

Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa

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People have sometimes doubted; can witchcraft and envy be the same? The other day, I saw this shop, with the above words written on it in the Luo language. The translation: 'envy is witchcraft'. I don't suppose that is 'proof', but it was striking!

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[Abstract] This article elaborates on the relationship between witchcraft and envy. It points out how much of tradition in parts of Africa is oriented to avoiding envy and suggests that countering the fear of envy is vital to community development on the continent. Tackling envy, being a theological

task, points to the central role of mission that has too often allowed such vital objectives to be clouded by secular thinking.

[EPIGRAPH] “What is thought of as ideals of sharing can be argued to be at least in part rules of society shaped by jealousy and distrust” (Maranz 2001:150).

Research for this article has been carried out largely amongst the Luo of Kenya. As an outsider, I leave others to notice similarities and differences with people in other parts of the African continent and, of course, with the Luo themselves to agree with me or otherwise on different points. Nevertheless, I consider these findings to be potentially transferable to other sub-Saharan ethnic groups.

The article points to apparent links between envy and witchcraft. It suggests that envy,¹ an emotion that “occurs when a person lacks another’s (perceived) superior quality, achievement, or possession and either desires it or wishes that the other lacked it” (Parrott & Smith 1993), is the root and powerhouse of witchcraft. (Note that because the definition that I give for envy is found in Western literature its accuracy for the African continent is inevitably limited. I use it here through want of a better alternative as I am forced to write in English so as to stand a chance of being published in *Missiology*. In the course of writing I am presupposing many linguistic issues, some of which I have attempted to articulate in more detail in Harries (2011).) While envy is not a measurable quantity but a subjective condition, it is no less important as a result. I want to bring this topic to people’s attention for three particular reasons:

1. Discouraging envy has long been an objective of Christian pastors/preachers, a prerogative of Christian discipleship, and an aspect of the Judeo/Christian tradition. Christianity advocates an understanding of the divine realm that discourages undue adherence to “this-world”-ly values. Such is clearly reflected in the 10th commandment and in New Testament references that say that while Christians are in the world, they should not be of the world (see John 15:19, John 17:14, James 1:27, 1 John 2:15, James 4:4). Such teaching is not commonplace on the secularist or liberalist agenda. I suggest that this Christian teaching is in many ways essential for the future wellbeing of Africa.²
2. Witchcraft has long been identified as an enemy of human progress and of good interpersonal relationships. It has in recent years been difficult to identify just how witchcraft can best be tackled. While spiritual warfare tactics surely have their place, this article implicitly suggests that it is a reduction in worldly desire, and not the increase in worldly desire often advocated by liberal capitalism, that will be effective in freeing people from this ancient adversary.
3. Witchcraft is fuelled by envy. Envy inhibits indigenous development in at least some African societies. Overcoming envy is essential to economic

and social development as well as theological' wellbeing and is, therefore, central to the missionary and development task.

<The Nature of Witchcraft> [A]

In using the term witchcraft, I am not referring to ancient European practices that go by this name in Western English. Whatever similarities there may be between those and what goes on in Africa today are not an important topic for me. Instead I use the English term *witchcraft* for want of a better alternative to describe an African phenomenon, because this term has already been widely used for this purpose in the literature.

Had an alternative term been chosen, things could have been quite different. Possible terms that come to mind include "the force," "devil worship," "the occult," "fear of human spirits," "wizardry," or Satan. Each of these terms, had it been chosen, would have directed scholarship along a different course from that which it has taken following the widespread adoption of the term *witchcraft*. This choice of term may have little or nothing to do with African people, although they are left to live with its consequences.

As is the case for any word or object, witchcraft needs to be understood in its own context. It is important to consider how witchcraft appears as part of a living community. To acquire an understanding of what witchcraft is for an African people, therefore, requires an understanding of the whole life of the people concerned. An understanding of witchcraft can only be as accurate as is that understanding of the whole of their lives.

