral and intellectual, held what we might now group together as magical rites in disrepute for various reasons, whether because they were foreign, because they were secretive, or because authorities believed them to be potentially harmful. Legally, however, magic was rarely condemned per se. Most ancient law codes criminalized only those practices that authorities regarded as being clearly and directly harmful. Derek Collins notes that *pharmakeia*, which covered the concoction of poisons as well as beneficial medicines, was the most common category of magical practice condemned in Greek law codes, as *veneficium*, the Latin term for poisoning, was for the Romans. The Romans also developed the broader category of *maleficium*. Literally meaning any kind of harmful action, this word came most commonly to mean harm done by spells or other magical means. The primary emphasis of the term was always on the harm done, however, while the specific means by which it was thought to be performed might vary. Beginning in the later Roman period and then continuing through the Christian Middle Ages and into the early modern era, so long as European legal codes were written mainly in Latin *maleficium* remained the most frequently used term for criminalized magic, and ultimately it would become the most common Latin word for witchcraft. It was never the only word used to designate such practices, however, and certain aspects of its meaning were always in flux.

Because these overlapping and at times indistinct categories can lead scholars into some analytical confusion, David Frankfurter has proposed redefining all practitioners of magical or religious rites in antiquity as “ritual experts” and then looking for certain set characteristics by which one could distinguish them systematically and reliably. For example, practitioners might
be categorized based on their centrality or marginality in their own culture, on their levels of education, on their ability to project authority within their society, and so forth. This scheme could easily be extended beyond ancient Western societies, and might well provide more sensible structures of analysis. There is, however, no sign that scholars are going to abandon writing about “magicians” or “witches” anytime soon.

Much scholarship has suggested that the categorization of magical practices became simplified somewhat in late antiquity, and that the distinction between magic and religion grew somewhat clearer when Christian monotheism rose to dominate the ancient Western world. By dividing the spiritual world strictly and starkly between God and the devil, Christianity provided a clearer theoretical distinction between religious rites, directed toward God, and magical ones, which it maintained were always directed toward demons, whether this was the intention of the practitioner or not. In his selection, however, Kyle Fraser shows that even this shift was more complicated than much previous scholarship has allowed, for various kinds of monotheism already existed in antiquity, and these systems conceptualized and categorized magic in some of the same ways as Christianity later would.

Such precedents aside, as Christianity developed in the late Roman Empire and eventually became the Roman state religion by the end of the fourth century CE, Christian intellectuals worked diligently to distinguish what they regarded as superstitious and magical pagan rites from legitimate Christian ones. In the early fifth century one of the greatest fathers of the early church, Augustine of Hippo, wrote a number of influential works in which he discussed magic (magia or ars magica in Latin), divination, and astrology. He feared that such arts operated in almost all cases through the power of demons, and he warned that practitioners often entered into a pact with these evil spirits, either deliberately or unwittingly, when they performed
magical rites. As Fritz Graf notes in the conclusion to his selection, Augustine’s ideas “set the tone for many centuries to come” (p. 103).

Following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, the history of magic in medieval Europe is long and complex. In general, however, across many centuries Christian authorities clung resolutely to the notion that almost all forms of magic had to involve demonic agency. As Richard Kieckhefer argues regarding “The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic,” that involvement was what made a practice “magic” in this period, in contrast to legitimate prayer or blessing, which authorities maintained drew on divine power. This strict dichotomy worked well in theory but could be difficult to discern in practice, as many suspicious or even explicitly magical rites incorporated various Christian formulas, such as standard phrasings from prayers or elements of ecclesiastical rituals.

