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AFRICAN PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT ABOUT WITCHCRAFT AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores African philosophical perspectives on witchcraft, examining the profound consequences of these beliefs for the Christian church on the continent. The research investigates the perceived reality and cultural comprehension of witchcraft, noting that a prevalent traditional viewpoint in Africa attributes virtually any personal misfortune to its operations. Consequently, the church in Africa identifies witchcraft as a primary spiritual challenge it must confront. This belief system has significantly eroded unity and love within families, the foundational units of the church. The church's mission has also been adversely affected, as many congregations that should be vibrant are instead rendered stagnant. Manipulation is identified as the principal mechanism of witchcraft, an activity that has successfully permeated individual lives, families, and the church at large. The core focus of this manipulation is to weaken the church's spiritual vitality. Witchcraft has historically served as an explanatory framework for natural catastrophes and personal calamities, a tool for social maneuvering by accusing others, and a method for imparting moral instruction.

Keywords: *African Philosophy, Witchcraft, African Christianity, Spiritual Warfare, Ecclesiology.*

Introduction

Witchcraft constitutes one of the most significant spiritual struggles that churches in Africa have historically faced and continue to grapple with. This persistent issue has undermined the harmony and love within many families, which form the very fabric of the church community. Consequently, the efficacy of the Church's mission in Africa has been compromised. This is evidenced by numerous congregations that, despite their potential for significant impact, experience stagnation rather than growth or influence. Manipulation is identified as the primary tactic attributed to witchcraft, a strategy effectively deployed against individuals, families, and the wider church. Through this manipulation, the central aim is to incapacitate the church's core spiritual vitality. This aligns with a mission described biblically as "to steal, to kill and to destroy" (John 10:10).

Throughout history, witchcraft has presented a significant challenge to humanity, affecting nearly all cultures and peoples at some point in their development. It can, therefore, be regarded as one of the universal human dilemmas. Within the African context, witchcraft has persistently been a major societal concern. Sundkler and Steel (2000) underscore this, noting that a primary function of both African Traditional Religion (ATR) and indigenous healing practices is the confrontation with witchcraft. Earlier academic research on the topic, such as studies by Moti and Bosch, documented extensive interviews with Africans regarding the existence and reality of witchcraft. However, questions typical of outside observers, such as "Is witchcraft real?" are generally not posed by Africans themselves. This is because, for many Africans, witches and witchcraft are not matters of speculation but are considered an accepted component of everyday existence. This worldview is so ingrained that virtually every misfortune or negative event, regardless of its scale, is readily attributed to witchcraft as the causal force. This paper, therefore, focuses on the African philosophical framework for understanding witchcraft and its resultant implications for the Church.

To understand its implications, one must first define witchcraft. M. Thomas Starkes (1974) offers one definition, characterizing it as a resurgence of nature-centric beliefs involving the worship of natural deities. Starkes notes that the etymological root of

"witch" is the Old Anglo-Saxon "wicca," which translates to "wise one". More broadly, witchcraft is understood as the application of sorcery or magic, or as engaging in communication with the devil or a familiar spirit.

Overview of African Philosophical Thought

The phenomenon of witchcraft is considered to be as ancient as humanity itself. Practices like black magic and sorcery have historically been integral components of tribal religions across various cultures, even if specific European terminologies for "witches" (e.g., *Hekese*, *Hexen*) and "witchcraft" (*Hexeren*) only appeared in written records around 1419/1428. Historically, witchcraft beliefs served multiple social functions: they provided explanations for natural disasters and personal misfortunes, offered a means to gain freedom by accusing others, and were used to impart moral lessons through narratives about malevolent individuals. It was also a mechanism used to restore harmony between conflicting parties. In many contemporary Western perspectives, aside from a few self-aware, constructed cults, the concepts of witches and sorcerers are largely relegated to the realm of fantasy. This modern skepticism, as Marwick (1975) suggests, might explain the significant academic effort invested in trying to understand why these beliefs persist as tangible, real threats to life, health, and property in societies where they remain prevalent.

