

The Epistemology Of Witchcraft In Traditional African Societies

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Abstract: *Witchcraft existed and still exists in traditional African societies. In spite of the tendency in some quarters to dismiss charges of witchcraft attacks as disprovable allegations, witchcraft is real and its practice is widespread in both urban and rural areas. Although witchcraft is shrouded in mystery, proof of its existence can be ascertained, beyond metaphysical realms, in the tangible and intangible effects of witchcraft attacks. Some of these effects are so real and pernicious that they can be easily detected via the physical faculties of the victims and those of other observers. This paper explores the dreaded phenomenon of witchcraft in traditional African societies. Citing instances of witchcraft activities in some African communities, the study x-rays the meaning of witchcraft, its practice, dimensions, socio-cultural manifestations, and philosophical import.*

Keywords: *witchcraft, metaphysics, traditional African society, philosophy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Although this paper is centred on witchcraft in traditional African societies, it is important to observe from the onset that witchcraft is not a peculiar African phenomenon. Witchcraft was practised in all human societies and, in some refined or relabeled form, it is still being practised in many parts of the world.

Due to Africa's over-reliance on oral tradition, there is no written record of the phenomenon of witchcraft in Africa in pre-colonial times. For the earliest written information about witchcraft, we have to rely on European literature and history. Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, first performed in 1606 (Bevington 2017), begins with a coven of English witches. Shakespeare's witches had their antecedents in the numberless witches of 15th-century Europe, a "witch craze" era characterized by massive trial and execution of tens of thousands of witches (Barstow, 1994).

In those days in Europe, even royal families were not unaffected by the menace of witches. For instance, in 1590, King James VI of Scotland, in consort with his Danish Queen, launched a massive campaign against witches which resulted in the torture and execution of many "witches". Even in earlier times, witches existed. Israel's King Saul, who had banned witchcraft in Israel, was forced by the exigencies of war to

consult the Witch of Endor in *First Samuel*, a Bible book *History.com* documents as having been written "between 931 B.C. and 721 B.C".

While it is safe to say that, at one time or the other, all human societies have been plagued by the activities or dread of witches, witchcraft as a social pandemic is now largely prevalent in indigenous cultural settings, such as those of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and their respective diaspora in the Western world. In these areas, where the philosophical outlook is fundamentally magical (Russell 1972), witchcraft of the most pernicious and vindictive sort remains dominant, thereby perpetuating the notoriety of witches as agents of Satan deploying evil powers to demonize and destroy people and their environments (Nadel, 1952, Thomas 1997, Kielburger, 2008).

Currently in Europe and the United States, due largely to industrialization, massive scientific and technological advancement, and boundless urbanization, witchcraft has acquired a benign, anti-orthodox, unconventional appeal. Witchcraft, among a section of the "free-thinking" multitudes of the Western world, has become an openly-canvassed form of divination or "modern paganism" (Clifton 2006) which can be learned from odd texts such as *Mastering Witchcraft: a Practical Guide for Witches, Warlocks, and Covens* (Huson 1970). Some Western witches, having mastered the craft of

divination, now own websites that advertise their services and sign up customers, most of whom are disillusioned or disoriented folks in search of spiritual self-awareness or necromantic excitement (Ankarloo and Clark, 2001).

In traditional African societies, the focus of this paper, witchcraft remains an undiluted evil. The following once near universal concept of the witch continues to be the way the average African in traditional and urban centres, and even in the diaspora, views the African witch:

One of the most surprising aspects of the study of witchcraft is that African, Asian, European, and Native American cultures all postulate similar behaviors on the part of witches. Witches are often elderly and socially isolated; they meet at night in small groups to plot evil deeds; they are able to leave their bodies or change their shapes; they can suck the blood, drain the energy, or devour the internal organs of their victims; and they murder family members, commit cannibalism, fly through the air, hold indiscriminate orgies, and seduce sleeping people. These similarities go beyond the possibility of coincidence. (*Encyclopedia.com* 2019)

The above accurately describes the current notion of the witch across Africa. But it is an incomplete picture. These days, those accused of being witches cut across all ages, and frequently they include young adults, teenagers and children: "Until 10-20 years ago, it was women and the elderly who tended to be accused" (BBC 2010). And whereas witches operated mostly at night in the past, these days, African witches operate actively also during the day. Their activities are, perhaps, more devastating today than they were in the past.

