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DEADLY WORDS

Witchcraft in the Bocage

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'They say there are savages in Africa; but you who've read so much, do you know -- anyone more savage than us?

'Here, one is immediately caught -- to the death: death is the only thing we know about around here.'

An unwitcher, to the ethnographer

THE WAY THINGS ARE SAID

It seems that even the pure light of science requires, in order to shine, the darkness of ignorance.
Karl Marx (1856)

Take an ethnographer: she has chosen to investigate contemporary witchcraft in the Bocage* of Western France. She has already done some fieldwork; she has a basic academic training; she has published some papers on the logic of murder, violence and insurrection in an altogether different, tribal society. She is now working in France, to avoid having to learn yet another difficult language. Especially since in her view the symbolic shaping out of murder or aggression -- the way things are said in the native culture -- is as important as the functioning of political machinery.

I. The mirror-image of an academic

Getting ready to leave for the field, she looks through the scientific (and not so scientific) literature on contemporary witchcraft: the writings of folklorists and psychiatrists, of occultists and journalists. This is what she finds: that peasants, who are 'credulous', 'backward' and impervious to 'cause of effect', blame their misfortune on the jealousy of a neighbour who has cast a spell on them; they go to an unwitcher† (usually described as a 'charlatan', now and again as 'naïve') who protects them from their imaginary aggressor by performing 'secret' rituals which 'have no meaning', and 'come from another age'. The geographical and cultural 'isolation' of the Bocage is partly responsible for the 'survival' of these 'beliefs' in our time.

If that is all there is to be said about witchcraft (and however much you try to find out from the books of folklorists or the reports of trials in the French press over the last ten years, you will learn no more), you may

* *Bocage*: countryside of Western France marked by intermingling patches of woodland and heath, small fields, tall hedgerows and orchards.

† *Unwitcher*: The Bocage natives use the word *désorcelleur* rather than the more usual *désensorcelleur* [ensorceller = to bewitch]. I have translated it by *unwitcher* rather than *unbewitcher*. Similarly, *désorceller* is translated as *unwitch* and *désorcillage* or *désorcèlement* as *unwitching* or *unwitchment*.

wonder why it seems to be such an obsession. To judge by the public's immense curiosity, the fascination produced by the very word 'witchcraft', the guaranteed success of anything written about it, one wonders what journalistic scoop could ever find a greater public.

Take an ethnographer. She has spent more than thirty months in the Bocage in Mayenne, studying witchcraft. 'How exciting, how thrilling, how extraordinary . . .!' 'Tell us all about the witches', she is asked again and again when she gets back to the city. Just as one might say: tell us tales about ogres or wolves, about Little Red Riding Hood. Frighten us, but make it clear that it's only a story; or that they are just peasants: credulous, backward and marginal. Or alternatively: confirm that *out there* there are some people who can bend the laws of causality and morality, who can kill by magic and not be punished; but remember to end by saying that they do not really have that power: they only believe it because they are credulous, backward peasants . . . (see above).

No wonder that country people in the West are not in any hurry to step forward and be taken for idiots in the way that public opinion would have them be — whether in the scholarly version developed by folklorists, or in the equally hard faced popular version spread by the media.

To say that one is studying beliefs about witchcraft is automatically to deny them any truth: it is just a belief, it is not true. So folklorists never ask of country people: 'what are they trying to express by means of a witchcraft crisis?', but only 'what are they hiding from us?' They are led on by the idea of some healer's 'secret', some local trick, and describing it is enough to gratify academic curiosity. So witchcraft is no more than a body of empty recipes (boil an ox heart, prick it with a thousand pins; etc.)? Grant that sort of thing supernatural power? How gullible can you be?

Similarly, when the reporter, that hero of positivist discourse, goes along on behalf of a public assumed to be incredulous, and asks country people whether they 'still believe' in spells, the case is decided in advance: yes, people do still believe in spells, especially if you go to the Lower Berry or the Normandy Bocage. How convenient that there should be a district full of idiots, where the whole realm of the imaginary can be held in. But country people are not fools: they meet these advances with obstinate silence.

But even their silence about things to do with witchcraft; and more generally about anything to do with illness and death, is said to tell us about their status: 'their language is too simple', 'they are incapable of symbolizing', you won't get anything out of them because 'they don't talk': that is what I was told by the local scholarly élite. Why not say they are wild men of the woods, since they live in a 'bocage'; animals, even? 'Medicine is a veterinary art round here' a local psychiatrist once told me.

So all that was known about witchcraft is that it was unknowable: when I left for the field, knowledge of the subject boiled down to this. The first

question I asked myself when I met the peasants, who were neither credulous nor backward, was: is witchcraft unknowable, or is it just that those who say this need to block out all knowledge about it in order to maintain their own intellectual coherence? Does the 'scholar' or the 'man of our own age' need to comfort himself with the myth of a credulous and backward peasant?¹

The social sciences aim to account for cultural differences. But can this be achieved by postulating the existence of a peasant who is denied all reality save that he is the mirror-image of an academic?

Whenever folklorists or reporters talk of witchcraft in the country, they always do so as if one were facing two incompatible physical theories: the pre-logical or medieval attitude of peasants, who wrongly attribute their misfortunes to imaginary witches; and ours, the attitude of educated people who know how to handle causal relations correctly. It is said or implied that peasants are incapable of this either because of ignorance or of backwardness. In this respect, the description given of the peasant and the '*pays*', the canton, that determines him is governed by a peculiar set of terms which necessarily imply that he is incapable of grasping causal relations. Witchcraft is put forward as a nonsense theory which peasants can afford to adopt because it is the local theory. The folklorist's job is then to underline the difference between his own theory (which also happens to be a 'true' one) and the peasant's, which is only a belief.²

But who can ignore the difficulties involved in postulating the co-existence of two incompatible physical theories which correspond to two ages of humankind? Do you really have to do thirty months of fieldwork to be in a position to say that country people are just as well able to cope with causal relations as anyone else, and to make the suggestion that witchcraft cannot be reduced to a physical theory, although it does indeed imply a certain kind of causality?³

¹ I have published an earlier version of the above: Jeanne Favret, 'Racontez-nous des histoires de sorciers', in *Le Monde*, 6-7 October 1974. Appendix I. (*The explorer of darkness*, cf. p. 225) reproduces a comment I wrote on a television report about witchcraft in the Berry: 'Sorciers et paysans', in *Critique*, No. 299, April 1972.

² Arnold Van Gennep introduces the subject 'Magic and Witchcraft' in his well-known *Manuel du folklore français contemporain* (1938) as follows: 'When one looks more closely at the facts, almost the whole of French folklore could be substituted here, since the acts and concepts which are designated *popular* [i.e. the subject of folklore] contrast exactly with acts and concepts which are designated *scientific*, through a *mistaken application of the law of causality*. The importance of this '*logical error*' has varied with time . . .' I have italicized what goes without saying for Van Gennep. Appendix II, *Ignorance as a profession* (cf. p. 227) analyses the folklorists' attitude to witchcraft.

³ In theory, anthropology is a more sophisticated discipline than folklore. However, its remarkable naïveté is illustrated by the fact that it was not until 1966 that a distinguished researcher, Edmund Leach, put his own reputation at stake by criticizing the dictum (which had so far been totally accepted) according to which some primitive people ignored the causal relation between copulation and birth. Cf. Edmund Leach (1967).

