
'Wayward' Indians: The Social Construction of Native American Witchcraft

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Abstract

The relationship between the breakdown of traditional ways of life and the eruption of witch-hunts among Native Americans is examined. This paper argues that Native American tribes experienced social disruption and a subsequent loss of autonomy as the federal government implemented policies that included a mix of acculturation, removal, and, in some cases, extermination. At the societal level, extensive contact with white Europeans also led to disruptions in the lifestyle, politics, and religion of Indigenous peoples. Accompanying this disorder was a rise in accusations of witchcraft. Using Durkheim's model of deviance, this essay argues that witchcraft was generally constructed as a social control mechanism to ensure social order and maintain moral boundaries. In times of social upheaval and disruption, the paranoia about witchcraft increased substantially to epidemic proportions: any hint of insolence could make one a suspect. This paper examines accusations of witchcraft rather than the ethnographic details of their actual practices. Tribal laws, treaties, and oral history transcripts are analyzed to determine how witchcraft accusations were used to negotiate the social and moral boundaries of Native American society in times of conflict. Comparisons are made to outbreaks of witchcraft in European society, including the more famous New England witch-hunts.

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“**Beware of powerful beings**” – Navajo maxim

Studies of Native American witchcraft have primarily documented its practices and practitioners as part of a traditional worldview of shamans and magic. This emphasis on shamanism and magic overlooks witchcraft’s broader function as a mechanism of social control. Witchcraft, or the attribution of witchcraft, often serves as a means of conceptualizing opposing viewpoints or deviant behavior. Though recent scholarship on Native Americans has begun to incorporate witchcraft’s socially created attributes, including the significance of gender, these studies continue to ignore its broader social control implications. This essay uses a Durkheimian model of deviance to analyze Native American witchcraft as a way to critique the generally accepted view that witchcraft is an inherent cultural characteristic rather than a socially constructed phenomenon. In Native American societies, witchcraft accusations and periodic witch-hunts have been used as means of social control.

What is witchcraft? Weber (1964) conceptualized witchcraft as a type of technology used to tap into superhuman powers, while O’Dea (1966:7) saw it as a method by which to invoke supernatural powers and direct it toward specific “empirical ends.” Anthropological studies of witchcraft document its widespread association with magic and religion (Marwick 1970; Middleton 1976). E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1976) observed that among the Azande of Central Africa, witchcraft was ubiquitous to its society and played a part in every activity of its life. Pritchard observed that like other societies, within the Azande “witchcraft beliefs embrace a system of values which regulate human conduct (18).”

It is important to point out that it is problematic to associate the single term witchcraft with all Native American tribes because of cultural differences in the understanding of and appropriate use of supernatural powers. The Cherokee regarded witches as "counterfeit or pseudo human being since humanity is but one among many guises that they assume in their incessant metamorphosis and in their parasitic relationship to the Cherokee community (Fogelson 1975:128)." Anthropologist Deward Walker, Jr. (1989) argues that it is almost impossible to define Native American witchcraft and sorcery since "no universal definition can encompass all groups in the Americas (3)." This stems not only from the problems arising from cultural differences in defining "witchcraft," but also the many local variations in its belief and practice.

In this essay, I do not focus on a single type of witchcraft or any one Native American tribe, but rather in examining several, I delineate patterns of witchcraft accusations within a specific social order or social system. For general studies on non-Western tribal society witchcraft see Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976) and Clyde Kluckhohn's work on the Navaho (1967). Unfortunately, there is not enough ethno-historical data from any single tribe to concentrate a focused investigation on it alone. Witchcraft persecutions during the eighteenth and nineteenth century are recorded on the Seneca by Morgan ([1851] 1972:164-65) and Wallace (1972:254-55), the Chickasaw (Adair [1775] 1930), the Natchez (Thwaites 1847:425), the Delaware, (Miller 1994), the Navajo (Blue 1988) and the Shawnee (Cave 1995).

