Abstract
That African Christianity is growing in numbers has become a familiar fact; testimony to the commitment of African preachers and adherents to the gospel of Christ. However, a disturbing trend is sweeping over many parts of sub-Saharan Africa in places such as Uganda. It is the increased number of witchcraft accusations that are being leveled against Christians and Christian leaders. In this paper, Robert Magoola acknowledges this unfortunate predicament facing the African church as it maligns Christian gospel proclamation and enhances African traditional religion’s self-advocacy. He evaluates the possible credibility of field-based evidence on the basis of a parable of the mole, giving possible responses to both true and false accusations. Magoola contends that it is the church’s responsibility to resolve the accusations through truthful self-examination and responsible engagement with the subject of witchcraft within each cultural context, in order to invite backsliders back, and walking more as disciples of their Lord Jesus, so that such accusations cannot be made against the church in the future.

Keywords: Christianity, church, witchcraft, Uganda, accusations

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Introduction

The effect of witchcraft accusations among Christians in African contexts are twofold: they are a vehicle propagating African Traditional Religion; and they demean Christian witness, as some Christians might become less committed to their Christian faith and instead reconsider traditional African faiths. Self-advocacy, which is “a religious tradition’s drive to maintain its membership by passing its tradition onto its children and by recommending its historical understanding, belief structures, and practices to non-members,” (Muck, 2011), is dual-directional. First, it works by closing the back door through which adherents might leave a religious affiliation, thus strongly discouraging any departures. This is the retention function. Second, it works to widen the opening at the front door through which new seekers may enter. This is the attraction function. Accusations of other religions, in this case, Traditional African Religion against Christianity, add a suction effect to the attraction aspect of its self-advocacy, which aims boost its attractiveness. Unlike Western contexts where stories of witches and wizardry are often not taken seriously, the effect of witchcraft accusations in African contexts has the great potential of effectively undermining Christianity and further boosting the local religion. For sub-Saharan Africa, Mbiti includes witchcraft among widespread fundamental religious concepts such as belief in God, existence of the spirits, and the continuation of human life after death and magic (Mbiti, 2002:103). Africans will not ask whether witchcraft is real. To them it is a given and so any accusations or hints thereof are taken seriously.

Self-advocacy works like a political campaign: the one candidate praises him/herself while undermining his/her opponent. The opponent does the same thing. The constituents are bombarded by the other’s negatives and the speaker’s positives ad nauseam. This type of fight in the religious arena is unnecessary. While self-advocacy, or for Christians, evangelism (as the attraction aspect) and discipleship (as the retention aspect), are necessary for those in each faith, adherents are required to do much more for their respective faiths than bickering about the actions of the other. A religion that bases itself on another’s weaknesses is weaker than one which bases its self-advocacy on its own strengths. As Dr. Muck has said in class, “May the best religion win!”

In this paper, I illustrate the elusive yet effective influence of witchcraft accusations with a Ugandan parable of the mole. Reports from the field, messages from church leaders and newspapers all reveal an increase in witchcraft. Sadly, I found that even Christ’s Church sometimes stands accused of witchcraft. So I sought to learn the truthfulness and effect of these accusations and to recommend solutions.
Introducing Witchcraft

“Witchcraft continues to be a topic that stirs passions and fears in many places around the world,” (Stabell 2010: 460). Witchcraft is gaining a great revival in many parts of the world today. From Harry Potter's children's movies and freemasonry in the West to shrine-based, ancestor-appeasing carefree worshipers dancing by their ancestors' gravesides; from the seemingly clean television screen presentations and suit-adorned worshippers to the grass-thatched dusty shrines of poor peasants; from wealthy white middle class Americans with beach homes to the poor overcrowded huts of voodoo adherents, . . . witchcraft is on the rise all around the world. It is reported among preachers and lay people. Through witchcraft, African Traditional Religion is regaining ground particularly in Africa. One wonders whether witchcraft has been hiding underneath the surface of the usual hustle and bustle or has only resurfaced recently. Questions arise about why witchcraft is such an important matter today and why it has become so blatant in the Lord's church around the world.

