

Attitude towards Witchcraft in Africa: The Role of the Church

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Abstract

In African societies, it is believed that witches are enemies of the society causing ill-health, bad luck and all sorts of misfortunes. Hence, any inhuman treatment directed to them is seen as an act to rid the society of its enemies. In an attempt to carry out this “moral imperative”, many have suffered for what they did not do due to false accusations while some have suffered unnecessarily just because their relatives were accused of witchcraft. Also, many whose cause of failure is not traceable to any force, go about attributing it to witches and some churches are involved in this act of abuse of human right. As a descriptive study, this paper explores the role of the church in influencing the attitude of Africans toward the perceived witches. It argues that attitude towards so called witches in Africa, is rooted in the people’s worldview and any solution to witchcraft accusation that does not take this worldview into consideration may not yield the expected results. So, the church has a role to play in this direction. It therefore recommends that among other things, the church should engage the Bible to deal with the fears and needs associated with the worldview about witchcraft, formulate a Bible based theology of suffering, revert to the message of salvation and join other NGOS to address the issues associated with human right abuse in witchcraft matters.

Key Words: Witchcraft Accusation, Church, Africa, Belief, Attitude

Introduction

In African societies, it is believed that witches are one of the enemies of the society causing ill-health, bad luck and all sorts of misfortunes. Hence, the attitudes of Africans to witches are characterized by fear, hatred, suspicion, cruelty among others. The belief that witches’ activities are against the joy, prosperity and progress of the society explains the level of hatred, inhuman treatment, violence and cruelty that are visited by individuals and the society, on anyone who confesses to or is accused of witchcraft in African societies. The perpetrators of such violence see their activities towards so called witches as their ‘sincere’ contributions to attempts to rid the society of evil so that joy and prosperity can be restored.

It has however been discovered that the treatment given to so called witches in recent times, has gone beyond the attempt to rid the society of evil. It seems other factors have crept into it. These factors include: strained relationship at work, in the family and society, socio-economic problems, selfishness, hatred and others. People are now being forced to confess to witchcraft, while many are falsely accused by their neighbours. Unimaginable abuses of human right now characterize the way the so called witches are detected and are made to confess. Many old women, wives and children are forced to confess to what they do not know anything about, while many of them are stigmatized and abandoned by their children/parents and therefore left to suffer untold hardships, many are killed in the process.

The most disturbing part is that, many revivalist/Pentecostal churches, that are supposed to give hope to the hopeless, are accomplices in this inhuman activities. Many prophets in that strand of Christianity claim to have been called by God to detect witches and deliver them and in the process, cause more hatred, suspicion, violence in the society. The fact that witchcraft is part of the worldview of the African people, the assignment of the church in the world which among others, is to give hope to the hopeless, and the involvement of some churches in promoting human right abuses toward so called witches, make it imperative for the Church to play active role in addressing the inhuman attitudes towards the victims, by influencing attitude towards so called witches. How then can the church achieve this? This is the focus of this paper. The paper sets out to examine attitudes toward witchcraft in Africa and the role of the church in influencing these attitudes. To achieve this, the paper investigates the reality of witchcraft belief in Africa. It then examines witchcraft accusations and its effects on individuals and society. It concludes by finding out what should be the roles of the church in influencing attitudes towards witchcraft in Africa.

The Reality of Witchcraft Belief in Africa

Witchcraft belief is a reality in Africa. Belief in witchcraft may sound absurd and illogical or be denied by the 21st century scientific man, especially considering the human right abuses that have characterized it. To the African who has witnessed cases attributed to witchcraft operations and confessions, witchcraft belief is not merely a result of socio-economic or psychological problems as some would view it. According to Mbiti (1969:202), the belief in witchcraft is there in every African village and it is part of the religious corpus of beliefs.

Belief in witchcraft is based on the idea that some human beings can control events through supernatural means and harm others with or without physical contact. In other words, that the spirits of human beings can be sent out on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind and estate (Tasie, 2012:4). A “witch” is usually thought to have become possessed by evil spirit which will force them to cause harm to other family and community members (Secker, 2012:24).

