

African Ideas and beliefs in Witchcraft: An Investigation of Socio-economic and political implications of the perception of witchcraft in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county, Kenya

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Abstract

Amongst many indigenous communities in Africa, there are hidden assumptions that problems, and in particular causes for its faltering development, cannot possibly be understood without considering the role of witchcraft in as much as the practice is commonly considered to belonging to the outmoded worldview of primitive societies. Ironically, the expectation that the practice would fade away together with other superstitions due to influence of modernization appears to be a mirage in much of Africa. Africa continues to witness increasing fear of witchcraft while in some countries the influence occult powers is celebrated through film and theater. The fundamental assumption is that regions whose people believe in witchcraft are likely to experience less social and economic development, while those regions whose people do not believe in witchcraft register high social and economic development. These are usually attributed to unusual phenomena like accidents, conflicts, sickness, diseases and death. The occult powers are deemed to be controlled by witches who influence the aforementioned phenomena for a purpose such as settling scores. The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of impact of witchcraft on social and economic development in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county, Kenya while treating witchcraft as a manifestation of Africa's magic worldview with profound impact on personal and social life as well as on politics, The objectives of the study were: to examine prevalence of belief in witchcraft in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county, Kenya, assess relationship between witchcraft and socio-economic development in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county, Kenya and to explain the impact of witchcraft on people's lives in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county, Kenya. Related literature was reviewed in line with these objectives. This study was guided by functionalism theory, focusing mainly on the works of Emile Durkheim. The study used qualitative research method. The research design was descriptive survey with a target population of 68,500 people in Uyoma, Rarieda Sub-county as the population of the study (Census 2009). The sample size was 382 in line with Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The study employed purposive and simple random sampling techniques. The key informants were medicine men, religious leaders, village elders and professionals. Questionnaires and interview schedule were the key instruments for data collection. Qualitative data was analyzed using thematic and content analysis. Piloting was done in Momba Sub-location to confirm the reliability and validity of the research instruments. The study recommends ban on witchcraft practices that have undermined people's lives in the community. Finally, the study suggests that further studies should be done on the future of witchcraft in society.

Key words: sorcery, witches, magicians, occult powers, witchcraft, mystical experiences.

1.1 Introduction

Belief in the existence of witchcraft goes back at least as far as the Old Testament of the Bible, which forbids the practice of witchcraft. For example, the book of Exodus (22:18) says: "Thou shalt not suffer witch to live." Pre-Christian cultures in Greece, Rome, and Iceland, among other places believed in the powers of witches (Davidson, 1973). In Brazil, a study conducted by Murphy (1963), revealed that beliefs about witchcraft and sorcery could have disruptive effects. Working with the Mundurucu in Brazil, he found out that witchcraft accusations combined with a rubber economic boom created group divisions and family migrations, which eventually supported a more dispersed settlement plan. He adds that people in relatively marginalized positions in a society might be able to use witchcraft or the threat of witchcraft as a form of social power. The relatively weak could then influence people with more power or wealth to redistribute it and minimize some of the inequalities in the society thus promoting accumulation and leveling.

In South Africa, Dreyer (1981) noted that belief in witchcraft and its practices are found among those who claim to have adopted Christianity and even those who are inclined to their indigenous religion. This is because despite Africans accepting Christianity, they still believe that there is mystical power governing the universe. Mbiti (1969) adds that Christians in Africa believe in witchcraft because Christianity seems not to meet their immediate social, religious and cultural dilemmas. In Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta in his book, *Facing Mount Kenya* (1965) shows witchcraft to be pervasive among the Agikuyu. Indeed, it appears that witchcraft is a way of life in this community. Some witchcraft was for defensive purposes, some for economic activities like hunting, business, and agriculture. Some for healing and health, some is used to increase attractiveness and enhance the love of life, to acquire influence and yet others for spiritual cleansing.

A more recent incident was reported in Kenya in both print and electronic media following the disputed 8th August 2017 disputed general election when bees attacked those who went to listen to the court hearings in the supreme court of Kenya. It was alleged that the bees that pounded on the people were as a result of witchcraft.

1.2 History of Uyoma people

Uyoma people belongs to a sub-group of River lake Nilotic speaking group known as Joka-omollo. They must have entered Kenya during the 19th century when the Luo community was migrating from Southern Sudan and settled on Ramogi hills. From Ramogi hills, they migrated and settled in Alego constituency near the place that is today known as Kobare market. From Kobare market, they migrated to a place known as Madiany which today forms a major division of Rarieda Sub-county known as Madiany division. It is in Madiany division where the name Uyoma was born. Uyoma community is popularly known as Joka-owila. Owila was like the founding father of this beautiful community. He had many sons and these sons used to kill one another by means of witchcraft.