Citing Robbins (1959), the text notes Allier Elisabeth's observation that French witchcraft was distinctly characterized by a large number of young women, particularly novices and nuns, who were believed to be possessed by devils. This historical example supports the argument that a diverse array of individuals could be labeled as witches, and a wide spectrum of actions could be associated with witchcraft. The label was not restricted to supernatural or extraordinary acts performed by peculiar individuals; it could also be applied to the socially unacceptable behavior of otherwise normal people. This raises a fundamental question, posed by Wyk (2004): Why do individuals turn to witchcraft?. What motivates the desire to inflict harm upon others?.

In the African understanding, witchcraft is not confined to the stereotypical image of an isolated, old woman; rather, it is considered ubiquitous. Its presence is perceived

in all facets of life and every aspect of society. No context is believed to be immune from it, and it is thought that any person, for various reasons, might engage in witchcraft. According to Wyk (2004), witchcraft is thus not conceptualized as a specific "craft" or "art". Instead, it testifies to the troubling mystery of why people inflict harm on one another and disrupt social harmony, often for reasons that remain obscure. Africans conceptualize evil as an anthropological reality; in this view, the origin of evil is not located in God or the devil, but is consistently traced back to human beings themselves.

The fundamental question of *why* people harm others persists. Across Africa, the consensus answer to this query is **jealousy**. Jealousy is identified as the primary motivation driving people to inflict harm, fostering hatred and the destruction of life. Furthermore, jealousy creates the foundation for fear and acts as a significant barrier to cooperation. It is seen as the underlying cause for the breakdown of community and the selfish exploitation of society for personal gain. In summary, jealousy is posited as the deepest root of witchcraft. In focusing on this, Africans highlight a critical aspect of evil. By identifying jealousy as the cause, as Wyk (2004) explains, they emphasize that witchcraft often stems not from righteous anger, but from a malicious urge to harm those who are more successful, possess more, or have other advantages.

This African concept of witchcraft shares parallels with the Christian notion of sin, particularly the idea of original sin. Both African thought and Christian theology acknowledge that the capacity for evil is inherent in all people. There is an understanding in Africa that anyone could potentially become a witch; this potential power exists within every person, even if it remains latent in most. In some African cosmologies, this evil capacity is symbolically located in the liver (whereas other traditions might point to the heart as the center of evil). Africans recognize that sin, exemplified by witchcraft, is deeply embedded within the fabric of human society. It is believed that witchcraft can be practiced deliberately (wittingly) or sometimes unintentionally (unwittingly), as a pre-existing societal evil overcomes an individual. This implies that sin and evil are not merely products of individual choice. Society itself can "turn" people into witches; for example, some African traditions teach that

witchcraft can be transmitted through a mother's milk or learned within the home environment.

However, Wyk (2004), citing Niehaus, cautions that not all witchcraft accusations are reducible to social tensions. Sociological factors do not provide a complete explanation for witchcraft and counter-witchcraft practices. Even observable motivations like jealousy, envy, and malice cannot account for every case of witchcraft or accusation. Niehaus suggests that divination, particularly through dreams, plays a significant role in witchcraft activities. This form of "extra-social revelatory knowledge" has a profound impact on the lives of Africans. Therefore, it is necessary to accept that non-rational elements, including dreams and hallucinations, are important factors in both the practice of witchcraft and the accusations related to it.

Middleton and Winter (1963) define witchcraft as a mystical, innate power that its possessor can utilize to harm others. M. J. Field (1960) elaborates on this, identifying the distinguishing feature of harm by witchcraft as its operation through a "silent, invisible projection of influence" from the witch. This influence is believed to be effective over any distance. From these definitions, it is evident that witchcraft is typically perceived as a unique power enabling actions beyond normal human capabilities. As Oluwole (1995) highlights, its most mysterious characteristic is the witch's purported ability to impact victims without physical contact or the use of any physical medicine.

Bolaji Idowu (1970), in his article "The Challenge of Witchcraft," directly addresses the question of the existence of witches. He answers affirmatively and categorically, asserting that witches in Africa are as real as murderers, poisoners, or other types of malevolent workers, whether overt or covert. Idowu argues that this perceived reality, not mere imagination, forms the basis for the strong cultural belief in witchcraft. He elaborates that individuals with exceptionally strong characters can project their personality in a way that affects other people. In his view, witches and witchcraft are "sufficiently real" to be the cause of "untold suffering and innumerable deaths".