II. Words spoken with insistence

I began by studying the words used to express biological misfortunes, and used in ordinary conversation: about death, sterility, and illness in animals and humans. The first thing one notices is that they distinguish between ordinary misfortunes and their extraordinary repetition.

In the Bocage, as anywhere else in France, ordinary misfortunes are accepted as 'one-off'; so, a single illness, the loss of one animal, one bankruptcy, even one death, do not call for more than a single comment: '*the trouble with him is that he drinks too much*'; '*she had cancer of the kidneys*'; '*my cow was very old*'.

An onslaught by witchcraft, on the other hand, gives a pattern to misfortunes which are repeated and range over the persons and belongings of a bewitched couple: in succession, a heifer dies, the wife has a miscarriage, the child is covered in spots, the car runs into a ditch, the butter won't churn, the bread won't rise, the geese bolt, or the daughter they want to marry off goes into a decline . . . Every morning, the couple ask anxiously: '*What on earth will happen next?*' And every time some misfortune occurs: always unexpected, always inexplicable.

When misfortunes occur like this in series, the countryman approaches qualified people with a double request: on the one hand for an interpretation, and on the other for a cure.

The doctors and vets answer him by denying the existence of any series: illnesses, deaths and mechanical breakdowns do not occur for the same reasons and are not treated in the same way. These people are the curators of objective knowledge about the body, and they can claim to pick off one by one the causes of the misfortunes: go and disinfect your stables, vaccinate your cows, send your wife to the gynaecologist, give your child milk with less fat in it, drink less alcohol . . . But however effective each separate treatment may be, in the eyes of some peasants it is still incomplete, for it only affects the cause and not the origin of their troubles. The origin is always the evil nature of one or more witches who hunger after other people's misfortunes, and whose words, look and touch have supernatural power.

Faced with a bewitched, one can imagine that the priest is in a more awkward situation than the doctor, for evil, misfortune and the supernatural mean something to him. But what they mean has become singularly blurred by many centuries of theological brooding. The dividing line between the ranges of the natural and the supernatural has been fixed by Catholic orthodoxy; but the reasons given have scarcely been assimilated, especially since each late pronouncement does not categorically cancel former ones. So theological knowledge is

no more unified in the mind of a country priest than it is in the body of doctrine.⁴

Hearing the various stories told in his parish, the priest can choose between three different and mutually exclusive types of interpretation:

1. He can dismiss these misfortunes as part of the natural order, and so deny them any religious significance: by doing so he sides with medical ideology, and in effect says the bewitched are raving or superstitious people.

2. He can acknowledge that these misfortunes do pertain to the supernatural order, but are an effect of divine love: so the bishop of Séez preaches 'good suffering' to a congregation of '*luckless*' peasants.⁵ A universally aimed (Catholic) discourse can turn him who is '*luckless*' into the most lucky. The man whom God loves best and so chastises, is only a victim in the eyes of the world. This reversal of appearances sometimes has its effect.

3. The priest can meet the peasant on his own ground and interpret his misfortunes as the work of the devil. He is permitted to do this by at least one branch or stratum of theology. He then has two alternatives.

He may consult, as he is supposed to, the diocesan exorcist, the official expert in diabolical matters appointed by the hierarchy. But in Western France, the priest knows very well that he is not likely to convince the expert, who has held this position for thirty years precisely because he is sceptical about the devil's interest in so-called 'simple' peasants: you have to be clever to interest the devil. So the diocesan exorcist, in the elitist style of any country priest who has risen in the Church or any peasant who has risen in society, offers the positivist interpretation. He refuses to give any religious meaning to the peasant's misfortune except by mentioning 'good suffering' or saying he will pray for him. Like the doctor, he refuses the peasant's request for a meaning by advising the man to consult a psychiatrist, to live a more balanced life, and to apply better the rules of the experimental method. The village priest knows in advance that to send a bewitched to the diocesan exorcist is to ask him to take his troubles elsewhere, and in effect to direct him to a doctor by way of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Alternatively, the priest comes and exorcises the farm and its inhabitants without consulting the hierarchy. As a more or less willing distributor of blessings and medals, holy water and salt, he plays the role in his parish of a

⁴ Sometimes the dogma changes, but it is always expressed in an a-historical form and guaranteed by the infallibility of the Supreme Pontiff: 'The dogmatic truth consists in effacing its historical trace from writing', writes Pierre Legendre (1974). Anyone could lose their way in it, and the country priest must have a hard time trying to find the religious code which is appropriate to the dramatic situation presented to him by the bewitched. For although the priest is concerned with dogma, he is much more concretely involved in the a-theoretical use that the ecclesiastical hierarchy makes of an institution (here, that of the diocesan exorcist) at the particular point in time when the bewitched comes to consult him.

⁵ To use one of their own expressions.

small-scale unwitcher who protects people from evil spells without sending them back to the witch.

'If it's a small spell, it works': the series of misfortunes stops and everything returns to normal. It works, but the origin of the misfortune and its repetition are still not satisfactorily symbolized. For when the peasant talks about being bewitched to anyone who is willing to listen, what he wants acknowledged is this: *if such repetitions occur, one must assume that somewhere someone wants them to*. I shall show later that witchcraft consists in creating a misunderstanding about who it is that desires the misfortunes of the bewitched. Note here that the Church's rite merely clouds the issue by attributing the evil to some immaterial spirit included by half-hearted theology in a list of 'preternatural facts'. For the victim, the witch is some familiar person (a neighbour, for example) whose aims he can at least hope to discover.

If 'it doesn't work': if the priest 'isn't strong enough' because his parishioner is 'caught tight' in the spells, the bewitched is left with his question: why this series of events, and why in my home? What is at stake here, my sanity or my life? Am I mad, as the doctor says, or does someone have it in for me to the point of wanting me to die?

It is only at this point that the sufferer can choose to interpret his ills in the language of witchcraft. Some friend, or someone else who has noticed him moving deeper into misfortune and seen the ineffectiveness of approved learning makes the crucial diagnosis: 'Do you think there may be someone who wishes you ill?'⁶ This amounts to saying: 'you're not mad, I can see in you the signs of a similar crisis I once experienced, and which came to an end thanks to this unwitcher.'

The priest and the doctor have faded out long ago when the unwitcher is called. The unwitcher's task is first to authenticate his patient's sufferings and his feeling of being threatened in the flesh; second, it is to locate, by close examination, the patient's vulnerable spots. It is as if his own body and those of his family, his land and all his possessions make up a single surface full of holes, through which the witch's violence might break in at any moment. The unwitcher then clearly tells his client how long he still has to live if he stubbornly remains defenceless. He is a master of death; he can tell its date and how to postpone it. A professional in supernatural evil, he is prepared to return blow for blow against 'the person we suspect', the alleged witch, whose final identity is established only after an investigation, sometimes a long one. This is the inception of what can only be called a cure. The séances later are devoted to finding the gaps which still need sealing, as they are revealed day by day in the course of life.⁷

⁶ An essential character, whom I have called the *annunciator*.

⁷ I have published an early draft of the above, although it now seems to me confused and inadequate: cf. Jeanne Favret (1971).

III. When words wage war

In the project for my research I wrote that I wanted to study witchcraft practices in the Bocage. For more than a century, folklorists had been gorging themselves on them, and the time had come to understand them. In the field, however, all I came across was language. For many months, the only empirical facts I was able to record were words.

