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VOODOO AND NORDIC GODS: A COMPARISON OF AFRICAN AND NORTH EUROPEAN WITCHCRAFT

Student: García Jaenes, María José

Tutor: Dr. Paula García Ramírez
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ABSTRACT

Witches and magic have been present in our lives since the beginning of humanity. However, I bring into focus whether we are aware of their relevance or why they have been loathed for so many years. In almost every culture, there exists a female creature sometimes human, sometimes not, with the ability of manipulating nature and the supernatural forces to their benefit. In the beginning, these witches were respected and considered crucial for society, but the arrival of other religions situated women and other minorities at risk, so they were accused of and executed for Witchcraft. Due to their mystic powers, their higher positions, the fact that most of witches were women and the misogyny implanted during the Middle Ages provoked the killing of hundreds of women. For these reasons, the present study is an attempt to analyse the role of women in Witchcraft, to find those similitudes between two apparent dissimilar cultures, Norse and African ones, and to show a modern representation of the issue.

Key words: Witchcraft, female representation, feminism, Norse and African traditions

RESUMEN

Las brujas y la magia han estado presentes en nuestras vidas desde el comienzo de la humanidad. Sin embargo, centraré la atención sobre si somos conscientes de su importancia o en el por qué han sido odiadas durante tantos años. En casi cada cultura, existe una criatura femenina, a veces humana y a veces no, con la habilidad de manipular la naturaleza y las fuerzas sobrenaturales a su beneficio. Al principio estas brujas eran respetadas y consideradas cruciales para la sociedad, pero la llegada de otras religiones situó a las mujeres y otras minorías en riesgo, acusadas y ejecutadas por brujería. Debido a sus poderes místicos, su posición de superioridad, el hecho de que la mayoría de las brujas eran mujeres y la misoginia implantada durante la Edad Media provocaron la matanza de cientos de mujeres. Por este motivo el presente estudio intenta analizar el rol de la mujer en la brujería, encontrar similitudes en dos culturas aparentemente diferentes, la Nórdica y la africana, y mostrar un ejemplo de una representación actual.

Palabras clave: Brujería, representación de la mujer, feminismo, tradiciones Nórdica y Africana

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of time, human beings have been convinced of the existence of a power that goes beyond their imagination, something they cannot explain through science or mere observation and that is present in every culture, being transmitted generationally. Together with this power, people have always tried to give an answer to their queries about death, if our spirits remain in this world or go somewhere else, if there exist negative creatures that cause us pain and sorrow, mixed with the anxiety that comes with the idea that our lives end and there is nothing after. These feelings lead us to believe in something beyond life and death and in figures that are capable of letting us in that something or judging us for our actions when alive.

Along with these ideas, it has been also present in other religions and traditions the figure of other humans that have the innate capacity to contact superior or divine entities and manipulate the energies that form our world and what is beyond the bounds of our understanding. Among many other names, they have received the title of Witches or Shamans depending on the folklore they appear in. Through literature, oral heritage, myths and legends and the existence of religion surrounding magic and its possible usages, we are aware that sorcerers or witches represent a valuable part of our daily life and current superstitions.

Nevertheless, magic has not always been regarded as something positive or completely beneficial, partially because there existed different usages for it, harmful or helpful ones, and on the other part due to the immense influence of Christianity all over the globe and into other practices and ideas on the spirit. Colonialism, the extension of Christian beliefs, the destruction and substitution of pagan and ancient religions have also caused the ideas inserted by the church to be rooted into our minds as truthful instead of people questioning them. However, we should always be conscious of the fact that these other societies also affected and transformed Christianity in a kind of interchange, which we will also consider in deep later on.

First of all, we will consider the creation of supernatural and mythological beliefs from various perspectives, as well as how it has affected those practices related to magic basing our research in the European and African context. Among the different ethnic groups both territories convey, there will be depicted their magical beliefs and the employment of mystical knowledge and tradition from their own perspective. Also, how the consequences

that the search of power and the religious clashes have brought to those territories and the people living in it, such as the witch hunts or the transition to a different set of beliefs.

Another point related to Witchcraft and that is crucial for its understanding is the intrinsic relation of women to magic. Matters such as the female connection to nature (the possibility of giving birth, their primitive duty as healers and farmers) and the historical misogyny they have been subjected to (prostitutes, slaves, home-keepers) have linked the figure of the sorcerer with females. Both issues, next to a cultural and literary scrutiny will lead us to a deeper analysis on why witches are women and is to be described in the subsequent sections.

Summarily, in the present research there will be an attempt to define that mayor power existing in the universe which received the designation of Magic, regarding its use by human and for their own purposes that passes to be called Witchcraft. Furthermore, it will also be made a general study on the figure of females as evil and related them to witchcraft due to the mayor implications this fact arouses and for the modern understanding of females claiming their place in the world. In addition, two apparent contrasting cultures will be confronted, which prove to be part of a great folklore with high content of witchcraft in their literature, beliefs and ceremonies. As a final point, there will be a short scrutiny on a modern TV show, one of their seasons that is a representation of magic and female witches, it being carried out in order to understand the scope that Witchcraft has achieved in modern times.

2. WITCHCRAFT: MEANING AND ORIGIN

2.1. Witchcraft as element of study

Before attempting to give an answer to the great question “What is Witchcraft?”, which is full of controversy and diverse opinions in every field of study, we should first comment upon the numerous matters surrounding this issue and introducing ourselves into its history, the cultural implications in which witchcraft is involved, in conjunction with its relevance during our time. As an example of the notability of the subject, we are expected to mention that witchcraft has been widely studied by scholars from diverse areas such as Raymond Buckland or Yvonne P. Chireau, belonging to the fields of anthropology and theology respectively, due to the amount of aspects embedded of the matter.

However, the starting point of this study will base its ideas in Max Marwick’s work, more specifically in his compilation of sociological studies on the matter entitled *Witchcraft and sorcery: Selected Readings* (1970). In his introduction, the author displays the idea that modern Western conceptions about anything that has to do with the supernatural tend to situate both witchcraft and sorcery into a world of fantasy, being popularized and represented in myths and fairy-tales. Nevertheless, we are far from the point that there exist other societies and religions in which these customs are present in their daily lives and from which our modern Western society has been originated or has been influenced by.

One of those non-Western societies has been investigated with high curiosity due to their interest and relation with magic: the Azande or Zande, from the Nile-Uelle Divide¹. Max Marwick proceeds to depict the customs and thoughts on witchcraft of this peculiar African community while following Dr. Evans-Pritchard’s study². According to this particular group, there is a distinction that has to be made between ‘witchcraft’³ and ‘sorcery’⁴ explained by anthropologists, and the people that practice them are therefore separated into those distinctions. Both notions are understood as methods to perform and utilize magic, the supernatural forces employed in rituals that would drive those practitioners to accomplish an objective.

¹ The Zande is an ethnic group with a long magical tradition. Their traditional homeland today lies across the frontiers of three modern African states: the Republic of the Sudan, Zaire, and the *Republique Centrafricaine*. (Evans-Pritchard, 1976: 1)

² See Evans-Pritchard, 1976

³ The practices of a witch or witches; the exercise of supernatural power supposed to be possessed by persons in league with the devil or evil spirits. (Oxford English Dictionary Online)

⁴ The use of magic or enchantment; the practice of magic arts; witchcraft. (Oxford English Dictionary Online)

What is important to remark is that sorcerers are considered by Zande people ordinary individuals that achieve their evil deeds through magic, and witches (more often than not, women) achieve theirs by a mystical power inherent to themselves and without the help of magic, also thought as hereditary. In the ethnic group anyone with access to magical substances can be a sorcerer, whereas witches present their “power” at a young age, and both conceptions are more likely to be perceived as negative rather than positive. Regardless of the connotations, we can assure through the author’s investigation and the attentive reading of the article on the Zande group by E.E. Evans-Pritchard “Sorcery and native opinion” (1931) that the magic element is present in the lives of this society, and it performs an important role in the development of their culture and religious beliefs.

To some extent, a similar event came into existence in Europe, because according to Sebastiá Giralt (2011) different assumptions and distinctions were made regarding the definition of Witchcraft during the 18th Century in the Old Continent. Personalities such as Tomás de Aquino and Guillermo de Auvernia started to distinguish two kinds of magic in the written tradition. On one hand, *magia natural*, a practice compatible with science and religion (similar to what the Zande described as Sorcery), on the other, *nigromancia*, currently known as ritual or ceremonial magic that is contrary to them as its aim is to control spirits or demons and use their power to their benefice (closer to the idea of Witchcraft in the Zande context). (Giralt, 2011: 16-72)

The earlier misconception perceived and transmitted by the Church that every “spirit” or supernatural force is demonic or Satan-related –and that provoked the massacre of hundreds of people in the previous centuries– is a key element to understand the hostility and suspicion towards any magical practice, especially within the European context. In his analysis, Giralt establishes that the *magia natural* is close to science as it tries to understand those aspects that go beyond what is considered rational. Therefore, its methods are not seen as harmful; whereas *nigromancia* does contain a religious character, as those “powers” are achieved through rituals and the belief of a superior entity, resulting in the persecution by the Church, because it opposes to Christian faith.