There is a thin line between the ideas of evil spirit, magic, sorcery, spell casting, and the idea of witches or witchcraft in any African society. All of those who are involved in these belong to the category of evil doers who are given the general name *aye* (the world) by the Yoruba. The “world” in this context is the concentration of the powers of evil in the world (Idowu, 1991: 173 Sanou, 2020: 145). In most African societies, it is believed that witches are inherently wicked. Hence, the African takes measures to protect himself against their attacks, seek healing for those who are believed to be attacked by them and attempts to check their operations.

Gbule and Odil record that discussions about witchcraft are polarized within the framework of Western and African scholarship. Western scholars like Pritchard (1937), Field in Parrinder (1949), Anne Marie (1968), Parrinder (1963) and Donoran (1992) as opposed to their African counterparts give a disoriented and distorted view of the reality of witchcraft. On the other hand, African scholars like Idowu (1976), Awolalu in Ilegu (2001), Offiong (1991), Talbot (1968) among others argue that witchcraft is a reality (2015). The reactions of Africans to the question of witchcraft show that witchcraft is real to them. Some do not even like to mention the word “witch” or talk about it in the night for fear of being heard and later attacked by witches. No wonder Idowu asserts that, it is idle talk asking the question of whether witches exist or not, because it is an urgent reality (1976). Awolalu in Ilegu (2001:1) also argues that there is no belief more profoundly ingrained in the Africans generally than that of the existence of witchcraft. Omoyajowo (2006: 1) tells the same line when he asserts that witchcraft belief ‘is real not only in Africa but even in Europe’.

Most African societies categorize witches into white and black. Black witches (*aVje/duvdu/* among the Yoruba) are believed to be wicked and diabolic. Their birds are black. They can inflict problem on any one or cause misfortunes in their society. White witches (*aVje/funfun*) on the other hand, are humane and more powerful than black ones. It is so because they stand for justice and light which Yoruba believe will always prevail over evil. It is this type of witches that normally raise good families. Their husbands and children always succeed in their endeavours. It is however believed that they help their family members at the expense of others. Gbule and Odili record that in Emu, Ukwuaniland, white witches while transferring the success or good luck of another person to their families would blow evil winds against their victims' affairs. This shows that white witches are not totally good. White witches also use their powers for the good of their society and to neutralize the powers of black witches. They are called *aVjevolovmo* (witches who raise successful children) among the Yoruba. They are always at loggerheads with black witches (Olusakin, 2013). Thomas in Gbule and Odili (2015:103) classifies good witches as cunning folk and bad ones as malevolent folk.

Ilegu records that the tradition is strong among the Urhobo that white witches are found among many medicine men, witch doctors and some, including women who are believed to have raised a successful family (2001:7). Unlike what obtains among the Urhobo where white and black witches hold meeting together, the Yoruba believe that the two do not have their meetings together. It is normally said that light and darkness do not meet. Among the Gbagyi in central Nigeria, witchcraft is not inherently evil: it can be used for good or evil depending on the enterprise to which the witch puts its power (Adedayo, 2016).

Awolalu and Dopamu (1997:248) note that though witches operate in guilds, they sometimes operate singly. It is believed that they are highly organized in their guild. The leader is always a woman while the executioner is always a man (called a wizard). Apart from the leader, there are other officers and messengers. Promotion is based on merit and the most important criteria are the number of relations donated for feasting and the number converted just like the Urhobo witches (Ilegu, 2001:7). It is believed that witches operate in the secret. They hold meetings mostly at midnight around 12:00 to 2:00am. Such meetings are spiritual because they go there with spiritual bodies leaving their physical bodies at home. If a person sleeps with one leg on the wall and the other on the bed or mat, is believed among the Yoruba that, the person has gone to witchcraft meeting. It is believed that witches meet in places like riverbanks, on top or at the feet of trees like Iroko, Bamboo, silk, cotton, market square, mountain, hill, in between plantain or banana trees and crossroads.

Also, it is believed that witches paddle to their covens by using agents like broomsticks and empty shell of groundnuts. They can even turn themselves to animal familiars like birds, owl, bat or black cat. Birds are seen as their common agents. That is why they are called the possessor of bird-*eleye* among the Yoruba. Among the Yoruba, the witches are collectively referred to as *aVwoneleye* (owners of birds). They can transform into different kinds of birds under different circumstances. The Yoruba also call them *yeVyeV mi onivyeabaVmiV* meaning "my mother of mysterious feathers" (Elebuibon, 2013). It is also believed among the Yoruba that witches can fly during the day especially the most powerful ones.