Today I would say that an attack of witchcraft can be summed up as follows: a set of words spoken in a crisis situation by someone who will later be designated as a witch are afterwards interpreted as having taken effect on the body and belongings of the person spoken to, who will on that ground say he is bewitched. The unwitcher takes on himself these words originally spoken to his client, and turns them back on to their initial sender, the witch. Always the 'abnormal' is said to have settled in after certain words have been uttered, and the situation persists without change until the unwitcher places himself like a screen between the sender and the receiver. Unwitching rituals – the actual 'practices' – are remarkably poor and contingent: this ritual or that, it makes no difference, any one will do. For if the ritual is upheld it is only through words and through the person who says them.

So perhaps, I was not entirely mistaken when I said I wanted to study practices: the act, in witchcraft, is the word.

That may seem an elementary statement, but it is full of implications. The first is this: until now, the work of ethnographers has relied on a convention (one too obvious to be stated) about the use of spoken words. For ethnography to be possible, it was necessary that the investigator and the 'native' should at least agree that speech has the function of conveying information. To be an ethnographer is first to record the utterances of appropriately chosen native informants. How to establish this information-situation, the main source of the investigator's knowledge, how to choose one's informants, how to involve them in a regular working relationship . . . the handbooks always insist on this truly fundamental point in fieldwork.⁸

Now, witchcraft is spoken words; but these spoken words are power, and not knowledge or information.

To talk, in witchcraft, is never to inform. Or if information is given, it is so that the person who is to kill (the unwitcher) will know where to aim his blows. 'Informing' an ethnographer, that is, someone who claims to have no intention of using the information, but naïvely wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable. For a single word (and only a word) can tie or untie a fate, and whoever puts himself in a position to utter it is

⁸ The anthropologist's task is like learning an unknown symbolic code which must be taught him by the most competent speaker he can find. Cf. for example: Royal Anthropological Institute (1971), S. F. Nadel (1951), John Beattie (1964).

formidable. Knowing about spells brings money, brings more power and triggers terror: realities much more fascinating to an interlocutor than the innocent accumulation of scientific knowledge, writing a well-documented book, or getting an academic degree.

Similarly, it is unthinkable that people can talk for the sake of talking. Exchanging words just to show that one is with other people, to show one's wish to communicate, or what Malinowski called 'phatic communication' exists in the Bocage as it does anywhere else.⁹ But here it implies strictly political intentions: phatic communication is the expression of zero-aggressiveness; it conveys to one's interlocutor that one might launch a magic rocket at him, but that one chooses not to do so for the time being. It is conveying to him that this is not the time for a fight, but for a cease-fire. When interlocutors for whom witchcraft is involved talk about nothing (that is about anything except what really matters) it is to emphasize the violence of what is not being talked about. More fundamentally, it is to check that the circuit is functioning, and that a state of war does indeed hold between the opponents.¹⁰

In short, there is no neutral position with spoken words: in witchcraft, words wage war. Anyone talking about it is a belligerent, the ethnographer like everyone else. There is no room for uninvolved observers.

When Evans-Pritchard, founder of the ethnography of witchcraft, studied the Zande, he made it his practice to interpret the events of his life by means of schemes about persecution, consulting oracles and submitting to their decisions: 'I was aided in my understanding of the feelings of the bewitched Azande', he says, 'by sharing their hopes and joys, apathy and sorrows [. . .]. In no department of their life was I more successful in "thinking black" or as it should more correctly be said "feeling black" than in the sphere of witchcraft. I, too, used to react to misfortunes in the idiom of witchcraft, and it was often an effort to check this lapse into unreason' (1937). But we learn from his book that actually the Zande had given him the position of 'Prince without portfolio', which is no slight consolation if one remembers that in Zande society, a prince can only be bewitched by another prince (a rather reassuring thought for an ethnographer established many miles from the court) and that by not giving him of portfolio, the Zande were exempting Evans-Pritchard from having to play the role, so important for the effectiveness of the cure, of symbolic guarantee of the return to order.

⁹ Under the term 'phatic communion', as part of 'ordinary conversation', Malinowski identified a particular type of discourse which is not aimed at giving information, but at a communion through words: 'inquiries about health, comment on the weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things' . . . (B. Malinowski, 1923). These remarks are exchanged in order to establish and maintain communication between the speakers. On this problem, see also T. Todorov (1970), E. Benveniste (1970), R. Jakobson (1960).

¹⁰ R. Jakobson (op. cit.) remarks that the prototype of this kind of utterance is '*Hallo, can you hear me?*'.

In other words, the ethnographer could not himself possibly be involved in a case of witchcraft.¹¹ In the Bocage, the situation happens to be less comfortable: nobody ever talks about witchcraft to gain knowledge, but to gain power. The same is true about asking questions. Before the ethnographer has uttered a single word, he is involved in the same power relationship as anyone else talking about it. Let him open his mouth, and his interlocutor immediately tries to identify his strategy, estimate his force, guess if he is a friend or foe, or if he is to be bought or destroyed. As with any other interlocutor, speaking to the ethnographer one is addressing either a *subject supposed to be able* (a witch, an unwitcher) or *unable* (a victim, a bewitched person).

It follows that wanting to know could only be — for me as for anyone else — in the name of a force which I claim to have or which my interlocutor credits me with. If I were not equipped to confront it, no one would believe I could survive unharmed, or even survive it at all.

'*Are you strong enough?*' I was often asked when I tried to establish an information-relationship, that is to get people who had experience of witch stories to tell me about them. A mere desire for information is the sign of a naïve or hypocritical person who must at once be frightened off. The effect that the person telling the story is trying to achieve is either to fascinate or to frighten: nobody would talk about it who did not hope to fascinate. If my interlocutor is successful, he says I have '*weak blood*' and advises me to change my course of research towards folk song or the ancient papegai festival. If he fears that he has not brought it off, he anxiously asks me how I can bear to hear such stories every day, and offers various assumptions: '*You've got strong blood*', or else '*you've got something*' (to protect yourself with). He then tries to identify my fetishes, to find out whether or not they are '*stronger*' than his own. Otherwise, he may identify me with a certain unwitcher who has just died, a double-edged compliment which I am bound to appreciate: to say that my '*hands tremble like Madame Marie's*' means that, like her, I'm '*quite strong*' — but also that in the end she met her master in witchcraft, and he did away with her quite recently.

As you can see, this is not exactly a standard situation, in which information is exchanged and where the ethnographer may hope to have neutral knowledge about the beliefs and practices of witchcraft conveyed to him. For he who succeeds in acquiring such knowledge gains power and must accept the effects of this power; the more one knows, the more one is a threat and the more one is magically threatened. So long as I claimed the usual status of an ethnographer, saying I wanted to know for the sake of knowing, my interlocutors were less eager to communicate their own knowledge than to test mine, to try to guess the necessarily magic use I intended to put it to, and to develop their force to the detriment of my own. I had to accept the

¹¹ He only recounts one incident (p. 460) in which the Zande were able to say he was bewitched.

logic of this totally combative situation and admit that it was absurd to continue to posit a neutral position which was neither admissible or even credible to anyone else. When total war is being waged with words, one must make up one's mind to engage in another kind of ethnography.¹²

¹² It is not surprising that Clausewitz (1968) was an important point of reference at the beginning of my work: war as a supremely serious game, trying to dictate its laws to the enemy; as an extension of a duel on a wider scale and over a longer span; as a continuation of politics through other means, and so on. It was not always easy to decide which one was speaking: the discourse of war or the discourse of witchcraft, at least until I realized that it was meaningless to think of witchcraft in terms of the categories of game theory.

