

THE CULT OF THE WERWOLF IN EUROPE

BY LEWIS SPENCE

THE religious nature of witchcraft has in recent years been made plain, chiefly through the instrumentality of Charles Godfrey Leland and Miss M. A. Murray, reader in Egyptology at University College, London. I myself had a hazy notion that a cult with well-marked religious attributes lay concealed behind the folk-lore idea of the witch and her practices, but I was obsessed with the idea that the confessions and phenomena of witchcraft were to be accounted for by hallucination and self-hypnosis, and, like many a more able worker in this field, I almost rejected the hypothesis that witchcraft was the modern representative of an older religion, although, oddly enough, I subscribed to a general belief in the survival of ancient but degenerate cults in Britain. On perusing Miss Murray's articles on the subject, however, I immediately embraced her conception of the survival of a very ancient witch-religion in Britain and elsewhere, as affording the most satisfactory solution of the problem that has yet appeared.

Perusing accounts of the trials of persons accused of werwolfism, I observed that in nearly all of these the criminal, in admitting his guilt, remarked upon the existence of a confraternity or brotherhood of werwolves, to which he had attached himself. The circumstances connected with these brotherhoods led me to the belief that they strongly resembled in character the societies which crystallized round the witch-cult. I looked for analogies among barbarous peoples, and discovered them. I even found that werwolves attended the witches' Sabbath in wolf shape. Finally, I formed the conclusion that werwolfism, like witchcraft, had originally a religious significance. I am not, however, prepared to say that its cult was one and the same as that of which witchcraft was a degenerate survival; but I believe that these cults impinged upon one another at certain points, and in certain circumstances and localities may even have become fused into one, if, indeed, they were originally separate.

At the trial of Pierre Bourgot in 1521, the accused admitted that one Michael Verding, also arraigned on a similar charge, and a certain black horseman made him take an oath of allegiance

to the devil, and led him to a clearing in the woods at Chastel Charlon, where a number of people were dancing. Each of them held in his hand a green torch which emitted a blue flame, and Pierre was stripped naked and smeared with a magical ointment, which caused him to be transformed into a wolf. Gilles Garnier, tried at Dôle in 1593, asserted that when wandering in the woods he was met by a phantom in the shape of a man, who told him that he could perform miracles, declaring that he would teach him how to transform himself at will into a wolf, lion or leopard, "and because the wolf is more familiar in this country than the other kinds of wild beasts," he adopted this form, anointing himself with an unguent when he desired to transform himself. Pierre Gandillon, a peasant living in the Jura Mountains, confessed in 1598 that he had been to the witches' Sabbath in wolf shape, and his sister was accused of intercourse with the Evil One, who appeared to her as a black goat, a familiar apparition at witch-gatherings. (The *lupo manaro* was an Italian witch who took wolf-shape.)

Jean Grenier, a boy of fourteen, tried at Roche Chalais in 1603, told how a neighbour, Pierre la Tilhaire, had introduced him to "the Lord of the Forest," who had provided him with a wolf-skin and ointment. This personage had forbidden him to bite the thumb-nail of his left hand, which was longer than the others, and told him not to lose sight of it whilst in wolf form, or he would immediately revert to his human shape.

These few instances, taken from a large number of others, seem to show that werwolfism was a social thing, having the nucleus of a settled cult behind it. Let us see what evidence can be adduced for the existence of a cult of werfolk in Europe and elsewhere.

G. Peucer (*Les Devins*, p. 198), writing of lycanthropy, says: "Immediately after Christmas Day is past, a lame boy goes round the country calling these slaves of the devil, of which there are a great number, and enjoining them to follow him. If they procrastinate or go too slowly, there immediately appears a tall man with a whip whose thongs are made of iron chains, with which he urges them onwards, and sometimes lashes the poor wretches so cruelly that the marks of the whip remain on their bodies till long afterwards, and cause them the greatest pain. As soon as they have set out on their road, they are all changed into wolves. . . . They travel in thousands, having for their conductor the bearer of the whip, after whom they march. When they reach the fields, they rush upon the cattle they find

there, tearing and carrying away all they can, and doing much other damage ; but they are not permitted to touch or wound persons. When they approach any rivers, their guide separates the waters with his whip, so that they seem to open up and leave a dry space by which to cross. At the end of twelve days the whole band scatters, and every one returns to his home, having regained his proper form. This transformation, they say, comes about in this wise. The victims fall suddenly on the ground as though they were taken with sudden illness, and remain motionless and extended like corpses, deprived of all feeling, for they neither stir, nor move from one place to another, nor are in any wise transformed into wolves, thus resembling carrion, for although they are rolled or shaken, they give no sign of life."