Alana (2000:121) records that witches can kill their victims at once or gradually and that they can share the parts of their victims while the person still walks about physically. Like Urhobo witches (Ilegu, 2001:8), witches do turn to wild animals like lion, bears, grass-cutters etc and kill human beings or destroy crops like cassava, yam, corn among others. Elebuibon records that among the Yoruba, it is believed that witches use the following methods and mean to manifest their powers. They are: persistent talk or importunity (*agogoenu*), looking without blinking (*awopaaaje*), shooting a witchcraft arrow (*ofa-ajenina*), sacred calabash (*igbaiwa*), vital forces (*ase*), and the power stored in the crevice of the cervix (*omusuaje*) (2013:54-57).

Witches are believed to donate members of their families alone. If there is need for them to go to other family, it will be after due consultation with the witches in such family. Most of the times, the people they donate are their husbands and children. Witchcraft is believed to be common among women, though some men are said to be involved too. Parrinder recording about witchcraft among the Nupe says that 'though men are in their coven, women are always the leader and that the men witches are not as violent as women (1969:167). Recently, children are also being suspected as members of the guild.

Among the Urhobo, witchcraft could be transmitted or transferred from parents or grandparents to children or grandchildren. The intention may be to fortify them against witchcraft attack or for the child to take over after the mother or grandmother may have died. Witchcraft may also be bought by people who feel they are being tormented by witches and feel if they possess same, it will stop the harassment. Moreover, witchcraft could be picked unknowingly through food or gifts (Ilega 2001:5, Agbanusi, 2016). Elebuibon notes that among the Yoruba, a woman is believed to be a witch only after being initiated into the secret of the cult, but witchcraft could be inherited and sometimes acquired through deliberate quest (2013)

In most African societies, it is believed that there are some persons who cannot be initiated by witches nor harmed by them. This is because the head (Ori or Chi) of such persons is strong: it is divinely fortified. Also, it is believed that some people can be witches and not know. Some of these are among those who dream but not remember when they wake up. Psychologists may give explanation to such, but Africans believe that it is witches who have initiated such people and make them forget their dreams so that they do not remember the places they went to in the dream and the wicked things they joined witches to do. It is also believed that certain individuals do refuse witchcraft initiation, but witches will make life unbearable for them. They can kill their beloved children, plague them with sickness or use their face to do evil at night (Olusakin, 2013).

In most cases, witches are believed to be the cause of misfortunes like mysterious death, drowning, miscarriage, still birth, failure, stagnancy, demotion at work to which no divine/natural cause can be attributed. It is believed that they can retard the progress of their families and community. It is also believed that old witches can use the blood of their victims to prolong their lifespan or exchange the life of a younger person for their own. Agbanusi (2016:117) records the experience of a university undergraduate student from Igala in Benue state. According to the student, anytime his paternal grandmother was ill, his own father would send message across to him not to come home, until the old woman would be well. The woman was believed to be a witch and that whenever she was seriously ill, she would swap her life span with that of any young person around, and become well again, while the young person would become sick and eventually die. Stories related to this abound in African villages on wicked activities of witches, though some of them are mere speculations borne out of fear, hatred, and suspicion. It must be noted that, this belief about the evil activities of witches makes Africans see any inhuman activities meted out to any witch as moral imperative.

Witchcraft Accusations and Effects in Africa

In Africa, witchcraft is seen as diabolical and wrong, not because Christianity speaks ill of it, but because it is believed that its operations are against the most central precept of African life which is preservation of life (Mogoola, 2012:99). Hence, it is regarded by Africans as anti-social. Witchcraft is so hated that right from the time a person is accused of it, she or he is not saved. As Mogoola puts it, witchcraft accusations like accusation of child molestation in the West is not taken lightly. In such a situation, people are not treated innocent until found guilty, they remain guilty until proven innocent. Even if one is proven innocent, the fact that he/she was once accused remains in the society's consciousness and once accused often means always accused (2012: 101, cf. Eboiyehi, 2017:247).

