

THE SOCIAL DYNAMISM OF MAGIC AND WITCHCRAFT IN AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEM: A CHRISTIAN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The act of witchcraft and magic rooted in a mysterious practice in African traditional culture has remained a controversial belief system in African societies from time immemorial. The problems created by witchcraft practices are numerous that one looking at it from the African worldview and Christian traditions would see nothing positive but negativities all the way. Findings showed that the controversial approach to witchcraft and magic has both positive and negative impact in African societies. Research reveals that majority of Africans do not portray the act of witchcraft and magic in a good light. For the church, witchcraft and magic is considered an occult and mystical practice. The controversy behind the phenomena of witchcraft and magic in Africa has made it difficult to investigate. However, this work is an attempt to explore and understand the act of witchcraft and magic in African traditional societies and Christian response to the controversial belief system. Phenomenological and analytic research method was adopted to gain more knowledge to the subject. By applying this method, it was discovered that witchcraft has some positive influences on the society amidst the numerous negative pictures that are being painted of it; It can be used to destroy and as well can be used to create or invent; can be used to inflict pain and sickness and can also be used to heal. Recommendations were made among others, that the various Christian organizations in African communities should be engaged in critical dialogue in order to address fears, misconceptions, and social issues driving witchcraft accusations.

Keywords: Social Dynamism, Magic, Witchcraft and African Belief System

Introduction

The belief in witchcraft and magic, a mysterious religious practice is not only applicable in Africa but is prevalent all over the world. This practice is both dynamic and controversial in that it has raised a lot of questions ranging from primitivity, illiteracy, multi-religiosity, multiculturalism and so on, with no clear response from both the church and African cultural traditions. Witches are not known by their physical appearance because their modes of acquisition differ either by birth, initiation or by accident (contact with infected object or place).

Historically, almost all societies in the world have some form of witchcraft/wizardry and Africa is not an exception. Mostly, witchcraft and wizardry are shrouded in mystical secrecy and there is also some controversy about their rationality and logic in the modern world. But in African traditional religion and philosophy, it is believed that witchcraft and wizardry form part and parcel of the rituals and ancient practices of the African people (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024). This has formed an integral of Africa's traditional religious existence. It permeates and controls the thinking, perception and lives of nearly all Africans that there are few, if any, African societies which do not believe in witchcraft of one type or another (Ugezu, 2023). However, the magical and secretive nature of witchcraft practices has made the phenomenon difficult to investigate and a hard nut to crack. Because of its secret nature, it's not easy to identify the real witch or wizard. Though both men and women can be witches/wizards, women are mostly accused or suspected, most especially old women and of recent children. The forced and voluntary confessions accompanied with the lynching of witches prove the unacceptability of witchcraft in Africa. Even

though a handful Africans accepts the magical practices of witchcraft, still a stark majority rejects the practice outrightly (Okechi, 2019). For the Christians, the magical acts of witchcraft are often understood in both positive and negative light. Within the church, some adherents who believe in witchcraft from the positive end do so in their hearts as it could be dangerous for a Christian to openly confess one's belief in witchcraft. That does not however, imply that the church does not admit its existence. Agbanusi (2016) opines that witchcraft and sorcery are part and parcel of the African immaterial and invisible reality. They form an integral part of the African spirituality, and have considerable influence in traditional medicine, exorcism, and so on. Agbanusi (2016: 117) also observes that different kinds of sicknesses and ailments can also be caused by witchcraft and sorcery, meaning that these practices can bring about either evil or good, depending on the situation and how they are put to use. So, one can safely infer that these practices are a two pronged traditions, depending on how it is being perceived. Apparently, majority of Africans, both Christians and non-Christians believe that witches are bad people who use their spiritual powers to inflict harm on other people.

In some Igbo cultures witches are believed to assemble cannibal covens, often at graveyards or around a fire, to feast on the blood that they, like vampires, extract from their victims. If they take the soul from a victim's body and keep it in their possessions, the victim will die. The witches in Igbo society are suspected to practice Satanism. This study as a matter of fact, investigates the Christian response to the controversial religious practice. Sometimes in the Christian tradition, the witches' malevolent power is believed to derive from a special relationship with evil spirit with whom they manifest through animal agents such as dogs, cats, hyenas, owls, or baboons. In a world where people take the reality of witchcraft for granted, this study goes far to investigate some grey areas that borders on witchcraft and magic in the contemporary African/Igbo society (Ajakor and Nwokocha, 2024).

