

# WITCHCRAFT: A LIVING VICE IN AFRICA

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*Witchcraft has been practised for centuries world-wide and it still deeply rooted in people's lives such that it is not ready to eradicate (Sebald, 1978). In spite of the many efforts to eradicate it, it continues to haunt the destiny or spells fear, death and destruction to its victims.*

*The voluntary and repeated confessions and lynching of witches prove that witchcraft exists in Africa. Even within the church, some adherents strongly believe in witchcraft. Consequently, the belief in this vice is a reality in Africa. Africans who do not openly admit its existence, do so in their hearts. It is against this background that this article attempts to discuss the fundamental question of the persistence of this vice.*

## **The Definitions and Meaning of Witchcraft**

Cambridge International Dictionary (1996) defines witchcraft as the use of sorcery or magic. Therefore, beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery are one way of explaining the inexplicable, controlling the uncontrollable, and accounting for the problem of evil (Nelson and Douglas, 1970). Anthropologists and sociologists have tended to distinguish between the witch and a sorcerer.

It is worth noting that the distinction between a witch and a sorcerer is not always clear. It is the witch, in this narrow sense, who is spoken of as the epitome of evil, the negation of the human being, the external enemy intent on destruction, whose image has been said to represent the standardized nightmares of the people (Wilson, 1982).

Middleton and Winter (1970:xv), define witchcraft as a "mystical and innate power which can be used by its possessor to harm other people." This definition excludes the use of external objects in the practice of

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witchcraft and expressly states that the intention of witchcraft is evil. Anthropologists view witchcraft as a psychic act which, in the words of Evan-Pritchard (1937:21) "has no rite, neither casts no spells nor uses medicine." It is a psychic act whose mysterious power permeates all aspects of human life, be it political, economic, social and psychological (Magesa, 1977; Field, 1958). Sorcery, as a form of witchcraft, is distinct from witchcraft and is defined as evil magic against others (Harwood, 1970). It involves the use of objects, formulas, incantations and casting of spells to harm people.

Although anthropologists and sociologists use the terms witchcraft and sorcery to mean different and specific things, the conventional use of the term witchcraft in Kenya today and in Africa in general, encompasses sorcery, the evil eye and all other means which people use to cause harm to others (Mbiti, 1969).

### **Witchcraft Acquisition**

Ways of acquiring witchcraft may take various forms as cited by Omoyajowo in Adegbola (1983). The forms may be through inheritance, which is common among the Kamba people of Kenya and Ga people of Ghana. It is believed that children acquire the vice by inheriting it from their close relatives. In most cases, they may not know it. Some people may go out and purchase it at the designated areas. The poor witches sell the substance of witchcraft to the willing buyers. The person who has bought it would eventually, be able to possess the power of evil.

Others may acquire it intentionally from devils. Certain communities believe that demons force it upon people and compel them to bring destruction upon their target neighbours. While there are those who may get it by swallowing the substance of witchcraft.

### **Witchcraft in the Bible**

Like most cultures of the world, the Israelite's culture acknowledges the belief and practice of witchcraft. For instance, when the Israelites were in Egypt, the lawgiver commanded that all sorcerers and witches be eliminated (Ex. 22:18). Leviticus 20:27 says that a man or woman who is a wizard should be killed by all means. The most comprehensive writing comes from Deuteronomy 18:10-12 where it is written that:

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits or a wizard . . . (KJV)

The well-known accusation of Jesus by the Jews that he healed people by the power of Beelzebub (Mt. 12:24), the pagan prince of devils, shows that Jewish propensity to impute the use of witchcraft in the performance of spectacular acts like healing or causing harm to others (people). Such injunctions could not have been issued in vain. "God has forbidden believers from time to time not to sacrifice to devils or to idols. Therefore, God could not have commanded this if there were no devils.

There were other passages which, in the light of the pre-existent belief in witchcraft, could be interpreted as further evidence of its reality. In short, to doubt the existence of witches and their activities was to deny the very existence of God.

