

‘In Witchbound Africa’: an account of contemporary conditions and discussions¹

Publication information: Harries, Jim, 2016, ‘In Witchbound Africa: In Witchbound Africa’: an account of contemporary Western Christian scholarship on witchcraft.’ *The Pneuma Review*, June 12 2016, <http://pneumareview.com/in-witchbound-africa/>

Introduction

Questions about witchcraft seem to float threateningly on the edge of most missiological discussions on Africa. Various authors of a recent edition of IBMR (International Bulletin for Missionary research (39(1))) have done us a service by bringing them to the fore. This is a very welcome step and I congratulate IBMR for their boldness in pointing us to this pernicious concern.

From 1988 to 1991 I lived and worked amongst the Kaonde people of Zambia.² Whilst there I heard of a book by a British colonial officer Frank H. Melland, that he had written about the Kaonde and that was published in 1923. It is to my knowledge still the most comprehensive account of the customs and traditions of the Kaonde. The title of the book often sticks in my mind: *In Witchbound Africa: an account ...* Melland having written in 1923, one would think things might have changed. More than three generations later this article asks; is Africa still ‘witchbound’?

Stimulated by the above IBMR authors, I would like to write this response to their scholarship. This response arises, subsequent to my above-described stay in Zambia, after having lived amongst the Luo (and to a lesser extent Luyia) people of Western Kenya since 1993. I find clear differences between these people and the Kaonde of Zambia. This especially because the Luo are ethnically and linguistically essentially unrelated to the Kaonde.³ But there are also enormous similarities. The fact that apparently unrelated people can have such similar beliefs suggests to me that ‘witchcraft’, as it is known in some Western scholarship, is a default product of certain worldviews, especially monistic worldviews that seem to be the norm in much of sub-Saharan Africa.

The question of the definition of witchcraft seems to be almost insoluble. Perhaps it is helpful to say that; witchcraft is a term used in Western scholarship that attempts to align certain practices carried out in the non-Western world with beliefs and traditions apparently once widespread in the West, which the West has in contemporary times come to understand as having been misguided. In terms of its content, witchcraft in Africa is a way of dealing with negatives in people’s character, such as envy (especially) and anger. This means used to deal with such has particular out-workings, including at times accusations regarding use of witchcraft that result in inter-human tensions, accusations, and sometimes physical violence.

Extractive Scholarship

¹ The title ‘In Witchbound Africa’ is taken from Melland (1923).

² <http://www.ethnologue.com/language/kqn>

³ The Kenya-Luo are Nilotic, whereas the Kaonde are Bantu.

The above introduction suggests that the West has paid some attention to witchcraft. The term itself, witchcraft, has dictated much of the nature of that attention. It has meant that from the start whatever constitutes 'witchcraft' is to be considered outdated and rooted in mis-understandings. Implicitly, as in the West, witchcraft accusations are no longer made but were once made, Western scholars are on their front foot, and Africans are on their back foot on considering this set of issues. Western scholars are waiting for Africans to be 'enlightened' as 'we' already are regarding the folly of belief in witchcraft.

Anthropologists have probably been at the forefront of studies of witchcraft. I have personally greatly valued reading many anthropological texts on this subject. Anthropology has been one of the many scholarly disciplines to have gone through crisis since the advent of postmodernism on the back of the undermining of foundationalism.⁴ Prior to about 1950, many Western scholars considered themselves to be writing on firm epistemological foundations. Since that time, at least amongst those 'in the know', the claim that science can be the foundation to all knowledge has lost its credibility (Plantinga 1983:4). Anthropologists have as a result been forced to re-examine some of their foundational assumptions, presumably including those on witchcraft.

Not having space to consider the above re-examination in detail in this article, I simply want to look at the implications of anthropology being conducted in Western languages, and being extractive. I begin with the latter.

