

ISSN: 2141-3827

CENTREPOINT JOURNAL

Humanities Edition



Volume 18

Number 2

December 2015

**A JOURNAL OF INTELLECTUAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL INTEREST**

Centrepont Journal (Humanities Edition)

VOL.18, NO.2, pp.1-125

ISSN: 2141-3827

CENTREPOINT JOURNAL

(Humanities Edition)

Published by the
University of Ilorin Library and Publications
Committee

<http://www.unilorin.edu.ng/ejournals/index.php/cp>

Funded by

 **TETfund**
TERTIARY EDUCATION TRUST FUND

Volume 18

No.2

December 2015

THE BELIEF OF THE YORÙBÁ PEOPLE ABOUT WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

The Yorùbá constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. It is doubtful if any other African group has greater influence on the culture of the new world than the Yorùbá whose descendants until today, continue to preserve Yorùbá culture and traditions the world over (Awólálú, 1979). They are bound together by language, traditions and religious beliefs and practices. The keynote of their life is their religion and according to Ìdòwú, (1962, pp. 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 belong to the deity". The Yorùbá hold the belief that God, the Creator of mankind, (Èlédàá) 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. In spite of this belief, the Yorùbá and even the entire human race find themselves in a world filled with difficulties, and misfortunes. They find themselves in a world where evil co-exists with good. The objective of this paper among others is to determine the extent to which this belief affects the people's behaviour. The paper establishes the fact that membership of secret groups most times affects the behaviour of members and the generality of the people either positively or negatively. The research methodology for this study is analytical. The paper concludes that in as much as people still experience misfortunes, the belief in the existence of witchcraft and sorcery and the fear attached to their activities will persist. The paper therefore suggests that man should accept his fate, and continue to struggle and battle whatever difficulties that come his way.

Keywords: Yorùbá people, evil forces, witchcraft, sorcery, implications.

Introduction:

It is an undisputable fact that man would have preferred to live in a world free from evil rather than a world where both evil and good co-exist. This accounts for why people do not bother to find out the cause(s) of their well-being or why they enjoy good things but at the least misfortune, they begin to think about, and are eager to find out, the cause(s) of their sufferings. This is based on the fact that people believe that all good things are meant for them. It is their birthright. They need not find out why they should enjoy a life free of misfortunes. On the other hand, whenever they experience any misfortune, they see it as negating their birthright and

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that such misfortune must be the handiwork of certain agents which are opposed to good.

This is what some investigations into the people's religion tend to dismiss as superstitious while others classify them as "munbo-jumbo" (Awolàlú, 1979, p.69). In the Yorùbá belief, evil comes to man in a number of ways which include:

(a) **The natural evil:** this refers to happenings such as flood, epidemic, earthquake, storm, pestilence, death and so on which are believed to be beyond human control. Although, they are not everyday occurrences, their presence in man's life is inexplicable.

(b). **The Mysterious evil:** This happens mysteriously and depends largely on what the oracle says. It could come from spiritual agents such as ancestors or spirits who might have been offended in one way or the other either, from individuals or from the entire community. For instance, the outbreak of measles is attributed to the spirit of "sònpònná" while the outbreak of thunder is associated with "sàngó" who happens to be one of the deified ancestors of the Yorùbá.

(c). **The supernatural evil:** Most misfortunes are attributed to the handiwork of either witches or sorcerers. The Yorùbá believe that the existence of the two supernatural agencies of evil account for the sufferings in the world today. All strange diseases, accidents, untimely deaths, inability to gain promotion in office, barrenness in women, impotence in men, failure of crops and a thousand of other evils are attributed to the handiwork of witches.

To buttress this view, Quarcoopone, (1987, p. 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 suck its blood spiritually". This situation is what Jacobs (1977, p. 251) describes as "an evil employment of mystical power generally in secret fashion". This paper therefore intends to examine witchcraft and sorcery as forces of evil and how the belief in their existence affects the people's attitudes.

Yorùbá belief in Witchcraft and sorcery

We want to start by making a distinction between these two supernatural phenomena which are usually mistaken for one another. For instance, Jacobs (1977, p.251) simply describes sorcerers as "evil or black magicians who are men and work in the dark or at night" while Quarcoopone (1987) defines a witch as "a person who is believed to be possessed by a witch spirit".

Field, (1937, p.400) simply defines witchcraft as "a bad medicine" while Crowford says that witchcraft means wizardry (referring to witchcraft and sorcery). Mbiti (1975, p.108) says "there is no distinction between witchcraft and bad magic"

(idán búburú). Awólálú (1979, 102) tries to make a distinction between the two when he says:

A sorcerer uses charms, incantations, 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).

