

## RESPONSE

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# Witchcraft Accusations and the Christian Church's Response

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### Introduction

In Africa, belief in witchcraft is as old as the continent itself. It is a reality. The belief remains strong despite the introduction of Christianity, education and western civilization. The early European missionaries to Africa tried in vain to fight the belief by prescribing heavy penalties against the alleged accusers of witchcraft. The African pastors who came after them were not successful either. Many Africans live in fear of being bewitched and nearly every sickness, death or misfortune is interpreted as being caused by witches and wizards, and more recently, Satanists.<sup>1</sup>

Mbiti defines witchcraft as “a manifestation of mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited or acquired in various ways” (Mbiti 1975, 165), while Evans-Pritchard describes it as “the belief that humans are capable of invoking, practicing and exercising a psychic force for the primary purpose of hurting or killing other humans, and engaging in other malevolent activities” (Evans-Pritchard 1937, 347). Both definitions paint witchcraft as being evil and a source of harm on those it is directed. In fact, “witches are thought to be a personification of evil” (Amanze 2002, 64).

Generally, all societies realize that human beings are weak, and at one time or another they experience pain, illness and other kinds of misfortunes. When such things happen, people come up with culturally oriented explanations, which may include witchcraft (Moro & Myers 2010, 276). Such explanations may influence a victim to visit a diviner or traditional healer in order to identify the witch. Considering that human beings have a tendency to look for a human source of misfortunes and other evil things happening in their lives (Wendland & Hachibamba 2007, 177), witchcraft has ended up being a perfect explanation for these

misfortunes. In the language of Shorter, witchcraft has a functional purpose:

Witchcraft accusation enables individuals to exonerate themselves and to receive public acknowledgment that they are ‘on the side of the angels’ that misfortune is not due to their own incompetence or even their own sin, but to an enemy who is the enemy of the whole community. Witchcraft is a form of auto-salvation or self-justification (Shorter 1985, 96).

This write-up is a response to the article entitled “Christian Pastors and (Alleged) Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC,” written jointly by Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell (2020). The article reports findings of their research which was carried out in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) about alleged child witches and the role the church plays in dealing with the issue of child witchcraft accusations. Of interest to me is the great role that churches in DRC play, more especially, pastors of EPED (*l'Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse*), of confirming whether a child is a witch or not, and praying for those accused so that they can be delivered.

### The Shift from Diviners to Churches

The findings of the study by Robert Priest et al. show that churches are preferred over diviners when it comes to the task of identifying witches and delivering accused. This has resulted from the fact that many church leaders claim to know who is a witch and how to deliver the alleged child witches from witchcraft. To state in their own words:

While in the past, diviners, shamans, and traditional healers were the religious professionals that people trusted to understand, explain, and address witchcraft

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a Satanist as someone who worships Satan, but in Malawi it is often used in a broader sense to include “witches.”

realities, today in Kinshasa Christian pastors are the authorities people frequently rely on for help (37-8).

A few explanations have been given for this shift from traditional practitioners to church leaders. First, it is believed that traditional healers only pretend to help those who consult them, while in fact, they cause harm to them. There is an increasing belief that the traditional healers themselves are actually witches (Mutsenga in Priest et al. 2020, 11). This assertion has also been made by some people in Malawi. Studies show that some people, whose children are accused of witchcraft do not consult diviners because, instead of helping them to be delivered, the diviners will simply advance the children in witchcraft (Machewere 2006, 14).

People's reasoning in the past for taking issues related to witchcraft to traditional practitioners was that of "send a thief to catch a thief." It is believed that the witchdoctors who were able to "remove" witchcraft from those accused were also practicing witchcraft; in fact, they were considered to be "experts", and this qualified them to solve the problem of witchcraft accusations (Mlenga 2016, 176).

Secondly, the fact that people are now taking their witchcraft issues to the pastors or prophets shows that the traditional practitioners are either failing, or the pastors have shown that they can deal with the issue. A study done in Malawi reports of instances where the diviners were considered to be unsuccessful. In the study, one pastor reported of having prayed for several children who had been to traditional diviners, but were not assisted. The diviners did not succeed in removing the witchcraft from the children (Chipeta 2009, 4).

Thirdly, the shift has come about due to the establishment of prophetic ministries in many African countries. Prophets are endowed with the gift of uncovering the hidden things, including issues to do with who is a witch and who is not. The fact that people were turning to diviners shows that the church did not show that it was able to help with these witchcraft issues until the prophets appeared in the pulpits. The prophets claim to sense who is a witch and who is not, and confirm it in the hearing of both the accused and the accusers. Fourthly, the fact that people are taking traditional issues to pastors can be an indication that

some pastors have started to display behaviour which is similar to that of traditional healers.

## **The Role of Pastors in Dealing with Child-Witchcraft Accusations**

The fact that many people are now turning to pastors and the church to have their traditional problems solved is definitely placing a big responsibility on the church, more especially, the pastors. This being a new development, it is very likely that the church leaders are overwhelmed, and at times may not really know how to respond to issues of witchcraft accusations.

### ***Confirmation of Child-Witchcraft Accusations***

Priest et al. have stated in their study that witchcraft accusers now turn to intercessors, prophets, and pastors for help (22). The authors did find out that the mentioned church leaders are not the source of witchcraft accusations but legitimize what is already existing. In other words, they just confirm the accusers' suspicions.<sup>2</sup> This makes sense because mere pastors are not expected to originate the accusations, as they may not be endowed with gifts of prophecy, through which they would be able to discern who is a witch or not. Normally, one would expect prophets to do so.

