

Understanding the Effect of Witchcraft on Church Growth in Kenya today

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Abstract: - Witchcraft is a problem all over the world; however, it makes people grow colder towards God and religion. Its destructive influence can go as far as slowing down material development of a society and the entire community. This paper seeks to address this problem, why it is morally wrong, and propose ideas on how to overcome this problem. In this way, the reasons why Christians oppose witchcraft are made clear, in the hope that this dreaded activity is overpowered by the truth and love that Jesus brings.

Key Terms: Witchcraft, Christian growth, Community evangelism

I. INTRODUCTION

The problem of witchcraft has faced the missionary founded and the mainstream churches in Africa, which has spread even the African Christian community.¹ This has been a problem since the 19th Century. It is high time the church in Africa addresses the problem and finds possible solutions to it before it becomes a disaster, which cannot be controlled.

Witchcraft is the use of supposed magic powers, generally to harm people or to destroy their properties.² These are powers that are usually meant to harm others or their belongings because of jealousy or as a form of revenge. A witch is a person who is believed to have received such powers from evil spirits.³ In the African context, it is believed that such powers are obtained from parents or grandparents, and in most cases, the favorite child is the one who inherits the powers. Some scholars argue that more than half of the people in the world think that witches can influence their lives.⁴ The word witch comes from the Anglo- Saxon word, which means a 'wise one' or 'magician'.⁵

II. DESCRIBING WITCHCRAFT

In his booklet, John Shaw delineates witchcraft as an activity that is aimed at getting specific results that are neither within human and natural power nor expected from God.⁶ Alternatively, through supernatural powers that are high than

the human beings or cannot be explained. The people who participate in this vice are called witchdoctors or witches. These are the people who are believed to have powers to perform some activities on other people so as to get desired results. Hence it is essential to distinguish them from 'traditional healers' who are also known as 'medicine men.' These medicine men intend to heal diseases or injuries, through ancient medical systems that are different from the conventional medical practices but the witch doctors are out to destroy; although the differences between the two are not always clear.⁷

Other terms also describe witchcraft such as *Sangoma*. This is a form of witchcraft that is widespread and greatly feared around the world. The *Sangoma* is said to be able to kill people by supernatural powers. Often this involves supernaturally removing organs from the body and then eating after the person is dead.⁸ People believe that the *Sangomas* have spiritual being or spiritual powers, which appear in the form of an animal and have the power to kill and eat people.⁹

This has been a burning concern in the Church from time immemorial since we live in the twenty-first (21st) century but still in an African setting where the belief in witchcraft is still, and therefore it is a high time for the church in Africa to stand and offer direction in this matter.

Firstly, we need to agree that witchcraft is evil and it is something we cannot assume because it has been passed on from time immemorial. According to Rev Magesa, there are two schools of thoughts concerning the existence of this evil. One school of thought, which has been influenced by the 'Western worldview,' is that witchcraft does not exist at all, and therefore, we can ignore the debate concerning this subject altogether. The other school thinks that witchcraft is real and we need to deal with it.¹⁰ We cannot live to ignore this issue and need attention that it requires.

Anyone who is rational will agree that for every living creature has to be faced with calamities either natural or man's fault such as: diseases, anger, envy, cruelty, unfaithfulness, loss of life and misunderstanding, fatal

¹Magesa Laurenti, *Witchcraft: A simple guide, AFER specific challenges to Evangelization in Africa v 1* Gabi publication pg 174.

²Dumdes Allan, *The World Book Encyclopedia, Vol 21*, World Book Inc, Chicago USA 1989. p. 73

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid. p.374.

⁶Shaw John, *Overcoming our fears of Witchcraft*, Pauline Publication Africa: Nairobi, Kenya, 2005. p.6

⁷ Ibid

⁸Bartle R. Neville, *Developing a contextual Theology in Malenesia with Reference to death, witchcraft and the spirit world* Asbury Theological Seminary, 2001, p.11.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰Shaw John p.176

accidents, death, name them and also for the non-living things experiences strange happenings such as earthquakes, floods, drought, mad slides, even collapsing of structures such as buildings and bridges, which happens without apparent reason. Rev Magesa explains that the differences arise on the part of how people interpret the aftermath of the calamity.¹¹ How one interprets such calamities gives room on the belief that they must be under the influence of supernatural powers.

