

WITCHCRAFT IN WEST AFRICAN BELIEF SYSTEM – MEDICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

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Abstract

It is generally believed in West Africa that apart from the outward material appearance, there is the experience of an immaterial invisible reality. Witchcraft is part of such reality. However, there are still a lot of controversies about the nature of witchcraft. Some people even doubt its reality. There are various speculations here and there as it appears that much about the phenomenon of witchcraft is still shrouded in mystery. This paper, therefore, studies the subject of witchcraft from the viewpoint of the West African worldwide, *vis a vis* the medical and social dimensions. Narrative and hermeneutic methods were used.

Introduction

It is generally believed in West Africa that, apart from the outward material appearance, there is the experience of an immaterial invisible reality. Witchcraft is part of such reality. However, there are still a lot of controversies about the nature of witchcraft. Some people even doubt its reality. There are various speculations here and there, as it appears that much about the phenomenon of witchcraft is still shrouded in mystery. This paper, therefore, studies the subject of witchcraft from the viewpoint of the West African worldview, *vis a vis* the medical and social dimensions.

Apart from the sub-title of what witchcraft is, which should be considered as part of the introduction, the other sub-titles in this paper include the following: Are witches and wizards born or are they made? What is the health implication of witchcraft to victims? What are the *modus operandi* of witches and wizards? Can witchcraft be used to hinder the socio-economic or the socio-political progress of victims? Why do witches and wizards attack people? Can witchcrafts be combined with a religion or is it an entirely exclusive affair? Is there anything good about witchcraft? Is there any possible protection from the activities of the so-called witches and wizards? What lesson does the issue of witchcraft leave for the organizers of public health system in West Africa?

Prominent among the issues here is the question of whether witchcraft actually exists. The position of this paper is that the existence of witchcraft should not be expected to be proven through scientific verification. In that case, the mystery of its existence remains unraveled. In any case, if we assume that witchcraft exists, what are the implications to the medical health workers and, more importantly socio-political existence in West Africa?

Though the scope of this research work is the West-African sub-region, Nigeria is the case-study. Consequently, a lot of references here will be based on the environment of Nigeria and experiences of Nigerians. Not much of library references are done in this work as much of the research investigation is based on personal interviews.

What is witchcraft?

Witchcraft is defined as the use of magic powers, especially evil ones. It is the activity of witches and wizards. A witch is a woman who is believed to have magic powers, especially to do evil things. A wizard, on the other hand, is a man who is believed to have magic powers, especially to do evil things. In other words, witches and wizards carry out the same operation of witchcraft, differing only in gender. Thus in Igboland, we often hear people make reference to ‘amoosu nwanyi’ (witch) and ‘amoosu nwoke’ (wizard). ‘Amoosu’ is the Igbo word from witchcraft, and also for a person who practices witchcraft. In the West African belief system, witchcraft is believed to take place mainly at night.

Are witches and wizards born or are they made?

A research carried out in the Edo area of Nigeria revealed that although most people become witches and wizards by initiation, some other people are born witches and wizards. Most of those born witches and wizards are children of witches or wizards who operate at such a level in the hierarchy that they had taken the oath of total allegiance to the witchcraft cult. In taking the oath, they often pledge to initiate some or all of their children while still in the womb. This implies that some people are initiated into witchcraft before birth. During the physical initiation, the initiate may be given food, which contains the witchcraft spirit. It is also possible for people to be initiated into witchcraft without their knowledge. Before they know it, they discover that they are already operating as witches or wizards. In this case the unsuspecting initiate may be served the food physically or spiritually in dream. Some people who had been into witchcraft confessed that they had been initiated through eating in dream.

What is the health implication of witchcraft to victims?

In West Africa generally, it is believed that different kinds of illnesses can be caused through witchcraft – illnesses ranging from simple cases of malaria fever to serious illnesses such as cancer, hypertension, kidney failure, ulcer, hepatitis, heart attack and stroke. They are also believed to suck the blood of their victims, sometimes to death. In some parts of Nigeria where witchcraft is common, it is believed that old witches and wizards suck the blood of their victims, in order to refresh their own lives. Some people even believe that some old witches and wizards are able to interchange their life with that of some younger persons. There was this story told by a certain university undergraduate from Igalala in the Benue State of Nigeria, that sometime in the past whenever his paternal grandmother was ill, his own father would send message across to him not to come home, until the old woman was well again. The woman was said to be a witch and that whenever she was seriously ill, she would swap her life span with that of any young person around, and become well again, while the young person would become sick and eventually die.