Perhaps the most important development that conceptions of magic underwent during the medieval period was the pronounced heightening of legal and theological concern about the nature and extent of the crimes that Christians committed when they supposedly engaged with demonic forces to perform magic. Major changes in this regard occurred, or at least were codified, during the pontificate of John XXII (1316-1334), as demonic magic was established more clearly than ever as constituting a terrible heresy that placed it within the jurisdiction of church inquisitors. By the early fifteenth century, the idea of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft had developed in Western Europe. Practitioners of harmful magic (*maleficium*) were now imagined to act in concert as members of heretical, demon-worshipping sects. Although Richard Kieckhefer cautions in his second selection that various stereotypes of witchcraft emerging in the fifteenth century were by no means uniform, certain ideas about the intensely
diabolical nature of witchcraft soon became fairly widespread across much of Western Europe, with profound consequences in terms of how suspected witches were sought out and prosecuted.

While some sizeable witch hunts took place already in the fifteenth century, the period of Europe’s most intense outbreaks of witch-hunting occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is important to recognize, however, that while fear of witches was evident to some degree in almost every region of the continent, trials were often sporadic, and truly major hunts that claimed hundreds or even thousands of victims were quite exceptional. The intensity with which authorities prosecuted witches varied greatly across different jurisdictions and over time.4

There is no way in a limited collection such as this to do justice to all the rich scholarship that has focused on witchcraft and witch trials in early modern Europe, but the selections here point to a few important themes. In terms of why this period, and above all the “iron century” from 1550 to 1650, experienced so many trials, Wolfgang Behringer presents a much-debated theory that general climactic worsening may have fueled broad societal concerns. Brian Levack examines the argument that witch trials were mainly generated by growing state power, a position which he largely demolishes. He notes that most trials were local affairs, and when sophisticated centralized governments became involved they often put a damper on witch-hunting zeal. Similarly, John Tedeschi notes that centralized inquisitorial bureaucracies also tended to restrict the severity of witch trials wherever they held jurisdiction.

Examining other aspects of European culture that may have contributed to the fear of witches in this period, Lyndal Roper situates ideas of witchcraft in the “Western imagination,” while Charles Zika explores how images (and imaginings) of witchcraft developed over the course of time. Finally, Erik Midelfort argues that when scholars think about witchcraft in early modern Europe, they should not think first and foremost about very large witch-panics, for these
were relatively rare. Instead they should focus on smaller but more endemic trials and on other manifestations of concern about witches in European society. Terrible in their consequences and often incomprehensible to modern minds in the logic of their operations, the great European witch hunts have always been the most intensely studied facet of the history of magic. But that focus may have obscured as much as it has revealed about historical responses both to witchcraft itself and to magical practices more generally.


3 On the influence of stereotypes of heresy on witchcraft, see Kathrin Utz Tremp, *Von der Häresie zur Hexerei: “Wirkliche” und imaginäre Sekten im Spätmittelalter*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica Schriften 59 (Hannover, 2008).

The connections between concepts of diabolical, conspiratorial witchcraft that emerged in the fifteenth century and the demonology that supported a good deal of witch-hunting activity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as continuities in many basic mechanisms of witch-hunting across these years, means that the history of witchcraft tends to elide any sharp distinction between the medieval and early modern periods in European history.\(^1\) Regarding other forms of magical practice, however, the Renaissance and Reformation have long been held to mark clearer historical breaks, with the Renaissance witnessing the rise of new forms of elite spiritual magic, and the Reformation introducing more modern and less “magical” forms of religion that contributed significantly to the eventual “disenchantment” of Europe.\(^2\) The weight of scholarship, however, has now moved against these positions as well.\(^3\) This volume begins with this important historical revision and then proceeds into the rich scholarship developing on magic and witchcraft in modern Europe and North America.

