

A CRITIQUE OF THE CAUSAL POWER OF WITCHCRAFT PHENOMENON IN AFRICAN BELIEF

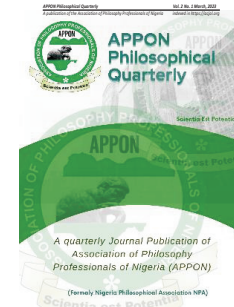
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Abstract

Witchcraft causation is the belief in the use of mystical powers to cause ontological impediments. This is much talked about in African society because of their ontological and cosmological beliefs. When an inexplicable occurrence happens in an African society, witchcraft influence is conceivably the culprit. In the analysis of witchcraft causality, I asserted that for witchcraft causation to be reasonable, a substantial evidence of causal link should be a necessity. Consequently, I adopted Hume's notion of causality which posits that for a cause and effect relationship to exist, the in-built connection between both shouldn't be mere subjective belief / impression but rather 'impression of sensation' even when Sogolo and Oluwole held the contrary view. The focus of this work is aimed at demystifying and critiquing the existence of witchcraft effects in African belief using Hume's causal explanation as yardstick. African belief on witchcraft causality seems moot. In this work, I also held that establishing the existence of witchcraft and drawing causal connection between it and its assumed ontological damage falls below universal or objective standard. Using analytic and expository methods, this paper examined the etymology of causality, witchcraft and Hume's notion of causation. I also analyzed arguments on the existence of witchcraft causality and clinched that the existence of witchcraft efficacy is contentious and if we should assume that it exists for some reasons best known to us, the witch lacks apparent capacity to be directly or unarguably linked to an observable deleterious effect in our contemporary world.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Causality, African Belief, Hume, Connection.

Introduction

For centuries, witchcraft phenomenon is much talked about in African society because of the mystery surrounding it. In most African culture, the manifestations of inexplicable events are ascribed to the influence of meta-empirical agent(s). A critical survey of the activities of this agentis encapsulated in

metaphysical assertions. For instance, how can we possibly demonstrate the existence of a witch or witchcraft in our current world? How can we show that a young woman who had no reproductive health challenge (after several medical examinations) but unable to get pregnant after 20 years of marriage is the handiwork of witchcraft impact? Can welink

this situation to witchcraft whereby a young man with no health challenge slept and did not wake up the following day? For the traditional Africans, these inexplicable occurrences have causative agents which most African communities do hold as perpetrators.

In the analysis of witchcraft causality in African belief, I would embrace Hume's intense demystification of causality vis-à-vis African witchcraft causation which gives credence to the human soul having the potency to invoke an effect on a distinct being. This is not to deny the existence of the soul but rather to trace or determine the prospect of an impression of causal connection between a disembodied soul and its assumed ontological damage. However, it would be knotty to deduce the potency of the soul causing a sequence of events. For instance, witches are believed to possess intrinsic power to influence events. Malevolent imagination against a neighbour is believed to have the capacity to cause affliction. How do we infer the availability of a causal necessity in-between a distinct occurrence and a witchcraft influencing it? The activities of witchcraft agents should exceed surreptitious construal.¹ In this paper, I would examine the concept and meaning of witchcraft and causality, Hume's notion of causality. I will also discuss causality in African belief, witchcraft in African belief and arguments on witchcraft. Lastly, a critique on witchcraft causality would be discussed.

On the Concept of Causality

It is pertinent to grasp the idea of causality so that we can traverse its philosophical investigation. Causality is a derivative from the root word "cause" which implies the source of, or rationale for an event; that which produces an effect or results to an effect. It is also known as causation or **cause and effector** an efficacy that connects one state (the *cause*) with another state (the *effect*), whereby the former is accountable for the latter, and the latter is dependent on the former.

Pantaleon Iroegbu described causality as "the act of bringing into reality what was not in reality".² Godwin Sogolo held that for us to comprehend the notion of causality we should demarcate it into primary (metaphysical) cause and secondary (empirical) cause. What he called secondary cause is what the occidentals typically esteem as the ultimate and only cause as responsible for the occurrence of a given event.³ By calling this cause 'secondary', Sogolo specifies that they are not of principal interest to traditional African.