This article seeks to expose envy as a here-to-fore neglected aspect of the nature of witchcraft. This neglect has serious consequences in misinforming the West in such a way as to prevent it from knowing how best to be a part of overcoming witchcraft. I build my case largely by drawing on personal experience of living in Africa since 1988.³

<The Roots of Witchcraft in Envy> [A]

While it may be true that witchcraft's efficacy results from a belief in magical processes, a focus on the nature of magic or on the folly of believing in magic can miss other aspects of its *raison d'être*, nature, and peril. Witchcraft does not arise by itself without human cause. Witchcraft arises, I suggest, from human discontent, typically expressed as *envy*. Simply put, if there were no human discontent, there would be no witchcraft. Of course, the same applies to many things. If there were no human discontent, there would be no alcoholism, wife beating, theft, scorn, or even anger. An important part of Christian teaching impacts these areas of life by discouraging worldly desire through moving Christian people's hope from being in this world to being in Christ. Christians are admonished to live sinless lives and are empowered to do so through a hope of eternity. Simply illustrated, Mum could appease little Johnny's anger over not having a chocolate ice cream like his brother by telling him that he will get one when they get home.

Jealousy and envy are age-old conditions that trouble all of us to various degrees; who has not been jealous at some point or other, after all? We should not be surprised at the power of jealousy. If 70 years is all one has, that is, then an economic or other loss of “utility” (to use an economist’s term [Investopedia 2011]) ought to be taken very seriously indeed. For example, my observing that my colleague’s wife is more attractive and loving than mine could be deeply troubling. Questions as to why my son has died of cancer at an early age while my neighbour’s son flourishes will cause deep and even endless anguish.

It is not always realised that there is in fact only a short step between the above and witchcraft. Let’s imagine you have two neighbours: one whose car is functional, the other whose car broke down and has been in the garage for two months. Your car is stolen—which neighbour will you suspect of the theft? Surely the one who has no car. You have already “felt guilty” when overtaking him waiting for the bus in the rain as you have driven to work in the mornings. You put yourself into his shoes (“How would I feel if I were him?”). That is an important question. If the answer is “I would feel so bad, that I would be tempted to steal a car,” then we have hit the jackpot (so to speak). That is, the assumption that others are jealous and likely to act out of their jealousy is a foundation stone to the fear of witchcraft. In the above example, the enactment of jealousy is a physical theft. In another instance, it can work through means of mystical powers. For example, a lady who is barren, widowed, and evidently bitter would be a prime suspect should another give birth prematurely or her children get sick after she has paid a visit to their home.

This leads us to consider the power of jealous feelings. Does it trouble me to discover that a colleague is lusting after my wife? Does it trouble me to discover that my neighbours are jealous of my children’s achievements? Am I troubled that others are going hungry while I may have enough to eat? If so, then I am a potential victim of witchcraft.

Let us consider life to be to be a circuitous route to be followed to avoid the bad feelings (as in the examples above) of others. Then the aim of life is to satisfy one’s innate desires (including sexual desires, eating, and others that are found up and down Maslow’s hierarchy [Cherry 2012]) while not raising anyone else’s hackles by making them envious. To this end, if I have wealth, I will not flaunt it. If I have an attractive wife, I will not show her off. I will try by all means to avoid any action others would interpret as demonstrating greed or disrespect likely to result in jealousy.

Hence, in many African cultural contexts, the poorer one is, the less likely one is to incite jealousy resulting in an attack using witchcraft. Closely related to this is that if an explanation for misfortune is that one has been bewitched by someone who is jealous, then one clear means of countering such an attack is to do away with the offending circumstance or object. For example, should somebody be jealous of me because I have a lot of cattle, and should that jealousy in turn be perceived as resulting (through witchcraft) in a

lot of misfortune, I might choose to do away with the cattle? (An example of this happening is given in a novel by Ruhumbika. A Tanzanian man whose family had been subject to enormous witchcraft attack decided to do away with all his livestock when he moved to a new area. “*Mifugo unavutia chuki na wivu wa binadamu wenye roho mbaya kuliko utajiri wa aina nyingine yoyote*” [“Livestock are more effective at drawing the hatred and jealousy of people with a bad spirit than are any other kind of wealth at all”] explains Ruhumbika’s character (2001:74) in Kiswahili).

