

WHY I DO NOT BELIEVE IN WITCHCRAFT¹

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Abstract

Each locality has its history-making events. Witchcraft is a recurrent phenomenon in time and space and its epochs and milieus have their peculiarities. The crack down on suspected witches in Akwa Ibom – Nigeria is a new comer to the historical scene and it raises many ethical questions, especially regarding fairness to alleged witches in terms of detection, accusation and trial. The author has at the back of his mind, the golden rule which is no stranger to any generation and epoch in history. Using analytical, critical and ethical approaches he traces the main cause of witch accusation not to a purely mysterious source as it is often portrayed, but to the sociological factors of an increase in insecurity, anxiety, tension and societal conflict. Witch accusation is simply an outlet for the release of such societal tension. Since such conflicts are only possible among colleagues and close relatives, the crackdown on witches and the social stigma imposed on their families, is responsible for rupture in intimacy among close relatives and friends. The author believes that an all-out crusade to stamp out ‘witches’, even as deterrence, is useless. It is equally unethical. Instead it aggravates the tension in society. Solutions to the witchcraft phenomenon should be sought in the resolution of internal social conflicts and enmity.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Suspects, Believe, Ethical, Accusation, Execution

Introduction

The story below is very historical. Some of the ‘actors’ in the story are known personally to the author. On that fateful day the village square was packed full with spectators, creating a scenario similar to that of a stadium during a well-attended league match. But it was not a football match. People from distant villages had turned up to watch the public execution of accused witch suspects. Executions of “witches” are not rare in Akwa Ibom state, but the unusually barbaric style of this execution pulled a larger crowd than usual. Normally accused witches are either burnt or axed to death, while their belongings are wantonly set ablaze. But for the case in question, the suspects were rounded up almost spontaneously and brought to the village square where stands an abandoned ninety-four-foot deep well that used to serve as a source of potable water in the olden days. The accused were urged to jump into the well voluntarily or otherwise be brutally pushed in by force. Those willing to confess or own up their involvement in the dreaded trade were falsely promised amnesty – an amnesty which never saw the light of the day. Within seconds, they were already inside and one could hear some of them groaning. Thereafter their household belongings and heavy blocks were let go into the depth. That was the point final of their earthly sojourn. But that was not all; all those mentioned as

¹This write-up was first published in Journal of Complementary Reflections: Studies in Asouzu, vol. 1, No. 1, 169-181, Department of Classics and Philosophy, University of Cape Coast, . It is Ghana reproduced here by kind permission of the journal for easy accessibility to students and staff of AKSU and others

accomplices by the ‘witches’ before their execution, were in turn rounded up at other locations and like many of their ‘colleagues’ knew nothing of what was amidst, until they were also exterminated at the wells closest to them. One of these victims used to be my barber during my teenage days. This particular episode was an utter display of the African mob ethos under anarchy and chaos. Perhaps if those suspects were caught by the public in any of the “civilized” Western nations, they would have been treated with some modicum of respect as befits human persons.

My Approach to Witchcraft

The present write-up on witchcraft is a viewpoint of a ‘participating observer’. In this matter, participation is only a prerequisite for understanding, while keeping the distance necessary for objectivity. This is a major characteristic of the phenomenological approach which allows the reality to disclose, expose and explain itself as it is to interested inquirers. This makes for objectivity and unbiased comprehension of the subject and what it stands for. As we will soon discover, applying such a methodology to the witchcraft phenomenon, betrays a major loophole. This is because witchcraft as a phenomenon is not self-disclosing. Therefore as far as its existence is concerned, my attitude is agnostic. I neither deny nor affirm it. I am simply uncommitted. My agnosticism hangs on this, that its existence or non-existence is a none-issue for me. I have had no personal experience of its pangs and menaces. And I may never have. May be I would do well to exclaim like the French philosopher Maurice Blondel: “whatever has nothing to do with my destiny does not exist for me.” Therefore, like Parrinder (1974:124), “What is said in this (write-up) is based on popular African beliefs in what witches are and do, and in describing witchcraft I do not intend to commit myself to the belief in the reality of it.”

Given the above self-acclaimed agnosticism many may rightly question my interest in a write-up on witchcraft. However I am lured into writing this paper first and foremost because of the undeserved attention and publicity accorded to the phenomenon in my own Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria mostly by church goers whose focus should be on the message of the gospel. It is an ethically and socially thorny issue in our contemporary society. Secondly I am appalled by the wanton, crude, bestial, primitive, brutal and irrational destruction of human life and property in the name of witchcraft eradication and the government’s insensitivity or apparent helplessness before such lawlessness. In reading Bertrand Russell’s (1975) “Why I am not a Christian,” I have come to appreciate this singular fact. Russell’s bitterness against Christendom envisaged only a particular brand and wave of Christianity in time and space. He was attacking the Christian institution and practices he was conversant with. Hence he once told Christians, “I love your Christ, but I hate you Christians.” My case is similar. I would never claim an overall knowledge of witchcraft practices as obtainable everywhere or even elsewhere, but I have an impulsive revolt against the brand of witch hunt currently in vogue in my home state in Nigeria. I came to hear of witchcraft, not from the witches themselves but rather from their perpetual hunters, none of whom claims to be a witch. My ethically-formed mind is offended by the naïve approach to the issue, especially the brutal retribution against alleged non-convicted ‘witchcraft culprits’. We are all aware of the principle obtainable in law that every suspected criminal is innocent until proven otherwise. I am therefore devastated by the banality and levity with which something as serious as taking a person’s life in unsure circumstances is handled in this 21st century.