Most anthropologists are scholars who have made a (laudable!) effort to root themselves in social realities that remain out of sight to others in the West, classically by stints in the field making observations while frequently participating as much as possible in the life of those being researched. The above degrees of commitment are not to be belittled. Anthropologists first immerse themselves in theory. Then they carry out fieldwork. Afterwards, they interpret their research in terms of extant theory. The 'theory' they are expected to use is Western (Halliburton 2004). That is; it is dualistic; it is theory that has arisen essentially in the modern era. When anthropologists write, they engage with other anthropologists and with other disciplines in academia. They do not engage primarily with the people they have researched; the latter typically have no power to confer the degrees or other potential salary-earning rewards for obtaining an accredited qualification that the anthropologist is looking for. To engage with anthropologists one has to know anthropology (i.e. what the anthropologists have been doing). Simply knowing something of a non-Western people is far from adequate for such engagement.

Unfortunately, in the course of extracting, discussing, dissecting, then relocating what they find on the field into Western scholarship, anthropologists can distort extant reality. Ironically, in today's world of so-called 'globalised education', non-Western scholars are required to base their research on their own communities on the anthropological accounts that have become identified with them. For example, an African scholar writing a thesis in Nairobi must use definitions of 'witchcraft' devised in the West. A pre-requisite for such scholars to be taken seriously in the global

⁴ See also Hiebert, 30-35.

educational scene, in other words, is for them to write on the basis of an identity other than their own. E.g. Kikuyu⁵ authors are required when they write about the Kikuyu to do so *as if* they (the authors) are European.

A large part of the above issue concerns choice of language. A Tanzanian colleague of mine recently wrote, at a Kenyan university, a PhD thesis about the development of a church in Tanzania. Tanzanians think largely in terms of mother-tongue and Swahili languages. I expected his thesis to analyse the implications of translation into English. “Ignore all that and just write in English”, his Kenyan supervisors apparently advised him.⁶

Should for example a Luo person wanting to engage with the rest of global scholarship be told that his people practice witchcraft, a term that describes something that used to happen in the UK and America, he must accept this to be true. The basis of the *accusation* will be that certain practices of the Luo are parallel to ancient European beliefs in witchcraft, and parallel to practices of other people around the world who are also said to believe in witchcraft. In order to be better informed he needs to read books in English about witchcraft. He is expected to super-impose the understanding he acquires onto his own understanding of his own people. Asamoah-Gyadu, apparently the only non-Westerner contributing to the 39(1) issue of IBMR, has had to go through such a process. Asamoah-Gyadu cites the following twelve Western scholars in his article: Stephen Ellis, Gerrie ter Haar, Hans W. Debrunner, Aylward Shorter, Robert S. Rattray, Peter Geschiere, Harold W. Turner, Gerhardus Oosthuizen, Birgit Meyer, Peter C. Wagner, Rebecca Brown, and C. H. Kraft. He also cites nine African scholars, Elias Bongmba, Kwame Bediako, Emmanuel Milingo, E. A. Asamoah, Douglas Akwasi Owusu, Asonzeh F.-K. Ukah, Opoku Onyinah, Emeka Nwankpa, Eastwood Anaba. The latter have of course built their understanding on the foundations of Western scholarship in the course of long intense studies. Asamoah-Gyadu’s biography emphasises his credibility by saying: he “has served as visiting scholar at Harvard University (2004), Luther Seminary in St. Paul (2007), and the Overseas Ministries Study Center (2012)” (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015:23). Now I do not blame Asamoah-Gyadu for doing this! I am simply pointing out that credibility in those scholarly circles arises from one’s track record in engaging with the West. Unfortunately, to get a ‘voice’ in Western scholarship; he might have had to ‘invent’ witchcraft for his own people.

The use of English in scholarship in Africa in some respects amounts to sheer folly. That is not to say that African or contemporary Western scholars can be blamed for this predicament. Whether or not we can apportion blame, it is a predicament that we are facing. I suggest that the best way around this predicament is to encourage African scholarship using African languages. If there were a body of emerging African scholars using their own languages, and thus thought forms and categories, a process of translation into English could then be engaged to inform Western scholars of it, as through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12). How to encourage the development of such an African scholarship? Perhaps to begin with on the side of the West; some Westerners need to take African languages seriously. Until such a turn-around occurs;

⁵ The Kikuyu are an ethnic group or *tribe* in Kenya.

