

WITCHCRAFT IN PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHTS: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

The belief in witchcraft has been a major source of worry to many especially in Africa. The concept has been tagged as a no go area. This research seeks to demystify the concept from a philosophical and religious view point. To achieve the aim of this paper, the evaluative method of research is adopted. The findings show that the meaning of witchcraft differs from one locality to another. The paper concludes and recommends that cross-cultural assumptions about the meaning or significance of witchcraft, the religious and philosophical thought of the term should be applied with caution since the term is difficult to define with precision from culture to culture.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Philosophical, Religious.

Introduction

The concept of witch craft and the belief in its existence has existed since the dawn of human history. It has been present or central at various times, and in many diverse forms, among cultures and religions worldwide including both primitive and highly advanced cultures (Kunhiyop, 2003). It is worth noting that witchcraft continues to have an important role in many cultures today.

In the opinion of Alan (1999) witchcraft (also called witchery or spell craft) broadly means the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities that are able to be exercised individually by designated social groups, or by persons with the necessary esoteric secret knowledge. However Keith (2010) rightly asserts that witchcraft is a complex concept that

varies culturally and societal therefore it is difficult to define with precision. With the aforementioned in mind, this writer admits that this subject is an uphill task. Another reason for this is that witchcraft often occupies a religious, divinatory or medical role, and is often present within societies and groups whose cultural framework includes a magical world view (Gibbons, 1998).

Although witchcraft can often share common ground with related concepts such as sorcery, paranormal, magic, superstition, necromancy, possession, shamanism, healing, spiritualism nature worship, and the occult, it is usually seen as distinct from these when examined by sociologists, anthropologists, theologies and philosophers. This paper x-rays witchcraft from philosophical and religious perspectives.

The Concept of Witchcraft

Etymologically, the word 'witchcraft' derives its meaning from the old English word as witchcraft, a compound of *wicce* (witch) and *craeft* (craft) which broadly means the practice of, and belief in magical skills and abilities that are able to be exercised individually, by designated social groups or by persons with necessary esoteric secret knowledge (www.wikipedia.com, accessed 4th January, 2016).

According to Evans –Pritchard (1976), in anthropological terminology a 'witch' differs from a sorcerer in that they do not use physical tools or actions to curse; their malevolence is perceived as extending from some intangible inner quality, and the person may be unaware that they are a witch, or may have been convinced of their own nature by the suggestion of others. This definition was pioneered in a study of central African magical beliefs by E.E Evans – Pritchard, who cautioned that it might not correspond with normal English usage.

However Historians of European witchcraft have found the anthropological definition of witchcraft difficult to apply to European and British witchcraft, where witchcraft could equally be used as a physical technique; as well as someone who really had attempted to cause harm by thought alone (Pritchard, 1976). Kunhiyop (2003) opines that witchcraft is believed in almost all African societies. The belief in witchcrafts is the traditional way of explaining the ultimate cause of evil, misfortune or death. Mckinney (1985), who studied this phenomenon among the Bajju people of Kaduna State in Nigeria notes that witchcraft is an inherent capacity to exert supernatural influence over another person. This influence frequently causes harm, and it explains phenomena such as breaches in social relations anti-social behaviour, unexpected occurrences, sickness and death.

Proofs of Witchcraft

Scholars differ on the proofs of witchcraft. However, most African scholars believe that the African beliefs that witchcraft is proven by the scores of stories of the activities and confessions of the perpetrators and victims alike (Kunluyop, 2003). If the assertion of Kunliyop is accepted then many questions come to mind; what do we make of the countless

stories of the activities of witchcrafts, confessions of witches and wizards? What do we say of the mass hysteria of witchcraft and secret societies? Doesn't this add up to the indisputable idea that there is witchcraft as we hear it from these stories and confessions? There are thousands and thousands of stories about witchcraft activities, confessions of old men and women young boys and girls, children, rich and poor, toddlers. For example, Davidson (1969) states that 'countless women, mostly of advanced years confessed to being witches and to having committed fearful crimes, a mid-wife confessed that she has killed as many 170 children, twenty –two of whom were related to her. Another witch, who had been several times tortured but had always recanted everything after been set free, was finally, after severer torture, brought to confess what she had dug up the bodies of sixteen children, boiled than and made witch slave out of them.