I will contend here that witchcraft is swiftly becoming a matter of urgency for the Christian church worldwide because while Christians lay complacent in their theological contestations, the witchcraft mole is active in their gardens eating up their children's food. Accusation and stealth are two of the most effective self-advocacy tools at a tyrant's disposal. As Laurenti Magesa writes,

The most important service for religious personalities in day-to-day life is to counteract witchcraft [which] is perceived by African Religion to be the greatest wrong or destructiveness on earth of which all other wrongs are but variations, emanations or manifestations . . . if religious leaders have any influence on the people, then, it consists in counteracting acts, or even intentions, of witchcraft, for witchcraft constitutes the perversion of everything that is good and desired in human beings; it is the personification or incarnation of all that is anti-life, and therefore the ultimate enemy of life on earth, (1997:68).

Magesa's comments here reveal two main aspects of witchcraft. First witchcraft is undesirable because it is harmful to people, as “there is no other purpose to life but fostering life . . . All rites and rituals from birth to adulthood are meant to solidify this life” (Magesa, 1997:114). Although divorce is a rare occurrence and imposes great scars on the community in which it is experienced, one of the reasons for the dissolution of marriage is an accusation of witchcraft (Mbti, 2002:145). But witchcraft accusation is the also the greatest holdup to marital commitment because impotence, sterility and barrenness might result from witchcraft (Magesa, 1997:120). What makes witchcraft so wrong is not that the Christian faith speaks ill of it or that foreigners disdain it, but that the craft itself is against the most central precept of African life – the preservation
of life. Fighting against witchcraft is therefore a moral imperative that all Africans should embrace.

Magesa’s second point is that the greatest response that religious leaders can make through their influence is the counteraction of witchcraft, a negation of life. Good people do not do witchcraft: they shun it. Without prompting, African church leaders are speaking out against witchcraft. In Kampala, Archbishop Henry Orombi of the Anglican Church of Uganda has appealed to Christians not to resort to witchcraft when they lose faith in God but to return to Christ in who hope is to be found. One way of understanding the way witchcraft works, is through a Ugandan parable.

A Parable of the Mole

Mama planted a garden of cassava roots. She cut up cassava seedlings from the previous crop’s bountiful harvest. She cut the stems per traditional standards to ensure maximum yield. She had help digging holes, ferrying, placing and covering the cuttings in the holes. Mama prayed for rain. The Lord God of heaven and earth sent sufficient rain to water the crop, invigorating the nutrients in the soil to nurture the crop to a healthy situation. Also the sun came in its right time, draining the earth of extra moisture that would choke the crops. The plants took root and grew strong. When she walked her gardens Mama smiled at the green luxuriant leaves and was sure to have a great bounty – she would be rich in food this harvest, she would share some of it with her neighbors, and with it nurture some relationships. Harvest arrived with great anticipation. She dug and behold! Unbeknownst to her, for months a mole had corrupted her roots. Only a few had survived. What Mama found beneath the surface demoralized her. What can she do? How will she deal with the underground mole’s effect on her crop? How can she prevent wasting her labor and thwarting her hope the next time?

Interpreting the Parable

Dealing with witch accusations in an African Christian context is similar to dealing with an underground mole that eats food before the harvest: the thief steals before the owner arrives at harvest. The problem does not reside with the cassava because it grew per Mama’s expectation, becoming a good and desirable crop. But the mole corrupted it. The problem therefore is the mole. The mole does its best work at night and underground, especially if undetected and unchallenged. But the people it opposes walk above ground and in the light of day, rejoicing in anticipation of a good harvest on the basis of outward evidence: lush greenery, strong stems; and so they rest thankfully at night. Here then is what Mama faces: an enemy she rarely sees, whose description she cannot articulate, whose ways are either new or unknown to her, and who changes with circumstances of whose triggers she is oblivious.
Among the Basoga of Uganda, mole hunting is one of the most frustrating accomplishments for boys, many of whom only have a vague notion of its description and ways. Hunters dig up large portions of the garden in order to follow the mole’s crisscrossed path. It leaves no clues to guide its captors. And so killing one mole could be a whole day’s affair. Much energy is expended, much sweat and dirt are evident on their bodies, and for a period food and drink are forsaken: but at the end of the day, the boys’ joy is in the satisfaction of having killed the mole. Even then they never know if it left any offspring that will be the next season’s menace.