⁶ Personal conversation.

it is almost impossible for scholarship on witchcraft in Africa not to be in some ways misleading, and extractive.

My reader, who may well not be familiar with any African languages, may be asking themselves; ‘what then should we do?’ Helping to deconstruct Western scholarship on Africa may be a part of that answer. This article aims to do a little of that, in the hope that it will result in Westerners seeing the need for what I could call ‘non-extractive field research’. As far as Western scholars are concerned, the answer has to be akin to ‘get over there’. Short-cuts are limited and misleading. This is one of many reasons we need to be encouraging vulnerable mission, for more on which see below.⁷

Accusing the Missionary

Recent decades have seen, on the side of Western outreach to Africa, a boom in short-term mission (Anthony 1994). Many reasons are often given for this including:

1. because many African people know Western languages long-term field exposure to learn languages is unnecessary.
 2. The maturity of the African church means that it only needs short-term ‘technical’ support.
 3. The rise of global communication.
 4. Western people’s reluctance to enter into long-term commitments, etc.⁸
- The role of ‘witchcraft’ is less often considered.

Western missionaries, with their much wealth and seeking for power while largely ignorant of local realities, are in some ways prime candidates for witchcraft attack, or accusation. In another sense, their ignorance of local languages and cultures, their not being economically dependent on the local community, plus their tendency to material generosity, immunises them against attack. (Material generosity is two edged: it buys friends, but because it is invariably partial, it attracts the envy of those outside of the circle of its privileged beneficiaries and creates tensions between beneficiaries.) I would like to suggest that witchcraft activity may frequently limit missionary longevity on the field. This can be explained in many ways:

1. A missionary couple left the field when they found that their slightly mentally-retarded child was being mocked and abused by local children. Mental illness in Africa frequently interpreted as being caused by witchcraft means that the mentally ill may not be respected.
2. Inter-missionary tensions frequently result in missionaries leaving the field.⁹ How often are these tensions provoked by the divisive talk of locals motivated by envy, the ‘power-house’ of witchcraft (Harries 2012)?
3. The 1970s call for a missionary moratorium was presumably motivated, in part at least, by envy of missionaries’ superior resources. It would seem that a motivation for getting missionaries out of the way may be to benefit from some of the resources that they have been consuming.

⁷ The AVM (Alliance for Vulnerable Mission) defines vulnerable mission as the practice of ministry by some Western missionaries that uses local languages and resources (vulnerablemission.org).

⁸ I have discussed some of the problems of the predominance of short-term mission in Harries (2006).

⁹ ‘Co-missionaries’, Figure 2, of Bloecher (2005:5).

4. Witchcraft beliefs result in a need for secrecy. For example, people who ‘believe in’ witchcraft often fear to reveal the level of their wealth, such as the number of cows they have (Harries 2007:51). This kind of orientation to secrecy and deception can result in the failure of many Western initiated projects. Such projects rely on people’s being honest. When projects collapse, missionaries can be forced to go home.

There is, in my experience, a widespread wisdom that says that Western missionaries are not accused of being witches. Perhaps such a standing high and dry from local issues is not always the best option? Envy resulted in Jesus’ crucifixion (Mark 15:10). Fear of loss of income caused Paul and Silas to be imprisoned (Acts 16:19). The people of Jerusalem hated Jeremiah for his negative prophecies, very nearly resulting in his death sentence (Jeremiah 26:11). These are witchcraft-related accusations. In contemporary times, Western missionaries meeting accusations such as the above, might leave the field and go home. Should they instead stick around?

Responding to witchcraft attack often promotes more witchcraft. Hence the apparently never ending spiral of accusation and counter-accusation that apparently characterises some African communities.¹⁰ (Missionaries should not, I suggest, be accusing people of being witches. Or accusing them of accusing people of being witches. But they do need to know what is going on around them so as not to be unknowing perpetrators or victims of witchcraft.) How should victims behave? Here is what Jesus taught us: “love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you ...” (Matthew 5:44). He did not say that when attacked by one’s enemies one should leave.

