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African Pentecostalism and Its Relationship to Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations: Biblical Responses to a Pernicious Problem Confronting the Adventist Church in Africa

Introduction

The subject of witchcraft accusations once used to be a major discourse all around the world; especially in Europe and its colonies in North America (Jennings 2015:1). During that era, which curiously continued through the period of the Enlightenment and the Reformation, notable men like Martin Luther and John Calvin are reported to have believed in the existence of witches and spoken forcefully in support of their extermination (Kors and Peters 2001:262-262). Indeed, Luther is reported to have stated concerning witches, “There is no compassion to be had for these women; I would burn all of them myself, according to the law, where it is said that priests began to stone criminals to death” (263).

In the succeeding centuries this phenomenon was eclipsed by the success of the missionary endeavor, which resulted in Africa, Latin America, and Asia emerging as collaborators on the global mission stage. However, in recent times, the subject of Witchcraft accusations has again resurfaced on the missions radar to the extent that the American Society of Missiology (ASM) dedicated an entire track of its annual missions conference to discussing this emergent phenomenon. Besides the ASM conference, the *International Bulletin for Missionary Research (IBMR)*, in 2014 devoted an entire edition of its widely-read journal to articles on this same theme, highlighting reports from various regions of the world faced with this problem. In addition, mission scholar, Robert Priest and several mission colleagues

from Africa have over the last three years or so engaged in research and presentations seeking to unravel this pernicious problem ravaging parishioners, congregations, and ministers in just about all the regions of the African continent. For instance, in the country of Central African Republic one out of every four cases in the courts of Bangui, the capital city, and between 80-90% of all the cases in the rural courts were concerning witchcraft accusations, resulting in 70% of prisoners in the central prison being there as a result of this (Gifford 2014:123). These statistics are indicative of the situation in several other African countries regarding the subject of witchcraft beliefs and accusations.

Definitions and Explanations

Witchcraft is a phenomenon associated with “supernatural activities that are believed to bring about negative or evil consequences for individuals and families.” It is also regarded as “benign supernatural power that can enhance one’s ability to perform extraordinary feats” (Akrong 2007:53). Witchcraft is considered to be a power inherent to an individual that can be employed for good or evil—when linked with men it is considered good witchcraft, but when connected to women it is regarded as evil (Dovlo 2007:58). In their classic, *Understanding Folk Religions*, Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou explain that the belief in witchcraft is universal, and among the greatest fears people who believe in its reality can ever have (1999:148-149). Witchcraft accusations are prevalent in societies where misfortune or evil is always blamed on a human cause, or agent, and in closely-knit communities where severe environmental or societal stress is experienced (151).

The belief in witchcraft serves the purpose of providing a worldview explanation for the causes of anything or everything that could go wrong in the life of an individual or a community (Kunhiyop 2008:378). The concept of mystical causality—“the belief that occurrences in the physical realm are predetermined and influenced by supernatural forces” (Quampah 2014:43)—which underpins witchcraft beliefs in Africa, not only serves as an explanation for its pervasiveness, but also answers why such beliefs may not disappear any time soon. Indeed, it is considered that belief in witchcraft is “a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the question of evil” (Kunhiyop 2008:377).

Worldview Foundations

Widespread among almost all African people groups is the belief that nothing of its own just happens (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007:145). Behind

every misfortune, evil, trouble, or trauma is a causal agent. This could be malicious or malevolent spirits, believed to populate the African cosmos (Okorochoa 1992:173); mistreated or neglected ancestors; enemies who collude with sorcerers to cause harm; or witches who possess inherent powers to wreak havoc. To the African there is always a spiritual or human causal agent behind every effect; it is therefore incumbent that the causal agent(s) be identified; whoever they may be. Even when there may appear to be a rational, natural explanation the spiritual/human dimension is always deemed liable. As has been observed, it is the norm to hear those confronted by personal trials ask “Who is doing these things to me?” instead of “What is causing these things?” (Akrong 2007:60).

There is hardly an African tribe or people without its stories and myths regarding the existence, exploits, and experiences of witchcraft in that community. These stories are transmitted from generation to generation and learned from childhood. Such stories accentuate the powers of witches, describing how they fly at night, demonstrate out of body experiences, possess animal familiarity, exhibit the ability to mutate, consume their victims, and gleefully leave a trail of trauma and mayhem. Unless such beliefs are confronted and transformed by the Word of God they persist and remain strongholds in the lives of such believers no matter their education, status, experience, or faith convictions.

