

Witches: Existence, Belief and Rationality

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Abstract

Man has the natural ability to know, explore and acquire more knowledge at different levels in life. The search for knowledge may be explored at different levels through the senses, imagination, intellect or experiences. This study however explores the concept of witchcraft which is mystical, metaphysical and epistemological in form. Ultimately, the study delves into the concept, belief and rationality of witchcraft; and at the end reveals that witches are real, exist and operate in Africa. Hence, witches possess mystical, supernatural and innate powers which can manipulate and influence people or events negatively or positively.

Introduction

Aristotle stated it categorically that man desires to know. This is true in all its ramifications but we have to add that though he desires to know that there are planes of knowledge. There is knowledge at the level of the senses, imagination and intellect, and man has the natural inclination or disposition to know realities at these levels of life. By implication there are various modes of truth. Those truths are arrived at via various techniques and/or methods.

It stands to reason that at the level of metaphysics alone which is the ground of principle devoid of experimental unification that resides the abode of meaning and significance. Materialism, empiricism, and its grandson positivism have all banished metaphysics; have reduced it to an illusion. Natural sciences equally tend to overshoot by stressing that only the things that they can explain and verify are real, and yet are dependent on sense experience which no doubt is limited. That knowledge is positive does not mean that it is founded on the senses but on experience. The kind of reasoning which banishes intuition as a way of knowing is self-defeatist and destructive. Why? Because experience has shown that there are multiple ways of knowing such as poetical, mythical, scientific, etc.

Kemjika, G.O. attests:

On a still higher plane metaphysical experience is the comprehension within reality itself and under a form which is wholly proper to it, of perception, the apprehension of categories and the grasp of supra sensible first principles are all equally 'positive' though not necessarily after the same manner.¹

Rodrique attests in Cloude's *Le Soulier d' Satin* that:

There is a prison we have had enough of: There are these eyes which have a right to see the end of things: There is a heart which cries out for satisfaction.

It suggests teleology, hence the reality and value of metaphysical experience. What we have said above puts in doubt the opinion of some people, presented by Jolivet thus:

It is not enough therefore to maintain that differing modes of knowledge have always coexisted or that August Comte, who dismissed all metaphysics as bogus, was actually one of the great metaphysicians of his century.²

Although science lays emphasis and at times overemphasis on verification, verification should not be understood in a univocal sense for there are different forms of verification, the form applicable should be dependent on the kind of inquiry carried out.

It is on this score that we want to venture into our discussion on witchcraft which in many minds remains an illusion, a myth or a figment of the imagination. In order to understand the realities involved in witchcraft, it must be established that it exists. This is why our work takes its present form metaphysical and epistemological perspectives of witchcraft.

Ontology which is a special field in metaphysics deals with 'ons-ontis' or 'ens-entis' being. In the words of Dalles et al, that which is; anything in so far as it exists. So we are not in doubt of the reality of witches, this paper works on the proposition that witches exist. If we go memory lane to the history of the human race from the point of view of

creationism, witches and wizards started when Adam and Eve fell short of the glory of God; and things fell apart. And with the casting down of the devil from the heavens (Revelation 12: 17), as the children of men engaged in unholy marriages, with fallen spirits. "It is disheartening that manuals on whether witches exist have become encyclopedic in bulk and lunatic in pedantry."³

The position of some people that witches do not exist and that witches exist cannot be true. As our paper revolves around the regions of existence and understanding, and these are within the spheres of metaphysics more precisely ontology and epistemology respectively both claims need to be examined thoroughly so as to be in no doubt which position is more logical than the other hence more acceptable.

Definitions and Concept of Witchcraft

In order to carefully and successfully do this kind of analysis, we have to look at the dictionary's definition of witchcraft and then look at the justifications offered by both claims in order to see whether their conclusions are valid or not. Oxford Mini reference Dictionary sees witchcraft as 'practice of magic'; and magic as "supposed art of controlling things by supernatural power." For Middleton John and Winter H.E., it is 'a mystical and innate power which can be used by its possessor to have other people.'⁴ These scholars introduced the purpose of the art of manipulation – to harm, so it is evil. It is not surprising to see Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard a renowned author on witchcraft state of the Azande people thus:

Azande believe that some people are witches and can injure them by virtue of an inherent quality: a witch possesses no rites, utters no spell, and possesses no medicine.