The Scope and Subjectivity of Witchcraft in Africa

Asike (2021) suggests that witchcraft relates to phenomenological assumptions about the intentionality of the "psychic ego". It articulates specialized ways of knowing (epistemologies) geared toward the exhibition of supernatural powers and the cultural claims that arise from them, existing within a diversity of cultures. While referencing specific cultural norms, witchcraft derives its force from demonstrating a particular mode of existence.

Reflecting this evolving nature, the world is changing, and innovations are occurring within cultural practices, including witchcraft. It is no longer viewed exclusively as a negative force responsible for misfortune, as it often was in the past. Today, different forms of witchcraft are recognized, some of which are applied for positive purposes. Asike (2021) posits that it has evolved from perceptions of "wicked acts" into something potentially beneficial, though it is understood to stem from the same essential source. These positive applications may include using such powers for the protection of oneself or one's family.

Classification of Witchcrafts

1. **Astral Projection**: Defined in esotericism as astral travel, this is described as an experience where the soul is believed to transcend the physical body. It is conceptualized as existing in a state of consciousness or trance that allows it to travel outside the body, potentially throughout the universe. Put simply, it involves intentionally moving one's spirit outside the body for a specific purpose. In the African context, this is closely linked by Asike (2021) to metempsychosis, the ability to "transmigrate" into the form of an animal (like a lion, dog, or crocodile) as a demonstration of power.

2. **Horoscope Reading**: This practice involves forecasting a person's future based on the relative positions of stars and planets at their birth, typically to predict positive outcomes. While frequently regarded as innocuous, the author argues it is not. It is suggested that this practice can be addictive and, in many instances, may lead an individual toward witchcraft.

3. **Telepathy**: This is defined as the communication of thoughts or ideas using means beyond the five known senses. Asike (2021) describes it as a psychic power derived from meditation, which allows a "flow of thought" into the mind. This is considered dangerous because the individual cannot control the source or nature of the thoughts flowing in. The source could be demonic, and the information received may not be accurate. Asike (2021) further argues that telepathy is not a common occurrence; rather, it is often framed in sophisticated, jargon-laden terms by folklorists and some Pentecostal pastors to intimidate or oppress their followers. These figures often succeed in convincing people of their moral authority and the "pure reason" of their telepathic results.

Other forms of witchcraft that have nothing to do with African Philosophy

- **Tarot Card Reading**: The use of specialized cards to seek insight regarding the past, present, or future by interpreting their arrangement. Asike (2021) asserts that these predictions are illusory and operate via demonic attachments.
- **Psychokinesis**: The purported capacity to move physical objects using only mental effort.
- **ESP (Extra Sensory Perception)**: The ability to acquire information without using the recognized physical senses. It is the capacity to sense things purely with the mind, separate from the body.
- **Pyrokinesis**: The alleged ability to ignite objects or people by concentrating psychic energy.

Starkes (1974), who is cited for these points, presents several basic beliefs associated with witchcraft and contrasts them with an evangelical Christian response:

1. **Partial Reality**: Witchcraft assumes the physical world is only one part of total reality. Christianity also affirms this. Starkes notes that evangelical Christianity was, for too long, conflated with rationalism and scientism.
2. **Innate Psychic Capacities**: Witchcraft assumes all individuals possess innate psychic abilities to contact non-physical realms. A key difference is that

Christians are called to make moral distinctions between good and evil. It is considered morally significant whether one engages in "white, black, or gray magic". The criteria for an evangelical Christian's actions are:

- a. Is the action thematically consistent with the Bible (e.g., with themes of love and justice)?
- b. Does the action glorify Jesus Christ, aligning with His teachings and practices?
- c. Are people being helped or harmed by this use of supposed innate powers?