What is the modus operandi of witches and wizards?

In West Africa, witches and wizards are believed to operate mainly at night and early in the morning. Research reveals that hierarchy exists in the world of witches and wizards. Both the kind of harm a witch or wizard can cause and his or her method of operation depend largely on his or her level in witchcraft. Generally, witches and wizards operate by making incantations while manipulating some fetish objects. But those who are high up in hierarchy can transform themselves into animals and operate under the cover of some animals. The

animals usually involved are the owl, the snake, the pussycat, the cockroach, the monkey, the hawk and the bat.

There is a story about a boy in a part of Edo State who, one evening in an exhibition of juvenile delinquency, chopped off the tail of a certain pussycat which used to come into their compound. The following morning, an old man who lived in the neighbourhood visited him and pleaded to be given the chopped off tail of the cat. But unfortunately, it was nowhere to be found. The old man went back home very sad. Soon after, he developed a strange illness on one of his feet, which illness he suffered till death. This strongly suggests that it was this old man that used to go about in the form of a pussycat.

There is also another story of a certain wizard who had agreed with his witchcraft group that every one of them would make a sacrifice of a son. As his own turn to make this great sacrifice approached, it appeared that the gravity of having to lose his beloved son dawned on him. So he decided to be smart. In the morning of the day that his fellow witchcraft members were to gather for the killing of his own son, he called the boy and told him that he (his father) was to make a journey. He told the boy that at night, he should be vigilant to observe some cockroaches move in a single file into the house. He told him that as soon as he noticed them, he should immediately kill all the cockroaches except the very last one. The boy agreed. So, the old man traveled. At night, when the boy noticed the cockroaches coming in line as he had been told, he began to kill them one after the other. As he got to the last, though he remembered he had been told not to kill it, there was this drive to have everything finished. So, he killed it too. At dawn, he got, not only the news of many deaths in the community but also that of his father. The implication is that those cockroaches were actually human beings (members of the community).

Can witchcraft be used to hinder the socio-economic or the socio-political progress of victims?

Apart from health hazards such as sucking of blood of victims, causing of illnesses and accidents, it is also believed that witches and wizards can hinder the socio-economic or the socio-political progress of their victims. There are many cases of where witchcraft members, while dying, confessed to being responsible for the social or political failure of some other people, sometimes, their own blood relations. If such confessions are to be taken seriously, it means, therefore, that these witches and wizards can actually affect the social living of people.

Why do witches and wizards attack people?

Research revealed that witches and wizards attack people for different reasons. They can attack their enemies to settle scores. Sometimes too, they attack people just for the fun of it, being bad by nature. Witches can also attack some people at the request of some other people, that is, as mercenary fighters. The witches or wizards might not necessarily have personal knowledge of their victims, but attack them on behalf of some aggrieved persons who, most often, have to pay for the witchcraft service. The payment is usually in cash or some other material items.

Sometimes too, witches and wizards operate for their own personal gains. For instance, a certain boy from Edo state told a story credited to his grandmother, that there was once a witch in their neighbourhood, who once requested a hen from his grandmother. She refused, having known that the woman was a witch and did not want to have anything to do with her. But in the night of that same day, a hawk came and carried that same hen which the witch had requested. This is believed to imply that it was the witch that transformed into a hawk to pick up that hen. This was confirmed by the fact that when, in the morning, the boy's grandmother accused the witch of taking the hen forcefully, the witch merely laughed.

Can witchcraft be combined with a religious worship or is it an entirely exclusive affair?

It would appear that witchcraft is antithetical to, and therefore, incompatible with, a religion such as Christianity or Islam. However, real life experience shows that some people combine the practice of witchcraft with their religious worship. In Africa, this is common in those parts where witchcraft is part of the people's culture or tradition. This is corroborated by Richard Cavendish in these words: "many Africans took what they wanted from Christianity and blended it with their own traditions, which are still vigorously alive" (Cavendish, 1994:101).