### **African Perspective**

Africans believe in mystical powers existing in the universe which cannot be simply explained psychologically or ignored as mere superstitions or trickery. According to Mugambi and Kirima (1976), persons who can manipulate this power are sometimes also said to have a means of communicating with the spirits, ancestors and even God. In the words of Sebald (1978:38), a witch stands between the victim and the supernatural power. His supernatural mediation was considered harmful. Therefore, they communicated to supernatural powers to bring disaster, death or fear to their victims.

Evans-Pritchard (1997), Parrinder (1958) and Mbiti (1969) wrote about mystical power and concluded that such power exhibits itself in six ways, namely:

- a) **Power of the curse.** In African tradition, cursing involves the use of words or actions against an individual or group. Words indicating the misfortune one will suffer for engaging in a particular action or saying certain words may be uttered. Certain actions, for instance, a **mother exposing** her nakedness to her son for something the **son** did,

constitutes a curse which negatively affects the person cursed. This negative effect reveals itself in disease, poverty or even death. The pronouncement of a curse is normally provoked by the words or actions of the person cursed. Curses are meant to cause harm to someone (Kenyatta, 1938). The fact that the person who curses has the ability to cause harm through the curse makes curses be viewed as witchcraft. However, not all who curse can be accused of witchcraft. Parents, grandparents, and other close relatives are known to curse persons within their families who may have done or said hurtful things against them, their families or the community in general. In most instances, the power of the curse is efficacious only in those persons who may be guilty of the offence.

- b) **Power to change the self.** Some people have the mystical power to change themselves into other life forms. For instance, some people can change themselves into animal forms, or retain their human forms while exhibiting characteristics of animals. Among the Ibo of Nigeria, it is common during certain ceremonies for certain persons to take on the likeness of certain animals with the intention of terrorizing certain people or simply causing fear. This may have the benefit of causing people to stick to certain moral dictates for fear of suffering pain in the hands of the mystical power.
- c) **Power to cause confusion among people.** Some people possess the power of causing confusion in people. This power when employed stupefies the victims to the extent that the witch or wizard can then take advantage of them. They can cause their victims to part with their wealth, or allow themselves to be used in doing something evil like killing someone while in a state of confusion. This power can also cause paralysis or even death.
- d) **Power of identifying witches.** While medicine men are generally understood to be a positive force in society because they identify witches and sorcerers who engage in evil, nevertheless, they are held in awe and even fear. The general population does see them as potentially dangerous because they assume that people with these powers can use the same power to cause confusion, suffering and even death if they so choose. In Kenya, the late Kajiwe, the medicine man from the Coast, was framed for this ability to uncover witches and sorcerers. He would be invited to many parts of the country to identify practitioners of witchcraft and to cleanse persons and places of the destructive powers of witchcraft and sorcery. However, people feared him too because they felt he could use the same power to punish them.

- e) **Contagious power.** Mbiti (1969) cites James Frazer who uses the term "contagious magic" to refer to evil magic which is used to harm people by using objects closely related to the person, for instance hair, foot prints or other articles belonging to the person. Among the Agikuyu of Kenya, answering the call of nature and leaving the faeces uncovered leaves one vulnerable to witches' powers. They can use the faeces to harm the individual who deposited it.
- f) **Homeopathic magic.** According to Frazer (Mbiti, 1969), homeopathic magic is evil magic used by a witch against a doll or an article resembling the intended victim. The evil action against the doll is supposed to affect the intended victim.

In order to understand the hold which witchcraft has over Kenyans in spite of the loathing and fear they have of it, it is important to understand the African worldview within which witchcraft thrives and affects.

According to Evans-Pritchard (1961) and Magesa (1997), every human being is potentially a witch. It is therefore inherent in people to cause harm to others through these hidden mystical powers. This potential is only actualized in a few people. Since nobody can foretell who will be a witch, people have always to be on the lookout for persons who exhibit characteristics that are associated with witchcraft. For instance, eschewing other people's company and behaving in odd ways like running around naked at night, are behaviours associated with witchcraft. Such behaviour is common among the Luhya people of Kenya.

### **Dangers of Witchcraft in Society**

The practice of witchcraft poses dangers in the society as it causes deaths of innocent people. This denies society the potential contribution that members who are so killed could have made to society. This action creates widows, widowers and orphans as people lose their partners and offspring due to this malicious practice. In communities where such deaths occur there is increasing fear and despondency among the population when people die mysteriously. This leads to a state of confusion and suspicion.