3. **Nature of Deity**: Witchcraft often views Deity as both masculine and feminine, evolving through various gods and goddesses. Christians experience God as possessing attributes of both love and justice, appearing both "harsh and tenderly loving".
4. **Impersonal vs. Personal God**: Witchcraft may view God as an impersonal "Life-force" of the universe. Christianity understands God as a person who exhibits personal characteristics and is actively involved in redeeming, creating, and sustaining the world.
5. **Morality**: Witchcraft tends to view morality as highly individualistic, advocating for the pursuit of one's natural desires. In contrast, Christian discipleship integrates both individual and social dimensions of morality.

A Redefinition of Witchcraft in Africa

While analyzing skeptical arguments, one might be tempted to dismiss the concept of witchcraft as a hoax, not genuinely accepted in African culture. However, in reality, the belief is deeply "inculcated" into people's lives as the primary explanation for misfortune. This reinforcement of belief is, to a large degree, perpetuated by folklorists and Pentecostal pastors, who maintain a strong attachment to the witchcraft narrative. They operate within a firm conviction of its existence and their own power over it. These figures, citing Starkes (1974), often actively participate in administering "justice" related to perceived witchcraft threats.

Experience demonstrates that there has never been a "fixed canon" or empirical verification for the concept of witchcraft in Africa. Accusations are often based on assumption rather than evidence. Consequently, such judgments are perpetually open to revision and falsification, precisely because of the lack of concrete evidence on the accusers' side. The text suggests that religious Pentecostal churches, in this regard, operate on a "ground of process theology" by affirming strong belief in witchcraft. There is no universally accepted epistemology (or way of knowing) that confirms the conditions for the existence of African witchcraft. This lack of grounding leads to the critical epistemological question: How is this concept spiritually realized by the people?.

Awolalu (n.d.) addresses this by stating that witchcraft can be acquired through various means. Some individuals are believed to be born witches, while others are said to inherit it (heredity), often from their mothers. It is also believed that witchcraft can be purchased or procured, or that the "stuff" of witchcraft can be transmitted to a person through food given by an existing witch. The Yoruba language provides specific terms for these distinctions: *agudẹ* (those who inherit witchcraft by birth), *agùrdẹ* (those who receive it through food or other consumables), and *àgùrdègudè* (those who actively seek witchcraft for power, fame, or wealth). Regarding detection, Quarcoopome (1987) notes that a "witch doctor" engages in witch-hunting and may identify a witch by entering a trance, using medicine, gazing into water, or consulting the dead.

Furthermore, the text suggests that many evangelists and pastors function as "diviners" themselves, claiming to possess God-given powers to diagnose witchcraft, even in children. Akrong (2000) observes that the emphasis on witchcraft within neo-Pentecostal and charismatic churches is growing, which is "creating what can be discredited as a revived witchcraft mentality in popular Christianity". The author relates this phenomenon to Karl Marx's concept of "false consciousness". Cultural and religious hegemonies are presented as forms of consciousness that compel people to live in certain ways. This is the mechanism by which folklorists and Pentecostal pastors subject people to the belief in witchcraft. This draws on Gramsci's (1957) concept of hegemony, rooted in Marx's false consciousness, which

describes a state where individuals are unaware of the systems of domination that shape their lives.

Witchcraft in Four African Societies

The text cites Nadel's (via Marwick 1975) comparative study of four African societies: the Nupe and Gwari of Northern Nigeria, and the Korongo and Mesakin tribes of the Nuba Mountains in Central Sudan. Each pair shares broad cultural similarities but also exhibits marked divergences, particularly in their beliefs about witchcraft. Nadel's analysis rests on two key assumptions:

1. That any significant cultural divergence implies corresponding divergences in other areas of the culture.
2. That witchcraft beliefs are causally linked to frustrations, anxieties, or other mental stresses, much like psychopathological symptoms relate to mental disturbances.

Both the Nupe and Gwari hold strong beliefs in witchcraft, with serious incidents demonstrating this conviction occurring even during Nadel's fieldwork. Both societies perceive witchcraft as unequivocally evil, a force that destroys life (often through mysterious wasting illnesses) and involves witches "eating" the life-soul of their victims. Witches are believed to operate at night and cannot be detected by ordinary means. All activities related to witchcraft occur in a "fantasy realm" that is, by definition, intangible and beyond empirical proof. This is exemplified by the tenet that it is the "shadow-soul" of the witch that roams and attacks victims, while the witch's physical body remains asleep at home, thus evading any normal attempt at verification.