When Owila was asked to explain the reasons why his sons had to kill one another, he used to reply *mano oyuma* an English translation of that is foolish and I cannot comment on the matter. His continuous use of this term gave birth to the name Uyoma hence Uyoma was coined from the Luo word *oyuma*. It is the enmity which emerged among the Owila sons as a result of them killing one another that made them to eventually migrate from Madiany to their respective places in which they live today. Uyoma community today occupies over a half of Rarieda Sub-county, Siaya County, Kenya along the shores of Lake Victoria. Their main economic activities include fishing, farming and basketry.

1.3 Forms of witchcraft in Uyoma

Various forms of witchcraft are practiced in the Uyoma community, but the most common ones are: night running, use of evil eyes on people, use of witchcraft to kill, use of witchcraft to cause madness in people, use of witchcraft to hijack luck from people, use of witchcraft to cause poor crop yield, use of witchcraft to cause infertility, use of witchcraft to cause diseases to people, use of witchcraft to cause accidents, use of witchcraft to cause infertility in human beings, use of witchcraft to break marriages use of witchcraft to prevent heavy down pour, use of witchcraft to make business activities to flourish, use of witchcraft to win court cases, use of witchcraft to avert evil ancestral spirits, use of witchcraft to make a stable marriage, use of witchcraft to win political positions, use of witchcraft to protect homestead from the evil, use of witchcraft to get employment.

All these forms of witchcraft in one way or the other cause human suffering. This is in line with Mbiti(1969) who pointed out in his research studies that witchcraft can be both destructive and constructive and that Africans believe that all ills, misfortunes, accidents, sickness, sorrows, dangers, unhappy mysteries are caused by mystical powers employed by sorcerers, witches or wizards. Accidents, causes of barrenness, misfortunes or other unpleasant experiences are considered mystical experiences of a deeply religious nature.

1.4 Positive Implications of perception on witchcraft in Uyoma in Uyoma

Witchcraft in its totality has got both positive and negative impact on people's lives. One of the positive impact of witchcraft on Uyoma people protection of homestead. Any person who feels threatened by the evils associated by the practice of witchcraft can visit the witch doctor popularly known as *ajuoga* among the Luo community who after receiving payments will give a substance that can either be dug in the homestead or planted to grow in the form of a tree. This will be able to protect the homestead from thieves or any malicious person who would be having an evil intention to harm (Medicine man, 37, March 1, 2018). This is in agreement with Mbiti (1969) who pointed out that evil magicians can plant an object in a person's home for protective purposes.

This community also believes that they can recover their lost property using witchcraft. A person who has lost his or her properties is able to recover it by means of a witchcraft. The person can visit a witchdoctor commonly known as *jabilo* who will either perform some ritual or give the person who has lost the property some substance that if used the stolen

property would be returned. He narrates how a man visited a witch doctor when he had lost 20 herds of cattle on a given night. The man visited a witchdoctor and was given some substance that after using on the cowshed, then the cattle would come back, it is surprising that the cattle came back to the homestead (Medicine man, 38, March 2, 2018). This is in line with Dreyer (1981) who opined that a man can seek the services of a witchdoctor to recover his lost property.

Politically, witchcraft has been used to win or manipulate voters during elections. In some cases, a person who wants to get a political position can visit a witchdoctor. This one he said was more prevalent in their community in which most politicians' visits witch doctors who give them some charms that would make them appeal to the electorate thus making them to be seen to be more important than their worthy competitors. Most of these charms would also work against the spirit of their competitors making them either to give up or not to be aggressive in their campaign. The medicine man listed a number of politicians that have succeeded in winning the political positions by means of witchcraft but for the purposes of confidentiality and privacy of the respondent, their real names have not been mentioned (medicine man, 40, March 3, 2018).

Many court cases have also believed to have been won through witchcraft. One can win a court case by means of witchcraft. This happens when the accused visits those who practice witchcraft especially an evil magician. The accused person would narrate the whole case that has made him to be charged in the court of law, in this case, the evil magician would act as a lawyer just like the way an accused person narrates a whole case to the lawyer before the lawyer can prepare for his defense. After the narration of the whole story, would consult the spirits which would inform him as to whether he would be able to help the man. If it is possible to help the man, then the evil magician would inform the man of what is expected of him to contribute. Once he makes his payments, the evil magician would give him a charm. It is fascinating to note that this charm works in two ways, first by making the person who has a case against the accused to drop the case or by making the magistrate himself to drop the case (medicine man, 42, March, 4, 2018).

