
THE NATURE AND EFFECTS OF WITCHCRAFT AMONG THE TIV OF BENUE STATE, NIGERIA: AN EXPOSITORY INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyze the nature and effect of witchcraft among the Tiv of North Central Nigeria. Witchcraft is a dreadful phenomenon feared by many, and at the same time revered by practitioners. It is shrouded in mystery since only the adherents have in-depth knowledge of their group's actions. Witchcraft is used more popularly and broadly to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical powers generally in a secret fashion. Witchcraft could be innate in an individual, it can be inherited as well as acquired. In Tiv culture, witchcraft is one of the three major components of Tiv traditional Religion alongside the belief in *Aondo* (Supreme Being) and *Akombo* (deities). Witchcraft is called *Tsav* while its adherents are called *Mbatsav*. A man who possesses *Tsav* powers is called *Ormbatsav* (wizard), while the female is *Kwasembatsav* (witch). Life in Tiv society is centered on the vital power of witchcraft. Although witchcraft cannot be scientifically proven, witches are believed to cause deformities, accidents, and misfortune. Many misfortunes of life are connected to evil manifestations of witchcraft. This study discusses the nature and effects of witchcraft in Tiv culture. Due to inadequate literature on the subject matter, this study relies mainly on primary sources, i.e oral interviews. Others were textbooks and journal articles. Findings showed that witchcraft is evil, antisocial and destructive. It was also found that Christianity has largely influenced the activities of witches.

INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft can be described as the knowledge and application of supernatural powers, skills and abilities by individuals that possess such powers. Although witchcraft is a purely spiritual or metaphysical activity, it is also manifests physically through events and happenings. Imojime points out such events to include “unusual occurrences such as disappearance of things, mysterious deaths, accidents etc”. Thus, people that possess witchcraft powers are feared in the community. Atoo's testimony corroborates Imojime's assertion above. He noted that “witches are capable of harnessing and manipulating the natural order to their advantage; they can cause rainfall, thunder, lightning, fire outbreak, epidemic, bumper harvests, and can also cause several misfortunes, if they chose”.

Agba stated that “the Belief in witchcraft is found among different communities and societies of the world whose cultural framework hinges on a traditional world view”. Witchcraft practice is a wide-ranging experience. Thus, the Tiv people of North Central Nigeria are not alien to this phenomenon. In Tiv culture, Atule reiterated that “the subject matter of witchcraft assumes mind-blowing stage”. The manifestation of witchcraft activities among the Tiv is colossal. For instance, Atule observed that, “death of individuals, poor harvest, epidemics, accidents, sicknesses and misfortune are perceived to have been orchestrated and projected by witchcraft”. This paper discussed the nature of witchcraft in Tiv culture and how it has been influenced by Christianity.

WITCHCRAFT: A REVIEW

Etymologically, the word “witch” is taken from the Anglo Saxon “*witan*” which means 'to know'; and “craft” which means the 'skill'. Literally, witchcraft could be understood to mean the skill/craft of the wise. However, several definitions of witchcraft have evolved. Nyabwari and Kagema define witchcraft as the “application of mystical powers for personal purposes.” They expressed that these mystical powers may enable practitioners with the ability to perform superhuman or uncommon acts, for instance, walking on fire, lying on thorns or nails, sending curses or harm including death from a distance. They can convert inanimate objects into biologically active living creatures, delve deep to reveal hidden information, or reveal the future, or detect thieves and other culprits.

According to Magesa, witchcraft or *uchawi*, as it is known in Swahili, is a generic term applied to a malevolent witch, sorcerer or anyone considered to have more power than that of the average person. Magesa agrees with Kagema that witchcraft is a mysterious power that

resides in human beings. That it permeates all areas of life and is an ever-present reality in people's political, social, and economic organizations. It affects both communal and personal life. Witchcraft, Magesa adds, is the enemy of life- acting as it does against harmony, good order, neighbourliness or good company. It is antithetical to cooperation and sharing, propriety and equitableness, honesty and transparency. In other words, witchcraft is against all that holds the community together the solidarity and the unity of society, the fine balance between the living and the dead, order and survival in the universe. Witches are people who cannot control their impulses, who have insatiable desires and hatreds, are often unsociable, selfish or arrogant.

Nyabwari and Kageema reported that, in African worldview anything that is wrong or bad both in society and in the world originates in witchcraft. This is the case whether it is illness, hardship, or misfortune. They also argue that, good order requires that people act openly and in daylight, identify with kith and kin, which respect taboos, and behave in a normal and moral fashion. This helps to suppress negative emotions like envy, hatred, anger, lust etc. Fear of being labelled a witch is a powerful deterrent against immoral antisocial behaviour, thus enforcing conformity to societal morals and values. This is perhaps why strange people with abnormalities, sterility, or bodily deformities are often considered witches - red eyes, ugly feet, queer and malicious behaviour. Since witches are regarded as opponents to the natural order of harmonious community life, any inexplicable mishap or tragedy which defies natural or religious explanation is attributed to witchcraft.