Offiong (1991) a Nigerian writer writing about the Ibibio also enumerates the activities of witchcraft; Barren women, people whose children die at birth, women with irregular menstrual flow, accident victims, traders who suffer losses, office workers who fail to get promotions, a political candidate who fails to get elected a student who fails examination a person who notices scratches on his or her body, a hunter or fisherman who fails to bring home meat, a farmer with bad crop yield, a football team that –consistently loses matches – all suspect witches as the cause of their misfortune. Even those who are most successful in their business or profession constantly fear being bewitched by envious relatives or friends.

If you were asked about the proof of witchcraft, you may have your own stories. However, are these stories valid? Could it not be that the so called witches and wizard were forced to accept such position as a result of torture, fallacy and ignorance? However with the reoccurrence of such stories, and the reality of alleged practices such as spell casting, Necromancy, demonology and white witches' one can affirm that witchcraft is real

Historical and Religious Perspectives

Historically, witchcraft has been a common practice in several religions. While some frown at the practice others see it as a religion itself some historical and religions perspective of witchcraft in selected and people are here by presented.

Abrahamic Religions

The belief in sorcery and its practice seem to have been widespread in the Ancient near East. According to Norman (2000), it played a conspicuous role in the cultures of ancient Egypt and in Babylonia, with the later composing an Akkadian anti-witchcraft ritual, the *Maglu*. A section from the code of Hammurabi (c. 2000 B.C) prescribes:

If a man has put a spell upon another man and it is not justified, he upon whom the spell is laid shall go to the holy river; into the holy river shall he plunge. If the holy river overcomes him and he is drowned, the man who put the spell upon him shall take possession of his house. If the Holy River

declares him innocent and he remains unharmed the man who laid the spell shall be put to death. He that plunged into the river shall take possession of the house of him who laid the spell upon him.

Hebrew Bible

According to the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia* (2003) in the Old Testament, references to sorcery are frequent, and the strong condemnations of such practices found there do not seem to be based so much upon the supposition of fraud as upon the abomination of the magic in itself. It is worth noting however that the King James Bible uses the words witch, witchcraft and witchcrafts to translate the masoretic word *Kashaph* or *kesheph* as found in Deuteronomy 18:11-12, Exodus 22:18, the phrase ‘thou shall not suffer a witch to live’ thus provided scriptural justification for Christian witch hunters in the early modern age (Wilby, 2006).

The precise meaning of the Hebrew *Kashaph*, usually translated as ‘witch or ‘sorceress’ is uncertain. In the 16th century, Reginald Scot, a prominent critic of the witch-trials translated *Kashaph*, *pharmakeia*, and their Latin vulgate equivalent *veneficos* as all meaning ‘poisoner’, and on this basis claimed that ‘witch’ was an incorrect translation and poisoners were intended (Reginald, 1985) His theory still holds some currency, but it is not widely accepted, and in Daniel 2:2 *Kashaph* is listed alongside other magic practitioners who could interpret dreams magicians, astrologers and Chaldeans (Dickie, 2003).

New Testament

The New Testament condemns the practice as an abomination, just as the Old Testament had (Galatians 5:20 Revelation 21:8, 22:15, and Acts 8:9;13:6) though the overall topic of Biblical law in Christianity is still disputed the word in most New Testament translations is ‘sorcerer’/ ‘sorcery’ rather than ‘witch’/ ‘witchcraft’.(See www.wikipechia.org/wiki/witchcraft, accessed 4th April, 2016).

Judaism

Jewish law views the practice of witchcraft as being laden with idolatry and necromancy as practical and theological offences in Judaism in the words of Buckland (2002), ‘although Maimonides vigorously derived the efficacy of all methods of witchcraft, and claimed that the Biblical prohibitions regarding it were precisely to wean the Israelite from practices related to idolatry, according to traditional Judaism, it is acknowledged that while magic exists, it is forbidden to practice it on the basis that it usually involves the worship of other gods.