2.2. Witch Hunts and the persecution of magic

Leonardo Mora Contreras carried out an investigation on Witchcraft during the centuries of Witch Hunts (16th and 17th) in Europe and claimed that every society that believed in witchcraft understood *magos* (magicians or sorcerers) as people with extraordinary powers

that could accomplish evil deeds due to magic instead of by praying and following their religious beliefs. In this analysis entitled *La Brujería y la Caza de Brujas en los siglos XVI y XVII: Evolución de un proceso* (2002), he also makes the distinction between *magia negra* (harmful and dangerous) and *magia blanca* which tries to provide well-being. However, he insists on the relativity of these terms, because someone could use black magic in order to protect himself or herself or others, whereas white magic misused, such as for loving matters, can end in obsession and/or pain. (Mora Contreras, 2002: 123)

During the Middle Ages, those supernatural activities attributed to witches are depicted by Mora Contreras as part of the low magic, that is, those practices that do not require a high educational level and that can be transmitted orally and are part of tradition and folklore. (2002: 124) Nevertheless, there is explicit the existence of a high magic, one that converges studies in Astrology, Necromancy and other disciplines and which is considered almost artistry for its complexity and the amount of theory required to practice it. According to the author, these concepts and the definition that the Inquisition provided for what was considered a witch offered the appropriate scenario for the instauration of the Witch Hunt in Europe.



Figure 1. Burning at the stake. An illustration from a mid 19th century book.

One of those depreciatory denotations was: “La bruja ha abandonado el cristianismo, ha renunciado a su bautismo, rinde culto a Satanás como a su dios, se ha entregado a él en cuerpo y alma, y existe ya solo para ser su instrumento de hacer el mal” (Charles Lea, 1983: 38). What is conceived in these words is that the Church assumed that a witch (female) has abandoned any ties with the Christian tradition and beliefs that she has given herself to Satan to whom she worships and only exists to commit misdeeds.

Furthermore, there was a reintroduction of Roman law in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe (ibid) which has been considered by scholars such as Bailey (2008) as the establishment of a persecuting society, where their neighbours were enemies and anyone could be blamed even though they were innocent and the accusation prevailed for the next centuries. In addition to this, the atmosphere that these changes introduced was inquisitorial rather than accusatorial, and the Church, aiming for perpetrating their own customs, had the power to destroy any vestige of pagan cultures, even though at the first stages of Christian conversion these modifications were gradual and more difficult (Buckland, 1997: 3). Buckland states that the first Christian churches are filled with pagan imagery and symbols because the people they tried to convert still had their roots in what was observed as pagan, and could apparently follow a different religion whereas internally still have their previous beliefs and values.

As we begin to have knowledge on the matter during this particular period of time and examining the historical basis of the issues of sorcery and wizardry, in his *Complete Book of Witchcraft* (1997) Raymond Buckland describes the origins of Witchcraft and Religion, which go back to the first human beings and their relationship with their environment. The first humans developed a strong connection with every element of nature, as they were aware of the environmental changes surrounding them: wind, water, storms, and the change of seasons...

Additionally, they became conscious of the relevance of activities such as hunting and bearing children, both being crucial for the survival of the species and the continuity of the circle of life. For every element and act related to nature, they associated and started to worship several figures of Gods and Goddesses and proceed to describe them or make pictorial representations in their homes. This practice has received the name of Animism today, described by Nelson (2004) as "[...] the belief either that every natural element and phenomena are alive, or that they possess an innate soul or spirit." Curiously enough, the God of Hunting of the first men is described in Buckland's book as a horned man, because most of the animals they fed upon were also horned.

Later on, the Christian Church took these representations of horned people of pagan origin and demonized them to their favour into what Western traditions consider as the Devil or the pictorial representation of Satan. Furthermore, far from the misogynistic idea that women were only useful to bear children, the first humans worshipped a feminine figure with

enlarged genitalia as the Goddess of fertility, being aware of the reproductive capacity of women and females in the animal world, as well as their relevance and power in the everyday life. "In most matriarchies, women's roles transcend their presidency over domestic and economic affairs: they also take charge of the spirituality of the community, especially officiating in rituals related to the fertility of Mother Earth (productivity of crops) and women's re-productivity which are linked." (Dipio, 2019: 7)

2.3. The extension of magic outside the European context

The previous description of animism and the persecution of pagan imagery has been applied predominantly to the European context, but scholars such as Edward G. Parrinder (1969) studied the situation and religious tradition from Western Africa, and particularly observed practices such as the ones of the Yorubas, Ibos and Ewes. He asserts that religions from this part of the continent have possessed traditional religious beliefs that deserve equal consideration in comparison with those from Europe or Asia; not to mention that their practices and ideas are developed and should not be depicted erroneously as *primitive* (7).

Of course, after the influence of colonialism Africa also suffered a slow, yet strong conversion to Christianity; however, in their origins their temples and places for worship were smaller, more private than the great cathedrals or Muslim mosques. Furthermore, apart from the Yoruba and Ewe people, many of the representations in their religions were symbols of the Gods rather than anthropomorphic images: "closed calabashes, stones, posts or trees, pots, axe heads, metal snakes, and so on." (1969: 61). These practices received the name of **fetishism**, which is depicted by E.B. Tylor as the "doctrine of spirits, embodied in, or attached to, or conveying influence through, certain material objects."⁵

Following Yvonne Chireau and Natalie Armitage's academic work, the European term "fetish" derives from the Portuguese verb *feitiço*, to fabricate/charm, referring to the handmade quality of these material creations. (Chireau, 2003: 40). It was first employed in 1760 by Charles de Brosses who connected the words to practices such as animal worship (zoolatry), star worship (sabeism) and veneration of the dead. (Armitage, 2015: 91). The term was widely used as a concept to describe one of the most salient features of African spirituality: the construction and use of sacred charms and other supernatural artifacts. However, there was another discussion made by William Pietz (1985) in which the problem

⁵ *Primitive Culture* (4th edition). II. 143-4 as quoted in Parrinder (1969).

of using this term was that added false values to a whole culture and distanced the speaker personally. Distorted into something completely different and attributed to African folklore as erroneous as well as a form of idolatry.

Still, African people did grant spiritual powers to those materials, where figures had a more complex nature and deeper meaning than simply a *magic element*. Furthermore, those people using them would be regarded as sorcerers or witches, depending on the aim they pursued when using magic. In addition, Parrinder (1969) studied their patron for worshipping, which was not as fixed as in other cultures but they could be performed daily, weekly or annual. Every celebration for a God, such as their birth or some mythological event, was spaced out in the year so they would not clash. This differs from the Nordic tradition in which each celebration had a fixed day and tended to coincide with the change of seasons.

That is also the idea with the people in charge of spiritual matters. As an instance, according to Buckland (1997) and his analysis of Europe, there existed some primal spiritual guides that received the name of Wicca. They were consulted for the accomplishment of the different rituals such as for fertility, success or hunt. Wicca, translated as “the Wise Ones”, were ritual leaders, people in charge of guiding the practices involving religious and magical matters and who were considered wise for their theological and expertise in nature.

These Wicca or Wise Ones could be situated at the same level as the African ritual leaders formerly depicted, because they were also recognised by their communities and acted as spiritual guidance. The “wise ones” represented a medium or channel to be connected with the gods and goddesses, preaching and hearing their claims for the other believers and who were part of festivities becoming almost divine figures.

2.4. A definition for *Witchcraft*

Having revised these aspects and in order to give a possible definition to the query “What is Witchcraft?”, we can define it as a combination of a series of cultural, traditional and generational-transmitted beliefs involving a supernatural/magical element and that has existed in different cultures, in addition to creating other religions that were contradictory to the Cristian Church. It is true that Witchcraft has been contemplated as an object of study outside its religious origin and predominant element; for this reason, many scholars’ approaches

(anthropological, political, religious, psychological...) offer their own point of view and define it according to their field of study.

For example, the anthropological study conducted by H. Sidky (1997) determines that the Western phenomena of *Witch-Hunting* during the Middle Ages in Europe has an undeniable political origin, where every action was committed in order to benefit the Christian Church so they could claim more power for themselves. Still and all, there are more factors to take into consideration, such as the importance of religion and convincing the population that they had the absolute truth, and that any other practice outside Christianity was pagan and in favour of the devil.

Sidky named in his analysis those people in charge of hunting witches as the “doctors of religion”, Inquisitors and the greatest intellectual minds of the age ensemble, dedicated to write a large sum of thesis and dissertations about Satan, devilish practices and the witches that supposedly performed them (1997: 25). For these pursuers the only and most effective choice was exterminating anyone “affected by the wickedness of witchcraft” and those people could easily be found in any existing population.