BETWEEN 'CAUGHT' AND CATCHING

There is one precept of British anthropology – perhaps the only one in the name of which I can call myself an ethnographer – by which the native is always right, if he leads the investigator in unexpected directions.¹ If the ethnographer is led astray, if nothing he finds in the field corresponds to his expectations, if his hypotheses collapse one after the other in contact with native reality even though he set up his investigation with great care, these are signs that we are dealing with an empirical science and not a science-fiction.

I was soon forced to change my plan to study the beliefs and practices of witchcraft – problematical concepts which haunt ethnographic literature – into that of acknowledging the truth of a discourse: in what way are the bewitched right when they say they are suffering? and the unwitchers, when they say they *'take it all'* on themselves? (And what of the alleged witches, who remain obstinately silent, or claim they do not believe in spells?) What, then, is at stake when such a discourse is being used?

These questions led to other, more fundamental ones, about the effect of spoken words and the very rationale of this discourse: why is talking in this way so like the most effective kind of act? How do words kill as surely as a bullet? Why do people talk rather than fight or die, why do they use precisely these terms? And why this kind of language rather than another? If one talks in terms of witchcraft, it must be that the same things cannot be said any other way. I therefore established, as a methodological principle, that the discourse of witchcraft and, for example, the scholarly terminology considered above cannot be interchangeable: since peasants know both and can use both, we must assume that referring to one or to the other does not involve the same relationship of meaning.

¹ As an example, this passage in Evans-Pritchard: 'The anthropologist must follow what he finds in the society he has selected for study: the social organization of its people, their values and sentiments and so forth. I illustrate this fact from what happened in my own case. I had no interest in witchcraft when I went to Zandeland, but the Azande had; so I had to let myself be guided by them. I had no particular interest in cows when I went to Nuerland, but the Nuer had, so willy-nilly I had to become cattle-minded too, eventually acquiring a herd of my own as the price of my acceptance, or at any rate tolerance' (1973).

What I have said about the political or aggressive function of speech suggests that this first step is bound to produce others. My route through this 'field' can be summed up as a progressive understanding of one proposition and its implications: *nothing is said about witchcraft which is not closely governed by the situation of utterance*. What is important, then, is less to decode what is said than to understand who is speaking and to whom. In the field, the ethnographer is himself involved in this speech process and is just one speaker among others. If he then chooses to write a scientific report on spells, it can only be done by always going back over this situation of utterance and the way he was 'caught' in it; this interchange between having been 'caught' and 'catching' things (from a theoretical viewpoint) is precisely what must be pondered.

I wish to suggest that what is needed is a second 'catching' and not a 'getting uncaught' – leaving it to the rest of this book to establish this necessity. I suggest that this marks unequivocally the distance that separates me from both classical anthropology and post-structuralist thinking in France in their shared ideal of 'a totally a-topical theorizing subject'.²

I. Those who haven't been caught can't talk about it

Witchcraft, remember, is not the only language available to account for misfortune, and the Bocage cannot be seen as some cultural island which has never been reached by the categories of experimental thought. The most superficial observation shows that everyone here can reinvent them for himself in explaining everyday events, or what I have called ordinary misfortune. In short, unlike a Zande who in all circumstances only has the choice between 'witchcraft' and 'sorcery' – two concepts which in the Bocage are totally indistinguishable – the countryman knows perfectly well that there are explanations of another kind.³ He can say that he does not believe in them at all, or that they account for everything but his own circum-

² In a review of a book called *Politiques de la Philosophie: Chatelet, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Serres* (1976), Bertrand Poirot-Delpech quite rightly says of its authors: 'They are all trying to stop being taken in by words [...] their "politics" – in the full sense of the term – are defined by words from the family of prefixes "dé" – *dé-voiler* [to reveal], *dé-caper* [to scour], *dé-crypter* [to decipher], *dé-pister* [to detect], *dé-construire* [to deconstruct], in short, *dé-penser* [to unthink]. *Dé-river* [to drift] too: not to *dé-pendre* [depend] either on God, on Being, on Man, on any centre or even on any locatable place. The spatial comparisons used by them all refer to the same, total a-topia, an absolute nomadism: to talk from nowhere, to become ungraspable, unapproachable, irrecoverable in every way' ('Maîtres à dépenser', in *Le Monde*, 30 April 1976).

³ The Zande of South Sudan, fortunately visited by Evans-Pritchard (1937) in the thirties, enabled a distinction to be made (since then held to be essential in spite of its ambiguities) between *sorcery*, or instrumental magic, and *witchcraft*, or magic operating without the help of a material prop: 'Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them in virtue of an inherent quality. A witch performs no rite, utters no spell, and possesses no medicines. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act. They believe also that sorcerers may do them ill by performing magic rites with bad medicines ...' (p. 21).

stances: he cannot prevent their being the official theories of misfortune. The priest assures him that God alone, or occasionally a hypothetical 'evil spirit', can will the series of events in which he is struggling; the doctor claims this series is only an illusion, or a set of pure coincidences. These official theories are backed by powerful social agencies: the School, the Church, the Medical Association. They constitute both the social order, and since this order prevails, social 'reality'.

Note here that when a Zande says he is bewitched, he is acting as a social being, who accepts his group's symbolic code and knows how to use it. But a peasant of the Bocage who says he is bewitched shows he has seceded from the official theories of misfortune, or that he lacks the capacity to use the positivist or religious set of terms which express *this* particular story. From then on, he deliberately shuts himself off and enters the state of secrecy.

The others shut him off by their criticism or scorn: he is superstitious, backward, raving, say the priests, the other villagers and the doctors. But the bewitched himself only reinforces his own isolation by justifying their attitude with such statements as 'you have to be caught to believe'. For he thinks that only a raving, backward or superstitious person could believe theoretically in spells, and talk about them without having specifically experienced them himself. He also says: 'For those who haven't been caught, they [spells] don't exist'; so unbelievable seems the reality of his misfortunes to anyone who has not been caught in such a series. Finally, he asserts: 'Those who haven't been caught can't even talk about it.' By the same token, one cannot talk to them even if they have enough good will to accept the truth of this discourse: for it cannot even be uttered in front of anyone who is exempted in advance from having to withstand its effects.

Of course such assertions were being made long before any ethnographer arrived in the Bocage. All the same, they prompted me to ask myself: what ultimate authority could I invoke, in talking about spells to a bewitched person or an unwitcher?

For when a bewitched person talks to an ethnographer, who is supposed to hold only to the official theories on misfortune, he starts to talk about himself in just the same way as he would to the doctor, the teacher and the ethnographer. He says that he only has a distant, indirect knowledge of spells, as well as of the 'superstitions of backward people' or the 'beliefs of the old folk' whom he also calls the 'back' people: from 'back' to backward is but a short step.*

At first, when witchcraft is put forward as the belief of other people, any information is bound to be loaded or unrecognizable. What is important to the native is that the listener – for instance, the ethnographer, who is presumed to partake of objective language – must not recognize him in

* The expression 'the back people', 'les arrières' is essentially a term of 'generation reference', i.e. of reference to the second generation from 'ego' – in the present context the generation of the 'arrière-grands-parents', the great-grandparents.

what he says. He will only talk about witchcraft provided he can set himself apart from it, and describe it as a particularly childish, preposterous and ridiculous set of beliefs.