In almost all African societies, stories and myths abound about the existence, exploits and experiences of witchcraft. The stories which are passed down from one generation to the next tell of how witches fly at night (some in the day time), demonstrate out of body experiences, possess animal familiarity, exhibit the ability to mutate, consume their victims and wreak havoc. The position of anthropologists that the phenomenon of witchcraft accusation is used as “a channel by which people can deal with hatred, frustration, jealousy and guilt and use socially acceptable opportunities for aggression, vengeance and gaining prestige and attention is debatable (Onongha, 2017:47).

Witchcraft accusation has been from time immemorial. In traditional Africa, it was believed that witches could confess to their evil activities under certain conditions, for examples, if she kills twins (ibeji); if she kills a person in the category of those that are believed to have white blood (Elejefunfun); or if she eats a concoction made with palm kernel oil (*adi*), if she eats *adieasa*, the bark of obo tree and snail prepared properly. It is believed that eating this concoction can protect someone against witchcraft attack. A witch can also confess if she goes against the rules of the guild and is thereby dispossessed of her power (Elebuibon, 2013:73).

If suspected of witchcraft, a person can be brought to *Aya Ile* (this is a place in every family compound among the Yoruba where the family members assemble and invoke the spirit of their ancestors and ask them for help if the need be. It is believed that anyone who is a witch and is brought to *ayaile* and refuse to confess, the elders in the family would ask the ancestors to take charge of the judgement. Also, there were deities and cults that exposed witches in traditional African society. These included, Orunmila among the Yoruba, Ayelala (among the people of Ilaje Ese Odo in Ondo State and Ijebu in Ogun State), Egungun masquerades (including Mohuru in Oyo and Dariagbon in Kisi), and cults like Atinga among the Yoruba and Egbe among the Urhobo (Elebuibon, 2013:73-84, Ilega). It is believed that in most cases, these methods of exposing witches were void of partiality and errors.

However, the way detection, confession and accusation of witches are done today leave much to be desired. It seems many people are falsely accused as a result of jealousy, and other factors. Also, it seems it is only certain sets of people that are now victims of witchcraft accusation. Witchcraft accusations are often directed to elderly woman and recently to children. It is quite unfortunate to note that across Africa, many women are said to have been “burned, buried alive, hanged to pieces and tortured to death” (Eboiyehi, 2017:248). In Tanzania between 2004 and 2009, more than 2,585 elderly women were reportedly killed. Between 2010 and 2011, more than 20 elderly women were said to have been hanged to death in Zimbabwe. Also in Zimbabwe, president Mugabe sacked his deputy, Mrs Joy mujuru (who was over sixty years old) over the accusation that she was a witch who wanted to assassinate him. Reports of witchcraft accusations and the humiliation that follows abound in Ghana, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, among others Eboiyehi 2017:248). Safechildafrica (2020) notes that in Europe in the 1600s, suspicion fell often on elderly women, but in recent time, suspicion has started falling on children. Hence, in the last 20 years, children have been the victims of witchcraft accusations in most societies in the world. Witchcraft accusations against children have been reported from over 300 countries all around the world in Africa, Asia, South America, Central America, the Middle East and Europe.

While it is a fact that the accusations of people as witches may not necessarily mean they are, many factors have been advanced as reasons behind witchcraft accusations and its resurgence in recent time. These include: the emergence of African Pentecostalism, movie industry, the emergence of diseases like HIV/AIDS and the current fall in the quality of public health services, which has made traditional witchdoctors to be famous again, and the emergence of the global economic crisis with its attendant socio-political and economic inequalities among people and groups in Africa. Others are tragedy, socio-economic hardships, strained

relationship at work, business place, church, family and among community members, struggles for properties, land and wealth. Also, it may be a result of the power that people within a family may have over their members especially over women, to take their land properties and in the case of widows to rip them of their belongings and other properties after the death of their husband's (Bello, 2020:21-26, Sanou, 2020:146). 'Most cases of witchcraft accusations are based on suspicion, rumours or gossip that circulates within the community whenever its members are faced with a tragedy', while many who have confessed to witchcraft may have done so under coercion (Sanou, 2020: 145), All these however do not rule out the reality of witches and their evil activities in African belief system

People who are accused of witchcraft share particular characteristics such as old age, poor health, red or yellow eyes, wrinkle skin, missing teeth, a great wealth. Children accused of witchcraft include children with certain characteristics like mental and physical abnormalities and disabilities such as albinos, down syndrome, autism swollen belly, orphans, who live with their step-parents and extended families, children whose birth is abnormal (premature children awkward position during delivery) (Bello, 2020:28, Sanou, 2020:146).

