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# Cultural Foundations for Fear of Witchcraft in Africa

## Introduction

In recent years hundreds of people have lost their lives after being accused of being a witch. In Limpopo Province in South Africa alone more than 600 people were killed between 1996 and 2001 after being accused of being involved in witchcraft (ter Haar 2007:4). This is not just a South Africa problem since throughout sub-Saharan Africa (see Akrong 2007; Bongmba 2007; Okon 2012) lynchings, exile, and ostracism are typical responses aimed at those accused of witchcraft activity. Such violent responses are indicative of the fear witchcraft imposes on much of the population of Africa.

This article seeks to answer questions concerning the cultural foundations that produce so much fear that people are willing to lynch and exile family members and other accused witches, fear that allows otherwise committed Christians to carry protective devices obtained from diviners and other religious practitioners, and fear that causes so much disorientation and disequilibrium among African Traditional Religionists, Christians, and Muslims alike.

## Definitions

Before getting into the paper it is important to define several terms that will be used throughout.

*Witchcraft*: Witchcraft is not an easy term to define, for it has both negative and at least neutral connotations. "Witchcraft is often associated with supernatural activities that are believed to bring about negative or evil consequences for individuals and families. There is an equally strong view about witchcraft that defines it in terms of a benign supernatural power" (Akrong 2007:53). Asare Opoku also defines witchcraft as "the

exercise or employment of esoteric power for a definite purpose, good or evil" (in Dovlo 2007:67).

*Positive Mystical Power:* Power used "for curative, productive or preventive purposes," and is the reason why some "Africans wear, carry or keep charms, amulets, and other objects on their bodies, in their fields or homesteads. Medicine men or diviners are the manufacturers, dealers, and distributors of these articles of medicine and power" (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:10).

*Negative Mystical Power:* Power that "can eat away the health and souls of their victims, attack people, cause misfortune and make life uncomfortable. Practitioners of these mystical powers are witches, wizards, sorcerers, evil magicians, or people with an evil eye, employing their power for antisocial and harmful acidities" (10).

*Sorcerer/sorceress:* "A man [or woman] with magic powers, who is helped by evil spirits. . . . A Sorcerer or sorceress uses evil spirits to cause ailments or misfortune to those targeted for attack" (Manala 2004:1496).

## Cultural Foundation Concerning Witchcraft in Africa

There are a number of cultural assumptions concerning witchcraft that impact most African people and therefore are factors that contribute to the fear of witchcraft. Tragically these cultural assumptions are found not only among African Traditional Religionists, but also among the professed followers of Jesus Christ.

### African Views of Causation

One of the core worldview assumptions among many Africans and especially among African traditional religionists is the belief that "everything is caused by some other person in a direct way or through mystical forces" (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:11). Nothing just happens. There is always a cause, and usually a witch or sorcerer is believed to be the one causing the problem (Manala 2004:1498). This witchcraft mentality blames misfortune, barrenness, accidents, snakebites, brake failures, sickness, untimely deaths, and almost every kind of problem on witchcraft (Akrong 2007:59). "It is not uncommon to hear people exclaim in dismay in the face of problems: 'Who is doing this to me?' instead of 'What is causing these things?'" (60). If a tire blows out as a mini-bus is going around a curve just before a bridge with the result that the bus plunges into the river killing all 20 people on board, people ask, "Who sent a curse?" From a rational perspective one could reason that the tire was old with no tread left, but from an African perspective the question is who caused it to "burst at that

specific place and time? Why not before or after the bridge? Therefore, someone is responsible for the accident to occur right ‘there’” (St-Arneault 2014).

Witches are believed to cause serious diseases like stroke, tuberculosis, AIDS, and many other illnesses by “pointing a finger at their victims, through food poisoning, [and] by mixing some magical potions with the soil on which their victims footprints are made to inflict pain on them” (Manala 2004:1494). Natural causes are not considered and are unthinkable—women are barren because someone has put a curse on them; unemployment does not have a natural cause—someone else got the job so the person who did not get it is bewitched (Achola 2005:10).