Many a world nations have vehemently opposed capital punishment today even in cases where criminals have actually been indicted after considerably fair court trials, for the sole reason that life is the most precious possession a person has and there is no end to the possibility

of conversion. How much more suspects who have not been given any trial at all! It is very obvious that much innocent blood has been spilt for nothing; many innocent souls are among those executed for what they really know not.

I am haunted by the philosophical principle: “In case of uncertainty, suspend action”. Witch hunt has become a tidal wave in Akwa Ibom state and in the nutshell that provides the background for this publication. Some practicing Christians in the state who sometimes plead for leniency on behalf of tried, convicted and condemned murderers often find themselves jubilating at the brutal murder of alleged ‘witches’ somehow arbitrarily rounded up and killed without trial. According to these superstitiously sentimental Christians, witchcraft is the worst offense on earth; “it is worse than taking another’s wife” or the most brutal act of terrorism. “All who take the sword”, they argue, “will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:53). As the reader would discover later, during the medieval period suspected witches were executed, but at least they were tried and only those ‘found guilty’ were the ones who perished. Moreover, there were penal codes and norms guiding the prosecution of such witchcraft suspects. Whatever constituted the modalities of such trials remains an ethical problem, for I have never heard of a witchcraft-detection appliance. Even at that, many of the judges afterwards recanted and demanded pardon for having shed innocent blood in ignorance. This was the case of the Massachusetts witch hunt in 1697.

The Witchcraft Phenomenon

The initial difficulty in dealing with witchcraft issues lies with the absence of unanimity as regards its meaning and definition. People do not even know what witchcraft is all about conceptually or worry about how suspected witches are spotted out or identified. Hence Mather et al (2006:335) rightly observes: Witchcraft as a term is difficult to assign any single definition. In some cases, it is closely associated with the harnessing of supernatural powers, in which case its definition is strongly synonymous with magic. When such magic is used for the malevolent purposes, it is called black magic; when used for benevolent reasons, it is commonly referred to as white magic. E. G. Parrinder (1974: 112) has also this important point to add namely that the confusion that has been constantly noted over the names of people and practices in African spiritual life is to be observed again in speaking of witchcraft. Witchcraft is frequently mistaken for magical practices and sorcery, just as a witch-doctor has been confounded with a priest or even with witches themselves. The above observation of Parrinder’s, simply catches a glimpse of the ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding this much-talked-about and overbeaten issue. Yet nobody seems to be in doubt that the craft of witches is the worst of all societal ills and that anything can therefore be done to eliminate ‘witches’ from their neighbourhood. Ab initio we are therefore echoing with Parrinder that a very clear distinction should be made between witchcraft, magic and sorcery. For the time being hardly does any society seem to do this. In addition Parrinder repeatedly makes this observation which would certainly shock many an indigene of Akwa Ibom state, but which is equally very vital to this paper, that witches are mostly women. This is because of all the ‘witches’ denounced and exterminated so far, none, to the best of my knowledge, is a woman.

Etymologically witchcraft derives from the Old English: *wicce*, referring to “female magician” or *wicca*, a male magician or the religious connotation *wiccian*, “the practice of magical arts” – the performance of Magic for evil ends. However, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines a witch as “a woman who is believed to have magic powers, especially to do evil things. In stories, she usually wears a black pointed hat and flies on a broom stick.” This

brings in this question which will highlight in no small measure the difficulty connected with the clear-cut understanding of the witchcraft phenomenon namely whether women are the only being accused of witchcraft practices. Amponsah refutes such allegation by affirming that there are male as well as female witches, but that women are accused of being witches more than men. Citing E. G. Parrinder (1958), he states that the fact that women are liable to be accused of witchcraft is a display of a deeply-rooted sexual antagonism. According to Gelfand (1967) the womenfolk constitute the greatest number of suspected witches, because “Men are more trustful, easily provoked, more powerful and therefore tend to be accusers, whereas women are more receptive, weaker, less easily roused to temper and therefore become the victims.” For Omoyajowo (1983) to answer the question – “why are women direct suspects?” we must take note of the fact that Africans believe in the supremacy of men over women.

It does seem arguable then that women are believed to associate with witchcraft to find escape from domination by men, and that the witches hunt is a positive attempt to bring them back to their proper position. And moreover it is believed that women possess such weaknesses as lying, weak memories and believing without sufficient evidence as to make them look suspicious. In addition, the peculiar characteristics of women make them more prone to witchcraft suspicions and accusations. The physical changes and functions of women are much more mysterious than men, for example, menstruation, delivery of babies; and etc. Women also tend to be fussy, quarrelsome and most of them are unemployed or underemployed and therefore have much time for idle conversation and gossiping. Married women are suspected more readily than unmarried ones and the older the woman the stronger. In Ghana old men and women are accused of being witches more than younger ones. (Amponsah 1975:84).

