

SHORT TAKES

The Use of Religion and Science in the Control of Witchcraft among the Abagusii of Western Kenya

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Abstract

Witchcraft belief and practice (*Oborogi*) is a pervasive aspect of Gusii community. It is seen as a threat to life and development. Curses and evil spirits might explain every social evil, but witchcraft is nearly always the reason in the minds of those who are struck by misfortune such as the demise of close relatives, all kinds of grave illness, impotence, barrenness, madness and failure to achieve certain goals in life. Among the Abagusii, witchcraft is an anti-social act that defies collective conscience. Those who practice *oborogi* are perceived as having mysterious supernatural powers with which they can and do harm to people. Further, it is seen as a psychic act through which socially disapproved supernatural techniques influence events. This paper examines how Abagusii community integrate knowledge of religion and science in controlling witchcraft acts among her people.

Key words: Religion, Science, Witchcraft, Abagusii, Kenya

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Conception of Witchcraft

Abagusii believe that some people are witches and can injure them by virtue of inherent quality. Unlike the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1976) and Ibibio (Offiong 1991), who only perceive witchcraft as a purely psychic act, the Abagusii in addition conceive it as involving performing of rites, casting of spells and possession of medicine or magic.

This conception of witchcraft among the Abagusii blurs the distinction between witches and sorcerers. According to Evans-Pritchard (1976) and Beidelman (1971), sorcerers are people who achieve their ends by use of magic, whereas witches achieve theirs by mystical powers inherent in their personality without

using magic or medicine. This criterion of distinguishing witches and sorcerers by the means they use to achieve their evil ends is not important to Abagusii but the end evil result is. Therefore to them, any person who can cause misfortune or harm to another person either by magic or psychic acts is seen to be practicing witchcraft.

The theory of witchcraft among the Abagusii is a fairly coherent body of two conventional beliefs. First, they believe that witchcraft is an inherent endowment which is transmitted in unilinear descent from parents to their children. This means that witchcraft is implanted from parents to their children through the process of socialization at an earlier age. This explains why witchcraft is associated with a particular family lineage.

These concepts of inheritance and socialization do not imply that all children whose parents are witches are witches too. Instead, in this community witches are be-

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lieved to possess some physical or psychological supernatural magical power called *enderi* which enable the possessor to cause harm to another human being. *Enderi* is passed from one particular parent who is a witch to his/her favourite son/daughter through initiation.

Initiation to witchcraft can also be done at an adult stage. For instance, if one person is a witch, they can initiate their spouse to witchcraft. In most cases, the initiated do not know they are witches. Those who are initiated to witchcraft through this way do bewitch people and carry on all activities involving witchcraft but they are unconscious of their actions and status.

Witches in this category are considered to be slaves of aberration and addiction. Being an inherent quality, the supernatural force is powerful than an individual self. In most cases, those who practice witchcraft are not conscious of their activities especially at night when these supernatural powers are perceived to be active.

Secondly, it is believed that some people can decide to become witches because of their natural tendency to do evil. They are envious, jealous or may have had some conflict with their relatives or some other persons within their family. Similarly, a people can turn into witches because they suspect another person is a witch and the only way they can prevent being bewitched is to also become witches.

According to oral narratives, this kind of witchcraft was alien to Abagusii. It is believed that they learnt this dark art from their Luo neighbours. People who practice this kind of witchcraft rely mostly on magic or medicine to cause harm to other people. Unlike in the first category, these witches are conscious of their activities and can control the power inherent in certain "magic or medicine" or other object they use to cause harm.

Witchcraft as a social problem

Among the Abagusii, witchcraft is understood as part of the mystery of human person. It is not

primarily an "art" or "craft." It is mysterious power. Its role and influence are not limited to activities of social nature. Witchcraft influences personal life as well. Efforts to preserve and promote life cannot be understood without reference to the power of witchcraft (Magesa 1997). Due to this, witchcraft is the enemy of life. It is intolerable for any society that values ethical principles and life itself.

