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Relationship between Social and Economic Status and Witchcraft in Africa

Introduction

The topic for this article, “Relationship between Social and Economic Status and Witchcraft in Africa,” presupposes the existence and practice of witchcraft in Africa that works to influence social and economic life. However, a number of questions need to be asked to test this presupposition. Is witchcraft in Africa a reality or an imaginary phenomenon? Does witchcraft really influence, for example, how people pursue higher education and create wealth or is it a claim that has no significance whatsoever?

The purpose of this paper is to describe the relationship between socioeconomic status and witchcraft in Africa in order to show how this relationship affects how people create wealth and pursue their ambitions. Finally, I will offer a brief critical analysis of the insights gained in the article and draw a conclusion. It is hoped that the insights gained from this study will contribute to helping the church respond to the challenge of witchcraft in Africa and elsewhere.

Before I do so, I first need to define the word *witchcraft* as it is used in this study. What is witchcraft? Witchcraft refers to at least three different phenomena. According to Moreau (2001:1279), the first phenomenon refers to a person using magical means to bring harm or provide benefits. Such people have been found in every culture in the world; some of them practice witchcraft on an individual basis, while others have institutionalized it in the form of religious sects, for example, Voodoo,¹ Santeria,² Macumba,³ etc. The Bible strongly condemns this type of witchcraft (Deut 18:10; Mic 5:12; Gal 5:20). The second phenomenon is what is referred to as “diabolical witchcraft.” It has been documented that accusations about this particular type of witchcraft arose in the medieval era, and it continues to this day. Basically, this type focuses on a witch as a person who consciously aligns with Satan (Moreau 2001:1279). The last

phenomenon involves the so-called neopaganism mainly found in Europe and the United States, which came about as a result of the 20th-century revival of magical thinking, including Wicca⁴ (1279). In this paper, I use the first definition of witchcraft provided above, which broadly defines it as the ability to use supernatural powers or techniques to harm others or acquire wealth. This definition seems to better serve the purpose of this study because it touches on the relationship between socioeconomic status and witchcraft.

Witchcraft in Africa: Reality or Imaginary?

Witchcraft has been more often dismissed by scholars as an imaginary or unreal phenomenon (Geschiere 1997:2, 20). Because of its complexity, some people have concluded that the language used to describe witchcraft and sorcery is actually a coded language that means something else. In other words, witchcraft is not real. So, is witchcraft in Africa real or an imaginary phenomenon? Do people use this terminology to make Africa look diabolical and backward, or is witchcraft part of a general African cultural phenomenon? If it is real, then what is its function in society? A brief overview of a number of studies conducted on the continent of Africa in the past 20 years give evidence of witchcraft beliefs as a cultural phenomenon that is still alive and well in many parts of the continent.

Witchcraft beliefs are still held and practiced in many parts of Africa south of the Sahara, and they do not seem to lose salience even after more than half a century of postcolonial self-rule (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Ashforth 2002; Miguel 2003). In his study, "Poverty and Witch Killing," Edward Miguel (2003:5) mentions a number of African countries where witchcraft beliefs are still practiced. In a recent study, which was based on a 2008–2009 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in 19 sub-Saharan African countries, Gershman (2016:183) concludes that witchcraft beliefs are still held in these countries. The countries surveyed represent 75% of the total sub-Saharan population.

Even though most studies have focused on sub-Saharan Africa, there is evidence of the presence of witchcraft beliefs in North Africa as well (Spooner 2004:316). In other words, people who hold witchcraft beliefs in one way or another exist throughout Africa as a whole, regardless of their religious affiliation, political ideology, or geographic location. The presence of witchcraft beliefs in Africa in the 21st century is made clear by the many reports of witchcraft confessions and accusations and even witch killings in many countries (Miguel 2003:5; The Daily Mail 2015).

In recent years, there have been shocking reports of attacks on accused witches and witch killings all over sub-Saharan Africa. Thousands of

people, primarily women, have been either attacked or killed in West, East, South, and Central Africa (Miguel 2003; Kgatla 2007). The results of witchcraft accusations, which include witch killings and destruction of their property, should be taken as a cry for help. In the past four decades, thousands of people accused of witchcraft have been killed throughout Africa. More than 50% of people interviewed in sub-Saharan Africa indicated they personally believed in witchcraft (Radford 2010). This shows that witchcraft beliefs on the African continent are not an old, imaginary phenomenon, but rather a present reality. This fact brings us to the relationship between witchcraft and socioeconomic status in Africa.

Relationship between Witchcraft and Socioeconomic Status

Anthropologists have established a close link between the belief in witchcraft and the social, political, and economic life of some people (Geschiere 1997:2–5). So, what is the nature of the relationship between witchcraft and socioeconomic status in Africa? Does witchcraft influence the social and economic development of the people of Africa? Here, the paper attempts to show that witchcraft beliefs influence how people view and participate in social and economic development in sub-Saharan Africa.

