

The Missiological Dilemma of Sorcery and Divination to African Christianity

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ABSTRACT—Even after conversion to Christianity two pre-Christian practices that hold attraction to some African converts are sorcery and divination. These practices, which served a function in the lives of the people, met needs and dealt with fears in their previous lives, pose present missiological challenges to the church. This paper aims at understanding what these needs and fears are in the African experience, and to find scriptural responses that are contextually relevant while avoiding the pitfall of syncretism.

Keywords: Sorcery, Divination, Worldview

I. Introduction

Sorcery and divination presents a serious challenge to Christian missions in the African continent. This is primarily because of the niche they fill, the function they perform, and the worldview yearnings they satisfy in the lives and experiences of the people. In order to respond to this challenge they pose, it is imperative not to merely dismiss these practices as superstitious. Rather than approaching the problem from a purely anthropological perspective, appropriate theological and missiological interventions ought to be developed to respond to this issue. This is extremely vital due to indications that there may presently exist a resurgence of these practices, even among several professed African Christians.

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At a pastoral retreat a few years ago, a couple shared the story of a harrowing experience in their ministry. They told how the minister's wife had been accused of practicing witchcraft. Elders in the area hired the services of a local witchdoctor to confirm their allegations. Fortunately, the witchdoctor absolved the pastor's wife, but indicted some of the conspirators. However, the minister eventually lost his position in that district and it took several years of pain and anguish before the issue could finally be laid to rest.

A similar incident was shared in class by a ministerial student in which a local witchdoctor was invited for an extraordinary church session for the purpose of identifying those in the congregation engaging in the practice of witchcraft or sorcery. This exercise was the culmination of accusations and counter-accusations among the rank and file of the membership. These reported cases are indicative of increasing allegations of African Christians engaging in sorcery and divination in the West-African sub-region, and the continent as a whole.

This paper will examine sorcery and divination, two related practices prevalent among some converts from folk religions (Na'Allah, 2006, p. 568). It will seek to ascertain why these practices still have such strong appeal even among professed Christians, in spite of how long Christianity has held sway in the socio-political affairs of the continent. A major reason why a study of this nature is so important is because "the vast ethnographic record of witchcraft possession and exorcism practices worldwide strongly suggests that their presence is extremely widespread, if not universal" (Cohen, 2007, p. 137).

II. African Worldview

It is widely known that "almost all African societies believe in witchcraft in one form or another" (Kunhiyop, 2008, p. 377), and that the issue of witchcraft is at the center of the African psyche (Pobee and Oshitelu, 1998, p. 29). This belief and practice of sorcery lies at the root of the African worldview—one that has been described as saturated with ubiquitous spirits. As one scholar stated, "Africans believe their cosmos to be peopled by myriads of intractable and capricious spirits locked in an internecine battle at the center of which is humankind" (Okorochoa, 1992, p. 173).

This anthropocentric view of the world ranks God, the deities, and ancestors above, man in the middle, and natural forces, such as witchcraft in the realms below (Uka, 1991, p. 171). Sorcery, or witchcraft is the ability to access, and control, these existing forces, and employing them for one’s own benefit—either for good or evil. It is generally believed that good magic reinforces life (Parrinder, 1951, p. 9), while bad, or illicit magic, also known as sorcery (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979, p. 246), is used to cause harm.

The belief in sorcery and witchcraft appears to serve an integral function in the belief system of all Africans, because it helps to explain the problem of evil. Affirming this view Samuel Kunyihop (2008, p. 378), a professor of religion observes, “Belief in witchcraft serves a very practical purpose in explaining events and the causes behind them.” A Yoruba syllogism that calls attention to the reasoning in this logic states (Schiltz, 2002, p. 337):

The witch shrieked out yesterday	<i>ájè kẹ̀ l’ánà</i>
The child died today	<i>omọ́ kú l’òní yí</i>
Who does not know that yesterday’s witch	<i>tani kò mò pé ájè ánà</i>
Devoured today’s child	<i>l’ó pa omọ́ òn’íjẹ.</i>