Socially, some marriages are believed have been stabilized through witchcraft. One can make his or her marriage to stand stable by means of a witchcraft. This can be done by consulting the services of an evil magician who gives a charm after receiving payments. This charm would make the wife if she is the one with the evil intention of doing prostitution, or the husband if he is the one with the evil intention of prostitution to stop the act. This act is referred to as *guro dak* among the *luo* community. This charm can be bad to the extent that if it has been applied but in one way or the other the other partner goes against it for example by carrying on with the adultery then he or she risks by being caught because such people stick together during the sexual intercourse and separating them would also require the services of the same evil magician! The medicine man highlighted the names of couples who have benefited from this activity but their names are not mentioned here for confidentiality purposes (Medicine man, 44, March, 5, 2018).

There are also strong believes that some business are sustained and enriched by witchcraft. Businesses can flourish by means of witchcraft. This is made possible by evil magicians who can give charms that will make business of one man to make profits while business of other surrounding businesses to run losses, the charm is put at the place where the business is conducted. He illustrated that the different ways of administering the charm depended on the type of business activity being conducted. This will aid in attracting the customers. The medicine man gave examples of people who have become successful business men in their community by means of witchcraft (medicine man, 46, March, 6, 2018).

The evil ancestral spirits can be sent away or revoked from somebody by means of witchcraft. The evil ancestral spirits are those ones that are inherited from the parents. Such evil ancestral spirits are referred to as *juogi* among the *luo* community. Such evil ancestral spirits are so bad to an extent that if not well checked on time then they can kill a whole generation. The evil ancestral spirits mostly makes somebody to be mad; although the level of madness ranges from a person to a person whereby some can be extremely mad while others suffer from mild madness. The underlying truth is that in a capsule, any form of madness is a threat to any individual life thwarting his or her contributions towards community development. The evil ancestral spirits can mostly be exorcised from the person who is possessed by seeking the services of an evil magician who has the powers to send away the evil spirits to the lakes thus breaking the ancestral bondage that ties such family so that they can be free from the atrocities committed by their ancestors (medicine man, 48, March, 7, 2018).

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1.5. Negative effects of perception on witchcraft in Uyoma

Apart from the positive effects discussed, there are also negative impact of witchcraft. Some of the consequences include, greed. The fear of witchcraft in the community has made people to be selfish. This goes against the spirit of Africans who from time immemorial are known to be generous people who are very much concerned about the welfare of others. People who have wealth to a bigger extent do not want to assist the poor in the society, this is simply because of their belief that when you assist someone with money, then instead of this person using that money to assist himself or herself, the person uses that money to work against the one who was generous enough to assist. This he does by visiting an evil magician who does some rituals on the money making this generous person not to have luck in get money again. The result of this is that in such a community where people fear such kind of malicious people then the poor will always remain poor and as such negatively affecting people's lives. The village elder named the victims who have suffered as a result of this act but their names would not be mentioned for confidentiality purposes (Religious leader, 1, April, 2, 2018).

Witchcraft has also been used to cause madness in a person. The village elder said that malicious people who don't want progression in another person's family for reasons well known to them can visit an evil magician commonly known as *jabilo* among the *luo* community who is able to provide charms that if used in the homestead of the target person or placed on the way followed by the targeted person then it does not even take half an hour before this person starts experiencing signs of madness which can even grow day by day and if not well checked by the family of the victim either by also visiting another evil magician to avert those dark powers or seeking spiritual intervention in the church, then the persons madness will keep on worsening day by day making such kind of a person not to be a productive member of the society. The village elder mentioned some of the victims who have greatly suffered in the hands of these people (Religious leader, 3, April, 3, 2018).

Infertility in men and women has also been attributed to influence of witchcraft. This one again is common among the envious individuals who don't want continuity in a given family. Among the *luo* community, this practice is known as *tweyo ng'ato*. In line with this issue, a person with the evil intention visit an evil magician who will in turn perform some rituals that will prevent the target individual from conceiving or a man not to be fertile enough to make a woman pregnant. In certain instances, a man can be made to be totally impotent such that his reproductive organs totally fail to rise to the occasion for sexual intercourse. This can be very disastrous if it happens in the youthful stage of an individual or even in young marriage since such marriages don't last for obvious reasons. Women who are again barren face the risk of being divorced by their husbands (Religious leader, 5, April, 4, 2018).

