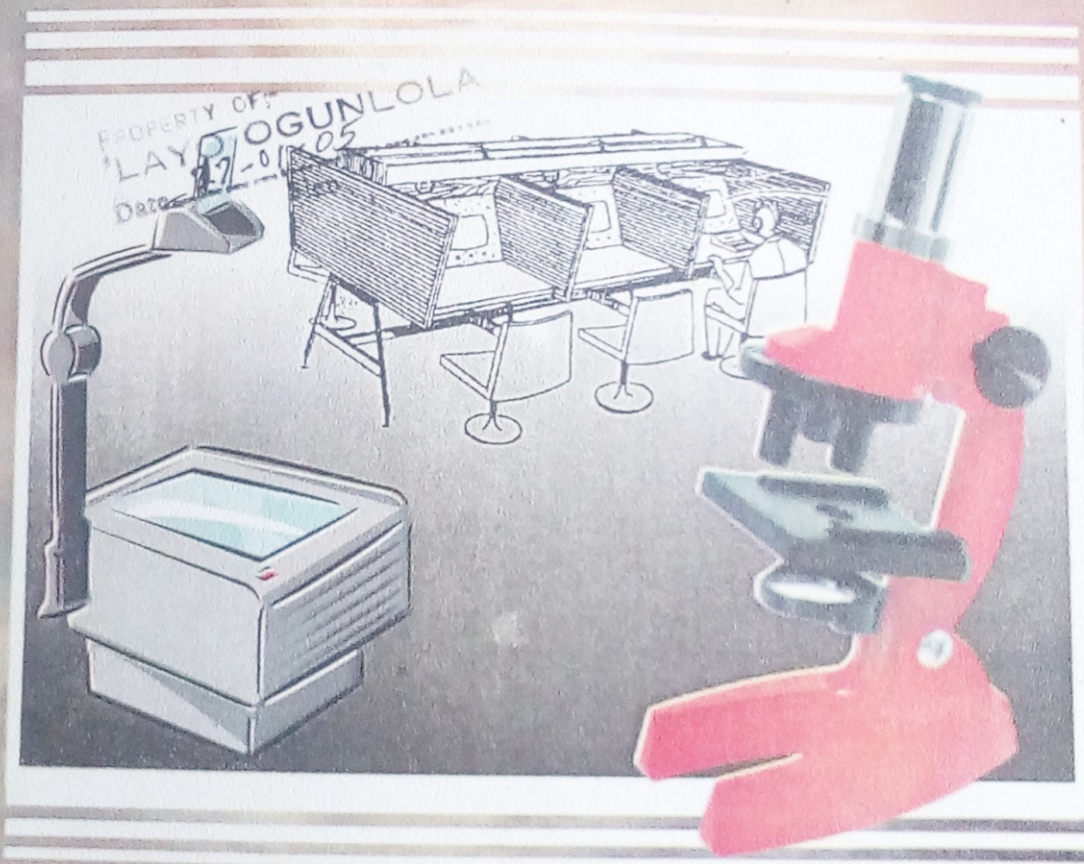


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THE BELIEF IN THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL FORCES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE YORUBA PEOPLE: WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY AS A FOCUS

'Layo Ogunlola

Introduction

We want to start this paper by saying that the Yoruba constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa and that probably, no African group had greater influence on the culture of the New World than the Yoruba who until today their descendants still preserve Yoruba culture and traditions the world over (See Awolalu, 1979 on preface). They are bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices. The keynote of their life is their religion and according to Idowu, (1962:159-160) "religion forms the foundation and the all governing principle of life for them. As far as they are concerned, the full responsibility of all the affairs of life being to the deity".

They hold the belief that God, the Creator of mankind (Eledaa) did not create man to suffer just as the Holy Books tell us that all things created by God (man, animals birds, trees plants etc.) were good but despite these beliefs, the Yoruba and even the entire human race found themselves in a world filled with difficulties, misfortunes and the like. They found themselves in a world where evil co-exist with the good.

It is an undisputable fact that man would have preferred to live in a world free from evil to a world where both the evil and the good co-exist and this accounts for why people do not bother to find out the cause(s) of their total well-being or why they enjoy good things but at the least misfortune, they begin to think and are eager to find out the cause(s) of their sufferings. The simple answer to this borders on the fact that our people believe that all good things are for them. It is their birthright and so they need not find out why they should enjoy a life free of misfortunes. And so whenever any evil befalls them, they see it as negating their birthright (i.e. good) and that such misfortune must be the handwork of certain agents which are opposed to good. This is what some investigators into the people's religion tend to dismiss as superstitious, others classify them as mumbo-jumbo and the like (see Awolalu, 1979:69).