But it is not necessary to give a complete definition of witchcraft. Recently, Walker (1999) stated that "[c]ultures throughout the world have feared witches, unfortunates who faced blame for disease, flood, drought, and virtually every other

misfortune that befell the community” (52). Drawing off of a theme within Walker’s statement, I will concentrate on the attribution of certain negative outcomes in a society on persons (namely witches); the broad definition of witchcraft as the use of magic to bring about evil is sufficient. By analyzing accounts of witch-hunts from several different tribes I began to discern a common pattern of witch persecution: in the face of overwhelming social change the persecution of witches- and not witchcraft itself - is a device through which tribal social boundaries are recreated. The persecution of witches is the means by which societal norms are redefined.

This study, then, is concerned with accusations of witchcraft rather than the ethnographic details of their actual practices. Witches represent a supernatural force beyond social control and their punishment is a mechanism by which to restore the social order.

The fear of witches using the supernatural for their own individual purposes rather than for the common weal has long compelled Western societies to seek them out and destroy them. In ancient Greece, Plato defined the practice of witchcraft as one type of poison “...which works by art, magic, incantations, and spells... and breeds in the minds of the projectors the belief that they possess such powers of doing harm, in those of the victims the conviction that the authors of their suffering can verily bewitch them” (Laws XI933a). [1] The generalized fear of some unknown force or person working against people and their society is reinforced by the acknowledgement that there are things beyond one’s control. Removal of those forces within one’s control thus makes good social policy.

Previous studies of witchcraft in Europe and the United States have emphasized how the fear of witchcraft was used to maintain religious (Christianity) and gender social control. Ben-Yehuda (1985:27) argues that the demise of witchcraft as a positive or technology of action “and its very specific goals (love potions, spells, love magic, and the like)” was due to Christian sanctioned witch-hunts beginning in the late Middle Ages (Thomas 1971; Russell 1980; Ben-Yehuda 1985; Levack 1987; Barstow 1994). During the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witchcraft became known as an “evil entity that created rather than solved problems.” Witches and witchcraft came to be represented as “something purely evil (Ben-Yehuda: 27-28).”

During the European witch-hunts from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, women accounted for 85 percent of the estimated five hundred thousand witches executed (Ben-Yehuda 1985:23). Women were more likely to be charged with practicing witchcraft (Garrett 1977; Andreski 1982; Heinsohna and Steigher 1982), as was true in the United States (Demos 1970, 1982; Karlsen 1998). Such documentary evidence has shifted the focus of witchcraft studies from those that emphasized religion and religious control to the significance of gender (beginning with Ehrenrich and English’s (1973) historical study of women healers). Recent analysis of the famous Salem witch-trials now includes topics related broadly to gender (Karlsen 1998; Reis 1995, 1997, 1998) as well as the interaction of gender, culture and communication (Breslaw 1996; Kamensky 1997).

Though studies of Native American witchcraft have produced detailed accounts of its technique as well as the role of its practitioners, these studies have failed to provide an adequate explanation of how witchcraft has been socially constructed as a

mechanism of social control. This essay examines Native American witchcraft in association with the social exercise of power and the communal orientation of Native Americans.

When the traditional communal organization of Native American society became threatened, the persecution of witches and the search for witchcraft practitioners would be used as a means of social control to maintain social and moral boundaries. Native American societies undergoing tremendous social change, usually in association with fundamental changes in their societies due to European invasion and conquest of their land, began to construct witchcraft as a deviant act.

Social Construction of Witchcraft: Social and Moral Boundaries

The social construction of witchcraft (accusations, witch-hunts, purges) is best understood by examining how it contributes to defining a tribe’s social and moral boundaries. Using Durkheim’s (1938:67) conceptual framework of crime and deviance assuming that all societies negotiate an understanding of where the boundary lines are drawn between acceptable and unacceptable actions (i.e.,crime). Each society draws these lines differently and thus the definition of crime and deviance is socially constructed.

By defining crime or deviance as a “normal function” of society, Durkheim theorizes, “where crime exists, collective sentiments are sufficiently flexible to take on a new form and crime sometimes helps to determine the form they will take (1938:65-73).” Therefore, deviance is a mechanism for social change and a basis for collective action to counteract that change. Durkheim further suggests that crime’s “primary and

principle function is to create respect for...beliefs, traditions, and collective practices (1933:72, 80).”