Witchcraft is, more correctly, a religion that focuses on nature worship and fertility rituals. For this reason, the feminine aspect of witchcraft plays a prominent role. In the past there have traditionally been as many, if not more, male witches/sorcerers as female in some pagan circles. Therefore according to Amponsah (1975) considering witchcraft as a religion for women only is untrue. Women have always predominated in the history of witches, and a host of more or less unsatisfactory explanations of this fact could be cited. For instance, sixteenth century writers felt women were more credulous and impressionable than men, and so more easily tempted by Satan. Others felt that Satan, being a male personification of evil, preferred women assistants. ... Probably the real explanation (if any) will somehow be connected with the fact that women were for so long thought to be inferior beings and thus were considered more susceptible to foolishness and sin; also they were less able to protect themselves against accusations leveled at them by the entire male and officially celibate Church and Inquisition. Right now in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, children have been promoted to the rank of witches. Some of them have been chased away from homes by parents, while others have even been killed in order to avert from the families the misfortune associated with witchcraft Effiong (2011).

The year 2008 will remain evergreen in the minds of religious and political leaders of Akwa Ibom State (Nigeria). It was the year one self-styled pastor, Bishop Sunday William, declared the entire state a coven of witches, saying there were roughly 2.3 million witches and wizards in the state, most of them children. William, in fact, added a serious dimension to the allegation: he told the international media that he had killed 110 of such child witches. He even claimed he charged some fee, sometime as much as ₦400,000 (four hundred thousand naira) to help willing parents kill their child witches.

A brief look at the history of witchcraft will bring to limelight the complexity of the

issue. This historical dimension would demonstrate that people today do not realize how elusive and complex the issue 'witchcraft' is and how difficult it is to pin it down for definition. The history of the phenomenon unfolds itself in a classic distinction between Gothic witchcraft in the middle Ages and modern witchcraft (Wicca). Gothic witchcraft was commonly associated with traditional Satanism while modern witchcraft has undergone a totally separate historical evolution. One sees then the irrationality of handling lightly and with all amounts of levity such a complexly delicate issue involving taking human lives while damning all consequences.

Gothic Witchcraft For the Catholic Church in the medieval period, devils and witches were virtually the same. Consequently, the church launched an all-out crusade to stamp them both out by exterminating all 'convicted witches'. This remark of a feminist, Mary Daly (1973) who bemoans the fate of fellow female executed during the Inquisition as witches, says it all.

A most striking example of the selective total destruction of a large number of women was the torturing and burning of women condemned by the church as witches. The most important medieval work on the subject, *Malleus Maleficarum*, written by two Dominican priests (Sprenger and Kraemer) in the fifteenth century, proclaim that "it is women who are chiefly addicted to evil superstitions." This is, after all, only to be expected, for "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women, insatiable. The in question *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witches' Hammer) was the papal bull promulgated by Pope Innocent viii in 1486. The bull set forth rules for identifying, prosecuting and punishing witches. In the middle Ages, people believed that witches were devil's handmaids. Hence many accused 'witches' were rounded up and exterminated during the Inquisition. In Europe alone, hundreds of thousands were tried and condemned in the 1600s. The Protestant's zealous war to cramp down and eradicate witchcraft became very popular in America especially in Massachusetts.

Even today the city of Salem, Massachusetts, is reputed for the seventeenth-century witch trials and executions, as is evident by the insignia on their police patrol vehicles and batches "Salem Police, The Witch City Massachusetts, 1626". This total war against accused witches came to a climax in the unpopular Salem witch trials of 1692 which triggered off trouble in Salem, Massachusetts. Two daughters of a minister, Samuel Parris, had undergone a series of convulsions which, according to the girls were the handiwork of witches around the city. Many 'witches' were held responsible. The accusations continued until more than fifty women had been named, including the governor's wife. In May 1692 the executions of the accused began. By July the jails were full of those suspected of witchcraft. About fifty repented and were subsequently released, but by September, twenty-two "witches" had been hanged. (Crim1981:336). The clergy unrelentingly pleaded on behalf of the accused and in 1697, their supplication seemed to pay off; there was a drastic change of mood when it was realized through recantations that after all much innocent blood had been spilled. Therefore on January 14, 1697 a day of fast called the "Official Day of Humiliation" was proclaimed throughout Massachusetts and the magistrates issued a public apology. "This set in motion an incipient anger that would redefine the attitude of New Englanders for centuries to come, shaping a peculiar spirituality endemic to the Northeast. Traditional witchcraft would dissipate at the close of the 1600s, not to emerge again until the twentieth century." Crim (1981: 336).

Modern Witches

Ancient pagans practiced sorcery and magic that could be construed as being the "craft" of the witch. Such was the biblical witch of Endor consulted by Saul for spiritual guidance (1Sam. 28:7). This means that witchcraft has been a long-existing and well-established

institution throughout the centuries before Christianity and so cannot be said to be the hybrid offshoot of Christianity. At any rate, modern witches have distanced themselves from and disavowed ties with Christianity because of what they regard as the proliferation by Christianity of a patriarchal, male – dominated religion that has historically ignored the role of women in the church and society. This becomes even more accentuated in Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and much of Protestantism which still stubbornly cling to the male monopoly of priesthood as ‘divinely ordained. The modern craft goes by the name witchcraft or wicca . Modern witchcraft era began with Gerald Gardner (1884-1964), the archaeologist. Gerald had gone through an extensive occult background and formation in Southeast Asia, where he studied the secrets of the Malaysian magical knife and became a Mason (in Ceylon). On his return to England in 1939 as an occultist, Gardner became a member of the Rosicrucian fellowship. It was here that he met Dorothy Clutterbuck, who is believed, initiated him into witchcraft.