The empirical notion of causation was championed by David Hume as "an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second" and "where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed".⁴ Hume demonstrated the empirical and mechanical causal phenomena and

¹. Helaine Minkus, "The Concept of Spirit in Akwapim Akan Philosophy," *Journal of the International African Institute* 50, no 2 (1980): 188-189. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1159010>

². Pantaleon Iroegbu, *Metaphysics: The 'Kpim' of Philosophy* (Owerri: International Universities Press Ltd, 1995), 364.

³. Godwin Sogolo, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought", in *An introduction to African philosophy*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and M.E.S. Van Den Berg, (Pretoria: Unisa Publishers, 1996), 215.

⁴. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 2nd edn, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1777), 57. https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/341/0222_Bk.pdf

observed that causal reality is far fetch from objective and experimental nature veracity. More so, he disdained and repudiated metaphysical causal explanation because for him metaphysical entities can never under any circumstances be observed and therefore, they contain nothing but mere delusion.⁵ Against Hume's analysis, proponents of African metaphysics i.e. Sogolo argued that a cause and its effect are necessarily knitted with a sort of necessary connection.

Hume's Notion of Causality

Hume viewed causation as an object followed by another and whose presence usually carries the thought of another or wherever the leading object will not be, the next will never exist. Cause and effect for Hume should encompass observable causal necessity, so he defended a radical empirical idea of causality claiming that under no circumstances can we by mere perception discern any link between an event and its assumed cause. In his words; "no impression can be conveyed by our senses, which give rise to that idea".⁷ For the mind is always carried by a 'customary transition', from the appearance of one to the belief of the other.⁸ This paper is an empirical critique of the idea of causal connection in relation to witchcraft causality in African belief. For instance, a mother (using words and symbolic objects) cursed his son and few hours later he died and neighbours claimed they held the mother

placing a curse on the son, thus she is the cause of the son's death. This belief and some other similar ones are based on some previously held traditional assumptions. Even if traditional Africans have their unique pattern of arriving at the knowledge of causal justification, the question is, since the world is advancing and more objective in approach and traditional Africans are engrossed in their relativistic and subjective causal approach then, how do they demonstrate their claims in such a way that a clear and realistic causal impression and connection can be discovered experientially by any group of persons in the cosmos, and not just mere African customary causation?

Hume claimed that our conception of causality emanate exclusively from the orderliness perceived in the operations of our natural surroundings.⁹ Furthermore, Hume set forth to investigate if the concept of cause is derive from the operation of the mind such that he discovered that "the mind can never possibly find the effect in the supposed cause, by the most accurate scrutiny and examination. For the effect is totally different from the cause and consequently can never be discovered in it".¹⁰ The attribution of necessity to cause and effect comes from man's observance of regular sequences, constant conjunction, uniformity in nature and resemblance between events.¹¹ Hume affirmed the idea of causal necessity as an invention of

⁵. Ibid, 104.

⁶. Godwin Sogolo, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought," *The African Philosophy Reader*, (2nd Edition), edited by P.H. Coetzee and A.P. Roux, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of South Africa, 2003), 234.

⁷. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature. Book 1: Of the Understanding*, 1739., 91. <https://people.rit.edu/wlrgsh/HumeTreatise.pdf>

⁸. David Hume, *Enquiries. Op. cit.*

⁹. David Hume, *A Treatise. Op. cit*

¹⁰. David Hume, *Enquiries. Op. cit*, 33

¹¹. David Hume, *A Treatise. Op. cit*

the human mind and not in the events *per se*. For instance, since Africans live together for a very long time and possess experiences (as in societal habits cum customs) that are interrelated and correlated, they conclude upon the occurrence of one, that which is expected from it would follow without any perception of any 'secret power' by which one event causes the other. Hume affirmed that all deductions from experience are effects of custom and not of causal power. Thus, he held that the idea of necessary connection is not inherent in the cause but belongs totally to human assumptions such that the mind moves from the event to its assumed cause.