It is believed that every misfortune is caused by humans or spirits. There might be exceptions when it comes to global catastrophes, but personal or family problems are always caused by someone. If the individual or the clan can’t find personal faults that would justify a correction from the ancestors, witchcraft or magic are suspected. The offender is someone known because these powers don’t function anonymously. There has to be contact between the witch and the victim. (12)

Such a view of causation also has theological significance since it offers answers to why bad things happen. Witchcraft offers an explanation of why one person gets sick while the neighbor does not, why one person’s cow dies while the neighbor’s does not, and why wicked people prosper and good people do not. “Belief in witchcraft is thus an attempt to explain the inexplicable and to control the uncontrollable” (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:14).

### Belief That Witchcraft Places Limitations on Life

Even though many Africans believe that there are positive mystical powers in the world, most view witchcraft as threatening and negative. Witchcraft is often believed to be the cause of untimely deaths, the inability of a wife to conceive, failure in important school examinations, and many other areas where witchcraft limits what a person can do or achieve (Bongmba 2007:114).

Witchcraft disrupts, interferes with, and hinders the development and growth of individuals and families. In Ghana there is the “belief that witches can tamper with one’s destiny, given at birth by God. This can bring about confusion in the life of an individual, usually expressed in acute immoral acts and social disorientation” (Akrong 2007:59).

Even within Christian communities and churches witchcraft beliefs

and the fear associated with them often keep pastors and members from living the abundant life Jesus intended. The suspicion that others are out to harm and that evil spiritual powers are present everywhere coupled with fear among pastors and members alike severely limit the effectiveness of the Christian message in countering the witchcraft mentality.

One of the saddest facts coming out in recent research among Adventists is that even pastors have so much fear of witchcraft and evil spiritual powers that they often refuse to discuss this topic in public for fear of attracting attacks from the evil one on themselves or their families. Let me share a few stories to illustrate this limiting force.

When a Doctor of Ministry student from West Africa was preparing his proposal for his doctoral project, he planned to team up with the religion faculty from three Adventist universities in presenting seminars on the dangers of dual allegiance and involvement in witchcraft practices. He found that the professors were willing to talk about the topic one-on-one, but they were not willing to stand in front of church members to present on witchcraft or evil spirits. Why? They feared that they or their families might be attacked, so they chose not to get involved.

Another student from an African tribe known for its witchcraft practices had been a pastor for many years and taught at an Adventist university before coming to Andrews University to work on his PhD. He told me that until he had spent several years at Andrews researching biblical and Spirit of Prophecy responses to evil spiritual powers he was always fearful of speaking openly about the topic with church members.

I have talked with other well-educated, committed Adventists who have indicated that one of the reasons they do not want to return home to work after completing their degree in the West is because they do not want to submit their family to witchcraft practices and curses. They continue to fear the power of evil spiritual forces, thus depriving the church of well-educated resources.

If pastors, church leaders, and religion teachers are themselves fearful in this area, what are the chances that the average lay person in Africa would have a biblical perspective on witchcraft and spiritualism? Joseph Ndisya's PhD research documents that church members and even church leaders live in such fear of the occult that many visit diviners and fetish priests in order to get protection from curses and witchcraft (2014). Their cultural worldview assumptions and values have not been transformed by biblical truth so even though they know it is wrong their fear of witchcraft is stronger than their fear of sinning by going against biblical principles.

In these examples, witchcraft assumptions and the fear associated with them limit the ability of many pastors and members to be light and salt in their communities. Their fear and compromising practices destroy the

beautiful message of Scripture concerning the protection of Jesus for his people. Thus, the very leaders and members who should be catalysts in changing the worldview assumptions that cause so much pain in Africa are limited by their unconverted worldviews.