If I act in keeping with the belief that untoward displays of wealth and pleasure reap nasty consequences, then the reverse surely also will apply, and nasty consequences will appear to have been caused by untoward displays of wealth. That is, I will understand misfortune as occurring as a result of my having aroused the ill-feelings of others, a belief that, I suggest, is a basic foundation of witchcraft. Once this precedent has been established, then I will be looking for a “witch” to hold responsible every time I meet misfortune.

The search for a person responsible for some act of witchcraft is not carried out blindly. Those most likely to be accused of being jealous are those who are too weak to avenge themselves, should they be accused. Because wealthy people are the most likely to be attacked by witches (i.e., most likely to be victims of the envy of others), the wealthy are likely to acquire elaborate defences against attack (Nyaga 2007). For this reason, an increase in living standard may not result in a decrease but rather in an increase in the prevalence of witchcraft.

ter Haar seems to suggest that the real evil associated with witchcraft is not the witchcraft itself, but the accusations that go with it (2007). While I agree in part with ter Haar, I believe it is wrong to think that witchcraft itself is somehow innocent. The harm done to human society by actual witchcraft is, in my view, likely to be greater than the harm done to those who are accused of being a witch.⁴ This harm can occur in many ways. Classically, those living in fear of witchcraft will avoid having reserves of certain kinds in their homes, such as spare clothing, extra food, and emergency medical supplies. This is because if neighbours become aware that resources have been stock piled, they are all the more likely to come and ask for them. If a neighbour refuses to lend (and lending in Africa will be for an on-going period until the need of this neighbour comes to be greater than the need of the one who originally borrowed [Maranz 2001:152]), then they are at risk of being bewitched. If they lend, then the effort they have put into acquiring their reserves ceases to have as much personal benefit. Hence people prefer to live “from hand to mouth.” Not having resources in reserve means, in turn, that crises easily become disasters, curable diseases result in death, etc.

If envy, as I have suggested, is the root cause of witchcraft, why has this connection not attracted more attention? I suggest that many see envy as a theological concept. Non-theologians and those who do not believe in God are therefore apt to avoid it. Suggesting that envy causes human suffering implies the need for (uncomfortable) introspection. It is easier to blame human

problems on social systems and ideologies than to locate blame in the human heart.

<African Traditions as Means of Avoiding the Effects of Envy> [A]

I want now to attempt to show how the avoidance of the appearance of envy is a widespread feature of traditional life in parts of Africa⁵ that continues into the 21st century. Many Luo traditions can be understood as being a means to show that one's heart is not being consumed by envy. Following customary laws is, therefore, a means of avoiding the envy that could become actualized as bad witchcraft powers (for more about customary law of the Luo, see Mboya (1997) and Raringo (nd)). I garnered my understanding of these laws from day-to-day conversations amongst Luo people as well as from published sources.

Visitors to a Luo home who stay for more than a few minutes may be urged to have something to eat. This is done, in part, to prove that the householders are sufficiently caring (i.e., not envious) so as to want to feed their visitors and for visitors to demonstrate that they are sufficiently trusting of their hosts not to put poison (i.e., witchcraft-substance)⁶ into the food they are given. Rushing off without eating implies that either or both of the above are not the case. The consuming of food by visitors is considered to bring blessing.

Also related to food is the very widespread habit of covering food that is being carried so that it not be seen by others. Shopkeepers in western Kenya are very careful to ensure that food given to a customer is sufficiently covered so as to be out of sight. For example, rolls or loaves of bread must always be carried away from the point of their purchase wrapped in a non-transparent bag or covering such as newspaper so as to avoid the jealous stares of those who have the "evil eye." The "evil eye" is thought to be able to put a kind of poison into the food, resulting in the person eating it subsequently having a physical ailment, such as an aching stomach.