Causality in African Metaphysics

For Sogolo, since Hume could not perceive any causal necessity between events; it does not violate the fact that there exists a relationship between the empirical and meta-empirical construal events in African belief. At the empirical level, there is nothing that we perceive that is absolutely transparent in origin, because the whole of reality has a foundation outside them that justify their being and operation.¹² Hence, to comprehend causal discourse, we need to know the essential guiding beliefs for arriving at causal reality. He further stressed that the challenges in understanding causation is that several influencing factors come into consideration which makes it difficult to ascertain the central cause. He postulated the following routes for determining cause and effect.¹³ They are:

- i. A cause must exist before its effect.
- ii. Cause and effect must be adjacent.
- iii. There must be continuous and

necessary synergy between a cause and its effect.¹⁴

Hume contended against the above beliefs claiming that even if we have knowledge of necessary connection between cause and effect, such do not proceed from direct perception. But **Sogolo** in "The Concept of Cause in African Thought" held that problem can emanate when there is absolute reliance on Western understanding of causation wherein A is the causal factor of B, thus, a necessity is expected to be present between A and B in accord with scientific guiding beliefs subsumed in the universal law. Consequently, the prevailing Western empirical tenets in accordance with scientific principles are responsible for the difficulty in the overall grasp of the epistemology of causation.¹⁵ There is a limit which the empirical version of reality can lead us. For instance, we know

"as well as any scientific man, that if the brakes fail while the vehicle is moving at high speed there could be a serious accident...If the accident is serious enough, some of the passengers could die. But the general laws (of empirical science) cannot answer...the question; where and when the brakes will fail, whether they could fail when the lorry is travelling at high or low speed and should that happen, who of all passengers will be fatally wounded. The scientific man will push the application of the

¹². Godwin Sogolo, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought", *Op. cit*, 215.

¹³. Ibid

¹⁴. Ibid

¹⁵. Godwin Sogolo, "The Concept of Cause in African Thought", in *The African Philosophy Reader* (2nd Edition), ed. P.H. Coetzee & A.P. Roux, (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of South Africa, 2003), 228-230.

general laws as far as it can go... Even if the general law says that only one person out of a hundred passengers in a lorry involved in an accident would be saved...the gods not science, decide who that lucky one shall be..."¹⁶

From the above presupposition, causal explanation could be based on the nature of the event to be explicated. In an attempt to defend causation, the specific nature of event involved must be taking into consideration. We have events that are obviously scientific and hence given scientific interpretation and there are others that require more than empirical justification. That is the reason Sogolo claimed that empirical cause is secondary and it is not of interest to traditional Africans. For instance, when we say that witchcraft causation is imperceptible this would fall short of empirical expectation. But if metaphysical cause possesses force or power, such should be demonstrable because even though traditional Africans have their unique pattern of arriving at the knowledge of causal justification, since the world is advancing and more objective in approach and traditional Africans are part of the world, how do they demonstrate and align their causal claims in such a way that a clear and realistic causal connection or impression can be discovered systematically by any group of persons, and not just mere African customary causation? As a panacea to this, Sogolo alluded to Horton's causal explanation stating that the dominant explanatory models

embraced by a specified culture are determined by the uniqueness of that culture. A person whose agrarian seeds refuses to grow in the soil during rainy season even with fertilizer, or a woman who gave birth to a strange object are perturbed to the traditional African man, hence Gyekye considered these unique events as discrete and isolated from western empiricism;¹⁷ they appear to be bamboozling; they are not considered subsumable under any known law of nature. Africans are not satisfied merely knowing how such events happen; they desire to know why they happened and who caused them to occur. He further held that Africans give more attention to insoluble happenings and not just merely natural occurrences as in a woman given birth after nine months, or a man impregnating a woman after sexual intercourse and so on. These natural events do not create any challenge because they are part of the order of nature.

Witchcraft Causality in African Belief

How do we feasibly comprehend the idea of a witch or witchcraft in our contemporary world? It is pertinent to examine the concept of witchcraft in African worldview which is a combination of the word "witch" (meaning "to conjure" or "to summon") while the "craft" connotes skill in executing tasks. Hence, the word "witchcraft" implies to summon or invoke using supernatural skills for creepy purpose.¹⁸ There is the claim that witchcraft or a witch can demonstrate its mystical efficacy through corporal contact, whereas scientific empiricists claimed that the

¹⁶ Godwin Azenabor, *Modern Theories in African philosophy* (Ikeja: Byolah Publishers, 2010), 58-59.

¹⁷ Kwame Gyekye, *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Philadelphia: Tempel University Press, 1987).