In any society, witchcraft is seen as antithesis or opposition to accepted social norms or moral values. Behaviours normally ascribed to it are mostly a reverse to all normal standards. It's believed that they delight in "unnatural practices" such as incest and bestiality; they exhume and eat corpses and can kill or harm even their own children. In a nutshell Magesa (1997) suggests four explanatory accounts for the perception of witchcraft as socially harmful. These are:

1. Witchcraft is the human embodiment of evil.
2. Witchcraft disrupts the social order and can be harmful to development.
3. Witchcraft is the antithesis of state sanctioned religion.
4. Witchcraft constitutes an independent centre of power and authority that competes with the society and religion.

Controlling witchcraft

Witchcraft is an extremely secretive cult. Members take an oath of secrecy never to reveal anything to non-initiates under any circumstances, particularly the identities of chapter members and their activities. Due to this the Abagusii had two elaborate ways of controlling witches. These corresponded to two elements in the nature of the witch, who is non-human and a witch who is human. This distinction influenced witchcraft controlling strategies.

In so far as witchcraft power is non-human, individuals tried to nullify it using antidotes either by personal protection or planting magical concoctions at the homestead. Personal

protection entailed wearing of amulets (*erinsi*) or applying magical solutions either internally or externally to one's body.

The most common personal protection was the use of black powder called *obosaro* which was prepared from special herbal trees. The preparation of *obosaro* was normally accompanied with special religious rites and incantation to give it potency. In using this concoction for personal protection, the skin of an individual was cut open using the razor blade by the traditional medicine man or doctor. While blood gushed out, the black powder was rubbed into the fresh wound. The belief was that the powder produced antidotes or anti-toxins that prevented witches from harming the individual concerned.

In dealing with witches as humans, the Abagusii understood first and foremost that there is a big distinction between religion and witchcraft. Just as Emile Durkheim (in Lukes 1982), the Abagusii distinguish the collective phenomena of religion from the individual practice of witchcraft. Though witchcraft seems similar to religion superficially, it is actually different. These differences are three-fold:

1. Whereas religion may involve [often collective] requests made to divine powers [e.g. through prayers], witchcraft involves belief that the witch can directly affect the world through use of magic, words or spells.
2. In witchcraft nothing is sacred. Magic objects, word or spells are used for utilitarian purposes.
3. Religion is by nature collective whereas witchcraft is mostly individualistic.

The difference between religion and witchcraft can be attributed to the origin of both. According to Emile Durkheim (in Ritzer 1992) religion as a social fact is an outcome of collective representation. Collective representation are the products of action and reaction which individual consciousnesses are endowed with the power of coercion or compulsion,

because they are collectively created and developed and, therefore, impose themselves upon the individual desires. This means an individual power is meaningless before the power of the group (collective consciousness).

The power of the group (collective consciousness) is realized by the individual on the occasion of group rituals and ceremonies. On the occasion of these group ceremonies, rituals and rites, group psychology comes to operate and influence individual member. In this case, every individual is taken by group sentiment; he/she is beyond him/herself and his/her ideas and feelings function abnormally (Mukherjee 1960). What makes the individual behave this way, argues, Emile Durkheim is nothing else but society itself compelling, convincing and overpowering. It dominates the individual psyche, which ultimately gives rise to the sense of the sacred. The sacred, then is but a subjective reflection of "social determinant" (society) which is more superior or powerful than individual power.

Among the Abagusii, religion was highly regarded. No person regardless of status or power was superior to religion. Due to this the society's social life was governed by the whims and dictates of religion. For instance, in solving conflict among close relatives, religion was invoked in finding solution.

According to Parish (1999), witchcraft normally created conflict and mistrust among community members. In Abagusii community it was common for those entangled in such conflicts to report to clan elders (*etureti*). This was because of the two principles which witchcraft was believed to operate in. According to Masese (2006), these principles were expressed in witchcraft myths because it was believed that witches couldn't harm someone whom they don't share same blood relationship (lineage). First, witches and their accusers were people close together and belonged to one lineage. Two, witchcraft accusations always grew out of personal antipathy or hostile emotions to those people who are closely related.