Because the peasant is talking to the 'other', the scholar, he objectifies himself, and says nothing. The ethnographer, for her part, does not listen – either she is looking for empirical facts and in these fantastic stories there are none which could satisfy any criteria of plausibility; or she adheres to this language and understands that it simply expresses a refusal on the part of the peasant to speak in his own person. Hence the arrogance of a folklorist's attitude in this particular matter: as long as she adopts an external position, the ethnographer hears nothing but wanderings meant to convince her that the speaker is quite as adept as herself in keeping his distance from an 'object' called witchcraft.

II. A name added to a position

In pursuing the ethnography of spells, the first point to grasp is being clear about whom each 'informant' thinks he is speaking to, since he utters such radically different discourses depending on the position he thinks his interlocutor holds. To someone who 'isn't caught', he will say: 'spells don't exist'; 'they no longer exist'; 'that was in the old days'; 'they were true for our back people'; 'they exist, but not here: go and look in Saint-Mars (or Montjean, or Lassy: somewhere else...)' 'over there, they're really backward'; 'oh, spells! I don't hold with all that rot!'⁴. To someone who is 'caught', one speaks in a different way, depending on whether the person is given the position of bewitched or unwitcher. (No one talks to the alleged witch, but this very silence is in itself a whole discourse, the silent assertion of a fight to the death, which always has some effect.)

When an ethnographer works in an exotic field, he too has to take up some sort of stance. But common sense and the handbooks point out the virtues of distance and the advantages to be derived from the status of rich cannibal.⁵ To claim, on the other hand, that one wants to hear about peasant witchcraft yet remain alien to it is to condemn oneself to hearing only objectivist statements and to collecting fantastic anecdotes and for unwitching recipes – i.e. to accumulate statements which the stating subject formally disavows. So for the last hundred and fifty years, the native and the folklorist have been looking at themselves in a mirror each has held up to the other, without the folklorist apparently ever noticing the ironic complicity that this implies on the part of the native.⁶

⁴ All the names cited in this book belong to the stock of local names. However, to preserve the confidentiality to my former interlocutors, I have systematically changed them: no name corresponds to the person who actually talked to me, or to the place where the event described occurred.

⁵ To adopt an expression of Jean Monod's (1972).

⁶ One can also say, and this is another aspect of the same problem, that the peasant is thus signifying his eminent right to participate in the same symbolic system as the scholar.

When I left for the Bocage, I was certainly in no better position than any of my predecessors, except that I thought their findings trivial compared with the reality at stake in a witchcraft attack. Within a few months I had myself done much the same collecting as they; it left me unsatisfied, and gave me no guidance about how to pursue my investigation. It would have been just as futile for me to try and win over the peasants with large-minded statements of good intention, since anyway, in matters of witchcraft, it is always the other person who decides how to interpret what you say. Just as a peasant must hear the words of the annunciator, if he is to confess that he is indeed bewitched, so it was my interlocutors who decided what my position was ('caught' or not, bewitched or unwitcher) by interpreting unguarded clues in my speech.⁷

I must point out that I knew nothing about this system of positions, and that the main part of my work has been to make it out little by little by going back over puzzling episodes. For several months my notes describe a number of situations in which my interlocutors placed me in this stance or that ('not caught', 'caught'–bewitched, 'caught'–unwitcher) although at the time I did not see anything but a classic situation of ethnographic investigation, even if a somewhat difficult one because I was after something particularly secret.

I was probably not yet ready to maintain this speech process in the only way conceivable to my interlocutors: by accepting that being given such a stance committed me to utter my part in this discourse in the same way as they did. Of course this position existed before me and was acceptably occupied and maintained by others. But now I was the one being placed there, and my name was being attached to this position as well as to my particular personal existence.

Although I went through the whole experience in a state of some confusion, I can say today that it is actually patterned around a small number of characteristic situations in which my interlocutors required me to occupy a position that they indicated. They were conveying that they had no need of my ability to listen, for what mattered to them was not merely to be understood, or, in the language of communication-theory – they had no need for a decoder. In witchcraft, to receive messages obliges one to send out other, signed messages: it was time for me to speak.

For example, here are some instances of the manner in which I was put to the test: (1) the first time that the bewitched told me their own story (and not that of some hypothetical 'backward people'), it was because they had identified me as the unwitcher who could get them out of their troubles. (2) A few months later, a peasant interpreted my 'weakness', took on the role of annunciator of my state as a bewitched, and took me to his unwitcher to

⁷ Anyone who called himself bewitched on his own authority would simply be thought mad: a warning to apprentice sorcerers who try to make peasants talk by simply declaring themselves 'caught'.

get me 'uncaught'. (3) For more than two years, I subjected the events of my personal life to the interpretations of this unwitcher. (4) Several bewitched asked me to 'uncatch' them. Although at this point I had become quite competent at handling magical discourse, I felt quite incapable of taking the speech-position upholding it, and I sent them on to my therapist. (5) Lastly, this unwitcher, with whom I had a complicated relationship (I was her client, agent, and guarantor of the truth of her words during the cures in which I was invited to participate) instructed me to bring her a healer who would relieve her of her bodily pains and to assist him in his task.⁸

You could say, given the ideal assumption that I might have made my choice in full consciousness of the situation, that every time these were the alternatives: either I refused this assignment of my identity to a position and withdrew from the speech process pointing out that I was being mistaken for someone I was not (*I am not who you think I am*); or I agreed to occupy the position assigned to me, unless I could propose some other which I felt more able to occupy (*I am not where you think I am*). In the first case, I would have had to leave the Bocage, where I no longer had any place; in the second, the speech process would go on but I had to place myself in the position of subject of the enunciation.

It emerges from the asides of investigators that I was not the first person to be offered this alternative. Some folklorists, for example, tell of their amusement at having been invited, at one point or another, to act as unwitchers. This type of occurrence is worth looking into. Note in the first place, that it is out of the question for the investigator to be assigned the position of bewitched. He would have had to give some sign that he knows he is mortal, vulnerable or at least subject to desires – all things one can freely admit, but only to close relations and in confidence – certainly not to uneducated farmers and while practising one's profession. In the field, the investigator therefore routinely presents himself to his interlocutor as someone who does not lack anything: or to take up the expression I used above,⁹ he displays a continuous surface without holes in it. Everything in his behaviour suggests he is 'strong enough'. This especially since he does not omit arguments likely to loosen their tongues: he may say he belongs to a local line of magic healers (he might claim, for example, that his maternal grandmother, who is still remembered in the area, 'passed the secret' on to him); and in his conversations with 'informers', he shows he knows many unwitchment recipes, magic formulae and fantastic anecdotes. Without being conscious of it, the investigator has done everything necessary for his interlocutors to assign him the position of unwitcher. But if he is actually told this, and asked to perform, he is amused. He recounts this episode as if it were just an entertaining anecdote, and a particularly conclusive evidence of peasant gullibility, to a listener who is confidently assumed to feel

⁸ These situations are discussed in the third part of this book and in a forthcoming volume, which will be almost entirely concerned with analysing unwitching séances. ⁹ Cf. p. 8.

equally superior. Indeed, there is cause to smile: there has been an error, a mistaken identity, the investigator was not the person he was thought to be.

But one may wonder who is more naïve, the peasant or the folklorist. The former cannot understand that one might collect formulae without putting them to any use, just for the sake of information; the latter judges that he has satisfied the demands of science by collecting information, without realizing he cannot do anything with it, neither science nor magic.