¹⁸ Etim Okon, "African World-View and the Challenge of Witchcraft", *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 2, no. 10 (2012): 69-70.

notion of witchcraft and the existence of witches are illusory or fictional. Okeja held that a witch is a person with eerie inherent qualities by which the soul of the being operates upon its world. 'Its world' encompass not only the material cosmos but all realities that are "objective or subjective, which do not respond to direct control".¹⁹ Thus, witchcraft is the process in which the human soul through numinous endeavours maneuvers the biosphere and cosmic law for a particular purpose especially evil aspirations. Also, Teffo and Roux portrayed witchcraft as nonphysical omen capable of achieving ill-disposed intentions in an ethereal manner. In this case, the physique of a witch is left behind in bed at late night hours and the soul 'float around' from the coven to cause harm. A witch can fly instantaneously from one point to another for the purpose of causing havoc, injury and mysterious death of someone familiar.²⁰ Witches possess an 'in-built power which enables them to converge with other members thereby using their 'shadow souls' to cast spell on their victims. In other words, witches possess weird and bizarre dexterity to transform into intangible forms or into other beings. In their disembodied forms, they can instantaneously

explore the universe and move from one location to another.²¹ Bond and Diane maintained that any researcher who deduced the existence or non-existence of witches is mainly a conclusion based on the belief system or mentality of the person involved in the investigation.²²

However, the belief in the existence of witchcraft is inapt in scientific analysis since it is not objectively provable, so it is labeled as mere absurdity. **Oluwole** as cited in Ikechuckwu and Oduah **reiterate** that witches and witchcraft are intangible; hence people tag them as false impression.²³ Okon cited **Evans-Pritchard's** analysis, asserting that witchcraft or a witch is an imaginary offence because a witch cannot do what it is supposed to do and has in fact no real existence.²⁴ Nevertheless, Okon responded to Evans-Pritchard's claims citing **Idowu** who held that the authenticity of witches in African society is as real as the bandits, armed robbers, assassins and kidnappers. He also cited Mbiti's affirmation that mystical forces assist individuals in projecting spells from remote distances. Okon further supported Idowu by citing Sogolo's assertion that witches are resistant to scientific research.²⁵ Okoro further

^{19.} **Uchenna Okeja**, "Magic in an African Context", in *Magic and the Supernatural*, ed. S.E. Hendrix and T.J. Shannon (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2012), 102.

^{20.} **Lesiba J. Teffo and Abraham Roux**, "Metaphysical Thinking in Africa", in *The African Philosophy Reader* (2nd Edition), ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P. Roux (Cape Town: Oxford University Press of South Africa, 2003), 202-203.

^{21.} **Godwin Sogolo**, *Foundations of African Philosophy* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1993).

^{22.} **Bond, George and Diane Gekawy**. 2001. *Witchcraft Dialogue. Anthropological Exchanges*. Athens: Ohio University Center for Internal Studies, p.7.

^{23.} **Nwakaeze-Ogugualkechukwu and Clara I. Oduah**, "Witches: Existence, Belief and Rationality", *Interdisciplinary Journal of African and Asian Studies*, 1, no. 1(2015), 2

^{24.} **Etim Okon**, "African World-View and the Challenge of Witchcraft", Op. Cit.

^{25.} Ibid

buttressed that the laws of the spirit are poles apart from that of the sciences because the focus of mystical knowledge contrasts empirical science. In other words, 'spiritual metaphysics' asserts life-force to be the major indication of all universal realities. Thus, a person who has spiritual influence views the universe "as organic and the entities in it as sacred".²⁶

A Critique of Witchcraft Causal Phenomena

Hume spurned metaphysical causal explanations as unreasonable and thus encompass nothing but illusion.²⁷ This is for instance due to the difficulties in inferring availability of causal connection in-between an occurrence and the assumed witchcraft sway. It is quite obvious that the soul has no objective reality but rather it is esoteric in nature. How then can we ascertain a soul or mental cause instigating a corporeal effect? Can incorporeal substance initiate an impact in an understandable way in an objective and fast developing world?²⁸ However, African causality is often engraved or interpreted in secretive undertone rooted in meta-empirical influence which seems to be more of a mental or abstract justification. This kind is synonymous to Hume's psychological construal of causation which is "nothing but...a determination to carry our thoughts

from one object to another."²⁹ For instance, a mother (using words and symbolic objects) cursed his son and few hours later he (the son) died and neighbours claimed that the mother is the cause of the son's death. This is more of a determination of our thought pattern to connect one event to another without any substantial causal evidence. In this case, to argue that causation is simply *a priori* intuitively certain is not categorically adequate. Hume maintains that causal link must manifest from experience.³⁰ For example, that a young woman who had no reproductive health challenges (after several medical examinations) but unable to get pregnant after 20 years of marriage is the handiwork of witchcraft impact is hard to defend. For a reasonable theory of witchcraft causation in African belief, a substantial evidence of demonstrable causal connection should be a necessity. In another words, for a cause and effect relationship to exist, the in-built connection between both shouldn't be mere subjective causal expression or belief. We should note that Western causality is revealing, approachable and objective. But for Africans, it is concealed in mysticism which has condensed the possibility of attaining a widespread (or global) knowledge of its activities.