Anthropological Dimensions

One of the earliest studies on witchcraft and its significance in an African community was carried out by Evans-Pritchard among the Azande, of Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1937). Since then a number of studies have relied on this significant, seminal work, adding insights to the nature, effects, and consequences of witchcraft beliefs on African communities. Witchcraft accusations have caused great societal turmoil resulting in alienation, separation, persecution, suspicion, and killings (von Boek 2007:294). Anthropologists regard this phenomenon as a way of regulating interpersonal relations—“a channel by which people can deal with hatred, frustration, jealousy, and guilt, and use socially acceptable opportunities for aggression, vengeance, and gaining prestige and attention” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999:152). Another function of witchcraft accusations is in making people conform to societal norms. People in such communities live in the fear of exciting the envy of others and therefore being accused of witchcraft because they stand out from the others (Hiebert and Meneses 1995:118). However, because witchcraft is regarded as the epitome of evil, accusations are never taken lightly. Accused persons are rarely tolerated, “but have to be cured, purged, evicted, or killed, whatever measure is culturally acceptable” (von Boek 2007:294).

What is most curious about witchcraft discourses in Africa is that those persons who most commonly stand accused are the weak, powerless, and defenseless in such societies—women and children. Often, these are elderly women who are either widows or childless, and children who are orphans. These socially disenfranchised persons with already peculiar circumstances in need of societal assistance bear the brunt of suspicions and accusations whenever anything goes wrong in homes or communities.

Resurgence of Witchcraft Beliefs in Africa

Without a doubt the missionary age was successful in planting the gospel seed in African soil. This is attested to by the Adventist Church statistics, which indicate that close to four out of every ten Adventists live on the continent of Africa. However, the missionaries were unable to eliminate witchcraft beliefs from the worldview of African believers. Such beliefs were regarded with disdain as primeval, and considered by them as superstitious; as a result all they succeeded in doing was to drive such beliefs underground. Secretly, locals continued to turn to shamans for aid in dealing with their fears, and the need of protection from witchcraft.

While the phenomenon of witchcraft beliefs were seemingly repressed for a while, about four decades ago the situation appeared to have escalated out of control. Eminent scholar of religious history, Philip Jenkins in his book, *The New Faces of Christianity*, traces the reemergence of witchcraft beliefs in Africa to the 1970s; the years of disillusionment, when many strange diseases surfaced in Eastern Africa, and when social factors fueled the fear of witchcraft (2006:110-111). Interestingly, it was about this same time that Pentecostal churches began to proliferate across the continent. Jenkins viewpoint harmonizes with the social deprivation theory advanced by Kenneth Archer considered to be responsible for the growth of Pentecostalism. The 3-Ds advanced by Archer are deprivation, disorganization, and the defective (2004:12). Essentially, what Archer espouses is a socio-economic milieu characterized by poverty, disempowerment, and seeming abandonment as the prime reasons that contributed to the flourishing of Pentecostal churches

African Pentecostalism

Within the last four decades, around the entire continent Pentecostal churches, once disparagingly regarded as “mushroom churches,” have emerged as major stakeholders in the religious and political realms of most African countries. A major contributing factor to this growth is Pentecostalism’s keen perception and parallels with African traditional

beliefs and worldviews. African Pentecostalism reflects continuity with African Traditional Religion (ATR) evident in its emphasis on pragmatism (Nurnberger 2006:21)—what works—rather than on orthodoxy. Other analogous elements that demonstrate this keen resonance between African Pentecostalism and ATR are animism—the belief that the world is populated with a myriad of malevolent spirits from which people need protection; dynamism—emphasizing the inherent power certain objects possess, and power that is available for control over every phenomenon or condition; divination—the ability to discern the future, answer questions of causation, and provide guidance for decisions in life; deliverance—freedom from evil spirit possession, demonic harassment, and from witchcraft; and the promise of a better life (Onongha 2011:68-85). In addition is the emphasis on materialism—the quest for the better life, now (Ogbu 2008:194).

Many of these Pentecostal churches which emerged from African Independent Churches or African Indigenous Churches (AICs) profess a theology of the spirit world where witchcraft is ascribed a significant role as a causative agency for evil, misfortune, suffering, and death. Perhaps one of the greatest factors behind the growth of the Pentecostal churches is their acknowledgement and emphasis on the reality of witchcraft, and the spirit world—something the pre-existing mission churches still struggle to validate. Recently, witchcraft accusations have been observed to be growing in significance, and the main culprit is found in African Pentecostalism.