In addition to limiting Christians in their witness and work, the fear of witchcraft also places limits on the general population on the continent by inhibiting

people from undertaking any productive activity in areas where this is often most needed. As a result, ambitious young people will move away and start businesses elsewhere, while outsiders, who traditionally cannot be affected by witchcraft, will take their place and profit from this situation. This is the case, for example, in Tanzania. Equally, in South Africa witchcraft accusations are often made against those who initiate development projects or otherwise try to improve their conditions of life. In other words, the witchcraft mentality thrives on fear. . . . It encourages a culture of passivity that leads to the development of a mentality of dependency, with lack of creativity and initiative as its by-product. (ter Haar 2007:18)

### Positive View of Witchcraft Powers

One of the African worldview assumptions that allows Christians to continue to seek the help of diviners and witchdoctors is the view that witchcraft powers can be used for good in society. This view suggests the possibility that positive mystical powers can continue to be helpful in protecting those who have supposedly made a total commitment to Jesus Christ. This belief causes some Christians to continue to wear charms and amulets, take medicine, or have the prescribed concoction rubbed into their bodies (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:10). Some also continue to keep dry bones, snakes, and birds on the rooftops of their houses, or place marks on private parts of their bodies (15). Such dual allegiance among some Christians is grounded in African religious thought that regards the metaphysical world as “a-moral. Spiritual forces, traditionally, were seen as intrinsically neither good nor bad, although their power could be channeled for moral or immoral purposes” (Ellis 2007:46).

Thus, in addition to the side of witchcraft that is feared because of its evil impact on people, there is also the associated belief that witchcraft can provide supernatural power to “enhance one’s ability to perform extraordinary feats” (Akroong 2007:53). This view holds that witchcraft powers can be used for personal improvements, social advancement, gaining of wealth, protection from sickness and danger, and giving people the ability to reveal secrets and see into the future (Bongmba 2007:114; Danfulani 2007:145-147; Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:24).

## Operates among Acquaintances and Blood Relatives

Another aspect of witchcraft that has such a negative impact on communities, families, and even within the church is that most witchcraft accusations are aimed at blood relatives, work associates, classmates, and acquaintances. In Ghana it is believed that the “witchcraft spirit can only operate among blood relations. It is for this reason that witchcraft accusations are very common within families” (Akrong 2007:57; Danfulani 2007:153).

According to Kisilu Kombo, witches are motivated by jealousy and act against those who excel or stand out in society or those who are economically successful. Those who do not stand out are believed to face fewer attacks so the witchcraft mentality can actually have a negative impact on creativity and the desire to get ahead in life (2003:77, 78).

When family members accumulate wealth that is not shared with the extended family or when personal advancement or educational achievement lifts a person above the average, suspicions of witchcraft are aroused. “In such cases, witchcraft accusations are used as a levelling mechanism that does not allow for the success of the individual to undermine the kinship structure and its associated values” (Akrong 2007:57).

This also fits with the theory of limited good where in many traditional societies people believe that there is a *limited* amount of *good* to go around, therefore the amount of land, wealth higher education, etc., is finite, so when one person gets ahead or has more of something the rest of the people have less (Limited Good 2015). When jealousy and envy are added to the mix of a belief in a limited good, witchcraft accusations are often the devastating consequence that tears apart the fabric of family, friends, associates, and members of a church.

## Personal Identity Embedded in Others

John Mbiti is famous for his dictum: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (1970:141), thus clearly indicating that the personal identity of the African is deeply embedded in the family, the clan, the tribe, and the community. Individualism as known in the West is rarely practiced in Africa. With one’s identity wrapped up in such tight group consciousness one’s fortune or misfortune is also believed to be closely tied to the influences and activities of others in society. There is always someone in society who can be pointed to or accused for whatever evil may happen to a person.