Not science: the folklorists failed to recognize the existence and role of the power of therapists in unwitching cures. They strained to find out what these therapists knew, and this in the particular form of secrets to be collected. In other words, whatever in their discourse most resembles an utterance, a statement which can stand on its own independent of the stating subject.

The content of the secret (the utterance) is for the most part neither here nor there: it does not matter whether one is told to pierce an ox heart, twist steel nails, or recite misappropriated Church prayers.¹⁰ Magicians know this, when they quietly say: 'to each one his secret', and show themselves in no hurry to increase their knowledge. For what makes an unwitcher is his 'force' and its links with a world of language (the very one which produced the content of the secret). The power of the magician, thus referred to a symbolic set, places him in the position of recognized avenger (and not, for example, of a criminal settling private scores), but on condition that he openly declares his readiness to assume this position.

Not magic: unwitching does not consist in uttering formulae or practising magic rituals. If they are to have any chance of being effective, a set of positions must first be established, by which someone who is not the magician places him in the position of subject supposed to be able; and the magician himself must acknowledge he is in it, and accept what this implies in terms of personal commitment to a discourse, and of assuming the effects of magic speech on his own body and so on.¹¹

So when the folklorist reacts to a request for unwitchment by laughing as if this were an inappropriate proposal; and excuses himself by saying he cannot do anything, or by sending the patient to his doctor, the peasant gathers that this academic does not want to commit his 'force', if he has any; or more likely, that he has no idea what 'force' is or just how much is involved in speaking. The folklorist's mirth simply shows that he does not think he can cure anyone with magic formulae, and that for him such knowledge is pointless. And so it is, unless a subject agrees to become the support of these magic utterances and to proffer them in the name of his

¹⁰ But the writings of the folklorists nonetheless rely on these small differences.

¹¹ It would be a great mistake to imagine that it is enough to propose the position of diviner or unwitcher to have it enthusiastically accepted. Everyone in the Bocage is sufficiently aware of the dangers and servitude attached to magic power to know that it is a poisoned gift which one must not touch unless one's desire to do so is sufficiently strong.

own 'force' taken as part of a symbolic universe – i.e. to convert this knowledge into a power.

III. Taking one's distances from whom (or what)?

So one cannot study witchcraft without agreeing to take part in the situations where it manifests itself, and in the discourse expressing it. This entails certain limitations which will seem most unwelcome to those who favour an objectivizing ethnography.

1. You cannot verify any assertion: first because there is no position of impartial witness in this discourse. Second, because it is pointless to question outsiders: to be bewitched is to have stopped communicating with one's presumed witch as well as with anyone not involved in the crisis; so other villagers know almost nothing of the matter. Finally, it is inconceivable that an ethnographer to whom someone had spoken as to the legitimate occupier of one of the positions in the discourse might step outside it to investigate, and ask what is the truth behind this or that story.

2. You cannot hear both parties – the bewitched and their alleged witches – since they no longer communicate. Not only do they not talk to each other, they do not speak the same kind of language. If, exceptionally, it were ever possible to obtain both versions of the same story, they could not be set face to face, since witches always claim that they do not believe in spells, object to the discourse of witchcraft, and appeal to the language of positivism.¹² In any case, the bewitched prevent any such confrontation by warning the ethnographer to avoid meeting their aggressor, for fear of becoming his victim. To take no notice of this advice would be a sign either of disturbing masochism, or of a rash faith in the powers protecting you, or indeed of an intention to work some betrayal. Note that such daring would be just as disturbing to the 'witch', however imaginary he may be: knowing that the ethnographer sees people who call themselves his victims, he would, on receiving a visit from this stranger, see him as an unwitcher come to fight him. In time of war, nothing so resembles the characteristic weapons of the magician (words, look and touch) as an innocent 'how are you?' followed by a handshake.

3. One cannot investigate in one's own 'quartier' [neighbourhood] so dreaded is the magic effectiveness of speech. The peasant thinks it wise to maintain a certain distance between the speaker and the listener, to prevent the latter from taking advantage of the situation. A serious crisis will never be taken to the local unwitcher. People prefer to choose their therapist beyond some boundary (in a neighbouring diocese or *département*), in any case outside the network of acquaintanceship. For this reason, I never worked less than ten kilometres from where I was living. So in general, I

¹² A dodge which an Azande would never have imagined, since he can only choose between *witchcraft* and *sorcery*.

remained unaware of the sociological context of witchcraft matters and especially of the particular positions of the opponents in the local struggles for prestige and power – and these usually constitute the subject-matter of ethnographic investigations into witchcraft.¹³

4. One cannot set up any strategy of observation (even a 'participating' one) which keeps the agreed amount of distance that this implies. More generally, to claim an external position for oneself is to abandon hope of ever learning this discourse: first (remember) because those concerned react with silence or duplicity to anyone who claims to be outside. But more profoundly because any attempt at making things explicit comes up against a much more formidable barrier: that of the native's amnesia and his incapacity to formulate what must remain unsaid. These are the limits of what one can ask a willing informer (in so far as such persons exist in the Bocage), and they are soon reached.

To take one example: if you want to know the substance of a diviner's consultation, you can simply ask him what usually takes place in a *séance*, or what his clients consult him about. But you should not be surprised at trivial answers: '*They come because of illness, love affairs, animals, to recover money they have lost . . .*' – 'And what about spells?' – '*That might be the case, but I don't deal with that*' will be the diviner's systematic reply. A barrier, then, of silence and duplicity: the diviner can only admit '*dealing with that*' in front of someone who puts forward a personal request for divination. About the *séances*, on the other hand, he claims he honestly has nothing more to impart than a few matters of technique: '*I begin with the game of piquet and go on to tarot cards.*' – 'But how do you guess their story?' – '*Well, I have the gift.*' Even when the ethnographer's questions are more subtle, they soon come up against the bounds of the unstatable, represented here by the reference to a '*gift*'. Pressed to make himself more clear, the diviner can do no more than illustrate his statements by recounting the enigmatic circumstances in which, one day, a long time ago, when becoming a seer had not yet entered his head, a patient seeking for revelations sensed the '*gift*' in him, and announced it to the professional diviner who then initiated him.

¹³ In the forthcoming volume, I shall show the relative autonomy of the discourse of witchcraft in relation to the sociological determinants usually proposed to account for its use. Here it is enough to point out that this discourse as it was spoken to me in the Bocage would make me tend more to question the basis of ethnography's most obvious assertions. Thus one often reads in scholarly publications that the 'witch' is always a 'jealous neighbour' (followed by descriptions of neighbourhood relations as opposed to kinship relations: or on the topographical distribution of cliques, etc.). In the Bocage too, it is said that the witch is a jealous neighbour. But 'empirical reality' is not so much in question here as a system of naming: it is because X was first classified as being my '*witch*' that he is said to be my '*neighbour*', '*jealous of me*', etc. References to topography are therefore surprisingly elastic, and motives of envy too obvious to need detailing. In the forthcoming volume, I shall return to this point, and the mechanism of imputation, i.e. the way in which one constructs an answer to the question 'Now, who is my witch?'

If the ethnographer resorts to the patients, he obtains uniformly improbable statements: the diviner, he is told, '*reads me like an open book*', or again, '*he's extraordinary, I never tell him anything and he knows everything*'. But if he has ever accompanied peasants to the diviner's and sat in the waiting room during the consultations, the ethnographer knows that they never stopped talking: it's just that, as after a hypnotic trance, they do not remember.