Judaism does make it clear that Jews shall not try to learn about the ways of witches (Deuteronomy 18:9-10) and that witches are to be put to death (Exodus 22:17) Judaism’s most famous reference to a medium is undoubtedly the witch of Endor who Saul consults, as

recounted in the first book of Samuel chapter 28 (www.wikipedia.org, accessed 5th March, 2016).

Islam

Divination, magic or sorcery in Islam encompass a wide range of practice, including black magic warding off the evil eye, the production of amulets and other magical equipment, conjuring, casting lots and astrology (Gow, 2003). According to the assertions of Nathaly et al (2011) Muslims do commonly believe in magic (*Sihr*) and explicitly forbid its practice. *Sihr* translate from Arabic as sorcery or black magic the best known reference to magic in Islam is the *Surah Al-Falaq* which is known as a prayer to Allah to ward off black magic.

Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of the dawn from the mischief of created things from the mischief of darkness as it overspreads; from the mischief of those who practise secret arts; and from the mischief of the envious one as he practise envy (Quran 113:1-5).

However, Emilie (2004) opines that some Muslim practitioners believe that they may seek the help of Jinn (singular jinni) in magic. It is a common belief that jinn can possess a human, thus requiring exorcism. Still, the practice of seeking help to the Jinn is prohibited and regarded as seeking help from the devil. The belief in jinn is part of the Muslim Faith for example Imam Muslim narrated the prophet said “Allah created the angels from the light created the jinn from the pure flame of fire, and Adam from the clay” (the Quaran 72:6). It is worth noting to state the students of the history of religion have linked several magical practices in Islam with pre-Islamic Turkish and East African customs. Most notable of these customs is the zar ceremony (Kelvinson, 2003).

Africa Traditional Religion (A.T.R)

Witchcraft is believed in almost all African societies. In Africa traditional religion, witches and wizards are seen as intermediaries which can serve negative and positive purposes (Okeja 2011). Okeja argues that witchcraft in Africa today plays a very different social role than in Europe of the past or present and should be understood through an African rather than post-colonial western lens. Much of what witchcraft represents in Africa has been susceptible to misunderstanding and confusion, thanks in no small part to a tendency among western scholars since the time of the now largely discredited Margaret Murray to approach the subject through a comparative lens *vis-a-vis* European witchcraft.

The way Africans View witchcraft is different from the way Europeans view witchcraft. For example in south Africa the term witch doctor, a common translation for the south African Zulu word *Inyanga*, has been misconstrued to mean “a healer who uses witchcraft” rather than its original meaning of “One who diagnoses and cures maladies caused by witches (Kelly, 1991). In this sense it will be positive to be a witch doctor.

Savage (2009) asserts that in South African traditions, there are three classification of somebody who uses magic. The *Thakathi* is usually improperly translated into English as “witch” and is a spiteful person who operates in secret to harm others. The *Sangoma* is a diviner somewhere on a par with a fortune teller, and is employed in detecting illness, predicting a person’s future (or advising than on which path to take), or identifying the guilty party in a crime. She also practices some degree of medicine. The third is the *Iyanga* which is often translated as “witch doctor” though many Southern African resent this implication, as it perpetuates the mistaken belief that a witch doctor is in some sense is a practitioner of malicious magi. The *Iyanga*’s job is to heal illness and injury and provide customers with magical items for everyday use. Of these three categories the *Ithakaitha* is almost exclusionary female the *Sangoma* is usually female and the *Iyanga* is exclusively male. Some African traditions also believe that witches and wizards should be respected, and can be a source of development for the continent if properly utilized. MacGuffey (1974), reports the complimentary remarks about witchcraft by a native Congolese initiate who opines that:

...From witchcraft may be developed the remedy (kimbuki) that will do most to raise up our country witchcraft deserves respect, it can embellish or redeem” He also goes further to assert thus: “the ancestors were equipped with the protective witchcraft of the clean they could also gather the power of animals into their hands whenever they are needed. If we could make use of these kinds of witchcraft, our country would rapidly progress in knowledge of every kind (p.121).