From the perspective of those with a “witchcraft mentality,” witches are the source of all evil. Instead of looking for reasons and explanations for particular events, they look for a witch as the cause of their problems. The consequences of such a mentality is that it absolves people from taking responsibility for their own actions. The usual explanation is that the victim has done the right thing, but that a witch has intervened to turn a well-calculated and well-intended act into something dangerous and harmful. (Akrong 2007:60)

Many of the African Initiated churches and Pentecostal churches have accepted this concept and developed their theology around the premise of a gospel of wealth and health where every individual is to enjoy success and prosperity. When those ideals are not achieved it is because witches and evil spirits are at work and others are to blame for failures and lack of health and success in life. Such a mentality results in a loss of personal freedom, the blaming of others for personal problems, and the creation of fear that others are always out to harm and inhibit one from achieving the good life (61).

### Psychological Issues and Witchcraft

Some skeptical Westerners question even if there is such a thing as witchcraft, largely as a result of their secular, enlightenment worldview. Some among early missionaries to Africa held such views, believing that as Africans encountered Christianity the fear of occult powers would die out. Gerhardus Oothhuizen illustrates how early missionaries to Africa ignored the importance and key role that a witchcraft mentality played.

Witchcraft and sorcery have been largely ignored by the missionaries in Africa because of their deep-seated westernized disposition on these matters. Their highly intellectualized disposition on witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spirit possessions and the reality of demons (with the exception of Satan) has made them turn a blind eye to these forces, which are considered to be out of bounds to any one associated with Christianity and thus to be totally ignored, whatever their influence may be. (In Bongmba 2007:118, 119)

However, for Christianity to ignore and play down the role and impact of witchcraft in Africa has resulted in many Christians attending church on weekends but turning to diviners and fetish priests for protection during the week. Such dual allegiance saps the strength and vitality of Christianity and renders it ineffective and powerless in the face of core African values and assumptions.



Missiologists would argue for the need to take seriously the beliefs and fears of a people as the first step in allowing the Word of God to speak freedom and peace into the areas of cultural need. To argue, as some do, that the witchcraft mentality is just psychological and not grounded in fact is to totally miss the core issue: many African people believe it is real so Christianity and the church must deal with it.

Etim Okon acknowledges the psychological side of witchcraft that continues to impact the life of many in Africa:

Belief in witchcraft provides a pseudo-psychological explanation for misfortune. Even lazy people trace their failure to witchcraft attack. It is common knowledge that indecision, or procrastination can cause frustration. People, who find it difficult to accept responsibility for their action, or inaction, rather find it very simple to pass blame on witches. Thus there is an idea of spiritual manipulation. . . . It is very likely that once a sick man is told that a witch is after his blood he will believe that his death is inevitable. He gives up all hope of recovery. And so the will to live, which plays such an important part in recovery from illness is missing. (2012:72, 73)

This psychological impact of witchcraft helps explain why some sicknesses and ailments cannot be diagnosed by medical science, and why people who believe their lives have been invaded by a witch are “rendered totally hopeless and helpless. The desire . . . to live and prospects of prosperity are shattered beyond restoration” (Manala 2004:1500).

These psychological underpinnings of the fear of witchcraft in many African countries result in witchcraft not being a topic of conversation. Victims do not want others to know what measures they have taken to protect themselves, thus inviting fresh attacks using additional means. Discussions of witchcraft are also rare in some places for the people fear that talking about occult power gives it additional power, “therefore the best way of protecting oneself is not to mention it” (Burnside 2010).

### Distrust of People Impacts African Social Life

The cultural assumptions concerning witchcraft listed above have a devastating impact on social life and how families, relatives, and acquaintances relate to each other. The witchcraft mentality causes social dislocation, suspicion, and fear to dominate the lives of many. Interpersonal relationships are weakened through witchcraft induced fear of what someone might be doing to them.



The belief that somebody can give you a gift that contains witchcraft substances makes parents warn their children not to receive gifts from old people especially. When people are sick, they will not stay near their home because it is believed that witches can strike at short range but cannot attack someone who is far from home. (ter Haar 2007:107)

Witches are believed to cause death, sickness, epidemics, barrenness, failure at school and at work, catastrophes like floods, fires, crop failures, and draughts on both individuals and the larger community (Bongmba 2007:114; Danfulani 2007:147, 151). With so much of life believed to be under the control of evil spiritual powers many go through life with constant suspicions that someone is out to destroy them, harm them, and inhibit them from living life to the full. That accused someone is usually a family member or close friend.