The Concept of Witchcraft and Magic

The word "witchcraft" which derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wiccecraft* has the term "witch" from the related nouns *wicce*, signifying a female craft worker. For the male, (plural *wiccen*) and *wicca*, meaning a male one (plural *wiccan*). However, the components of Witchcraft: "witch" and "craft" can literally represent a male or female craft worker. The above illustration can present a witch as someone who performs magical acts. Such magical/craft acts can be both positive (inventive) or negative (destructive) such that can cast spells on people, demonize and hurt people or influence and limit their potential success (Nwogu, 2018). The background above offers a gender blind narrative, such that the male witch can serve as the meaning of wizard; a word normally used to describe male witches. On the other hand, craft can be seen as the act of doing something in a skillful way. So, witches employ skill in their inventive and destructive activities. However, it appears that the act of harming people through spiritual and magical means is the most dominant in the activities of the witches especially in Africa. Cambridge International Dictionary (1996) defines witchcraft as the use of sorcery or magic. Middleton and Winter (1970), defined witchcraft as a "mystical and innate power which can be used by its possessor to harm other people." This definition excludes the positive aspect of the witches expressed through discoveries and inventions. It appears that greater percentage of scholars presents the intention of witchcraft as evil. Ngangah (2020) describes witchcraft as the act of using and employing magical chants and supernatural powers to manipulate nature, people, and social occurrences to achieve selfish or self-serving benefits for one's self or clients. The Encyclopaedia of Religion (2019) describes it as the act of casting a spell in order to achieve some personal goals, whatever the nature of such goals.

It is the position of this study to postulate that witches do not always use their spiritual powers to execute destructive acts of personal revenge, ill will, envy, selfishness, or self-assertion like Ngangah (2020) aptly stated. Some witches who are eager to commercialize their powers also

function as sorcerers to foretell the future. Anthropologists view witchcraft as a psychic act which, in the words of Evan-Pritchard (1937) "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). The practice of witchcraft in Africa has to do with both the act itself and the belief in it. However, one should bear in mind that the definition of witchcraft is not necessarily a rigid one, as the phenomenon is dynamic, secretive and slippery in nature, but social research confirms that no matter how witchcraft is defined; the act will involve putting people perceptions into consideration. Although, witchcraft cannot be scientifically proven, the nature of witchcraft can be described from the undeniable effects of witchcraft activities. In African traditional societies, witches have always been associated with evil people. This causes fear, hate and even seeking to eliminate whatever that is associated with witchcraft. Nyabwari & Kagema (2014) implies that the witchcraft practice in the Traditional African religions is depicted as spirits that are able to be used for good or evil through religion.

The Origin of Witchcraft in Africa

Witchcraft in various parts Africa has different modes of operation which makes studying its origin in the continent a difficult exercise to embark upon. However, scholars have identified several regions of Africa where witchcraft beliefs may have originated. One such region is the Congo Basin, which includes parts of modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, and Gabon. This region has a long history of traditional religions and beliefs in the power of spirits. Another possible region is the Great Lakes region of Africa, which includes parts of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda. This region has also been known for its traditional religions and beliefs in the supernatural. The western coastal region of Africa, which includes parts of Ghana, Ivory Coast, and Benin, has also been cited as a possible birth place of witchcraft in Africa (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024). Witchcraft beliefs can be said to be deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture which can be traced back to hundreds of years before colonial powers in the country.

It is also important to note that witchcraft beliefs have been found throughout Africa. In fact, they have been found in nearly every country on the continent. This is likely due to the fact that many traditional African religions share a belief in the power of spirits and other supernatural forces. These beliefs were then influenced by the introduction of Christianity and other outside religions. As a result, witchcraft beliefs can be found in a wide range of African cultures and traditions. It's also worth noting that while witchcraft beliefs have often been used to oppress and harm people, they have also been used to heal and protect them. It's worth mentioning that some scholars have argued that the concept of witchcraft in Africa is actually a complex and multifaceted one. Some of the scholars who have studied witchcraft beliefs in Africa include Peter Geschiere, Adam Ashforth, and Jean and John Comaroff. Peter Geschiere is a Cameroonian anthropologist who has studied witchcraft beliefs in Central Africa argues that witchcraft beliefs have evolved over time and are now used to understand the complexities of modern life. Adam Ashforth is a South African anthropologist who has studied witchcraft beliefs in the context of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. He argues that witchcraft beliefs are often used to understand and cope with the violence and uncertainty of daily life. As for Jean and John Comaroff, they are a husband-and-wife team of anthropologists who have studied witchcraft beliefs in Southern Africa. In their submissions, they argue that witchcraft beliefs can be used to resist and challenge colonial and post-colonial power structures. They also argue that witchcraft beliefs can be a way of expressing agency and empowerment. In a nut shell, they have explored the complex and varied nature of witchcraft beliefs in Africa, and they have shown how these beliefs can be used to understand a wide range of social, cultural, and political issues.

