Sorcery, Satanism, and Shamanism

According to demonological theory, witches returned from their dances with the knowledge and tools to work harmful magic, or sorcery. According to anthropological reconstructions, sorcery arose out of shamanism, the altering of consciousness in order to interact with spirits for the benefit of the community. In general, shamans enter a trance state in which they experience their spirit or soul journeying to a world of spirits where they can gain information about or effect actions to influence the normal world of humans, although they can also summon spirits to aid them in both the spirit and the normal worlds, and some people consider mediumship, in which practitioners in a trance are possessed by spirits, to be a form of shamanism as well. Shamans proper, though, undergo an initiation in which they travel to the spirit world to gain experience, and then conduct public performances while in a trance to accomplish some communal purpose through interaction with the spirits. Shamans are found in hunter-gatherer, pastoral, and simple agricultural societies around the world, and their practices are generally held to be continuations of the oldest form of magico-religious practice, dating back to Paleolithic times. Their general orientation is to accomplish positive social purposes like healing the sick, but the spirits they interact with are not always benign, and some shamans specialize in working with the destructive ones. Furthermore, the power to heal also confers the power to harm, and shamans sometimes use this to inflict illness on members of competing groups, or battle other clans’ shamans in spirit in order to prevent them from doing this to their people or to gain some other advantage for their own group.

So long as people lived in small, autonomous social units, the high level of interdependency discouraged the use of harmful magic on other members of their own group, although shamans, who acted as clan leaders, may have used their power to assert their authority by punishing malefactors. However, the transitions to pastoralism and agriculture and more particularly the development of larger scale societies and polities loosened this restraint, and some shamanic practitioners began to use their power for their
own private ends, whether as part of leadership struggles with rivals or for more personal reasons. Some shamans also came to perform spiritual attacks on behalf of clients, either as part of a full-service practice or as a specialty. Healing came to routinely include diagnosis and cure of such magical attacks, sometimes by retaliating to force the attacker to call off the spirit or simply pushing it back on him or her, along with curing other forms of disease, both natural and spiritual. In some societies the spiritual sources of disease included magical harm caused by another person spontaneously, purely by force of ill will, what anthropologists call witchcraft.

Historically, records of sorcery go back to ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, and continue through classical Greece and Rome through the Middle Ages. Physical remains of “voodoo dolls” used for image magic and innumerable cursing tablets have been found from ancient as well as classical civilizations, literary sources describe the use of verbal curses, ligature, incantations, necromancy, and the evil eye, not to mention magic potions, ointments, and poisons, and professional practitioners as well as amateurs are known to have used them. The use of cursing tablets and much of the learned magic contained in books fell off in Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages, but the Germanic invaders brought their own traditions of harmful as well as helpful magic which mixed with the popular survivals from antiquity. These remained in use, gradually modified by their interaction with the Christian religion and each other, into the late Middle Ages, when they were supplemented by written traditions recovered from antiquity and imported from Byzantine and Arab civilizations to form a “common tradition” of magical assumptions and practices that was shared by almost all Europeans, from philosophers to peasants, popes to the poor, assumptions and practices that did not simply stoke peoples’ fear of harmful magic, but also equipped them with an arsenal of magical weapons that some people most definitely used.

Early medieval penitentials treated image magic and toxic potions as actual practices and engraved Norse runes were part of an extensive system of harmful as well as helpful magic. Itinerant sorcerers in the ninth and tenth centuries extorted tribute from peasants by threatening to bring storms down on their crops, while Burchard of Worms tells of women who “remove a turf from their [enemy’s] footprints and … hope thereby to take away their health or life.” Accusers in late medieval sorcery trials brought forth “magical amulets that had been left under their thresholds or beds” that contained “noxious powders, human feces, wood from a gallows, or other such materials” like “the bodies of … small … animals.” Necromancers’ manuals containing intricate rituals for summoning demons which were used by some learned magicians for various nefarious purposes survive from the late Middle Ages, and there is ample evidence that, just as in the classical world, professional sorcerers were available to work their baleful magic for a fee.