So the diviner and his client have a common 'misknowledge' which is not the same as the simple complicity of sharing a secret: no winning of trust will ever make the persons concerned capable of explaining what the terms '*gift*' and '*seeing everything*' really mean, because the whole institution of divination depends on the fact that they do not want to know anything about it.

For anyone who wants to understand the meaning of this discourse, there is no other solution but to practise it oneself, to become one's own informant, to penetrate one's own amnesia, and to try and make explicit what one finds unstatable in oneself. For it is difficult to see how the native could have any interest in the project of unveiling what can go on existing only if it remains veiled; or for what purpose he would give up the symbolic benefits of such important resources.

(I am well aware that there is a fundamental gulf between my present aims and those of my Bocage interlocutors. Until now, I have been content to state that the discourse of witchcraft is such that to gain access to it one must be in a position to sustain it oneself. And yet, it is one thing to have access to it – it was a memorable adventure which has marked me for my whole subsequent life – it is another thing to want to go on to develop its theory.)

If you want to listen to and understand a diviner, there is therefore no other solution but to become his client, i.e. to tell him your desire and ask him to interpret it.¹⁴ Like any native – or any desiring subject – the investigator is bound on this occasion to be afflicted by misknowledge: so for several months, however carefully I tried to take notes after each divination séance, a certain part of the consultation, always the same, was censored by amnesia; similarly, when a seer, who I was hoping would teach me the everyday tricks of divination saw the '*gift*' in me and gave me her life-story for interpretation, claiming she had nothing to teach me that I did not already know, I could not help being amazed.

Persistent amnesia, dumbfoundedness, the inability to reflect when faced by the seemingly unstatable – i.e. a vague perception that *something in this cannot be coped with* – this was my ordinary lot during the adventure.¹⁵ It may

¹⁴ To consult without asking the seer to 'see' is futile, since the latter sees nothing and there is nothing for the ethnographer to understand.

¹⁵ I might just as well express it as 'can't be thought' or 'can't be said'; in talking of what 'can't be coped with', I am trying to point to an element of reality, that at some point escapes the grasp of language or symbolization.

be wondered how, at a certain point, I managed to surmount this inability, that is, try to get it out in words, to convert an adventure into a theoretical project. But this question cannot be answered simply by invoking one's duty towards the demands of the scientific approach, or one's debt to the scholarly institution which acts as patron: if that respect applies, it is somewhere else and in another manner. To have been engaged in the discourse of witchcraft beyond what can be required of an ethnographer in the ordinary practice of her profession poses first the problem of motive; what could have been my own desire to know; why was I personally involved in the ambition to give a solid basis to the 'social sciences', and why, in the case of divination for example, was I not content to resolve the issue by invoking the concept of '*gift*', or, even sooner, by accepting the findings of the folklorists.

So the distance necessary if one is to be able to theorize does not have to be established between the ethnographer and his 'object', i.e. the native. But of all the snares which might imperil our work, there are two we had learnt to avoid like the plague: that of agreeing to 'participate' in the native discourse, and that of succumbing to the temptations of subjectivism. Not only could I not possibly avoid them; it is by means of them that I was able to work out most of my ethnographic work. Whatever you may think of it, it must be granted that the masters' predictions do not always turn out to be true, which state that in such cases it becomes impossible to put any distance between oneself and the native or between oneself and oneself.

Anyway, I was never able to choose between subjectivism and the objective method as it was taught me, so long, that is, as I still wished to find an answer to my initial question – what are the people involved trying to shape out through a witchcraft crisis one? Working in this way has at least preserved me from one limitation regularly met by the objectivizing ethnographer and which is never emphasized, since it is taken for granted: I mean the ethnographer's dependence on a finite *corpus* of empirical observations and native texts collected in the field. This kind of ethnography meets any new question with the answer that it is included, or not, in the *corpus*; it can be verified, or not, in the empirical data – and of anything not referred to in the *corpus*, nothing can be asserted. In my case, the fact that Bocage peasants forced me to come up with a number of statements in the same way as they did (i.e. to be an encoder) enabled me to break away from the limits of the *corpus*; or, and this comes to the same thing, to include my own discourse in it. For the sort of question posed by comparative grammarians, I was able to substitute that posed by transformationalists: can this utterance be produced or not? Hazarding my own words in the presence of native decoders, I became able to discriminate accepted from unacceptable meaning whatever the utterance and whether or not it was produced during my stay in the field. The limits of ordinary ethnography are those of its *corpus*. In the case of the ethnography I was practising, the problem was,

each time, to evaluate correctly the limits of my position in speech. But my having occupied at one time or another all the positions in this discourse, knowingly or not, or willingly or not, at least enables me to have a view on everything that is storable.

It is now time to give a little information about the position of the witch. No one, in the Bocage, calls himself a witch; it is not a position from which one can speak. A witch never admits his crimes, not even when he is delirious in a psychiatric hospital (this is considerably different from exotic witchcrafts). The witch is the person referred to by those who utter the discourse on witchcraft (bewitched and unwitchers), and he only figures in it as the subject of the statement. His victims claim that it is unnecessary for him to admit he is a witch, since his death speaks for him: everyone laughs at his funeral because he died in a significant way, carried off in only a few hours as a result of the diviner's curse, or neighing like the mare he had cast an evil spell on, and so on. This makes it highly unlikely that there are witches who actually cast evil spells, but this is surely not in the least necessary for the system to function.¹⁶

¹⁶The only position I did not occupy was that of witch. And yet the magazine *L'Express* published a report on my investigations and decided to call it 'The witch of the C.N.R.S.', thus succumbing to the cult of the dark hero I alluded to above (G rard Bonnot, 'La sorci re du C.N.R.S.', in *L'Express*, No. 1206, 19-24 August 1974).

WHEN THE TEXT IS ITS OWN FOREWORD

On re-reading my field-notes, I find that nothing directly concerning witchcraft lends itself to ethnographic description. Remember that any information on the subject is not informative, but only moments in a strategy: either a peasant, not himself behind what he says, insists how unlikely it is that there should be bewitched and how he could never be one himself. Or else the speaker is involved in what he says, but is talking in order to engage me in his own fight to the death against a witch and not just to give me information. The facts of the case are then simply a speech process, and my notes take on a narrative form.

If I am to describe witchcraft in the Bocage, it can only be done by going over the situations in which I was myself given a position. The only empirical evidence I have of the existence of such positions, and of the manner in which they relate to each other consists of fragments of narrative. My mistakes, and sometimes my refusals or evasions are part of the text; each answer I gave my interlocutors was, like their question, part of the fact under investigation. It should be remembered that these positions only gradually became clear to me through the later repetition of the same request: this time, I was able to perceive (or admit) that I was meant to occupy them. The ethnography of spells consists in the description of this system of positions. It was by comparing several similar episodes that I was able to abstract such a description.

It may – quite justifiably – be deplored that ethnography can depend so much on the ethnographer's moods. Readers of my narrative may wonder how, on this occasion or that, I could have been so stupid. Of course I have regretted this myself. Others, more bold or more resourceful, would have behaved more dashing. And yet I claim that the ethnographer's stupidity, for instance her refusal to realize where the native is wanting to lead her, is inevitable in such circumstances. *That there must be a subject to uphold the verbal exchange* is a necessary condition for the ethnography of spells. It does not really matter what sort of person the investigator is (and another would react differently to the same situation); the bewitched person addresses himself to the person in front of him and to him only; and that is why the

person cannot be eliminated from ethnographic description (or at least from the narrative on which the description is based) any more than you can eliminate the words and deeds of the native.