Olaus Magnus, in his *History of the Goths, Swedes and Vandals*, 1658, says that on Christmas Eve multitudes of werwolves met at a ruined castle in Courland, at which certain tests were set the members of the "pack," but that these "only believe themselves to be wolves," being in a state of hallucination. "Colleges" of werwolves are also spoken of by old authors as existing in Teutonic and Slavonic countries.

In ancient Greece and Rome we find plentiful proof of the existence of religious societies connected with the wolf. "It may be conjectured," says Professor Robertson-Smith, "that the human sacrifices offered to the Wolf Zeus (Lycæus) in Arcadia were originally cannibal feasts of a wolf tribe. The first participants in the rite were, according to late legend, changed into wolves, and in later times at least one fragment of the human flesh was placed among the sacrificial portions derived from other victims, and the man who ate it was believed to become a werwolf." There are many traces of connection between Apollo and the Wolf, and the Lyceum of Apollo Lukios at Athens was the temple of this wolf cult. The Hirpi or wolf-kin of Mount Soracte in Italy were members of certain local families who acted as priests at the annual sacrifice to Apollo, with its "fire-walk." From the myth of Romulus and Remus, too, we may infer that the Romans were anciently a "wolf" clan. The Neuri of Scythia, according to Herodotus, were a body of sorcerers who took the shapes of wolves once a year. A Chinese work of the third century tells that in "Hupeh" there was once a clan that had the power of assuming tiger form, and who worshipped the tiger. In the hinterland of Sherbro, an island off the coast of Sierra Leone, there exists a Human Leopard Society founded for the purpose of obtaining human fat which is used in the

composition of certain fetish medicines. The members of this society are ceremonial cannibals, have a regular process of initiation, and wear leopard-skins when hunting their victims (T. J. Alldridge, *Sherbro and its Hinterland*). The wizards of Abyssinia take the shape of leopards, and members of the Blacksmith caste in that country are supposed to be able to transform themselves into various kinds of animals. The Makololo of the Zambesi believe that persons known as Pondoro can turn themselves into lions, and it would seem that these are members of a secret cult. In Central Java the wer-tiger is personified by an hereditary caste.

In America, several fraternities of the same kind are to be encountered. The Quakiutl Indians of Vancouver had until recently a class of holy persons known as Hametses, of whom Jacobsen says :

“ Admission to the society may be claimed by any youngster of a distinguished and well-to-do family, that is, of one possessing a great many blankets. If found acceptable on the ground of his family connections, the candidate enters on a four years' period of probation full of severe trials and painful castigations. But during the last four weeks of this novitiate he remains alone in the forest, in order by bodily privations to prepare himself for the ceremony of reception. In the eyes of the other natives of the place he is then already a more exalted person, possessed and guided by the god Pae-Pae-Kvalamisiva, whose proper abode is in the air ; and with a certain feeling of awe every one moves away on hearing the notes of his flute and pipe in the bush.

“ The act of reception into the society consists in the hamets suddenly rushing from the wood into the village, and then, in a festive gathering prepared by the other hametses, with his teeth tearing a piece of flesh from the arm of one or more of his tribal associates, and swallowing it ; or else biting pieces out of dog's throats. The men who may get injured by the hamets thus falling upon them in blind fury no doubt let him have his way, either because they are unwilling to contend with the god working with him, or because they are indemnified with a number of blankets, often as many as forty.

“ I may now state that I was twice present as an onlooker at hamets' feasts. On the first occasion, pieces of flesh were torn from the arms of five men ; on the second, a hamets bit out pieces from the throats of sixteen dogs. At the former feast the hamets began by singing and dancing the first four dances usual on such occasions. But towards the end of the fourth he was like a

madman, howling like an enraged bear. Then he tore all off the blankets from his body and rushed on an Indian standing in the vicinity. He defended himself with all his strength, and at first even successfully. But the hamets, to whom his frenzy seemed to lend a supernatural power, soon flung his opponent on the ground, bit a large piece of flesh from his arm and swallowed it.

"At the second feast sixteen dogs were bitten by a hamets, who tore out a piece from the throat of each. While hunting them down he wore a large mask representing a wolf's head, the eyes and lower jaw of which were movable. When there were no more uninjured dogs at hand he pretended to be sick, and apparently vomited through the wolf's jaws large pieces of flesh which he had kept concealed under the blanket. At the same time a second hamets seized with his teeth and pulled out by main force the pieces which were too large to pass easily through the narrow jaws of the mask. At the end a number of Indians joined in a dance which represented how the wolf, who grew longer and longer by several of the men creeping under the blankets, tried to escape, while the crowd sought to lay hold of him. It all made a tremendous uproar."

The Tonkaways, a wild people of Texas, celebrate their origin by a grand annual dance.