This general function of deviance as a universal social phenomenon with specific cultural variations in its form and content can be used to conceptualize witchcraft. In times when the social order is under duress, or evil has befallen the group, the group will seek to find a causal factor. Under this conception of deviance, witchcraft, or the attribution of witchcraft, defines an unacceptable form of action. The belief that witches can in fact effect changes in the world, combined with misfortunes within the society or group lead to the belief that witches are causing the behavior (causing harm). The behavior of witchcraft thereby becomes a form of deviance, which violates social norms.

I am not saying that the social group makes up the belief in witches and then attributes the witches to the problem. It is that the causal link between evil actions befalling the society and witchcraft will result in the searching for those causal agents. (Of course the agents are found in precisely those groups or people least able to react to the social forces bearing against them.) Witches are not just scapegoats; rather they are forces working against the social order just as the behavior of criminals causes harm to society, so too the behavior of witches causes harm to society.

The appearance of witches and witchcraft at work in a society, and their subsequent persecution, can then be explained as a way to maintain social cohesion during times of crisis and uncertainty. It can also help explain why in societies with existing witchcraft practitioners, those same practitioners may be labeled suddenly

during times of crisis as deviants - the social context has shifted such that they are now perceived as malevolent rather than benevolent.

Durkheim (1933:110) explains how the social and moral boundaries are collectively maintained:

Crime damages ...unanimity [and] since it is the common conscience, which is attacked, it must be that which resists, and accordingly the resistance must be collective. [Punishment's] true function is to maintain social cohesion... We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has just been committed. They stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk of the event and wax indignant in common. From all the similar impressions which are exchanged, for all the temper that gets expressed, there emerges a unique temper - which is everybody's without being anybody's in particular.

Crime, or in this case, witchcraft, causes a threat to the collective conscience, resulting in a collective response of punishment. According to Durkheim, the collective conscience is synonymous with social cohesion: it binds society together. It represents common values and morals, ensuring cohesion, especially during times of transition and crisis. In his study of witchcraft, Ben-Yehuda (1987) noted that "[a]cts that challenge this consciousness of likeness will most probably be defined as deviant and may lead to social change (14)."

The crime and punishment of witchcraft, then, facilitates cohesion of the collective conscience. This is the conclusion Kai Erikson (1966:4, 11,13) arrives at in his study of the 1692 Salem witch trials:

Deviance makes people more alert to the interests they share in common and draws attention to those values which constitute the collective conscience of the community...Boundary-maintaining devices...demonstrate to whatever audience is concerned where the line is drawn between behavior that belongs in the special universe of the group and behavior that does not...For these reasons, deviant behavior is not a simple kind of leakage which occurs when the machinery is in poor working order, but may be, in controlled quantities, an important condition for preserving the stability of social life.

In modern society, the “drawing attention to those values which constitute the collective conscience” is fulfilled by “the widespread reporting of deviance in the mass media...replacing more direct ‘degradation ceremonies’ (Ben-Yehuda 1987:6).” In traditional societies, degradation ceremonies included public hangings or the use of stocks and pillories (Erikson 1966:29). In Puritan Massachusetts and in Native American communities throughout the United States, degradation ceremonies included the public execution of witches.

In studies of the European witch craze from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, Ben-Yehuda (1985) views the witch hunts as “closely linked to specific changes in societal boundaries in different realms” suggesting that as medieval society was disintegrating it was being replaced by a new social order.

The boundaries of the old order were changing in a very significant way along more than one dimension. These changes brought about innovative institutional arrangements in all social spheres. As a result, new and positive reactions to the changes became possible, since old traditions, and limitations were broken (e.g., in the areas of art and science). However, there was also an extreme negative reaction, a ferocious witch-hunt aimed at restoring the old societal boundaries.

Heinsohn and Steiger (1982) and Breslaw (1994) argue that as healers and midwives, women were more commonly the targets of witchcraft. Breslaw (1996) concludes that during the Reformation these women became a significant threat to the Christian church. Their use of herbs and medicines was perceived as an unchristian manipulation of the supernatural while their role as medical practitioners gave them some legitimacy as community leaders. As villagers continued to seek their advice about not only healing but their personal lives as well, it convinced local ecclesiastical authorities that these women were a serious threat to their authority. Breslaw argues that the focal point

of the European witch craze finally became centered on strictly limiting women’s independence and controlling their sexuality as the new social order became dominant over the old.