The resurface of Witchcraft during such a difficult époque even though it had previously existed in antique civilizations is in itself intriguing, and there is a possible explanation given by Eetesam Párraga (2016) as she argues that it could be the result of historical root, social circumstances, theology, anthropology and Magic theory in the following citation:

Pero, de dónde viene, cómo nace la brujería en una época tan oscura y caótica como el medievo europeo es una pregunta que muchos investigadores han intentado contestar, desde las raíces históricas (el culto a Diana, a Hécate, si nos remontamos más atrás en el tiempo), las circunstancias sociales (la miseria, la incultura), la teología (en la creación de la idea del Diablo durante la Edad Media podemos encontrar una clara intencionalidad política, incluso), la antropología y las teorías generales sobre la Magia que encontramos en autores como Malinowski o Frazer, sus dos diferenciadas y correspondientes versiones. (184)

3. THE FEMALE WITCH

In the 21st century, when a person thinks, reads or listens to the word "witch", the first image that comes to their minds is the same: a woman with magical/supernatural abilities. Some of them may evoke a green, ugly woman riding a broom⁶ and accompanied by a black cat, or they might think on the main character of some TV series: blonde-haired woman, beautiful and related to Satan⁷. However, none of them depicts what can be considered real, because as previously stated, Witchcraft was a mere method to understand the world in which humans lived, and their practices were driven by the necessity of surviving (Buckland, 1997: 14-16) with the addition that any modern explanation will drive us to a world of fantasy.

On this particular section, the aim will be to highlight the misogyny present in society; the reason behind magic being generally attributed to females and how the utilization of knowledge next to the rebellion against pre-established conventions drove women to be executed and being treated negatively.

3.1. A feminist reading on witchcraft

The fact that the analysis is made from a feminist perspective due to the high misogynistic component in witchcraft accusations is undeniable, so, in connection to the topic of the female witch we will support this point of view in Garthine Walker's analysis entitled *Witchcraft and history* (1998). The author comments upon several works on the issue of Witchcraft and their historical and anthropological relevance with emphasis on the situation women had during the Middle Ages, especially issues regarding magic.

One of the books she analyses and that can be of use for the present study is *Instruments of Darkness: witchcraft in England 1550-1750* (1996) by James Sharpe. Following Walker's reading, Sharpe presents "a counterpoint that privilege misogyny as a causal or explanatory force" (365) and discusses several explanations on why witches were so often women and how economic, social and political interests were mixed in the degradation

⁶ As the one depicted in the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1935) produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and that inspired Halloween costumes.

⁷ *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018) is a supernatural horror TV series developed by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa for Netflix, based on the Archie comic book series of the same name.

of the **weak sex**. The first justification is that writers, for several centuries, had based their ideas on a particularly misogynistic treatise entitled *Malleus Maleficarum*⁸.

This literary and theological work was conceived as a manual for the recognition and extinction of Witches; it collects a series of rumours, stories and tales supporting their hunting. Eetesam Párraga (2016) made a reading and reported the parts in which the work is divided. The first part of the book states the importance of believing in witches and their relationship with the devil, in addition to some theological treatises which may be fake; the second part presents a list of the cases of magic conducted by witches and how to destroy their rituals and the third one presents questions on the different processes to have into account.

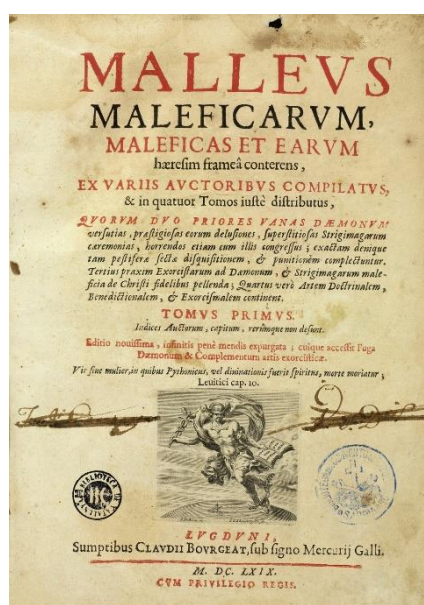


Figure 2. *Malleus Maleficarum* (front page) (1487)

In relation to women being the main target, the study conducted by Randeep Singh Chauhan (2005) on this particular book and the Judeo-Christian tradition of women's subjugation demonstrates that the hatred towards them and their mistreatment was caused by maintaining a patriarchal system, one that defended the male superiority over females. On this male-dominated background, terror, the lack of educational background and constant ill-

⁸ Also known as *The Witches' Hammer*, it is a theological document written by Heinrich Kraemer and Johann Sprenger and published c. 1486. Its expansion and content incited and maintained the witch-hunting hysteria in Europe, being approved by inquisitors and established as the handbook of witchcraft. (source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malleus-maleficarum>)

treatment would lead to submission and the justification of female killings under the attribution of being witches.

Continuing with Sharpe's possible explanations on the 'Witch Hunting' phenomenon, the second one refers to Christina Lerner's study (1984). From the paper, we are given how pre-existent misogynistic notions have prevailed and expanded in new religions and socio-political processes. Lerner also suggested that women were prosecuted in such numbers because "in the law and order crises generated by the new regimes of early modern Europe women were a prime symbol of disorder" (1984: 86). Therefore, females lead to disobedience and rebellion towards a pre-established order.

There is a third argument in which Sharpe comments upon the theoretical possibility of a crisis in gender relations "simple misogynistic attacks by men wishing to exercise domination" (1996: 174). He also combines this idea with that of how competing for power was the dynamic of society instead of a basic man-women opposition. However, what is key is the fact that most targets of accusation and victims of hate were women, and in most cases, females with power or knowledge of any type.

3.2. Lilith: the first 'wretched' woman

Stephen A. Mitches analyses in his book *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (2011) how throughout the Christian era, witchcraft and other forms of magic were condemned by influential church leaders while listing some of them: Saints Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom, Isidore of Seville, and church councils such as the Council of Paris in 829 (2). It was clear that Christianity was against any other religion or point of view that could threaten their status and power; they considered women as weaker to men because Eve was tempted by the serpent and the fallen of humanity was attributed to her, apart from being inferior because she was created from Adam's rib and not from dust. For these reasons and because the Church tended to persecute any "unorthodox" practices and beliefs, anything and anyone contrary to their teachings or representing sin, females were conceived as sinful, imperfect and lower to men. One of those immoral representations of women and prior to Eve's existence is the figure of Lilith, supposedly to be the first partner of Adam who was against submitting to a man and rebelled against him and God himself.

She is identified as Adam's first wife in a Hebrew myth from the 8th Century, whose literature was excluded from the Christian tradition but relevant in the Torah. In a Midrash (a biblical interpretation of the scriptures from the Torah by ancient Judaic authorities), it is stated that both man and woman were created independently and following God's image, even though Lilith was created after Adam because he felt alone., It is said in the collection compiled by Reuben Hoscke Kohen of midrashim from the 17th Century that even though Adam and Lilith were created from dust the text adds that God “utilizó inmundicia y sedimento en lugar de polvo puro” for Lilith which means that she was not “perfect” and came from dirt.



Figure 3. *Lilith* (1889) by John Collier.

According to the study conducted by Marta Morueco O'Mullony (2019) about this character, the female was a nocturnal spirit and/or an ancient Goddess that, originally, appeared in Ancient Mesopotamia and was adopted by hebraism. Originally, Lilith was a deity with the form of a serpent, custodian of the doors that divided the celestial and earthly worlds; but she was banished and substituted and became related with demonic, darkness and witchcraft (González López, 2013: 105-114).

Thus, when the first man tried to maintain sexual intercourse with the first woman, she refused to be submitted to him and escaped. (O'Mullony, 2019: 124). As she abandoned paradise it is said that Lilith laid with the demons living in the Red Sea and as punishment for her rebellion God killed every creature that was born from her sinful intercourses and she was condemned to suffer eternally. Therefore, Lilith became a female figure that drove men to sin with her sexuality, perversion and whose aim was to hurt men and children in order to revenge for their murdered ones and Adam's attempt to rape her. She is usually represented with a snake, quite similar to some imagery attributed to witches, as we can perceive in the preceding picture.

3.3. The reason behind witches being mostly women

In the same line of thought, Sidky claimed that more often than not accusations were made upon the socially marginal, weakest and most impoverished people of society, women. One of the explanations for the great number of female witches in comparison to males is that these "demon specialists" accused women of being frailer and more inclined to sin as it happened with Eve in Paradise or Lilith. In addition to it and according to Eetessam (2015: 183), women related to magic have been powerful, strong, cruel and wild, and they were presented as so in arts, theology treatises and civil law.

En los albores de la Edad Media, cuando aún el cristianismo intentaba imponer su visión del mundo sobre las costumbres paganas, nació un nuevo ser, un nuevo agente del mal que aunaba en sí las características de otras mujeres de poderes similares, enfocándolas y retorciéndolas bajo el prisma de la maldad demoníaca cristiana: la bruja.