We church leaders can easily rest oblivious of witchcraft’s effect on the people of God in our care. Accusations, however, act to wake us up to the stewardship of God’s flock and the evangelism of non-Christian people.

A Report from the Field

The present question concerning the role of witchcraft accusations among Christians in an African context assumes the reality of such accusations the Africa Christian context. I propose that accusations are a means of African Traditional Religion’s self-advocacy. In order to settle this matter in a contextual way, I asked friends in Uganda, Africans in Wilmore and read widely both newspaper articles and scholarly materials. My findings revealed numerous accusations of witchcraft in the African Christian context. Having settled that, I want to ascertain the credence of these accusations, if they are founded on trustworthy evidence and how the Church responds to these accusations.

As soon as accusations of witchcraft surface, the accused person’s life is ruined and one’s relationships are at risk. People are not treated as innocent until found guilty; they remain guilty until proved innocent. Witchcraft accusation is to the African comparable to an accusation of child molestation in the West, which is never taken lightly. Yet, per Magesa (1997:64-65), unity of an African community is that community’s “life in its fullest sense.” Relational breakdown is the start of death. Since unity is so important to life itself, witchcraft is the greatest sin for humans in society as it causes disunity and thus becomes a means of death as it spells the demise of relationships and persons, families, clans and entire societies. Churches disintegrate. But even though evidence might exonerate a person of all wrong doing, that he/she was once accused remains in the society’s consciousness: once accused of witchcraft often means always accused.

If witchcraft is present and prospering in the African church: then something is deeply wrong within the church itself. As the Church fails to deal with witchcraft internally, the resulting lack of credibility hampers the church’s witness and ensures greater challenges to Christ’s ministers in the field. Regardless of their truthfulness or foundation, the charge of witchcraft within the church is a serious one. It not only goes against the African cultural
norms of right living, it also stands against Christian doctrine and standards for living.

In response, the church should first address the accusations. If accusations are true, the church is mandated to call the culprits to discipline and to disciple its people into authentically waking with Christ. Second, regarding the current abundance of confusion concerning witchcraft, along with its activities and forms, a clear and concise definition of witchcraft and witches is vitally necessary for successfully dealing with accusations. While God is not limited by descriptions, the church can only plan and deal with what it can describe. Note though it is a starting point for the church's bid to self-defend against its accusers, the definition does not necessarily promise control.

The Accusations

To state the obvious, there are two types of accusation. Some accusations are true and others are false. Some are founded on truth and others are founded on deception. While some accusations are based on circumstantial, spiritually misunderstood or imagined evidence, there are some cases with witnesses who cannot be easily dismissed. Some are weightier than others. Some encompass a greater scope of society than do others. Some accusations proceed from Satan ‘the accuser of the brethren’ and others from righteous consciences. Therefore, in response to these accusatory messages, the church must first discern the character of the accusation, its source and purpose with whatever evidence might be provided.

Reports in the field reveal that witchcraft is alive and healthy in the church. Ugandan Anglicans in Busoga have said that: “Reverends have shrines in their homes. Some reverends use fetishes in their homes, travel with them in their clothes, and some tie them around their arms, waists and legs. Some pastors make statements that reveal their belief in and possible involvement with witchcraft.” When pressed for evidence the parishioners state that, beyond the use of fetishes that are sometimes sighted in secluded corners of their offices, by the door, on the wall and sometimes concealed underground in close proximity to important buildings, pastors have been known to visit witch doctors’ shrines for consultation. Some send ‘go-betweens’ to seek counsel on their behalf. These shy ones may use their ministry assistants, often spouses, friends or parishioners. Some pastors have threatened their perceived enemies with evil retaliation through witchcraft. With deeper involvement pastors have been known to consult with local and regional spirits (ebiteega and amaghembe). In particular the prosperity-gospel-proclaiming independent church pastors are said to travel more often for consultations. Some clergy have been reported as having presented animal and even human sacrifices. Some pastors are said to go out at night in order to carry out
sorcery activities. If this is true among the pastors, one wonders how it is with their parishioners.