The reason for this kind of confusion is that there is a general belief that the two have fundamental similarities which make them enemies of man. The following represent a brief comparison of the two evils:

- (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 but Sorcerers may have, but use destructive medicines to kill their victims.
- (e). Witches have animal and bird familiars while Sorcerers do not.
- (f). Sorcerers have no recognized guilds or societies but Witches have their guilds at both local, state and national levels of government.
- (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 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.

It is pertinent to mention here that no matter the difference between the two groups, they are inter-related in outlook, in form and even in their modes of operation. The two groups are known for evil deeds and they are feared not only among the Yorùbá but among several other tribes of the world.

Witchcraft

Quarcoopone (1987, p.150) describes a Witch as:

A person who is believed to be possessed by a witch spirit.

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

As defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica, "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".

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The fact remains that Yorùbá in particular and Africans in general, whatever their level of literacy, believe in the reality of witchcraft especially going by their experience of the influence of witchcraft in their lives. No wonder, why the Yorùbá say: "*ibi a rin mọ n là á rí mọ*" meaning 'the farther you go, the more you see'. This implies that debate on the existence or otherwise of witchcraft depends on experience. People have had experiences which cannot be waved off or termed as psychological conditions.

Yorùbá believe that witches are people with inherent power which they can use in doing anything bad. Their powers are for evil and all forms of anti-social purposes. Their main duty is to pester human life without any rite attached to it. The belief 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*", "*ẹlẹye*", "*iyà àgbà*", or simply "*àjẹ*" because they are females. They attend their meetings through their animal species. They have the power to defecate on good medicine and render magic useless because by means of their spiritual power, they know the ingredients used for any medicine.

This claim is supported in Ìṣọla's written play, *Ẹfúnṣetán Aniwurà* (1973) where Ìṭawuyi used Àwẹrọ to poison Ìyálóde's food to retaliate the killing of Adétutù, one of Ẹfúnṣetán's female slaves who was impregnated by Ìṭawuyi another male slave and who was subsequently beheaded by Ẹfúnṣetán, he says:

Ha! Ìwọ lo tún ń sọrọ bí ọmọdé bá yí, iwọ kò mọ pé ògbólógbó àjẹ ni. Kí o tó já ewé, kí o tó wa egbò, iyá ti rí gbogbo rẹ. Kò sí òògùn tó ran ẹlẹgírí mọ. Irùngbọn àgbọn rẹ ju ti lẹmọmù lọ. (o.i. 16).

You are still talking like a child, you don't know that she is an addicted witch. Before you prepare all ingredients, "*iyá*" has seen everything. There is no medicine that can be effective on her. Her beard is more than that of an Imam. (p.16).

Sorcery

Sorcery embraces all kinds of magic that disrupt man's total well-being in any form and the Yorùbá have strong belief in it. Awólàlú and Dọpámú (1979, p.249) assert that:

... magic is known as sorcery. It is offensive and anti-social. It is much feared because it can be used to kill, to harm, to destroy life or property, to make happy destiny an unhappy one, and to disrupt the well-being of the individual and the society.

Sorcery is in different types. They include: **Space sorcery** which works through space. No matter the distance, it attacks the intended victim except such a

person is magically protected. In most cases, it is accompanied with incantations in addition to mentioning the victim's name and that of his or her mother (lágbájá ọmọ lākásègbè). In other cases, they mention things that have once come in contact with the victim. This category of sorcery is used at night because the victim is believed to have slept off and the spirit wandering about in dreamland. This is an appropriate time for the sorcery to work effectively.

It is worthy to mention here that the incantations used include "Àpèta. Àsàsí, Àránsí, Àbílù, Àgádágodo, Èfún or Èèdì. Their application depends largely on the kind of punishment intended for the victim. For example, in Àpèta, an object is used to represent the victim. The object is shot or incantations used to invoke the spirit of the intended victim or by shooting a magical gun in 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 in deep sleep and when this is done, the victim dies.

Effects of Witchcraft and Sorcery on the People's Behaviour

It has been pointed out that both witchcraft and sorcery are agents of evil. They are believed to be causes of death for the underaged, illness, disease, sterility, misfortune, ill-luck, financial losses, untold hardship and the likes. They can ruin the personality of their victim. 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 forms of misfortunes and social evils. They possess and operate on the 'id' personality.

The 'id' seeks immediate gratification of primitive, pleasure-seeking impulses. The 'id', like the new born baby operates on the pleasure principle. It endeavours to avoid pains and obtain pleasure regardless of any external considerations. The 'id' always likes to form a mental image or hallucination of the object that will reduce tension-wish fulfillment. Anybody that is controlled by 'id' trait loves to satisfy his/her needs irrationally with no consideration of reality. Their motto is "my will be done", the negative effects of such will on others notwithstanding.

