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Witchcraft Accusations: Destroying Family, Community, and Church

Introduction

Timothy Stabell wrote an article entitled "The Modernity of Witch-craft" in which he stated that "witchcraft continues to be a topic that stirs passions and fears in many places around the world" (2010:460). This is particularly true of Africa where the belief in witchcraft is so pervasive that it can be viewed as a commonplace feature of many African spiritual beliefs (Ellis and ter Haar 2004:27). From a traditional African perspec-tive, there is an undeniable connection between the material and spiritual worlds. This worldview supports the idea that there are spiritual reasons for ordinary everyday occurrences. Because sacred and secular realities are inseparable in African traditional beliefs, it is a common practice to attribute the misfortunes that happen to people to supernatural powers (Mbiti 1990:151; Akrong 2007:55; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23).

Witchcraft is generally defined as the ability of a person or group of people to cause harm to others by use of supernatural powers (Hutton 2006:211). Generally speaking, witchcraft is any type of evil that nega-tively affects the fulfillment of human life (Akrong 2007:59, 65). In many African contexts, there is often a very thin line between the ideas of evil spirits, magic, sorcery, spell casting, curses, and the idea of witches or witchcraft (Quarmyne 2011:477). Because witchcraft is directed against others, it is generally perceived as "the anti-social crime *par excellence*" (Mencej 2015:112; Dovlo 2007:68). Witchcraft is believed to be against the preservation of life, which is the most central precept of African life. Therefore, fighting against witchcraft is considered a moral imperative for all those affected by it (Magoola 2012:99-100). As a result of the perception people hold on witchcraft, they treat with the greatest cruelty those sus-pected to be associated with it, even wishing to physically eliminate them from society (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:9; Akrong 2007:65).

Witchcraft beliefs and accusations negatively impacts family relationships as well as other networks of social relations (Akrong 2007:58; Harries 2012:130); therefore this paper will focus on the impact of witchcraft accusations and offer some recommendations as a Christian response to the phenomenon.

Witchcraft in African Cosmological Thought

The belief in witchcraft is a strong and widespread phenomenon on the continent of Africa (ter Haar 2007:1). Belief in supernatural powers and witchcraft are well-known components of the worldview of many Africans across all social lines. It is no longer only a village affaire, but is a belief held by people of diverse education and religious affiliation in rural as well as in urban settings (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23; Quarmyne 2011:482; Dovlo 2007:67). It can therefore be argued that in Africa, the belief in witchcraft is a religio-cultural phenomenon. Elom Dovlo notes that "although the belief in witchcraft is part of traditional religious belief, Islam and Christianity in their development have accepted the worldview that supports the belief system by providing preventive and curative measures against witchcraft attacks and by neutralizing supposed witches" (2007:66). Asamoah-Gyadu argues that the emergence and the popularity of the prosperity gospel in Africa is reinforcing not only the belief in witchcraft but is also validating the practice of witch-hunting in many parts of Africa. Because the prosperity gospel preachers instill in their congregants stresses that God has met all human needs of health and wealth through the suffering and death of Christ, believers invoke acts of bewitchment to explain their negative life experiences (2015:25).

Throughout Africa it is still widely believed that all forms of misfortune, such as crop failures, poor spending, barrenness, addiction, sicknesses, accidents, and death, are caused by witchcraft (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:11; Hill 1996:338; Quarmyne 2011:480; Dovlo 2007:68). Since everything experienced as inimical is attributed to witchcraft, some refer to this phenomenon as the "witchcraft mentality," which is

> a constructed interpretive scheme that attempts to account for misfortune, or anything inimical to a person's well-being, as traceable to the activities of witches. In this scheme of interpretation all causality is deemed to have originated primarily from the spiritual realm; the material causes are considered secondary, or seen as the medium through which the primary spiritual causality finds its expression. Such an interpretation tends to discount a material causal explanation of events, focusing attention on external agents, usually witches. This then creates a mindset that attempts to account for misfortunes not in