According to the Yoruba belief, evil comes to man in a number of ways which include:

- (1) **The Natural Evil:-** By natural evil we refer to things such as flood, epidemic, earthquake, storm, pestilence, death and so on. This they believe is beyond human control. Although it is not an everyday occurrence, its co-existence with man is inexplicable.
- (2) The second are evils caused by mystery (**MYSTERIOUS EVILS**), depending on what the oracle says. This may range from spiritual agents such as ancestors or spirits who might have been offended in one way or the other either by an individual or by the entire community. For instance, the outbreak of measles is attributed to the spirit of Sonponna (one of the divinities grouped under the deified ancestors) while the effect of thunder is associated with Sango who also happens to be one of the deified ancestors.
- (3) The third source is referred to as "**THE SUPERNATURAL**". Most misfortunes are attributed to the handwork of either witchcraft or sorcery. The Yoruba believe that the existence of the two supernatural agencies of evil account for the sufferings in the world today.

According to Awolalu (1979:81), all strange diseases, accidents, untimely death, inability to gain promotion in office, failure in examinations and business enterprises, disappointment in love,

barrenness in women, impotency in men, failure of crops and a thousand of other evils are attributed to witchcraft.

In the same way, Quarcoopone (1987:151) writes:

The reality of witchcraft is evidenced in the belief that they are thought to be responsible for all kinds of misfortunes in the society: diseases, paralysis, barrenness, impotence, failure in life and even death.

He goes further to say that "illness is said to appear when the witches devour the spiritual body and sucks its blood spiritually".

A.B. Jacobs (1977:251) describes this situation as "an evil employment of mystical power generally in secret fashion".

This paper therefore intends to look at witchcraft and sorcery as forces of evil and how their existence (according to the people's belief) affects their social behaviours.

The Yoruba Belief in Witchcraft and Sorcery

We want to start by first making a difference between these two supernatural powers because some people do mistake them to be the same. For example, A.B. Jacobs (1977:254) simply differentiate the two by saying:

Sorcerers are evil or black magicians. They are men ... He works in the dark or at night...

While Quarcoopone (1987:150) defines witchcraft as "A person who is believed to be possessed by a witch spirit".

Field (1937), simply defines witchcraft as "a bad medicine" while Crowford says that witchcraft means wizardry (referring to witchcraft and sorcery). Mbiti (1975) says there is no distinction between witchcraft and bad magic.

The reasons we can abound for these confusions is simply that there is a general belief that both has fundamental similarities which make them enemies of man. However, we would attempt at differentiating between the two.

Awolalu, (1979:80) in trying to make a distinction between witchcraft and sorcery, writes:

A sorcerer uses charms, incantation, spells and magic knowingly and with premeditation. A witch, (says Evans-Pritchard), "performs no rite, utters no spell and possesses no medicine. An act of witchcraft is a psychic act" (i.e. a person claiming to be responsible to occult powers).

What these infer therefore is that:

- (a) A sorcerer uses concrete and palpable objects while a witch does not.
- (b) The sorcerer is conscious of his actions while a witch does not mind the kind of evil life she lives.
- (c) Witches eat their victims spiritually, sorcerers do not.
- (d) Witches have no client while sorcerers may have people who buy destructive medicines to kill their victims.
- (e) Witches have animal and bird familiars while sorcerers do not.

*The Belief in the Existence of Evil Forces and Their Implications on the Social Life of the Yoruba People:
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- (f) Sorcerers have no recognized guilds or societies while witches have their guilds at every level of government be it local, state, national or even international.
- (g) Witchcraft is inherited (either knowingly or unknowingly) while sorcery is learnt.
- (h) A man finds it easier to cease to be a member of sorcerers by repenting and ceasing from works of evil magic whereas it is not easy if not totally impossible for a witch to dissociate or renounce her membership.
- (i) While some witches use their witchcraft to protect their children and relations sorcery is purely for bad and no good is expected from them.

Witchcraft

According to Quarcoopome (1987:150), "A witch is a person who is believed to be possessed by a witch spirit. He went further to say:

Witchcraft is the belief in the possession of some supernatural powers by which evil or harm can be effected and good deed done.

Awolalu, quoting the Encyclopedia Britannica says "witchcraft is the art or craft of the wise as the word "witch" is allied with "wit" (to know). This was revised to "the believed use of supernatural means for harmful evil ends".

He then concludes that:

Thus a witch is a wise person supposed to possess supernatural powers in consequence of forming a league with the devil or evil spirits and through such an evil alliance and co-operation, the possession of the crafts which enables her to perform supernatural acts which in most cases are destructive. Hence, witches are seen as personification of evil, as innately wicked people who work harm against others (See Awolalu, 1979:80).