Furthermore, in an attempt to critique or

²⁶ ChiedozieOkoro, "On Causality and Science: Towards a Deconstruction of African Theory of Forces", *Journal of Integrative Humanism* (2014), 67. <https://docplayer.net/60463152-journal-of-integrative-humanism-ghana-march-2014-on-causality-and-science-towards-a-deconstruction-of-African-theory-of-forces>

²⁷ David Hume, *Enquiries. Op Cit*, 104.

²⁸ Jerry Fodor, "The Mind-Body Problem", *Scientific American* 244, no. 1, (1981): 114.

²⁹ Peter Millican, *Hume's Central Principles*, 14. http://www.google.com/url?q=http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/philfac/millican_hume/series_2/2011_Hume_MT_2.pdf&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwixv63mxc39AhVYR_EDHdDODduQFnoECAEQAg&usg=AOvVaw3ggekNinhaqsReRcYORhaf

³⁰ Georges Dicker, *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge), 133.

defend causation, the specific nature of event involved must be considered. We have events that are obviously scientific and hence given scientific elucidation and there are others that require more than empirical analysis. That is the reason Sogolo claimed that empirical cause is secondary and it is not of interest to traditional Africans. When we say that witchcraft causation is imperceptible this would fall short of empirical expectation. Yet, if metaphysical cause possesses force or power, such should be demonstrable in a satisfactory manner because even though traditional Africans have their unique pattern of arriving at knowledge of causation and since they are part of the cosmos, their accessibility to knowledge claim should be somewhat patent and aligning to the array of this advancing world. Moreover, we need to know some critical guiding beliefs that must exist before arriving at causal assertions. They are:

1. Whenever a specific event happens (especially malevolent occurrence), it must be the case that a particular cause is known to be always responsible. This will erase any iota of doubt if this is constantly the case.
2. There must be a continuous and necessary synergy between the cause and its effect³¹

When the above measures are used to weigh up witchcraft causal belief in Africa culture, it would be observed that it does not meet up to expectation. For instance, a young man slept alone in his room with his door locked and screamed at midnight hour, he died instantly. This incident is not necessarily influenced by witchcraft because from similar experiences, other factors could be held as culprit after a thorough investigation. We can't be certain that witchcraft agent caused this and some

other similar cases since unresolved medical factors or deleterious genetic foundation could impede continuous human existence. To infer external or covert causal force in the explanation of inexplicable events is not consistently relevant to all bizarre manifestations. The medical practitioner could give causal interpretations to most of these assumed mysterious events and if others linked witchcraft influence to them, it would be knotty to authenticate it.

Conclusion

So far, we have deliberated on the concept of causality, causality in African metaphysics and Hume's notion of causal connection. Witchcraft causation in African belief and an analysis on it were also discussed. We alleged that the occurrence of inexplicable events in African society is expected to be the handiwork of metaphysical entities. However, the main challenge is the discovering of a causal 'connexion' in between the visible effect and the assumed cause (the witch). The existence of witchcraft causation in African belief system is questionable and if we should assume it exist for some reasons best known to us, we should be mindful that the witch or witchcraft lacks apparent capacity to be directly linked to an obvious effect in our mundane world. This claim is not to deny the traditional Africans' unique ways of interpreting reality. Though Hume's causal connection has western foundation; that does not imply there is no iota of cogent truth in his quest for causal knowledge which any realistic worldview on causation is expected to meet up. For Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, the 'science of witchcraft' causation should promote the methods that will not dislocate the web of nature but rather will enhance it, thereby promoting sustainable progress in

³¹. David Hume, *Enquiries*. Op. cit, 33.

knowledge claim.³²

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³². Samuel Asuquo Ekanem, "Religion, Voodoo, Witchcraft and the Development of Science and Technology: A Philosophical Diagnosis," *A Journal of Contemporary Research* 7, no 4 (2010): 343.