But I wanted to press the reporters on further evidence of these accusations. Why would a Christian leader engage in such activities, I asked? “They seek favor and a good name. They engage witchcraft in order to succeed in Christian mission. They want promotions in the church, or retention of their current favorable positions. They want to be popular in the mission field and thus claim greater positions from those who hold them.” If this is true, we can deduce that these church leaders’ self-focus leads them into spiritual danger.

Roy Musasiwa defines mission as “God’s activity through the church for the establishment of his kingdom and the total salvation of humanity,” (in Yamamori et al, 1996:195). Mission is God’s and does not proceed from humans. It serves to strengthen the kingdom of God, not a human one. It focuses on people who are yet in the world, and works for their sake, not for the missionary through whom it works as a ready vessel, who is sold out to the cause and on fire for Christ (see Acts 4:19). According to Christopher Wright mission is the church’s “participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation,” (2006:23). Mission proceeds from God: it does not start or end with people. Although God includes people in mission, mission ownership remains God’s preserve. Therefore, church leaders who seek favors and positions in mission engage the wrong trade. Their self-focus deters God’s mission. It is little wonder that their success rate is reported as generally much lower than their invested time and effort would warrant. The one kingdom cannot support its opponent: while Satan seeks to destroy, not build, Christ’s kingdom (John 10:9-10), Christ seeks and saves the lost, redeeming them from Satan. Contention is rife between the two kingdoms.

**Effect of Accusations**

Accusations undermine the power of the gospel and downplay the church’s effectiveness in society. The listener to these stories might wonder: if they have a powerful God, why Christians revert to witchcraft, and whether witchcraft is more powerful than Christ. Doubts flood the Christian adherents’ minds and seep into the general societies’ consciousness. Fear creeps into people’s hearts as a result of witchcraft that vindictively singles individuals out of their communities. How safe are we, they wonder? Moreover, since it is a spiritual reality, people have to be on alert everywhere all the time.

Relatively younger Christians are forced to wonder at their own chances of Christian survival, or its effectiveness in dealing with life’s issues, particularly if their mentoring spiritual leaders fail to live holy lives. In addition, witchcraft accusations suggest there is real value in the witchcraft that beckons their
leaders. By sucking their leaders into its malevolent jurisdiction, witchcraft beckons the rest of the church. It seems to say: “come and see!” Witchcraft steals from Christ as it communicates itself by the actions, words and attitudes of Christians along with non-Christians.

If truly present, witchcraft undermines God’s work in the church. Families that practice witchcraft would normally scorn Christ’s power to heal, grant peace and joy under distress or transform dire circumstances as revealed in Scripture through prayer. Without faith in Christ they accomplish little in the spiritual realm. They are reduced to Satan’s reign of terror, social enmity and persistent suspicion. They suspect one another even without substantial evidence. And so Christians easily slip into mutual hatred, families separate, churches split on the basis of unresolved disagreements and lack of trust. But disunity is not Christ’s desire (John 17) and points to Christian immaturity (1 Corinthians 3). While Christ the Redeemer is able to retrieve his people from the gates of hell itself, their choices have the grave potential to spiritually harm them. Also, those who are perceived to be witches are under constant threat of retaliation, physical harm and social ostracism.

Toward a Solution

Problems require solutions. The problem of today’s African church is a stealthy, conniving enemy who seeks to steal, kill and destroy its people. Like a subcutaneous mole, African Traditional Religion uses witchcraft accusations in order to capture the priceless flock of Christ. Witches do not proclaim their activities out of an overflowing joy as do Christians. Witches are compelled. Madame Akatowaa said on camera that the spirits she serves would take her to task for any mistakes. They do not forgive her or other adherents, as does God (Ault, 2009). Therefore, leaving God’s people in this level of torment is unjustifiable. A solution is sorely needed. By way of resolving the present predicament, I present here two practical responses based in Christian faith and Scripture: self-examination and responsive engagement.