As Brian Copenhaver demonstrates in his article on Marsilio Ficino, much of the magical thinking of a leading Renaissance magus, while grounded to some extent in new intellectual systems of Neoplatonism and hermeticism (more the former than the latter), was in fact still rooted in medieval philosophical, scientific, and medical knowledge. Richard Kieckhefer concludes even more broadly that systems of magic did not undergo much fundamental change at all as a result of intellectual developments associated with the Renaissance. R. W. Scribner
then challenges the idea that Protestant religion differed significantly from earlier medieval forms of faith in terms of its attitude toward magical operations. He sees no evidence that the Reformation disenchanted European society in any significant way. Alexandra Walsham rehearses and reappraises Scribner’s seminal argument in important ways. She concludes that instead of any singular moment of disenchantment, scholars should look for “cycles of desacralization and resacralization, of disenchantment and re-enchantment” throughout the course of European history (p. 527). I point in a similar direction, although less programmatically, when I argue in “The Disenchantment of Magic” that if we take these perspectives and apply them back onto late medieval demonological literature about witchcraft, we can actually discern certain elements of disenchantment already evident, arising not from any religious or intellectual revolution associated with the dawn of some new era in history, but instead from traditional Christian thinking about the operation of magic and demonic power. In this way I highlight one facet of what Walsham would later clarify as ongoing cycles of disenchantment and re-enchantment.

Although scholarship focusing on witchcraft and witch trials in the early modern period had long dominated and in many ways defined the field, other aspects of the history of European magic are now attracting increasing attention. In particular, studies of common or popular forms of magic are transforming our understanding of the place of magic in early modern society and the concerns it invoked. As much as people might fear bewitchment, they were often perfectly comfortable employing simple magical rites themselves, or turning to local magical experts or to semi-professional “cunning-folk” when the need arose. This focus is, in turn, helping to elide the sharp division between Europe’s early modern and modern periods, in terms of the history of magic. While witch hunts largely ceased in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Europe’s
last fully legal witch trial occurred in 1782), widespread belief in magic and recourse to magical rites did not.

Serious scholarship on magic in modern Europe is a relatively new field, compared to the century or more of scholarship that has focused on medieval and early modern magic and witchcraft. It too must cover a broad spectrum of practices and practitioners, from continuing forms of traditional magic to new and distinctly modern rites. The latter include such practices as mesmerism, spiritism, and complex ritual magic developed by elite occultist groups like England’s famous Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Again, no handful of selections can do justice to the range and richness of this scholarship. Here, Owen Davies provides a broad survey of the spectrum of magical practices and practitioners evident in England from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Cunning men and women performed healings and provided protective charms, as they had in earlier periods. Astrologers and fortune tellers hawked their services. Even exotic gypsies had their place in the magical culture and imagination of a modern and industrializing nation. Karl Bell focuses on more elevated discourse about magic. Middle class elites typically derided any serious belief in magic and witchcraft, and they regarded their own disenchantment as a key characteristic separating them from the less enlightened working-class masses. But in fact middle class ideas about magic were themselves riven with uncertainties and contradictions. They were, in short, not nearly so “modern” as they struggled to be. Lastly, Michael Saler provides a theoretical framework in which to understand some of the contradictions to which Bell’s research points. His historiographical survey considers the various ways in which Western modernity has remained enchanted, even as an essential component of the modern stance is its conviction in its own disenchanted state.
Of course, not all members of modern Western societies have stressed a disenchanted outlook as a key component of their self-conception. Some have embraced enchantment and have actively pursued practices that they deem to be magical. The mostly middle- and upper-class occultists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mentioned above are one example. In the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, probably the most obvious representatives of this kind of enchanted modernity would be the broad array of rapidly growing religions collectively known as neopaganism. The members of many such groups declare themselves to be practitioners of what they call magic, and modern neopagan witches, also called Wiccans, have deliberately reappropriated the world “witchcraft” to describe their rites.

Here, Helen Berger presents an overview of modern neopaganism, beginning with its emergence in England but really focusing on its rapid spread in North America. Modern witchcraft, or at least the first openly practicing group of modern witches, was founded by Gerald Gardener in England in the 1950s, but that movement and the many other varieties of neopaganism that followed in its wake soon crossed the Atlantic and found their greatest success in the highly pluralistic and individualistic religious culture of the United States. Marion Gibson also focuses on America, not just analyzing the development of various American forms of Wicca but also positioning the figure of the witch, both modern and historical, within American culture.