He added: An act of witchcraft is a psychic art.⁵ Sophie Oluwole expresses poignantly that:

Witchcraft is usually regarded as a peculiar power by virtue of which some people perform actions which the ordinary man cannot normally perform.⁶

Field, M.J. did not stop at affirming that witches exist, he went ahead to posit some of its features. He states:

The distinguishing feature of killing or harm by witchcraft is that it is wrought by the silent, invisible projection of influence from the witch.⁷

Attitude of some scholars toward belief in witchcraft could be summarized in the statements of Eyo, thus:

I, myself, do not believe that a man or woman is a witch in the supernatural sense except in so far as he or she is practically a social deviant or an unpleasant person within the community that believes in witches.... What is correct is that it does exist, not in reality but only in the minds of some people. Witchcraft exists in fantasy in the minds of mentally sick people.⁸

He does not even see it as a psychic act like Crawford. What his position has helped us to do is to think of the eccentric as the abnormal, paranormal and see the regular as the normal probably because we hold the same views, beliefs and use the same categories for knowing realities. Let us ask ourselves what of the prodigies? Are they not seen as abnormal or even paranormal?

But are there really witches? Idoniboye's, D.E. assertion will build the air we need to proffer answers from some African scholars. He said,

Point I want to stress here is that when Africans talk of spirits in the sense I have been discussing, they are not speaking metaphorically nor are they propounding a myth. Spirits are as real as tables and chairs, people and places.⁹

He simply wants to put a non-African in the exact mode whereby he can appreciate the African's mode of knowing which is not synonymous with that of a non-African. Mbiti attests to the existence and reality of witchcraft thus:

Every African who has grown up in the traditional environment will, no doubt, know something about this mystical power which often is experienced, or manifests itself, in the form of magic, divination, witchcraft and mysterious phenomena that seem to defy even immediate scientific explanation.¹⁰

For Bolaji Idowu;

There are witches in Africa; that they are as real as murderers, poisoners, and other categories of evil workers, overt or surreptitious. This, and not only imagination is the basis of the strong belief in witchcraft.¹¹

Existence of Witchcraft

With regard to the question of existence, we can say there is no problem, for at worst, it could be held that witches exist at least conceptually. It is with the word actual or real that problems are introduced. That is with whether witches are real? Why? because we can talk of the real as concrete and the 'unreal' as abstract. We can talk of the man as real, but that he is tall, the tallness associated to him would be seen as the 'unreal' for tallness should be seen as the 'unreal', for tallness should be seen to have no objective independent existence. Real could be opposed to false, illusion or even the metaphysical; and could be likened to the true and actual. True is conformity to what is actual or real, while actual emphasizes an occurrence distinct from the possible or even theoretical.

What then do scholars or people who say that witchcraft is unreal mean? Crawford states that "witchcraft is essentially a physic act and is, objectively speaking impossible."¹² For Sophie, people who deny the existence of witchcraft simply claim that

Witchcraft neither designates something tangible or observable nor does it refer to something that has an independent existence either in the sense of being actual or true, hence they label it an illusion.¹³

It is a truism in Africa that witchcraft exists; in short, it is a threatening and undeniable reality. It is unthinkable for a traditional African to interrogate its existence, for it is virtually actual and true for him. There is need to make sharp distinctions between objects of the mind and objects themselves if we will avoid landing ourselves in error.

We may ask ourselves some critical questions in order to assess the position of these scholars. Those who agree that witches are real. Does belief in witches suggest the objective existence of witches? The assumption that witches are real to the African as physical entities tend to argue for the metaphysical reality (existence) of witches. We may ask what are the logical or scientific basis or empirical justifications for this kind of belief? It does seem that Idowu claims that witches have objective reality for he asserts:

There is no doubt that there are persons of very strong character who can exude their personality and make it affect other persons. Witches and witchcraft are sufficiently real as to cause untold sufferings and innumerable deaths.¹⁴

Although some who tend to hold that witches exist cannot show that witches have objective reality, and may opine that there are many modes of knowing, they may be in difficulty explaining and showing how these other modes of knowing works or even how we can share in their knowledge. So for some to hold that witches are real must entail their existence being actual – conforming with what exists in nature and/or being true – of fitting into a model, standard, conforming with what is either real or actual.

