Witchcraft to Witch lore: A transformation in concepts and practices

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Witchcraft to Witch lore:

A transformation in concepts and practices

Waheed I. Chaudhry[1] and Tooba Rafi[2]

Introduction

The phenomenon of supernatural has been widely prevalent throughout cultures regardless of time and space. Essentially it helps the people of a society to understand things, phenomenon as well as social actions, which are beyond their comprehension under the normal thought process. Thus to understand any society a study of its belief system is indispensable. The present study of the beliefs about witchcraft in Sonikot (a village of Gilgit, Northern Areas of Pakistan) aims at better understanding of the area and its people.

Belief in witchcraft has been around as long back as one can remember and even today the waves of time have not been able to wash away the witch's imprint on the sands of many a culture. Though the history of witchcraft has some fiercely bloody chapters but with the 'Age of Enlightenment' a general tolerance of witchcraft was ensued and by the period of Romanticism, witchcraft was unchallenged, since it was accepted as part of the newly valued genre of the occult. Witchcraft became more or less acceptable as folk magic and lost its previously attached stigma. It remained no more punishable under law and as such lingered among many peasant societies. The present study, therefore, endeavors to reveal some important social and religious factors surrounding the phenomenon of witchcraft believed and exercised by inhabitants of Village Sonikot of Gilgit.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted by means of participant observation, in-depth interviews with the locals as well as focus group discussions among different age groups (below 12, 13-24, 25-36, 37-48, and 49-60). A questionnaire was also used at a later stage to collect related statistical data. Out of a total of 150 households 50 were selected through random sampling owing to the homogeneity of the community.

Snowball sampling was brought into use for selection of people who had firsthand experience with a witch. Moreover, a few local academics and religious scholars were also consulted on some specifics related to witchcraft.

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Understanding Witchcraft

The Princeton University online dictionary defines magic as "…. any art that invokes supernatural powers." This definition, while technically correct, seems woefully inadequate. Webster's dictionary adds a little more to the word with its definition of magic as "the practice of using charms, spells, or rituals to attempt to produce supernatural effects or control events in nature."

Even in the absence of a universally agreed upon list and hierarchy of magical practices, the usually classified practices of magic include divination, astrology, incantation, paganism, sorcery, spirit mediation and necromancy. Another version also includes mysticism, paganism, medicine, heresy, witchcraft, shamanism, voodoo and superstitions in this list (International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences: 1968).

Thus viewed witchcraft falls under the large umbrella of magic. Even the popular usage of the term 'witchcraft' can mean a wide range of meanings, including forms of magic found in the southern United States, such as voodoo, hoodoo, conjure, or mojo; Haitian voudou, Cuban or Puerto Rican Santeria; any of the other African–based religious systems in the Caribbean or Brazil or elsewhere in south America; and any of the numerous interests designated as parapsychology or psi; or it can mean romantic attraction. Today witchcraft can refer to Wicca or any other neo pagan religions, some of whose adherents refer to themselves as witches (Baroja: 1973)

According to the International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences(1968), by "witchcraft", most anthropologists mean *a belief in a mystical power that develops in some people and enables them to work evil directly, without magic or spiritual assistance, but some use the term, for instances, of evil magic. Most anthropologists agree that witchcraft is a belief and not actually demonstrable.* In Britannica, the online encyclopedia, witchcraft refers to the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, practices typically involving sorcery or magic. Although defined differently in disparate historical and cultural contexts, witchcraft has often been seen, especially in the West, as the work of crones who meet secretly at night, indulge in cannibalism and orgiastic rites with the Devil, and perform black magic. Witchcraft thus defined exists more in the imagination of contemporaries than in any objective reality. Yet this stereotype has a long history and has constituted for many cultures a viable explanation of evil in the world. The concept of witchcraft is also treated as a cultural ideology, a means of explaining human misfortune by blaming it either on a supernatural entity or a known person in the community (Pócs: 1999).

