

RESPONSE

Significance of this Research and a Tanzanian Case Study

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Significance of this Research

The article by Priest, Ngolo and Stabell (2020) breaks significant new ground in understanding the complex, life-and-death realities of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations. It also points the way toward addressing them. Complementary qualitative, quantitative, and theological research paints a nuanced picture of Kinshasa pastors. The selected stories illustrate the situation well. The extensive survey answers questions about the prevalence of beliefs and practices and the extent to which they are influenced by factors such as denomination, theology and education.

These 82 questions are carefully crafted to probe specific local beliefs and practices. In this way, they avoid problems from previous quantitative research such as Pew’s survey which asked just one question, “Do you believe in the evil eye—that certain people can cast spells and curses?” This question conflates several cultural practices only sometimes associated with witchcraft, and it does not separate belief in the abstract possibility of witchcraft from fear that my step-child is killing my child. [The Pew findings reveal some prevalence and comparison: 80% in Tanzania and 60% in DRC answered “yes” which put them in the top 3 of the 19 African countries surveyed, while 24% in Kenya was the lowest rate (Pew Research Center n.d.)]. In contrast, Priest et al. developed a specific question on the effectiveness of witches which allows variation with five response categories (6):

Certain people are truly capable of killing other people in a supernatural manner through witchcraft.	Frequency	Percent
Definitely Not	28	3.9%
Probably Not	40	5.6%
I Do Not Know	128	18.0%
Probably Yes	263	36.9%
Definitely Yes	254	35.6%

I have asked this question in shorter surveys with smaller groups and have found significant variability

between African ethnic groups even within the same country. Pew cannot capture this by asking just 1000 to 1500 in each country. However, Priest et al.’s 714 responses allows generalizability to Kinshasa pastors. Most important, I hope that others replicate this survey elsewhere or at least use some of the 82 questions with the same wording to allow real comparison.

Building on the foundation of this work, I believe further research should focus on three areas: First, we need more research about others who are accused, not just children. Across the world, people harm the poor, elderly, outsiders, and women much more than children. Second, the research in this article makes a compelling case that the Bible does not teach that evil people (witches) can cause harm through invisible means, but mistranslation and misunderstanding to the contrary have made a huge negative impact. This impact demands more biblical research contextually grounded in rigorous anthropology, especially about diviners and witches. Finally, we need more and more loving responses to accusations of witchcraft. Therefore, we need research that evaluates the effectiveness of various interventions. I hope that this quantitative data can be used as a baseline to demonstrate accurately the effectiveness of EPED and other approaches.

Change from Critically-Contextualized Research and Response: A Case Study of Response to Accusations of Witchcraft in Northwestern Tanzania

In their report, Priest, Ngolo and Stabell conclude,

Furthermore EPED pastors are also aware that the ministries of Christian pastors sometimes helped put that child on the street. And they recognize that flawed biblical and theological understandings sometimes contribute to the problem. Our research showed that theological education made a positive

difference for pastors. But perhaps not as much as it should have. (45)

The authors suggest a positive, doable intervention. They hope that better contextualized theological education could make a greater difference. They show impact from EPED pastors using seven successful “grassroots strategies of transformative engagement” (34-37).

In Northwestern Tanzania, we have used a critical contextualization approach¹ with very similar transformation strategies. This has made a positive impact for churches and suffering people. I have been involved in ministers training for the past 25 years with the deans of Lake Victoria Christian College (LVCC)—John Mwan-zalima, Raphael Okeyo, Benester Misana and Nestory Lunyilija. Each also pastors churches. Together they oversee over 300 Pentecostal Evangelistic Fellowship of Africa (PEFA) churches in Northwestern Tanzania.

There are many ethnic groups in this area, with the Sukuma being the largest. The majority of Sukuma have not followed Christianity or Islam. People frequently consult *waganga wa kinyeji* (local, neo-traditional diviners/healers) about misfortune who often identify someone causing the problem through witchcraft. People regularly neglect, beat, fine, or chase away people suspected to be witches (whom I will abbreviate as PSWs), especially older, divorced or widowed women. Thousands of PSWs have been hacked to death with machetes.²

We began doing ethnographic research and leading critical contextualization discussions about sickness, death, and witchcraft together in 2005. This led to more biblical research. Since then, we have all changed significantly in our understandings and responses to PSWs. This has produced change in those we have taught as well. These leaders who originally told me endless stories of suffering caused by witches, now argue against blaming a person in almost all specific cases, although (like EPED pastors) they do not deny that witchcraft could be possible.