Everyone wants to lead a happy life, and this is the goal of most of us in the world. Therefore people are struggling to understand evil and how to get rid of the suffering to have a happy and peaceful life.¹² For this reason, people use all forms of ways to live a better life; even if that method does not honor God, with even saying like, “if you fail to make money the right way, make it either way.” Ironically it is reported that also the clergy patronizes the witchdoctors’ place and the driving force is jealous, power, money, intimacy, just but a few.¹³

There is an increase of Kenyans consulting the witch doctors services, which is evident as Zachariah Samira¹⁴ Explains, that the signboards are everywhere advertising the services they (witchdoctors) offer. This means that clients are being served and he also adds that the clients do not come from Mars.¹⁵ As the article suggests that the people who mostly seek for these services are the youth, who wants to get jobs and, or promotions and even more surprisingly, pastors consult them to increase their congregation or to deal with their rivals.¹⁶

The African mindset is that, when something happens in the community such as accidents or death of a relative, the blame is always on the devil. African communities believe that ‘bad’ things happen only when some evil powers have been applied. The ideal African culture is in coexistent with the strengthening of vital force or relationship in the universe. Above all forces, God is the one who gives existence and increase of power to all others. Then there come the dead of some communities, (thanks to their transition into the other world), who are endowed with special powers and the livings form a hierarchy based on this.¹⁷ Mbiti alludes that “the different manners of being are distinguished by their mode and degree of participation in the Supreme Force (God) and superior forces of other “spiritual” beings.”¹⁸

III. BIBLICAL VIEW ON WITCH CRAFT

Christian views on witchcraft arise from scriptural, theological, and historical considerations. There are several references to witchcraft in the Bible, and the strong condemnations of such practices, which we read do not seem to be based so much upon the superstition of fraud as upon the “abomination” of the magic in itself. When we read Deuteronomy 18:11-12; Exodus 22:18, the whole narrative of Saul’s visit to the witch of Endor (I Samuel 28) implies the reality of the witch’s evocation of the shade of Samuel; and from Leviticus 20:27.¹⁹

The prohibition of sorcery in the New Testament leaves the same impression - (Galatians 5:20, compared with Revelation 21:8; 22:15; and Acts 8:9; 13:6). Supposing, the belief in witchcraft was an idle superstition, and it would be strange that the suggestion should nowhere be made that the evil of these practices only lays pretending the possession of powers, which did not exist. There is some debate, however, whether the word, ‘witch’ used in Galatians and Revelation, as many people today, particularly theologically and conservative Christians, assume that these texts refer to all people to whom the word witch has been applied. In this view, anyone considered a “witch” is seen as condemned by the Bible.²⁰

IV. UNDERSTANDING WITCHCRAFT

In any society, some laws and regulations govern it and therefore form the legal statutes. In the perception of evil as witchcraft, the source of evil goes beyond the proper level that includes, breach of taboos and ordinary community etiquette in service matter.²¹ The way the society has viewed the relationship between human beings has been the standard measure of life and therefore when someone violates it, then he or she has introduced evil in society. Evil also originates from spiritual source or powers that are in most cases given to or acquired;²² by individuals for the sake of manipulation of others.

In the African perspective, the origin of the power of witchcraft is supernatural, which means that a witch is a person possessing or possessed of, or by, the supernatural forces to inflict evil.²³ Witchcraft is an indication that the societies are insecure socially and economically as well as spiritual starvation. They have a puzzling experience that science or the church cannot solve immediately. Therefore, they turn to witchcraft for a quick explanation of the events. It should be also be remembered that the African mindset and worldview is still alive; that is the belief of the spirits.²⁴

¹¹Magesa Laurenti.p.177

¹²Ibid

¹³Wamanji Erick, *The Saturday Standard* 8th April 2006, p. 37.

¹⁴ Zachariah Samira is a lecturer at Kenyatta University in the Department of Philosophy and Religious studies.