There are various views on how witchcraft began. Some say that the origins of the witch date back thousands of years, to the days when the goddess was worshiped and humanity had great reverence for the powers of nature and for women as creators of new life (Justine Glass: 1973).

In the "New Age" philosophy, this relates to the concept of "Gaia" or "Mother Earth," which views planet earth as essentially a living being. Others argue that witchcraft belongs to a matrilineal period, when the female principle was dominant (Ibid: 1973)

Beliefs in witchcraft are found in many cultures worldwide, and historically notably in Early Modern Europe, where witchcraft came to be seen as a vast diabolical conspiracy against Christianity. The intensity of these beliefs is best represented by the European witch-hunts of the 14th to 18th century. In the setting of the witch hunt a French lawyer and political writer, Jean Bodin (1580) published a book in which he stated fifteen characteristics of a witch. He put the characteristics as follows; denial of God, cursing God and other blasphemies, worshipping the devil and bringing him sacrifice, dedicating children to the devil, murdering children before they were baptized, pledging to Satan children yet in the womb, converting people to satanic cults, honoring oaths sworn in the name of the devil, incest, murdering men and little children to make broth, disinterring the dead, eating human flesh and drinking blood, killing by means of poison and spells, killing cattle, causing famine on the land and infertility in the fields, having sexual intercourse with the devil.

Because of this association of the witch with magic, the term sorcery has long been synonymous with witchcraft in the English-speaking world. Nevertheless, some scholars distinguish witchcraft from sorcery by noting that witches are usually regarded as possessing inherent mystical powers, whereas sorcerers are considered to be ordinary persons using learned techniques. Moreover, different cultures do not share a coherent pattern of witchcraft beliefs, which often blend other concepts such as magic, sorcery, religion, folklore, theology, technology, and diabolism. (Britannica Encyclopedia, 2009)

The same dichotomy between sorcery and witchcraft exists in the beliefs of many African and indigenous peoples throughout the world. This distinction was first brought to notice by Reo F. Fortune in his book ' *Sorcerers of Dobu'* (1932) where he described in some detail two distinct systems of human supernatural evil: sorcery, evil magic practiced by men; and witchcraft, an innate power possessed only by women. He showed how such beliefs functioned positively in maintaining social order, but it was not until thirty years later that his descriptions were affirmed by others and his contribution to sorcery and witchcraft studies was finally accepted as pioneering and important. The mentor of oceanic anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski (1954) discussed similar findings in his study of the Trobiand islands where he mentioned a 'corpse-devouring and man killing flying witches'. Similarly, the works of Evans-Pritchard (1937) are credited with having pioneered the sociology of sorcery and witchcraft, and have firmly established the distinction between them, and with revealing a logic and rationality in the cosmological premises underlying these beliefs. Similarly, important studies by Jane Belo (1949) on Bali, Beatrice Whiting (1950) among the Paiute and others, and Richard W. Lieban (1967) among the Cebuano of the Philippines also showed that the anthropological distinction between

sorcery and witchcraft are widespread and that aspects of these beliefs are strikingly similar around the world

All these studies have been conducted in the past but witchcraft and its associated ideas are never far from the surface of our popular consciousness and - sustained by folk tales - find explicit focus from time to time in popular television and films and in fiction (Britannica encyclopedia). Shelley's 'Frankenstein'; Stoker's Dracula; Irving's 'Sleepy Hollow'; Edgar Allen Poe's 'House of Usher'; Sir Walter Scott's 'Ivanhoe'; (Avon lea, the Lady of the Lake, Merlin and Arthur, the Tales of Robin Hood), Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', and even stories and books of this post modern era like 'Lord of the Ring', 'Harry Potter', and 'Eragon' are but few of the examples.