In my home area in Kenya, it is known that the sick and dying are often neglected, but people pay a lot of attention to someone once they have already died. A church leader once explained the reason for this to me. Whoever visits a sick person is likely to be the object of the latter's envy expressed in demands for help and assistance, whether spoken or silent. The sick person's envy of the visitor's health is what is feared. Once the person has died, his or her spirit is more likely to remember and, therefore, haunt the person who was present in the final period of suffering but did not help them sufficiently than it is to haunt someone else who stayed away.

Another example of the fear of envy became evident recently in my home area in Kenya when the government made inexpensive motorcycles available.⁷ Many young men now own motorcycles. Contrary to the situation known in Europe, however, it is extremely rare to see a motorcycle on the road that is not "in business." That is, almost everyone who has a motorcycle is using it for the purposes of making an income by transporting people for a

fee. Few people own a motorcycle for leisure, as to do so would be to invite the envy of those who have little leisure. In other words, people (witches) are less likely to be envious of a person who uses resources to make their daily bread than of another who uses the same for leisure. (This reminds me of the Amish in Pennsylvania, who can also consider pleasure for its own sake to be “wrong” [A.H. nd]).

The final example I will give, going back to Luo traditional law, is that of polygyny. If a man marries multiple wives, then, according to Luo tradition, he must ensure that each one has her own house. This is to avoid the jealousy for which co-wives are known. Co-wives are so known for jealousy that the name a woman routinely uses to refer to her co-wife in Dholuo is *nyeka*, which can be translated into English as “my jealousy.”

People’s fear of jealousy profoundly affects the topics of conversations they enter into and what may or may not be said or discussed (Harries 2007:49-52). It is very important in the course of conversation to avoid any suggestion that one is jealous of someone else’s property, business, wife or children, or general success. This means, for example, that if one asks after somebody’s children, then it should only be in brief without requesting details or pressing for information. Questions about someone’s business activities or general prosperity are of the same ilk. Detailed questions raise the suspicion that the questioner’s interest is motivated by or will lead to jealousy and that this in turn will result in recourse to witchcraft. Hence, people’s responses are very often evasive.

In Luoland, the equivalent of a medical doctor is known as the *ajuoga*. This is the person some people turn to in the case of severe difficulty, such as sickness, barrenness, misfortune, business failure, etc. The essence of the *ajuoga*’s art is the ability to discern who is jealous of the person concerned, or at least who could be jealous of them, or could be considered to be jealous of them. A person will consider himself or herself to have been helped by the *ajuoga* when the jealous person (i.e., the witch) is identified and when that jealousy in some way neutralized—perhaps by being provided with protective medicine of some kind or through using some magic to kill or disable the jealous person who is deemed to be the cause of the problem.

Maranz provides another clear indicator of the widespread fear of envy in Africa. In the African way of life, someone has the right to take a friend’s property if it happens not to be in use at the time (2001:19, 34). This is because the property owner would be putting himself or herself at risk from the power of the envy of the person wanting the item if the property owner were to refuse the asker access without very good reason. Because people cannot hold onto their personal property, there is less value in personal property—unless, of course (to some extent), the property is owned “for business purposes” (as already stated above). Hence people prefer to live with fewer things, and the things they have are less well looked after or maintained.

Many dramas of jealousy and envy are enacted within the extended family. Close family members and not-distant relatives or non-relatives are the

most likely to be suspected of harbouring harmful jealousy. For example, many grandchildren may be competing for the attention of a single grandparent or for a plot of land. This is one reason why the position of family can be so ambiguous; they are people one is close to, understands, and in various ways depends upon, but they are also the people who are most likely to be jealous and, therefore, are the most likely to do one harm through witchcraft.

Unlike in the West, I have noticed few occasions oriented openly to enjoying oneself. On the contrary, the agenda is frequently stated as other than enjoyment. This arises, in part, through the African view being holistic; hence, work and pleasure run together. In addition, someone setting out to enjoy oneself appears to be profligate, and thus selfish, and thus the person concerned is likely to become victim to the biting envy of another. Events that appear (from a Western perspective) to bring enjoyment may well actually be oriented to the deterring of unhelpful ancestors, i.e. evil spirits.