In some cases, witchcraft has been used to break marriages. This is common among men and women who are out to deny married couples their spouses. It is important to note that it is commonly applied to a greater extent by women who feel that they should deny others their husbands. In this case the woman with an evil intention will visit the evil magician, explains her case and agrees to abide by the terms and conditions of the evil magician. She would be given a charm that if she applies on the man as per the instructions of the evil magicians, then the man would start disturbing the wife by either being irresponsible by failing to provide for the family, start domestic violence, totally abstain from eating the food prepared by the wife or even fail completely to meet her conjugal rights. In extreme instances, the man totally abandons his family and moves on to stay with the woman who has charmed him (Religious leader, 7, April, 5, 2018).

The cause of deadly diseases to individuals is also linked to witchcraft. This is mostly common among those who want hurt others. They would visit an evil magician and explain to the magician the kind of a disease that the victim should suffer from. Depending on the gravity of that illness, the evil magician will then go ahead to consult the world of spirit by shaking some of the objects and producing a fearing kind of a sound. This is commonly referred to as *go gagi* among the *luo* community. Once the spirits are consulted, the magician will give the one who wants to hurt the other the charm to use as per the instructions of the evil magician. When such charm is used on the victim, the victim would suffer from some kind of illness that even the medical practitioners in the hospitals would not be able to treat (Religious leader, 9, April, 6, 2018).

Uyoma people is an agricultural community. Witchcraft has be used in the community to cause and end a prolonged drought in a very controversial manner. The way it happens is astonishing since elders in the community would make a visit to a witchdoctor who will in most cases advise them to make a sacrifice of human beings, this is done by means of

witchcraft whereby the witch doctor would perform some rituals by calling the names of the individuals who are supposed to die for rains to happen, this type of act is commonly referred to as *koro nga'to* or *chiwo misango* among the *luo* community which is an English translation of offering sacrifices to appease gods and ancestors. The witchdoctor would advise that at least two people must be killed by a crocodile in order for the drought to end. The persons in this question to pay the ultimate price in most cases are the daughters who are married in other places commonly referred to as *migogo* among the *luo* community and are back in their community maybe to pay a visit, visitors in the region and as such these groups of people are normally advised to keep off from bathing in the lake during a prolonged dry spells lest they risk being caught by the crocodile (Religious leader, 10, April, 7, 2018).

In extreme instances, witchcraft has been used to kill. This is very common among extremely envious people who are out to completely destroy someone. The person who wants to carry out this heinous act visits the evil magician known as *janawi* among the *luo* community. This evil magician will first advise the person if he or she is fully convinced that he wants to kill someone. Once the person accepts that he or she is convinced, then the evil magician will go ahead to ask the person if he or she is ready to abide by the terms and conditions of that heinous actions. When all of that is accepted, then the evil magician will ask the person who has visited him the kind of death that the victim should die of. Depending on the agreement between the evil magician and the person who wants to kill, this death will occur as per their plans. In most instances, this kind of death normally occurs instantly and preventing it by medical intervention in most cases goes in vain (Religious leader, 11, April, 8, 2018).

1.4 Conclusion

Major conclusions drawn from this study were that witchcraft has got an immense impact on people's lives. Some of the impacts of witchcraft on people's lives are positive while some are negative, however, it is important to note that the positive impacts of witchcraft only bring good to a smaller percentage of selfish and self-centered individuals in the society thus making witchcraft to be viewed as that which does not bring the ultimate happiness in the society rendering it to remain a thorn in the society's flesh.

Key informants interviews

(Religious leader, 1, April, 2, 2018).

(Religious leader, 3, April, 3, 2018).

(Religious leader, 5, April, 4, 2018).

Religious leader, 7, April, 5, 2018

Religious leader, 9, April, 6, 2018

Religious leader, 10, April, 7, 2018

Religious leader, 11, April, 8, 2018

Medicine man, 37, March 1, 2018

Medicine man, 38, March 2, 2018

Medicine man, 40, March 3, 2018

Medicine man, 42, March, 4, 2018

Medicine man, 44, March, 5, 2018

Medicine man, 46, March, 6, 2018

Medicine man, 48, March, 7, 2018

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