Paul Gifford in his study of *Mountain of Fire and Miracles*, one of the influential Nigerian Pentecostal churches that has become transnational, describes what he refers to as their “enchanted worldview,” with a sharply defined cosmology composed of witches, marine spirits, spiritual spouses, and curses (2014:123). He explains the significance of this brand of Pentecostalism stating,

Many scholarly treatments of Africa’s Christianity give this enchanted imagination and witchcraft only the most cursory mention. Yet, not to give this enchanted worldview its due weight is to misunderstand religion in Africa. I would suggest that African Pentecostalism is built on this religious imagination. This is the biggest single reason for the success of Pentecostalism in Africa. A form of Christianity in which this religious imagination can be given full play has now become acceptable. No longer is there a need for the phenomenon of “dual allegiance,” in which one goes to a mainline Christian service on Sundays and secretly resorts to a healer-diviner on a weeknight. One no longer needs a healer-diviner to identify and counter the spiritual forces causing one’s misfortunes, for this can be done on Sunday during the Pentecostal service. (Gifford 2014:123)

Deliverance services are common and regular features in African Pentecostal churches. It is not unknown in some of these deliverance services for the victims to be bound, or chained, depending on the nature of the case, and for the individual to be whipped into submission, until the evil spirits leave the host. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, a religion scholar who has written extensively on Pentecostalism in Africa explains that deliverance services are established practices among these churches because of a synthesis between traditional African beliefs and their understanding of Jesus' role as healer and exorcist (2015:64).

Perhaps more disturbing about the connection between Pentecostalism and witchcraft beliefs and accusations is the knowledge that despite the close association between Islamic culture and magic, witchcraft accusations are rare in Islamic communities. This is not strange for even when witch-hunts were rampant in Europe, they were unknown in Islamic communities (Kors and Peters 2001:287). Kors and Peters aptly observe, "While Christian theologians could not settle for the observation that magic simply 'worked,' their Muslim counterparts could and did" (287).

Witchcraft Accusations and the Adventist Church

Personal observation, supported by interactions with ministers and membership from across the various regions of Africa—north, south, east, and West—suggest that witchcraft beliefs are strongly entrenched in the psyche and worldview of African Adventists more than what may be realized. Each time a discourse veers in such a direction anecdotes shared indicate that there exists unhealthy fear, even awe for the purported activities of those with such powers. In certain occasions and contexts some members and ministers have even been accused of possessing powers to bewitch and oppress others. While such accounts are often dismissively treated, rarely is the subject of witchcraft engaged in discourse theologically with the intent of responding to the fears and baggage associated with the belief. There have even been reports of some Adventist churches who have engaged locally reputable witch-hunters to help identify and exorcise alleged witches from their congregations. In one such instance, a special service of this nature was conducted on Sabbath.

As is often done whenever there is the hint of witchcraft beliefs and accusations the issue is usually swept under the rug and expected to remain there. Perhaps the greatest reason however, why this subject cannot remain unexamined and unengaged any longer is due to the growing influence of Pentecostalism in the religious affairs of the continent. Adventist church members with vestiges of traditional worldviews are prone to

attraction to Pentecostal congregations where the reality of witchcraft is acknowledged and seemingly resolved. Hence the growing documented evidences of dual allegiance in Adventist churches around the continent.

Responding to the Challenge

Now, more than ever before the Adventist Church in Africa needs to no longer pretend and hope that the matter of witchcraft beliefs and accusations will disappear if it just holds still and does nothing about it. The experience with Pentecostalism should serve as a lesson; for there was a time when some leaders believed Pentecostal churches were merely a fad that would never last. That is far from the case at the moment.

Because witchcraft beliefs are innate to the African worldview and the milieu in which Adventist members are immersed, the church needs to be intentional and earnest in responding to this pernicious phenomenon. Definitive measures are necessary on the part of Adventist leadership in Africa if worldview transformation is to be realized. In times such as these church leaders will need to be proactive rather than reactive—waiting to punish parishioners who they consider to have engaged in such practices.

As the Adventist Church stands at the crossroads—trying to decide whether to engage or not the controversial issue of witchcraft beliefs and accusations—and contemplates how to critically and biblically respond to this phenomenon, the counsels of renowned missiologists, Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou in their classic, *Understanding Folk Religion*, are worthy of close consideration. In their classic volume they present several important processes, which are briefly outlined (1999:173-174): (1) witchcraft beliefs and accusations should be taken seriously; (2) the church and its agencies should speak out against evil witchcraft causes; (3) the church and its leaders must stand up in defense of those wrongfully accused, and (4) the church must develop processes to defuse hostilities and demonstrate true unity and love among its members.