Regarding the beliefs of witches in Europe, their practices were considered pagan and unfaithful with the arrival of Christianity, which actually was "a man-made religion" (Buckland, 1997: 17) and the trials and the action of inquisition gave birth to the Witch Hunt or Witch Craze previously mentioned. During the 13th Century, the Church began to hunt down those people, essentially women, who were against their religion. They followed beliefs, which were considered as demonic and/or pagan: "witch proceedings were taken out of the jurisdiction of the local clergy and given into the direct jurisdiction of the Pope, with the inquisitors answering only towards the Pope for their actions." (Madej-Stang, 2015: 18).

The misogyny present in history and the submission women were subjected to, due to the Christian church, was reflected in the number of females assassinated during the Witch Hunt. In addition, Madej-Stang declares through the analysis of other medieval sources such as that of Michaelis (1587) that they accused women of carrying out the most devil deeds such as slaughtering children and creating ointments with their fats, effects that male witches rarely did. (1997: 33). However, Jules Michelet presents in her dialogue another perspective, that of *la Bruja* who has been for thousands of years the only doctor with knowledge on herbs and potions to put a remedy on any disease, where the most powerful people would come to be treated, being called *la Saga* or *la mujer sabia*. For Michelet, the power embodied in *la bruja* was also the reason why she was hatred and feared by the rest of people, as she conveyed intelligence and a threat to Christianity:

Los emperadores, los reyes, los papas, la gran nobleza tenían algunos médicos [...] pero la masa del pueblo no consultaba más que a la Saga o a la mujer-sabia. Si no curaba, se la atacaba, se la llamaba bruja. Pero generalmente, por un respeto mezclado con temor, se le llamaba igual que a las Hadas, Buena mujer o Bella dama. / A la bruja le ocurrió lo mismo que a su planta favorita la Belladona, que empleaba y que fueron el antídoto de las grandes epidemias medievales. El niño o el viandante ignorante maldice estas flores sombrías antes de conocerlas. Sus ambiguos olores le asustan y huye de ellas. Sin embargo, son las Consoladoras que, discretamente administradas, han curado o aliviado frecuentemente tantos males. (1987: 31)

Women who performed witchcraft and were expertise in the use of medicinal herbs that could result fatal, after the mistreatment and persecution were forced to exile to lonely sinister locations, far from humanity and pain. In addition, Madej-Stang (2015) carried out an etymological and cultural study about the tales on troll-women from the Northern tradition and Germanic mythologies. Both combined gave origin to several beliefs about numerous powers by which females were accused of by the Church. Some of those accusations were attacking people during the night and riding them to death, bringing misfortune transformed into animals, being the most popular cats, dogs, rats, toads, owls and magpies which later on were believed to be witches' familiars.

This brings us to the trials where women were tortured and executed for activities such as harming others through occult powers, flying through the air, controlling people's thoughts and actions, raising natural phenomena or transforming themselves into several types of animals and even though Inquisitors had no real proof, a denunciation was enough for burning them in fires. Moreover, we shall not forget that fires and certain kinds of tortures were specially created for those women and this fact drove some of them to commit suicide after being accused of sorcery.

3.4. Foretelling and fate: the three witches

Correspondingly, the scholar Madej-Stang has analysed these prosecutions and other relevant matters with focus on the issue of the female witch in her book *Which face of Witch: Self-representations of women as witches in works of contemporary women writers* (2015). In her study, there is a chapter included that is dedicated to the term "witch", its origins and its implications with relation to females as studied by Golther (1908). Etymologically, the word employed for 'witch' coming from the Old High German was *unholda* (fiend, demon) it was first employed to denote female demons such as the Eumenides or Furies⁹ coming from the Classic mythology, instead of a woman that worked with magic.

During the 16th and 17th Centuries the term used during the witch craze was 'Hexe', probably derived from the word *hahazussa* or the root *hazen* (to hate), meaning "the one who hates". Nevertheless, Golther proposed the name of *Hagazusa*, "a hostile forest woman", being forests the place of residence of evil spirits, most of them female. Most of the Western folklore situates their *witch stories* and fairy tales in forests and natural places with trees and lakes, and the several terms employed hold a misogynistic component as they mostly referred to women with a negative/evil trait.

On behalf of this matter, Madej-Stang explains the term 'witch' further with the support of Golther's analysis; Thus, she conveys how this precise term comes from the Anglo-Saxon *wicce* (to prophesy or foretell and to bewitch) as well as other terms from Old Germanic that were employed depending on the use attributed to magic and of those individuals using it. The previous significance of *wicce* leads us to the fact that this feature,

⁹ "Las furias son hijas de la discordia, ejecutoras de los fallos de los ministros de las venganzas divinas y azote de los criminales. Su nombre hacía temblar al mundo pagano" (González, 1892: 202). Roughly translated, furies were daughters of discord and bloody punishers of evil-doers, so every person in the pagan tradition trembled when they were named.

the earlier meaning of this term and its connection to foretelling and divination awoke a new perspective from the rest of the population.

Once again, even though this perception is not completely devilish, with the undertone of being something “supernatural” and/or something out of this world, was mainly connected to females. An example offered for this remark is the *fylgjen* in which Germanic people believed and that the author describes as female entities that appeared in crucial moments of someone's life, accompanying them through their birth and death and other life-changing events, not mattering if those were positive or negative. This aroused the creation of two contrasting opinions about witches among the population; half of them felt admiration for those magic-powered women and another half believed they were cause of disgrace and misfortune for the rest of mortals:

Her figure can be and was connected with a number of female spirits said to be accompanying human life. More or less influenced by each other in different times and areas, European cultures developed the idea of the weavers of fate. Often goddesses or demi-goddesses, it was nearly always women who took this role. (2015: 4-5).

According to the previous citation, these women were related to fate and were believed to be the ones controlling other's destiny or even foretell the future, "this is why they were also referred to as spinners and weavers, the ones who spin the fabric of human life." (ibid, 5). There exist literary references to such entities in England that date back to the seventeenth century, such as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1623), the weird sisters who foretold the tragedies that were to occur in the play.



Figure 4. *The Weird Sisters* (1785) by John Raphael Smith

Another representation of three witches that controlled destiny and whose representation was aesthetically unpleasant, also known as the Fates, is found in cinema with the image presented in Walt Disney's film *Hercules* (1997). Those impressions had in common the social reject, the lack of beauty or depiction of features and the need of people in consulting them for what was yet to come.



Figure 5. Fates from the film *Hercules* (1997)

3.5. Further examples of witches in Literature

There has always existed the negative portrayal of females in texts and pictorial representations as we have observed, so in order to get deeper in the analysis of the witch-woman figure, the scholar Golrokh Eetessam Párraga (2015) conducted her analysis on the issue and provided several interesting examples on literature that are connected to women as evil. Her study *Lilith y sus descendientes: trayectoria del mito de la “femme fatale” en las literaturas europeas* provides a considerable amount of literary references from which we can take profit for the present analysis.

3.5.1. The evil witch

As previously stated, the figure of the witch has existed since the origin of religions and the understanding of the world, just with different conceptions and meaning attached to it. Therefore, there have been representations of those mystic humans in arts and literature; such is the case of Classic Antiquity. In Lucano's *Farsalia* or *Belli civilis libri* (book 4) there is presented a sorcerer named Erichtho, a woman with no morals that could mutilate corpses to carry her spells and curses. She was also described as a child-murderer, someone capable of giving anything to the Gods and of whom they were afraid.

This echoes in the medieval accusation of witches robbing and employing dead bodies in their rituals and these females being loyal and able to offer anything that their Lord asked for. Eetessam (2015) mentions this relationship among the Divine (or demonic in other cases) figure and the servant witch in Spanish literature, that being the case of *La Celestina*. Through the invocation of divine powers, Celestina is able to obtain the supernatural strength that she lacks, because as a witch she has the knowledge of herbs and rituals.

Lastly, Classic poets such as Ovid contributed to the evil image of cruel women that killed children and screams through the night to terrorize the rest of the population. Such is the case that he depicts them under the name of *strigae*, an image stereotypical and deeply rooted in the Italian imagery. As an example of this, Sabina Magliocco (2018) conducted a study on Italian magic and witchcraft. There she mentions how there existed popular stories about striges, “women who could transform into birds of prey by means of magic, and who would fly at night looking for infants in their cradles to slaughter”. (157) In addition to Ovid, Petronius in his Satires recount stories about nocturnal women whom he also calls ‘snakes’, another animal attributed to witches.

4. THE COMPARISON OF TWO CONTRASTING CULTURES: NORSE AND AFRICAN TRADITION

In order to provide a wider vision on magic and the figure of women there will be studied the following clashing beliefs with their own development and way of life: the Norse mythology on one hand and the African and African-American folklore on the other. Even though there have been commented certain matters from both contexts in previous sections, this particular part of the analysis will attempt to shed light into witchcraft matters while not being based in a certain period of time. Rather, the intention is to take the most relevant and interesting matters of both cultures along their history, comparing their situations as well as their representations on literature and visual culture.