In 2013, Dr Janice Rasmussen and I together with these and other leaders designed and conducted a train-the-trainers workshop, entitled, “Christian Responses to Witchcraft Accusations” (for more see Rasmussen 2017). Since then, those trained have taught over 5000 people in 48 three-day seminars. Though hosted by a local church, the entire village is invited. We have not yet conducted systematic research to evaluate their effectiveness, but stories from these communities are promising.³ I will share two experiences from Rev. Raphael Okeyo in leading these seminars:

This seminar had 171 participants. Initially people did not see the value of such a seminar. As discussion continued, four widows told their stories. A pastor’s widow gave her story. After the pastor died, his brothers and neighbors began to accuse her of killing him. A year later, two of her nephews died the same day. Their parents went to a diviner who told them that she had caused their deaths. The clan beat her and her children, burnt down their house, and covered her with petrol to burn her. Before lighting the match, the police came and rescued her. The clan still decided to send her back to Kenya where she came from.

But after the teaching, the church with the village members were touched and they raised \$286.80 for her. Also after understanding the law through the teaching, she accused those who had attacked her. The court fined them and two are in prison until now.



Participants in the seminar.

¹ This article demonstrates important principles for research or transformative education: the power of dialogue between 1) a deep understanding of people in context provided by 2) thorough anthropological research and a response from 3) deep understanding of scripture. Paul Hiebert called this *critical contextualization*. He recommended it be done in a local, but also glocal *community* (Hiebert 1999, 15-29). This article grows from “glocal” networks of trust and relationships in Kinshasa and around the world sharing social, financial, and human capital over a long time. Together, the authors build on their own extensive ministry and research experience/understanding in this area as well as that of a broader international, interdisciplinary, and interfaith community.

² According to Tanzania Human Rights Reports (which are based on police reports) people murdered an average of 517 PSWs in Tanzania from 2005 to 2009. (“Tanzania-Human-Rights-Report-2009.Pdf” n.d., 21) This peaked at 765 murders in 2013 and has since declined to 307 in 2017 (“Tanzania Human Rights Report 2018” n.d., 18).

³ As one example of the influence of seminars training church leaders in this area, 23% more men were circumcised in those villages where a one day seminar for church leaders was given in addition to the government intervention to reduce HIV spread (Downs et al. 2017).



Raphael standing by the widow mentioned in the story above.

As the EPED intervention suggests, caring for the vulnerable can also reduce accusations and persecutions of those cared for. The PEFA churches in NW Tanzania now help support over 300 widows and over 500 fatherless children. In 2017, I personally met “Ruth” (name changed) back in her home village, displaying the sleeping mats she had made as part of the church’s small business ministry to widows. This is how Raphael told her story,



Ruth and one of her six children.

Ruth’s husband got sick. His family took him to an *mganga* (local diviner/healer) who told them that his wife was causing his sickness. Eventually they took him to a hospital where they diagnosed typhoid, but it was too late. He died in one day. Then his family attacked his widow. They grabbed everything from her house and burned it down. They beat her and some of her older children. People called me because I had conducted the witchcraft seminar in this village. I called my brother who is a policeman in the capital, but was home on vacation. He quickly went and threatened to jail all of them if they killed her. They stopped beating her, but he called me to come as the mob grew. I borrowed a car and came. They said, “If you love her and say she is not a witch, then take her from this village because she will be

killed here.” So she and her six children came and lived with our family for six months. I went back and did the seminar again in their village. I asked them if they really believed the *mganga* or the hospital’s diagnosis. We taught them that *kashaph* in the Old Testament and *magus* in the New Testament are wrongly translated as *mchawi* (witch). They would be better translated as *mganga* (diviner/healer). We taught them that we must love our neighbors as ourselves and true religion is to care for the widows and orphans in their distress (James 1:27). Then the chairman of the village and others repented after realizing they had understood the scriptures wrongly. The village welcomed Ruth back. Since her husband’s family still did not welcome her, the church built her a small house and helped her with farming and small business.