Offiong describes witchcraft as the natural exercise of evil by persons who are possessed with malevolent innate powers which can be employed to hurt people. He stated that a witch has a physical substance innate to the body wherein lies their mystical power. Parrinder defines witches as people who had made a league with the devil not only to cause tempest and ruin crops, but to fly to distant places to spend all night in devilish lusts. Similarly, Middleton and Winter cited in Gule and Odili referred to witches as “personification of evil and as a group of an innate wicked people who do harm”. In a broad sense witchcraft describes all sorts of evil employment of mystical power generally in a secret fashion. The positions above indicate clearly that, witches are nothing good and beneficial; hence, they are portrayed as anti-social and immoral.

On the other hand, Gule and Odili opine that witchcraft could be inherited or acquired. Ilega corroborates the position above and state that, “witchcraft acquisition may be hereditary; some may buy it with their money or acquire it through food either knowingly or

unknowingly”. In the same light, Ikenga-Metuh cited in Ogbule and Odili add that “while some persons are born witches, others acquire it by swallowing or eating a chemical substance which imbues them with the psychic insight or power”. The scholarly views in Ogbule and Odili, Ikenga and Ikenga-Metuh indicates that even if one has no inherent witchcraft, one can acquire these powers if he chooses to. Both men and women therefore have a choice to operate in this dimension. Awolalu and Dopamu quickly remarked that minor witches are predominantly women and that men are the head of the witch guild.

Apart from the evil perpetrated through witchcraft, another disturbing reality about it and witches generally is that they live normal social lives, making it difficult for them to be easily identified. For instance, one's parent, friend, wife or child might be a witch without him knowing. Atoot went on to state that “many times, even the individual which might not initially figure out the fact that he/she were a witch until later in their lifetime”. This view is also shared by Ogbule and Odili who note that many witches don't know who they were initially. Again, the Ga people in Ghana as reported by Nyabwari and Kagema believed that witchcraft is passed on from parents to their children. Children thus became witches without their knowledge although they wait its practice until they attain puberty. It can be summarized here that, based on the views of authors above, witchcraft is the knowledge, acquisition and application of mysterious powers usually for selfish evil end. Hence, its often-nocturnal operations are antisocial and projected to inflict pain on individuals in the society.

WITCHCRAFT IN TIV CULTURE

Witchcraft in Tiv is called *tsav* while its practitioners are called *mbatsav*. A male which is called *ormbatsav* (wizard), while his female counterpart is called *kwase mbatsav*. According to Torkula, “the term '*tsav*' is employed in reference to “a cosmic potency internalized in man as part of his personality”. *Tsav* is one of the major constituent elements of Tiv traditional religion. Torkula has identified these components of Tiv traditional religion to include “the belief in *aondo* (*supreme being*), *tsav* (*witchcraft*) and *akombo* (deities or lesser gods). Thus, being a major component in Tiv traditional religion, witchcraft occupies a prominent place in the society over the entire history of the Tiv.

Gundu had maintained that, in Tiv cultural world view, the reality of *tsav* manifests in people in three different forms. This is similar to Offiong's argument that “a witch has a physical substance innate to the body wherein lies their mystical power”. According to Gundu, therefore, the first and most potent form appears like the crown of a cock and covers the heart

of the individual with “claws”. The second is a dwarf type with no “claws” (*kpumutsa*) while the third type is a small point projection from the heart which gives the possessor some awareness of the supernatural. Tordue agrees with the above view adding that, “this phenomenon is called '*ishimanomsoor*' (meaning a man's heart) by the Tiv”. According to Gundu and Tordue, although *Tsav* is a mysterious power, it is housed by the human organs, specifically, the heart.

Supporting this view, Dzurgba explained that, *tsav* is the supernatural organ with which a person is born, and locates itself either in the heart or liver or lungs. As it can be found only in any of these three organs, the Tiv people say that a person has *tsav* in his chest, for example. When a Tiv has *tsav ken vanger*, meaning that “one's heart is full of witchcraft powers”. Dzurgba added that, when a mandied in pre-colonial Tiv society, and the council of elders could not ascertain the cause of death, the council of elders occasionally cut the person's chest open and inspected the heart, the liver and the lungs. If one of these organs was abnormal, for instance swollen, the council of elders concluded that the deceased had *tsav* in the chest. Due to the *tsav* in the chest, he was indebted to other persons who had *tsav* in their chests and so because the debtor could not or refused to pay back the debt, the witches had no option, but to kill the debtor and share his meat among them to settle his debt. In this case, the Tiv people say that he had killed himself (*a wuaiyolna*); thus, even his bereaved family members were consoled that he had not been killed forcefully by other persons that had *tsav* in their chest.