The fact remains that the Yoruba in particular and Africans in general whatever their level of literacy, high or low in the society believe that witchcraft is real especially going by their experience of the influence of witchcraft in their lives no wonder why the Yoruba says "ibi a rìn mo là n rí mo" i.e. "the further you go, the more you see". This means that the debate on the existence or otherwise of witchcraft depend on experience. People have had experiences which cannot be waved off or termed as psychological conditions.

The Yoruba believe that witches are people with inherent power which they can use in doing anything (things that are bad) their powers are for evil and anti-social purposes. Their main duty is to pester human life without any rite attached to it.

The belief among the Yoruba is that a person may possess this power without being aware and this is the mystical aspect of the concept of witchcraft.

It is believed that witches can send out their spirit at will while the body remains and anything done to the spirit affects the body wherever it is. They are called names such as "iyà mi" Eleye, Iyá Àgbà or simply Àjé, because they are females. Of late, teenagers and young women also acquire and practice witchcraft. Their guild is called Àjo and they attend their meetings through their animal species. They have the power to spoil good medicine and render magic useless because by means of their spiritual power, they know the ingredients used by any medicine man.

A typical example to support this claim is read in *Efúnsetán Aníwírà* where Itáwuyì wanted to retaliate the death of Adétutù by asking Àwèrò to poison Iyálóde's food. He says:

"Hà! Ìwo lo tún n sòrò bí omodé báyii? 'Two kò mò pé ògbológbó àjé ni. Kí o tó já ewé kí o to wa egbò iyá ti ri gbogbo rè. Kò sí òògùn tó ran elégírí mó. Irùgbòn àgbòn rè ju ti lèmomù lo" (o.i. 61).

Sorcery

Sorcery embraces ALL kinds of magic that disrupt man's total well being in one way or the other and the Yoruba have a strong belief in it. We have various types of sorcery namely:

1) **Space Sorcery:-** As the name implies, they work through space and no matter the distance the sorcery will attack the intended victim except if he/she is magically protected. In most cases it is accompanied with incantations in addition to mentioning the victim's name and that of his/her mother, i.e. *Lágbája, omo làkàsègbè*" and in other cases things that have once come in contact with the victim are used. In most cases this category of sorcery is used at night because the victim is believed to have slept and the spirit wandering about in dream, a time appropriate for the sorcery to work. They include:

- (a) **Àpèta:-** Where the victim is involved and shot by using an object such as mud to represent the victim. The object is shot or incantation used to invoke the spirit of the victim, or by shooting a magical gun towards the direction of the victim's place of abode. The belief is that when the victim's name is called he/she hears and answers even when in deep sleep and when shot, he/she dies.
- (b) **Àsàsí:-** This may not necessarily kill but the victim starts to behave abnormally and violently too. He is incapable of intelligent actions. It can be used to disunite a couple or good friends.
- (c) **Àránsí:-** a magical object is sent (animal or divinity or *sigìdì*) to harm any victim.
- (d) **Àbílù:-** This brings drastic changes in the victim's fortunes without necessarily killing or making a victim behave abnormally rather it ruins his/her properties thus turning a wealthy man into a relatively poor man. It can also make it impossible for the victim to settle down in a place.
- (e) **Àgádágodo:-** This is called the magic of padlock of *Àkáràbà*. A victim is locked up in the *àgádágodo* either to prevent him from doing something or force him to do something. It can be used to spoil court proceeding. It is also used to silence an insane patient who is seen to be violent.
- (f) **Èfún/Èdì:-** This makes a victim do things that are dangerous. He/she may jump into a well, from the top of a storey building, in front of a running vehicle, into a lake, shoot himself or any irrational behaviour.

Effects on Social Life

Both witchcraft and sorcery are believed to be agents of evil. They are believed to be causes of death, illness, disease, sterility, misfortune, ill-luck, financial losses, untold hardship etc. They can ruin the personality of their victims as said earlier. They are both enemies of the society because they work against the peace and well-being of the society. They are anti-social and so are always used to explain ALL misfortunes and social evils.

When people quarrel, they believe that their opponents may do them some harm and if anything happens to one of them, he/she attributes it to his/her opponent even when the opponent does not know anything about it. This is common in most polygamous with co-wives where sexual

antagonism is evident and one of them is suspicious of the other and the relationship strained. It is also common over possession of inheritance, struggle for Chieftaincy title etc.

The implication therefore is that a person who believes he/she is an object of sorcery is not likely to source it to anything other than his social grouping. He believes him/herself to be attacked by someone he knows or who knows him/her and not by a complete stranger because according to the Yoruba "bí ikú ilé ò pani, tòde ò lè rí ni pa". But can we take all these to be true? Are all these allegations real?