In consideration of this objective, first it is worth mentioning the fact that the mixture of Eurocentrism and a heavy colonial past have provoked that most studies were carried out on the matter with relation to the Western context and with respect to European Witches. Nevertheless, the current analysis tries to investigate further, resulting in the search and comparison of this notable topic with reference to the Old Continent.

As a final remark, it is also meaningful to convey that since the beginning of the development of their spirituality, the African and European population had acquired some similar ideas as far as supernatural powers were concerned. For example, how spiritualism would affect them in their lives and how they understand that there existed people capable of get into a mystical world where others could not reach. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that they present two contrasting world-views and the following quote by Wole Soyinka sums up that dissimilitude:

This, for us, is the occidental creative rhythm, a series of intellectual spasms which, especially today, appears susceptible even to commercial manipulation. And the different which we are seeking to define between European and African drama as one of man's formal representation of experience is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential differences between two world-views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics (1976: 38)

4.1. African and African-American culture

Due to the particularities present in African and African-American magic, both will be analysed into one section, even though their particularities and characteristics are to be properly differentiated. The purpose is to create a wider opinion on these traditions, one that goes beyond the theatrical or cinematographic representations and the stereotypes given in literature while most of them have a Western, white, Christian authors.

Additionally, even when African-American tradition had its base in African people, other factors have affected its development and have resulted in a mixture of other traditions with its correspondent way of thinking.

4.1.1. Colonization: the effect on African lands

According to Yvonne Chireau in her study of black magic and non-Western religions, the later do not just include theologies and church-based doctrines, but also those beliefs and customs embedded in the experiences, values and everyday activities of a community or certain group. (2003: 4) On behalf of this idea, we should consider than any religion shares the same origin with the rest vital experiences and cultural heritage that are taught within the following generations. For example, she analyses what is called ‘Conjuring’, which consists in the African-American tradition of healing and harming through the knowledge of herbs and special objects, and which practices are considered supernatural and a religion by itself.

Nevertheless, she also comments upon the fact that some scholars such as Henry Mitchell (1975) argued “Conjure represented the “low religion” of black America, as it was “contrary to the belief system and ethical rules of the higher tradition” of Christianity. His sceptical approach to Conjuring as a religion due to his own Christian conception and beliefs is imprinted in his book *Black Belief: Folk Beliefs of Blacks in America and West Africa* (1975). The misconception that African beliefs are lower or less developed is also consequence of a Eurocentric perspective and the power that the Christian Church had obtained through the years.

Additionally, American colonies during the era of slave trading from Africa were formed by hundreds of people with their own generational consciousness and spiritual perspectives maintained in the New World. This resulted in the realization of rituals and ceremonies on earth when one of them died, made in order to secure the “passing of the dead into the realm of the ancestors” (Chireau, 2003: 41). Such as this, there is an example on the

film on slavery directed by Steven McQueen, *12 years a slave* (2013) in the scene where they sing “Roll Jordan Roll”. On said scene, a group of slaves start to sing for another one that has been killed by the owner, creating a high spiritual moment. The fact that the protagonist, somehow sceptical, start to sing too is the representation of this rooted sacred past.

Furthermore, Chireau also refers in her study to one of the first African-born writers that tried to shed light over the issue of magic and religion during the 18th century: Olaudah Equiano. Equiano (c.1745-1797) was self-proclaimed West African, sold into slavery and later freed. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), with its strong abolitionist stance and detailed description of life in Nigeria, was so popular that in his lifetime it ran through nine English editions and one U.S. printing, in addition to being translated into Dutch, German, and Russian. (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2020). He brought up currents such as Providentialism “or the belief in the manifestation of divine purpose and other notions of spiritual contingency such as witchcraft” (2003: 36) and illustrated how both black and white people had integrated those perspectives into their lives since the beginning of time and in their creation of religions. These mind-sets included a series of practices through which they could benefit from “supernatural powers” and employ them to their own requirements.

The origin of these religions has been discussed to arise from a combination of factors such as social, geographical and political, and in the particular case of African-Americans, their lives before and after the enslavement. In their perspective is imprinted the mixture with European supernaturalism¹⁰, the introduction of Christianity among African communities and those people born in North America, a land marked by colonialism and white supremacy.

African American supernatural traditions represented the continuum of African spiritual practices in the New World. By the start of the nineteenth century, unique products had emerged out of the tangle of African and European cultures of the colonial era. The emergence of distinct African American practices has itself been the subject of intense scholarly discussion. While the supernatural beliefs of Anglo-Americans at the end of the seventeenth century became “folklorized”—that is to

¹⁰ Supernaturalism as in Merriam-Webster (2020) is defined as “the quality or state of being supernatural” and “belief in a supernatural power and order of existence”

say, less visible, shifting to marginal sectors of society, underground, or out of the public sphere—among blacks, supernatural beliefs began to proliferate. (Chireau, 2003: 52)

This meant that those witchcraft beliefs that were embedded in European and African folklore were carried out to America, resulting in a persecution equivalent to the European Witch Craze: the early American persecutions. In their history, once again the people most likely to be suspected of witchcraft were any person opposed or having a culture contrary to Christianity, which in this territory were Native Indians, black slaves, disobedient women (such as reluctant sexual partners) and criminals or people whose skills surpassed that of the colonizers. It determined the division of the completely American population into different types or classes depending on their gender, socio-economical class and race.

4.1.2. Supernatural elements from the African folklore

Considering African cosmologies¹¹ and their approach to magic, their concepts of divinity and “theories concerning cause, effect, and the responsiveness of spiritual forces to human will” (2003: 37) have reached black African-American religion. This provoked that they included certain characteristics such as highly structured cosmologies, concepts of a diffused monotheism, rituals of sacred mediation, an emphasis on devotions to ancestors and the dead, and the use of spiritually efficacious objects.

On the same line, we are provided with an example of how these cosmological precepts were transmitted by generations: in precolonial Africa. Chireau described the theory in which Kongo people¹² regarded the world as a “multidimensional structure, with two mountains connected at their foundations and divided by a barrier or horizon line, symbolized by water.” (37) It can be somehow connected with the Christian belief of Heaven above and Hell below, whereas the Earth in which mortals live exists as the intermediate world.

Precolonial Kongo people (do not mistake them with Congolese people) also believed that human beings were able to pass to another realm after their death, so it was common for most religions believing in the afterlife. Such as in this particular example Chireau explains it as “a land paralleling that of the living and inhabited by ancestors, ghosts, and spirits who were able to affect the lives of those in the earthly realm.” (37) A conception

¹¹ Defined as a theory or doctrine describing the natural order of the universe. (Merriam-Webster)

¹² The Kongo people are a Bantu ethnic group primarily defined as the speakers of Kikongo (Kongo languages). They have lived along the Atlantic coast of Central Africa, in a region that by the 15th century was a centralized and well-organized Kingdom of Kongo, but is now a part of three countries. (Wikipedia)

on life after death which is also quite similar to that of Norsemen with the Valhalla, the land of Gods where every valorous warrior ended after dying in battle but that we will consider in deep later on.

4.1.2.1. Perspective on divine manifestations

There is also a discussion of some other elements in Chireau's study where the presence and influence of Europeans is appreciated in the earliest definitions of black American magic, taken from the indigenous African religions that were practiced in colonies. One of those basic traits was the conviction that in most African and European religions they thought that the universe was filled with divine activity and powers as well as integrated their visions on the unearthly into their daily experiences.

In the case of English Protestants, those unusual events were the result of an only deity manipulating the natural order and leaving signs on Earth, which give birth to the Providentialism previously brought up. Their understanding of comets, hailstorms and apparitions were evidence of God's displeasure with humans and/or foretold his will. On the other hand, Africans also understood other natural phenomena such as thunder and lightings as manifestations of numerous divine beings and not only one.

As far as the perspective over godly energies are concerned in the context of colonial America, we have the clash of Christian and African perspectives once again. That is the case of the former who, in order to maintain their distance with the proximity of the supernatural in their activities, Anglo-American Christians employed an image of wonder and providences so they remained witnesses of divine strength.

However, Africans interpreted the universe and anything that happened as a myth and they became spirituals inhabitants and participants of the mystical universe through legends and tales. In addition, even though these two groups observed the world differently, some of the European images were inserted in their beliefs and the reality of witches, demons and other carriers of misfortune in earth were embraced in the oral traditions of both races.

4.1.2.2. Supernatural objects and divination

As previously stated, the digressive logic embedded in the creation of supernatural objects explains the employment of numerous amulets and charms in many African traditions and, in consequence, in African American practices. This is so that Europeans in their travels

to Africa found these protective charms everywhere, called *gree-gree* or gris-gris and whose meaning is related to spiritual force, coming from the Mande language (Chireau, 2003: 46)

As an example of this, black people born and/or raised in America transformed these handmade charms and amulets used in African religious rituals of different kind into objects that offered them security and resistance, which means that they decided to add a protective significance to them.

Apart from the protection given by those amulets, they trusted in divination as a “system of sacred disclosure”, a conjunct of customs that had supposed a common spiritual activity in Africa, perceived as a trustful procedure for mediating and entering the invisible realm. They also introduced other divination methods, which included augury, geomancy and spirit mediumship that were mainly practices by religious authorities in indigenous African societies.