Witches are said to be jealous individuals who do not like to see others succeed in life. Consequently, people who appear economically progressive and successful are said to be prime candidates for witchcraft. Conversely, persons who do not stand out because they have not achieved anything

unique or outstanding are normally safe because the witches do not notice them. The consequence of this state of affairs in an area where the vice of witchcraft prevails is that people in the area will not want to do things that may suggest that they are doing well economically. Invariably, economic depression sets in as peoples' initiative is depressed. Moreover, it brings psychological fear to the people who believe in the vice. Such people are bound to be in a state of uncertainty for not knowing the next victim of witchcraft.

Since witchcraft is a vice that is loathed by all communities, those suspected of being witches or sorcerers may be harassed, beaten up and sometimes get killed by the communities. The hunt for witches may lead to deaths of innocent people who may fall victims due to suspicion. Such people may either be killed or ostracized. The practice of witchcraft among a given community stigmatizes members of the community in the eyes of the wider community. The vice of witchcraft is associated with backwardness and primitiveness. Members of such communities may suffer ridicule although they may not all be involved in the vice.

### **Positive Attributes of Witchcraft from the African Perspective**

From African perspective, witchcraft has positive attributes given that fear of possible usage of mystical power by witches, sorcerers and diviners force the ordinary people to behave in socially accepted ways. These ordinary people do not want to attract the attention of witches by going out of the ordinary.

Areas where witchcraft beliefs and practices are common do not experience high rates of crimes and immorality. Incidentally, some people including nominal Christians argue that without witches, their social world would lack a social control mechanism. Therefore, the vice acts as a stabilizing agent. And since all people are believed to have access to witches, people do not underestimate the ability of their neighbours to revenge in case of social, political and economic misdeeds.

### **Christian Perspective of Witchcraft**

The Christian church categorically condemns witchcraft and censures her members who may practice this vice. She condemns witchcraft since she believes that Christ has conquered Satan and all "powers of darkness"

(Lk. 11:14), therefore, witches cannot harm Christians. With Christ on their side, nothing can harm them. It therefore follows that believing in witchcraft is an indication that one has not truly believed in the salvation wrought through Christ's death and resurrection, as claimed by Christians.

The church views witchcraft as going against the fifth commandment of God, namely, "Thou shall not kill." Because witchcraft ultimately leads to death, it is immoral and therefore sinful to engage in it. The Bible expressly condemns witchcraft and places it among sins like murder, adultery, and idolatry. It admonishes Christians to refrain from it (Rev. 21:8, Gal. 5:20).

### **The Persistence of Witchcraft**

The largest religious group in Kenya is Christianity. In spite of its avowed antagonism and opposition towards witchcraft due to its stated victory of Christ over the devil and by extension, witchcraft still influences many Africans, among them millions of Christians (Mbiti 1969, Magesa 1997, Ela 1988). The African view of morality could shed some light on why witchcraft persists in spite of its universal condemnation. According to Mbiti (1969), p'Bitek (1970), and Magesa (1990), God in the African moral worldview is the upholder of the moral order. However, he leaves the minute details of housekeeping in the universe to patriarchs, elders, priests, divinities, the living-dead and spirits who become the guardians of human morality. Every being, especially human is a potential witch (Evans-Pritchard 1961, Magesa 1997). In some people, witchcraft is active while in others it lies dormant. Morality in African cultures involves doing what one is supposed to do in his/her community and avoiding activities considered immoral by the community. Man is neither innately good nor bad. His conduct determines whether he is good or bad. An immoral act carried out in secrecy does not make one bad, but the overriding criterion for moral conduct is visible discernable behaviour.

Christianity, therefore, has to compete with this deeply rooted belief in the moral order among Africans. While it is true that many Christians do not believe in witchcraft anymore, there is still significant population of Christians who are still controlled by this moral worldview.