Atoo conjectured that those who possess *tsav* are called *mbatsav* (singular *ormbatsav*) and their activities are theoretically geared towards good governance (*tar soron*), and personal comfort, security and communal well-being. However, Jembe Tarlaha asserted that, practically, the extent to which any *ormbatsav* can be beneficial to society in the context of his activities is a factor of the type of *tsav* “growing” on his heart and particular *akombo* being manipulated at the point in time. Jembe's submission above implies here that, *tsav* and *akombo* as major components of Tiv traditional religion work concomitantly. This is probably why Bohannan argues that *tsav* is morally neutral and can be deployed for either good or bad. If deployed for good, society is assured of a potent social control mechanism. Zauka agreed with Bohanan's position and added on the other hand that, if it is deployed for evil, individuals can be bewitched leading to sickness and sometimes death. He identified other malevolent aspects to include crop failure, bad dreams, ill luck, barrenness and the like.

In Tiv society, several reasons may be enough to account for human killings using witchcraft. Affliction of sickness and misfortune against individuals in the society are also common manifestations of witchcraft. Zauka noted that the most prominent reason that results to witchcraft affliction is the phenomenon of *imborvungu*. It is the most sacred religious object in Tiv traditional religion. This object is kept in utmost secrecy and if a person, who is not meant to see it, accidentally sees it or is shown, he/she is in serious danger of death. KperaGbor confirmed that, “unauthorized spotting of another persons' *imborvungu* is equal to death”. As it is usually described, the offender has to *haawambe shami* (meaning, offer blood sacrifice) to appease the deity and its owner. Again, any individual who needed to acquire *imborvungu* will equally offer sacrifice of human blood as the price. Retrieving of one's *imborvungu* from his/her mother's kin also attract sacrifice of human blood (i.e where one inherited *imborvungu* from their parents, usually, it is one's mother's kin that took custody of it). All this indicates that every activity surrounding the phenomenon of *imborvungu* is associated with killing of family members. Hence, it is the mostly used opportunity for the operation of witchcraft to kill in Tiv society. Denen revealed that, when *ormbatsav* wants to kill a person (old, young or even infant), he invites him to a secret place and shows him the *imborvungu* and makes a demand for a human being as the *mbatsav* are interested in human meat (*nyamor*).

Witches have supernatural capabilities for acting miraculously; for instance, Denen said that they operate in the day and night. Also, *mbatsav* have spiritually invisible bicycles, motorcycles, cars and airplanes. For a long time before the internet came to be known in Tiv land, Tiv people had believed that *mbatsav* were capable of bewitching a person from a far distance through the means of evil air sent forth from the mouth of a wizard or a witch. This religious practice may be associated with the principle by which the telegram, telephone and internet media operates. All these invisible means of transport emphasize the visible power and pervasiveness of *tsav* in Tiv traditional religion.

Ekwunife identified three ways to becoming a witch/wizard. This could be either through inheritance or voluntary initiation into a witch guild or through buying or acquiring witchcraft intentionally”. Similarly, Mbiti posits that, “witchcraft is a manifestation of these mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited, or acquired in various ways. For some people it is said to function without their being aware of or having control over it. More often, however, it is believed that witchcraft and bad magic are combined and work evil.

EFFECTS OF WITCHCRAFT

Witchcraft beliefs are grounded in the concept of causation, which remains a guiding principle in Tiv cosmology in explaining why misfortunes happen. This principle suggests that all misfortunes are caused by some unseen power. Atoo declared that “witchcraft is a dreadful phenomenon”. This saying indicates that someone with ill motive has decided to harm another person. Thus, according to the Tiv mindset, any misfortune or sickness is viewed as being caused either by ancestral spirits, bad magic, sorcery, or witchcraft. According to Zauka, witchcraft has caused hatred, created fear, curiosity and psychological trauma, among other things. Hence, the bottom-line is that, witchcraft has no known positive effect.

There are several evidences of the corrosive effects of witchcraft in Tiv society. For instance, Atoo, Zauka, and Denen in separate interviews strongly affirm that witchcraft causes unusual occurrences like fatal accidents, conflicts, untimely death, domestic and public nuisance. The belief in witchcraft is a salient feature of Tiv daily life, and so there are obvious reasons for mistrust among the people and negative signs of a cohesive social relationship. Economically speaking, the practice of witchcraft practice has seriously deterred and disrupted economic activities in the society as progressive attempts have been made by the *mbatsav* who change themselves into animal to despoil people's farmlands. R. C. Abraham has, therefore, postulated that:

A member of the *mbatsav* who sees the farm of one of the 'empty chested' flourishing, while his own is in poor condition, it is said that he takes one of these monkeys and goes to the farm of one whom he wished to injure. He changes himself into one of these monkeys after which, he real monkeys in the surrounding bush hear him and hasten up to despoil the crops and wreck the farm.