¹⁵ Wamanji Erick, *The Saturday Standard* 8th April 2006.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw & Tie Tienou, *Issues in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publisher, 1998), 4-5.

¹⁸Mbithi John, *African Theology*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2000 (p. 121).

¹⁹ <http://www.faust.com/index.php/legend/christian-views-on-witchcraft/> retrieved on 3rd February 2014

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Magesa Laurenti p. 179

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴Wamanji Erick, *The Saturday Standard* 8th April 2006.

As one of the witch doctors who was interviewed seemed to confirm, Thomas Hobbes' philosophy that man is greedy.²⁵ The witch doctor said that nobody comes for the good of the society or others, but selfish needs and only to injure rivals.

V. DEALING WITH THE 'PROBLEM'

This problem has been there for a long time, and it is high time for the Church in Africa to deal with it.

Many people are falling to the charm of the witch men as the report published in the Daily Nation that some of the cabinet ministers are among the thousands of Kenyans flocking to consult the witch doctors.²⁶ These witchdoctors promise a simple solution to the problem and the heart's desires. As observed above, even the Christians have fallen to this charm. Nancy Duff suggests that the Christians of today whereby any idea, movement, or action that suggest that we have placed our loyalty to something else rather than God, becoming our example of worshipping the 'golden calf.'²⁷ Many preachers identify the 'golden calf' of today to the unrestricted pursuit of economic success and sexual pleasure. These are the driving forces of society today because most of us want to live a happy life. This makes people to get out of the way of God, to obtain what they want to fulfill the desires of their heart.

There have been reports that people, who have been suspected to be witches, have undergone severe stigmatization in several parts of Kenya. As reported in one of the local dailies, there has been arising in the killing of people who are suspected to be practicing black magic. "Five elderly people accused of witchcraft were burnt to death in Kisii. The four women and one man were accused of abducting a child and making him dumb through black magic, on Thursday."²⁸ These had been on the news headlines for some time.

As a church in Africa, we need to address the sanctity of life and the implication of taking action. It is essential to let the society know that there is law, and it should be followed with observed concerning the protection of one's life. This reveals how Africa's unreason regarding certain phenomena is continuing to cost the lives of innocent people. It is also shocking that Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) approach this disaster not by eliminating belief in witchcraft, but by voicing caution on the killing of witches.²⁹ Since mid-2007, children have been kidnapped and murdered in Uganda in what are believed to be bizarre rituals to attain wealth. In

Tanzania, the killings of albinos were rampant because fishermen believe that the hairs of albinos bring good luck and accrue plentiful harvests of fish. In May 2008, Amnesty International found out that 1000 suspected witches in the Gambia had been kidnapped by witch doctors employed by the government in a nationwide witch-hunting campaign. In Nigeria and Congo, children are chased from their homes, and some are killed because they are believed to possess evil powers. Until now, there have not been any significant organized efforts to analyze witchcraft critically. Belief in witchcraft is based on the theory of 'Fear appeal' unscrupulous individuals in positions of influence are regularly exploiting magical thinking, illiteracy, and many.³⁰

There are diseases, which are believed to be caused by the witches and their magic, but after the enlightenment of the medical explanations, it is now clear that we are responsible to our own health mistakes. For example, AIDS in some parts of Kenya and Africa as a whole is seen as witchcraft's involvement, but the scientific explanation has seen it as the sexual immorality with an infected person.³¹ Other diseases that affect people cannot be attributed to witchcraft such as epilepsy, measles, and, chicken pox to mention but a few. These diseases need to be treated by a qualified medical person.

Bartle suggests some of the things that Christians can put in consideration when dealing with this problem as outlined below:

There must be an education in the church and also in the community that this is a spiritual problem and has a spiritual solution. Jesus defeated all the powers of evil and has given all authority it Christians to drive out evil spirits.

The church and its leaders in the community must unite to defeat witchcraft.

There should be united in prayers for witchdoctors to be defeated and witchcraft is driven out of the community.