Witchcraft accusation has a lot of effects on the individual and the society. Some of the effects are discussed below. It leads to long term stigmatization and the marginalization of women or the accused. It leads to the displacement and in the worse scenario, the killing of the accused. In the northern part of Ghana, women accused of witchcraft are taken to designated camps where they are isolated from the wider community (Bello, 2020:33). Also, it affects interpersonal relationship, in the family, among neighbours and community members as people suspect each other in cases of misfortune. It also leads to a situation where the accused and the children are denied their fundamental human rights by being prevented from mingling with people in public places, community centers, recreational areas and parks. In some instances, the children of the accused may be denied access to schools, health facilities and even church as they may be thought to have inherited the spirit from their mother (Bello, 2020:34).

Economically, the accused are adversely affected. They may be forced in some instances to relocate their homes and leave their properties behind including their farmlands. In some cases, their belongings are burned and destroyed. Also, witchcraft accusations can retard the progress individuals can make in their economic development and productivity. The stigma attached to witchcraft accusations affects the goods and services that could be rendered by the accused to better their lives economically. Also, people who are not very active economically and socially use witchcraft accusations to undermine the active people in progressing and making economic developments impacts. Hence, women who take up roles that are considered to be for men, and progress or make huge economic impact in them, are seen by some people as witches. The fear of being branded a witch may make some women refrain from taking up challenging tasks and works that can enhance their economic development (Bello, 2020:35).

Moreover, witchcraft accusations affect economic productivity. In traditional Africa, parents were leaving their children with elderly women to take care of them to enable them work in the farm. Even in contemporary time, these old women take up the roles of caring for kids of their children, to allow the parents of those kids go out and participate actively in economic activities and yield income for the family. However, in the families where the old woman is accused of witchcraft, she is either taken out of the homes and the society or not allowed to play that role again for fear of bewitching the children. This situation may force the mother of the kids to stay back at home or be involved in less demanding and productive activities to be able to care for the kids. This takes its toll on the social and economic productivity of the family (Bello, 2020:36, Eboiyehi 2017).

Furthermore, the economy of many societies has experienced a serious retrogression due to the belief in the operation of witches. Sons and daughters of some societies who live abroad have refused to go home and develop their towns for fear of being killed by witches. Instead of developing their towns, they invest in other towns, where they feel they are safe.

Many women who suffered a lot to raise their children have been left to suffer until death by such children due to false accusation. Many children have testified seeing their mothers in the dream with cutlass wanting to kill them, and because of this, have refused to help their mothers or give them money for fear of such mothers (now seen as witch) using the help or money as a point of contact to attack them.

Although, like the African man, Nigerians believe in other causes of misfortunes, there is this idea of attributing every calamity to the operation of witches in the people's minds. Many fail in business today, because of laziness, reckless spending, lack of planning and vision, among others, likewise the problems many students face are self-inflicted, but they are quick to find the reason for their suffering in witchcraft operations. In fact, in some quarters, witches are seen as one of the agents that spread HIV/AIDs pandemic. The implication of this is that, medicine men, diviners and spiritual churches have become more popular. The generality of the people who patronize spiritual churches do so because, they believe witches are after them.

In another dimension, witchcraft belief has scattered many homes. Many, who are supposed to render help to other members of the family, are far away from each other due to witchcraft belief. Many wives have been abandoned by their one time caring husband due to this belief. Their children are also scattered and are suspicious of each other. Homes where love, care, brotherliness, and help used to reign have turned to arena of chaos because of false accusations.

May be a positive effect, Ilegu opines that at least the belief in witchcraft exerts some pressure on men and women to observe the social virtues and to feel the right sentiments lest they be suspected of being witches (2001:12). Also, it serves some socio-economic purpose. For example, among the Navaho, Klukhom and Leighton records that witchcraft belief helps to balance the economic differences or imbalance in society. To quell the suspicion that the rich man gains his riches through witchcraft, he redistributes his wealth among relatives. In another dimension, the belief that if elderly ones in the family are not cared for, they can turn into a witch and bewitch their people demands that the Navaho treat the aged ones with proper care (cited in Gbuleand Odili, 2015:107). Also, witchcraft accusations make people conform to societal norms out of the fear of being accused of witchcraft because they stand out from the others (Onongha, 2017:47).