In much the same way, the old social boundaries of Native American communities were crumbling before the onslaught of European invasion and usurpation of their land, culture and traditions. Caught between wanting to preserve their way of their life and faced with the problem of being unable to resist or prevent a fundamental re-ordering of their existence, Native Americans, like the Europeans a few centuries before them, responded negatively to these bewildering changes through witch-hunts (Dennis 2003).

Witches stand outside the standard norms of society; they deviate from the “normal” group and have a role distinct from the group (even if that role is held in a generally favorable light). This is illustrated by the Cherokee belief that witches are “nonpersons” or “dead” because they violate the sanctions of the tribe’s morality (Fogelson 1979:87). It is not the existence of witchcraft itself that is the target, but rather that it signifies the potential for chaos. Once the illusion of a moral consensus has been removed in times of social change, the large-scale persecution of deviants is one way to reconstruct its social and moral boundaries. For example, among the Hurons and Iroquois anyone, “who was guilty of treason, or *by his character and conduct made himself dangerous or obnoxious to the public,*” could be executed without redress once the council of chiefs secretly charged them with practicing witchcraft and appointed a young man to kill them (Parkman [1865] 1983: 381). [2]

Witchcraft Accusations and Persecutions

Next, I focus on two types of destabilization Native American tribal social orders experienced in American society: confrontation and removal. The first social upheavals were during the period of initial confrontations between white settlers and European colonial powers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The outcome of these confrontations was the beginning of a large-scale removal of Native Americans to the interior of the country. These actions coincided with the Puritan witch trials of 1692 in Salem, and with an analogous form of witch persecution within Native American tribes. Before the interaction with white settlers, Native Americans were more likely to seek out and exterminate witches outside their tribes or kinship groups. In light of enormous changes wrought by this interaction between settlers, Native Americans began to persecute witches as a way to stabilize their rapidly eroding moral order: witches were just as likely to be sought within their kinship group as outside of it.

The shift in belief that a malevolent person or witch could live within rather than outside their village coincides with the famous the Salem witch trials (Breslaw 1996). Inside Salem, settlers' generalized fears about Native Americans attacking their community were embodied in the serving girl, Tituba, who was among the first inhabitants to be accused of practicing witchcraft (Breslaw 1996:2-4). Described in some accounts as an "Indian servant," Tituba's subsequent confession of witchcraft provided a "new conception of the witch, based partly on Indian belief (Breslaw 1996: 8)."

Native Americans were obsessed with the same problem: how to root out an evil menace to the social order – in this case, the European settlers - and came up with the similar solution – have an internal witch-hunt (Dennis 2003). For many Native Americans, practicing witchcraft included the use and abuse of power such as the use of magic by shamans to cast evil spells characterized by “the malevolent use of spiritual power” that resulted in some catastrophe such as disease and death (Cave 1995:447). As pointed out earlier, originally witchcraft practiced against Native Americans was believed to originate from outsiders, other tribes or Europeans. Puritan sources indicate that Native Americans believed that “shamanic power could be used against an enemy, but they recorded no instances in which any Indian was actually punished by the members of his own band for the practice of witchcraft.” Indian informants “explained that witchcraft...could be employed against enemies, not against one’s own kinfolk (Cave: 447).”

Only after interaction with Europeans did the locus of witchcraft turn inwards on to the perceived witch’s own tribe. Anthropologist Deward Walker (1989:9) notes that this shift to the practice of “in-group witchcraft and sorcery suspicion.... stems from neo-colonialist struggles with members and groups of the greater Euroamerican society.” Extensive contact with white Europeans had led to disruptions in lifestyle, politics, and religion, resulting in an outbreak of witch-hunts and accusations of witchcraft against members of their own tribes.