I will add just a few more indicators that point to the prevalence of envy. One is seen at a meal. Amongst many Western people, a visitor arriving at a mealtime may be required to sit and wait patiently or return again later. This is not so in the parts of Africa with which I am familiar, where everyone is automatically invited to join in eating whatever food is available. No one should be left to look on enviously as others eat. Another example concerns funeral attendance. Death is considered, in much of Africa, to arise as a result of witchcraft, which I am saying is often rooted in envy. One way of proving that one is not guilty of someone's demise through having been envious of them (bewitching them), is to attend the funeral—and indeed funerals are very well attended.

Some African societies consider good to come by default, if only the troublesome effects of the envy of others can be done away with (Harries 2006). Some Africans have achieved success by supplanting their traditional fears with a determined faith in the God found in the Christian tradition whose word is expounded in the Scriptures. Many Christians in Africa are taking advantage of the powerful words of the Gospel, which provide protection against witches and immunity to the demands of unhelpful ancestors. A common belief is that the more faith one has, the more effective this is, and the more one can prosper without coming under attack from witches; hence the prosperity Gospel grows in favour by leaps and bounds.

<Countering Witchcraft> [A]

We now come to the question of how, in the light of insights exposed in this article, one ought to counter witchcraft. If indeed, as I am suggesting, witchcraft is rooted in untoward desire (envy), then increasing desire through consumerism is unlikely to be very helpful. Increasing wealth and the supply of money can actually aggravate levels of witchcraft suspicions and accusations. It is poor people who are the least likely to be attacked by witchcraft.⁸

With reference to the Luo people of Kenya, Hoehler-Fatton claims that *juogi* (witchcraft powers that are nowadays widely considered to be universally bad) were once considered to be, at times, good and, at times, bad (1996:12). Douglas makes a similar claim regarding the Lele of Congo (1999:178). There is an important sense in which many African traditions have, since the start of the colonial era, been demonized. It is very difficult for African people to cope with official communication that implicitly tells them that their African identity is useless or, worse, evil. People cannot and should not simply forget their pasts. Because the African past continues to impact Africa and its people today, it is important to try to understand that past in order to deal with that impact.

Belief in witchcraft and the actions of powerful spirits continues to infiltrate the African church, despite clear biblical teaching on the subject (see, for example, Deut. 18:10, 14; 2 Kings 17:17, 21:6; 2 Chron. 33:6; Nah. 3:4; Acts 8:9, 19:19; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 18:23). Unfortunately, frequent reference to and attention to witchcraft, especially by community leaders, can empower it. Because witchcraft is considered to be the source of almost all evil in life,⁹ telling people that witchcraft does not exist results in incredulity when problems continue to arise. The teaching that God is invariably more powerful than witchcraft has contributed to the prosperity gospel—often much condemned by the West even while implicitly believed by many African people. For guidance towards a philosophical approach to the issue of whether witchcraft is real, see Hiebert's (1999) advocating that missionaries adopt the philosophical position of critical realism.¹⁰

This article points to a clear relationship between witchcraft and envy, which has been inadequately recognized in the literature. A clear comprehension of this relationship offers new hope in efforts at overcoming witchcraft itself. One problem arises from the traditional means used by the African church to tackle witchcraft—by paying attention to witchcraft, the church empowers it. An overt acknowledgement of witchcraft's power reifies it and increases, rather than decreases, people's fear of it. Further, stating that God's power is greater than that of witches, while clearly true, puts God to the test and can compromise his status. Calling on God to deal with witches could be seen as empowering the latter if all problems do not suddenly come to an end. Because witchcraft in Africa is considered responsible for all ills, and because in this world ills do not end, God can appear to “fail” in this contest. Alternatively, some will assume ailing Christians to have lost their link to God, i.e. their salvation; otherwise God Almighty surely would have come to their aid.