Furthermore, there is a strong similarity between what the church leaders, especially prophets, do during deliverance and what traditional healers do when carrying out their work. In the case of the Ngonde of Northern Malawi, diviners carry out an exercise called *Kusecha*,<sup>3</sup> which is derived from the English word "to search." In the context of the church, prophecy time is more like a "searching" time; a time for prophets to smell out who is a witch or not. Just like the pastors in DRC legitimize and confirm suspicions which already exist within the child's family; many diviners do the same. Diviners often look for hints in order to confirm whether one has been bewitched or not, or whether the one accused is a witch or not.<sup>4</sup> For instance, in the event of death or sickness, a traditional practitioner often asks if the patient ever quarreled with anyone, or stepped on any strange thing. If the client agrees with him, the

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<sup>2</sup> This idea is also supported by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu. In his study, he found out that witchcraft is reinforced in people's minds both by Christian preaching and by its coverage in the media. See "Witchcraft Accusations and Christianity in Africa," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 39, No. 1, January 2015.

<sup>3</sup> This is the process in which a traditional diviner speaks to his clients personally, to inform them about the past, present and future events affecting them. For more on this see Joyce Mlenga, *Dual Religiosity in Northern Malawi*.

<sup>4</sup> It is not always that they look for hints, there are times when they discern it themselves. The traditional healers are believed to possess supernatural powers which give them discernment.

diviner just confirms that he or it is responsible for the death or sickness.

### ***Readiness of Pastors to Deal with Issues Related to Witchcraft***

The fact that people no longer trust the traditional diviners and healers should be good news to the Christian church. Therefore, the church must seize the opportunity to give proper guidance to those who seek help from them. For a long time, many mainline churches in Africa have been trying to stop their members from consulting diviners and traditional healers by prescribing heavy disciplinary penalties, with little success (Mlenga 2016, 298). Since no amount of disciplining is yielding results, much more must be done in order to assist both the accusers and the accused from the pastoral approach.

Many Africans believe that traditional problems do require traditional solutions. Now that the church is perceived as a place where people turn to seek solutions to their traditional problems, including child witch allegations, it is imperative that it should equip itself to provide spiritual solutions so that it does not betray the trust that people have in it.

The church should be proactive instead of being reactive to the situation concerning witchcraft. For a long time, the only role that many of the mainline churches have been actively playing is to suspend or excommunicate those who seek assistance from diviners for various reasons. It is pleasing to note that revival groups and charismatic churches play an important role in dealing with the issue of witchcraft, because witchcraft is grouped together with demons, and they consider delivering people from witchcraft as important:

Any theology that will take the African worldview seriously will have to deal with issues of witchcraft [and] demon possession . . . Neocharismatic theology deals with these issues by asserting the victory of Christ over the principalities and powers . . . Many pray for those afflicted by witchcraft, exorcise demons, and even free those that participated in the occult (Nyika 2015, 56-57).

The church must take contextualization and enculturation of the gospel seriously so that Christians find solutions to their “traditional” problems in the church, and because Christ is the answer to every problem. The church must endeavour to fulfill its mandate on earth, rather than abusing and

manipulating people for its own gain. The study done by Priest et al. reports of a pastor who confessed that he was praying for deliverance to market his church, not really to help those who came to him for pastoral assistance (11). In another case, a pastor is seen making unbiblical conclusions on indicators of child-witches (23). All this shows that the pastors are not properly trained or equipped for these emerging issues.

God’s missionary task is a serious one, and those who go into it must take it seriously by equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and skills while seeking guidance from God through prayer and reading his word. Rather than instilling fear in the people, the church must be seen to be helping people to be set free from fear. The success story of transformation which EPED has achieved through its conferences must be taken to many parts of Africa so that pastors can understand their role amidst these witchcraft accusations.

A study from Malawi also shows that the mainline churches are not very ready to solve some problems related to witchcraft. When approached with issues to do with witchcraft, some church leaders do advise their members to consult traditional healers because they believe that issues of witchcraft can only be dealt with by them (traditional healers) and not the clergy (Chipeta, 2009, 3).

Another interesting thing is that in Malawi, children who are considered to be practicing witchcraft<sup>5</sup> are often taken to pastors not of their church, but of other churches. Church members are able to differentiate the powers that their pastors have. Some are able to fix the problems, while others cannot. The Pentecostal and charismatic pastors are preferred over those of mainline churches. These churches encourage Christians not to fear witchcraft because it is believed that it has no power on those who believe in God. They are under God’s protection.

### **Conclusion**

Witchcraft is a reality in Africa. It cannot be wished away. No amount of talk that witchcraft does not exist will help. The idea is entrenched in the minds of Africans, and it is difficult to uproot. The church leaders have a daunting task of dealing with issues associated with witchcraft, whether they like it or not. Since many people are turning to the church for solutions to child-witchcraft accusations, the church must be properly equipped to deal with the issue. The church must be careful when dealing with the issue so that it does not appear to be involved in child-witch

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<sup>5</sup> It must be noted here that children in Malawi were not necessarily accused of witchcraft, but there was a period in Malawi in early 2000s when there were a lot of confessions from children that some adult women were teaching them witchcraft. This is no longer common. The confessions have since subsided.

accusations, but must look for long lasting solutions which will not victimize children or any member of the society.

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