Relation of Magic, Religion and Science

In the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century anthropological discussions of magic, religion, and science were heavily influenced by evolutionary theories and debates about the nature of scientific reasoning and practice. E. B. Tylor (1832–1917) and James G. Frazer (1854–1941) made some of the most important early contributions to the study of magic and religion, although both relied on ethnographic information that was limited in geographic scope and lacked extensive contextualization. In contrast to a number of previous ideas holding that magic is an undeveloped and primitive form of thought, Tylor found that magic required a rational process of analogy based on understanding the links between cause and effect. He was also interested in its symbolic properties. He did, however, emphasize the differences between thought in magic and thought in science, for he called magic a "pseudoscience" that was incorrect and deluded. His point was that people involved in magic could not differentiate between causal relationships achieved through magic, and causal relationships that occur in nature. Although he thought that both magic and religion could exist together in any given society, he proposed that magic diminished as human institutions advanced and therefore associated scientific thought with more noteworthy human achievements. (Tylor: 1871)

Frazer's understanding of the relationship between magic and religion was structured according to a linear evolutionary framework composed of three forms of thought: magical, religious, and scientific. He postulated that magical thought, the earliest stage of human development, was replaced by religious thought as people observed its failures and came to believe that they could propitiate gods in order to control nature. Religious thought was then replaced by scientific thought as human beings understood natural laws. He observed that scientific reasoning involved a comparable thinking process, or "association of ideas," and for that reason viewed magic and science as fundamentally different from religion, which involved human beings' propitiation of superior powers. (Frazer: 1911)

By the turn of the century the writings of scholars with a sociological orientation increasingly became more important. They based the distinction between magic and religion on its function

and on the context of its performance. For Marcel Mauss (2001), magic was private and secret, and did not contribute to group activities and organizations. Émile Durkheim (1915) similarly viewed magic as an individual practice in contrast to religion, which he saw to be collective. Max Weber (1921) was interested in comparing the practice of magic and religion in pre-capitalist and capitalist societies. He observed that magic was dominant in pre-capitalist societies, and was on the decline in capitalist societies along with what he called the increased "rationalization of economic life."

Role of Supernatural in Society

Witchcraft serves many different social functions. In ethnographic studies of peoples around the world, anthropologists have detailed many of the positive social functions of witchcraft. Various anthropologists have observed many kinds of services the belief serves in a society. Reo F. Fortune (1932) in his study of a Melanesian society showed how such beliefs functioned positively in maintaining social order. Likewise Malinowski (1935) discussed positive social and legal functions of Trobiand sorcery.

As popularized in Evans-Pritchard's (1937) work, witchcraft can be understood as an explanation for misfortune, which might function to provide people with a sense of control over their own lives and the ability to understand forces in their world. These could be called empowering functions of witchcraft. Understandings about witchcraft can be used to define values and moral standards in a society, thus contributing to a society's definition of itself or distinction from other groups. Also, people who are in relatively weak and marginal positions in society might be able to use witchcraft, or the threat of witchcraft, as a form of power. In this way, the ideas and practices of witchcraft could work to mediate social, political, or economic inequalities.

Witchcraft also serves more overtly political functions. The complex of ideas associated with witchcraft can involve rituals that identify people responsible for practicing witchcraft. Early anthropological works on African societies noted the existence of movements against witchcraft, sometimes known as anti-witchcraft movements or witchcraft eradication movements that borrowed from these cultural institutions. Audry Richards' (1935) important essay on a witch-finding movement in Zambia shows how the movement drew from responses to the influences of colonialism, yet also drew from rituals that are part of a common complex in central African societies.

In his appreciation of Evans-Pritchard's book, *Max Gluckman* (1944) made his oft-quoted statement: "if a sociologist can find where charges of witchcraft in a particular society fall, he can almost reconstruct the social relationships of the society".

From the late 1940's to 1960's, many African studies by British social anthropologists followed Gluckman's premise and sought predictable patterns of suspicion and accusation and functional

explanations of beliefs in the sorcery and witchcraft. Titles of some of these studies are representative: J. D. Krige, "The Social Function of Witchcraft" (1947); Monica Wilson, "Witch Beliefs and Social Structure" (1951); and S. F. Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies", correlating specific aspects of beliefs in witches with aspects of social structure (1952). As Keith Thomas (1971), a modern historian said "the role of magic in modern society may be more extensive than we yet appreciate".