Finally, the existence of the two is not doubtful or debatable as we have genuine accusations. This however does not mean that there are no false accusations stemmed from fear, anxiety, hatred, envy, speculations, imaginations or wrong interpretations of dreams, signs, omens, etc.

A person usually accuses another person he naturally hates even if that person has good intention for him and if he feels they will jeopardize his welfare in one way or the other, he fears them.

People also fear their rival and those not well-placed as themselves and blame such rivals for their woes. We also have mental failure with the urge to put blame on others. This is common with patients suffering from severe depression e.g. addicted brother. They always lay the guilt at the door of those around them.

Furthermore, the fear of imaginary enemies can lead to mental imbalance. The psychological result is misfortune. These are people who cannot believe that certain things do happen naturally. They are usually superstitious and attribute all evils to the work of their enemies who do them evil secretly. For instance, if a co-wife attempt to make her husband hate her partner but fails, she begins to suspect the other wife even if they've not met for so many years back.

The people's idea about witchcraft and sorcery make them fear. They think just anybody can employ evil forces supernaturally to do harm whereas this is not so.

The society is haunted by sense of insecurity and everyone feels the need to defend himself against the unseen and probably imaginary enemies.

The world we are in is mixed with the good and the evil but because some churches preach the existence of evil and protection, it tends to perpetuate the reality and reinforce beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery.

Backbiting is another evil greater than witchcraft and sorcery. It is believed that they do more harm to the society than witches and sorcerers.

The evil caused by back-biters spreads like wild fire and so back-biters should be regarded as enemies of the society.

From the foregoing, we have seen that the social function of witchcraft and sorcery is that of providing something to put the blame of man's misfortunes on. They are seen as explaining social tensions in the society and so they are feared by all.

There are bound to be difficulties, misfortunes, untold hardship, death, inexplicable situations etc. in the society (even the holy book did not say we would not have problems). Such cloudy situations in human life is often blamed on the witches and sorcerers that they destroy ties of good neighbourliness and those ties that are necessary for the continued existence of an orderly social life. This is rather unfortunate.

Since people always believe that other people are behind their problems, accusation of witchcraft and sorcery only worsens the social relationship between the accuser and the accused and consequently, destroy the foundation of the solidarity of the social group.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to highlight the roles which both witchcraft and sorcery play in the social life of the Yoruba people, and this is the provision of avenue for the people to blame their misfortune on some people. That is these evil forces stand to explain reasons for the societal problems.

We have also established the fact that man cannot avoid experiencing misfortunes/problems such as death and others that are inexplicable to man because no matter how white the sky is, a little cloudy area shall emerge no matter how a man's life is joyous, there must be occasions for misfortune but it is quite unfortunate that the society at large put all the blame for their misfortunes on witchcraft and sorcery despite the fact that those two groups are also part of the society.

The belief is that witchcraft and sorcery disrupt the good rapport existing within the society and the cooperation between the society and these two groups further stained each day. This situation no doubt, is to the disadvantage of the entire society. The belief that there is always danger hunts the society, hence the belief on the need to take refuge somewhere to escape experiencing the influence of these evil powers or their imaginary enemies.

This world is a place where the evil and the good exist together but because some religious organizations preach the existence of evil forces and that they are capable of providing a way out, this further strengthens the people's belief in the existence of these powers.

We must however point it out here that backsliding is more devilish than witchcraft and sorcery. There is the belief that backsliders are inimical to the peace of the society than witchcraft and sorcery. The evil caused by them spread very fast like the fire from petrol explosion, for this reason, it is necessary we see a backslider as a more dreadful enemy of the society.

In conclusion therefore, we want to stress that the belief in witchcraft and sorcery will continue as long as people experience misfortunes and as long as people continue to have the opportunity of becoming a witch and a sorcerer, and this will no doubt do a great harm even to the economy of the society because many who could have become useful to the nation must have been bewitched and their progress retarded and this results into a backward trend for future generation.

As long as the guild of witch is not the one to be proud of and because it is not a condition that these group are offended before they perform their evil acts on their victims, it may be very difficult if not totally impossible to eradicate the continued existence of the group in our society.

Despite the belief of some people that they have power to combat witchcraft and sorcery, investigations and experience have shown that many of such people merely use their customers to find a source of leaving for themselves. Until today, we still hear of cases of victimisation by the guild of witches and sorcerers. Many who could have been an asset to this country have been destroyed, no wonder why people still put the blame for their misfortunes on others especially their rivals, the truthness or otherwise of such allegations notwithstanding.

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