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What Attracts People to Occult and Witchcraft Practices?

Introduction

This article does not research the topic of witchcraft. For this reason, you will not find in it different perspectives about witchcraft and references to what this or that author says. Rather this work reflects what I have seen and experienced about witchcraft in Africa and what attracts people to it. More specifically, the paper explores the following questions: What are the definitions of the occult and witchcraft? Why are people attracted to witchcraft, in spite of strong biblical teaching against it? What kind of people are most attracted to witchcraft? What are the fundamental reasons why people seek help from witches? Why are people from Africa in particular attracted to witches? Why are people, including Christians, turning to witchcraft for solutions to their daily challenges of life?

In 2005 eleven bodies were taken to a mortuary in a small town in Zambia after a 22-wheeler truck ran over them. When the bodies were identified, we learned that three of those were Adventists. It is not because they were Adventists that caught my attention, rather it was what was found on their dead bodies. When they were undressed, it was discovered that all three were wearing pieces of animal skins inside their outer clothes that were wrapped around their waists with some small horns hanging around those pieces of skins. After enquiring from those who lived in the area what this was all about, I was told that all three of these young men were businessmen who had turned to witches from Tanzania in seeking power to make wealth. All three were involved in very thriving businesses. The question that bothered me was why these, apparently faithful Adventists, were attracted to and even had taken to magic to make wealth.

In another story an Adventist woman whose six daughters died within a period of three years decided not only to find out why her daughters had died, but also to seek protection from witches for her life and that of her

only living son. In spite of the counsel given to her by church leaders, family, and friends, she went ahead with her plans to consult a witch doctor. The question that lingered in my mind was why this lady failed to listen to the biblical counsel that was given to her and instead went to seek help from witches.

Before I leave these stories, let me share one more. My wife and I, during our first two years of marriage, could not have a child even though we wanted one. In the first year, outside pressure was manageable. But in the second year pressure mounted to the extent that people, both church and non-church members, began talking to my wife and me separately about the situation, suggesting that we seek help from witches. We resisted. Pressure mounted to its highest peak when my Adventist mother-in-law approached me and said she had found someone who was willing to help us get a child, the only condition being that they would name the child. The text that came to my mind was, "Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?" (2 Kgs 1:16). I refused to consult witches or any such powers in spite of being told things like, "Pastor, there are things that are beyond your training and belief as a pastor and you need to listen to elderly people." I will share the end of this story in my conclusion.

The Bible is very clear that believers should not approach or consult witches. "As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will also set My face against that person and will cut him off from among his people" (Mic 3:7); "Do not turn to mediums or spiritists; do not seek them out to be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God" (Lev 19:26); "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer" (1 Chr 10:13). And yet, in spite of these commands believers and non-believers go to mediums, spiritists, and witches to seek their help. Why?

Definitions

Witchcraft refers to the use of powers by magical skills or some supernatural means to control and influence things. For the purposes of this article, I have defined witchcraft as belief in the idea of attributing bad things or good things to be outcomes of acts by individuals referred to as witches who are believed to have control and influence over things in this world by use of supernatural or mystic powers. Witches are therefore people who appear to possess magical skills or powers that are supernatural and as such are able to control or influence things, to bring about certain results such as healing, killing, predicting the future, control events, etc.

The term “*attract*” in this paper is used to mean “inclined to believe” or “prone to turn to” as opposed to the notion that people want to be witches or people love witchcrafts.

African Worldview about Witchcraft

Let us turn now to the question why people are attracted to witchcraft. People’s behaviors have roots. While we may not believe in evolution of a human being having evolved from a monkey, there may be truth in evolutionary behavior. It is important for me to make sure that I do not come out as supporting evolution. The intent of the point here is to observe that the behavior of people is copied from their ancestors and people tend to solve problems in the same way, to a large extent, as their ancestors did.

Evolutionary psychologists tell us that people imitate or carry forward in their lives those ways that their ancestors used to solve their problems. Evolutionary psychology is founded on several core premises (Buss 2015):

1. The brain is an information processing device that produces behavior in response to external and internal inputs.
2. Different neural mechanisms were specialized for solving problems in humanity’s evolutionary past.
3. The brain has evolved specialized neural mechanisms that were designed for solving problems that occurred over long evolutionary time.
4. Most contents and processes of the brain are unconscious; and most mental problems that seem easy to solve are actually extremely difficult problems that are solved unconsciously by complicated neural mechanisms.
5. Human psychology consists of many specialized mechanisms, each sensitive to different classes of information or inputs. These mechanisms combine to produce manifest behavior (Buss and Kenrick 1998).

One of the leading behavioral psychologist, Mark Leary, argues: “Evolution is important to understanding certain mysterious of human behavior because, in some cases, a behavior that is difficult to understand in modern times makes sense when we consider the possibility that the puzzling behavior evolved to deal with a particular problem that our ancestors faced during the distant evolutionary past” (Leary 2012:5).