Historical documents left by missionaries, traders and government agents on the frontier during the eighteenth and nineteenth century report a growing fear among Native Americans that witches *inside* a particular kinship group were practicing

harmful magic against it, causing evil. As Native Americans became increasingly powerless to resist and defend their communities from white settlers, the “common enemy” was no longer sought outside the tribe: individuals within the tribe were targeted if they were perceived to be a threat to its leadership or were in some way hindering a return to a traditional pre-European way of life.

Essentially powerless to white aggression, Native Americans responded with an outbreak of witchcraft accusations against tribal members in an attempt to control the unseen and incomprehensible forces of disorganization. Where witchcraft had once been exclusively practiced against enemies outside of the tribe, there was a rising fear that witchcraft was being used against the tribe from within. This shift from the location of a “common enemy” outside the tribe to inside the tribe is evidenced by the targeting of individuals who both pose a threat to its leadership and thereby hinder the tribe’s ability to return to a traditional way of life. Purging the tribe of malevolent people (i.e., witches) was thought to counteract the evil effects of these changes in lifestyle, politics, and religion; by blaming it on witchcraft, the violation of the traditional way of life could, in turn, be corrected or restore harmony.

Some witchcraft accusations arose over internal power struggles led by “nativist preachers of reform and revitalization who, claiming direct inspiration from the Great Spirit, called for changes in Indian life and, in so doing, often challenged established village leaders (Cave 1995: 448).” Internal power struggles and nativist movements led to a shift in the origins of witchcraft accusations from without to being generated from within tribes or kinship groups. One such instance was recorded in 1751 by a missionary about a Delaware woman who was living in a Wyoming village in

Pennsylvania. She claimed to be a prophetess inspired by the “Great Spirit” calling for the people to “free themselves of disease by destroying the poison possessed by their old and principal men (Cave 1995:448).” The “poison” she referred to was the traditional medicine bundles possessed by shamans and chiefs. Though the outcome of her actions is not known, this prophetess accused tribal elders of witchcraft because she thought their actions had brought misfortune to their people. These actions foreshadowed other events to come.

Beginning with the colonial period and continuing through the nineteenth century, Native American witchcraft purges were often associated with nativist responses to European encroachment on their land, culture and religion (Cave 1995; Dennis 1998, 2003; Dowd 1992; Miller 1994). A Delaware prophet called Neolin prophesied that if only his tribe would rid themselves of alcoholism and dependency on European trade and goods, they would be able to resist further European westward expansion. In 1805, the Shawnee Prophet, along with Tecumseh, his older brother, led another nativist movement to purge their tribe of the evil caused by European domination. The Shawnee Prophet singled out four women as being responsible for practicing malevolent magic, accusing them of using witchcraft against the tribe. He sentenced them to death and they were only saved at the last minute through the efforts of a Presbyterian minister (Tanner 1987:103). The four women accused of witchcraft were perceived to be guilty of betraying the social and moral boundaries of their tribe through their supposed employment of evil magic.

Sometimes the targets of witch hunts were Christian converts or elderly leaders (men as well as women) who were believed to be too closely associated with European

ethics and thus making them responsible for the present social disintegration of their traditional culture. “By purging the witches, the Delaware established their boundaries and strengthened their cultural reintegration...[Witch hunts] resulted in greater numbers of young people, hearty survivors who used the purge as an opportunity to move into positions of leadership (Miller 1994:248).”

The shifting of the moral and social lines among Native American tribes was also influenced by the change of federal governmental policies from voluntary to forced removal. Plans for removing Native Americans west of the Mississippi river were first drafted before the War of 1812 by William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, Missouri (Gibson 1976:4). One Indian response to this policy was to cooperate through voluntary exile. After receiving a grant of land from the Spanish government around 1800, a mixed group of Cherokee, Shawnee, Delaware and Kickapoo voluntarily removed themselves to eastern Texas because they “had found the encroaching Anglo-American settlements threatening to their cherished tribal life ways (Gibson 1976:5).”

Rather than fleeing as a means to protect traditional ways of life, other tribes resigned themselves to living in a European dominated society. In an effort to remain on part of their ancestral lands, the Five Civilized Tribes were forced to cede large tracts of it for white settlement. [3] Tribal leaders also facilitated assimilation to European customs by adopting the dress, political organization and, even conversion to Christianity. This policy was met with tribal dissent, creating conflicts about who should be their leaders. Encroachment of white settlers continually threatened their lands, while taking on European habits and behavior also weakened traditional

customs. These changes away from the ways of their ancestors brought further disunity among the tribal members (Gibson 1971), making them vulnerable to internal strife and giving rise to fears of witchcraft.