The main focus of modern witchcraft is the worship of Mother Goddess, a religion acclaimed to be preexistent several centuries before the advent of Christianity. In addition, modern witchcraft is a syncretistic blending of Theosophy, Freemasonry, ritual/sex magic, etc. in the writings of Gerald Gardner. Witchcraft belief is a worldwide phenomenon though it has vanished in some parts of Africa, but in West Africa, the belief still persists. It forms part of their everyday conversation and all kinds of misfortune are attributed to witches and very often wrongly. According to Idowu (1973:195) “To Africans witchcraft is real, and in writing about witchcraft, the belief of Africans must come first. To a West African, witchcraft is ubiquitous. It plays a part in everyday activities of life, farming, hunting, fishing and other occupation.” A man who dies in a motor accident is believed to have been smitten by witches; ... Why was a particular man bitten by a snake and not another person?

Why did a man die just after he had built a new house? Why was a woman taken ill only after she had quarreled with another woman? “Witches are responsible” – appears to be the only available explanation for these great ‘WHYS’ of life. But in each of these cases the cause is wrongly identified. Omoyajowo (1983). The Profile of the Witch Under this heading, we want to highlight what is believed to be the identifiable characteristics of witch practitioners. Despite their number and variety today, something that is said to be common to most modern witches is first and foremost their belief in the Great Mother Goddess. All through history she has been manifested in different forms: Artemis, Astarte, Aphrodite, Diana, Kore, Hecate. The Horned God, Pan is the male counterpart of wicca. He equally has many names. The Mother Goddess is represented by the moon and the Horned God by the sun. There is also a strong belief that people may become witch by inheritance, or by picking up, buying or swallowing the witchcraft substance available at a very cheap rate or by acquiring it intentionally from demons.

Belief and Practices

In order to really discern who witches are, I consider it worthwhile to look into what people believe to be the obnoxious trade of these anti-social beings. And from there we will attempt to discover who witches are but taking as our point of departure what they are believed to be really doing. It is for their wicked and destructive actions that they are hated and hunted by the society and as we will see later, some social scientists even hold that belief in witchcraft provides a sort of outlet for the release of society’s tension. “By their fruits you will know them.” Moreover this Latin adage holds strong here: . Witchcraft belief is still prevalent *Esse sequitor agere* in West African societies. The spiritual churches in West Africa profess that witches are

around and can cause a lot of harm to people. Many people therefore leave the orthodox churches to find shelter in these new churches, as they claim to have power over the witches. Some of these spiritual movements act as witch doctors and can exorcise the witch spirits from people. The various self-confessions by witches reinforce the belief in witchcraft. But some scholars opine that these confessions are made under social duress. For example if a woman is barren, society may despise her and may accuse her of being responsible for her own misfortune. The woman, in her anxiety, may therefore admit being a witch. The belief is still influential because West Africans think about dreams as real, and if someone dreams of cows running after him he interprets this as witches who are after his soul. (Appiah 1975:92).

Unlike in the West, Africans do not consider the source of evil to be a fallen spirit like Satan. Instead, the source of evil is found within humanity itself - among the ambitions and jealousies of men. The genesis of evil is thus demonic humanity: the witch or sorcerer. That is . The picture of l'humanité maltournée the witch or sorcerer is therefore the image of an inverted or reversed human being, adulterated or pervasive personhood or wicked humanity. The witch is a human being who has missed his mark or target – who has fallen short of or away from humanity and what it stands for.

The witch is L'“enfant Horrible de l'humanité ” – “The horrible offspring of humanity.” Hence the best way of dealing with them is to eliminate them. Witches or sorcerers act only at night, fly or walk on their hands or heads, dance naked, feast on corpses, exhibit insatiable and incestuous lusts (despite sexual impotence), murder their relatives, live in the bush with wild, even predatory animals or excrete and vomit in people's homesteads (Ray,1976: 150). The above image rhymes with the sociological portrait of the witch or sorcerer as an antisocial person: morose, unsociable, disagreeable, arrogant, ambitious, sly, ugly, dirty, lying, envious, shift-eyed, and mischievous. The witch or sorcerer is thus both an antisocial person and an antihuman being. The figure of the witch is that of the wicked vested with preternatural malevolent powers and means and using same to inflict misfortune and untold hardship upon others. Witches have been held responsible for a wide variety of misfortunes, ranging from ‘preventing butter from churning, causing accident and injuries of all kinds, destroying the fertility of the earth, animals and human beings, and even causing death. The origin of such forces and powers may vary from hereditary to a source indwelling in the witch in spite of himself and irrespective of his intentionality. Whatever the source, witches are thought to be in league with cosmic forces of evil. Hence it is understandable that the imagined profile of the witch is usually the very opposite of what people consider as normal of human beings. The figure of the witch, sometimes called the ‘nightmare witch,’ embodies what any society considers inhuman, and in so doing provides a model of what people ought not to be like. Thus witches skulk about at night, fly or walk on their hands, worship devils and even have sexual relations with them, and sacrifice or devour children; the more heinous the conduct, the more believable (Crim1981:805).