Sometimes the gross power (arising from the budget they have available to spend) and their linguistic-cultural ignorance quickly gets missionaries into trouble with their host communities. They could ‘survive’ on the basis of the resources they have to share. Missionaries who do not have such generous budgets and who take the time to carefully learn to use indigenous languages can learn to be less abrasive.¹¹ They can duck some of the witchcraft-flak. (Non-conventional Western missionaries, who do not have generous budgets, can be rendered more liable to witchcraft attack, for example as a result of being ‘unusual’.) If they manage to survive, then they can begin to give a role model of how to live honourable lives after having been accused of being witches, much as did Jesus, Jeremiah and Paul in the examples cited above.

Witchcraft Emerges from Worldview

Rasmussen and Rasmussen tell us that witchcraft arises in societies in which causation is seen to be relational (2015:15). Witchcraft then is not a vestigial organ that can be excised. It seems to be an integral part of what I once called a ‘magical worldview’ (Harries 2000). Countering witchcraft, then, can be done at world-view level. The bible challenges the ‘magical worldview’ through its reference to the sovereignty of God. That is the message that missionaries should be sharing. They

¹⁰ Once witchcraft accusation is legitimised, there is no knowing where accusations and counter-accusations will end.

¹¹ Research by Detlef (nd.) shows that missionaries who learn language have greater longevity, without clearly articulating why this is.

should be sharing it in word, and in deed; they should avoid accusing witches, and should remain faithful to God when themselves accused.

Witchcraft forces are NOT ‘supernatural’

Many of the authors in IBMR (39(1)) seem to assume that witchcraft forces are ‘supernatural’.¹² The very term supernatural implies that there is a ‘natural order’ and then another order that is ‘super-to’ i.e. above the natural, i.e. the term is inherently dualistic. I have shown elsewhere that much of Africa is monistic.¹³ To consider witchcraft powers to be supernatural can be grossly misleading. Let us take a classic witchcraft practice of stabbing an image of a person with a knife; a practice which is thought will kill that person. Such a practice is only effective if either the person concerned knows (or is impacted upon by those who know) that the image has been stabbed, or knows that it is likely that an image of him has been stabbed (i.e. is aware that a witchcraft attack on him could be being carried out). The notion that there are ‘supernatural powers’ in African witchcraft can be a construction of poorly thought out translation of witchcraft discourse into Western worldviews.

Racism

The kind of writing engaged by our IBMR authors could, unfortunately, be interpreted as ‘racist’. They are after all accusing non-Western people of practicing witchcraft. This is where the global use of English is very problematic: Yes, Western missionaries need to be alerted to what they will find in Africa. On the other hand, it is probably wrong to accuse Africans of doing that which the West calls ‘witchcraft’. This issue of accusing people of being ‘racist’ goes much broader than our particular concern with witchcraft here. I have addressed it in more detail elsewhere (Harries 2011a).

Reflecting on ‘Holistic Mission’

Protestant mission activity has in recent decades, especially since Lausanne 1974, widely advocated ‘holistic’ or ‘integral’ mission. I have critiqued this in more detail elsewhere.¹⁴ I take advocating this kind of mission to have arisen from translation-error. While scholars such as Padilla have a point, the English they use ignores, I suggest, swathes of the modern Western worldview that has been guiding Western mission. Christian mission activities by the West have been an essentially ‘spiritual’ venture by a decreasingly ‘spiritual’ society. Obliging Western missionaries to engage material generosity alongside their Gospel preaching under the label of ‘holistic mission’ is in practice to have them draw on Western dualism.