There are certain beliefs that are embedded in the African mind. Some of these include: (1) belief in evil powers that prevail everywhere and bring evil to people, (2) belief in the existence of the spirits of the dead, and (3) belief that witches have power to control and influence things and to bring about certain results. Let me illustrate some of these concepts.

A woman whose wealthy husband died was made an administrator of the late husband's estate. Her husband had willed everything to her and her three children. However, in spite of what the will clearly stipulated, the husband's relatives demanded that she surrender the wealth to them or else face the consequences of losing her children. In spite of the fact that the law was on her side and she did not need to fear, she feared that she and her children would be bewitched; therefore she surrendered all the wealth to them. Her basis for this behavior was purely the historically carried-over fear that was reinforced through tales and experience that witches have power to control the future.

Another story may reinforce this motif. A 16-year-old grade 12 girl approached me, telling me that she was going to fail her grade 12 exams because her mother had cursed her. I had known this girl to be the most intelligent student in this school. When she approached me, she shared that her mother, after visiting T. B. Joshua in Nigeria came back with a drink that she and her siblings had to drink. When the daughter refused to do so, her mother told her that she was cursed and was causing the curse to affect the entire family. The girl believed the curse on her was real and told me that in spite of being very intelligent, she would not pass her exams because she was cursed. I will tell the end of this story in my conclusion.

Additionally in Africa, belief in the presence and works of evil powers, especially witches, is pervasive. Most African traditions conceive of the universe as alive with spirit powers and a place in which evil is hyperactive. As a result, misfortune that emanates from natural causes is made worse by the belief that witches, with their supernatural powers, are the real cause of anything and everything that happens.

The belief in the immortality of the soul continues to perpetuate belief that the dead can and do engage in the activities of the living and that witches have powers to manipulate and control the spirits of dead people. It is not uncommon in Africa for living people to bless their children by using common expressions like, "May the spirits of your ancestors bless you and watch over you in your life" or "May the spirits of the dead go ahead of you." Because this belief is so strongly held by many and because it is stamped on the minds of people to such a degree, witches are strongly associated with the spirits of dead people with the result that it becomes easy for most Africans to consult witches for help.

The main points that has been made in this section is that in the African framework of thinking, the African worldview, belief in supernatural powers, belief in the immortality of the soul, and belief in witches, make it easy for Africans to turn to witchcraft for power, protection, and even sustenance of life.

Driven by Human Needs

Another thing that explains why people are attracted to witchcraft is the quest to find answers to human needs. People have needs that have to be met and in meeting these needs, people will turn to anything that will help them to meet those needs. With the evolutionary behavior that Africans have grown up with, one of the believed sources of meeting needs is witchcraft.

Behavioral psychologists identify, among other needs, the following four: the need to live and not die, the need to protect oneself against enemies, the need to love and to be loved, and the physical needs such as to have food to eat (Staub 1999).

First, the need to live. No one wants to die. People will resist death or attempt to avoid death at any cost. Abraham's behavior may illustrate this point. When Abraham sensed danger and death because of the beauty of his wife, he told lies (Gen 12:10–14, 20). People in general, if they perceive some threat to their lives, will seek after almost anything that will give them life. If they have grown up knowing that witches have powers to protect them from death, they will go there. King Saul did just that (1 Sam 28:7–20).

Second, the need to protect against enemies. People do not want to be hurt by those who may be more powerful than they are. Elijah is a typical example. When Elijah sensed danger to his life from Jezebel, he ran away (1 Kgs 18). Elijah had options as a believer in God. Ellen White states that Elijah could have remembered that the same God who had given him power to perform at Mount Carmel, the God who had used him to put to death over 400 false prophets, the God who had taken care of him for the three years there was no rain, could easily take care of Jezebel. But at that time, faith in God failed him. He ran away like a crazy man (White 1943:160–162).

When King Asa faced a military threat from King Baasha of Israel, Asa panicked and faith failed him. Instead of relying on God who had earlier delivered him from the Cushites and the Libyans, he went to Ben-Hadad, King of Aram for help. The word of the Lord came to Him, "Because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Yet when you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. You have done a foolish thing, and from now on you will be at war" (2 Chr 16:7–9).

Third, the need to love and be loved. Everyone has a need to be related

to someone. People do not want to be rejected or fall out of love. Leah did everything she could to stay in love with her husband Jacob and if it meant manipulating him by purchasing her son's mandrakes, she did it (Gen 30:14-16). When Sarai was not able to conceive a child, she gave her maid to Abraham to be his wife and Abraham accepted that solution (Gen 16:1-5). When Leah realized that she was not loved by her husband, and perceived that the only way she could be loved and appreciated was if she gave him more children, she offered her maid Zilpah to Jacob (Gen 16).

These stories illustrate human behavior when certain needs are not met. In the African context in which people have roots in a belief that witchcraft can help them meet needs, to turn to witches for help becomes the most obvious thing to do.

How is the matter of human needs related to witchcraft? In their quest to find answers to their needs, people will go to the source they believe is able and has power to help them meet those needs. When threatened by sickness and when people cannot find answers to their needs elsewhere, they will go back to witchcraft for possible answers. When they are scared of being destroyed by their enemies, they will seek help from witches to protect them. When they need wealth and they cannot find it, they will turn to witches to help supply their needs.