One of the most characteristic features of modern witchcraft, particularly among its North American variants (although this feature has also been exported back to modern witchcraft’s point of origin in the Old World), is its association with feminism. Most varieties of modern witchcraft seek to create a decidedly non-patriarchal form of religion, if not a completely matriarchal one, which Wiccans feel is sorely lacking in Western culture. Diane Purkiss unpacks
these efforts in important ways, noting that Wicca’s central Great Goddess is to some degree actually a creation of male fantasy. She also points to some of the problems arising from Wicca’s tendency to posit a lost golden age of pre-patriarchal female freedom in very distant antiquity.

This analysis also indicates some of the complicated issues that arise when historians come to study modern witchcraft. Obviously, we are interested in practitioners’ own understanding of their movement’s past and of its relationship to historical witchcraft. From the perspective of academic history, however, much of that understanding is pseudo-history as best.6 Wicca’s founding figures put forward the notion that historical witchcraft in the medieval and early modern periods was actually a pre-Christian fertility religion – in essence, that witchcraft historically had been what they were creating modern witchcraft to be. There is absolutely no evidence that this was ever the case, and most modern witches now accept that their movement’s original conception of its pre-history constitutes a foundational myth, not historical fact. The same could be said about many world religions. But even so, as Jo Pearson articulates in her article on “Writing Witchcraft,” that pseudo-history still serves very real and important purposes within the Wiccan community, so historians must give some consideration to how they will engage with it in their scholarship. Purkiss also addresses this issue to some extent, demonstrating how pertinent, and fraught, it is to any historical consideration of modern witchcraft. As in the depths of antiquity so now in the modern period, how magic and witchcraft are defined and who gets to assert these definitions remain critical and contested issues.


3 Although see Euan Cameron, Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion, 1250-1750 (Oxford, 2010), for a nuanced argument about the place of Protestant theology in processes of disenchantment.


5 For some coverage of this diverse array, see Alexandra Owen, The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern (Chicago, 2004); John Warne Monroe, Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008).

As Europeans began to explore and colonize the rest of the world in the early modern and modern periods, they carried their ideas of magic and witchcraft with them, implanting these across the globe and imposing them on native peoples and practices. Much of the history of magic and witchcraft in a global context, therefore, is closely linked to the history of colonialism and subsequently to post-colonial developments. Of course, indigenous beliefs and practices that might be translated as “magic” or “witchcraft” existed around the world long before Europeans encountered them, and these can certainly be studied without reference to any Western incursions. Some scholars would argue, however, that even to call such practices “magic” or “witchcraft” and to study them within the frameworks those terms create is itself a colonial imposition. Thus even when European colonialism is not the explicit context in which magic and witchcraft are studied around the globe, issues raised by colonial and post-colonial studies lurk in the background.

This volume begins in British North America, where seventeenth-century colonists famously brought both their ideas of witchcraft and the mechanisms of witch-hunting with them when they came from the Old World. As Richard Godbeer indicates, however, they also brought a broad range of traditional European magical practices for use in healing as well as harming, in divination, and so forth. As in the Old World, these common, almost quotidian magical practices probably shaped most people’s lives far more than did the fear of witches or witch trials. Even
in Puritan New England such trials were relatively rare, and rarer still was for them to escalate into major witch hunts.¹ Outside of the New England colonies, with their particular mix of judicial independence and religious fervor, trials for witchcraft were extremely limited in early colonial North America.

Among those relatively rare moments of real panic, the most important early North American witch hunt by far, accounting for roughly fifty percent of all accusations and executions in the New England colonies and looming even larger than that in the historical imagination, occurred at Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. Historical scholarship on the Salem hunt is an industry unto itself. Events there have been analyzed from a myriad of perspectives, from Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum’s classic account of economic and social strife among the colonists of Salem Village to Mary Beth Norton’s analysis of connections between the trials and underlying tensions caused by recent Indian wars and the inherent uncertainties of frontier life.² Once again, it is impossible to do justice to this diverse array of scholarship in a compact collection. Here I offer only one piece on Salem. David Harley focuses not on social conditions but on cultural concepts that supported the hunt, providing a careful reading of the tensions that emerged from Puritan concepts of obsession and possession.