A lot of Africans also believe that witchcraft is also the science of the African man and that if fully utilized its benefit can be used to endow our race. The initiate mentioned above also goes further to state this: “You witches (*zindoki*) too, bring your science into the light to be written down so that the benefits in it will endow our race. Be proud of your craft.”

On the other hand, in some central African areas, malicious magic users are believed by locals to be the source of terminal illness such as AIDS and cancer. In such cases, various methods are used to rid the person from be witching spirit, occasionally physical and psychological abuse. Children may be accused of being witches, for example a young niece may be blamed for the illness of a relative. Most of these cases of abuse go unreported since the members of the society that witness such abuse are too afraid of being accused of being accomplices. It is also believed that witchcraft can be transmitted to children by feeding. Parents discourage their children from interacting with people believed to be witches (Erwin 2011). Scientifically the existence of magical powers and witchcraft are generally believed to lack credence and to be unsupported by high quality experimental testing, although individual witchcraft practices and effects may be open to scientific explanation or explained via mentalism and psychology.

Historically the predominant concept of witchcraft in the western world derives from Old Testament laws against witchcraft and entered the mainstream when belief in witchcraft

gained church approval in the early modern periods (Kelly, 19991). Russell (2003) posits that a theosophical conflict between good and evil, where witchcraft was generally evil and often associated with the devil and devil worship. This culminated in deaths, torture and scapegoating (casting blame for human misfortune), and many years of large scale witch –trials and witch hunts, especially in protestant Europe, before largely ceasing during the European age of Enlightenment (Ankarloo, 2001). According to Margot (1979) Christian view in the modern day are diverse and cover the gaunt of views from intense belief and opposition (especially from Christian fundamentalists) to non-belief and in some churches even approval.

From the mid -20th century, witch-craft sometimes called contemporary witchcraft to clearly distinguish it from older belief become the name of a branch of modern paganism. It is most notably practiced in the WICCAN and no longer practices in secrecy. It is worth-noting that the western mainstream Christian view is far from the only societal perspective about witchcraft. According to Jonathan (2013) many cultures worldwide continue to have widespread practices and cultural beliefs that are loosely translated into English as “witchcraft” although the English translation masks a very great diversity in their forms, magical beliefs, practices and place in their societies. Douglas (2013) asserts that during the age of colonialism, many cultures across the globe were exposed to the modern western world via colonialism, usually accompanied and often preceded by intensive Christian missionary activity. Beliefs related to witchcraft and magic in these cultures were at times influenced by the prevailing western concepts. Witch hunts scapegoating witches still occurs in the modern era, with killings both of victims for their supposedly magical body parts and of suspected witchcraft practitioners.

If the assertion of Semple (1998) is anything to go by, suspicion of modern medicine due to beliefs about illness being due to witchcraft also continues in many countries to this day, with tragic healthcare consequences. HIV/AIDS and Ebola virus disease are two examples of often lethal infectious disease epidemics whose medical cure and containment has been severely hampered by regional beliefs in witchcraft. If a disease transcend orthodox medicine, it is believed that witches and lizard many be responsible. In a BBC report of 2nd August 2014, a doctor was cited as saying “Ebola outbreak: witchcraft hampering treatment” (www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-28625305).

Witchcraft in Philosophical Context

The thorny issue of witchcraft among many today is not unconnected with the serious problem of evil. Evil is here understood in terms of human crises of pain, sickness, death and anything that causes discomfort to the human being. It is penitent to state that belief in witchcraft is a serious philosophical attempt to deal with the thorny question of evil. This belief in witchcraft explains that there is a primary or ultimate cause of evil. Evans –Pritchard (1979) captures the logics of witchcraft when he writes;

It is a system with its own natural logic. This explanatory system provides answers to questions of why particular occurrences happen to specific individuals at the time they do. It does not invalidate their understanding of empirical cause and effect of an occurrence. Rather it deals with its ultimate cause (p.56).