II. THE MEANING OF WITCHCRAFT

The compound word, "witchcraft", is made up of two modern English words, "witch" and "craft". Giving its hideous associations, it is not easy to pin down the meaning of the word, "witch", but its etymological roots, according to *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2019), are traceable to two Old English words: the noun, *wicca*, which means "sorcerer" and the verb, *wiccian*, which means "to cast a spell". Witches essentially utilize the same tools employed by sorcerers. Both clandestinely employ magical chants and supernatural powers to manipulate nature, people or social occurrences to achieve selfish or self-serving ends for themselves or their clients. However, sorcerers, unlike other enchanters who are outright witches, generally double as spirit-invoking healers or seers of sorts and openly offer their services to their clients. Witches, usually, merely use their own spiritual powers to execute destructive acts of personal revenge, ill will, envy, selfishness or self-assertion. A few witches, eager to commercial their magical powers, also function as sorcerers.

Proceeding from the foregoing, we can characterize a witch as someone who casts spells and performs magical acts to demonize and hurt people or influence and limit their potential and success. This gender-blind definition also serves as the meaning of "wizard", a word sometimes used to refer to a male witch. Throughout this paper, except where otherwise distinguished, the word, "witch", will have a generic, genderless, all-purpose, application.

Having defined "witch", let us turn to the word, "craft". Ordinarily, "craft" has a basic meaning known to most people, and this can be stated as the act or art of creating or doing something in a skilful way. However, its older English version, "craeft", which is of Germanic origin, also stands for "strength" or "power" (Encarta 2009).

Witchcraft can loosely be defined as the invisible act of harming people or their belongings through the use of enchantments and diabolical powers. Note the deliberate use of the word, "act", in this definition. This paper does not view witchcraft primarily as a belief system but fundamentally treats it as an act or acts of demonic force aimed at afflicting, manipulating or hindering someone or something. Witchcraft refers to both the act and effect of the phenomenon; it also includes belief in witchcraft and the practical manifestations of that belief. So, the word, "witchcraft", in this paper, is used in two complementary senses:

- ✓ the demonic act of bewitching someone/something or the effect of such bewitchment; and
- ✓ belief in the demonic act of bewitching someone or something.

Bear in mind, however, that our definition of "witchcraft" is not necessarily rigid as the phenomenon is secretive and slippery in nature. However, that witches and their craft, no matter how defined or interpreted, put people in harm's way is confirmed by social research:

"In my field research, I did not present my working definition of witchcraft to interviewees or informants. Instead, the first question posed to each individual was for an explanation of their understanding of witchcraft. Though respondents varied in the wording of their explanations or descriptions, the common theme of causing harm was present in every definition of witchcraft." (Roxburgh 2016)

III. THE PRACTICE OF WITCHCRAFT

How real is witchcraft? While the validity of witchcraft cannot be scientifically or legally proved, the nature of witchcraft can be grasped and described from the visible and undeniable effects of witchcraft attacks. There is some truth in Mbiti's claim that for the African

The physical and the spiritual are only two dimensions of one and the same universe. Africans 'see' all the invisible universes when they see, feel or hear the visible and tangible world. (1999, p. 57).

What has not been said is that apart from the influence of African traditional religions, the vicious effects of witchcraft frequently experienced by victims across Africa is a major reason why the African cannot overlook the influence of spiritual forces in his or her daily life. In this segment, we will examine the nature of witchcraft by narrating some of its practical manifestations as recorded by trust-worthy researchers.

Although the act of witchcraft, to the non-witch, may seem "intangible and beyond empirical verification" (Nadel 1952), there are credible insights regarding how witches practise their craft. After researching witchcraft in four African societies, namely, the Nupe and Gwari of northern Nigeria and Sudan's Kotongo and Mesakin tribes, Nadel

(1952) identified certain spiritual conceptions of the Nupe and the Gwari which may help in explaining the metaphysics of witchcraft. Basically, he spoke of "the 'shadow-souls' of witches which roam about and attack victims, while their bodies remain asleep at home, thus deceiving any ordinary attempts at proving, or disproving, these mystic activities." Key beliefs noted by Nadel's enquiry include the following:

- ✓ A body is possessed of a double soul: "shadow-soul" and "life-soul".
- ✓ Witches have the power to "eat" the "life-soul" of their victims.
- ✓ 'Only the "shadow-souls" of witches roam about and attack victims while their bodies remain asleep at home, thus deceiving any ordinary attempts at proving, or disproving, these mystic activities.' (19)
- ✓ 'Witchcraft itself is a mysterious, malignant and often deadly power, emanating directly from evil wishes.' (23)