To them, divination specialists were knowledgeable religious authorities that provided guidance in their communities with matters such as vital and mystical experiences. These experiences were similar to “revelations” where they consulted spiritual forces containing information occult to the rest of mortals and incommensurable knowledge.

4.1.3. *Fetishism in Africa: Voodoo dolls*

Having defined what ‘fetishism’ is and its misconception, it is essential to deepen into the concept and reconduct the idea of fetish in the African context. In connection with this, there exists another element that has been imprinted in the Western mind-set as something negative and whose provenance is set in Africa. There are a number of practices and myths that were popularised with the name of Voodoo. Still, for the better understanding of the term “Voodoo”, its origins and its relation to witchcraft inside and outside Africa, we should bury ourselves in the study conducted by Natalie Armitage (2015) and compiled in the book *The Materiality of Magic: An Artifactual Investigation into Ritual Practices and Popular Beliefs*.

First, the use of figures with human-like form was common in other practices and religions in Europe much earlier than having been in contact with African religions. As an example, and being guided by the reading of Christopher A. Faraone’s *Binding and Burying the Forces of Evil: The Defensive Use of ‘Voodoo Dolls’ in Ancient Greece* (1991), there is presented the usage of clay figures in magic rituals representing divine entities or spirits in Ancient Egypt instead of individuals.

In those artifacts with human forms, people used nails to “fix the spirit” into the object, and the practices found outside West Africa prior to the Medieval time had a stronger connection between divine force or supernatural powers and humans. After this period, the relationships became twisted, more malicious and with clearly negative intentions, a meaning closer to what the voodoo doll represents.

However, in West African cultures the tradition of doing magic was not conceived as satanic or against God’s will, so they believed in the “power of evil-doing” or *kindoki* (Armitate, 2015) which purpose was directly injure or provoke death to its target, but this belief cannot be compared to Europeans’ concept of witchcraft. As an example, Bakongo people did not separate witchcraft and sorcery, so *kindoki* was the employment of powers, whether positive or negative in order to achieve success in something. For Bakongo people, the materialization of that power object was the *nkisi nkondi*, a ritual object that contained a spirit and enables the human owner to employ its spirit as their own or for their own purposes.

In her conclusion, the scholar asserts that the threat perceived from a *nkondi* figure was so in order to frighten witches, because those spiritual objects protected from physical and spiritual harm. The nails found in them had been understood as a harmful act instead of a binding one, so the current perception of voodoo dolls is a humanoid doll to which we attach a human part (hair, personal objects) and they are attached with nails to these dolls in order to harm the individual they represent. Nevertheless, the *nkondi* served as warning material for those that wanted to transgress social order in the Bakongo culture, and any harmful fact addressed towards its owner would be reflected to the “witch” wanting to cause pain.

4.2. Norse folklore

Nowadays, we have been witnesses of traces of Norse mythology in modern films and comics, such as the case of Marvel’s superheroes: The God of lightning, Thor, and the son of giants, Loki. As it is the case with other mythologies and traditions, contemporary representations are not reliable or not completely true to their original sources, for they tend to be romanticised or modified as in Marvel productions, or in the case of Voodoo matters in Disney’s *The Princess and the Frog* (2009). However, its relevance and the effect of Norse mythology in the rest of Europe is remarkable and worth-analysing, as well as their interest in magic matters and the myths related to witches and sorcerers.

4.2.1. *Mythology and written tradition*

On the previous comment about Norse mythology and their divine figures, there is a remarkable example of Thor and Loki in superhero movies. We are given an incorrect blood-relation among the two of them, for they are presented in cinema as brothers, both sons of Odin. However, in mythology they were not such and their real tie is better explained in Peter Andreas Munch's book from 1926.

According to Munch's translation and revision, Loki was a powerful being that became the foster brother of Odin, and that found his place among the Æsir, the main Norse Gods. We are facing an ambiguous character, because it is true that he was malicious and considered an enemy by some scholars such as Julia Clinton Jones (1880): "Fire, to him, was the demon Loki; whose evil nature breaks forth in the volcano;—who, in a wider sense, was Lucifer himself." (13); however, Loki was also known for trying "to make good the evil he had done, and occasionally placing himself at the service of the Æsir" (Munch, 1926: 21).

On the same line, in her compilation of Norse myths entitled *Valhalla, the Myths of Norseland* (1880), Julia Clinton Jones introduces the reader into this particular tradition full of Gods/Goddesses, nature forces and strong-willed heroes with a brief description of Norsemen's culture and religion. She interprets mythology in the same way as Buckland does, with the recognition of myths being a way to define and find an explanation to the phenomena occurring in the world, and the way in which its characteristics depend on the land it is found and the people that develop it. This search for an explanation is the reason why there are so many ancient traditions and mythologies, and why several of them share numerous traits even though they were developed in different continents.

Furthermore, for the analysis of several matters about the Scandinavian tradition, we are expected to read, understand and form our judgement about magic and witches following Stephen A. Mitchell's study on the issue entitled *Witchcraft and Magic in the Nordic Middle Ages* (2011). There we have displayed several pieces of information, relevant data and a considerable amount of references on the historical past of Norse territories, the perception of witchcraft by their population, mythology, law and even issues about gender in this complex but enrichment environment.

4.2.2. *Spiritual perspectives compared to African ones*

Remarking the similarities between Western and African religions, -such as Greek, Norse and Yoruba mythology and their polytheism¹³- share with believing in a supreme God/Fatherly figure, or Earth Mother (Odin in Norse, Zeus in Greek and Obatala in Yoruba mythology), as well as attributing elements of nature to other figures (Shango in Yoruba and Thor in Norse tradition, or Olokun and Aegir, gods of the sea in these same religions)

There is another element from Norse mythology vastly known and reproduced, which is the *Valhalla*. According to Jones (1880), the depiction of the Valhalla and how to approach it was “[The Valhalla] rested among the clouds, and the death-river Thund, flowed before its gates...Bright-winged Valkyriar bore him [there] after a hero-death, or the black Dragon, Nidhögg, dragged him down to Naströnd, if base or cowardly.” It has been interpreted by Christians as something close to their idea of Heaven, but for Norsemen, the Valhalla was something deeper than just the afterlife, it was the land where Gods/Goddesses lived and valorous warriors were resurrected after death.

Similarly, Chireau (2003) depicted the idea of a world with “multidimensional structure” understood by precolonial Kongo people, where they believed that human beings would pass into the other realm after dying, a land parallel to that of the living inhabited by ancestors, ghosts, and spirits “who were able to affect the lives of those in the earthly realm.” (37). Those forces able to affect the **earthly realm** can show correspondence with the Norse Gods or other spirits, having power in Earth and being related to some particular aspect of nature.

These two similar perspectives of the world, an earthly and a spiritual one found in Norse myths and in West African religions, demonstrate the theory that numerous religions have common elements with others. Also, it shows that more often than not, separated beliefs and cultures may share a set of beliefs and practices even before they actually have contact one with another, or maybe due to the fact that both were affected by the same cause, for instance the latter presence of Christianity.

¹³ See Adeyinka Makinde *Mythical Gods of the Yoruba* (2017)

4.2.3. The magic tradition

The first issue to have into account regarding the Norse tradition is the richness of territories that compose the medieval Nordic world in the Middle Ages, among which are included Greenland, Iceland, the Faroes and parts of Scotland to mention some of them. (Mitchell, 2011: 17) This meant that in addition to a vast territory, there existed a cultural complexity in the Norse field with the clash of different traditions, languages, economic sources and politics.

Therefore, in Mitchell analysis, it is stated that from all this apparent diversity, there was a tendency to separate population in an elite and peasantry, where the latter one believed in magic and the former did not but, in reality, both groups believed and practiced it to some extent. Yet, from the apparition of Christianity onwards, there was an attempt to separate spirituality and religiousness into the Christian belief and the conception of the supernatural as pagan and malicious. This instigated the conception that magic and superstition were related to peasants and the lowest class and science and Christian values to the higher ones.

However, from the beginning Norsemen had the conception of what Mitches calls a “magical world view”: a world where nothing is accidental but rather the result of the actions of others, stimuli that can be interdicted and altered. (2011: 41) This leads to the point that they believed in individuals with the skill to manipulate events or looking into their future, the embodiment of human basic impulses and desires. However, at the same time they considered these supernatural practices as real, there also existed contrapositions, laws and sanctions for the misuse of them such as exile or execution.

From the daily use and belief on the occult, we can describe what is “practical magic”: the use of rituals and certain practices in exchange for improving the lives of others. This is so because many potions and remedies helped with health, as they could cure certain illnesses and pains, individuals looked for boosting their economic situation or women tried to get pregnant and bring a strong child into the world.