Kunhiyop (2006, p. 374) argues that the belief in sorcery and witchcraft can be seen as a worldview explanation for negative experiences or seemingly inexplicable reverses in life such as untimely death, infertility, conflict, and failure. Another contributory factor to the belief and practice of sorcery is mystical causality—an element inherent to the African worldview. To the African nothing just happens (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007, p. 145), it is always necessary, therefore, to investigate the spiritual/metaphysical cause in order to determine its spiritual etiology (Imasogie, 1983, p. 60). While the belief in sorcery or witchcraft may seem irrational, especially to the Western enlightened mind, to the scholar of African religions it is seen as “a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil.” (Kunhiyop, 2008, p. 377) Paul Hiebert (2008, p.118) provides additional insight to the reasons people resort to magic declaring, “The use of magic is essentially pragmatic—if something seems to work, then keep on doing it until it no longer does.”

III. Divination and Sorcery in African Religions

Just as in most world religions divination plays a vital role in African Religions. Diviners deal with the question of finding out what may have gone wrong, and what could be done to remedy personal or corporate ills; these diviners could be male or female (Mbiti, 1991, p. 157). Laura Grillo (1992, p. 317) who studied the role and function of divination among the Dogon people of West Africa explained that divination could take one of two forms, intuition or revelation. In the former, the diviner, who is not a magician, uses rational analysis of social situations and measures to arrive at a diagnosis of the client's behavior against a standard of moral norms. In the latter scenario, the diviner employs external powers or deities to arrive at a conclusion. Among the purposes that divination serves for its users are:

(1) It serves as a channel of communication between the divinities and humans (Thorpe 1991, p. 93; Grillo 1992, p. 319).

(2) During rites of passages such as birth it is employed in order to determine the destiny of a child, and at marriage to ascertain affinity (Parrinder, 1969, p. 62).

(3) It serves to reiterate the values that unite the community upon which the functioning of the cosmos is predicated (Grillo, 1992, p. 318).

(4) It helps to interpret dreams, explain signs, and predict the future (Parrinder, 1976, p. 190-191).

(5) It assists in the making of decisions (Grillo, 1992, 319).

(6) It is used in determining causes and remedies for misfortune (Grillo, 1992, p.319).

In contrast to divination, sorcery in most African societies is viewed in a negative light. This is because sorcerers employ their magical arts to cause harm or misfortune to the persons targeted. Sorcerers, however, tend to be treated with ambivalence. On the one hand, they are feared because of the powers they control, and on the other, they are sought, even courted, in times of need or crises. Some of the factors that cause the demand for the services of the sorcerer includes: illness, infertility, fear of bewitchment, suspicions of spousal infidelity, protection, prosperity, vengeance, etc. The functions or offices of a diviner and sorcerer could be performed by one person in certain cases and circumstances. Another function that sorcery and divination play in the society is to act as a check against moral misdemeanor due to the fear they invoke. Ogbu Kalu (1993, p.

119), opines that they act as religious policemen by enforcing moral rectitude.

IV. The Missiological Challenge

Mission scholar, Timothy Tennent (2010, p. 487), observes that, “the crisis of our time is embodied in the forces of relativism, pragmatism and institutional parochialism which have hindered the emergence of a healthy, robust missiology.” In Africa local customs and practices were condemned by missionaries without any attempt to replace the functions these pre-Christian customs served (Kraft, 2005, p. 392). This well-known situation is referred to by mission anthropologist Paul Hiebert (2004, p. 418) as the flaw of the excluded middle—that is, the denial in the existence of the middle-zone world of spirits and the supernatural in the missionary worldview. Any undertaking to respond to the issues of sorcery and divination should begin with the desire to understand the root of those needs and fears which induce their practice. Insight into the experiences, assumptions, and logic in the people’s worldview will facilitate effective missions, achieve worldview transformation, and prevent syncretism, or Christo-paganism (Hiebert 2009, p. 69). The following section will outline the various needs and fears that make people predisposed to seek after sorcerers and diviners. It will also present suggestions for responding biblically to the twin challenges of sorcery and divination.