Some people from the majority world, such as Padilla, have been enthusiastic promoters of holistic mission (Padilla 2005). Unfortunately, missionaries with resources become victims to jealousy, and provoke outbreaks of jealousy against

¹² The term supernatural can be used in a variety of ways. In a generic sense, to say that witchcraft forces are ‘supernatural’ is only to say that they do not fall into naturalists’ worldviews, which is true enough. To say that they are ‘supernatural’ in a context of African monism, however, I suggest is misleading.

¹³ For more discussion on this see Harries (2015).

¹⁴ For example, see Harries (2011b).

those they 'help'. That is; resources brought onto the scene by 'holistic mission' can themselves aggravate witchcraft-tensions. I am not saying that NO Western missionaries should introduce outside resources, but that some Western missionaries should be allowed to NOT provoke such jealousy; that they should minister in a Biblical way, i.e. other than on the back of superior resources. (Biblical prophets and preachers such as Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, Peter, did not back their ministry with generous gifts from far-away to their potential converts. It should be clear that, as far as local people in Africa are concerned, missionaries who do not bring resources can be seen as being in an 'inferior' category.) Padilla, and others in the majority world, coming from a monistic viewpoint are sometimes apparently angered by the high levels of consumption of Western missionaries, who then refuse to share (Padilla 2005:15). Certainly in Africa, where envy powers witchcraft (Harries 2012), such sentiments can be considered under the category of witchcraft. Whether Western missionaries or which Western missionaries can survive such onslaughts is a very pertinent question. The practice of vulnerable mission would help to alleviate the intensity of such feelings of envy. (See 'avoiding the flak' above!) On the other hand, in a contemporary context in which material generosity of foreign missionaries is expected, one who does not so provide can be suspect.

Vulnerable Mission as the Way Forward

Contemporary Africa is changing. There are many established institutions in Africa that were not there 100 or more years ago. Today's missionaries frequently meet communities who have heard the Gospel, are familiar with their language, even are using computers and surfing the internet. Today's missionary to Africa is not, typically, meeting unreached tribes in the jungle. He is trying to engage a complex history of which his own forefathers (i.e. previous generations of Westerners) have become an integral part.

At the same time, it has been my experience in Kenya, that a combination of pressure from home to be 'heroic' as a missionary, plus a tendency for missionaries to be identified with money and local people's need for that money, puts missionaries under pressure to be in charge, to lead, and to be powerful. Missionaries' reports to their donors and potential donors frequently necessarily include accounts of how vital their role is to be in the poor community they are entering. This kind of power-play can be unhelpful.

Because institutions missionaries meet on the field, be they churches, businesses, schools, hospitals etc., are often poorly run, inept and corrupt *on Western standards*, missionaries easily pick up roles of correcting and 'saving' such institutions. How long such a process will continue, is rarely considered; is Africa for-ever going to be operated from the West (Bronkema seems to suggest that this is the way we are heading (2015))? Sometimes the only other option Western missionaries seem to see to being in charge and 'saving' African people from apparently self-inflicted moral and physical demise, is leaving the field. Sticking around while seeing what is happening is too much to cope with. Short-termers take the place of long-termers as a result. (Of course leaving the field does not resolve the issues, it only puts them further out of sight.)

The above practices leave local people in a fix. The only ‘advice’ they ever get from Westerners, is that which is rooted in a context other than their own, that does not work. (Although, there are plenty of efforts being engaged to making it work anyway, because it comes with enormous subsidy.) When it does not work, and Westerners leave, what are the Africans supposed to do? They are left with non-functional institutions.

Some missionaries are needed who: 1. Stick around. 2. Do not subsidise their key ministries. 3. Engage using local languages. This is what we call ‘vulnerable mission’.

Conclusion

‘Witchcraft’ is prominent in many African communities. Witchcraft beliefs are ways of coping with negatives in human character, especially envy. Westerners define witchcraft in ways that give them an advantage. Anthropologists are to be acclaimed for their efforts at understanding witchcraft and related cultural content of non-Western communities, but also need to take some responsibility for strait-jacketing non-Western scholars. Language issues underlie the latter – expecting English to do service in understanding and engaging deep African issues is generally asking too much. This article shows ways in which an African and majority world orientation to witchcraft removes missionaries from the field. It asks whether missionaries shouldn’t be oriented to surviving witchcraft accusation instead of avoiding it? Times have changed; Africa already has its institutions (schools, hospitals etc.). Perhaps some missionaries ought to learn to survive in a context of the Africanisation of such institutions instead of ‘rescuing’ them. Missionary support often comes to those doing the rescuing, but ought to go to those who are more ‘vulnerable’ to on the ground African realities.