Of course, transplanted Europeans were not alone in North America. Historical scholarship is only beginning to examine native American magical practices, either before or after contact with Europeans. Here, Matthew Dennis gives an account of how the Seneca of western New York preserved their traditional practices, but also adapted under pressures deriving from expanding European settlement and missionary efforts. He and others are marking important pathways that future scholarship will surely follow.³
Practices that could be labeled magic or witchcraft also flourished in Central and South America in the early colonial period. Here interactions between natives, settlers, and colonial authorities were even more tightly woven than they were to the north, where natives tended to be pushed out of areas settled by Europeans rather than incorporated into colonial society. In the office of the Inquisition, Spanish authorities also had a centralized and sophisticated institution for examining native practices. Irene Silverblatt offers one perspective on these complex interactions, focusing on seventeenth century Peru. Magic and witchcraft also remain tied to issues of colonialism and post-colonialism in modern Latin America, unlike in the United States where modern magical practices are, for the most part, of modern occultist or neopagan varieties. Stephan Palmié and Raquel Romberg both address these dynamics in their studies, focusing on Cuba and Puerto Rico respectively. While each of these cases is to some extent unique, the dynamics that they reveal – both those that surround magical practices themselves and those that now drive scholarly investigations – can to an extent be generalized to other studies undertaken across Latin America.

Africa enjoys an even more well-developed body of scholarship on magic and witchcraft than does Latin America. Here too, most recent studies have focused on the effects of colonialism and the difficulties of post-colonial modernity. Needless to say, regional differences are again extremely important, but inevitably generalizations are made that span the continent. Because the major European colonization of Africa occurred later than in the Americas, colonial authorities did not impose the framework of their early-modern beliefs regarding demonic magic and witchcraft on native African practices. Instead they imposed their post-Enlightenment disenchantment and disbelief in the real effects of any magical practices. In the post-colonial period, belief in magic and witchcraft has revived to some extent, or at least it has become more
acceptable to admit to such beliefs. In some contexts, in fact, treating what are regarded as
traditional beliefs in magic seriously, accepting possible real consequences deriving directly
from magic, and responding accordingly have been valorized as a way to resist the perceived
continuing oppression exerted by modern Western cultural values that were imposed during the
colonial period. In some places in Africa one again finds significant concerns voiced about
harmful witchcraft and even gruesome vigilante justice carried out against suspected witches. In
some cases, such actions are all but officially sanctioned by local authorities.

Witchcraft and magic have also become significant components of modern African
politics. They represent a widely accepted (and feared) component of the power wielded by “big
men,” and they also provide a recourse for the otherwise powerless. Peter Geschiere was among
the first scholars to examine magical and occult beliefs and practices in modern Africa not as
holdovers of precolonial traditions but as vibrant and flourishing aspects of African modernity.
He also influentially charted connections between modern politics and the occult. Subsequent
scholarship has complicated these connections. Todd Sanders, for example, examines how in
some cases the notion of witchcraft provides an arena in which Africans can contemplate and
negotiate the category of “tradition” itself and its place in their modern world. Adam Ashforth
addresses the various ways in which modern Africans may believe in witchcraft, and the
problems faced by scholars attempting to assess other people’s beliefs, especially those which
many people may not feel comfortable admitting openly to outsiders. Given the charged nature
of the topic, this is a problem confronting researchers focusing on magic and witchcraft in many
contexts.