They hold nocturnal meetings on top of big trees at the outskirts of towns and villages. Trees on which they meet cannot be uprooted easily. Some meet on the sea or lagoon and sometimes do fishing turning human beings into tilapia. They sometimes meet at the graveyard of a dead relative and remove pieces of flesh from the body and eat with enjoyment. Hence among the Shona of Rhodesia, graves are guarded for about six days after the burial. Amponsah K. (1975:87). Some communities believe that witches ride on the back of owls, antelopes, leopards and other nocturnal animal to their meetings. They sometimes transform human beings into animals using them as transport to their gathering. Others believe that witches have cobwebs extending from their houses to their meeting place. Witchcraft is by definition irrationally

vindictive or inexplicably persistent. When misfortunes are overwhelming, inexplicable, irrational, they are attributed to witchcraft. A parent whose children die one after the other suspects a witch. Sudden illness in children, especially young children who cannot explain their symptoms, is attributed to witchcraft. The farmer who has inexplicable prosperity in a year when everyone else is starving must be a witch. Although the revenge of a witch may be considered legitimate, the means taken is never thought to be legitimate: it is excessive and antisocial. Serious, secret crimes, the authors of which are unknown, are also attributed to witches (Shorter 1973).

A witch is said to have evil eyes and when cast on a farm, the crops wither or would not yield good harvest. They can cause death, sickness, miscarriage, barrenness and all kinds of failure in business. Some believe that witches attend their meetings naked and it is this reason that if a woman is seen nude, she is suspected at once of being a witch. If a woman goes out at night walking alone in the nude, she is accused of being a witch. It is the personality soul which leaves the body without doing harm to it. It leaves the body like a football bladder taken out of the case or a snake leaving its slough. If the personality soul becomes disturbed in any way during the process, this may lead subsequently to the person becoming sick or even dying. It is also a belief, that if one rubs the skin with pepper when the personality has left the body, it would not be able to re-enter the body after the meeting. The witch would then die. Witches attend their meetings with the head down, emitting flames from all over the body. This can be seen at night but it is dangerous to see.

The witches are duty-bound to provide a human being each in turns, and they meet to feast on these human souls. The body of the victim is eaten by the whole company. The victim does not die at once but by slow stages but sudden deaths may be attributed to witches. A new entrant is made to take an oath of secrecy at the first meeting. He should not by word of mouth or action expose members of the association and its evil activities. Even if a member is apprehended by an object of worship, for example a god, he should do everything possible not to divulge the secrets. Amposah (1975:89). This is therefore the reason for the belief that witches can harm only their close relatives. In my village, even a mother was accused of being the witch responsible for her daughter's polio. Hence this common proverb: "if the witch belonging to the home does not give you up as an offering for food, foreign witches would not catch you" (Amposah 1975: 91).

Witchcraft as a Problem

All notwithstanding, I do not want to doubt the troubles of those claiming to be pestered by witches. There are those who are really suffering and whose sufferings the victims attribute to no other than these anti-social agents. I sincerely pity them in their sufferings. "Is it reasonable to doubt the dreams of a blind man, who dreams day and night?" Witches, wizards and sorcerers are the worst type of evil people whose nefarious activities (by means of mystic forces) are calculated to doing harm to other people. The Tiv People consider witchcraft as the unpardonable blameworthy act or sin. Contemporary research on psychosomatic illness clearly indicates that witchcraft beliefs [My emphasis] can indeed cause serious illness and that counter-magic consequently can also be somatically effective.

The Sociological Explanation of Witchcraft Belief

It can be seen, that behind the imaginary witch-victim link is a real accuser-suspect link. With increased urbanization and the development of new types of social relationship it is natural

that there should be an increase in insecurity, anxiety and tension. Such tensions are expressed in the traditional way through accusations of witchcraft. Hence among co-workers struggling for regard of their employers, political opponents, inheritance of disputed land, there is an obvious tension between progressives who adopt new attitudes towards life and conservatives who remain faithful to traditional practices and lifestyle. Witchcraft equally arises from envy of the better-off by the worse-off (Shorter (1973).

Sociological Functions of such Belief

What are the “benefits” of belief in witchcraft to society? What socially useful role does functional interpretations of the witchcraft belief play in the understanding of local community life? Some believe that there are certain important roles played by such accusations in the understanding of the society. Below are some of them. The belief in witchcraft is said to provide explanations to undeserved misfortunes, calamities that would otherwise have been attributed to chance in a society which tolerates few expression of hostility. This means that the embarrassment that would have arisen from an otherwise unexplainable calamity would disappear thanks to witchcraft allegations. “If one is struck by a falling branch, witchcraft does not explain the resulting wound, but does explain why that particular branch happened to fall just as one was passing underneath” Crim (1981: 805). The belief in witchcraft explains not how a misfortune happens but why a particular person suffers that particular misfortune. Hence witchcraft as a theory of causation does not necessarily deny that men fall sick from eating bad food or from certain unhygienic behavior or practices; it explains why some of them fall ill at times and not at other times.

