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WITCHCRAFT BELIEF IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES.

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Abstract

Witchcraft is an endemic belief in African societies from time immemorial. It is rooted in mysterious element of African traditional culture. 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. 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. Recommendations were made among others, that human rights should be protected.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Belief System, Secrecy, Africa, Traditional Societies.

Introduction

Witchcraft is a general term used more popularly and broadly to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical power, generally in secret fashion (Mbiti, 1969). African peoples believe that there are individuals who have access to mystical power which they employ for destructive purposes. In a non scientific environment, belief of this type cannot be clean from

fear, falsehood, exaggeration, suspicion, friction and irrationality. Whatever reality is concerning witchcraft in the broad and popular sense of the term, the belief in witchcraft is there in every African village, and that belief affects everyone, for better or for worse. Africans see witchcraft as ubiquitous; it permeates all areas of life and is an ever present reality in people's political, social, and economic organizations. Pritchard (1937) asserted that everywhere in Africa, as among the Azande, it plays a role in Agricultural, fishing and hunting pursuits, in domestic life of homesteads as well as in communal life of district court. Witchcraft role and influence are not limited to activities of social nature. It influences personal life as well. Efforts to preserve and promote life cannot be understood without reference to the power of witchcraft which is closely connected to and influences the establishment of law and the understanding of morality and ethics. In his own view, Ekwunife (2011) noted that witchcraft is an African occultic science through which persons (males, females, genders) with highly domineering propensities coupled with greed, physically and mysteriously afflict victims with the help of hidden or familiar contact instruments, with a view to subjecting them to the witches/wizards selfish wills. Quarcoopome (1987) described witchcraft as, the belief in the possession of some supernatural powers by which in African mentality, everything wrong or bad in society evil or harm can be affected and good deed done. Thus, in African mentality everything wrong or bad in the society and in the world, and, most particularly, various afflictions originates in witchcraft. There is no kind of illness or hardship at all that may not ultimately be attributed to witchcraft. When natural explanations fail to satisfy, the social explanation of witchcraft is invariably invoked. In support of this view, Pritchard observed among the Azonde that:

> If blight seizes the groundnut crop it is witchcraft, if the bush is vainly scoured for game it is witchcraft, if women labourslу bale water out of a pool and are reward but a few small fish it is witchcraft; if termites do not rise when their swarming is due and a cold useless night is spent in waiting for their flight it is witchcraft; if a prince is clod and distant with his subject it is a witchcraft; if a magical rite falls to achieve its purpose it is witchcraft; if, in fact, any failure or misfortune falls upon any one at any time and in relation to any of the manifold activities of his life it may be due to witchcraft.

Witches could be classified in terms of gender-female witch, which most scholars technically identify as witch and male witch as wizard. Metu (1999) noted that in Igbo culture area female witch goes by the gender name *amosu nwanyi* while male goes by the nomenclature *amosu-nwoke*. In line with Metu's view Pearce (2012) asserted that witchcraft practices can be divided into two orders-a-higher order known as ekpinan and a lower order known as ifut. He further explained that the higher order of witchcraft is more expensive and involves native doctors who use their spiritual powers to protect themselves and clients against the interferences of witches usually of lower order.

Arazu (2004), classified witchcraft in terms of functions; white witchcraft- for protection of homes, towns and places (*Amosu ncheuno*), black witchcraft, used for creating fear in people to earn their respect (*Amosu Ikponsi*) and red witchcraft directed towards total destruction, the vampire witches/wizards *(Ogboma*). Environmentally and ecologically, witches could be

associated with riverine or sea witchcraft (*Amosu mmiri*-Igbo) and up land witchcraft (*Amosu enuani*-Igbo). A witch is irresistibly driven to cause misfortune. Such power is so strong that it palpably affects the physical appearance of the individual. Witches may be usually old, strong, beautiful or ugly (Kwane 1996).

Witchcraft Possession

Witchcraft is a manifestation of mystical forces which maybe inborn in a person, inherited, or acquired in various ways. For some people it is said to function without their being aware of it, or having control over it. Africans belief that every person is potentially a witch, that is to say that all human beings have witchcraft power in them. Active witchcraft is usually inherited, bought or adopted.