Research revealed that in areas where witchcraft is part of the people's culture, witchcraft is simply seen as a super-human power, and therefore, desired by some people for protection, just as a 'white man' would want to have a gun for protection. In such areas, it is expected that a traditional ruler must have the witchcraft power in order to be able to wield adequate power in the two spheres of life the physical and the spiritual. This aspect of the people's tradition is rooted in the conviction that if a traditional ruler is not a high-ranking wizard or witch, then some of his subjects who are witches and wizards can use their power arbitrarily and make the community ungovernable. This is comparable to what happens in civil society where the relevant organs of the executive arm of government is armed with some legal powers, guns and ammunition to check the nefarious activities of armed robbers, assassins and other defaulters of the law. In some areas of Edo state, reports show that the people believe that a traditional ruler can attain such a height in witchcraft that merely his presence in the community can neutralize or nullify the evil machinations of subordinate witches and wizards. For instance, there is the story, around the Edo area, of a certain witch who, because she was late to the meeting of witches and wizards in which 'things' were shared to members, had to take back to her community the only remnant, which happened to be 'Jiga'. (Jiga is a deadly disease characterized by things like worms coming out from different parts of the sufferer's body). Her assignment was to infect as many children in her community as possible with this dreaded disease. But unknown to the witch, the ruler of her community was higher than her in the hierarchy of witchcraft. Consequently, on arrival with 'Jiga' she could not infect anybody with it, instead, the witch herself became infected with the disease, and eventually died of it.

Is there anything good about witchcraft?

Sometimes, we hear people associate some positive acts or qualities with witchcraft. For instance, a very good footballer can be described as a wizard in the game of football. The Igbo people would say: "O talu amoosu bọọlụ" or "ọ bụ amoosu bọọlụ" (literarily, this means that he or she is a wizard or witch in football playing). Semantically, the statement expresses that the person in question has great mastery of the game of football. This suggests that witchcraft could have an element of 'positivity'. This shows that witchcraft could actually be seen as some super-human power, which could be used either positively or negatively, but more often used negatively? It is in line with this thinking that sometimes we hear people remark, regrettably though, that while the 'white man' exhibits his own witchcraft in inventions and in the production of superior technological equipment, that the 'black man' exhibits his in mischievous acts. A school of thought has it that the act of witchcraft is used by some people to heal fractured bones. According to the proponents of this position, the witch-doctor does this by getting a fowl and breaking the bone of the fowl in correspondence with the part of the body where the patient has the fracture. Then, without touching the patient, he treats the fractured bone of the fowl. While the fowl is being treated, the patient wriggles in pain. As soon as the bone of the fowl is healed, that of the patient is also healed. (Investigation on this is yet inconclusive). In any case, witchcraft, as it is perceived in most

parts of West Africa, evokes an air of melancholy, danger and evil. Even in those areas where it used to be a culture, it is now beginning to be abhorred, owing to the influence of Christianity.

From the point of view of the Christian religion, witchcraft is totally evil. In the Christian world, witchcraft is seen as the use of witches, mediums, spirits, omens, and sorcery with its magic. The Old Testament commanded that sorcerers, spiritists and mediums be killed (Exodus 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:9-14). God warned Israel many times against such practices (Deut. 18:9-14; Lev. 19:31; Isa. 8:19-20; Jer. 27:9-19; 1Chron. 10:13; Mal. 3:5). In several parts of the Bible, it is reported that God was angry with Israel and destroyed it because of its idolatry and sorceries (2Kings 17:16-20; 21:6-15; 2Chron. 33:6-10). Nineveh was destroyed because of its witchcraft (Nahum 3:4-7). Also in the New Testament, sorcerers are listed along with the immoral, the drunk and the idolaters (Gal. 5:19-21; Rev. 9:21; 22:14-15). Moreover, Christians are warned to leave such practices, described by the bible as practices of darkness (Gal. 5:19-20, 24; 2Cor. 6:14-18; Eph 5:6-12).

Is there any possible protection from the activities of witches and wizards?

Witchcraft attack is a spiritual one and, therefore, requires a spiritual defense. In the Christian world, the phenomenon of witchcraft is well recognized, hence provisions for its defense are made. The bible contains many quotes to show that witchcraft has no power over God's people who continue to trust in God. In Micah 5:12, God promised to remove all witchcraft from His people. God and Christ show that God's power is far greater than all magical powers and all spirits – Gen 41, Exodus 7:1-13, 19-24; Matt 8:16; 10:8; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 10:17; Acts 8:4-24; 13:6-12. It is also expressed in the following verses that God and Christ have power over Satan and his forces: Matt 12:29; Luke 10:18-19; John 12:31; Rev. 12:7-9. In Romans 8:31-39, it is written, "If God is for us, who can be against us?". In verses 8 and 9 of Psalm 121 it is said: 'The Lord will keep you from all harm, he will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.'

What lesson does the issue of witchcraft leave for the organizers of public health system in West Africa?