Thus the Akan believe that every misfortune, like every piece of good fortune, involves two questions: how it happened and why it happened at all. The ‘how’ is answered by commonsense empirical observation, but it is the ‘why me?’ question which the Akan asks and to which he seeks the answer through divination by the help of the priest-healer or a diviner. Belief in witchcraft therefore explains why a particular person at a particular time in a particular place suffers a particular misfortune – disease, accident, etc. Belief in witchcraft in the Akan concept as a theory of causation is concerned with the singularity of misfortune; even though the Akan contend that every misfortune has its empirical side K. Appiah-Kubi (1983). Thus witchcraft as a theory of causation (the scientific slant) embraces a theory of morals, for it says that witches are wicked people. It is their wicked feelings which cause their witchcraft to do harm. The ethics of witchcraft thus disapproves of the common anti-social vices and approves of the virtues of many societies. The belief acts as a sanction against anti-social behavior by supporting social virtues. The belief supports the moral order of the community, over and above particular quarrels. Anger, hatred and strife are not only bad, but they carry in them the mystical threat of disaster to others or to oneself. Witchcraft attacks the virtuous; ancestors attack the wicked. To prosper men should make sacrifices to the ancestors but they can only do this when they live in harmony with others Appiah-Kubi (262).

Witchcraft accusation serves as a socially legitimate expression of hostility as instances of displaced aggression in a society which tolerates few expression of hostility. In the tribal societies in Africa, witchcraft accusations have been seen as providing legitimate grounds for otherwise disallowed lineage fission and division of villages which have grown too large, cumbersome, and fraught with conflict.

Studies of witchcraft in England also connect accusations with conflict. Quarrels often resulted in witchcraft accusations, particularly when they were followed by inexplicable illnesses or similar misfortunes. It was often the unneighbourly person, specifically the abrasive beggar, who was designated a witch, possibly as a way of alleviating one's guilt at having turned him or her away empty-handed. Crim (1981: 805).

Disease in Africa is normally regarded as having some spiritual cause. Because they neglect this side of life European hospitals are suspected, and regarded as cold and inhuman. Not only disease but death itself is thought to be due to an evil spiritual force. The idea of natural death is foreign to many peoples. "An enemy hath done this thing." Among the most powerful evil influences that are supposed to cause disease and death are the witches. Parrinder (106-107). My Real Problem with Witchcraft Issues My greatest problem with witchcraft belief centers on the identification, trial and punishment of the accused. In the nutshell, my problem is all about evidence and witnesses. When it comes to the suspicion, detection, formal accusation and arrest of alleged witches a great deal of uneasiness looms in the air as far as I am concerned. The whole question regarding allegations against purported witches: about who plays the leading role in their accusation and their arrest generates many ethical questions.

To say the least, there is something fishy about the whole issue. Given the enormous price to be paid for the purported anti-social crime, I sincerely believe that at least from an ethical point of view, the above questions should be taken more seriously. Even though once the arrest is made the public appears to approve of the exacting penalty, I feel that such a sentiment about community's security is in order, but the question of who initiates the move leading to eventual arrest cannot be said to come from the collective emotion just emerging from nowhere. In fact experience shows that nobody wants to be named either as a ringleader or even as a participant in such affairs.

Witch Identification: The Process

The Witches' Hammer of Pope Innocent viii mentioned above stipulated rules governing the identification, prosecution, conviction and possible punishment for 'witches'. In those days there were at least modalities for prosecuting suspected witches. Whatever that imply, at least they were tried. But today, there are many questions left unanswered in the above regard. Such unanswered questions would not allow me to belief in witchcraft. There are no formal trials, no prosecutors or resort to defending lawyers and of course there are no exhibits and witnesses. Killing the suspects without court hearing and with no recourse to justice is to say the least legally unconstitutional and ethically bankrupt anywhere in the world. This is because in law, every accused is presumed not guilty until proven otherwise. These and many other pertinent ethical issues are left unresolved and they block my ears to cries for vengeance against 'witches'. For instance the question about the modalities for identification and if such is totally hate-free should not be swept under the carpet.

As witchcraft is considered to be of a mysteriously inexplicable power, an accusation can be made and is often made without any need for circumstantially substantiated evidence and no account needs be taken of the suspect's denial of guilt or declaration of innocence about the accusation brought against him. To support such an unsubstantiated accusation, it is claimed that sometimes witchcraft can be exercised unconsciously during sleep. Hence, all the advantages lie with the accuser (Shorter (1973:140)).

Often the accusers and ringleaders in witch hunt are not known. In Akwa Ibom state for instance, they would certainly not want to be named. Many, who accuse others of witchcraft,

claim that they are encouraged to do so by the confessions made by the suspects themselves. But in most cases such confessions are made out of duress in hard conflict situations or by victims who are mentally imbalanced. What would anyone gain by claiming to be a witch? After all witches are hated antisocial persons whose death is desired by all. In the middle ages an estimated number of 200,000 to one million people were burned as witches. But most of these were subjects of psychological disorders, practitioners of sorcery, people who incurred social unpopularity or who were known as evil speakers. In some African countries there is in place 'witchcraft ordinance' forbidding anyone to claim to be a witch, or threaten witches, or accuse anyone of being a witch, or employ or solicit any person to resort to witchcraft. Where such a law exists, they have prevented the killing of 'witches', though they also tend to increase the fear of witchcraft. However, as A. Shorter (1973:142) observes: It is a fact that people accused of witchcraft do sometimes openly boast of being witches, and take pleasure in uttering threats which inspire terror in those at whom they are directed. Such people belong to social categories which are subordinate and depressed, deviants from the common social pattern, more often women than men, and claiming to be a witch is a peculiar way of enhancing one's status in society, of wielding power over others. In particular, when a person is accused of witchcraft and threatened by social displeasure and ostracism, the most effective way of retaliation may be to claim to be a witch and make people afraid to take any steps against him. The Witch Identifiers

In the past it was the legitimate function of witch doctors to identify witches. But in today's society, that function has been arrogated to the arbitrary decision of just any individuals and mushroom churches. Witchcraft accusation has become the easiest means of getting rid of one's enemies. Seers pretend to be the only that can curb the wicked scheme of witches. They first of all reveal their identity and wicked plans.