Though witchcraft belief exists in almost every society, the position that witchcraft accusations are common in societies where misfortune or evil is believed to have human cause and where the concept of mystical causality holds sway, cannot be totally thrown away. The concept of mystical causality holds that occurrences in the physical realms are orchestrated by spiritual forces. This belief finds expression in Africa due to its religious worldview – a worldview that believes in a symbiotic relationship between the physical and the spiritual, where every misfortune has a causal agent be it human or spiritual forces. Misfortune in Africa is blamed on forces like malevolent spirits, neglected ancestors, enemies who collide with sorcerers or witches who possess inherent powers to wreak havoc (Onongha, 2017:47). The negative effects of witchcraft belief in Africa demand that the Church plays a significant role in relation to witchcraft belief.

The Role of the Church in Africa in Relation to Witchcraft Belief

The history of the church is replete with roles she has played in relation to witchcraft belief and accusations whether the role has been positive or not. The view that witchcraft is diabolical and anti-social did not just start in the modern world: it was a well-grounded belief

in the traditional Africa and in the medieval Europe. In Europe, the persecution of witches occurred during the latter Middle Ages as well as the early modern period and reached its height between the 15th and the 17th centuries. About 110,000 men and women were tried as witches across European nations and American colonies between 1450 and 1750 and about 60,000 of them were executed (Climenhaga, 119).

In Medieval Europe, magic was used to describe individuals or group that did not subscribe to the perceived societal norms of the Christian community. In this category were Jews, heretics and the principle Other. There were common elements in stories surrounding the Jews, heretics and witches (Climenhaga, 119). This belief according to Climenhaga, paved way to the mass persecution of witches and the perception that witches were of diabolical Other within the medieval Christian thought.

The periods in European society during which there was gradual shift in Christian thought surrounding the idea of magic was divided into 3 periods. The first called conversion stage was between 300 to 1100 AD and it was during this period that the image of diabolical Order formed. During the second period which was in the 12th century, the image was solidified and the third period which was between the late 14th and early 15th centuries was the time of the outbreak of 'witch craze' (Climenhaga, 120). For Climenhaga, during the conversion period, there were few charges of purely witchcraft. The concept of *magia*, (the early form of magic) was related to pagan and the Roman state religion, while that of *superstitio* was related to the idea of false religion and beliefs. As of 107 CE, sources like the Ignatius of Antioch's linked witchcraft and heresy to pact with Satan. This was also seen in the episode between Simon Magus and Paul in Acts. To pact with Satan was believed to be close to devil worship and during this period witches were believed to be seduced by the devil.

Since the Medieval period believed devils and witches were virtually the same, the church embarked on an all-out attack crusade to stamp them out by exterminating all convicted witches. Many condemned women were tortured and burnt by the church as witches. Sprenger and Kraemer in Umoh note that 'it is women who are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions ... all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women, insatiable' (2018:60. The Pope Innocent viii papal bull promulgated in 1486, set forth rules for identification, persecution and punishment of witches. Many accused witches were rounded up and exterminated during the inquisition. In Europe alone, hundreds of thousands of women were tried and condemned in the 1600s (Umoh, 2018:60)

In Massachusetts, the war against witches came to a climax in the unpopular Salem witch trials of 1692. The execution of the accused was said to have begun in May and by July, the jails were full of those suspected of witchcraft. According to Umoh, about fifty repented and were subsequently freed, by September, twenty –two witches had been hanged (2018:61, cf Bello, 2020). It was later realized through recantations that much innocent blood had been shed. This led to the observance of a day of fast on Jan. 14, 1697 called "Official Day of Humiliation" proclaimed throughout Massachusetts and the magistrates issued a public apology. Traditional witchcraft dissipated at the close of 1600s and did not emerge again until the 20th century (Umoh, 2018:61).

Onongha notes that the missionaries who came to Africa, through their denial of the reality of witchcraft only succeeded in suppressing the belief, their parishioners still secretly held the belief. Many of them still secretly visited medicine men and others to protect themselves against witches. The belief later resurfaced in the 1970s which incidentally was about the time Pentecostal churches began to proliferate across Africa. Onongha therefore sees a close relationship between the emergence of African Pentecostal churches and the resurgence of witchcraft belief and accusations in modern Africa. He argues that this was possible because of the similarities between traditional African belief system and Pentecostal teachings (2017:48).