Recognizing the presence of envy underlying witchcraft acknowledges the origin of witchcraft powers in the human heart (see also Harries 2007:206-245). Yes indeed, God can help Christians to overcome witchcraft, perhaps through power confrontation in spiritual warfare, but also by encouraging them to be “content with their lot” (1 Tim. 6:6) and to fear God more than the men who could bewitch them. An alternative to the denial of magical agency

in witchcraft is to defeat the envy that resides in people's hearts. If indeed, as I believe, witchcraft is a major factor inhibiting indigenous development among some African people, overcoming the fear of envy is essential to their future economic, social and theological wellbeing. The missionary and development task then—though it may include money, technology, and education—is essentially theological and involves undoing envy by encouraging reverence for God and hope for eternity rather than the anxieties over spirits and witches that arise from the fear of mortal demise.¹¹

<Summary and Conclusion> [A]

This article reconsiders the nature of witchcraft in Africa by connecting it to envy, a here-to-fore neglected aspect of the phenomenon. I have suggested that witchcraft is rooted in and empowered by human envy. The implications arising from the perceptions exposed in this article are widespread and profound. The problems widely associated with underdevelopment of parts of the African continent are identified as being rooted in witchcraft. The dearth of resources for which Africa is known may be *caused by* witchcraft fears, which modernization has failed to eradicate. These fears cannot be countered using spiritual warfare tactics alone. If witchcraft fears are rooted in envy, as here suggested, they must be confronted by dealing with this envy both as held against others and as assumed on the part of others about oneself. It is Christian teaching that can undermine fears of witchcraft and envy and reorient the human heart through imparting the promise of hope beyond this time and place.¹² The key to overcoming witchcraft and therefore of many of the troubles besetting Africa, is found to be true faith in Christ.

The implications of this conclusion are far reaching. Perhaps the wealth transfer engaged in by the West in favour of Africa is not helping but is aggravating superstitious fears. Perhaps the Western presentation of the gospel in Africa would be more effective if they left their money at home? I advocate vulnerable mission (<http://www.vulnerablemission.org/>), which works on the basis of local resources and in the context of local languages that enables a deep grasp of the complexity of local belief systems and how to engage with them.

Notes

1. The term jealousy is in this essay sometimes used as a synonym of envy.
2. This article considers Christianity in respect to African ways of life. It does not consider Christianity by comparison with other world religions.
3. I have lived in Zambia from 1988, then in Kenya from 1993.
4. My reference to “actual witchcraft” is to that result or results of witchcraft beliefs other than the harm caused to people as a result of their being accused of being witches. The actual witchcraft may be the power of witchcraft as a supernatural force, or the impact of people's fear of such

power; the distinction between these latter two is generally not clear in the kinds of monistic societies in which witchcraft is prevalent. (I use the term monistic in the philosophical sense. Societies in which witchcraft is prevalent do not make a strong dualistic distinction between material and spiritual as does the West.)

5. My understanding is drawn largely on my experience of living amongst the Luo and Luyia people of western Kenya.

6. Poisons used to enact witchcraft in Africa are fundamentally different from “poisons” as used in conventional English in the UK or America. The latter implies the presence of some chemical that will cause harm to a body by biological or chemical means. Poisons used by witches are understood as having their effect through very different mechanisms.

7. Motorcycles have begun to be very commonplace since about 2008.

8. Although poor people may, as I suggested above, be more likely to be accused of being witches.

9. Many African people consider witchcraft to be responsible for any misfortune.

10. As far as the Christian West is concerned, we could say that witchcraft has both a negative and a positive impact on Africa. On the negative side, it prevents economic advance. On the positive side, it inhibits the negatives associated with the development of a society based on consumerism. There is no simple solution to this apparent contradiction that is less than the true complexity of the whole Gospel.

11. The more detailed question of just what it is in the Gospel that discourages envy and thus witchcraft falls outside of the boundaries of this article. I suggest that it is the whole Gospel, including the presence of God that the Gospel promises, which deters witchcraft fears.

12. As does perhaps the teachings of other religions?

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