According to Denen, this destruction has caused many people to migrate to other places in search of greener pastures while those who could, sold little from their surviving crops. Socially speaking, Jembe noted that the relationships between communities have been dampened by witchcraft activities, thereby cutting short the peaceful co-existence between them. In the area of education, jealousy and hatred as well as hate speech abound, and these have always resulted to bewitchment. Witchcraft can be invoked to explain the success of others, with bad intention. It makes sense of the inequalities of life; thus, the fact that one

person is soaring higher than the others, a witch selfishly wants more than he or she ostensibly deserves.

In Tiv land, competition between two people draws their progressive attention of witchcraft. On many occasions, Jembe asserts that “the target is to tactfully bring down the other through some kind of mystical power”. Witchcraft stigmatization has also in some cases led to children experiencing torture and/or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In addition to those activities already detailed, children who have been stigmatized as witches have suffered imprisonment, forced starvation, forced participation in psychologically damaging 'exorcism' ceremonies. Psychologically, the perpetration of evil through witchcraft is quite alarming. People are surrounded by fear and mystery. Untold events and hardship are classified under the most qualities of the *mbatsav* who maim or kill people. There is nothing in Tiv that is illusory as *tsav*. The fear of the *mbatsav* by the Tiv people acts like a persistent, incurable disease; it is enslaving. The activities of the witches set them apart as evil people who do not contribute to the general good of the society. In most cases, they are definitely anti-social for they are malicious, envious.

Encounter with Christianity

The prominence and increasing importance of the Tiv people in the modern world concerning their religious lives is necessary to spotlight an account of the main religious beliefs and practices of Tiv, which have had undeniable contact with Christianity and western culture. I argue that witchcraft is a practice that needs a sound and urgent Christian response. Christianity has amply stated that magic, spells and divination as well as any other form of supernatural contact (other than prayer) is forbidden, since it relies on supernatural power outside of God. The Bible says:

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practice divination or sorcery, interpret omens, engages in witchcraft or cast spells or who is a medium or spirits or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.

God has made it clear that witchcraft is dangerous and incompatible with

Christianity. It may seem attractive, magical and different, but it does not give eternal life and a relationship with God. The practice of witchcraft cannot be tolerated with the worship of God because He is perfect and holy and cannot be combined with the worship of anything from humanity. Christianity provides a powerful authority for denouncing crime or any immoral wrong. The Bible maintains that, "All scripture are God-breath and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work".

CONCLUSION

This study discussed the nature and effect of witchcraft in Tiv society. It held that witchcraft is the application of supernatural or spiritual powers for evil ends. These powers can be inherited from birth or acquired. Concerning their operations, this study found that witches indulge in nocturnal activities and prey on individuals, especially those that do not belong to the guild. Their aim is to cause sorrow, pain, misfortune and disaster in the society. Conceptually, the use of the term witchcraft applies to people, with an inherent power by which they can transform to other beings, abandon their bodies at night and attend meeting with people of similar persuasions. Witches do not just prey on individuals; they maliciously execute their wicked evil plans. This phenomenon has lingered throughout the history of Tiv people. However, following the advent of Christianity, the Bible condemns witchcraft and its allied practices. This has reduced the witchcraft operations significantly. Akaatenger crowns it all that, the Biblical position of unstinted condemnation and repudiation of witchcraft and related practices pre-supposes recognition of the reality and dynamism of evil and the devil. To ensure a progressive society, this study concludes that, the society must eschew witchcraft.

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LIST OF RESPONDENTS

S/N	Name	Age	Sex	Address	Occupation	Date interviewed
1.	Imojime Goon	55	Male	Yandev, Gboko LGA	Community Leader	15 th January 2020
2.	Atoo Gyundun ase	76	Male	Gee Alieda, Gwer LGA	District Head	10 th March 2020
3.	Agba Korgba	54	Male	Katsina Ala street Makurdi	Teacher	20 th January 2020
4.	Atule Gbaa	76	Male	Angough Village Gboko	Farmer	17 th November 2020
5.	Tordue Sombo	67	Male	Mbayion District Gboko	Retired Civil servant	12 th January 2020
6.	Zauka Toryou gh	73	Male	Wannune town Tarka LGA	Farmer	2 nd October 2020
7.	Jembe Tarlaha	59	Male	Nanev District Adikpo, Kwande LGA	Farmer	12 th December 2019
8.	Kpela Gbor	51	Male	Ihugh town, Vandeikya LGA	Farmer	9 th April 2020
9.	Denen Orakaa	45	Male	High level, Makurdi	Civil Servant	15 th May 2020