With slight variations, these views are essentially shared by other groups, including many Nigerian and non-Nigerian groups. For instance, the above view that witches "eat" the "life-soul" of their victims is shared by the Azande of southern Sudan:

The Azande of southern Sudan believed that witchcraft was a psychic act; it required no magic spells or actions, and could even be done involuntarily. Witchcraft was inherited from the parent of the same sex. Witches were believed to possess mangu, a substance thought to be lodged in the intestines and to confer the spiritual power to harm. Witches were also believed to be able to send their spirits out at night to eat the souls of their victims, causing them to sicken and die. (Evans-Pritchard, 1937)

Though Nigeria's Edo, among other groups, believe, like the Azande, that witchcraft is inherited, it further holds the view that some people become witches by initiation. In other words, witches and wizards are born as well as made. And the powers of witches and their level of operation differ according to their ranks in the spirit world. Though some operate in the day time, witches are most active at night. The mode of their operation, according to a recent study of witchcraft in West Africa, can generally be described as follows:

Research reveals that hierarchy exists in the world of witches and wizards. Both the kind of harm a witch or wizard can cause and his or her method of operation depend largely on his or her level in witchcraft. Generally, witches and wizards operate by making incantations while manipulating some fetish objects. But those who are high up in hierarchy can transform themselves into animals and operate under the cover of some animals. The animals usually involved are the owl, the snake, the pussycat, the cockroach, the monkey, the hawk and the bat. (Agbanusi 2016)

That someone can be initiated into witchcraft is corroborated by D. Amaury Talbot (1915), a British woman who dwelt among the Ibibio of southern Nigeria and conducted a research on their women in the early 20th century. Her ethnographic account, which includes how children are initiated into witchcraft and the effect of such initiations, also details how witches carry out their operation. In her book, *Woman's Mysteries of a Primitive People*, she states:

When a witch is either unwed or barren, she generally seeks out some child whom she may initiate into her secrets.

For this purpose she inveigles some little one into her house and sets before it "chop" such as children love, in which "witch medicine" has been mixed. Several cases in which parents have charged suspected persons with putting witchcraft potions into their children's food were brought before my husband in the Native Courts. One such occurred just before we left Oron. The witch, a barren woman, famous for her knowledge of drugs, was accused of having administered "medicine" to a small boy in a dish of plantains mixed with palm oil. The magic having entered into him had caused him, against his will, to sally forth at night and join the unholy revels. (162)

According to her, a common strategy used by witches to gain access into a family in order to attack that family was to initiate one of their children and use him or her to destroy the whole family, one by one. She illustrates this view with a true life story in which a wicked Ibibio chief (a wizard) had invited the family of one Ekpenyong to a feast in the chief's compound with the goal of initiating Offong, his last-born son. At the feast, "a fine portion ... in which beforehand a strong medicine had been mixed" was set aside for Offong" who ate same and returned home with his family. A few nights later, the wicked chief turned himself into an evil bird and visited Offong, urging him to leave his bed:

...the witchcraft that was within the boy drove him forth, and to his astonishment he saw a great crowd of people before the house flitting hither and thither in the light of the moon. He cried out in surprise at sight of such a multitude, but the bad chief cautioned him never to tell anyone of what he was about to witness. Then all went together, not walking upon the ground, but floating a few feet above, until they reached a great cleared space in the bush, such as Offong had never seen before. In the midst of it was a cauldron simmering over a fire, and into this from time to time, to the lad's horror, gobbets of human flesh were thrown by one or other of the witch-company. After all had danced awhile in the light of the flame, they seated themselves in a great circle and the contents of the pot were distributed among them. To Offong was given a large piece of flesh and some yam. He ate the latter, but concealed the former, which he took home, placed in his mother's 'smoking basket,' and then hung over the fire. (164)

For a while, Offong was helpless for "no matter how much lie strove to stay in the house, the witchcraft that was within him carried him through locked door or wall-chink to the meeting-place". Then, one day, the chief and the other witches said it was Offong's turn to provide a member of his family for the feast or else "they would rend him in pieces and fling him into the pot". To save his life, Offong opened up to Akpan, his elder brother, who sought out a "juju man" to whom he narrated all his younger brother's troubles. The juju man told him what to do and gave him "a medicine so strong that no evil thing could withstand its power" (166).