Since Christianity and other religions are imbibed and practiced by Africans but with an African frame of mind, those 'foreign and imported' religions have been coloured with the sentiments of our traditional religion, interpreted and lived in a peculiarly African way leading to syncretism. This remark of I. Igwegbe about visions that prophecy today is very syncretistic is very apt here. Prophecy very comfortably mixes, propounds and professes all available creedal system into a new form of religion that is neither foreign nor African. For a Christian today, it means a lot for his faith, because any weak grip on God means a firm grip on what is not God. On another note, whatever we know about witches and their activities today do not come from the witches themselves, but from their exponents, their denouncers and hunters, none of whom claims to have anything to do with the obnoxious trade. In such a setting, there is bound to be distortions, misrepresentation, falsehood, exaggerations and prejudice. As we all know, nobody pleads in favour of his opponent in the law court. This is because witchcraft as a phenomenon is an anti-social menace and nobody in his/her right senses would want to declare himself/herself a witch or to be associated with the craft of witches. Now coming to the criteria for identification, namely suspicion, denunciation, accusation and arrest, we notice that witch suspects are readily available scapegoats. This is because as A. Shorter correctly remarks, in traditional African societies misfortune is linked with sin, impiety, and the breaking of taboos.

Thus putting the blame on a witch is a means of exculpating oneself. Witchcraft accusation therefore becomes an escape route, providing a way of explaining serious misfortunes and rendering those who suffer them blameless in the eyes of society. It also takes its origin partly in the psychological need to provide an outlet for repressed hostility, frustration and anxiety. Shorter (1973:140). Due to the mysteriousness of its character, the magical technique of divination through oracles was popularly used to discover the truth of one's suspicions. This is

known as witch-finding; a mean by which an individual resorts to a diviner or to an oracle to discover the identity of a particular witch believed to be afflicting him or his family. Divination by means of oracles is one of the chief props of witchcraft belief. Normally suspicion falls on those who have motive, those who are the enemies of the victim or his family.

The pattern of witchcraft accusation, therefore, follows the pattern of tension and conflict in society, and this tends to influence witchcraft beliefs themselves. For example, male bias may influence accusations and beliefs. In most societies it is the men who are the diviners, and men who take the initiative in accusation. They tend to accuse women of witchcraft. Where poisoning is linked in people's minds with witchcraft, women are naturally suspected because they cook the food and often brew the beer. Witchcraft is therefore more often associated with women than with men. Shorter (1973:140).

Witchcraft accusation only occurs between certain categories of people. This is because it is the outcome of the pattern of tension and conflict in society, and therefore one who considers himself a victim will naturally suspect the person who is in enmity with him, his possible rival or the queer and the ugly. This shows why witches are less likely to be people of different social status or of considerable social distance. In the contrary, witches are more likely to emerge from among equals or one's family – for example, between co-wives in a polygamous family, between members of a lineage when there is no recognized form of arbitration for working out tensions or resolving conflicts, between paternal half-brothers, between a barren woman and women who have children of whom she is jealous. (Shorter: 141). The above constitutes the reason why witches are considered the worst enemies of the society and why in all cases, the argument advanced to justify whatever form of death penalty is administered to them follows the brutal Old Testament “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth” ordinance, with no reference to this other biblical injunction: “Thus says the Lord, vengeance is mine” (Deut.32:35). That is equally why the manner of execution of witch suspects is arbitrarily brutal, depending on the discretion of the local community.

Belief in Witchcraft versus Christian Belief

Another impediment against my being a party to witchcraft belief is that nowadays such a belief tends to replace the Christian creedal system. Christians are the only preoccupied with witches and their activities. They are more concerned with witchcraft activities and programs than the witches themselves. Their belief in them appears stronger than their Christian engagements. And I think this is born out of the proliferation of sects propagating ‘religion of fear’ in our contemporary African society. The Church has never disputed the existence or power of the devil and other evil forces like witchcraft in the world. It acknowledges them and sternly warns its followers against them. However it assures followers that with Christ they are more than victorious over their terror. At baptism all Christians renounce Satan and everything about it. But the 21st century Christians have become promoters of these renounced forces. In his , Isidore Igwegbe *The Treasure of the Word* observes that the grave sin of Israel and Judah was the placement of faith on persons and objects which did not qualify as objects of firm grip of faith. And I can comfortably add that this generation and this part of the world sin gravely by misplacing and mistaking the object of their faith. In those olden days, those who killed twins and exiled twins mothers thought they were rendering great services to the gods, whose land had been desecrated by the abominable acts. However, imbeciles, down syndrome, abnormal children were sometimes spared. But in Akwa Ibom today, all these deformed and handicapped

are condemned as agents of witchcraft despite whatever contrary scientific explanation has been offered by modern healthcare for their deformity.