The Contours of Witchcraft-lore In Sonikot

The study basically aimed to explore the phenomenon of witchcraft in Sonikot, but in its place, the outcome was witch lore not witchcraft. Today, no witch can be found in Sonikot. The last known witch to inhabit the area died some years ago. Curiously the practice could be found nowhere yet its stories were everywhere. Even those who could have testified in favor of the witch's case were either dead or very old or few. Furthermore as far as the younger generations were concerned, they seemed to rely entirely on incidents related to them by their elders or on stories of occurrences that happened in far off areas reaching them through word of mouth. It seemed that the research on witchcraft in the area was but a generation too late. 'Witchcraft-lore' on the other hand was still alive and highly omnipresent. The belief that witches do exist was strong and related stories were often exchange. Thus in spite of the physical absence of a witch, its symbolic presence in Sonikot was undeniable. This delay however has come with a cost. Much of the details of the witchcraft-lore of Sonikot have been lost since they were never documented. What has managed to survive has been through the word of mouth. A major reason for this loss may be the lack of actual experience of the phenomenon by most of the living generations.

Though wide spread belief in a witch still exists, her physical existence is curiously absent. The most pressing question then in this scenario would be has this absence had any effect on people's belief in them? The answer is yes! Today a lot less people think there to be absolute truth in the witch lore they'd been hearing since children. The empirical findings for this research showed that 30% of the sample categorically refused to believe in them, 13% were not sure and 57% of them said yes.

Though the belief in witchcraft is still pervasive, certain pockets of people have started to emerge who either are neutral or are in downright opposition to the idea. At any rate, they do not share in the collective belief that witches exist. Islam, the chief religion in Sonikot, has this to say about magic; divination and magic in Islam encompass a wide range of practices, including black magic, warding off the evil eye, the production of amulets and other magical equipment, conjuring, casting lots, astrology and physiognomy. Respondents commonly believe in magic (Sihr) and explicitly forbid its practice. The scholarly respondents reported that Sihr originates from Arabic language which means sorcery or black magic. The best known reference to magic in Islam, as reported by the respondents from Sonikot, is the Surah Al-Falaq (meaning dawn or daybreak), which is a prayer to ward off black magic.

Factors causing a decline in belief

Special care was taken in this section to mention only those possible reasons which were both a part of the locals' observation as well as the researcher's analysis. The identified factors have been divided at the personal and societal levels. A sample of 50 households, selected on random basis (represented by head or any adult member), provided basis for the following discussion.

- **Determinants at individual level**

It seems that the pattern of belief in witchcraft-lore varies with certain individualistic constants like age of the person in question, his/her education, exposure, sex, etc. all of which are discussed in detail below. Disparities exist in;

- Age

With room for certain exceptions, different age groups hold different opinions about the matter. For this five groups were formulated of different age brackets; 1-12, 13-24, 25-36, 37-48, and 49-60 and engaged them in different focus group discussions. It was found that the older people tend to have firmer and more rigid believe in the existence of witches. As the age progressively decreases the belief progressively has little influence on the minds of the people as well.

The younger generation dismisses the idea by saying "our elders may know what they saw but I can't believe in something that I haven't experienced myself. The stories told by our elders and by town folk in general have great loopholes which my sensibilities can't accept." However, a strong belief was found in very little children. This can be accounted by the fact that the influence of the parents and grandparents is still very strong on them

Belief in witchcraft			
Age groups	Yes	No	Somewhat
1-12 yrs	83%	--	17%
13-24 yrs	20%	70%	10%
25-36 yrs	50%	30%	20%
37-48 yrs	60%	20%	20%
49-60 yrs	75%	12%	13%

Belief in supernatural			
Age groups	Yes	No	Somewhat
1-12 yrs	83%	-	17%
13-24 yrs	40%	30%	30%
25-36 yrs	40%	20%	40%
37-48 yrs	90%	10%	-
49-60 yrs	88%	-	12%

and they haven't yet started to question the information fed into their minds by their elders thus their acceptance of the idea.