It is Okunzua for example who tried to justify the belief in witchcraft. He agrees that witchcraft is a mysterious power which does not exist in the same form as a tangible phenomenon or tangible phenomena. He then said that witches operate on an astral plane and not necessarily on the physical plane. The epistemological question how the mind that is mental have an influence on the physical arises? How does an object which is outside the mind enter into the mind to become an object-in-the-mind? So because witches do not operate on the physical plane, we cannot use the explanations or scientific principles limited and tied to the physical level or realm to explain their operations. Our research on witchcraft cannot then be ordinary. Since what happen at the astral plane are far removed from the ordinary person, conclusions drawn from events these may sound meaningless for him. Or we may cling to the fact that it works, and see it as real; and use experiences of some people to serve as an empirical basis of the rational justification of its reality. Why? Because science itself makes use of canons of a method, a method for explanation and evaluation of reality. The truth is that these canons are based on assumptions or an assumption; or even an epistemological thesis that has not been proved which scientists have simply adopted, and not on an indubitable truth. Do you now see that to hold that witchcraft does not exist because it does not conform to known laws or scientific principles will be suicidal? Why? Simply because scientific knowledge is not conclusive, as science is in the habit of overturning some laws and replacing them with new laws whenever it discovers lapses in its original position. That does not mean that science is not at times resistant to some discoveries which could destabilize its edifice which it has idealized so much and built on very proudly.

A critical look shows that science is fond of substituting the epistemic for the ontic and it is very disastrous. Something can be intelligible and not understood by some people. Something may not be yet understood but not unknowable. Knowledge at every point in time depends on the used abilities of human beings at that point in time. Sophie captures this thus:

... inability to check, reproduce, etc, may not be the result of the non-existence of what it studied but rather evidence of the inadequacy of our present method of experiment. Future scientific progress may remove this inadequacy.¹⁵

But that does not clinch the matter; the African should find out a way of showing that his belief in witchcraft is not based on irrationality, fear, etc but that it is based on experience and go to the extent of showing its practical efficacy. Arthur Gregor showed a kind of honesty required of a researcher who is all out in pursuit of the truth. He remarks:

There is a side to magic, a dark shaded area we have not been able to penetrate. No investigator has been able to explain away some of the power of the shaman possess, and there are witchcraft phenomena that refuse to yield to our cold western analysis. 'Hay also mas alla. There is something beyond', as the Mexicans say. We may strip the magic from the magic, but the mystery remains.¹⁶

The attitude of wishing away things one does not understand does not aid pursuit of knowledge or truth.

A pivotal question here and now is, do Africans have their belief on witchcraft based on experience or experimentally verifiable canons or principles. It is only an evidence or evidences advanced which are valid that should ground their belief properly speaking. Stories may not serve as conclusive evidence for witchcraft to be seen to have objective reality i.e. Idoniboye says

A fly is trapped in a stopped bottle... no amount of shaking would wake the witch;... the fly was released, and the sleeper awoke.¹⁷

As a philosopher has no ground for dismissing an inference based on experience, likewise no one has enough or valid ground to dismiss African inference, for it is empirically grounded for the Africans. This African's experience the West sees as invalid, as it is for them an application of 'post hoc' or ergo poster hoc' argument form. Some questions arise at this point. If the African explains the mode of operation of the witches, would he achieve much? If he demonstrates the causal relationship between the witch and the bewitched will it do?

If he demonstrates it practically by manipulation of the bewitched through the use of occult power, will that refute any derogatory comment raised? Each of these methods will suffice as a scientific mode of proof. He can explain the mode of operation. But he may not be able to fulfill conditions 2 and 3. We may not have the scientific apparatus to do these but with repeated conjoined occurrence we can suspect causal relationship. In the science, energy has not divulge its nature to scientists, neutrino has not divulged its existence to scientists and yet they admit its existence. The third method tends to propagate that one does not understand until one makes or gets involved. Although it is of Kuyper's assertion with regard to philosophy of science, it needs to be re-examined strictly in order to figure out properly its limitation.

Abiding by the logic of science and canons of scientific procedure, the Africa needs to base her claims on methods 2 and 3. But that may not serve as convincingly, there is great need to critically assess these methods and block every loophole in thought with regard to them. Even if there are criticisms, they should remain because not even science is bereft of criticisms. Moreso, is it not from effects that usually causes are traced most of the time. The African can no doubt infer the existence of witchcraft via myriad of experiences. The phenomena may not be seen but the effects are seen and from these possible causes are inferred or determined or known.