Next time at the coven, after prior consultations with Akpan, Offong told his witch-company that he was now ready to offer his elder brother but that the latter was too big for him to convey alone. He invited the witches to his father's compound so that they could help him take his hefty elder brother to the coven. The wicked chief and all the witches agreed to do so. And this was what happened when they came:

Then Akpan strewed the strong medicine upon the ground...so that when at nightfall the evil creatures gathered round the compound, the charm held them and they could not flee away...There, before the house, the witches were found naked and trembling. No sooner did these perceive that their evil nature could no longer be hid than they started screaming like bats and ill birds of night, running round and round seeking a hiding-place, yet could not escape because the juju held them. Then Ekpenyong beat upon the great drum, and summoned all the townfolk together, and they bound those evil creatures, both witches and wizards, and dragged them forth to the juju house...and pronounced sentence that all the witch company should be burnt to death save their chief alone. Him they bound to a tree, and, while still alive, tore small pieces from his body, which they roasted before his eyes, then forced him to eat, crying...After a while he also died in great agony. (166-7)

Another common practice of witches involve the drawing out of the "dream body" of a victim. This malicious magical act feeds "upon the essence of things, leaving the tangible forms apparently unaltered". Moments later, the bewitched person or object dies or withers away. As an illustration of the ways witches can kill someone before he or she actually dies, an informant of Talbot's volunteered the following story about how an unhappy barren co-wife killed her rival's baby:

Then the unhappy woman goes to a powerful witch-doctor, usually some ancient crone who has grown old in the study of secret things such as these. There she buys a strong medicine, and at night-time enters into the room where her happy rival sleeps by the side of their common husband. By magic arts she draws out the 'dream body' of the piccan, and bears it off to the bush, where a company of witches, brought thither by the witch-doctor, are waiting to devour it. Witches by their magic can feed upon the essence of things, leaving the tangible forms apparently unaltered. Next morning the babe lies dead within the womb, because it has no soul. Then the mother begins to cry 'Who killed my piccan? The barren woman sits in her house laughing low to herself, and her rival hears her laughter. (168)

In certain situations, the wickedness of witches attract public backlashes against perceived witches, and some of these have resulted into lynchings and deaths. It should be noted that while cases of innocent victims cannot be ruled out, backlashes against witches are often triggered by the horrendous effects of witchcraft attacks, especially the mysterious afflictions, diseases and deaths it unleashes in many communities. The visible unbearable outcomes of witchcraft are the reasons why anti-witch mob lynchings, though condemnable, are becoming widespread in Africa:

This belief has devastating consequences. Even in advanced countries like Ghana and Kenya, people are often accused of being witches, persecuted and murdered. Especially the elderly, women and children become victims. In northern Ghana, there are so-called "witches' villages", where women accused of being witches seek shelter (Palmer 2010). UNICEF study pointed out that even children suffer violence as supposed witches in Africa, and some are killed (Cimpric, 2010). Between 1991 and 2001, around 22,500 Africans are said to have been lynched on the grounds of purportedly practicing witchcraft. (Danner, 2013).

Many Africans believe that the harmful effects of witchcraft on victims of the phenomenon are the main causes of the violence against alleged witches.

IV. PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLANATIONS

Philosophers, particularly Western philosophers, have treated the subject of witchcraft as a marginal aspect of philosophy of mind, and witches as ontological illusions. Philosophy in general, even metaphysics, has always controverted the treatment of "things not seen" and has been unsure whether to attribute joy or sadness to them:

The philosophy of mind has ever been a subject of deep interest, and that department which leads to a belief in "things not seen," has, more than any other, promoted the happiness, or increased the misery of the human race. (Mitchell and Dickie 1839)

While no philosopher can satisfactorily prove or disprove the existence of witchcraft, some philosophical positions can serve as ladders upon which one may validate or invalidate the phenomenon of witchcraft. For instance, Plato's philosophy is said to have been more supportive and tolerant of the idea of witches than Aristotle's philosophy which became more prominent than Plato's in the 13th and 14th centuries. According to Encyclopedia.com (2019):

Platonic thought allowed for the existence of a natural, morally neutral magic between divine miracle and demonic delusion; but Aristotelianism dismissed natural magic and denied the existence of occult natural forces. If no natural magic existed, it followed that wonders were worked either through divine miracle or demonic imposture. Magicians compel or exploit supernatural powers, and since God and the angels cannot be compelled or exploited, the powers with which sorcerers deal must be demonic, whether they know this explicitly or not. Thus, Scholastic logic dismissed simple sorcery as demonic witchcraft.