Self-examination

First, upon hearing an accusation of witchcraft, the church should examine itself by asking boldly to seek the truthfulness of this accusation. The most desirable scenario in light of any accusation is to uncover falsehoods. For this the church might be thankful: though worrisome, the statements are untrue. The church is more on the side of righteousness than the lies being presented by an agent of Satan. Knowing that Satan is a liar and the accuser of the brethren, the church can rejoice in its proximity to Christ, evidenced by such persecution. Jesus presents false accusation of Christians in a positive light (Matthew 5:11-12). However, if individual members of the church are accused falsely and are thus made vulnerable for public ridicule and punishment, the
church should be a place of refuge for the innocent (c.f. Hiebert et al, 1999:174).

But the inquisitive mind still claims fire when it sees smoke. When the Pharisees accused him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, Jesus’ response stated, “a house divided against itself falls” (Mark 3:25). Jesus’ response applied the erroneous accusation to its implied end. If Beelzebub casts out Beelzebub, then he will surely fall by his own hand, fulfilling Jesus’ ministry. The public image of the church, especially in light of false accusations, is secondary to its real calling. Rather than witchcraft and its effect on individuals and their communities, the greatest fear of Christ’s Church might be that God’s people should fall into the sin of witchcraft.

Responsive Engaging

A cursory engagement with the subject of witchcraft quickly reveals its ambiguity. Most people groups have varying definitions of witchcraft and wizards (Hiebert, 1999:62-63). The worldwide plethora of definitions is more confusing than helpful. Each society should responsibly learn, create and/or mend its own definition of witchcraft. Mission visitors there should also learn that definition. Respective churches do well to heed the call to ‘crouch in the dirt with their people,’ in search of meaningful solutions to this overarching problem. Mother tongue definitions will likely bear more credence than translations of these same concepts, because engaging witchcraft through a translated tongue is only second best. Yet, even if the same English terms are used in various cultural settings, a unifying definition of those terms remains at a superficial level.

Conclusion

In response to numerous accusations of witchcraft among African Christians more self-examination and responsive engagement needs to be done. Through publicizing official statements on witchcraft, correcting falsehood, exonerating the innocent, and appropriately punishing culprits, the Church, being secure in Christ, can move from being on the defensive to taking the offensive side in dealing with witchcraft accusations. Evangelism and discipleship should return to the top of the Church’s list of commitments.

African Religion lies under threat. An focused spiritually mature church is a great threat to witchcraft and African Religion. A means by which witchcraft can defend itself from the onslaught of Christianity is by accusing its opponent of resembling it. Mole-like, witchcraft fights from a defensive position. The result, however, is dual-directional self-advocacy with the tandem purpose of its retaining and acquiring adherents back from Christianity. The same accusations have a dual negative impact on Christianity. While Christians are invited to witchcraft through curiosity, they become less assured of their own position in Christ. Although Christianity is stronger, it cannot afford a
complacent response to witchcraft’s tactics. Both true and false accusations are an invitation for Christians to engage witchcraft spiritually. Moreover, per their history, Christianity cannot survive associating with witchcraft in Africa.

Endnotes

2 http://artmatters.info/?p=192, accessed May 10, 2011 is a story by Ogova Ondego dated January 2, 2007. It reports high levels of witchcraft in Kenya. Movies from Nigeria reveal much witchcraft activity and are also featured in Ondego’s story. In Zimbabwe, many instances of witchcraft, including cases of incubus and succubus have been reported by word of mouth. A friend recently told me about a local political leader in Busoga, Uganda who was possessed while at a public funeral and was thereby suspected of witchcraft. In his documentary film, African Christianity Rising: Stories from Ghana, James Ault shows details of the spiritual ministry that Madame Akatowaa, a traditional Ghanaian shrine priest, offers her people. Mensa Otabil, a local Charismatic pastor, is skeptical of Akatowaa’s activities, seeking to protect his flock from this ‘idol worshipping . . . fetish witchcraft.’

3 Cf. Hiebert et al, 1999:62-63 which attempts to describe witches by what the various peoples think about them. They find some assertions are unlikely.

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Stabell, Tim

Wright, Christopher

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**Online Resources**
http://artmatters.info/?p=192
http://jamesault.com/