- Sex

The gender of a person emerged as an important determinant of his/her beliefs. The trend towards believing in witchcraft-lore was seen greater in females as compared to males. This is because of a strict division of spheres for both the sexes. While the women are to spend their entire day in the house, the males spend all day out (at work or otherwise) and come back only at night. Males are even encouraged to go to other larger cities for education. The girls are taught at a neighborhood school and often at a religious school. Obviously the males thus have more exposure. This consequently results in both of them seeing the world very differently. The 'house' emerges as a strong educational institution where 'culture' and the 'ways of the ancestors' are taught and reinforced. Due to the proximity of the girls to it, they tend to absorb in more.

It would be interesting to mention here that of all the males questioned for the purpose of this study, 41% admitted believing in the existence of witchcraft whereas an equal percentage denied the stories as mere myth. The remaining 18% of them were unsure of what to believe. The percentage of believers among women at the same time was much higher. 73% were absolutely convinced of the craft's truth. Only 18% firmly denied it and 9% remained undecided.

- Literacy

Educational background is important, for the more educated a person was, the lesser his/her belief in witchcraft and vice versa. It is important that these factors should not be generalized in isolation. It is the combination of all these that really determine a person's stance. For example a highly educated but a man of advanced years did believe in the stories of witches. In another house nearby lived a young uneducated girl who dismissed the idea as mere tales.

These disparities raise questions in one's mind. Why do these differences exist? Are witches really not present? A young student of BBA put it as, "had there really been witches, no sort of advancement or development would have decreased their appearances." However physically present or not, their wide spread symbolic presence signifies far deeply embedded functions in the culture of Sonikot than appears in a first glance.

- **Determinants at Group level**

The population of Sonikot has undergone some changes at the societal level which have direct implications on their belief on witchcraft-lore. The most conspicuous of them have been discussed below:

- Education

There is a growing realization of the importance of education in Sonikot today. This consequently has led the area to boast a very high literacy rate of 80.3%. Even the otherwise somewhat deprived fairer sex is preferentially schooled now, so much so that the difference

between the literates among both the sexes is very nominal i.e. 81.2% and 79.5% for male and female population respectively. This development is a giant leap from the generations before especially for the women who mostly used to remain illiterate for life. It seems that with this increase in the trend towards a good education, the old believes about witches and their existence are fading away.

With education has come logical thinking. A question that could previously only be answered though supernatural now has a scientific explanation. Minds nourished by facts, fail to rationalize the concept of witches scientifically today. Thus they rather 'disbelieve'. Their demand is simple-"seeing is believing, if we actually see it, only then will we believe it."

- Development

The challenging relief and unreliable climate together with its inaccessibility through the high mountains kept Sonikot, Gilgit less developed than most places in Pakistan. It was only since the construction of KKH, the airport and the great boom in the tourism industry of Northern Areas, that the place was put on the map of development. Ever since then, however, the area has covered decades of development but in a few years. With this advancement in the infrastructure and exposure of the people, the wide spread beliefs about supernatural that once governed the lives of the locals, now has assumed a more passive role. Similarly so has the occurrence of witch sightings to such extends that today in areas like Sonikot at least no more witches can be found. In surrounding areas less marked by development however one can still find women notorious as witches.

- Electrification of the Area

Before the introduction of the facility of electricity the locals relied on the sun as their main source of light. This meant that as soon as the sun went down darkness fell all over- the prime conditions for a witch-attack. Almost all stories related of witch attacks occurred at night time. Electricity came some 2 to 3 decades ago in Sonikot-around the same time the tide of development took over the area. With electricity the dark of the night became less murky. Light bulbs came to all houses. People of Sonikot opine that the decreased number of attacks by witches ever since has happened because just as darkness brings the peak of a witch's power, light repulses and weakens her. Thus electricity has driven them away. Perhaps it can also be attributed to the fact that light enables us to see everything with clarity and clears the doubts of dark.