Ethnography as I learnt it – and even taught it – is considered a science so long as one covers up the traces of what fieldwork was like. This is both an apprenticeship, during which an outsider is taught to decode a symbolic system he did not know before, and a long dialogue between the outsider and his host: that is to say a process of verbal exchange. It is understood (it is even a rule in this kind of literature) that these two elements can only be mentioned outside the text: either in another book of a different genre (a diary or a philosophical journey) which does not claim to be scientific precisely because it chooses to admit these traces;¹ or in a scientific report, but only in the form of a 'foreword'. The scientific *text* as such is for the results of the ethnographer's decoding work.

Thus scientific status or objectivity is usually made visible in the split between the stating subject of ethnography, and the set of statements on the native culture: in other words, in the difference between foreword and text. A noteworthy feature of the ethnographic text is that the stating subject (or rather, the author) is regularly hidden. He withdraws in favour of what he states about his object. It may well be asked – and my colleagues never tire of questioning me about this whenever I talk to them about my research – whether the material I have produced on witchcraft in Western France can be called 'science', since the stating subject of ethnographic work cannot at any moment disappear as a person behind what he states about his object. Just as the native, throughout the fieldwork, continually appealed to the particular personality of the investigator, similarly readers of the opening remarks of this chapter may fail to see how the ethnographer could abstract himself from the narrative on which his description of witchcraft is based. Can you still talk of science when the text is its own foreword?

The reader will understand that, faced with this question, I have a number of arguments (or excuses) based on the peculiarity of the situation in which I found myself. But I think it is more interesting to develop here a completely different argument which questions this conventional withdrawal of the stating subject behind the usual topic of statements in ethnographic writings. Yet there cannot be any statement which is not upheld by its relationship to the stating subject: that is what recent linguists

¹ This difference is seen in a particularly striking way in the work of Michel Leiris. Compare *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934), the diary of his expedition through Africa, and the scientific reports written on his return, for example: *La Langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga* (1948). But one could also take C. Lévi-Strauss as an example, and note the unbridgeable distance he established between *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), (the phrase 'philosophical journey' is from Madeleine Chapsal) and the rest of his works. Similarly, Balandier expresses his desire to admit the original workings, but 'in parallel' with his scientific work proper (*Afrique Ambiguë*, 1957, p. 19).

tic studies, or for that matter everyday experience, have taught us.² I was forced to face this by the borderline situation of witchcraft, where I could hardly avoid understanding that it was a matter of one subject calling forth a response from another subject.

I could develop my arguments along the following line:³ ethnography, as the science of cultural difference, has legitimately constituted its research procedures and criteria of validity around the notion of objectivity. It is by talking of the native as an object, as someone 'other' and by referring to him as a 'stating subject' ('he' has this practice or says this or that) that we reach the possibility of a discourse on a different culture, on an object which is not me. Yet if one wants this discourse to be plausible or even intelligible the 'I' must announce himself and say to whom he is addressing this discourse about the other: for *only a human being who names himself 'I' can refer to another human as 'he'; and he can only do so by addressing a 'you'*. Now, in ethnographic writings, neither the speaker nor his partner – in other words, neither the stating subject, author of the scientific report, nor his reader – are defined. It is implied that the 'I' need not introduce himself because he is taken for granted, just like the 'you' who is talked to. It is so much a matter of course that the 'I' and the 'you' converse about 'him', that the stating subject can withdraw behind an indefinite subject, and call himself 'one'.

Etymologically, the French *on* [English 'one'] is *homo*, anyone, everyone, people – any subject as long as it is indefinite. The fact that it is a subject gives it the right to predicate something of 'him'; the fact that it is indefinite means that, like any personal pronoun subject, it replaces a proper name without ever having to identify itself. 'One' is 'we': I who am talking and you who are listening. It is everyone and anyone except 'he' the only definite term in ethnographic discourse. Thus the stating of scientific discourse is spent in the act of designating, leaving open the question of who designates and to whom.⁴ As a result, what is designated – the other, the native, the third person – is bound to become unreal in the eyes of the reader, as for instance De Martino⁵ notes: 'Once the book was finished', he

² Cf. Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. I (1966): 'Structure des relations de personne dans le verbe'; 'Les relations de temps dans le verbe français'; 'La nature des pronoms'; 'De la subjectivité dans le langage' And vol. II (op. cit.): 'Le langage et l'expérience humaine'; 'Structure de la langue et structure de la société'; 'L'appareil formel de l'énonciation'; 'L'antonyme et le pronom dans le français moderne'.

³ This argument claims less in relation to the one I defended above on subjectivity (cf. pp. 20–4): I prefer to come back to it only after I have provided some means of dealing with it other than basic principle. The present argument acknowledges the importance given by the ethnographic approach to objectivity, but points out that to reach this aim one will have to go about it differently.

⁴ This is how I would today define the statements I have defended before on this same point (cf. Jeanne Favret, 1969).

⁵ De Martino, an Italian historian who thought he ought to read some ethnography in preparation for a study of contemporary rituals of exorcism in Taranto. The following quotations come from *La Terre du remords* (1966), pp. 13 and 14.

says, 'the Aranda [described in the monumental study of Spencer and Gillen] appeared to the reader like some dubious form of humanity, a monstrous joke in human history, the futility of which could not be compensated for by its very conventional weirdness'. Unable to perceive that they have anything in common with the natives talked about, the author who talks and the reader who is talked to are lost in 'a world of visiting and visited shadows, insignificant and trivial for all their meticulous prattle'.

Another peculiarity of ethnographic writing is that the native, the 'he' who is so freely predicated, never seems to have been engaged in his own person in any speaking process. Scientific works do not refer to the original speech situation except to illustrate a point and to explain a native statement by referring it back to the speaker's social position: 'he talks in this way', we are warned, 'because he is a warrior', an 'aristocrat' or a 'shaman'. The remarks he once made to the ethnographer had no aim other than to represent the interests of his faction. In other words, an implicit convention of ethnographic discourse holds that a 'he' can never be an 'I', and that the position of the stating subject in the original speech situation must thus always be left vacant: at best, a social group sometimes offers its identity. The situation would be no more plausible if the author presented the social group as a person (which no social group can ever be) or even as a fiction of a person. For this subject in the third person, as he speaks in the text, does not seem to speak to anyone, in any case not to the subject the ethnographer may very well have been at the time when the words were exchanged. In ethnographic writing, a native faction talks to a universal science, a non-person to an undefined subject.⁶

So ethnography seems to be carried forward between a native confined for all time to the position of subject in the statement, and a scholar who assigns himself the role of stating subject, though an indefinite one. The native then turns out to be a conceptual freak: no doubt he is a speaker, since ethnography is based on his words; but he is a *non-human speaker*, since he can never occupy the position of 'I' in any discourse. As for the ethnographer, he presents himself as a *speaking being*, but without a *proper name* since he refers to himself under an indefinite pronoun. A strange dialogue, between these two fantastical beings...

⁶ In his *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 1 (op. cit.), Benveniste remarks that the pronoun 'il' [he] is improperly labelled 'third person' since it is 'the non-person, whose mark is the absence of what specifically qualifies the *je* [I] and *tu* [you]. Because it implies no person, it can take any subject or contain none, and this subject whether it is expressed or not is never stated as a *person*' (p. 231).

Part II

THE REALM OF SECRECY