### The Impact of Personal Experience or Knowledge

Personal experience and knowledge concerning witchcraft makes it a reality for many. “Mystical power is known or experienced by nearly all Africans who have grown in a traditional environment. They will have witnessed magic, divination, witchcraft or other mystical phenomena” (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:9). Whereas a non-African may see natural causes many Africans believe in the reality of evil spiritual forces at work. Most Africans have witnessed the devastating impact of witchcraft in their communities. They have either seen people who have been bewitched or cursed or they have heard horror stories that are equally effective at communicating the idea that witchcraft is real. Often all it takes is for someone to point a finger at a person and say, “You will see,” to effect the person involved but also the whole village as they watch the person suffer and waste away with no medical explanation.

Rose Galadima and her husband, Bulus, tell of a Christian university student who lived in fear of witchcraft. The young man related two incidents he suspected were responsible for his nightmares: once he took a motorbike taxi and because he didn't have change, the motorcyclist left him, saying, “You will see.” Another time he bought some defective batteries. The Muslim store owner accepted the return, but told him, “You will see.” The young man worried that these people would use witchcraft to attack him. Although he was a student of modern science, he lived under a threatening cloud of evil forces. (Agang 2009)

Thus, a basic core value of many African worldviews is that witchcraft is real, is everywhere present, is known through personal experience, and

is the assumption that has the most influence in the lives of too many people.

### Summary

Witchcraft in Africa is rooted in at least seven basic worldview assumptions: (1) the belief that almost every problem or evil that affects people is caused by evil spiritual powers, (2) witches limit human development and enjoyment of life, (3) witchcraft powers can be used for good purposes to ward off evil and sickness, (4) personal identity is so closely intertwined with family and community that it becomes the basis for suspicion and fear that close associates are the source of bewitching curses, (5) witchcraft beliefs have powerful psychological influences on personal well-being, (6) people cannot be trusted because they might be trying to cause harm, and (7) witchcraft powers are viewed as real because of personal knowledge or experience.

### Recommendations

In view of these seven worldview assumptions concerning witchcraft and evil spiritual powers I offer the following recommendations.

1. It is time for the church to stop its silence on this topic. The question whether or not witchcraft is real or not is the wrong question. The belief in witchcraft is present among university professors, politicians, church leaders, illiterate farmers, and most Christians and Muslims. Almost nobody doubts that it is real (Achola 2005:17). The witchcraft mentality “cannot be legislated or banished into oblivion” (Dovlo 2007:87). Therefore, the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to place it on the table for open discussions, allowing biblical principles and teaching to impact the fear it holds on so many.

2. Many African Seventh-day Adventist pastors have received little if any training in Adventist schools on how to deal with this important topic. They have been trained in Adventist theology from a Western perspective that does not take seriously the worldview values and assumptions concerning evil spiritual powers. This leaves them ill-prepared to deal with “the anxieties, fears, and insecurities that African converts face regarding witchcraft” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:25). Therefore, all undergraduate theology programs in Adventist colleges in Africa should include courses on African Traditional Religions and biblical responses to witchcraft, the occult, and evil spiritual powers.

3. Biblical themes such as how Christ has “disarmed the rulers and authorities” and “made a public display of them” (Col 2:15 NASB) need

to be emphasized along with what it means for the believer to have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:4). The biblical narratives that reveal the power and protection of angels must become much more prominent in Adventist teaching. Church members need to take seriously the fact that Jesus has given power and authority over evil spiritual powers to his followers until the end of the age (Luke 9:1; Matt 28:20). Finally, Adventists need to understand the issues of the Great Controversy so clearly that they will never look to evil spiritual powers for help but will stay true to their commitment to make Jesus and his ways first and last in every aspect of their lives.

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