In Asia, too, magic and witchcraft interact with forces of colonialism, postcolonialism,
and modernity. They also have deep histories, and the imposition of Western terminology and
categories in scholarship can raise fundamental problems. As Philip Kuhn cautions while providing background to a major “sorcery” scare in eighteenth-century China, “there is no single Chinese word that embraces all the meanings of sorcery, largely because ‘sorcery’ is not a unified Chinese concept” (p. 96). Nevertheless, he continues to employ the word, and he usefully surveys a range of occult and supernatural practices that were prevalent in Chinese society, and that raised suspicions and concerns that are somewhat comparable to the fear of sorcery and witchcraft in Western societies. Margaret Wiener’s essay takes us to Indonesia and into the colonial era. She presents an example of how, as in Africa, forces of colonialism and modernity helped reshape native practices. Colonial authorities rejected magic as nonsensical, but they also needed magic to exist. That is, they needed to be able to categorize native peoples as backward and irrational in order to justify colonial domination over them, and they seized on magical practices as one grounds for doing so. Such processes, however, although rooted in colonial domination were never one-sided. Gyan Prakash offers insight into how, in India, native elites appropriated and deployed notions of magic and superstition very much along the same lines as European authorities did, in order to demonstrate their own rationality and modernity. They attempted to “purify” traditional practices (in this case Hindu ones) of what they deemed to be “superstitious” elements. In this way, they hoped to be able to advocate for “true” Hindu culture’s equality with the West, in terms of its compatibility with notions of scientific Western rationality.


3 For other examples see Malcom Ebright and Rick Hendricks, *The Witches of Abiquiu: The Governor, the Priest, the Genizaro Indians, and the Devil* (Albuquerque, N.M., 2006); and the (limited) treatment of native practices in Alison Games, *Witchcraft in Early North America* (New York, 2010).


The final volume of this collection presents studies addressing a series of major issues that might confront scholars working on magic or witchcraft in any geographical area or chronological period. The first of these is the enduring issue of how the object of this study, “magic,” is to be understood and theoretically delimited. As discussed already in the general introduction, modern scholars began working toward some general definitions of magic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These all proved problematic, but they continue to provide some important frameworks.\(^1\) Other scholars have more recently pursued the question of why modern Western scholarship has been so driven to define and delineate a category of magic, especially in opposition to either religion or science.\(^2\) Moreover, as magic becomes a topic for scholars working in areas of cognitive theory or neuroscience, other kinds of definitions of magical thinking and magical experiences are being developed, rooted now in human biology as well as in human culture.

Among the selections here, that from James Frazer’s *Golden Bough* represents a classic attempt to differentiate magic from religion. Frazer argues that religious practices propitiate higher powers, and so may not always succeed even if performed properly, while magical practices are conceived as operating according to fixed rules of cause and effect. This makes magic, in Frazer’s estimation, closer to science, but it is “bad science” because magic is inevitably based on a “total misconception of the nature of the particular laws” that govern
natural cause and effect (p. 57). Émile Durkheim objected to Frazer’s functional distinctions and argued instead for social ones. He maintained that, in essence, religion was a system of beliefs and rites associated with supernatural forces that bound people to a particular community or “church,” while magic was more individualistic, performed mainly for personal gain. Bronislaw Malinowski merged Frazer’s and Durkheim’s theories to some extent, arguing that magic, like science, aimed to achieve specific, immediate results, while religion was more communal and transcendent in its goals, aiming to impart cosmic meaning and moral values absent (supposedly) from magical operations.

All of these theories have found their critics, perhaps none more profound that Randall Styers, who asserts that modern theories of magic are themselves “magical,” exerting “potent forms of surreptitious – and often mystifying – power” (p. 3). He also contends that, however else it may be defined and whatever else it may be construed to be, the notion of magic as “premodern” has become essential to post-Enlightenment conceptions of Western modernity.

Recently scholars have also begun studying magic and “magical thinking” from the perspective of cognitive theory and brain science. The connection between psychology and the study of magic goes back to the founding fathers of psychology, such as Freud and Jung. But current cognitive and neuroscience approaches represent a new frontier in magical studies. Drawing on cognitive theory, Jesper Sørensen demonstrates how individuals may understand magic as both embedded in tradition and an innovative force, as well as how it represents both an aspect of religion and a challenging competitor to established religious systems, since magical practices can allow people to reshape their received understandings of ritual and symbolic systems. Eugene Subbotsky distinguishes between “magical thinking” and “magical belief,” and examines how these may function in human thought and cognition.
If basic definitions are among the most troublesome conceptual issues in the study of magic, undoubtedly one of the most troublesome issues in the social history of witchcraft has been the pronounced association of witchcraft with women and their marked prevalence among those executed for this imagined crime. Images of female witches have existed in Western cultures since antiquity, and in the era of the major European witch-hunts approximately seventy-five percent of all those executed as witches were women. These dismal facts call out for explanation, and a great deal of scholarship has focused on this issue (although it has just as often been pushed aside in other scholarship).