Saint Birgitta enumerates many of the purposes to which magic was put, saying that both men and women follow the counsel of “accursed witches and sorceresses” (and here she specifies the female gender) in order to conceive children, win love, discover the future, and be healed of illness of one sort or another touched all aspects of daily life, but we

should hardly be surprised to discover that, as in Birgitta's list, romance, attempts to discover one's destiny, and health emerge as the dominant elements of surviving examples of medieval Nordic magic, to which might be added, imprecation. (2011: 52)

On the previous quotation, there is specified the topic of the female as a witch and a sorcerer, that is, as bearer of the knowledge and the connection to the supernatural. In addition, how the diverse aims of the population could be achieved through magic and traditional knowledge, practices that reached issues such as the weather or gaining love and desire. Furthermore, with the gradual introduction and acquisition of Christianity, traditions and rooted beliefs did not disappear immediately, so there was an interchange of culture. This is why the brewing of drinks for celebrations was adjusted into the Church practices and the employment of pagan prayers but adapted to the Bible.

4.2.4. Women from the Nordic perspective

Once again, according to Stephen A. Mitchell in his book he made an analysis on the figure of supernatural-related women on the Scandinavian context. This investigation centred the attention on literature and literary images of females and the fact that more often than not, those were stereotypes (2011: 176). For example, the scholar mentioned in Mitchell's work, Jenny Jochens (1991), conducted an analysis on Norse literary sources such as heroic poetry or Icelandic sagas and determined that the 'witch figure' was one of the conventional stereotypes created to represent women among the Germanic population.

From Jochens study, the author states that there existed a time in which women dominated the areas associated with wisdom and spirituality, such as divination and ritual magic. However, there occurred a displacement after Christianity where males started to take the lead and took advantage of the knowledge women had so they could begin to exploit it to their own benefit. For reaching these conclusions, most of the studies on gender in Scandinavian literature base their ideas in Icelandic pre-Christian culture and written tradition, even though the gender question covers the whole Nordic perspective, because in their passages there are numerous mentions to those women and the mystical world.

There are traces of Norse legends that present figures with characteristics similar to the witches and wise women previously depicted in this analysis. Several of them are collected in Peter Andreas Munch's *Norse Mythology Legends of Gods and Heroes* (1926), where we can find a section on chapter 1 dedicated to the different spirits or supernatural

beings that receive the name of *Vettir* (voettir, véttir, “spirits,” “sprites”). At the same time, the *vettir* are separated into kind sprites and bad sprites, being the former ones beneficial for the country and held in high esteem, whereas the latter included giants, dwarfs or dark-elves and regarded as evil. (1926: 43) Furthermore, we have to be aware of the fact that after Christianity came to the territory, there was no good/bad distinction and every sprite was defined as evil or unnecessary.

4.2.4.1. Female witch-like sprites

There exist numerous legends among the Norwegian population that speak about supernatural entities that live in the forests, called the Hidden Folk. Among those figures we can highlight the Hill-lady, sometimes considered evil and malicious and others friendly towards men, she is a female entity that appears to be beautiful on the front but hide a tail and a deformed back. Those folks are known for stealing human children as they cannot bear their own, or even are accused of seducing young men and women in order to have descendants with them.

Another female figure which shares some characteristics with the witches formerly described are the Nix and the Water-Sprite, which live in rivers and lakes and are considered evil beings. Myths recount that the Nix demanded a human sacrifice to villagers every year, as well as ensuring that they were able to shape-shift into other animals or humans. Other trait of these creatures appearing in legends is that if someone heard a Nix groaning and moaning meant that someone is to be drowned.

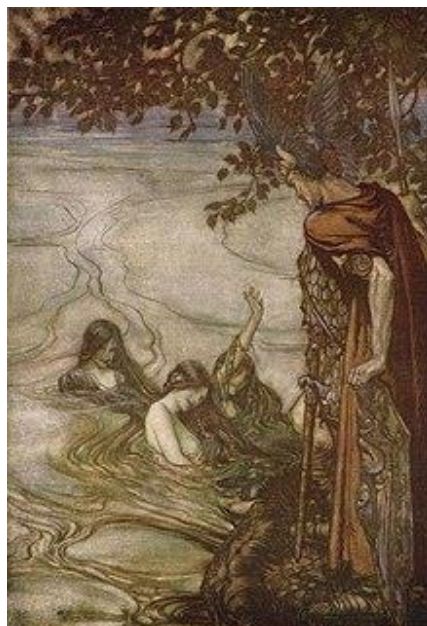


Figure 6. *The Rhine Maidens Warn Siegfried* (1912) by Arthur Rackham.

This might be related to the supposed ability of witches to modify their bodily voluntarily into different animals, or their own facial and body features, and the myth that they sacrifice human lives for their rituals and the consummation of their sinful practices. The previous picture represents those water creatures and appear as beautiful and seductive women.

The third creature to mention that shares other attributes with the Witch, received the name of the Nightmare. A female creature that is sometimes depicted as a figure with no head and sometimes as an actual woman that crawls during the night and hurt people when they are most vulnerable: in their sleep time.

Thus, the Nightmare does not differ widely from the so-called Werewolves, who by day are actual human beings, but who during the night assume the shape of wolves; in this guise they course about bent on sinister mischief, attacking people in sleep, exhuming and devouring corpses in the churchyards. [...] One who had the ability to disguise his outward semblance was, in the ancient phrase, “multiform” (*eigi einhamr*), and was sometimes also called “shape shifter” (*hamhleypa*). (1926: 47)

In the citation above, the reader can infer how once again, the wicked female is presented with the trait of consuming corpses (even though the witches are accused of using them in rituals and Nightmares fed upon them) and morphing at will into other beasts to pursue their deeds. Their relation with wolves (an animal associated with forest witches) and the comparison to other supernatural and devilish creature as the werewolves highlight the negative connotation and the fear existing in the mind of villagers.

5. *American Horror Story*: “Coven”. A modern representation

As the final section of this study, we are to take into consideration the third season of the popular horror TV show *American Horror Study*. This television series, created by Brad Falchuk and Ryan Murphy and directed by the latter, was first released in 2011 with their season “Murder House”. Instead of a linear story divided in different seasons, each of those composing this series presents a different environment and terrifying story with different characters and locations. This particular season entitled “Coven”¹⁴ is centred in witches during our modern times and is set in New Orleans. The season contains flashbacks from the Salem Witch Trials and about the slavery of African-American population on the 19th century.

5.1. Salem as the centre of Witchcraft activity in the USA

First things first, the white witches claim to be descendants of Salem, a city deeply linked to witchcraft and generally recognised for the Salem Trials that occurred during the 17th Century in British colonial America. As a replica of the European Witch Hunt, hundreds of innocent lives were put to an end due to political, religious and judicial leaders under the accusation of devil acts, the negation of God and the suffering of people through magic.

Marta Gutiérrez Rodríguez made an analysis on Salem’s trials in her article “Witches and Literary Justice: The Salem Witchcraft Trials in Nineteenth-Century Historical Fiction”) and declares that this event was one of the best documented in American history. She remarks that “two competing narratives of trauma the conflicting stories of the prosecution (who firmly believed in witches and witchcraft) and of the defendants (who claimed their innocence and rejected any relation with witchcraft or the devil—can be clearly seen.”(2013: 39) existed.

5.2. Coven’s plot

In the development of Coven, New Orleans is claimed as the witches’ home and the story elapse in two different directions: the witches inheriting their practices from Europe (Salem descendants) and the “voodoo” witches coming from an African-American context. Both clans, as they might be considered, are presented as mortal enemies where their lives are also

¹⁴ An assembly or band of usually 13 witches. (Merriam-Webster). Retrieved from: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coven>

defined by slavery, treachery and pain, and the conflicts in addition to the inherited trauma lead to bloody encounters and numerous deaths.

Additionally, we are given the growth of a group of girls under the care of Salem descendants and their way into Witchcraft and more precisely, Wiccan practices. They are guided by the European-inherited witches, from now on called Wiccan, and have to overcome a series of challenges, some of them highly mortal, in order to obtain a greater power.

Not only they will discover their own strength in order to survive in the modern world, but they will also have to face considerable adversities, the responsibilities that magic and the consequences that search of power can drive people to. Voodoo, rituals, traumatic history and rules are the components that make of this series a really interesting item for the present study.

5.3. Burns, voodoo and blood

The reason why I was attracted to employ this series into the present analysis of witchcraft is precisely the elements previously evaluated. Initiation rituals, blood magic, black magic and a deeper explanation for the Witch-hunts with the assumption of the supernatural being real are some of the elements, as well as other practices represented with beliefs of the African ethnic groups, that make this TV show appealing and relevant.

First, it is mentioned the hatred towards the figure of the witch, with emphasis on magic being mostly attached to females. The academy for witches is decaying and they try to search for new young women with supernatural abilities in order to instruct them and exploit their power. On the other hand, the voodoo group is centred in revenge from their historical past of subjugation and slavery, in addition to present their lifestyle and divination rites.