> the actions, behaviour or attitude of the victim, but rather in the activi-
> ties of an enemy or malefactor. It is not uncommon to hear people ex-
> claim in dismay in the face of problems: "Who is doing these things to
> me?" instead of "What is causing these things?" (Akrong 2007:59-60)

In the African traditional mindset, witches, sorcerers, ancestors, or
other supernatural beings are considered the primary causes of life mis-
fortunes; however, the attribution of a misfortune to ancestors and other
supernatural beings does not mean that they themselves directly caused
it. It means that because of an offense done against them, they have simply
withdrawn their protection from the offender so that he/she became an
easy prey for witches, workers of curses, and sorcerers (Sanou 2015:41).
In the case of death through a certain illness (e.g., typhoid, malaria, snake
bite, etc.) witchcraft is used to explain how this death happened and the
bereaved family usually seeks a metaphysical answer for why their loved
one died. A consequence of this causal ontological perspective on mis-
fortunes is that every misfortune has a spiritual origin caused by a witch
acting as a personal agent.

Witchcraft is usually believed to be inherited or learned (Akrong
2007:54; Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:12; Quarmyne 2011:480). Witches are
thought to use supernatural powers to cast spells, curse individuals, or use
charms to harm others. Through supernatural powers, a witch is believed
to be able to operate via evil spirits to enter someone's body and force the
individual to suffer symptoms of a certain disease (Quarmyne 2011:480).
Because witchcraft is shrouded in secrecy, it is believed that unless under
coercion, no one ever willingly admits to being a witch. As such, witch-
craft accusations are based on suspicion, rumor, or gossip that circulate
within the community whenever its members are faced with a tragedy.
In many instances, when misfortunes are experienced, traditional healers
and diviners are called upon to determine and explain the source of the
misfortunes and also reveal the identity of the offending witch. The belief
is that diviners can detect the terrible smell carried by witches (Quarmyne
2011:480, 481).

Typical Victims of Witchcraft Accusations

Witchcraft accusations are pervasive in many African communities
and an alarming element of such accusations is the killing of suspected
witches (ter Haar 2007:1; Akrong 2007:65; Dovlo 2007:72). Non-Gov-
ernmental Organizations (NGOs) such as HelpAge International (n.d.),
AgeUK (2011), and Amnesty International (2009) estimate that thousands
of witchcraft-related banishments or killings occur in Africa each year. For
some strange reasons, the face of witchcraft is feminine and juvenile in the

majority of African contexts. Although in most cases women, especially older women, constitute the vast majority of those accused of witchcraft (Quarmyne 2011:476; Akrong 2007:59), children are increasingly becoming victims of such accusations (ter Haar 2007:1; Schnoebelen 2009:14-17). On this basis, AgeUK concludes that "it is usually the most discriminated against and marginalised who are accused of witchcraft because they are least able to defend themselves or because they are considered of little value to society and therefore a burden to it in times of hardship."

People are often accused of witchcraft based on particular characteristics such as old age, poor health, red or yellow eyes, wrinkled skin, missing teeth, or a hunched-backed stance (Quarmyne 2011:479; Cimpric 2010:2; Schnoebelen 2009:14-17; Dovlo 2007:68). Children likely to be accused of witchcraft fall into different categories: orphans who live with step parents or extended family with financial difficulties, children with any physical disability or abnormality (e.g., autism, Down Syndrome, swollen belly, red eyes), twins (associated with the occult or the anger of the gods), children whose birth is considered abnormal (premature children, awkward position during delivery), and children with albinism. Albinos are accused of witchcraft but also sought out because of the magic powers supposedly contained in their organs, hair, skin and limbs (Cimpric 2010:2; Schnoebelen 2009:15, 17). Dovlo rightly notes that "the great variety in marks of identification [of witches] means that people intent on accusing others of witchcraft can always do so" (2007:68).