Witchcraft and Socioeconomic Status

Witchcraft influences people's socioeconomic status in a direct way. This means that the state of the economy of a particular society is determined by the level of witchcraft beliefs held, which in turn determines the socioeconomic status of families and individuals (ter Haar 2007). In such societies, witchcraft and socioeconomic status are so closely linked that one defines the other and vice versa.

The term *status* as used in this paper should be understood as the position or rank of a person or group within a society. On the one hand, one can earn social status through achievements, which may include hard work, skills, etc. This type of status is called achieved status. On the other hand, one can inherit a position in the stratification system. This type of status has nothing to do with achievements. Therefore, it is called ascribed status (Brym and Lie 2009:88). Socioeconomic status is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a person's work experience and of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others, based on income, education, and occupation (Woolfolk 2007:160).

In traditional environments where people hold cultural beliefs in witchcraft, they see any ascendancy to a higher social status as the result of witchcraft and magic (Geschiere 1997:137–140). This belief has implications for other aspects of social and economic life, including law enforcement, aid donations, and even public health. As a result of this attitude, “witch doctors are consulted for almost every affair of life, from healing diseases to placing curses on rivals, as well as for personal, political, and financial gain” (Radford 2010). Generally, this practice makes some Africans’ lifestyle more or less grounded in witchcraft beliefs. People make development decisions based on their understanding of what witchcraft might mean to them in the short and long term.

Many ethnographic case studies conducted in Africa show that witchcraft beliefs can have a direct adverse effect on interpersonal relationships, cooperation in society, as well as on diverse aspects of socioeconomic development (Gershman 2015; Harries 2010). This happens as a result of increased fear of bewitchment and the fear of witchcraft accusations, whose punishment is severe and brutal in most parts of Africa (Hund 2000:366–367).

These two fears, namely the fear of bewitchment and the fear of witchcraft accusations, occupy the minds of many people most of the time. As such, witchcraft mentality in general and its implications in particular influence people’s social and economic plans from start to finish. Whether or not some people will be willing and enthusiastic to participate in social or economic activities depends on the level of their belief in witchcraft and their fear of its possible implications. These two fears have generated another problem in African societies—the erosion of social capital (the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively). Studies show that communities that are infested with witchcraft beliefs become distrustful, suspicious, and non-cooperative (Gershman 2015). Suspicion and lack of trust interfere with people’s confidence and freedom to work together for the development of their communities. They are not free to help each other or support one another even in the projects that require people to cooperate and work together as a community. This mindset applies to other facets of life as well, including education, farming, business ventures, and women’s or youth development programs (Gershman 2015). Trust and confidence have the power to drive people into working together for their development and socioeconomic prosperity. In societies where witchcraft beliefs are widespread, the spirit of collegiality and brotherhood is diminished because of the erosion of social capital. When mistrust is common among the people, there is a tendency to want to maintain their status quo.

In such communities, people’s success or lack thereof is thought to be closely associated with witchcraft and magic. If a person succeeds, they

are accused of using witchcraft to become wealthy, highly educated, or politically influential; if they fail in their endeavors, it is thought that somebody else has cast a spell on them in order to put them down. If they are accused of witchcraft, they run the risk of being mercilessly killed (BBC News 2009). If they choose to underperform or do nothing for fear of witchcraft accusations, they run the risk of living in abject poverty thus failing to reach their God-given potential. Whatever their socioeconomic status, they pass that on to their children. In short, witchcraft beliefs contribute significantly to Africa's poverty and underdevelopment (Gershman 2015). Some may even choose to leave their communities altogether and relocate at a faraway location (ter Haar 2007:1–5).

The Salience of Witchcraft in Africa

In the previous section, I attempted to show the close relationship between witchcraft and socioeconomic status in Africa. I argued that witchcraft beliefs can deeply influence people's ambitions in almost every aspect of life. However, this raises the question of why witchcraft is such a powerful force among some people on the continent of Africa. To answer this question, I would like to suggest and discuss at least two reasons. The first sees witchcraft as serving an explanatory function in society and the second has to do with the theory of limited good.

Witchcraft as an Explanatory Tool

Witchcraft in Africa is so widespread because it serves to explain the mysteries of life, most of which otherwise would remain unexplainable. These mysteries can be divided into two categories: (a) misfortune and tragedies, such as sudden deaths, illnesses, crop failure, businesses problems, etc., and (b) good fortune and upward social mobility, which may include getting wealthy, acquiring higher education, success in politics, etc. People, who hold such beliefs are convinced that no death or sickness occurs without a malevolent agent behind it. They equally believe that no one can become wealthy or well educated without recourse to witchcraft. This view of witchcraft gives it an explanatory function (Horton 1972:21–23).

Not all scholars who have studied this subject agree that witchcraft has this function. Some see it as a symbolic personality standing for moral failings (Middleton and Winter 2004:107). Other have insisted that witchcraft as part of African Traditional Religion simply fulfills no explanatory function (Horton 1972). Practically speaking, there seems to be more evidence to the contrary. The fact that many people in these societies use witchcraft beliefs to make sense of things that occur in their communities,

good and evil, is enough evidence to see these beliefs serving an explanatory function (Nyabwari and Kagema 2014:5–6). As an explanatory tool, some people see witchcraft as a necessity in society. Some have argued that there is good witchcraft and bad witchcraft. The work of a witch doctor, for example, is considered essential and therefore good, to the point that some of them are accepted as witnesses in courts of law (Geschiere 1997). They are considered to be doing their part for the common good of the entire society.