V. Responding to Needs

One of the basic reasons why Africans, like other primal cultures, consult diviners, and sometimes sorcerers, is to maintain communication with dead ancestors, and seek their help. These “living dead” are believed to be the guardians and benefactors of their surviving relations, who through death have assumed greater powers for assisting or afflicting the living—depending on how they are treated. In formulating a response to this problem African theologian Kwame Bediako (1995, p. 223-230) advocated the need for developing a theology of ancestors. At the head of his “Ancestor-Christology” was Christ, Lord of the ancestors (Bediako, 1995, p. 228). Similarly, Yusuf Turaki (2006, p. 480) proclaimed, “Jesus has come to fulfill our African ancestral cult, and has taken the place of

our ancestors, replacing them with himself.” The New Testament book of Hebrews finds resonance with this African worldview, and may prove useful as a bridge to presenting Jesus as the Greatest Ancestor, at the head of the lineage, yet without a beginning.

A second factor that gives reason for seeking sorcerers and diviners is the need for guidance. Kraft acknowledges that when it comes to divination, finding a functional substitute is a bit difficult because God condemns the practice outright. However, he averred that the spiritual gifts of prophecy and discernment given to the church can aid to meet this need (1 Cor 12:4-11) (Kraft, 2005, p. 393-394). Church members should therefore be taught to appreciate the role and value of spiritual gifts to the body of Christ and how they can discover what their unique gifts may be (Rom 12: 4-8; Eph 4: 4-14). Ministers on their own part may be encouraged to pray for the gift of discernment, just as Solomon sought it from God (1 Kings 3:6-14).

Favor, prosperity, and longevity are other reasons, which lead people to sorcery and divination. Cyril Okorochoa (1992, p. 172), submits that salvation for the African must come in tangible ways, such as material blessings, health, and good fortune. This is because the African worldview is regarded as more “this-worldly” in nature (Parrinder, 1951, p. 8). It is for this reason that the “health and wealth gospel” is popular in the continent. Although this manner of presenting the gospel has earned many deserved critiques, it is however true that several passages in Scripture suggest that God desires an abundant life for the faithful (Matt 7:7; 1 John 5:14-15; Ps 16:5; 34:10, 17; 55:22; 81:16; 84:11; John 10:10). However, rather than seek help from demonic agencies, the people should be taught to seek these blessings through a covenant relationship with God.

Patrons of divination and sorcery seek a harmonious existence and thereby engage in rituals and sacrifices. Yusuf Turaki’s (2002, p. 165) response to this situation is for a theology of redemption and reconciliation based on the sacrifice of Christ. Apprehension of the merits of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice should provide freedom from expensive, exploitative rituals that only leave worshippers in fear and anxiety (Rom 5:8-10; 8:1, 2; Heb 8-10). Additionally, the development of a covenant theology could serve as a means to lead the people to higher levels of faith and commitment.

Another element the local celebrations, and festivities connected with divination and sorcery provide is a sense of fellowship and belonging (Peel 1990, p. 58-59). Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz (2006, p. 107) advocate the concept of the church as a family, so as to

satisfy the communal nature of the African. A study of the Old Testament reveals that celebrations and festivals were many, and were related to religious observances (Lev 23; Esther 9:18-24). Accordingly, local rites of passages—such as birth, puberty, marriage, and burial—could be taken over by the church—as is the case in some churches already—and used to draw the people into tighter communal bonds, and deeper commitment to God. This would also provide release for their exuberant and convivial festivities. Furthermore, the Old Testament concept of *shalom*, which is at the heart of the gospel, and finds its equivalent in the Yoruba desire for *alafia*, should be expressed in loving and caring relationships facilitated by the church (see Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37), and in community building (Hiebert, 2008, p. 303-304).