Witchcraft accusations can also be triggered by other factors such as tragedy, economic wellbeing, and strained relationships among community members (Dovlo 2007:69; Mencej 2015:114). It is reported that witchcraft accusations increase in times of social instability (Hill 1996:325). Witch-hunts have been prompted by health crises such as HIV/AIDS, cholera, Ebola, meningitis, tetanus, and many other epidemics (Schnoebelen 2009:19; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23; ter Haar 2007:1).

Strained relationships are also known to contribute to witchcraft accusations. It is often common for rivals to accuse each other of witchcraft practices. This is commonplace in many polygamous marital relationships where jealous relationships between co-spouses or between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law often maliciously accuse each other of witchcraft as part of competition for either the husband or the son/husband figure (Quarmyne 2011:479).

The same level of rivalry is also often observed between professionals, business people, political leaders, and even religious leaders. Because economic wellbeing can be attributed to witchcraft, witchcraft accusations are ways of either getting rid of one's rivals or a way of justifying their success (Stabell 2010:461; Dovlo 2007:69). In other instances, tensions already exist

between people before accusations of witchcraft occur. In these instances, the main function of the accusation is to provide people with a means of expressing and channeling the tensions as well as providing an outlet for repressed hostility, frustration, and anxiety. In the event of a misfortune, the suspected is "first and foremost sought among those neighbours with whom victims had already been in problematic relationships before the misfortune occurred" (Mencej 2015:114).

The Impact of Witchcraft Accusations

Whether in the context of the family, community, or church, witchcraft accusations generate a lot of apprehensiveness in interpersonal relationships (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23; Schnoebelen 2009:2). In this section I will review six main negative impacts of witchcraft accusations on individuals and the community at large.

Killings or Forced Exile

In some contexts, witchcraft accusations lead to the killing of alleged witches. It is reported that in Tanzania alone, "around 3,000 people were killed after being accused of being witches" (*BBC News* 2014). Those who escape lynching are displaced through forced exile or by their personal decision to flee from the threat of harm (Schnoebelen 2009:2; Mgbako and Glenn 2011:389). In the northern part of Ghana, for example, special communities generally referred to as "witch camps" have been established as a refuge for alleged witches for the purpose of "de-witching" them. It is well documented that only a small fraction of the suspected witches in those camps are men (Dovlo 2007:72, 75).

Coerced Confessions

Once alleged witches arrive at the camps, the *gambaraan* (a witchdoctor) performs a ritual to determine their culpability. When a person allegedly found to be a witch denies the accusation, he or she is given a concoction to drink by the witchdoctor along with the explanation that death would be the outcome if they drink it knowing that they are guilty. The thought of possible death causes many people to confess that they are a witch. When the accused person accepts being a witch, she or he is forced to go through a "de-witching" ritual by drinking and bathing with an herbal preparation. This ritual is believed to exorcise alleged witches of their evil potency, rendering them powerless forever. Theoretically the "de-witched" women can return home since they no longer pose a threat

to society. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case (Dovlo 2007:75-76; see also Cimpric 2010:1).

Life-long Stigmatization

As indicated above, the innocence verdict or the ritual cleansing does not remove the stigmatization brought about by witchcraft accusation. Once suspected, people are always perceived as guilty (Mgbako and Glenn 2011:389). Since witchcraft accusations stigmatize and marginalize for life, they are in some sense mini death sentences as they leave many accused destitute with no possibility of survival without dependence on others. Witchcraft accusations are a traumatic experience both for the accused and their relatives, especially in contexts where witchcraft is thought to be inherited (Akrong 2007:54; Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:12; Quarmyne 2011:480). This leads to the stigmatization of other members of a family when one of them is accused of being a witch.

The consequences on children resulting from an accusation of witchcraft have long-term negative effects on a wide range of areas. "Once accused of witchcraft, children are stigmatized and discriminated [against] for life" (Cimpric 2010:1). Their ordeal starts in the way their parents and religious leaders subject them to inhumane treatment to try to extract confessions of witchcraft or force the spirit of the witch out of them. They are likely to be denied access to medical treatment, as some medical personnel often refuse to treat children who are considered to be witches. Their right to education is denied as many parents refuse to send their children to a school attended by a child believed to be a witch. In some cases, teachers refuse to accept children accused of witchcraft in their classes. They are also denied access to their family or community life, as they are rejected or abandoned by their family and community. Their abandonment by both family, church, community, and even some government systems causes such children to roam the streets where many of them fall victim to drug and alcohol addiction, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, or trafficking for forced labor or sexual exploitation (Secker 2012:26-28; Cimpric 2010:1).