Witchcraft could be transmitted through medicine Omoyagowo (1963) affirmed three ways of becoming a witch/wizard; either through inheritance or voluntary initiation into a witch guild or through buying or acquiring witchcraft intentionally. Witchcraft can also be obtained from demons or the dead. Again, children descending from matrilianage of witches are often thought to have inherent tendencies towards witchcraft.

An active witch could feed an innocent person with witchcraft substance or it could happen to someone being recruited as a novice. The medicine will be compelled to act as witch, which could include such actions as being forced to steal flesh from victim. This flesh is used to feed senior witches in a communal feast. As such, sudden weight loss is usually considered an effect of witchcraft. Once eaten, human flesh becomes an addiction which leads to the deliberate consumption of medicine (Drucker 1993). This medicine incorporate substances that are both curative as well as poisonous and substances that operate both mechanically within the body and metaphysically. This medicine is not only used by witches, but also as a defense against witchcraft. The use of the medicine is very different for males and females. However, in both cases, a close kinsperson will be most likely the target.

If the witchcraft substance is good it can be used for personal advantage, and inspires men to particular feats of talent. But it is potentially dangerous. Only with this substance can a man bewitch another send him evil dreams, and make poisons to kill him (Parrinder 1985).

Mode of Operation

Purveyors of the African occultic science form secret guides and operate mostly at nights on top of gigantic trees like Iroko or Akpu tree (cotton tree). They hold their covens with their ethereal bodies where they suck the ethereal blood of their victims and wreck destructions on targeted victims, places and natural objects (Ekwunife, 2011). Drucker (1993) and Adinkura (2004) affirmed that witches attack at night the bodies of their victims, which typically Causes lingering illnesses and deaths. It is commonly believed that witches conduct their deeds in spirit form while their physical bodies sleep. Parrinder (1958) described the operation of witch thus;

> …generally (but not exclusively) female. She goes out at night and meets in an assembly with other witches. She leaves her body in her hut and flies to the assembly,

> often as owl, other birds or animal. The witch preys on other people and Proaves a victim for consumption in the assembly. The blood of the victim is sucked or its members eaten. This causes the wasting disease to his physical body, and the victim lingers until heart, liver or some other vital organ is eaten.

The activities of witches are characterized universally by secrecy and loathsome behaviour. Witches do not want their revolting activities exposed to the ordinary person. They reject kinship ties and loyalties and will readily harm a kinsperson as anyone else. They break every accepted norms of the society. Witches can also change themselves into spirit-like beings at night and go to witches assemblies while their mystical bodies remain at home. They can also change themselves into animal shapes such as owls or other nocturnal creatures. Alternatively, they ride on these creatures to their assemblies. Moreover, human beings who are though dead may actually be used by witches as familiars to run the witches harmful errands, causing misfortune in society. When secretly active at night, they prefer to be naked performing their dances while holding or actually spurting fire. They handle excrement, urine and vomit for purposes of harming people through the life force that these materials represent. They also enjoy soiling their neighbour's yard and other property with these materials.

Witchcraft Accusation/Labeling

Since witchcraft activity is essentially occultic, as well as mystical and mysterious, it is very hard to identify the witch/wizard. Innocent people are often mistaken for real offenders. For the fact that human world is still infested by evil and wickedness, the possibility of people accusing their rivals or imagined or real enemies of witchcraft cannot be ruled out. It is a common belief in Africa, that when something goes wrong in the welfare of an individual or his family, he immediately wondered who had caused it to happen. In most cases the individual would suspect that someone had used evil magic, sorcery, or witchcraft against him or his household, animals or field. On this note, witchcraft is a rationale for explaining strained family relations and unfulfilled obligation. Mbiti (1992) noted that if there is a dispute between neighbours or relatives, one party may want to get rid of the other by means of mystical forces. Or, if something goes wrong following such dispute, and quarrelling, everyone will immediately suspect that it is caused by the other party through witchcraft. Accusing someone of being a witch will essentially cut him or her off from the family and any future inheritance. United Nations High commission For Refugees (UNCHR, 2009) reported that witchcraft beliefs are widespread throughout Nigeria and that people accused of witchcraft beliefs are widespread throughout Nigeria that people accused of witchcraft are subjected to violence and death. Guardian News and Media (2012) observed that witchcraft is a means of explaining unequal distribution of good and bad fortune and occurrence of otherwise inexplicable misfortune. In some areas of Africa, where civil wars and economic disasters have left society in disarray, the number of allegation, have amounted to epidemic of accusations.