The 'id' seeks immediate tension reduction by such primary processes or direct gratification of impulses or wish-fulfilling imagery. This is unlike the ego personality that takes reward into consideration. It delays gratifications until the conditions are appropriate. The ego is essentially the executive of the personality because it decides what actions are appropriate.

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 what happens. This is common in most polygamous homes among co-wives where sexual antagonism is evident and all of them are suspicious of one another and there is strained relationship. This is equally pronounced in cases involving possession of inheritance, struggle for chieftaincy titles, etc.

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People also fear their rivals and those not well-placed like them and blame such rivals for their woes. They also have the urge to put the blame of their failure on others. This is common with patients suffering from severe depression. They always lay the guilt at the door step of those around them.

Yorùbá literary writers also affirm this belief in their works. In polygamous homes, vices such as selfishness and jealousy are common. These, if not properly handled, can result into murder. This is what Ọmọtáyọ and Ọgúnníran (1997) try to explain in *Abínúṣeni*. The authors expose those vices believed to be common in polygamous families. Adéjísólá for jealous reasons proceeds to report her husband to her guild of witches. She exclaims:

Ọkọ wá ti yan àrólé..... E máa gbọ o, iyá rẹ ni iyálé pátápátá. Èmi ni iyàwó kékeré pátápátá. Iyá rẹ lògá isẹ, èmi lomo isẹ, ó di méjì. Iyá rẹ ló bí ọmọbinrin tó kókó kẹkọ jade ní Yunifásítí. Gbogbo àwọn ọmọbinrin tí iyá rẹ bí ló yàn tó yanjú. Ní ẹ lẹwọn ọkúnrin máa ní dù wọn wàràwàrà bí àkàrà gbígboná. E máa gbọ o, Iyá rẹ ló ri ẹ jùlọ nínú gbogbo iyàwó tókọ wa fẹ..... Ọmọ ẹni tí a wí yìi lẹkọ wá fí ẹ àrólé.... Ọlórún kí ẹ ọba ẹnikanṣọṣo. Kò jẹ tò ó bẹẹ rára. Àfi kí a tún un tò ló lẹ tẹ mi lórùn. (o.i. 74).

Our husband has chosen his heir... Listen to this. His mother is the most senior wife. I am the most junior wife. His mother is the master, I am the servant. His mother is also the mother of the first female graduate. All his mother's daughters are successful. Boys do run after them like the hot cake. Listen! his mother is the most prosperous of all our husband's wives... this woman's child is chosen as the heir by our husband. God is not for only one person. He will never arrange it so. Except we re-arrange it, I cannot be satisfied. (p. 74).

With this in her mind, she proceeds and attempts to terminate Ọkánlẹwọn's life by reporting him to her guild of witches. The universal unconsciousness in Adéjísólá would not have allowed her to bewitch Ọkánlẹwọn but the fact that she is jealous, makes her carry out her threat to deal with Ọkánlẹwọn. This is what we call the 'id' and ego personality that would make man do things without considering the effects of his action on others. This is common with witches and sorcerers.

Adéjísólá requests that Ọkánlẹwọn should be killed so as to have her own son as the sole heir. She has a lion archetype. The lion is the king of the forest and leader of all animals. The lion hates any surrogate and always makes sure that no one competes with it or else, that animal would die. The impulse to kill is always in the lion whenever it is hungry. Adéjísólá has the impulse to kill anybody that stands in her way or her son's.

Witches and sorcerers are sources of social tension and misunderstanding in any community. It is also believed that because they possess evil powers and because they are sure of having the cooperation of other members of the guild, they are encouraged to perpetrate their evil acts. This is what Şàngótóyè (1997) portrays in *Adákédájó*. In the text, Àrẹ̀mú lavishly spends the money given to him by his father-in-law for conversion into the new currency and when he is asked to return the money, he lays ambush and kills Kànmí, his brother-in-law. He then rushes to his guild of witches for cover. His case is extensively discussed. Although the group agrees that Àrẹ̀mú is guilty but because of the covenant they made, they send an emissary to the Police Officer and the judge in charge of the case, who happen to be members of their guild with bribes asking for their favour. The Police officer laments:

È ẹ̀şun. Lára isòro tí àwa agbófinró máa ní ní niyẹn. Àwọn èniyàn a máa fa okùn gbòṛòlògbòṛòlò wọn kò sì ní fẹ́ ìyà ìdí rẹ́. Ẹ́ ẹ̀ni bá fa nńkan tó nípa, ó yẹ kí ojú rẹ́ rí nńkan tó tóbí. Şùgbọ̀n ohun tí ẹ́ wá sí yí, kín ní kí a ẹ́? (o.i.82).

Thank you. This is part of the problems facing we Law enforcement agents. People will pull long ropes but they are not prepared to face the consequences associated with it. He who does what nobody had done should see big trouble. But for the issue at hand, what do we do? (p.82).