A sizeable number of Africans hold the view that an evil does not just occur. It must have a cause and if one is not obvious, blame must be placed

on one. Agents other than God cause misfortune by the use of medicine, incantations, and sending secondary agents like birds and animals to cause evil. Therefore, this is the part that is seen to be played by witches.

Ideally, Christianity is supposed to lead to conversion to Christ. This means believing in God's power to forgive sins and to safeguard one against the powers of evil, witchcraft being one of them. However, Christianity as brought from the West the so-called "mission Christianity" has not permeated deeply into the consciousness of a large number of Africans for it to become an integral part of African religiosity (Mbiti 1969). Many Africans continue to view Christianity, either consciously or unconsciously, as an amalgam of a "set of rules to be observed, promises about rewards for faithfulness in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be sung, rituals to be followed and a few other outward things (Mbiti 1969: 233). Africa's cultural substratum has not been effectively evangelized and converted. It is, therefore, common to find supposedly committed Christians who practice witchcraft, albeit secretly, or exhibit fear of being bewitched. This fear suggests that they are not sufficiently convinced that the protective power of the salvation wrought by Christ vanquishes the evil of witchcraft and its effects on believers.

During moments of crisis when people are looking for answers to vexing issues or experiencing intractable problems, falling back to the traditional way of explaining misfortunes becomes common especially when current religious and medicine do not seem to provide the answers. Neither civil and religious sanctions, nor the fear of hell have succeeded in eradicating witchcraft (Bahemuka 1982). Obviously, one must conclude that the fear of witchcraft and its consequences is more real and threatening, to a majority, than the threat of burning in the eternal fires of hell. According to Christian teaching, hell stands out as a destination for all unrepentant sinners, who include the practitioners and believers in witchcraft.

The belief system surrounding the practice of witchcraft discourages a logical scientific mentality among people in the explanation of phenomena. This is because the belief in witchcraft encourages people to lay blame for evil caused through witchcraft and sorcery on certain people although no scientific proof can be given to connect the accused persons with evil.

### **Reasons for the Persistence of Witchcraft**

There are several reasons for the persistence of witchcraft in Africa and in Kenya in particular. These include punishments meted out to persons found guilty of witchcraft, which are not as severe as they were in African tradition. In many African countries, it is illegal for instance, to kill a confirmed witch. Churches punish confirmed witches in their congregations by asking them to repent and denying them participation at church functions. These alternative punishments for witchcraft, unlike the traditional ones, are milder and may therefore not make many potential or practising witches to desist from the vice due to fear of the consequences of being caught (Shorter 1973:142).

African cosmological perspective would have a vacuum if witchcraft beliefs and practices were eradicated. The other reason as to why witchcraft beliefs and practices persist is because of its secret nature of existence. This aspect of secrecy attempts to explain all mysterious social phenomena. Subsequently, it conforms to the African thinking pattern.

Witchcraft pays (Shorter 1973). There are people who pay large sums of money to witches so that they may inflict pain or death on their enemies. The lure of money will always entice practitioners to continue with it especially because in most cases, getting caught does not bring with it fearsome retribution.

The extreme poverty faced by many people will always drive them to use the relatively cheaper services of the witch to fulfil certain obligations, which would otherwise be too expensive to fulfil. For example, persons who feel wronged by others may find it difficult to pursue justice through legal means, which may involve hiring the services of a lawyer.

Christianity has not appreciated fully the hold witchcraft has over people in Africa. This has resulted in feeble efforts like condemning witchcraft from the pulpit, excommunications and other sanctions as the main ways of eradicating it. Other ways, which take into account the traditional ways of dealing with witchcraft, must be sought in order to address the underlying reasons for people engaging in witchcraft in spite of the present attempt to eradicate it.

Illiteracy, poverty and the lack of alternative means of explaining phenomena leave people with witchcraft as a way of explaining social reality, especially mysterious happenings. It is the poor and the illiterate who engage more in witchcraft compared to the literate and better economically endowed people. However, many learned and wealthy people have resorted to witchcraft when the means at their disposal does not produce a desired result (Shorter 1973).