Raphael also argues that the invisible causes of suffering Tanzanians label “*uchawi*” (witchcraft) are demonic, not people. Scripture teaches that demons cause suffering, accusation and fear. Distinguishing whether a person or a spirit is the ultimate cause has critical social consequences. I sometimes asked why we attack widows instead of fighting spirits when Ephesians 6:11,12 says, “stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places” (NLT). Sometimes the response was that “*wachawi wanafuga mapepo*” (witches herd spirits) and send them to cause evil. I would question whether it was not rather the spirits herding the people. Most agreed that witches were not free to do as they wanted.



Nestory, Raphael, and Benester presenting about the seminars they have taught in Tanzania along with Janice while I translate at the 2016 Nairobi conference on witchcraft and witchcraft accusations.

For example, when the Tanzanian leaders presented at the Nairobi conference, someone challenged

them that as African pastors, they must know that witches cause harm. Benester responded that the Bible doesn't teach anywhere that witches cause harm. One of my Congolese students responded that sometimes witches confess to hurting others so that is undeniable proof.

Raphael replied with a story about a woman who confessed to him that she had killed a choir member and her husband through her evil eye by turning their food to poison. He responded,

I said, "I don't believe you are a witch. Turn this fish into poison and kill me now." She said, "No, I can't do that. It has to rise up in me." "Well, then it is just a demon," I said. So we cast out the demon. Then I told her to poison the fish. She said, "I can't! It is all gone!" I replied, "You see, I told you that you aren't a witch. It was just a demon."

This story illustrates that although these leaders focus on the damage of accusations and are much more skeptical of specific accusations and confessions of witchcraft, they are no less likely to pray against demons than in the past. They still practice spiritual warfare even as they oppose social warfare.

Change: Possible and Critical

Pastors influence change! But a better contextualized understanding and response is needed in health research and care, development, courts, policing, politics, etc. Each of these will be much more effective if they respond to local understandings of witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft.

Assumptions about causation like witchcraft and related actions do not change easily, but people do change and innovations spread. The witch craze began and ended in Western Europe. Wide-scale murder of PSWs began 50 years ago in Sukumaland. In interviewing more than a hundred Tanzanians in 2005-2008, I never heard of a child accused of being a witch, but by 2013, these accusations had spread to Tanzania. During my research, people with albinism began being killed for *waganga* to use their body parts. A friend showed me pictures of six-year old Mariamu whom he had been supporting, and then her dismembered body. But Christians used those pictures to lead a vigorous local and global response that has resulted in no more murders of people with albinism since 2015 ("Tanzania Human Rights Report 2018" n.d., 18-20).

Every week pastors in Kinshasa and Tanzania decide how to respond to PSWs. Their responses

influence all of the Church and how it is viewed by others. This will increase as African Christianity rapidly grows and spreads. The mistranslation of *keshaph* in the Vulgate influenced Europe in the witch craze and all of Europe's translations and theology influenced all those influenced by missionaries from Europe. Likewise, the innovation of accusing children as witches did not stay in DRC. What happens in Kinshasa does not stay in Kinshasa. By 2060, six of the countries with the largest Christian populations will be in Africa and none will be in Europe (Pew Research Center n.d.). Persecution of PSWs is a challenge in each of them. How the church responds to it will shape the next 500 years. At the UN conference mentioned in Geneva on the 500th year after the launch of the reformation (39), no one directly mentioned Calvin's witch trials or theology. Many talked about pastors harming PSWs around the world now. At the end of two days, I had opportunity to show that a few Pentecostals are defending PSWs and that the Bible does *not* teach that witches cause harm.⁴ Kinshasa is the next Geneva.

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⁴ The 1560 Geneva Bible (most of which was later adopted in the King James Version) translated Exodus 22:18 as "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." Several at the conference quoted this as proof that the Bible teaches witches exist and even deserve to be killed, but I challenged this as a mistranslation as the authors of this paper demonstrate.

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His publications on witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft include:

"Diviners and Witches" article and 19 application notes and touch points for the *Africa Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Oasis. 2016. 662-665.

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