The existence of witches cannot comfortably be wished away with the wave of the hand or ruled out on purely logical grounds. Sophie remarked;

... quite philosophically interesting is the postulation that the mind can affect other minds either by a kind of physical or non-physical radiation transmitted through brain waves.¹⁸

That witchcraft is mysterious is understood; but that it is supernatural as postulated by Sophie, Bodunrin, Lithown, etc is not acceptable to me; rather it is preternatural or suprasensible. I do not consent that for the fact that something seems mysterious that it cannot be explained but hold that it has not yet been possible for us to explain it based on our tools of explanation. For the African, witchcraft is not necessarily a belief, it is a reality, in short, it is 'paranormal'.

Witchcraft is not only real, it is equally true and actual, and acceptance of this position suggests that the edifice of science needs to be rebuilt and reformulated but it would be painful to the scientists as it was very painful amidst evidence for them to accept Einstein's postulation that the theorems of Euclid and Newton's law of gravitation were inadequate after their having been accepted and celebrated as indubitable. It is more profitable for scientists to base their positions on facts or reality than on emotion. Science for Ogugua is a 'leap into the unknown'; so any operation of nature which does not rhyme with the known laws of science does not destroy the basis of science rather it would solidly strengthen science and heighten the relevance of science if integrated into he household and edifice of science.

Belief and Rationality of Witchcraft

We have at this point in time to look for any bridge that could be built between rationality and belief in witchcraft. Why? Because belief does not connote or suggest reality or even knowledge. Or else why did 'justified true belief' spanning through Plato, Descartes to our contemporary period not hold water? Even for Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson "basic knowledge is completely justified-true-belief." This is not the same for non-basic knowledge, knowledge got from other statement(s), that cannot be justified true belief, because it is inferred. The truth is that we have basic and non-basic knowledge; the latter derives its epistemic strength from other justifications. Let us ask ourselves how we have knowledge of our existence, is it not by intuition? There could be knowledge even if there is no justification of the proposition in question. Gettier is of the opinion that justification is not always reliable as the criterion for knowledge. It does seem that justification of knowledge may be a necessary condition for knowledge but not a sufficient condition; for our justification may be false and our knowledge true. Why? Because most justifications are based on induction, that means they are based on limited evidence which is what we have most of the time. Do you know that a statement can be true for a reason quite different from the reason for which you hold it to be true?

For knowledge to be cocksure, it should be based on conclusive evidence for only such reasons have a modal and epistemic character whereby possibility of mistake is eliminated. So we need to be skeptical to a point of not allowing science to hoodwink us and make us see reality only from its prism even on our concocted good reason. Science as far as we are concerned has not established or shown conclusive reasons why witchcraft should be discarded and seen as illusion or the grounds for having any reality of witches or witchcraft. We do not think science has examined all the conclusive necessary and sufficient conditions or reasons about witchcraft. Here conclusive reason is not punctuated to be interpreted in a specific sense but in an absolute sense.

At this point we have to ask ourselves, is belief in witchcraft rational? Before we can safely respond we have to know the meaning of rationality. Rationality is derived from 'reason' and has affiliation with making, adopting opinions, of course on the basis of an appropriate reason or ground. It connotes in a sense an ability to affirm something. Rationality to Cohen has up to nine forms such as: rationality of logic, rationality of mathematical calculation, rationality as exhibited in ampliative induction, scientific rationality, etc.¹⁹

In a work of this nature, we are mostly concerned with rationality exhibited in rules and logic as they form the basis for any kind of knowledge. Moreover we know that rationality is used for man and not animals or non-living things. Livingston Paisley cited De Sousa thus it would be pointless to raise the issue of rationalism in relation to any entity or events deemed to be devoid of intentionality and purposiveness.²⁰

Rationality is meaningful within the framework of human behaviour hence is tied to intention, desire and action. Do you now see that it is opposed to physico-chemical determination of any personal behaviour? It has a kind of string that draws it to an end, so it is teleological. Paisley remarked:

Rationality, then, is a concept that is only meaningful in relation to the framework of action and the intentional explanations that are appropriate to it.²⁰

Rationality has been discussed extensively by scholars and they have built theories of it. Think of Karl Popper's rationality principle which stipulates that every human action is subjectively rational, for the agent who engages in it deems it appropriate. Do you see that desires and belief have been used to explain someone's behaviour or action? Cherniak posited minimal rationality. Cherniak's model at times resembles that of Popper as he talked of a quantitative loosening of a rationality requirement. For Cherniak, the rational fits neatly between action and desire and belief. It is a truism too that agents do not do what they deem as appropriate always. But there is no doubt that subjectively appropriate action can contribute to the agent's overall rationality. It is equally good to point out that;

the question of the rationality of belief branches into at least two different issues: on the one hand, there is the question of atomic epistemic rationality, which is a matter of asking when it is rational, in regard to purely epistemic ends, to have a certain belief; and on the other hand, there are questions about the rationality of this or that belief relative to other, non-epistemic ends.²¹

With this kind of understanding, beliefs are a necessary ingredient in practical rationality as some forms of action or even inaction tend to have a direct consequence for the rationality of a belief. Success does not entail rationality; an action can still fail and yet be rational. An action can be apparently appropriate even if the desire of the agent is destructive or self-destructive hence rational. There are other theories of rationality such as Herbert Simon's 'bounded' rationality.