Disruption to Social Life and Structure

Witchcraft accusations are disruptive to social life and the African sense of community and relationships (Ntloedibe-Kuswani 2007:205). Because of the belief in some contexts that witches work harm on neighbors or kin, rather than strangers, they are considered a serious threat to other members of a shared community (Hutton 2006:211; Dovlo 2007:81; Nyaga 2007:257;

Kgatla 2007:269). This belief generates a high level of apprehension in interpersonal relationships even among close friends as "people would usually seek culprits responsible for their misfortune first and foremost in their immediate environment" (Mencej 2015:113; see also Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23). Worse still, this belief causes people to perceive even close family relations and those on whom they are intimately dependent on to be viewed as potential sources of their misfortune (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23). There are reported instances where people went as far as attacking or even killing the parents whom they suspected of being responsible for their misfortunes (Dovlo 2007:72).

Witchcraft accusations clearly contribute to the disintegration of African families. Since the accused, the majority of whom are women, are driven from their communities when they escape or survive lynching, their husbands sometime divorce them out of fear of being taken for their accomplices and then remarry. The effects of the accusations are known to go far beyond what happens to the alleged witches and often include the immediate families even after the punishment has been meted out to the supposed witches. Children of alleged witches are very often seen as either witches or potential witches and thus become socially stigmatized. Considering the fundamental role of African women in parenting, when they are accused of witchcraft and exiled from their community, their role as a parent is revoked since they are no longer able to socialize their children (Dovlo 2007:81, 82).

Since older people are a vital part of the learning institution in African communities for younger generations, witchcraft accusations levied against old women and their subsequent marginalization leaves many communities without mentors for younger women or caretakers for orphans (Quarmyne 2011:483).

Promotion of African Traditional Religion

The perspective of some Christians on witchcraft and witchcraft accusations helps promote not only the belief in the power of witchcraft over that of God but actually helps promote the tenants of African Tradition Religion (ATR) in general. African Independent Churches (AIC) and charismatic movements strongly uphold the African traditional worldview in their approach to witchcraft. It is reported that in many contexts, the credibility of preachers and pastoral caregivers is measured by their ability to detect and ward off demons believed to be sent by witches. In some cases, Bible texts such as Micah 5:11, Acts 8:2-5, and Revelation 9:20-21 are used to justify the physical eliminations of people accused of practicing witchcraft (Baloyi 2014:1, 7; Dovlo 2007:80). Some

preachers not only acknowledge the existence of witchcraft, but go as far as insisting that its power can be used for good purposes and should therefore not be condemned as totally evil (Dovlo 2007:81).

The most alarming practice is that in the event of suspected witchcraft practices among Christians, witch doctors are sometime invited to help detect alleged witches in Christian congregations (Onongha 2014; Bongmba 2007:129). Such a practice clearly undermines the power of God and downplays the role of the church and its witness in society. Because in such instances some Christian leaders indirectly elevate the power of ATR over that of the gospel, weaker members of their congregations "become less committed to their Christian faith and instead reconsider traditional African faiths" (Magoola 2012:98, 103). Some Christians stop trusting that the power of God alone is enough to prevent witches from attacking them (Bolayi 2014:8). This is one of the reasons why dual allegiance and syncretism continue to be a major challenge to Christian mission in Africa.