By 1830, the policy of removal gradually evolved into an inevitability for all the Five Civilized Tribes with the election of Andrew Jackson. Mississippi passed legislation in January 1830, “revoking special privileges...[held by Native Americans]...and prescribing penalties for failure to comply (Jordan 1976:22).” A few months on May 28, 1830, the Indian Removal Act was passed, making “removal” federal policy.

This new direction in federal policy and law also created new divisions within the tribes concerning legitimacy of leadership; some blamed their chiefs for authorizing their removal. The Choctaws were in “confusion and political disunity” after they were sentenced to removal and lost over ten million acres of land with the signing of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. [4] They quickly replaced their leaders with ones “who labeled themselves leaders of the Republican Party and opposed to the treaty-signing Despotic party (Jordan 1976: 23).” President Jackson chose to ignore these elections and ordered that the original chiefs be restored to tribal leadership. Inevitably, these and many other tribes were removed to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma, where suspicion continued that witchcraft was to blame for their troubles.

Reports of witchcraft trails conducted among the Choctaws and the Chickasaws in the early part of the twentieth century indicate that the fear and suspicion of witchcraft persisted for many years after removal (Dale 1930: 128). Additionally, oral history interviews collected by WPA workers during the 1930s (called the Indian-

Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma) contain numerous instances in which witchcraft accusations were made to justify murder: the ritual killing of witches to strengthen the moral boundaries of the community (Seidman 1965). For example, in the late nineteenth century, a Choctaw living in what is now Oklahoma killed his wife with an ax because he suspected her of being a witch. He was subsequently acquitted of murder after he provided “proof” that she was witch. [5] Nancy Fulsom Cox, another Oklahoma Choctaw, reported that a woman in the tribe perched on rooftops and lived by stealing from others. Cox stated that “she was a conjurer and was responsible for all the bad things that happened in the community.” [6] Finally, Elmer Hill of the Creek Tribe told the story of a young man who said he was a witch and claimed to have caused the death of a sick man; he was buried alive as punishment. [7]

Both the Cherokees, prior to relocation in 1824 (Mooney 1897) and the Choctaws, just after relocation in 1834 [8] prohibited the “practice of burning to death or otherwise torturing and killing persons accused of witchcraft (Dale 1930:128).” Conversely, persons who accused other tribal members of practicing witchcraft could also be subjected to a “punishment of sixty lashes on the bare back..” [9] The origins of these laws are attributed to the “silent working of missionary influence,” but the passage of these laws did not curtail the flow of witchcraft accusations (Mooney 1897). Kilpatrick (1997:5) notes that among the western Cherokee “the killing of suspected witches...continued unabated throughout the nineteenth century.” Writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, Swanton (1928:632) reported that the Creek “have been known to knock old women regarded as witches on the head and throw them into

the water. Now there is a law against it, but even last year an old woman was killed as a witch.”

These laws are representative of the existence of a generalized belief among Native Americans that traditional ways of living, particularly its emphasis on communal values rather than individualist ones, were under attack: an adjustment was necessary to restore social harmony. A witch-hunt was a speedy remedy to rooting out the evil that had somehow penetrated the boundaries of the tribe. The violation of the tribe’s moral and social boundaries due to the pressures of relocation erupted in a pattern of witchcraft accusations, which derived its legitimacy from a traditionalist worldview.

Summary and Conclusion

Faced with the overwhelming changes the invasions of white settlers, and later, the political and economic resources of the federal government, Native Americans fought to survive as a “people.” That these crises were often interpreted as the result of supernatural forces, i.e., witchcraft, it is not surprising that “Indians sought solutions both in religious tradition and innovation (Dennis 2003:22).” They tried to return to a pre-European way of life by purging themselves of evil brought about by the malevolent use of witchcraft. The witchcraft persecutions that ensued were legitimized by the belief that they were acting for the common benefit of their community. Witchcraft accusations were a way to restore harmony to their lives in the face of overwhelming and incomprehensible change.