The situation is that many people still do not believe that witchcraft exists. Such people insist that there are no scientifically-proven cases of the reality of witchcraft. This position does not seem correct considering the fact that witchcraft, by its nature, is not supposed to be subjected to scientific investigation. Scientific investigation is suitable only for the investigation of physical phenomena. By the way, to hold that a thing does not exist simply because it has not been so proven, can only amount to *argumentum ad ignorantiam* (fallacy of ignorance). After all, in science, it had been believed for many years that atom was indivisible until when relatively recently the otherwise was proven. So, even if it is proper to subject witchcraft to scientific investigation, the fact that such investigations have not yielded positive fruits now does not deny that possibility in future. Besides, the Christian holy book recognizes the existence of witchcraft (see the quotations above). Although the bible might not be an absolute authority on this issue, the fact remains that it is a substantial authority on its own and commands a high level of credence. Historically, people in different parts of the world have believed that there is more to this world than meets the eye. Expressing the same view, Richard Cavendish writes:

Europe is full of ghosts, and has been throughout the centuries. They shimmer through library walls, challenge diplomats on Norwegian Ski slopes, glide across the lawns of English Rectories in full sunlight or embarrass people in German bathrooms. The more sensational of them stalk grim castle battlements with their heads tucked underneath their alms

or career along lonely roads at midnight in spectral coaches drawn by headless horses. (Cavendish, 1994:6)

Africa is not left out in this kind of horrific experience. Cavendish also reports that westerners were amazed by their findings in Africa:

For centuries westerners had gazed in awe at the remains of ancient Egypt, at the towering pyramids, the temples, the tombs with their mummified corpses presented in elaborate wrappings and cases, the obelisks and statues and sphinxes, which testified to the wealth and sophistication of the kingdom on the Nile. There was an enticing air of secret magic and mystery about the strange animal-headed gods and goddesses, the hieroglyphs or ‘sacred writing’ which covered the walls and pillars of temples, the necropolises with the mummified corpses of thousands of animals – cats and dogs, crocodiles and falcons and baboons. It was fascinating and at the same time it felt dangerous (Cavendish, 1994:104).

The issue of witchcraft, therefore, is not one that can be discarded with a wave of the hand, especially taking into cognizance the fact that we are dealing with an immaterial phenomenon here, not a physical one. So we should not be looking for an empirical proof as such of the existence of witchcraft. After all, when, in a Christian prayer session, ‘the man of God’ says, ‘the holy spirit is here’, usually nothing is seen. This, however does not rule out the possibility of the effect of the ‘holy spirit’ being observed. It is the same with witchcraft. The fact that we do not yet comprehend the exact mechanism which sustains its *modus operandi*, does not mean that it is fantasy. What is more crucial here is effect and not scientific observation or physical appearance. The fact that an old farmer in a rural area, for instance, does not understand the exact scientific principles of germination does not stop his or her crops from germinating.

It would appear that some people prefer to claim ignorance of the existence of witchcraft for the fear that recognizing its existence would mean an acceptance of its possible influence on them and that it would make them vulnerable to witchcraft attack. But certainly, pretense of ignorance or even actual ignorance in this respect does not make any positive difference just as in the case of the HIV/AIDS disease where the ignorance (pretended or actual) of new victims does not hinder its eventual manifestation and devastating effects. Instead, ignorance or its pretense even makes the bad situation worse as it overshadows the need for necessary precaution and procurement of available drugs for treatment. In Epistemology it is said that appearance is not always reality, the argument here is that reality is not always appearance either. In other words, reality does not subsist in appearance.

Therefore, the actual lesson which the issue of witchcraft leaves for the organizers of public health system in West Africa is that some illnesses suffered by people in the sub-region are not just medical but also spiritual. This means, therefore, that the organizers of public health system in West Africa should be prepared to also take care of the spiritual dimension in the treatment of ailments. Since witchcraft proves to be intractable with the physical strength of medication, public health workers in West Africa must take proactive measures to take care of non-appearing but yet real illnesses or aspects of certain illnesses. This explains why some Christian public health workers in West Africa complement medication with prayers. Hence they believe that in order to take care of the ‘unseen’ aspects of illnesses they need to operate in the power of the Almighty God, through the Lord Jesus Christ. The bible says that in the name of Jesus Christ, every knee must bow.

In doing this, however, they have to live a spiritually upright life in order to be able to operate well in the spiritual realm. This is so, so as to avoid an experience akin to the one in

the bible where some people were attacked and overpowered by the demons they wanted to cast out, due to the lack of adequate spiritual strength.

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