If a person is accused of being a witch, the church leaders should speak up and offer to deal with the problem. Physical violence will never solve a spiritual problem. If a person is genuinely a witch, the leaders can lead the person through the steps of confession and repentance of sins so that the person can then be set free from witchcraft spirit through the power of Christ.³²

VI. CONCLUSION

Some people are innocently demon influenced by having most parts of their bodies pierced and inserted with

²⁵Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia standard 2004.

²⁶Gakiha Weru. Daily Nation 7th December 2008, p. 28.

²⁷Duff J. Nancy, *Locating God in all the wrong places: the Second commandment and American politics*. April 2006, USA.

²⁸Robert Nyasato and Paul Gitau *The Standard* published on 28th February 2009.

²⁹George Ogare, *How Can the Concept of Humanism Solve Witchcraft Belief in Africa*: <http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/> retrieved on 20th Feb 2014

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Karen Morrison, Michael Smith, *Myths and Mysteries about HIV/AIDS*: <http://books.google.co.ke/booksretrieved> on 16th Feb 2014

³² Bartle R. Neville. p.231.

either bone particles or jewelry, which would have been “blessed” by the traditional doctors who have put in some of the witch magic power in the name of protection from evil eyes.³³ Also, some prints on the fabric are worn traditionally are none other than occult symbols. Tourism ignorantly purchase and take home demonically contaminated curios, ornaments, artifacts, etc. not knowing how they have “an accursed thing.”³⁴

As Zablon Nthamburi states, “nothing makes sense to an African unless it is held within the interest of the whole community.”³⁵ This shows that, if the church needs to make a difference in the life of the African society, it needs to address the problem of what is practically such as the reason why there is the rampant spread of diseases, abject poverty and the lack of development in rural areas for fear of being bewitched. To give an example, there are places where people deliberately do not want to put investment in their home areas for fear of being killed with the evil people, which they allege to be caused by witchcraft. This problem is mostly in the western part of Kenya, whose people still have a strong belief in witches.

The church in Africa must participate in the mission as it identifies with the agonies of the people.³⁶ With this, it will be able to address the problems that make people rush to visit those witches. The love of one another will also help in healing this country and the continent at large.

The belief in occult forces is still deeply rooted in many African societies, regardless of education, religion, and social class of the people concerned. According to many Africans, its incidence is even increasing due to social stress and strain caused (among others) by the process of modernization. Most often magic and witchcraft accusations work to the disadvantage of the poor and deprived, but under particular circumstances, they become a means of the poor in the struggle against oppression by establishing “cults of counter-violence.” Magic and witchcraft beliefs have increasingly been instrumental for political purposes. They can be used to support any kind of political system, whether despotic or democratic. The belief in occult forces has severe implications for development cooperation. Development projects, which constitute areas of strategic groups in their struggle for power and control over project resources, are likely to add further social stress to an already endangered precarious balance of power, causing witchcraft accusations to flourish. Besides, witchcraft accusations may serve as

indicators of hidden social conflicts that are difficult to detect by other methods.³⁷

The big question is, therefore, how Christians should treat the witch doctors. There are two approaches that I will look in to. First, there are places where witches are lynched for being suspected to be practicing this evil. As Christians, we should respect the dignity of every person, as children of God. Lynching is not a solution since it amounts to murder. In extreme cases, the Law of the land should charge them in the courts if they are found to be guilty, then the law of the land will judge them.

The other aspect is that Christians and other people should view these witchdoctors as human beings. Christians are the ones who are fit to help them through evangelism if the occasion arises. John Shaw gives an example of how Paul witnessed this in Ephesus in Acts 19:18-20.³⁸ They did not use any violence. This has been a long-standing problem not only in Africa but also across the globe. The solution is courage, prayer, and evangelism. With evangelism, witchcraft will come crumbling down on its weight. The defeat of witchdoctors by Moses in Egypt and by Paul at Ephesus will repeat itself.

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³⁴Ibid.

³⁵ Nthamburi Zablon, *The African Church at the Crossroad*, (Uzima Publication: Nairobi, Kenya) p. 144.

³⁶Ibid. p. 146

³⁷Dirk Kohnert, *Magic, and witchcraft: Implications for democratization and poverty-alleviating aid in Africa* (Institute of African Affairs, Hamburg, Germany) p. 345.

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