The desire for power is the last need to be considered. This demand is believed to arise from a yearning to be in control of a world regarded as hostile, and filled with capricious spirits and enemies. Mastery is as a result achieved through magic, which is defined as “the control of this-worldly forces such as mana, by the proper use of chants, amulets, and rituals” (Hiebert, 2008, 118). Among the methods used in obtaining control, Turaki (2002, p. 168-169) lists word power (incantations), symbolic powers such as charms or masks, fetishes, sorcery and witchcraft. Regarding a viable strategy to respond to this power demand in primal societies, Ott, Strauss, and Tennent (2010, p. 254) observe:

Most folk religions and the middle tier of society are concerned with issues of power: sickness and health, wealth, status and prosperity, fertility and control of people and nature. Before people from power-oriented cultures will come to Christ, they often must be convinced that he has the power to address those concerns more effectively than their old religious system. Power oriented people require power proof not simply reasoning, if they are to be convinced.

Magic is the counterfeit sought through sorcery and divination, but miracles are the biblical response to this need. However, it appears that a rational, propositional, theological formation may serve as a hindrance to some modern agents of missions from anticipating God’s supernatural intervention, or to pray earnestly, and confidently for His kingdom to be established in power. Perhaps this may have arisen as a result of trepidation that nothing may actually happen

when they pray. A caveat to this situation is nevertheless given by Glasser et al (2003, p. 342):

Whenever we seek to coerce God to do our bidding through the use of a religious formula of one sort or another, we are in danger of yielding to that residue of fallenness in us that desires to be in control, rather than to submit to God's will. The central thrust of biblical faith is the recognition that we are to worship God and to identify with God's purposes and will.

The danger of an imbalance or an overemphasis on power encounter, therefore, and a corresponding under-emphasis of a truth encounter, is syncretism (Ott et al, 2010, p. 255).

VI. Responding to Fears

A dominant compelling fear of people in primal societies that leads to divination and sorcery is the fear of evil or misfortune. This is believed to spring from a curse or a spell that is cast on a person. Hiebert (2008, p. 305) counsels that as one develops a biblical strategy to address the question of spiritual realities it is important to avoid two extremes: (1) The first is denial of the reality of Satan and the spiritual battle in which we are engaged, (2) Undue fascination with, and fear of Satan and his hosts.

To counter the fear of suffering and evil a theodicy, which responds to the question of why good people suffer, should be developed as a solution. Such a theodicy can be derived through careful study of the book of Job. This is because there is no other book in the Bible like Job that provides a look behind the scenes of a cosmic conflict in which humans appear as pawns, yet possess the powerful gift of choice. Ricardo Barbosa de Sousa (2002, p. 34), notes the common thread that connects the spiritual conflicts experienced by Job, Jesus, and Peter, namely—God's silence. Satan's defeat, he observes, was not measured by power, but by surrender to God's free and unconditional love (Sousa, 2002, p. 34). For Kunhiyop (2008, p. 386-388), a theology of evil should possess the following concepts: (1) The sovereignty of God, (2) The goodness and love of God, (3) The presence of God, (4) The ultimate source of evil, (5)

The effect of moral choices, (6) The effect of physical laws, (7) The effect of evil forces, and (8) God's purposes.

Another major issue confronting people in primal societies is the fear of witchcraft and sorcery. This fear leads to a desire for protection from the powers of evil, and produces a constant state of insecurity. As with the fear of evil and misfortune, the solution may be found in spiritual warfare. Gregory Boyd (2009, p. 106), finds the language of warfare as a thread connecting the Old, New, and Intertestamental periods. He believes that the advancement of the kingdom of God cannot come without battle against spiritual powers. He postulates,

What the kingdom of God means therefore, is that the hostile alien kingdom of demonic captivity, oppression, poverty and blindness (physical and spiritual) is coming to an end through the ministry of Jesus. He is the bringer of the kingdom of God, for He is the vanquisher of the kingdom of Satan.

It is however pertinent to realize that, “the secularism of the modern Western worldview tends to deaden Christ's followers to this ongoing but unseen spiritual struggle leading to “practical atheism” and a sense that all problems are “psychological, social, physiological, or circumstantial””(Ott et al, 2010, p. 246).