For some communities, belief in witchcraft provides an outlet for repressed hostility, frustration and anxiety. The fact that witchcraft gives an explanation, whether justified or unjustified, for phenomena that cannot be logically and readily explained gives a psychological release to members of the community. It brings about semblance of order and meaning in times of confusion by providing needed answers to difficult circumstances, which unless explained could lead to chaos (Parrinder 1969).

Witchcraft reinforces social norms and structures. Fear of being accused of witchcraft can make people to adhere to social sanctions due to the perceived misfortunes that may befall those who ignore them (Evans-Pritchard 1961). Witches are people who flout certain communal expectations. For instance, witches are known to be loners who avoid socialisation with other members of the community. Members of the community, afraid to be branded witches, will be careful to play their communal role expectations.

The practice of witchcraft is, in many instances, inherited or passed on from one generation to another. Practitioners of witchcraft have been known to claim that they have no option but to follow family clan tradition, otherwise they would themselves suffer misfortunes (Mbiti 1969).

Giving logical scientific explanations does not and cannot be the adequate answer to people living with witchcraft. Although exposure to scientific thought and culture can weaken witchcraft's hold on people, it may not eradicate it entirely. This means that metaphysical solution must be sought in dealing with witchcraft.

Witchcraft is normally practised at night. This makes it difficult to identify persons who engage in it. Practitioners of witchcraft would be

**afraid** to be caught engaging in witchcraft because they would suffer **at the hands** of people who catch them, and even be jailed if they were found **guilty** of the offence. It is against the laws of natural justice to **harm witches**. In many communities, witches are not interfered with for fear of government reprisal.

It is believed that witches operate in unison. It is **this aspect of togetherness** that the witches get the motivation of hitting their victims **at will**. It is not easy to prove them (witches) guilty in court.

### **Possible Ways of Minimizing the Practice of Witchcraft**

Some of the ways of minimizing or even eradicating witchcraft may include a concerted public awareness campaign which may be done with the aim of informing the public what the evils of witchcraft are. Persons who have had a personal experience of witchcraft can testify to its harmfulness.

It could be demonstrated that paraphernalia used in witchcraft have in themselves no power to cause misfortune or suffering. This could be done by destroying or using such paraphernalia to determine the ineffectiveness of a thing considered potent. Christianity and other faiths could deal with it more seriously by finding teachings and practices that could address this issue in ways that speak to people's experiences and also employ punitive sanctions against those who practice witchcraft. Churches could look for effective ways of presenting Christ as a redeemer capable of protecting believers from the power of witchcraft.

Where possible, methods used in witchcraft could be documented with the aim of looking for alternative ways of substituting witchcraft with other activities, and creating counter measures which would be more effective in combating the vice, and which would be more beneficial to the society. It must be understood that the belief and practice of witchcraft is retrogressive **granted** the fear and stifling of initiative that it engenders in communities **that believe and practice it**. It is important that it is accepted as a **negative factor in society** and it should not be shunted aside as mere superstition.

Knowledge of the African worldview and belief system is essential for all who would want to be at the forefront in the fight against witchcraft. Ignorance of African metaphysics is a lack, which has plagued past attempts to eradicate it. Efforts must be made to know how people continue to practice witchcraft in spite of the negative opinions expressed about it.

Christianity should make better use of its claim to have the power to liberate people from the world of evil spirits; a world that is similar to the world of witchcraft. Exorcisms, or casting out of evil spirits, a decidedly biblical practice could be useful in helping persons who operate in the realm of witchcraft to break free of this insidious belief and practice. Efforts should be made to find out the sources of the power of witchcraft. This should then be followed by concerted efforts not only to educate the masses on the true nature of witchcraft, but also zero down on the witches themselves in order to help them be free from the shackles of the belief in witchcraft.

### Conclusion

The African remains on the threshold of unresolved dilemma. He strongly believes in the Western culture and everything that goes with it. On the other hand, he fully responds to his traditions, which guide his activities. This brings about a dichotomy and divided loyalty especially of the Christian believers who are supposed to embrace Christianity fully. However, such people in times of social problems resort to traditional practices and explanations. It is in this light that witchcraft is considered as a permanent feature in the lives of many. Consequently, witchcraft will continue to dominate the minds of many people for a long time unless a traditional alternative for the vice is found.

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