From the above one can see that natural causes and witchcraft are not mutually exclusive but supplementary. The one supplements the other, accounts for what the other does not account. Pritchard explains further by example that fire is hot, but it is not hot owing to witchcraft for that is its nature. It is a universal quality. It is the particular variable conditions of an event and not the general universal conditions that witchcraft explains. Kunhiyop agrees with Pritchard that the belief in witchcraft serves a very practical purpose in explaining events and occasions and the cause behind them. Death is thus not a natural phenomenon. The death of young men and women is very unnatural. In some societies death from dysentery, falling off a tree and any violent death were considered such a serious misfortune that he deceased had to be buried in the back yard. The critical observation of Pritchard just cited indicates that there is a recognition of natural causes, but at the same time there is the acknowledgment of the fact that things do not “just happen”. It will be safe to conclude that Africans see witchcraft as “witchcraft as “the enemy of life” (Magesa 2005).

It is very important to state at the juncture that the two critical philosophical questions that face us with regards to witchcraft are metaphysics and epistemology. At the metaphysical level, one must ask for example, if one confesses to the eating of the flesh and drinking of human blood, is it to be taken metaphorically or physically? Views differ as far as the above hypothesis is concerned. For example the Nupe people of Nigeria believe that the eating is spiritual not physical. That still does not settle the metaphysical problems associated with the “eating and drinking of human flesh and blood. (Davidson, 1969) at the epistemological level, we must ask ourselves how do we know that the stories are true or false, when we are not witches and wizards ourselves? Davidson also asserts that as Africans we believe that if someone has confessed to being a witch, why should we not believe him or her? However, if one were to put these stories together and ask himself of the truthfulness or lack of would he not conclude what “while they by no means prove that the actions confessed were point to vivid and profound belief in witchcraft. This writer agrees with Kunhiyop when he submitted that these stories demonstrate clearly that what is known about witchcraft is what is known about witchcraft is believed about –them. But what is believed about them is that they embody the workings of evil.

Witchcraft in Scientific Context

Scientifically, the existence of magical powers and witchcraft are generally believed to lack credence and to be unsupported by high quality experimental testing, although individual witchcraft practices and effects may be open to scientific explanation or explained via mentalism and psychology (www.wikipedia.com/witchcraft). It is penitent to state that today

in African there are many who believe that science and technology is the “witchcraft” of the white man according to African studies of witchcraft, contemporary ideas of witchcraft provide an idiom for expressing individualism, innovation, and human agency that are much a part of modern life. As interpretive constructs, they also help to shape the political world, and they are, therefore, powerful forces that can both help to maintain or transform social and political worlds (www.science.Jrank.org/witchcraft).

Witchcraft in Technological Context

To kick the ball rolling in analyzing witchcraft in the technological context, it is penitent to state that in the mind of many, especially Africans, witchcraft and is a form of technology. Ottuh (2015), in a postgraduate class lecture asserts that “witchcraft is a craft” if witchcraft is a craft, then it is safe to say witchcraft is a form of technology. This sentiment becomes much more valid in this writer’s opinion when reference is made to a whatsapp picture (2005), he received from a friend. In the said picture there are four boxes; in each of the box is a name of a country and their craft. The first box was the United State of America, with the picture of an aircraft, the second was Britain with the picture of an aircraft, the third box was china with the picture of a aircraft while fourth box was Nigeria with the inscription “witchcraft” and the picture of a Bat. Below these boxes were the words “they have aircraft, we have witchcraft”.

The above picture was meant to be a joke but it goes a long way to show how people connect witchcraft to technology. Clarke (1973) postulates three laws about witchcraft and technology that is today known as Clarke’s three laws. They are:

1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist state that something is possible, he is almost certainly right when states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.
2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into impossibility
3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. It is important to state that if Clarke’s third law is interpreted literally it means every advanced technology is an art of magic (witchcraft). Bubin (1996) asserts that Clarke’s third law is the most widely cited out of this three laws Clarke’s third law echoes a statement in a 1942 story by Leigh Brackett: “witchcraft to the ignorant ... simple science to the learned” this statement seems to suggest that what is called witchcraft in the actually sense is the mother of modern technology. Earlier example of such sentiments may be found in mild talents (1932) by the author Charles fort, where he makes the statement: “...a performance that may someday be considered understandable, but that, in these primitive times, so transcends what is said to be the known that is what is what I mean by magic”.