In the conflict against spiritual forces of darkness, it is also important we remember that the weapons of our warfare actually belong to God; we are only told to put them on, not to manufacture them (Adeyemo, 2002, p. 62).

Similarly, Glasser et al (2003, p. 341) add this note:

When Paul lists the Christians' weaponry, he confines himself to the sword of the spirit, the Word of God, and to prayer. No lance, no bow and arrows, no spear! No triumphant seeking to bring the powers to their knees! Christians are called merely to stand at a distance from their seduction and enslavement in the quiet conviction of Christ's victory.

The recognition that God's ways are different from ours, and that the power in which we do exploit for the kingdom is not innate to us (Adeyemo, 2002, p. 63), calls for humility, and balance. Consequently, a theology of spiritual warfare against demonic powers should sum

up with the acknowledgement that: “Perhaps the most balanced conclusion is that any biblical theology of mission must put God’s power at the center of effective mission and must emphasize that prayer and dependence on God are foundational to the missionary task” (Ott et al, 2010, p. 252).

Another problem that looms large in the psyche of primal cultures is the fear of shame or failure. Shame is a component that plays a significant role in making people conform, and maintain harmony and peace (Hiebert, 2008, p. 111). Some people will do anything, and perform any sacrifice so as to avoid being ridiculed, or considered failures. For this reason a theology of reconciliation will play a vital role in restoring relationships, and providing a needed sense of community (Heibert, 2008, p. 111-112).

Finally, there is the fear of death. In Yoruba culture, as in most African cultures, children are not expected to die before their parents for this would result in the violation of the principle of substitutionality and self-continuity, which is inherent to their belief (Babatunde, 2006, 221). The death of young persons is usually attributed to witchcraft and sorcery (Turaki, 2002, p. 169). A biblical response to death, and other fears associated with primal societies is a theology of the cross. At the cross Christ disarmed and defeated Satan and all the demonic hosts. As George Eldon Ladd states, “Christ has nullified the power of death; He has nullified the power of Satan” (Ladd, 2009, 91). No longer therefore should the cross be emptied of its power, redemption needs to be understood in this-worldly terms also (Ott et al, 2010, p. 133). Not only has death been defeated, Christ has liberated from the fear of death all who believe in Him (Heb 2:14-15).

VII. Recommendations

Some recommended steps to take, in responding to these issues which lead to the practice of divination and promote the use of sorcery, will be:

(1) To seek to understand the function these practices fulfill in the worldview and logic system of the people.

(2) A contextual analysis of the religion, culture and society of the people in order to discover functional substitutes to replace those unbiblical practices with biblically appropriate ones.

(3) The development of various theologies necessary to

respond to these challenges; such as theologies of dynamism, divination, discernment, communalism, reconciliation, suffering and evil, and the cross. These theologies should then be taught and applied to respond to the needs and fears of the people.

(4) Rather than regard education and civilization as the means by which such practices shall be brought to cease, this challenge must be viewed in the context of the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan which shall continue until the second coming of Christ.

(5) The role and power of prayer in personal and corporate life needs to be emphasized especially among such people whose worldview already acknowledges the potency and efficacy of this vital spiritual tool.

(6) Narrative theology, which recognizes the value of understanding the people's myths, proverbs, wisdom, and poetry, as well as the heuristic nature of scriptural narratives, should receive greater emphasis among African cultures.

VIII. Conclusion

Because the issues of divination and sorcery meet needs and respond to fears in the lives of people from primal backgrounds, the church should bring these issues to the fore of its discussions. Bible conferences should be held in various regions where such issues should be discussed and resolutions arrived at in consultation between scholars, leaders, and local lay-leaders. Bible studies need to be designed and taught in the churches to lead believers to turn from pre-Christian ways to faith in the power and wisdom of God. Such studies must show sensitivity to the context these believers are coming from, and lead them to total dependence on the Word of God and the power of prayer alone. No longer should church leaders assume that because people have been baptized everything has changed in their lives. Their worldviews still remain the same and therefore need to be transformed through the careful application and teaching of the Scriptures.

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