When the issue of the rationality of witchcraft belief, the meaning of rationality is assumed to be fixed and unproblematic. It stands as a standard of measure vis-à-vis witchcraft belief. Our question should address both rationality and witchcraft belief. We have discussed the issue of rationality. Now we have to address witchcraft concretely as a human experience or practice and not abstractly as a system of propositions, for life is larger than logic; moreso witches have an immense influence on the community where they operate as they are part and parcel of the communities and societies where they live.

We have followed this path of discussion so as to illumine mutually in a supportive way the major aspects of witchcraft with regard to its ontic and epistemic perspectives. For Alvin Platinga, one should explore neatly a foundational picture of knowledge whereby a belief is rational if and only if it is quite evident with respect to those propositions that constitute the foundation of a person's noetic structure. A pivotal question is, what are the conditions to be met before a belief gets into this foundational structure? Such characteristics are self-evidence, immediacy, incorrigibility, evident-to-the-senses, etc. From Platinga's position, one will find it difficult seeing why belief in witches should not find a place in one's foundational structure with regard to existents or entities operating in the world. If one excludes belief in witches, one should also exclude many propositions he would want included, and if he would not let go of these latter propositions then nothing makes it rational for one to exclude belief in witches. It is not contrary to reason to talk about belief in witches hence it is rational.

Conclusion

We need equally to stress that rationality does not suggest truth. Something can be rational and yet not true. There could be cases where truth and rationality go together and falsehood and irrationality go together. That does not remove the fact that there could be cases where truth and irrationality go together. The theme of this conference is "Belief in the Occult and Paranormal", it has nothing to do as such with truth, but if I am asked between truth and rationality to choose one, I will definitely choose truth; and claims of truth over rationality. Why? Because with regard to rationality you have to dip yourself in standards you can think of ontological, epistemic, social, etc standards. And as you look at any reality from the prism of any standard, other standard positions may look irrational. But since what we are concerned with as such is belief in the paranormal, the unusual, the abnormal, the irregular so to say, we have to maintain that the setting of a standard is a philosophic task, hence we have to recover the philosophic ground with the ontological dimension as a medium for proper articulation, understanding and interpretation of witchcraft belief. What we argue therefore is an imaginative construction of a dynamic experiential metaphysics which will put us in the frame for better understanding of belief in witchcraft within our contemporary realities and conditions.

In another phase, one can examine the logics of dialectic with regard to belief in paranormal, more precisely witchcraft. The basic dialectic in the relation of rationality to belief in witchcraft, there is a move from rationality through incredibility to credibility. How is it done? It could be illustrated through the relation of belief in witchcraft to historicity. Man though a rational animal is equally a historical animal, and there is no doubt canons of rationality are influenced by the historical periods. For example, in the ancient period one would not think of scientific rationality; just as one could not have thought of the kind of rationality models propounded by Cherniak, Herbert, etc in literature in the days of Chaucer. There is no doubt that the structure of our historical being suggests the claim that our temporal finitude has need of a metaphysical or spiritual ground, for the African already not only knows but accepts that the visible and invisible world intermingle and interpenetrate with each other (rationality), the character of our concrete existential historical conditions tend to overlook the spiritual and emphasize more the material, whereby only what we perceive or see tends to be given concern, this eventually plunges us into doubt, despair and confusion (incredibility). Paradoxically it is our relation of confusion, despair and estrangement from reality that forces our desire for auto transcendence, and ensures our efforts to remain faithful to our constitution, that make us now realize the superiority of spirit over matter, and the possibility of minds to influence other minds. Here lies the fullness of belief in witchcraft (credibility).

It stands to reason therefore that our quest for rationality in witchcraft if it is not to be procrustean, need focus on stories, and histories and not on abstract propositions. These kinds of stories and histories are common among us, hence should embody a belief system. We now conclude that witches are real in Africa, by implication, they exist and operate. They are actual and some propositions about them are true.

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