It is not so obvious that witchcraft beliefs are opposed to the fundamental tenets of Christianity. The experience of European Church history shows that it is not enough merely to condemn witchcraft as evil. People's interest must be diverted from the morbid preoccupation with witches. In Europe, traditional witchcraft beliefs received a new lease of life in the later Middle Ages when they were harnessed to ideas of Christian demonology. Witches were alleged to be human servants of the Devil, and even the offspring of devils who had intercourse with human beings Shorter (144).

Today in this part of the globe Christians are so concerned about witches that they have turned into heralds and evangelizers of witchcraft, giving it unnecessary or undeserved attention and publicity. They have become bearers of its bad tidings; oblivious of the biblical injunction: Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (Jas. 4:7).

Anachronism of the Witchcraft Belief

This is the scientific era and people's attitude to issues should somehow reflect the spirit of the time. However, many actually living in the 21st century are concretely several centuries behind; that is: some are not carried along by the spirit of the time but are still hooked down to their archaic lifestyle befitting only the pre-scientific man. By scientific or unscientific here we simply mean that the development of science has given rise to a conceptual frame of mind importantly different from that in which 'traditional Christianity' flourished. Hence: The world of strict and universal laws which, as it were, science was discovering as it began its modern development in the 17th century had no place for the capricious interference of 'supernatural' beings; the world began to be seen not as the haunting-pitch of alien spirits, but as a system of components working together in obedience to the ineluctable laws of mechanics. By the beginning of the 20th century certainly the great bulk of what had once been regarded as 'manifestations of spiritual agency'...had become to most thinkers scientifically disreputable.

The demise of witchcraft carried away with it a number of 'supernatural' activities intercourse with the devils, devil-possession, levitation, sorcery, foreknowledge and some more (Pratt 1970:13, 15). For instance, if the roof of this building caves in, the first question which occurs to a modern man is no more 'why has God or the enemy done this to me?' But something like: 'What has gone wrong with the rafters?' By 'modern man' in the above statement is meant not necessarily any person living in the 21st century. Rather we mean someone whose thought pattern, belief, way of relating with and interpreting reality reflect, even in a vague manner, what science has revealed and demonstrated to be tenable about our universe. Therefore the anachronism surrounding witchcraft beliefs hangs on this that people find it very difficult to break with the past. We see how difficult it is for us today to give up archaic attitudes that we took up during our infancy and that are firmly rooted in our hearts. For example: do we not feel a kind of satisfaction when we hear that a thief has been caught and beaten to death? When it comes to eradicating such anachronism from modern minds, Western education becomes handicapped. Christianity has done its best but never succeeded in converting Africans totally. From time to time especially in time of calamities, they fall back to the traditional beliefs of their forefathers. "People may go to Church, but their religion is skin deep. They have not been made to realize they own the faith. It has not become part of their lifestyle. A value vacuum looms from one end of the African continent to the other." (Martin 1994).

When one sees an African professor of nuclear physics standing naked at a road junction in the midnight and pulling off the head of a living chicken while making some incantations to the evil spirits or when one considers the number of Christians seeking exorcism from numerous healers in modern African communities, one would not need to be told again that science has not succeeded in dealing a fatal blow to the belief in demons (Nnamani 2002).

My Concluding Remarks

As we round up our itinerary of the horrific experience on witch hunt in the South-South of Nigeria, we remain devastated by the obvious likelihood that a lot of those brutally killed are very innocent of and have nothing to do with the craft of the witch that they are accused of. A lot of innocent blood is being shed daily for nothing. The witchcraft phenomenon did not start today and did not have its genesis in Africa. Europe and America had their turn and have come to regret the slaughter of close to one million guiltless human beings. With the teaming proliferation of religious sects with their unending prophecies of doom in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, there will be no end to killings in the name of witch hunt. The message at the close of The African Synod gives a clarion call to the urgent need to save Africa from its multi-dimensional of impending doom. But the culture which gave its identity to our people is in serious crisis. On the eve of the 21st century when our identity is being crushed in the mortar of a merciless chain of events, the fundamental need is for prophets to arise and speak in the name of the God of hope for the creation of a new identity. Africa has need of holy prophets. (L'Osservatore Romano (English edition) May, 11, 1994).

A bishop from the République Démocratique de Congo made this all-important observation that in the Congo, as in many other countries in Africa, sects proliferate in a disconcerting way. To tackle this phenomenon the Catholic Church in Africa must pay attention to the phenomena of witchcraft, magic, the action of spirits and the dead because these phenomena have a real impact on the life of many Africans, even the baptized (Martin (1994). But the Akwa Ibom story bears a special trade mark in that there is no trial whatever of accused 'witches.' All that is important is their elimination; and this is done with impunity. But even in situations in which convicted criminals are concerned, the question still remains about the possibility of a convict being discovered innocent only after his/her execution. This was exactly the experience in the State of Georgia USA this 2001, where some witnesses recanted only after the execution of an alleged innocent criminal had taken place. In the nutshell then, this message of A. Shorter rings a warning bell not only to Akwa Ibomites, or Africans but to all who indulge or will possibly indulge in an all-round elimination campaign of even tried 'witches': It is obviously gravely wrong to accuse someone of witchcraft, to confess to witchcraft, or to encourage anyone to believe he is a witch. But witchcraft beliefs will not be destroyed by a direct attack on them. The only remedy is to deal with the sociological causes, remove tensions, and inculcate a positive approach to misfortune and the problems of evil in the world. Fear of witches must give place to confidence in God and especially in Christ who shared men's sufferings and misfortunes (Shorter1973:144).

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