Nadel (as cited in Marwick 1975) highlights a radical difference between the two groups regarding the gender ascribed to witches. Among the Nupe, witches (known as *gaci*) are exclusively women. They are believed to be organized into a society that mirrors human associations, led by the same woman who, in real life, is the official head of the women traders. This leader holds an exceptional status: she is considered the only "good" female witch, perhaps a reformed one, and is thus able to control the

sinister actions of her companions. Men fit into this structure in an ambiguous way. Certain men are said to have a power *similar* to witchcraft, known as *eshe*, which is inherently good. This power enables them to perceive, control, and combat the female witches. However, the female witches simultaneously require the cooperation of these men; it is only when the female and male powers are combined that female witchcraft achieves its full potency.

In contrast, the Gwari believe that both witches and their victims can be male or female, without distinction. Witchcraft among the Gwari is identified through ordinary divination (practiced by both genders), and the primary counter-measure is an annual cleansing ritual that involves the entire community, irrespective of sex.

Turning to the other pair, the Korongo and Mesakin were historically neighbors and, despite different languages, are often bilingual. They share nearly identical economies, political structures, and religious practices. Despite these similarities, the Korongo have no witchcraft beliefs whatsoever. The Mesakin, conversely, are described as "literally obsessed" with fears of witchcraft (called *torogo*), leading to frequent and violent quarrels, assaults, and blood feuds. Mesakin witchcraft beliefs are highly specific: it is thought to operate only between maternal relatives, most notably between a mother's brother (uncle) and his sister's son (nephew), with the older relative attacking the younger. Furthermore, this witchcraft is only believed to activate if there is a "legitimate cause for resentment," which is almost always a dispute over anticipated inheritance.

Implication for the Church in Africa

The prayer ministry of the church in Africa stands to be enhanced if congregations are not ignorant of the existence and perceived operations of witchcraft. A conscious awareness of its devices is crucial. This understanding, which must be adequate and not merely literal, will better equip the church to tackle problems associated with witchcraft beliefs. Opening the church's eyes to this reality can empower members to live in God's power rather than in fear and panic , recalling the scripture, “My people are destroyed because of their lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

The deliverance ministry of the church will likewise be encouraged if the church educates its members about witchcraft while simultaneously exposing the limitations of such powers. By emphasizing that "power belongs to God" (Psalm 62:11) , the church can teach that the power of witchcraft is not superior to God's power. Reinforcing that God's power is supreme over all forces of darkness will help the congregation learn to depend on God for their protection and deliverance.

Family ministry can become more effective if the Church avoids magnifying the power of witchcraft and its practices. An over-emphasis on witchcraft has generated significant problems within homes, which in turn negatively affects the church. By remembering that the Christian struggle "is not against flesh and blood" (Ephesians 6:12) , believers can be guided away from focusing on the human beings they suspect of wielding witchcraft. The focus should instead be on dealing with the spiritual "power of darkness" that may possess a person to do evil. This shift in perspective will help families and the church rise above demonic manipulation.

The mission of the church in Africa will be firmly established when its members are connected to the power of God, which is far superior to the power of witchcraft. This connection will instill confidence and courage, enabling believers to tackle the challenges posed by witchcraft. Such strength is only accessible through a committed and consistent relationship with God. Only those equipped with God's power can withstand attacks originating from witchcraft or any other evil power. This, according to Sogolo (1993), will ultimately enhance the church's ability to "depopulate the kingdom of darkness and populate the kingdom of God".

Conclusion

This paper has provided a decisive examination of African philosophical thought concerning witchcraft and has drawn several key implications from this analysis. A core tenet of the traditional African worldview is the belief that all evil occurrences are attributable to witchcraft. It is crucial that African churches are not ignorant of witchcraft's perceived existence; however, this requires a deep, adequate understanding rather than superficial knowledge. Such an understanding will equip the Church in Africa to live under the guidance of God's power, victorious over all

forms of darkness. Therefore, the church is admonished to place its ultimate confidence in God, who possesses all power.

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