Kirby (2012) observed that witchcraft accusations has risen due to several factors; (i) Seasonal rainy season famine (ii) tension in the house (iii) women's leisure (iv) men's frustration (v) general security (vi) economic deprivation and food insecurity and (vii) availability of an easy

solution. However, females are mostly accused of killing their own infants, killing a co-wife child, or attacking husband or brother in-law (Drucker 1993). Though both men and women could be witch or wizard, majority of witch hunts in the past were aimed against women and specifically older women found themselves the target. In some cases, these accusations are significant attempt to control behaviour of women. Bahre (2002) noted that it is a manner of controlling female sexuality in an age where urban setting does not facilitate victorian idea of feminity. Women are also accused of witchcraft when there is difficulty in conceiving a baby by the daughter's in-law. They are seen as the witch responsible for their barrenness especially in situation where the woman has advanced in age, Gest (2002) noted that women who are older are considered easy target in the society.

However, there is reverse order in the accusation of witches from women to children in the recent time. Children are singled out by parents, or other care taker adults for a variety of reasons that distinguish them from among others in the household such as bad dreams, bed-wetting, children who are cleverer, who have different likes and dislikes-almost anything can be symptom of possessing evil spirit. Often the accused are outsiders either step children or house helpers. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2009) reported that witchcraft against children have become the focus of increased international attention in recent years. There have been increasing numbers of children who have been accused of witchcraft. Those suspected practicing witchcraft are often subjected to torture, discrimination and death. In some cases, the campaign against witches has been pursued by preachers associated with small Christian sects. These pastors sometimes instill fear on the community and encourage them to denounce specific children as witches leading to abuse, abandonment and even murder.

In disagreement with the notion of labeled witches, Ekwunife (2011) asserted that witchcraft perpetration ranges from old to the young one with the exclusion of children. Members could be old women, old men, middle aged women/men, young women and men. Since witchcraft is an activity of conscious agents, activity that is maliciously and selfishly executed, there is no way children could be involved. The US state Department documented that police occasionally beat children accused of witchcraft. Immigration and Refugee B (2002) also stated that, local authorities in Nigeria often treat witchcraft as crime punishable to death. When a witch is convicted of witchcraft, he/she will be severely punished in the community where he/she belongs, through stoning, beating, payment of fine or death. Some African communities kill witch by beating or strangling them to death or by burning them alive. Another form of punishment is banishment from the community. At times such segregation of life and suffering and the detachment from the family characterized by lack of food and basic life facilities leads to untimely death.

However, false accusation of witchcraft is not lightly treated. Such false accusation may result in death by the oracle or demand compensation for the accused person. To avoid accusation or suspicions of witchcraft, people seek to behave in the way sanctioned by people of the community. Hanle (1969) stated that this has the effect of increasing social solidarity and conformity, since it is the non-conformer or the unpopular person who is often accused, and

may reaffirm social values. Fear of being accused of witchcraft may also prevent moving about at night and thus act as a sanction against illicit affairs.

Conclusion

African traditional societies believe in witchcraft as means to explain human experiences of pain and suffering and sorrow. This belief satisfied people's search for explanations and solutions to their problems. For Africans, witchcraft is the enemy of life. Harmony, order, good neighbourliness or good company and transparency- all of which constitute signs of how human and created order should be but are denied in most fundamental way by witchcraft. By their actions or mere intentions, they make other people ill. Nothing is too vile for a witch, nothing too shocking. The solidarity of the society and the unity between the living and the dead, fundamental elements in the order and the survival of the universe mean nothing to witches/wizards. Thus witchcraft is intolerable for any society that values ethical principles and life itself.

Recommendations

i. The right of every individual to live should be the utmost concern of both government and African society. The punishment meant for the accused such as death by hanging, stoning, strangling is inhuman and should be put to an end
ii. Poverty and unemployment rate in the African societies surely contributes to the increase in the witchcraft accusation and suspicion. Therefore, adequate provision, youth and women empowerment will be a good measure towards tackling the challenges.
iii. Other approaches can also be adopted as alternative to traditional approach, putting into consideration that the society is dynamic.

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