Some gendered analysis of witchcraft still rests on generic notions of ingrained misogyny in Western culture and the function of witch trials, or even threats of accusation, in controlling socially unruly women. As Christina Larner observed in the 1980s, however, while European witchcraft was “sex-related,” it was never “sex-specific,” and witch-hunting was never simply a matter of “women-hunting.” Surveying the historiography, Elspeth Whitney concludes that the comfortable notion that women were accused of witchcraft as a result of broad misogyny in Western culture actually allowed historians (mostly men) to sideline the issue of gender in their analysis of witchcraft. David Harley then offers one case-study of how scholars got the gender-related dynamics of witchcraft accusations badly wrong. Mainly because of their inclusion in the infamous 1486 witch-hunting manual *Malleus maleficarum*, midwives were long assumed to be among the women most commonly accused of witchcraft. A standard explanation was that this represented a patriarchal attempt to control a domain of purely female expertise. In fact, however, careful study of trial records reveals that midwives were rarely accused of witchcraft, or even held suspect. They were instead widely respected in their communities.
Stuart Clark is among the scholars who have sought to turn the framing of gender and witchcraft on its head, asking not why women were targeted as witches but why, given how witchcraft was understood in early modern Europe, it was so much more readily associated with women than with men. Lyndal Roper offers a case-study of why some accused witches, particularly women, may have accepted the accusations made against them in all their improbable details. Elizabeth Reis focuses specifically on New England culture, clarifying how Puritans’ views of the female body, even more so than the soul, allowed them to associate witchcraft predominantly with women. Finally, Alison Rowlands exemplifies a very recent trend in gendered studies of witchcraft, examining how some accusations still came to be lodged against men and exploring the gendered dynamics at work in such cases.

Yet another major issue in the study of witchcraft involves the question of whether any of the more fantastical elements associated with some stereotypes of witchcraft, above all the concept of witches gathering in large numbers and engaging in terrible and perverse rites at diabolical assemblies known as sabbaths, have ever had any basis in reality. Intriguing answers have been proposed by scholars who see elements of archaic fertility cults and perhaps shamanistic practices such as trance states and spirit-travel in many descriptions of witchcraft and especially of witches’ sabbaths. Possible connections have been noted by scholars of shamanism, most prominently Mircea Eliade, although he cautions that shamanism is not the only variety of archaic practice that may have informed ideas of witchcraft and the sabbath. The most famous scholar of witchcraft to argue forcefully for such connections is Carlo Ginzburg. In his groundbreaking study Night Battles, he first suggested a link between the spiritual combats and other fertility rites testified to by northern Italian benandanti (literally: those who go well). He then developed this argument more broadly, identifying what he was convinced were
fragments of archaic shamanistic practices underlying many aspects of witchcraft in his later study *Ecstasies*.\(^5\) His article here summarizes his main positions. Gustav Henningsen presents another example of archaic, possibly shamanistic rites transforming over time into witchcraft.\(^6\) Many scholars, however, are skeptical about the lengths to which such connections can be stretched. The final series of short selections gathered here frequently strike a cautionary note.\(^7\)

Despite all the scholarly attention that has focused on the long and complex history of magic and witchcraft, even in these major areas of study there are few fully agreed-upon positions, and debate remains intense. This demonstrates the continuing dynamism of this field of study, and the vibrancy of these issues for historians and other scholars. For all the significant scholarship that has come, much more work remains to be done in almost every area covered by this collection.

---


7 Also challenging Ginzburg, see Franco Nardon, *Benandanti e inquisitori nel Friuli del Seicento* (Trieste, 1999).