- Increased Population

A few decades ago the neighborhood of Sonikot was sparsely populated with houses far and wide. One had to cover a considerable distance to reach another's home. Since witches attacked in secluded areas far from the sight of anyone else, these conditions suited them just fine. However with increased development came an increase in the population density of the area as

well. Consequently, with the population of the neighborhood getting denser, that of the witches grew progressively smaller until today we find no witches in Sonikot at all. Locals rationalized that huge crowds of people scared the witches and drove them away towards less populated regions. However another possible explanation might be that with the no more secluded areas with in and around the neighborhood, the very stage for the drama was lost, thus the eventual decrease in the phenomenon.

- ## Change in Lifestyle

The change in the surroundings has brought change in the life style of the people as well. Though this change is worthy of an entirely separate research, in a nutshell, it has brought about increased awareness, exposure to other cultures, scientific and rational thinking. People's lives have become a lot busier now and the philosophy of collectivism has started to be replaced by that of individualism. All this hold a significant contribution towards this decrease. As a female resident of Sonikot and a student at the Karakoram University said, "People here have become much more aware, less superstitious, more educated and busier than before. These stories of witchcraft were mere gossip for the idle minds and ears." According to another middle aged house wife of Sonikot: "In earlier days people had time for gossip. They used to exaggerate a single such incident so the belief was widespread as compared to now." In other words the stuff for gossip has changed with the change in the social and material culture of the people.

Moreover, previously most households in Sonikot housed extended or joint families. Now, however, a vast majority lives in nuclear families (about 79.07%). This change in the residential pattern i.e. from extended to a nuclear family, has weaken the hold of elders on the youngsters. This makes the younger generation naturally more independent than their parents or grandparents had ever been. This makes them want to test the world around on their own accord rather than blindly believe what the elders tell them.

- ## Change in the status of Women

In Sonikot, the woman of yesteryears saw a tough life "shackled in the chains of her duties and responsibilities". No particular rights of hers were acknowledged, no formal education was given to her except for the occasional cases of religious education. She spent all day long carrying out the endless list of chores and duties that were expected of her without any comic relief to speak of. The fact speaks volumes that every person inquired about women's status in olden times, all without any exceptions agreed on her being oppressed.

Even today one cannot call the woman of Sonikot completely empowered; still the situation has improved manifolds. She is now identified as a person with rights and she has the strength as well as the family backing to defend any violation against them in most cases. She is educated and respected for who she is. Though a small number but some of them even are allowed to go outside the house and maintain a job.

As long as a woman does not get "too independent" most people see this change as positive. However there were some men who were not happy with the present scenario. According to them the modern woman has unnecessarily started to "poke her nose in all walks of life" and that they need to be contained again.

At any rate the wider acceptance of the changes in the stereotype of a 'good woman' has softened the distinction between the two extremes thus rendering the idea of a witch a little irrelevant to today's life. About 85% of the respondents thought the change in women's status is positive where as only 15% viewed it disapprovingly.

Functions of Witchcraft-lore in Sonikot

The term 'witch' is socially highly loaded with a variety of meanings. Here; the principal referent reflects the ideology of those who uses the term. Thus looking into the actual believe gives us insight into the minds of these people as well as into their culture.

- Explaining Natural Phenomenon

The concept of witchcraft in Sonikot acted such as to give labels to things indecipherable to the locals. Explanations to them saps out the element of uncertainty and thus anxiety transforms into fear which somehow is easier for inhabitants of Sonikot to cope with. What really happens is that as a means to shield them from the enigmatic problem at hand, the elders, notables and so called wiser people of Sonikot have developed stereotypical responses that presumably solve them and these responses are acknowledged and accepted by the entire community. For example problems like harsh environmental conditions, the volatile climate of the region, primitive technology, and other disasters such as frequent land sliding or sudden storms, earthquakes were all given magical causes. A man suffering sudden illness was seen as ominous, so were sudden deaths. Science may be able to give various reasons for the unexpected ailments and bereavements now, but for the residents of Sonikot there was just one cause - the ill will of a witch.