Witchcraft persecutions also constituted a device to control the moral and social boundaries of the tribe and remind its members as to what were legitimate and

illegitimate practices in relation to the traditional Native American way of life.

Witchcraft persecutions varied by tribe, sometimes-targeting men, and other times, women. For example, among the Delaware, the matrilineal association of witchcraft combined with secrecy in a society that stressed communal ties, resulted in many women being the targets of witch-hunts, trails and executions. Miller (1994) reports that women accused of practicing witchcraft were often executed to neutralize external threats such as a disease epidemic.

Though there were differences among Native Americans tribes in the way they defined their social and moral boundaries of what was legitimate and illegitimate, they were all bound by the same generalized belief that they were defending their traditional rights and way of life. Sometimes this included justification for white assimilation in an attempt to avoid relocation, as among the Cherokees of Georgia. Other times, internal divisions in the tribes caused the forcible removal of leaders such as Greenwood LeFlore and David Folsom of the Choctaws, (who opposed removal) with those who were more conciliatory toward removal (Jordan 1976:20-21). The various actions calculated to restore prosperity and peace to the tribes resulted in a pattern of witchcraft persecutions.

Though it would be easy to reduce the cause of these persecutions as being related exclusively to times of adversity (i.e., removal), an examination of Native American witchcraft demonstrates that the origins of these accusations are associated with the wider consensus related to commonly held notions that comprise generalized belief systems. The defense of social and moral boundaries by many Native American tribes was maintained through periodic witch-hunts and accusations. The social control

measures of witch-hunts had “an obviously inhibiting effect on acculturation and other cultural changes (Miller 1994:248).” However, Native Americans were not the only ones who engaged in witch-hunts in order to clarify internal tribal or community boundaries by attacking deviants. White Europeans living in Colonial New England exhibited a similar pattern of persecution.

Studying social and moral factors as well as political and economic considerations provides a more complete picture as to why the witch-hunts emerged when they did (McWilliams 1996). Kai Erickson’s (1966) study of the Puritan witch-hunts identified three waves of internal conflicts among the Puritans: the expulsion and eventual execution of Antinomists in 1637, Quakers in 1656-65, and, finally, witches in 1692. As each group was singled out as heretic, the definition of heresy or deviance became less specific and more broadly characterized to encompass a variety of acts directed against the community and deemed to be evil. Just as the obsession with evil grew among the Puritans, so too did the irrational fear that even seemingly God-fearing Puritans were in league with Satan in order to manipulate supernatural powers and bring about misfortune. It was an easy next step to believe that witches were to blame.

As recent studies of the New England Puritan witch-hunts suggest, several Puritan settlements like that of Salem Village were under a continual threat of Native American attack (Hill 1995; Norton 2002). Threat of Indian assault had stymied frontier settlements just to the north of Salem limiting access to additional land at a time when its sagging economy desperately needed to expand (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974). Salem Village itself, the site of the greatest concentration of witchcraft charges in 1692, was acrimoniously divided into feuding factions. Fueling this resentment was

its political and ecclesiastical dependence on the more prosperous Salem Town. As its economic, ecclesiastical and political crises heightened, it was easier to characterize Antinomists, Quakers and even outspoken women (Kamensky 1998; Reiss 1995, 1997), as responsible for the village’s troubles. Those accused of practicing witchcraft served as tangible evidence that the community’s woes were due to internal malevolence.

Among the women accused of witchcraft, their impertinence combined with having wealth made it more likely for them to be singled them out as “deviant.” Karlsen (1998) argues that these older, usually married women past child bearing age violated the religious and/or economic Puritan social hierarchy by either being outspoken or possessing personal wealth. Hill (1995) and Norton (2002) both point out that the mass hysteria in Salem Village was related to a complex of factors, but especially an overall economic recession. Being a wealthy woman in the midst of such economic disparity especially made her a vulnerable target. If she also challenged the male church hierarchy, her fate was almost sealed. The witch hunts provided relief from the guilt and fear that accompanied the dramatic changes to Puritan society as its old moral boundaries of communal austerity and self-denial was rapidly being replaced by a new ethic, commercial individualism. Unable to control the pace of these changes, the Puritans, like the Native Americans, tried to reassert control by purging itself of evil. Anyone was a potential “deviant.” As Erickson argues (1966: ix, 68, 92,114,137):

The deviant is a person whose activities have moved outside the margins of the group, and when the community calls him to account for that vagrancy it is making a statement about the nature and placement of its boundaries. It is declaring how much variability and diversity can be tolerated within the group before it begins to lose its distinctive shape, its unique identity.