These two principles made witchcraft a family affair and thus better handled at lowest level of the judicial system (*etureti*). *Etureti* was composed of members of the same lineage.

In dealing with conflict cases of witchcraft, clan elders had to undergo religious rituals of cleansing and invoking the protection of ancestral spirits. This was because of the belief that religious power was more powerful than witchcraft power. The parties involved were also asked to strip naked and take an oath under the ritualistic tree, *omotembe*, in full view of all community members. This oath was a serious one because if one took it and yet guilty, serious misfortune 'always' visited upon such a person like being stricken by lightning.

The next and crucial stage was listening to the two parties. In this case each party was given an opportunity to express their innocence or facts regarding the case. In most cases, the witch will generally protest with innocence. After listening carefully to each party, the clan elders passed no verdict but rather summoned *omoringori* to detect whether the accused was indeed a witch. The reason for this was to avoid making subjective judgment or conclusions.

In order to make unbiased ruling on witchcraft cases, *omoringori* integrated religious power and 'scientific experimentation' to detect if indeed the accused was a witch. As noted by Pugsley (2001), the remarkable discovery of 'scientific method' is the discovery that the nature of the world around us could be revealed through observation, hypothesis and the objective testing of each hypothesis.

The making of witchcraft case ruling had an elaborate procedure which was spearheaded by the *omoringori*. The first step was the summoning of all community members to gather for prayers and meditation under the sacred or ritualistic tree, *omotembe*. Before commencement of prayers, two other communities were randomly selected to act as control group to the other two who were entangled in conflict.

As community members continued praying and mediating, *omoringori* placed a traditional

magic instrument called *oronsuku* unto the bottom of the traditional pot, *egetega*. After this *omoringori* mixed special medicinal herbs with water and poured the concoction unto the traditional pot to the fill. This mixture was then placed on fire to boil.

As the concoction boiled, intensity of prayer and mediation increased. This is because the Abagusii believed that with prayers, the powers of witchcraft will be overcome and the ancestors or their god will have mercy upon them and reveal who indeed was a witch. Further, they knew that the power of prayer had some impact on ones mental state. As noted by Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania, during the moment of intense spiritual awareness, activities in the brain's amygdala, which monitors the environment for threats and registers fear, is damped. Parietal lobe circuits, which orient you, go quiet, while circuits in the frontal and temporal lobes, which mark time and generate self-awareness, become disengaged (Beauregard 2003). This then affect on how one's body responds to the immediate threats of the environment.

When the concoction reached the boiling point, the conflicting parties' right hands were smeared with some special herbs, so were the randomly selected community members. After this each one of them was then asked to get out *oronsuku* from the boiling concoction as prayers and meditation continued. The first group to try get *oronsuku* out of boiling concoction were the randomly selected community members. They were followed by the accuser and lastly the accused. If the accused was a witch, the special herbs would not protect him/her from burning thus would not get *oronsuku* out.

This method was mostly preferred by clan elders in solving witchcraft conflict because it was considered unbiased. In most cases, if one was detected to be practicing witchcraft, the clan elders authorized his/her kinship members to kill him/her. Mostly kinship members way-laid the detected witches at night and killed

them by inserting a sharp object in their ass or nailing the head with long nails (or some other sharp object).

On the other hand, if the person was found to accuse another falsely of witchcraft he/she was censured and ashamed. Further a heavy fine was imposed on the accuser for soiling another's name. This deterred most people who did not have tangible evidence about a person's witchcraft activities. Such people only engaged in gossip or whispering campaigns.

In conclusion, this method of controlling witchcraft was quite effective. Incidences of witchcraft practices and accusation were minimal. However, with the introduction of colonialism, Christianity and formal constitutional laws, this mechanism has been sidelined. Consequently, there is a skyrocketing increase of witchcraft accusation and killings in this community.

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