The question of causation in fact often supersedes in its urgency that of 'what', for it becomes a matter of supernatural drive behind a natural incident. For example, a death is clearly recognized as natural in Sonikot but the raison deter behind it is taken to be supernatural. Thus this means that even with advancing scientific insight, the function of witchcraft does not necessarily end.

- Defining Social Boundary

The concept of witchcraft serves as a means of role defining in Sonikot that is to say that by defining what is bad, it also sets the parameters of good. Since witchcraft in Sonikot is limited only to the women folk thus this boundary defining[3] is also just for the women. The way the witch behaves lies in clear contrast to that accepted of a woman. The witch's demeanor asserts

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[3] Emile Durkheim referred to this abstract idea as 'social boundary' in his book 'The Division of Labor in Society'

the opposite of civil conduct and is motivated by greed and sordidness. This is to say that the witch essentially stands for all that a good woman should not be. Here, by presenting a counter image, people derive standards which they can identify with. In essence thus, the image of the witch makes a contribution to the maintenance of social order as it has been set through generations (Sebald: 1978). For example, the stereotype of a witch goes into gory details describing her vices. She goes around at night attacking people and eating human flesh. Thus it automatically implied that no female of good character is to be seen outside after dark. This is so deeply ingrained in the minds of the people of Sonikot that seeing a woman outside at night automatically implies her being a witch. What's more is that the threat of being classified outside of the accepted boundary of community standards serves as conformity pressure for the women of Sonikot. This controls undesirable habits in women with the threat of proclaiming them a witch. Since stinginess, quarrelsome and other such antisocial qualities were attributes of a witch's personality therefore in order to stay away from such suspicions; women of Sonikot try to avoid being associated with such adjectives. True not all women in Sonikot were so strict in this observance in the present times, but the number that do have these reservations in mind greatly outnumber those who do not.

- ## Reinforcing the Age Old Battle of Good versus Bad

The witchcraft phenomenon in Sonikot is not without a moral i.e. evil can be balanced by good and suffering gives way to solace. The belief that misfortune can result from witchcraft finds relief in a contrasting parallel: the belief that fortune can be restored by a healer. Since the originator of such adversity is a human, a human counter-figure is presented to regain lost control over misfortune. Thus both figure come forward as the antithesis of each other where the healer stands for the ideals of goodness and the witch symbolizes all things bad. In this way it essentially becomes a battle between good versus evil.

The importance behind this aspect of witch lore is that it ensures the locals of Sonikot that this cosmos is after all just, ordered and moral. There is security amidst all the danger if one just keeps on the 'right path' and has faith in its power of 'good'.

- ## Social Sanction System

Another function of witchcraft in Sonikot is to maintain the social order by guarding correct social behavior. Sonikot is a part of a patriarchal society prevalent which puts women in a role of subordination. Having no direct control over their lives, the women of Sonikot may find themselves in a place of vulnerability. This susceptibility is to some extend countered by the idea of a witch. The thought that a seemingly helpless woman can have such extraordinary powers and threaten men with even their lives at some level ensures that they may not be so unjustly treated (Sebald: 1978). A man who believes in the witchcraft-lore would not dare harm a woman lest she turns out to be a witch. This is especially true for the olden times when women were more suppressed and the belief in witchcraft was nearly absolute. Even today this idea has

been confirmed by some of the respondents and it is still playing its part at the back of people's minds.

On part of the women in Sonikot, the belief makes sure that women conform to the idea of a good woman so that minimum problems may arise in the running of the social system and peace and stability may be maintained in everyday life.