Impact on Economic Development

Since good fortune is also often attributed to witchcraft, some people are fearful of excelling in their studies or in their professions for fear of being accused of witchcraft (Stabell 2010:461; Amoah 1986). In other cases, people may be afraid to either face challenging tasks or increase their economic status for fear that their success would attract witchcraft attacks (Nyaga 2007:258; Baloyi 2014:4; Dovlo 2007:83). Because of the forced exile of alleged witches, valuable human resources are lost, thus depriving communities of important assets that can contribute to growth and development. The marginalization of elderly women also affects productivity since they are often the ones who tirelessly provide free baby-sitting so that younger people can engage in economic activities (Dovlo 2007:82; Quarmyne 2011:483). This type of attitude in response to the fear of witchcraft clearly undermines people's initiatives in productivity and socioeconomic development. In some contexts, people fear building nice houses, buying good means of transportation, or even dressing better than the average. Among the younger generation, some avoid returning to their village once they move to and succeed in urban centers (Nyaga 2007:258).

As the result of forced exile, those accused of practicing witchcraft lose their social and economic status. When a witch is accused they are usually forced to leave their homes in such a hurry that they barely have the time to take anything with them and in many cases their homes are burned down and their businesses looted (Mgbako and Glenn 2011:389; Daily Mail 2015).

The fear of either witchcraft or that of being associated with its practices

clearly undermines people's initiatives in productivity and socio-economic development in Africa as "the economically able and socially active are often restricted by witchcraft accusations to develop their potential to the full. The weak may use the weapon of witchcraft accusations in order to stop the powerful from broadening the development gap that exists between them" (Kgatla 2007:270).

Conclusion

The belief in witchcraft and its destructive powers remain a social reality in the life and thought of many Africans across all social lines. Witchcraft accusations and their subsequent consequences on the accused and their relatives is a crucial violation of human rights as well as a disruption to social life, good interpersonal relationships, and economic development. The church cannot afford to remain silent when the majority of its members live in such contexts.

Recommendations

In the face of the severe consequences of witchcraft accusations, what should the church do? The contributors to *Mission in the 21st Century* outline five essential marks of effective mission: (1) proclaim the good news of the Kingdom, (2) teach, baptize, and nurture new believers, (3) respond to human needs by loving service, (4) seek to transform unjust structures of society, and (5) strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth (see Walls and Ross 2008). I suggest this framework be adapted in addressing issues related to witchcraft accusations.

Following are three recommendations the church can initiate to begin to reduce the problems associated with witchcraft accusations:

1. In the process of teaching and nurturing believers, a special emphasis should be placed on worldview change (see Onongha 2014) and a well-balanced approach to the truth, allegiance, and power dimensions of Christian discipleship taught (see Sanou 2013). Worldview is the unconscious frame of reference people operate from. Since most African converts to Christianity are from an African Traditional Religions (ATR) background, when they come to Christ they are likely to interpret the Scriptures through the filter of an ATR worldview. Unless their conversion is followed by a worldview transformation, their Christian life will remain influenced by the values and core assumptions of the ATR worldview especially in times of crises (Bauer 2013:85). Africa is a power-oriented mission context. Change of worldview must also be accompanied by demonstrations of God's power in conjunction with coherent biblically

based arguments. Converts need a visible demonstration that the God of the Bible is more powerful than the powers of witchcraft. Unless converts from an ATR background experience, at the worldview level, a truth-filled and power-filled Christianity, many of them will "continue to seek out the old power sources to satisfy their fears and needs" (Bauer 2008:342). Because we believe in the reality of the Great Controversy, there should be a steady and systematic discussion on witchcraft and the power of God to conquer evil powers in training programs both for church leaders, seminarians, and church members.

2. Because the violence, marginalization, and ill-treatment of people accused of witchcraft is a breach of their human rights, church leaders should be involved in community education on human rights as well as lobbying for justice for the harm done to victims of witchcraft accusations. This can be a powerful tool for deterring community and church members alike from engaging in witch-hunting.

3. Through a partnership with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), church entities should promote and participate in the rehabilitation, integration, and counseling of exiled alleged witches to help them return to their families and communities. Efforts should be made to work toward the empowerment of those who cannot return to their communities with income-generating activities so they can support themselves.

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