These similarities according to Onongha, include pragmatism, animism (belief in the existence of malevolent spirits from which man should seek protection), dynamism (belief that certain objects possess inherent power with which other phenomena can be controlled, divination (ability to discern the future, answer questions of causation and provision of guidance in life decision making) and deliverance (freedom from evil spirit possession, demonic harassment and from witchcraft and the promise of a better life and materialism (the quest for better life now). Pentecostalism is said to have provided a worldview where misfortunes, evil, among others are blamed on witchcraft powers, marine powers, spiritual spouses among others (2017:48-49, cfSanou, 2020:145).

It is pathetic to note that instead of some churches to learn from the mistake of the past and handle issues related to witchcraft belief with caution, the church in Africa especially, African Indigenous Churches is a major crusader in the persecution of perceived witches. Many of the churches and their leaders claim to be specialists in detecting witches and delivering those who are possessed by witchcraft spirit. Hence, they serve as haven for many who go there for protection against and deliverance from witchcraft attacks. In most cases the prophet uses his 'gift of revelation' to confirm the accusation levied against "a witch" by his/her relatives or the community. In the process of detecting and delivering the witches, a lot of human right issues come into play. Many old women, widows and children have become victims in these churches. What is going on in many churches in Africa is reminiscent of the 'witch craze' of the early modern history in Europe. This acts perpetrated by Pentecostal churches is worrisome.

Though not peculiar to Africa, the issue of witchcraft is a sensitive one because it is embedded in the people's worldview. So, any solution proffered, that focuses only on socio-economic factor without tackling it from the cosmological perspective of the African people, may not totally eradicate witchcraft accusations experienced in many societies today. Therefore, the role of the church in this direction is important both in addressing the worldview that underlies the belief in witchcraft and in influencing the attitude of Africans toward any confessed, suspected or accused witch. Generally, the churches in Africa have either openly denied the reality of witchcraft or have taken the belief to the extreme, perpetrating many forms of criminality in the name of casting out demons.

The fact that some have denied its reality or have condemned the way it is being handled is an indication that witchcraft matter is a serious problem for the church in modern Africa. Recently, an academic conference on witchcraft was organized at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, the reaction of ecumenical bodies like Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) showed that the church needs to address witchcraft issue in Africa. Majority of the Christians in Nigeria thought the conference was planned to ensure the meeting of witches all over the world. In fact, some declared some days of serious fasting and prayer to stop the conference from holding.

Hierbert, Shaw and Tienou in Onongha suggest three processes in dealing with witchcraft belief in Africa. They are: witchcraft belief and accusations should be taken seriously; the church and its agencies should speak against evil witchcraft causes; and the church and its leaders must stand up to defend those wrongly accused and the church must develop processes to diffuse hostilities and demonstrate true unity and love among its members (2017:49). This implies that one, the African people see witchcraft as a real phenomenon. Two, as Umoh argues, a lot of human right issues have entered into the accusation, trial and punishment of the accused. Three, it is true that misfortunes are real in people's life and in a worldview that holds to the concept of mystical causality, an outsider is the cause of any misfortune that befalls a person even when it is glaringly clear that the misfortune is self-caused. The church therefore needs to do something about the matter.

How then should the church in Africa deal with witchcraft issues? This researcher agrees with Onongha that in tackling the problem, the church must deal with the issue of the reality of witchcraft from the Biblical point of view. The scripture must be engaged to deal

with the issue. The church needs to devise how to respond to the fears and needs associated with the worldview. According to Wyk (2004), the early church used Exodus 22:18 and Deut. 18:10 as the scriptures to argue for her stand against the witches. In the NT, there seems to be no scripture referring to witchcraft, but the church especially (Pentecostal churches) has built its theology against the witches around the issue of demonic possession and exorcism in the NT. However, critical readings of these texts show that they have been mistranslated or taken out of context. In the two texts, the participle of the verb *kisheph* denotes “to practice magical art” The phrase *‘ishshaba’alath-‘obhin* 1 Samuel 28:7 means “a woman that has a familiar spirit” or “who practices necromancy”. The church therefore needs to confirm the reality of witchcraft from the Bible especially as her exegetes, theologians and missiologists decipher the meaning of the texts that purportedly declare death sentence on witches. Unfortunately, witchcraft has been syncretized in the church by untrained pastors who have little or no knowledge of the original intended meaning of Biblical texts and only fuse the Christian concept of demon possession with traditional belief in witchcraft to create “a witch demonology” (safchildafrica, 2020, Onongha, 2017).