- ## Upholding the Patriarchal System

In keeping with the above discussion, witchcraft-lore fulfills the function of outlining for women, how they are supposed to behave if they want to be accepted in the society. The stereotype of the witch gives rise to another stereotype - that of a 'good woman'. The essential idea here is simply that all of their actions should be in direct contrast to that of the witch, as believed by the inhabitants of Sonikot. Thus a good woman should not be quarrelsome but in fact be soft spoken and calm. She must have great control on her temper and never allow it to show. She should be alright with whatever she gets and however her family keeps her and should not complain. On no accounts is she to answer back to anyone especially to a male relative. She should in fact be a model of compliance and obedience. Her association with religion should be strong and her character pious and pure. In her appearance, she should be simple and clean. Untied hair and long nails are not only signs of vanity but also defining features of a witch therefore a female should stay as far away from that image as possible, as is believed in Sonikot. Last but not the least she should not be seen outside the house alone at any time for a woman's true place is inside her home. On occasions that she has to go out, she should either have a *mehram* male relative as companion or she should commute with a group of other females (if the place that she has to go is nearby). At night however, her getting out of the house is simply out of question. In short she should be the kind of woman who fits in perfectly in the male-dominant system of family as well as society. All is without a doubt reinforces a woman's subordinate role and a man's supremacy. Instilling these believes in a woman's mind keeps a check on her lest she becomes too independent and challenge male dominance in the society. .

However this is not necessarily a bad thing. Preparing the minds of the female folk such as to create as little ripples as possible in the prevalent system according to which a society has been working in Sonikot, though not perhaps entirely fair, is an extremely convenient and effective way to maintain stability and after all this stability is important for both men and women alike.

As the various witch-sighting stories went, practically males were the only victims of witches. Thus a witch was actually a woman who challenged male power and dominance. The witch thus stands for all women who fail to conform to this social structure and those who pose as threats to man's dominant role. Going out, being independent (economically and otherwise), speaking her mind out, quarreling with the husband's family all are serious threats to the fiber of social life, and by avoiding such actions on the woman's part ensures safety to the social structure as it stands in Sonikot.

- Witchcraft as a Cultural Symbolism

It would not be incorrect if the culture is symbolized with a piece of colored glass. True to the massive diversity we know in culture, everyone has its own unique color and when we look through it, it shows the same world in a different shade. This color is the context a particular culture provides and unless we do not understand the context we can but understand little of another's culture. In this exclusive context commonplace things and occurrences may exist as queues to a certain meanings. These are the cultural symbols that shape the minds of every person under influence of a culture and demand of him to align his behavior accordingly.

Like everything else, the concept of witchcraft in Sonikot was found to be a series of symbolic prompting and symbolic reactions determined by the area's culture. It is actually the culture that provides the blueprint for the role of a witch and anyone who appears to resemble that stereotype is essentially cast into that role by the community. Viewed from this angle it becomes perfectly plausible that educated, intelligent individuals should come to embrace their cultural suggestion and comply to them. An example quoted during the research involved a woman being proclaimed a witch since she fell sick at the same time a misfortune fell on her relatives. In another example the residents 'knew' an old lady to be a witch since every time a death took place in the neighborhood, she would fall sick too. Thus a mere coincidence of timing was a sure shot sign of the first woman's evil identity. In the second case, the woman was old and probably ill. In such conditions her falling sick from time to time may appear perfectly normal to others but for the people of Sonikot it was the final seal of condemnation on her. A woman suffering from a problem of sleep walking may similarly be branded thus, so be the woman who is just grouchy and mean.

Thus what other people may dismiss as superstition or unrealistic fears, to the people of Sonikot appear as uncontested cultural symbols. These symbols function perfectly as autosuggestions. Having said that in Sonikot, the witch's power was real because the people believed it real and that is just why it worked. In the words of Sigmund Freud (1964);

> "A community is subject to the truly magical power of words; they can evoke the most formidable tempests in the group mind, and are also capable of stilling them. Reason and arguments are incapable of combating certain words and formulas. And, finally, communities have never thirsted after, truth. They demand illusions, and cannot do without them."

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