"One of them, naked as he was born, is buried in the earth. The others, clothed in wolf-skins, walk over him, snuff around him, howl in lupine style, and finally dig him up with their nails. The leading wolf then solemnly places a bow and arrow in his hands, and to his inquiry as to what he must do for a living, paternally advises him 'to do as the wolves do—rob, kill, and murder, rove from place to place, and never cultivate the soil'" (Schoolcraft, *Indian Tribes*, v, p. 683).

The Berserker of Scandinavia and Iceland were obviously originally members of a bear or wolf cult, the adherents of which "ran amok" and behaved like the animals they worshipped, dressing in the skins of wolves and bears, the name berserk meaning "bear-clothed." Indeed, it would be difficult to discover a country where some such well-defined society of men dressing in the skin of the beast which they adored, and mimicking its man-eating or destructive habits, has not existed at one time or another.

Looking for signs of ritual or other magical practices in the accounts of these societies, we are not disappointed. We have seen that the followers of Apollo Lukios and the Hirpini possessed

a well-developed religious cult, as do the Human Leopard Society, the Hametses and the Tonkaways, in which cannibalistic practice, or the remnants of it, survived and survive. Can we doubt that it was the same with the werwolf societies of Europe, those "colleges" of which the older writers speak?

European werwolfism, indeed, seems to me to bear a close resemblance to the system known as Nagualism found in Mexico and Central America. This religious cult with an initiatory ceremonial and a well-marked ritual, unmercifully opposed to Christianity, was driven by the Spaniards into the wild and unsettled districts, where its orgies are perhaps still celebrated. Its chief tenet was a belief in animal transformation and familiar spirits, and, as it affords a link between witchcraft and totemism, it provides us with even stronger evidences that the witch-cult and the habit of taking beast form are associated. Its votaries clothed themselves in wolf-skins, were temporarily under the hallucination that they were wolves indeed, and gave themselves over to orgiastic cannibalism.

Orgiastic cannibalism! But is not that a very different thing from ritual anthropophagy? Admittedly so; but let us glance at its probable development. The members of the werwolf societies probably took the guise of the wolf because of the survival of a forgotten totemic belief that the members of a tribe or clan were one in blood and origin with the animal which they worshipped. This belief gave rise to a cult of ceremonial cannibalism, a mimicry of the habits of the totem animal, which in later times degenerated into gross cannibalism, just as ceremonial cannibalism elsewhere has degenerated into a popular vice. Later, the practice spread, and often became individual and independent of tribal or cult control. Folk-belief, however, would find its own interpretation of this state of affairs.

Communities of semi-civilized people would begin to shun those who devoured human flesh, and they would be ostracized and classed as wild beasts, the idea that they had something in common with these would grow, and the conception that they were able to transform themselves into veritable animals would be likely to arise therefrom.

The whole circumstances surrounding the cult of the werwolf in Europe thus seem to show that, like that of witchcraft, it may have had a religious meaning, that after a time its fuller ritual significance was lost and that it degenerated into a series of localized orgiastic societies, possessing the memory of its usages, but oblivious of the spirit which animated it during its hey-day.

A SPECTRAL ISLE

BY W. N. NEILL

SOMEWHERE in the Southern Indian Ocean is situate an island that has been seen and even sketched, but which disappears, as if by enchantment, when a ship comes too near. The statements of voyagers as to its appearance vary widely. Some say it is crescent-shaped, others that it is circular, while others, again, would have it a flat island with a great peak in the centre. The name by which it has long been known is S. Juan de Lisboa. Although in modern days it has disappeared from the charts of these latitudes, for map-makers have given up in despair the attempt to fix its correct position, yet for two centuries, at least, it held its place somewhere to the east of Madagascar and south of the Mascarenes. Expeditions are no longer sent out to locate and colonize this mysterious isle, but until the beginning of the nineteenth century attempts were constantly being made by the French Government to add St. Jean, as they called it, to their possessions in the Mascarene archipelago. One of the first to mention it was M. de la Roche Saint André, sent to Madagascar in 1655. He searched for it in the latitude where it was fixed by the Portuguese maps of the period, but could not find it. About 1704 a goodly number of anonymous memoir-writers referred to it and gave careful descriptions of its shape and appearance, and these references served to stimulate research once again. In the instructions given by the French King to the Chevalier de Nyon in 1721 he is ordered to find and take possession of St. Jean in the name of France, but though the Chevalier searched long he had to confess himself baffled. Amongst the instructions given to Labourdonnais, the great French colonial governor, when he set sail for his new post, the necessity of hoisting the French flag over St. Juan was specially impressed upon him, but he was no more successful than his predecessors in the search. In 1772, M. Donjon, second in command of the *Bougainville*, stated that on April 27, during a violent storm, he discovered the elusive island and he gave its precise position. He was also able to make a rough sketch of its outlines. Poivre, then Governor in the Mascarenes, immediately ordered the Chevalier de Saint Felix—afterwards an admiral—commanding the *Heure du*