Perceptions and Acquisition of Witchcraft across Africa

There are many different beliefs about how witchcraft is acquired. In some cultures, such as the Akan of Ghana, it is believed that witchcraft can be inherited from one's ancestors. Magesa (1997) claims that Akan culture believes that a witch has the power to transmit its powers to ones upcoming generations. This power is latent but can be activated. When activated, it can be projected to ones' offspring after death. This practice is shrouded in secrecy. In Akan culture, the power of witchcraft is thought to reside in various organs of the body especially the blood, hair, liver (Magesa, 1997). In other cultures, such as the Venda of South Africa, it is believed that witchcraft can be acquired through eating or drinking magical substances, such as the blood of a sacrificial animal. In still other cultures, such as the Nama of Namibia, it is believed that witchcraft can be acquired through contact with certain objects, such as bones or stones (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024). All human being according to Magesa (1997), have the ability to inherit or acquire witchcraft. This however, implies that regardless of one's' specific beliefs, there is usually a strong belief that anyone can acquire witchcraft, regardless of one's' faith, gender, age, or social status. In many African cultures, the acquisition of witchcraft is often associated with taboos. For example, in some cultures, it is believed that one can become a witch by eating the flesh of a dead person or by engaging in incestuous relationships and breaking such taboos is often seen as the primary way of acquiring witchcraft.

Consequently, Omoyajowo in Adegbola (1983) further claims that witchcraft can also be acquired through inheritance which is common among the Kamba people of Kenya and Ga people of Ghana. For him, it is believed in these cultures that children acquire witchcraft 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 buyers in the form of edible food. The person who has bought it would eventually, be able to possess the power without knowing while others may acquire it intentionally from desired witches. In most cases, the witches 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 unintentionally. In some cultures, such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is believed that people can become witches through a spiritual process called "awon omo oko," which means "children of the bush." This process is believed to involve the person undergoing a series of rituals, such as fasting, bathing in special waters, and being cut with knives. After undergoing these rituals, the person is believed to become a witch. In some cases, people may undergo these rituals voluntarily, while in other cases, they may be forcibly initiated into witchcraft (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024).

However, from the submissions above, it should be noted that the practices associated with witchcraft vary greatly amongst the variety of African cultures. Some cultures, for example, may believe that witches must drink the blood of a child in order to maintain their power, while others believe that witchcraft is acquired in secrecy, often inherited from ancestors. Going by the African conception of personhood, witches who use their mystical powers to visit harm on fellow members of the community are not considered to be persons in the African worldview. This is because; such witches are working against the interest and welfare of the community. As noted earlier, though there is no scientific proof for these African metaphysical beliefs, the fact that there is physical evidence of their reality among African societies makes it difficult for one to argue against (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024).

Christian Response to Witchcraft from the Biblical Perspective

The Israelite culture in the Bible times like the cultures of the world, influenced the Christians belief and perception of witchcraft in Africa. For instance, when the Israelites were in Egypt, the lawgiver commanded that all sorcerers and witches be eliminated (Exodus 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 exists otherwise such injunctions could not have been issued in vain .

In the Bible, God has forbidden believers from time to time not to sacrifice to witches or to idols. Therefore, God could not have commanded this if there were no witches. In many passages of the Bible, there is a trace of pre-existent belief in witchcraft which could be interpreted as further evidence of its reality. In a nut shell, to doubt the existence of witches and their activities in the Bible is to deny the very existence of God. The place of witches in African philosophy and thought may have been informed by the biblical standpoint on witches which is obviously evil and demonic. In the Bible, witches are presented as demons and are feared and avoided. The same appears to be the case in many African traditional societies where the witches are believed to be behind most of the misfortunes befalling people and communities around them. Dirk (1996) argues that witchcraft accusations in Africa are associated with occult and mystical notions of witchcraft in the Bible. He opined that the misgivings on witch doctors in African societies are traceable to its presentations in the Bible as evil and demonic.