5.3.1. African roots

For example, in Episode 2 there is the first clash between the two societies, we are given the story of Madam Delphine LaLaurie, a white witch and slave owner who suffered the revenge of black population. She was punished to live forever buried in the ground after seeing her family die for the harm she caused to slaves. The story is presented in flashbacks, but from minute 28:00 onwards after Fiona's visit to her place (Salem's clan chief), Marie Laveau, the

chief of voodoo practitioners, claims the use of Necromancy, how it came from the Arawak¹⁵ population back in Africa and their 2.000 years tradition of shamans. Furthermore, she adds, “Well maybe you haven't heard the news about civilization started in Africa. We're more than just pins and dolls and seeing the future in chicken parts. You've been reading too many tourist guides” in order to criticize the stereotypes of Afro-American magic culture.

5.3.2. Witch-Hunters

Another of the issues presented is the figure of the Inquisitor or Witch-Hunter. This character firmly believes that witchcraft is a plague and should be completely exterminated, with the existence of a Sacred Order dedicated to that. In order to achieve his objective, he will become a witch's lover so he could attack them later from the inside. In chapter nine, we are depicted how he was trained to hunt witches and the way he introduced into their lives without suspicion. “I'm part of a sacred order, a soldier in a shadow war, a war that's been raging since before the time of Salem; we are a brotherhood pledged in blood, dedicated to stamping out the pestilence of witchery on the North American continent.” (Episode 9, 13:41:00). He directly refers to the Salem Trials and his aim is not only the Coven, but also de Voodoo society as it happened in the past: any woman, independently of their origin was accused and exterminated.

5.3.3. Coven

Also, dealing with guidelines, associations and trials, among the Coven there exists a series of rules that must be respected. Through their code, somehow, they follow the same thinking of witch-hunters. Any witch breaking one of the set of rules by which they act on, will be judged and executed by burn. One of them is, for example, killing another witch, and its repercussion are shown in Episode 5.

During the same episode, we are shown the Council of Witches and the first man-witch that appears in the show. Through their presence and speech, they demonstrate to have a strong connection and devotion for rules to be respected, because there are lesser witches than before and they believe that respecting guides would allow them to survive. They are the ones that could ask the abdication of the “head of the Coven”, receiving the name of the Supreme. (Episode 5, 28:34).

¹⁵ An inaccurate remark due to the fact that the Arawak were American Indians, the first group of people encountered by Christopher Columbus. Some of them survived in South America and they emigrated in order to survive the Spanish invasion. (*Britannica*). Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arawak>

5.3.4. *Papa Legba from Voodoo practices*

Moreover, regarding the voodoo population we are introduced with a mythological figure named Papa Legba. In the series, he is the supernatural figure capable of granting immortality in exchange of your soul and after specific term and appears then witches ask for his help. However, in order to understand his powers and story, we have to read attentively about African voodoo practices and more concretely, Haitian tradition. According to the anthropologist Rafael Agustí Torres, Papa Legba is an intermediate among *loas* (venerated spirits) and humans, and every communication with the other side goes through him.



Figure 7. Papa Legba (representation)

En el vudú haitiano, Papa Legba sirve como intermediario entre los loas y la humanidad, se encuentra, por tanto, en una encrucijada espiritual y, da o niega, permiso para hablar con los espíritus de Guinee. Se cree que este loa habla todos los idiomas humanos, en Haití es el gran elocuente. Papa Legba facilita la comunicación, el habla y la comprensión, está asociado comúnmente con perros, que son sagrados para él, su fiesta puede ser el 1 de noviembre o el 14 de enero. Es el origen de la vida, por lo que debe ser saludado cada vez que comienza una ceremonia o cualquier otra actividad con los loas. (2019: 37)

5.3.5. *Real historical figures*

The last remarkable feature from *Coven* is the apparition of fictional characters that are indeed based in historical personalities. Their historical existence together with the legends surrounding them are mixed into the figure of two women confronted in the series: Madame LaLaurie and Marie Laveau. Each of them belongs to a different group of witches, the former to Salem's descendants and the latter to the Voodoo witches. Besides, they coexisted in the

same century and were rather powerful in their age. They also gained their place in the world and were not remembered by means of their relationship with men; on the contrary, their achievements either positive or negative are highlighted.

5.3.5.1. *Madame LaLaurie (1780-1842)*

Madame Delphine LaLaurie was born into a rich household. She grew up in a wealthy atmosphere in New Orleans during the 18th century. That meant her parents gave everything she wanted since a young age and soon learnt how to earn people's trust and sympathy to obtain what she desired. For this reason, she became one of the most loved Creole women and married wealthy man who provide her with more treasures and a beautiful mansion. However, she was not considered a complement for their husbands as she gained her own power and recognition among the Creole society. This was the group of people formed by the feigning French society in New Orleans, famous for their abundance of wealth and impact on the American Colonization. (Rehlaender, 2019: 7)

In the series, we can observe her charm, wealth as well as her relevance during her time. Furthermore, we are also conscious of the horrors that her last house kept in the attic. Madame LaLaurie was known for being harsh towards her slaves (at a time owning slaves was a common and normalised practise in New Orleans during the 1800's), but nobody could imagine the tortures she committed for pleasure. Every aspect of it was compiled in the newspaper *The New Orleans Bee* under the name of "The Fire of Roral Street". It was published in 1834, when a fire assumedly started by a slave in the kitchen allowed the revision of LaLaurie's mansion and the finding of her "chamber of Horrors". This place was represented in the series with a graphical representation of tortured slaves, hanging people, skin-showing injuries and much more.

5.3.5.2. *Marie Laveau (1801-1881)*

Marie Laveau was born from a slave woman and a French Louisiana man, so her background was composed by the imagination of New Orleans and the native African roots. Known as the queen of Voodoo, Laveau represented a figure of authority in New Orleans in every aspect that dealt with magic. Voodoo practices were criminalized by the French and employed by criminals to get away with their crimes in the place where she was born, but after her death, it became a tourist attraction and embraced by the American culture. (Deitz, 2015: 1) Marie Laveau accepted the outcasts, black and white people, under her guidance and she earned the sympathy and the fear from the rest of the population.

Few women could assert having the amount of power and recognition by their own means as Laveau had in the 19th century. She had even more power than white males in New Orleans, even though women of mixed races had it even harder to find their place in society. In *American Horror Story*, she is depicted as a charismatic woman ruling her own business in New Orleans, and even Salem's witches resort to her when they need magic advice. In the series, she is in charge of reminding the others their African roots, the relevance of Voodoo practices and provide vengeance for the pain others inflicted to black slaves such as the punishment of Madame LaLaurie. It is represented how she can control the undead as part of the Voodoo ritual and her pact with Papa Legba in order to be immortal.

6. CONCLUSION

As a summary of what has been researched, we can conclude that Witchcraft is the combination of religion, a set of beliefs, rites and a group of people that are involved with the supernatural and the faith on its use for their own benefice. In addition to this, the historical persecution of witches and the social groups employing or being accused of using magic has been performed by the powerful ones in order to obtain more control, assert their dominance, spread their own beliefs and create fear around what is unknown. That is the case of the Middle Ages where it is clear that the concentration of power was in white, Christian males which were afraid of the possibility of other people, in this case women and racialized individuals, bearing knowledge, as it could drive them to free themselves from pre-established customs.

In conjunction with it, we have been witnesses of several perspectives on the matter of magic and its use, according the Western tradition: with the Witch Hunt and the mention of the counterpart in America. Yet, not only from these backgrounds but also in general terms, magic has always been perceived as a strong force that could be employed for good and bad acts. It was only after the arrival of Christians that their conception on magic changed and evolved into something merely diabolic and related to Satan for the reasons that have been displayed: search of power, patriarchal system, the instauration of Christianity over other pagan traditions, etc.

To the same extent, we are aware of the traditional descriptions of female in sacred texts such as the Bible, which were not precisely angelical, being directly accused as responsible for the fall of human and for being more prompted to sin. Due to these depictions, women were obliged to play the role of the “weak sex” and were prevented from learning and to positions of power. In addition, those images were employed as an excuse to accuse women of treachery, of being witches and hurting the rest of the population. This was so because a strong woman was synonym of an obstacle to achieve their aim.

Later on, these stereotypes evolved and mixed with ancient legends and myths of female figures that captured children, with knowledge on every herb and ritual to cure and cause pain, oral literature speaking about women-creatures that could foretell disgraces and sorcerers able to end people’s life by transforming into a dangerous wolf. However, it has been proved that not every culture speaks of women like that and were also traces of powerful

females, women that were praised and respected for their strength and that is the image we would like to remark and not hold into in the Christian one.

Last in order, there is to be mentioned the modern representation retrieved from the show *American Horror Story*. It is conclusive because we are given an approach of witches into our era, how they could be anyone, the implication that women still have to fight for their rights and for being heard and most importantly, the depiction of two traditions, the Nordic-European and the African one. Even though the show presents some historical and anthropological inaccuracies, they catch the essence of both perspectives widely studied and shows that magic is not perceived that differently if we consider our roots. The portrayal of formidable women, the positive and negative traits of witchcraft in both houses and the issues that affect any other human being connected or not to the supernatural, make of this series a perfect brooch for the current study.

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