Witchcraft and the Theory of Limited Good

The theory of limited goods was introduced by George Foster. His article “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good” drew a lot of responses, both critical and supportive (Kennedy 1966; Ginzberg 2014:20). The theory states that the progress of any person in this world is seen as a threat to the rest of the people in the world. What one gains in life is at the expense of others (Foster 1965:296). Therefore, if one person becomes wealthy in a community, it is because he or she has taken a bigger share, and the result is that some people in the same community will be poor. If one person earns more academic degrees, it is because they have taken the share of other members of their society. This worldview, some believe, drives the witchcraft mentality in Africa, because those who are perceived to take more than their share get bewitched as a warning to them and to the rest of the society. Therefore, witchcraft is seen as a means to regulate the acquisition of goods and influence to ensure equal redistribution of the limited resources available (Grinker, Lubkemann, and Steiner 2010:274).

However, while this worldview may seem to be the driving force behind witchcraft activities and attacks, it has also been established by experts that, in reality, it is envy and jealousy that play a major role in the practice of witchcraft (Harries 2012:132–133; Gershman 2015). Because of envy or jealousy, people who enjoy higher socioeconomic status become the targets of witchcraft (Harries 2012).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at the relationship between witchcraft and socioeconomic status in Africa. It has established the fact that witchcraft beliefs, as a cultural phenomenon, are still alive and well throughout the continent of Africa. More than 50% of people interviewed in one study of some societies indicated that they personally believed in witchcraft, which means that one in every two people in Africa may hold some sort of witchcraft belief. The influence of witchcraft on the socioeconomic status

of many Africans is a matter of great concern. This cultural phenomenon seems to impact the social and economic status of more than a billion people living on this continent.

Now, what does this mean to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Africa, where the Adventist membership is the largest in the world? This reality means a number of things:

1. The Seventh-day Adventist Church as one of the fastest-growing churches in the world in general and Africa in particular (Zylstra 2015:18), interacts with a large number of people who hold witchcraft beliefs, whether the church knows it or not. This also means that many people who convert to Adventism come from families and communities that hold witchcraft beliefs.

2. When the church plans out-reach and in-reach programs, including major evangelistic campaigns, it must do so with the understanding that a significant number of the people who attend those meetings may be influenced by witchcraft and sorcery.

3. The Seventh-day Adventist Church cannot afford to be naïve enough to believe that every person who converts to Adventist Christianity from witchcraft backgrounds is fully converted and would never think of either going back to their former beliefs and practices or playing the dual allegiance game while holding church membership (Dosunmu 2011). This also means that some people who call themselves an Adventist may be holding witchcraft beliefs.

4. Christianity has half a billion followers in Africa and has been operational in Africa for nearly 200 years. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, with a membership in Africa of 8 million, has been on the continent for over 100 years (Mwashinga 2013), and yet witchcraft beliefs are increasing instead of decreasing. Where has the church gone wrong?

Witchcraft beliefs in Africa were a challenge at the dawn of Christianity and in the middle of the 19th century, and they remain a challenge now in the second decade of the 21st century. Their evil influence still drives millions of people into poverty and misery. Fear of bewitchment and witchcraft accusations has defined the socioeconomic development of many Africans for so long. It seems that the future of the African continent depends on the success of the Christian project in replacing this fear with saving faith in Jesus Christ. Looking for a biblical solution to the problem of witchcraft could mean looking for an effective way of bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these people and liberating them from the shackles of sin. Then, and only then, will the evil relationship that exists between witchcraft and socioeconomic status in Africa be forever broken.

Recommendations

1. In order to remedy the situation addressed both in this paper and in this conference, I suggest that the church should come up with a clear strategy on how to effectively address the challenges posed by beliefs in witchcraft. This document should be biblically sound, theologically coherent, and culturally relevant and be disseminated to all Seventh-day Adventists in Africa, in the major languages spoken. This document should address any objections that might arise in relation to witchcraft beliefs and practices.

2. The church should be intentional and constant in teaching its members and other people biblical faith without ignoring the fact that witchcraft is real. The church must not wait until the time of crisis to teach or warn people. People should be taught biblical principles of living a joyful, victorious Christian life. They should be encouraged to live without fear because in Christ, Christians are more than conquerors (Rom 8:37).

Notes

¹Voodoo is a black religious cult practiced in the Caribbean and the southern United States, combining elements of Roman Catholic ritual with traditional African magical and religious rites, and characterized by sorcery and spirit possession.

²Santería is a pantheistic Afro-Cuban religious cult developed from the beliefs and customs of the Yoruba people and incorporating some elements of the Catholic religion.

³Macumba is a Brazilian cult incorporating the use of fetishes and sorcery and deriving largely from African practices.

⁴Wicca is a religion that is characterized by belief in the existence of magical powers in nature.

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