This has inadvertently initiated a cold war from the church against the activities of witches not minding that some of them may be serving some good purposes. Perhaps, being that witches in Africa are portrayed in a bad light, some of them are notorious in causing physical and economic harm to people with the use of mystical powers. The place of witches in African society is that of disdain and contempt; people do not want to hear about them as everybody believes that they are evil people who are working against the harmonious and peaceful existence of the community. It is believed that witches are only interested in showcasing and exercising their mystical powers; not minding the impact of such powers on the community and people involved (Dirk 1996). In most African communities, witches are either killed or ostracized, in order to cut every tie they might have with the community. When such witches are ostracized and isolated, they are usually forced to go on exile, far away from where the news of their witchcraft could travel (Dirk 1996).

Despite the misgivings against witchcraft in Africa, many, including some Christians still value its potency and powers as Mbiti (1982) argues that, even when the witches are exiled out of the community, their clients could still travel as far as they are in order to consult them and contract them to assist them solve some spiritual problems. Though, it is an established fact that most witches are notoriously evil, this study insists that some still serve good purposes. Some witchcraft magic can serve defensive purposes, some for enhancing economic activities like hunting, business and agriculture, and others for healing and health. Some witchcraft magical powers can be used to increase attractiveness and enhance the love of life, to acquire influence, and yet others for spiritual cleansing (Kenyatta, 2018). Kenyatta lists 11 types of magic that covers nearly all aspects of social and economic life as follows:

1. Protective charms or magic (githitu)
2. Hate or despising magic (mununga or ruruto)
3. Love magic (munyenye or muriria)
4. Defensive magic (kirigiti or kihinga)
5. Destructive magic or witchcraft (urogi/poison)
6. Healing magic (kilonia, githitogiakuhuuhamurimu)
7. Enticing and attracting magic ruthuko
8. Silencing and surprising magic ngiria, itwanda
9. Wealth and agricultural magic (muthaigawautonga)

10. Purifying magic (mukuura, muhoko, ndahikio)

11. Fertilizing magic (muthaigawaunoru)

Kenyatta notes that majority of Agikuyu used githito charm as a symbol of security against numerous potential dangers in life. Such charms could be manufactured for a group, especially for a family as when a father decides to protect his homestead. They could also be individually acquired by people involved in various specialized activities like hunting. Such a hunter would seek a charm to protect him from wild animals and enemies of all kind.

However, being that the witches' negative (destructive) powers are mostly used to achieve heinous purposes, it has become almost impossible to appreciate its positive side. In African societies, people hardly associate with witches on their communities, and even their women always find it hard to get men who will marry them within the community. It is also believed in Africa that witches are mostly old people who might have lived out their active years without achieving much; thereby using their old age to envy other people who might be making progress in their chosen careers and endeavors.

Positive and Negative Attributes of Witchcraft in African Society

The study shows that the practice of witchcraft in African society poses both positive and negative attributes. Its negative attribute poses dangers in the society as it causes deaths of innocent people. This causes great harm in the society as responsible men and women who have the potential to making significant contributions are so killed through some witchcraft activities. This action creates widows, widowers and orphans as people lose their partners and offspring due to the activities of the evil and malicious witches. 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 (Umeh and Ezeaka, 2024).

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 victims 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.

Judging from the positive end, 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. In this case, the witch acts as a stabilizing agent. And since all people are believed to have access to witches, people do not under estimate the ability of their neighbours to revenge in case of social, political and economic misdeeds.

Conclusion

The study clarifies that the practice of witchcraft in African society is not entirely bad; being that witchcraft activities are notoriously evil, the study underscores that its mystical powers can as well heal and protect. However, the import of witchcraft activities in Africa has remained on the threshold of unresolved dilemma. The belief in witchcraft practice in African society is strongly based in the Western culture and everything that goes with it. Some accept the practice as capable

of achieving good purposes while a greater percentage perceive the practice as entirely evil. This brings about a dichotomy and divided loyalty especially of the Christian believers. 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 witch is found. Witches are recognized as the evil people of the community who manipulate natural powers to perpetrate some selfish evil ends, and also capable of commercializing their trade in order to benefit people out of it.

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