As the church in Africa contemplates a response to this subject the foremost question that needs to be addressed should be, Is witchcraft real? The importance of this question lies in the significance of worldviews and how they shape people's responses to issues. A generation ago, issues such as witchcraft and ATR beliefs had no place in ministerial education and formation. For this reason, nothing was done to engage these subjects. The beginning place must be a return to the Scriptures as a guide to shaping our response to the phenomenon of witchcraft beliefs and accusations. If witchcraft is real, the church therefore needs to develop strategies to engage and respond to the fears and needs associated with this worldview.

In addition to this, in Bible conferences clear enunciation of the

significance of the Great Controversy doctrine and how it responds to the problem of suffering and evil needs to be undertaken. Biblical scholars and missiologists should together craft and share a theology of suffering that provides better explanations for suffering from a biblical perspective other than what African Traditional Religion offers—that ancestors, witches, enemies, and sorcery are the agents of suffering and evil. While it is true that suffering can emanate from an evil, satanic agency, such as is evident in the book of Job, the Bible clearly demonstrates that suffering may also result from poor human choices. Moreover, the Scriptures reveal the sovereignty of God over evil and suffering, transforming adversity and pain into purpose and praise. The Great Controversy doctrine, therefore, provides a metanarrative, a big picture that bestows perspective and coherence to the issue of suffering. In this manner, the doctrine responds to the rational philosophical explanation anthropologists indicate that witchcraft beliefs provide regarding the cause of suffering or evil.

Additionally, since fear dominates the psyche of many Africans, in recommended Bible conferences the subject of the believer's status in Christ needs to be better emphasized. It has sometimes been stated that Africans fear Satan more than they do God. Therefore, the power of God to protect, to deliver, and keep his own needs to be thoroughly discussed and demonstrated to African believers. Until converts encounter and experience a better, superior way, witchcraft beliefs and accusations will never cease. As Allan Anderson astutely maintains, "Any religion that does not offer at least the same, and preferably more benefits as the old religion will be unattractive" (2014:166). Adventism in Africa desperately needs to provide better answers, demonstrate better security and identity to its members.

Until recently in ministerial formation the issue of spiritual warfare and deliverance ministries have not been taught or clearly demonstrated. Now, more than ever, these lessons need to be taught and underscored. Not the questionable, unbiblical practices associated with many Pentecostal churches under the guise of deliverance; rather, the kind that engages the Three Encounters for conversion advocated by Charles Kraft—truth encounter, power encounter, and allegiance encounter (2009:447-449). Such a balanced biblical approach, devoid of noise, display, or the magical, will respond to the spiritual needs and fears associated with witchcraft beliefs. Power encounters demonstrate the supremacy of Christ over the forces of evil; they are, however, a rarity in Adventist praxis. Many members are not sure they can turn to their pastors in matters regarding demonization and spirit possession. Allegiance encounters entail leading captives from the camp of the enemy to break their old connections, destroy tokens of their past affiliations, and determine to make Christ alone their Lord and Master. Truth encounters entail more than proof-texting—that for which

Adventists are well known—or the mere presentation of facts that reach the head but not the heart. Properly done, the truth encounter should enable members to understand and appropriate their new identity and relationship with Christ. Consequently, they should no longer live in fear and bondage because they know God is always present with them; for the shout of a King is in their midst (Num 23:21). Neil Anderson (2000) in his book, *The Bondage Breaker*, elucidates on these three encounters.

Adventist pastors and scholars need more than ever before to teach and demonstrate the power of God, which was evident in apostolic times. It was the display of such power that led to the establishment of Christianity in the former bastions of magical arts, such as Ephesus and Colossae, transforming them into centers for evangelistic missions. While on one hand African Pentecostal churches may be faulted for questionable methodologies, the Adventist Church on the other hand is not devoid of culpability either. The Adventist Church is also guilty of indifference against a cancer that has been slowly destroying the faith and spiritual vitality of its members on the continent. The time has come to act, for the Adventist Church in Africa to lead the way in applying and demonstrating a theology that is contextually developed, which responds to the twin challenges of intransigent witchcraft beliefs, and the warped, syncretistic methodologies of African Pentecostalism.

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