A Bible based theology of suffering should be formulated by Bible scholars and missiologists. People must be made to know that while satanic agents could cause suffering (like the case of Job), suffering could also result from poor human choices. They must also be made to know that the sovereign power of God over evil and suffering can transform adversity and pain to purpose and praise (Onongha, 2017:52). Further, the status of believers in Christ needs to be taught to enable them dispel the fear that witchcraft belief causes. Christians need to be made to know their position in Christ. There is no place in the scripture where it is recorded that Christians should fear witches or workers of darkness. Christianity/ salvation does not place Christians under Satan, rather above him (Eph 6:10ff). The knowledge of the truth about the position of believers in Christ will help to prepare them for adequate and focused warfare to dispel darkness

The power of God to protect, deliver and keep his own despite the existence of evil needs to be thoroughly taught by the church. Biblical deliverance needs to be encouraged. This is the one according to Onongha, that engages “Three Encounters” for conversion and advocated by Charles Kraft which are truth encounter, power encounter and allegiance encounter (2017: 52). Power encounter according to him demonstrates the supremacy of Christ over the forces of evil. Allegiance encounter leads captives from the camp of Satan, break their old connection, destroy tokens of their past affiliations and make them recognize Christ alone as their master. While truth encounter enables members to know the truth about the nature of their new identity in Christ which does not give Satan and evil final say over them.

The church needs to revert to the message of salvation and shun the message of condemnation. It is quite alarming to see that there is now a shift in the focus of sermons of the modern day clergy from pure salvation message to prosperity preaching. Nothing dispels darkness like light, also, nothing dispels falsehood like the truth. Most clergy waste precious forty-five minutes on the pulpit condemning other clergy or Christian groups instead of using this precious time to preach salvation which holds more weight than the gospel of condemnation.

While matters of worldview and beliefs are sensitive and must not be toiled with because they are deep rooted phenomena, it is important to point out that cases of human right abuse that go with witchcraft belief in Africa should be discouraged by the church. In witchcraft matters in Africa, Umoh (2018) rightly observes that from the process of accusation to trial and punishment, the right of the accused is not always considered. The procedure for detection is crude, while the trials are in most cases one sided. Also, the way the churches that claim to have specialized in catching witches go about it is questionable. Many charlatans have seen witchcraft deliverance as an avenue to make money. While everyone has the right to believe

whatever they hold dear to them, that right should not be used to legitimize the abuse of other persons' right.

The church needs to join forces with other FBOs, NGOs both at the local, national and international levels to enact laws that will make witchcraft related violence a hate crime punishable under the law (Horowitz, 2020). Also, measures can be put in place to discourage a situation where exorcisms will lead to abuse of human right and profit making. The ecumenical bodies in Africa have a lot to do in this direction. At the local level, the church can embark on teaching people about the natural causes of illness, poverty, death and others that are often blamed on witches. She can follow the footsteps of the churches in Papua, New Guinea where some of the Catholic faith have started teaching their congregants about the natural causes of death and illness (which are most common triggers for anti-witch attacks) and are providing shelter for accused witches while denying the sacraments to those who accuse others of sorcery (Horowitz, 2020).

Conclusion and Observations

This paper has examined the reality of witchcraft as it relates to various Nigerian societies. Witchcraft accusations, its effects on the society and the role of the church in influencing attitude towards witchcraft are also examined. It is hoped that as the socio-economic condition of the people is further improved, accusation that stems from socio-economic factor will reduce. Also, it is hoped that if various religious organizations emphasize more on love of humanity, forgiveness, peace, progress, discourage oppression and discrimination against women and the eternal consequence of evil, there would be change in people's attitude towards so called witches. Churches need to emphasize hard work, modesty and victory over darkness and evils, in their teachings. Even if witchcraft is considered an evil spirit, it should be borne in mind that Jesus did not kill those he delivered from evil spirits, neither did he charge them money. The church should therefore desist from any act of abuse of human right and extortion regarding witchcraft.

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