

THE PLACE OF WITCHCRAFT/WIZARDRY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The belief and practice of Witchcraft is not only applicable in Africa but is prevalent all over the continent. However this practice is easily prone to Africans which has raised a lot of questions ranging from primitivity, illiteracy, multi-religiosity, multiculturalism and so on, with above assumed as the root cause. The problems created by witchcraft practices are numerous that one looking at it from the African worldview would see nothing positive but negativities all the way. The study employs the analytic method. 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. Also witches are not known by their physical appearance because their modes of acquisition of witchcraft differ either by birth, initiation or by accident (contact with infected object or place). In conclusion I recommend that the mystery behind this practice be unveiled through the proper channel of education so that the beauty in it will be harnessed and the negative sides eradicated.

Keywords: Witchcraft, wizardry, Africa, traditional, societies, philosophy

Introduction

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. It permeates and controls the thinking, perception and lives of nearly all Africans, both educated and non-educated. It is an integral part of Africa's traditional religious heritage. There are few, if any, African societies which do not believe in witchcraft of one type or another. Africans believe that the hand of either God or evil forces may be seen in any event. However, the fact that witchcraft is mystical and occultic, and secret makes the phenomenon difficult to investigate. It is a nut too hard 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 voluntary and repeated confessions and lynching of witches prove that witchcraft exists in Africa. Even within the church, some adherents strongly believe in witchcraft. Consequently, the belief in this vice is a reality in Africa. Africans who do not openly admit its existence, do so in their hearts.

This work is an attempt to explore and understand witchcraft belief in African traditional societies. Phenomenological research approach was adopted to gain more knowledge on the subject. Findings showed that African traditional societies belief in witchcraft. This belief has both negative and positive impact on African societies.

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-edged sword, depending on how such powers are put to use. Generally, witches are believed to be bad people who use their spiritual powers to inflict harm on other people.

Definitions and Meaning of Witchcraft

The word “witchcraft” undoubtedly derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wiccecraft*, just as “witch” derives from the related nouns *wicce*, signifying a female worker of that “craft” (plural *wiccen*) and *wicca*, meaning a male one (plural *wiccan*). Having seen the components of Witchcraft: “*witch*” and “*craft*”.

From the above category, a witch as someone who cast spells and performs magical acts to demonize and hurt people or influence and limit their potential success. This definition is gender blind, and so 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 act of harming people through spiritual and magical means. 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 use of external objects in the practice of witchcraft and expressly states that the intention of witchcraft is 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.

Witches generally use their own spiritual powers to execute destructive acts of personal revenge, ill will, envy, selfishness, or self-assertion (Ngangah 2020). Some witches who are eager to commercialize their powers also function as sorcerers. 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 meaning of witchcraft has to do with both the act itself and the belief in it in African traditional system. However, you 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 in harm’s way. It can be said that witchcraft cannot be scientifically proven, but the nature of witchcraft can be described from the undeniable effects of witchcraft attacks in African traditional societies. Witches have always been associated with evil and people fear, hate and even seek to eliminate them wherever they are rumored to exist (Nyabwari & Kagema 2014).

Origin of Witchcraft

Traditional African religions have depicted the universe as a multitude of spirits that are able to be used for good or evil through religion. 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. Witchcraft beliefs are deeply rooted in Ghanaian culture and can be traced back to hundreds of years before colonial powers in the country were even present.

In addition to these specific regions, it's 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. In his book "The Modernity of Witchcraft," he 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 book "Of Revelation and Revolution," 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 short, these scholars 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. Witchcraft has been practised for centuries in different parts of Africa. Therefore, the origin in Africa might be difficult to get.

Witchcraft Acquisition

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. 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. However, regardless of the specific beliefs, there is usually a strong belief that witchcraft can be acquired by anyone, regardless of their gender, age, or social status. It is also worth noting that, 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. Breaking these taboos is often seen as the primary way of acquiring witchcraft.

As cited by Omoyajowo in Adegbola (1983). The forms may be through inheritance, which is common among the Kamba people of Kenya and Ga people of Ghana. It is believed that children acquire the vice 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 willing buyers. The person who has bought it would eventually, be able to possess the power of evil.

Others may acquire it intentionally from devils. Certain communities believe that demons 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 of witchcraft. 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. It is important to note that the beliefs about how witchcraft is acquired vary greatly from culture to culture, and not all of these beliefs are held by everyone within a particular culture. In addition, it should be noted that the practices associated with witchcraft vary greatly as well. Some cultures, for example, may believe that witches must drink the blood of a child in order to maintain their power,

Witchcraft in the Bible

Like most cultures of the world, the Israelite's culture acknowledges the belief and practice of witchcraft. 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 (people). Such injunctions could not have been issued in vain. "God has forbidden believers from time to time not to sacrifice to devils or to idols. Therefore, God could not have

commanded this if there were no devils.

There were other passages which, in the light of the pre-existent belief in Witchcraft, could be interpreted as further evidence of its reality. In short, to doubt the existence of witches and their activities was to deny the very existence of God.

The Place of Witches in African Philosophy

Witches are feared and avoided in African traditional societies; they 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 powers which the people think that the alleged witch have. He has opined that the presence of witch doctors in African societies are helping to a large degree, in fight against the activities of witches who go about 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). How does the society relate with these witches upon discovery?

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 in their heinous activities. In any family where it is suspected that witches exist, it is almost impossible for the community to associate with members of the community, 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.

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 we have noted, though there is no scientific proof for these African metaphysical beliefs, the fact that there are physical evidence of their reality among African societies makes it difficult for one to argue against.

Dangers of Witchcraft in African Society

The practice of witchcraft poses dangers in the society as it causes deaths of innocent people. This denies society the potential contribution that members who are so killed could have made to society. This action creates widows, widowers and orphans as people lose their partners and offspring due to this malicious practice. 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.

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 candidates 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.

Positive Attributes of Witchcraft from the African Perspective

From African perspective, 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. Therefore, the vice acts as a stabilizing agent. And since all people are believed to have access to witches, people do not underestimate the ability of their neighbours to revenge in case of social, political and economic misdeeds.

Conclusion

The African remains on the threshold of unresolved dilemma. He strongly believes in the Western culture and everything that goes with it. On the other hand, he fully responds to his traditions, which guide his activities. This brings about a dichotomy and divided loyalty especially of the Christian believers who are supposed to embrace Christianity fully.

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 vice is found. Witches are recognized as the evil people of the community who manipulate natural powers to some selfish evil ends, and also capable of commercializing their trade in order to make money out of it.

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