Prayer and Faith

In this section of the article, I suggest how the Bible and God addresses the issue of meeting human needs and how God appeals to his people to be people of faith.

The Bible is not silent about how God addresses human needs. The Psalmist states:

Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits— who forgives
all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from
the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your
desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagles.
(Ps 103:1-3)

The Psalmist describes a God who addresses different human needs including human sickness and threats to life.

Jesus demonstrated his concerns for human needs and demonstrated his ability to address human needs through the miracles that he performed. When he calmed the tempest tossed waters, he demonstrated his ability to protect his children from threats to life; when he raised his hand towards the demon possessed man from who the disciples had run away, he

demonstrated that no power can penetrate his protecting hand; when he fed the five thousand men and told Simon to lower his net in daylight with the result that there were so many fish in the net that it started to break, Jesus demonstrated his ability to supply the daily needs of his people; when entire villages celebrated the freedom from diseases because Jesus had healed “all the sick” in those villages, he demonstrated his ability to heal all manner of diseases; and when he raised Lazarus from the dead and Jairus’ daughter from the dead, Jesus demonstrated his ability to give life even after death had occurred.

The real issue then is that of trust. Do God’s children trust God enough to put their faith in him in all these areas of life? Notice what James states:

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. (Jas 5:13–18)

Ellen White put it well when she said: “The disciples were to have the same power which Jesus had to heal ‘all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people.’ By healing in His name the diseases of the body, they would testify to His power for the healing of the soul. Matt 4:23; 9:6” (1940:821).

They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. This world is a vast lazar house, but Christ came to heal the sick, to proclaim deliverance to the captives of Satan. He was in Himself health and strength. He imparted His life to the sick, the afflicted, those possessed of demons. He turned away none who came to receive His healing power. He knew that those who petitioned Him for help had brought disease upon themselves; yet He did not refuse to heal them. And when virtue from Christ entered into these poor souls, they were convicted of sin, and many were healed of their spiritual disease, as well as of their physical maladies. The gospel still possesses the same power, and why should we not today witness the same results? (White 1940:823)

Christ feels the woes of every sufferer. When evil spirits rend a human frame, Christ feels the curse. When fever is burning up the life current,

He feels the agony. And He is just as willing to heal the sick now as when He was personally on earth. Christ's servants are His representatives, the channels for His working. He desires through them to exercise His healing power. (823)

The Holy Spirit

The impression that one is left with after reading the book of Acts is that God, through the acts of the Holy Spirit has power over all authorities on earth and no human being or power can conquer God.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God enabled people to speak languages they were not taught, heal all manner of diseases, be protected from all attacks by their enemies, and see the dead raised to life. Acts 1:8 clearly states, "And you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." In Jesus' long parting speech in John 13-17, Jesus repeatedly promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to take his place, stating that "I will not leave you as orphans." And Peter made it very clear that the gift of the Holy Spirit was not restricted to one general area when he said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39).

The promise of the Spirit is not appreciated as it should be. Its fulfillment is not realized as it might be. It is the absence of the Spirit that makes the gospel ministry so powerless. Learning, talent, eloquence, every natural or acquired endowment, may be possessed; but without the presence of the Spirit of God, no heart will be touched, no sinner be won to Christ. On the other hand, if they are connected with Christ, if the gifts of the Spirit are theirs, the poorest and most ignorant of His disciples will have a power that will tell upon hearts. God makes them the channels for the outworking of the highest influence in the universe. (White 1900:328)

Where Do We Go from Here?

God is sufficient for his people. Just as God provided for the children of Israel in the wilderness he is capable of doing so today. He is Provider, Protector, Healer, and Life-Giver. The church must prove to its members and those in the community that God is a more reliable source to fulfill all their needs than any other source. He is sufficient. How can that happen? I propose two things:

First, the church needs to develop and teach its members the doctrine

of prayer and faith in line with the teachings from James. When my wife and I could not have children the first two years of our marriage, I resolved that I would talk to God in prayer and I did. God heard me as he heard Isaac of old (Gen 25:21), and he gave us a miracle child and afterwards, two more children.

Second, the church needs to explore a clearer understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the context of mission. The examples of the New Testament church after they received the Holy Spirit is that of a vibrant church that does not only teach propositional statements of truth such as the true day of worship or the state of the dead. The church in Acts, under the ministration of the Holy Spirit, is a vibrant church that teaches the truth and meets the needs of people. It is a church that emulated everything Jesus did when he was on earth. He was a Healer, he was a Provider, he was a Protector, and he was a Life-Giver.

My wife and I waited upon the Lord, trusted him, and refused to consult witch doctors contrary to the advice we were given. After much prayer, God gave us Paul our first born and we dedicated him to God. I shared this personal story and other Bible stories with the very intelligent grade 12 student and asked her to repeat this text every day before she went to bed and again when she woke up: "Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (2 Kgs 6:16). She is well. She did well in the exams. Our God is sufficient if we trust him.

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