Bibliography

Anthony, Michael, J., 1994, *The Short-Term Missions Boom: A Guide to International and Domestic Involvement*. Michigan: Baker Publishing Group.

Asamoah-Gyadu, J. Kwabena, 2015, ‘Witchcraft Accusations and Christianity in Africa.’ *IBMR*, 39 (1), January 2015, 23-27.

Bloecher, Detlef, nd., ‘Continuous Language and Culture Studies are indispensable.’ https://www.dmgint.de/files/cto_layout/img/red/downloads/PDFs/englisch/Continuou s%20Language%20Studies%20DBloecher%20714.pdf

Bloecher, Detlef, 2005, ‘Reducing Missionary Attrition (ReMAP) - what it said and what it did.’ https://www.dmgint.de/files/cto_layout/img/red/downloads/PDFs/englisch/remapi_su mmary.pdf

Bronkema, David, (2015), ‘Flying Blind? Christian NGOs and Political Economy.’ 211-245 in: Cheong, John and Meleses, Eloise, (eds), 2015, *Christian Mission and Economic Systems: A Critical Survey of the Cultural and Religious Dimensions of Economies*, Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Halliburton, Murphy. 2004. 'Gandhi or Gramsci? the use of authoritative sources in anthropology.' *Anthropological Quarterly* 77(4):793–817.

Harries, Jim, 2015, *Secularism and Africa: in the light of the Intercultural Christ*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock.

Harries, Jim, 2000, 'The Magical Worldview in the African Church: What Is Going On?' 487-502 In: *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 4, October 2000.

Harries, Jim, 2006, 'The Effectiveness of Short-term Mission to Africa: in respect to Westernising, Christianising, and dependence creation.' <http://www.jim-mission.org.uk/articles/effectiveness-of-short-term-mission-to-africa.html>

Harries, Jim, 2007, 'Pragmatic Theory Applied to Christian Mission in Africa: with special reference to Luo responses to 'bad' in Gem, Kenya.' PhD Thesis. The University of Birmingham. <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/15/> (accessed 2nd January 2010).

Harries, Jim. 2011a. 'Racism in Reverse: the impact of the West on racism in Africa.' 163-184 In: Harries, Jim, 2011. *Vulnerable Mission; insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a position of vulnerability*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Harries, Jim. 2011b. 'Material Provision' or Preaching the Gospel: reconsidering holistic (integral) mission.' 81-98 In: Harries, Jim, 2011. *Vulnerable Mission; insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a position of vulnerability*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

Harries, Jim. 2012. "Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa." *Missiology: An International Review* 40(2): 129–139.

Melland, F.H., 1923, *In Witch Bound Africa: an account of the primitive Kaonde tribe and their beliefs*. Philadelphia: J.B.Lippincott Company.

Padilla, Rene C., 'Holistic Mission.' 11-23 In: Claydon, David, (ed.) 2005. *Lausanne Occasional Paper*. (LOP). No. 33. *Holistic Mission*. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelisation, Pattaya, Thailand, September 9th to October 5th 2004. http://community.gospel.net/lcwe/assets/LOP33_IG4.pdf

Plantinga, Alvin, 1983, 'Reason and Belief in God.' 16-93 In: Plantinga, A., and Wolterstorff N., (eds.) *Faith and rationality: reason and belief in God*. London: University of Notre Dame Press.

Rasmussen, Steven D.H. and Rasmussen, Hannah, 2015, 'Healing Communities: responses to witchcraft accusations.' 12-18 in: *IBMR* 39(1), January 2015.