The occasion which triggers this boundary crisis may take several forms - a realignment of power within the group, for example, or the appearance of new adversaries outside it - but in any case the crisis itself will be reflected in altered patterns of deviation and perceived by the people of the group as something akin to what we now call a crime wave.

A similar “crime wave” occurred among the Native Americans removed to Indian Territory instigated by similar conditions as the New England witchcraft persecutions. As Erikson suggests, the “unique identity” of Native Americans, including their tribal laws, government and communal land system, was constantly being threatened by federal government policies to destroy them. As they struggled to preserve their own ways of living, the moral boundaries that bound them together as a group were being refashioned by internal power divisions and external pressures to conform to federal policies.

Accusations of witchcraft coincided with internal tribal divisions over contested leadership and its accompanying power shift between “traditionalists” and those who were willing to assimilate. Some of these witchcraft accusations led to tribally sanctioned witchcraft trials and executions. The traumatic effect of relocation policies on Native Americans caused an increase of witchcraft accusations. A significant contributing factor to the character and nature of these witchcraft accusations is related to the paternalistic influence of Christian missionaries along with “modernization” attempts by the federal government to force them to adapt the language and culture of the dominant American society. Accounts of people accused of witchcraft indicate that acculturation (i.e. converting to Christianity or adopting European culture) made them marginal to their own tribes and therefore targets of witch-hunts. They had violated the moral center of the traditional Indian heritage, religion, ways of life, and were blamed

for the social upheaval Native Americans experienced during the nineteenth century. These accusations of witchcraft also indicate a division within tribal leadership between tribal elders and the young. A "new" type of witchcraft accusation occurred after contact with Europeans based on fears that evil magic was being practiced from within and against the community, rather than originating from outside.

Witchcraft persecutions were legitimated through "the consensus of the common weal grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations (Thompson 1971:78-79)." For traditional Native Americans, this moral consensus was made possible only by maintaining separation from European society through retention of their distinct material culture. Accusations of witchcraft were used to ensure these boundaries were not violated. If anyone crossed over these borders, they could use witchery as an excuse to purge their tribe of unsavory individuals. Tribal laws were enacted making the practice of witchcraft a crime and provided a legal basis by which to conduct these purges. Given the limited means by which Native Americans could resist relocation and other federal policies intended to destroy their unique status, witchcraft persecutions became an important mechanism of social control outside the jurisdiction of Europeans.

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[1] ‘By “force” I mean what happens when men change their opinions under the influence of pain or suffering.’
‘This too I understand,’ he said. ‘You are right.’
And I think that you too would call it “witchcraft” when people change their opinions under the spell of pleasure or impulse of panic.’
‘Yes, such delusions always seem to act like witchcraft.’
Plato, *The Republic*, Part Four [Book Three] p. 120

[2] Italics my own.

[3] The tribes who experienced dislocation or “removal” west of the Mississippi River during the nineteenth century include: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Delaware, and Seminole.

[4] The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was signed on December 27, 1830, requiring the Choctaws to surrender 10,423,130 acres of land in Mississippi. See Jordan 1976:22

[5] Vol. 9:40-42. WPA Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. Columbus Rose, Atoka, Oklahoma. Choctaw Tribe.

[6] Vol 2:310. WPA Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. Nancy Fulsom Cox, Atoka, Oklahoma. Choctaw Tribe.

[7] Vol. 29:111-116. WPA Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma. Elmer Hill. Creek Tribe.

[8] See *Laws of the Choctaw Nation, Revised and Collated to October, 1867*. Session I. - 1834. Section 3.

[9] Ibid.

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