Variations of Clarke's Third Law

Porter (1994) elucidates that there exist a number of snow clones and venations of Clarke's third law:

- Any sufficiently advanced act of benevolence is indistinguishable from malevolence (referring to artificial intelligence)
- Any sufficiently advanced incompetence is indistinguishable from malice. (Gray's law)
- Any sufficiently advanced cluelessness is indistinguishable from malice (Charte's law)
- Any sufficiently advanced troll is indistinguishable
- Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from a rigged demo and its contra positive
- Any technology distinguishable from magic is insufficiently advanced (Gehm's corollary)
- Any sufficiently analyzed magic is indistinguishable from science
- Any technology, no matter how primitive is magic to those who don't understand it.
- Any sufficiently ignorant person is indistinguishable from stupid
- Any sufficiently ancient recovered wisdom or artifact is also indistinguishable from magic
- If the above assertions are considered valid, if this appear that a lot of people new technology as a form of witchcraft, and witchcraft as a form of technology.

Witchcraft in the Nigerian Context

The belief in witchcraft in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized this is evident in the country. For example it was alleged that Nigeria's first female ambassador, Elizabeth Ogbon-Day was killed by witches (*Vanguard*, Sept. 2 2014), CNN (www.CNN.com), reports that children were abused and killed as witches in Nigeria. (www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/africa/08/25/nigeria.child.witches).

The activities of witches and wizard in Nigerian newspapers, reported that at a time when Boko Haram insurgency was at its peak, the Association of Nigerian witches, 8 wizards (WITZAN), came out boldly to curse Boko Haram, and to say "Enough is enough". (www.sunnewsonline.com. Witches declare war on Boko Haram). The activities of witches and wizard which before now are believed to be existing, but in the secret and mostly at might not only have an association now, but they also have a facebook page, and also give directive on how to find the closest coven close to initiates. (www.facebook.com/WITZAN). In Nigeria, several pastors especially of the Pentecostal brand have mixed their evangelical brand of Christianity with African beliefs in witchcraft to benefit from the lucrative witch finding and exorcism business – which in the past was the exclusive domain witch doctor or traditional healers. These pastor these have been involved in the fortuning an even killing of children accused of witchcraft.

It is reported that over the past decade around 15,000 children have been accused and around 1,000 murdered. Churches are very numerous in Nigeria, and competition for congregations is hard some pastors attempt to establish a reputation for spiritual power by “detecting” witches, usually following a death or loss of a job in a family, or an adversity. (www.bbc.co.uk/news) in the course of exorcisms accused children may be starved, beaten, mutilated, set on fire, forced to consume acid or cement or and Christian activists have spoken out strongly against these abuses, many Nigerian churches are involved in the abuse, although church administrations deny knowledge of it (www.guardian.co.uk) by the belief, perceptions, and reactions of Nigerians to witchcraft, it is not a question of whether witches exist or not it a question of understanding, the scope, nature and influence of witchcraft. Unlike the western world who perceive witchcraft to be either positive or negative, Nigerians tend to belief that witchcraft is evil, but witches and wizards can be appeased to achieve some good

Conclusion

It has been noted that the concept of witchcraft and the belief in its existence has existed since the dawn of human history. It has been present or central at various times, and in many diverse forms, among cultures, and religions worldwide, but primitive and advanced culture. In other words the way people view the concept of witchcraft differs from culture to culture, this has led to so many misconception of the term “witchcraft is a complex concept that varies culturally and societally, therefore it is difficult to define with precision.

This writer affirms that in the study of witchcraft in African societies, the concern with systems of logic and through that has long engaged anthropology and philosophy continues more recently, there has been a focus on indigenous systems of knowledge and hermeneutical traditions. More contemporary scholars are interested in forms of interpretation, skepticism and religious critique that come from within local thought traditions. Scholarship is now more than ever before, poised to counter the academic practice of maintaining distinctions in forms of thought from westerns and African societies (Austen, 1993; *African studies Review*, 1998).

It is very penitent to state and recommend that cross cultural assumptions about the meaning or significance of witchcraft, the religious and philosophical thought of the term should be applied with caution since the term is difficult to define with precision from culture to culture.

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