There is this tendency to dismiss witchcraft as an outcome of a primitive group's incapacity to offer rational explanations to certain natural or mysterious occurrences. The ethno-philosopher, Evans-Pritchard, who has conducted numerous researches in this field, does not think such alleged ignorance is necessarily behind witchcraft beliefs. He posits, in his study of the Azande, that "belief in witchcraft in no way contradicts empirical knowledge of cause and effect". Witchcraft, according to him, is a system with its own natural logic. This explanatory system provides answers to questions of why particular occurrences happen to specific individuals at the time they do. It does not invalidate their understanding of empirical cause and effect of an occurrence. Rather it deals with its ultimate cause.

The "ultimate cause" of an event may not necessarily be a logical one. Such a cause is likely to be sought after physical enquiry has failed to provide "ultimate" answers to persistent questions about why certain events happen to certain persons at particular times and in certain circumstances. Evans-Pritchard further explains:

It is the particular and variable conditions of an event and not the general and universal conditions that witchcraft explains. Fire is hot, but it is not hot owing to witchcraft, for

that is its nature. It is a universal quality of fire to burn, but it is not a universal quality of fire to burn you.

The philosophical concept which throws significant but partial light on the phenomenon of witchcraft is the theory of determinism which was first framed in the 18th century by the French scientist and philosopher, Pierre-Simon, marquis de Laplace. Laplace theorized that if an all-knowing observer can know with absolute precision the location and speed of every particle in the universe, such an observer can perfectly predict the future (Solomon and Higgins, 2009).

Such strictly scientific thinking has little to do with witchcraft but there are variants of determinism framed by other philosophers which bear some relevance to the subject matter. They include causal determinism (the view that things don't happen randomly - there is a cause for every effect), theological determinism (which holds that everything is predestined to happen by an all-knowing and all-seeing divinity), and pre-determinism (which holds that all events are determined in advance – it can also be seen as a form of genetic, environmental, or biological determinism).

Some of these Western deterministic ideas correspond with the concept of destiny in many African cultures, a separate topic which the scope of this paper will not permit us to discuss. What we must emphasize here is that though witchcraft has a cause-and-effect dimension, Africans hardly believe that it is the only cause of an event. What those who know witchcraft to be a reality of the African experience are interested in, Evans-Pritchard again explains, is how “witchcraft brings a man into relations with events in such a way that he sustains injury”.

Further elucidating this point, Adam (2006) draws attention to the “difference between efficient cause and final cause” a difference he explains with this quote by Gluckman:

For every misfortune, like every piece of good fortune, involves two questions: the first is “how” did it occur, and the second is “why” it occurred at all. The “how” is answered by common sense empirical observations: the man died because he was bitten by a poisonous snake. But this does not explain “why” that man was bitten by that snake and at that time and place, and not by another snake at another time and place; or indeed why that man was bitten and not some other man altogether. Beliefs in witchcraft explain why particular persons at particular times and places suffer particular misfortunes – accident, disease...and so forth. Witchcraft, as a theory of causation, is concerned with the singularity of misfortune (Gluckman, 1956: 83–84).

V. CONCLUSION

Witchcraft is real, and so are its victims. It is also a known fact that non-witches have falsely been accused of perpetrating the evil act on certain individuals who might have been victims of acts inflicted upon them by some unknown real witch or by some happenstance unconnected with witchcraft. All these breed confusion and create doubt about the notion of witchcraft. This confusion is compounded by the extreme views of Western and non-Western modernists who think that whatever cannot be scientifically and

technologically explained cannot be true. Satanism is real but can it be scientifically and technologically explained?

Marginal topics, such as sorcery and witchcraft, deserve closer attention regarding how they really operate and how they affect real victims. Witchcraft should be studied instead of being recklessly dismissed as a fake notion. Roxburgh (2016) had made a similar plea and I would like to conclude with his words:

In essence, the modern world provides an order, a unified and universalizing conception of a singular, objective reality that can be known and accessed, and therefore controlled. As this modern reality advances, expanding across and penetrating deeper into our societies, lives and imaginations, its logic seeks to eliminate alternative conceptions of reality, forcing them to the margins of human discourse and experience. However, as argued by Horkheimer and Adorno, these alternative realities may be essential as they provide greater meaning and insight than modernity can offer. (Roxburgh 2016)

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