The same goes with the judge who has no option but to pervert justice. Delivering his judgement, the Judge says:

Ọ̀gbẹ̀ni Àrẹ̀mú, mo gbọ́ gbogbo àwíjàrẹ́ àti ẹ̀bẹ́ tí o ní bẹ́. Bí ó bá jẹ́ pé bí ó ẹ́ yẹ ní, ẹ̀sùn ipàniyàn ló yẹ kí wọn fí kàn ọ́. Şùgbọ̀n nítorí pé kò sí ẹ̀rì níwájú mí pé o mò nípa ikú Kànmí àti pé àánú tí o fẹ́ ẹ́ ló di ẹ̀bí mò ọ́ lẹ́wọ́, máa wò ẹ́ ẹ́. Ídájọ́ mí ní pé kí o lẹ́ ẹ̀wọn ọ̀dún méjì tàbí kí o san owó ìtanràn, ẹ̀gbẹ̀rún kan naira. (o.i.84).

(Mr. Àrẹ̀mú, I heard all your defense and plea. If we are to act right you would have been charged for murder but because there is no evidence before me to prove that you know anything about Kànmí's death and because it is your kindness that puts you into trouble, I would want to pity you. My judgments is that you go for two years imprisonment or pay the sum of one thousand naira in the alternative). (p.84).

The actions of the Policeman and the judge are no doubt negative forces against the spirit of *ẹ̀mọ̀lúàbí* among the Yorúbás. They are both demonic. As members of the secret cult, their actions are tantamount to a misuse of power. It

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amounts to oppression and wickedness which are associated with the guild of witches and Sorcerers. People know this but because of the fear already created in them, nobody would make an attempt to accuse them except through spiritual means. This is in line with the Yorùbá saying that: "*èpè ni a fi ñ wo èpè*" meaning "a curse is the most effective instrument for cleansing another curse".

Furthermore, the fear of imaginary enemies can lead to mental imbalance. The psychological result is misfortune. There are people who will not believe that certain things do happen naturally. They are usually suspicious and attribute all evils to the handiwork of their enemies who do them evil secretly. This infers that the people's idea about witchcraft and sorcery make them fear. They think just anybody can employ evil force supernaturally to do harm whereas this is not true to some extent.

The society is haunted by the sense of insecurity and everyone feels there is the need to defend himself against 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.

There is no doubt that neither science nor foreign religions have been able to disprove, the existence of the guild of witches and sorcerers and the magnitude of their magical powers. The foreign religions also affirm that man is not the only creature living on the earth; they live with spirits, world powers, ghosts, and the likes who influence their lives in one way or the other. We have heard of cases where medical doctors will ask patients to seek for solution to their ailment through traditional means after they might have exhausted all scientific means of finding solution to an ailment.

The belief in the existence of witches and sorcerers creates fear in individuals. In as much as we believe that these forces co-exist with man and that they have the magical power to devour, it is advisable to rely on one's destiny as the escape route rather than running after shadows. Many have formed the habit of running to herbalists and diviners for safety. This action has led to wasting of huge sums of money even when no solution is recorded.

Since experiences have shown that one cannot run away from the menace of this group because they are omnipresent, it is better that man takes his solace in his Creator (God) who is believed to have total control of all powers of this world.

Experience has shown that in villages where their presence is mostly felt, the head of the village (Ọba or Baálẹ̀) and his council of chiefs appease suspected witches and sorcerers by given them chieftaincy titles. The belief is that as chiefs, they would not want the village to disintegrate. However, such actions do not work in most cases. This is because members of the guild make pledges, that is to say that they enter into covenant which they must fulfill at the appropriate time. They are either allowed to make voluntary pledges or they are told what they should pledge.

This ranges from their most loved wife, children and relations, failure of which results into more serious afflictions on the defaulting member.

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 used to explain social tensions in the society and so they are feared by all.

However, our stand is that there are bound to be difficulties, misfortunes, untold hardships, deaths, inexplicable situations, etc. in the society more so when it is evident that the world is a place where both the evil and the good co-exist. Even the Holy books do not say that man would not experience misfortunes. Despite the fact that we are not denying the existence and negative effects of witches and sorcerers, blaming all such situations on witches and sorcerers may not be justifiable to some extent, more so, when it is evident that the Creator does not exempt man from having bad experiences.

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, destroys the foundation of the solidarity of the social group. At the least experience of misfortune, people begin to accuse their imaginary enemies and this culminates in creating enmity among people, no matter how closely related they are. We have heard of some people who were accused of possessing the spirit of witchcraft and they were ex-communicated from their villages. This will definitely not go down well with the children of such persons as they are not likely to partake in community programmes no matter how vibrant such programmes are. The community will lose the cooperation of such people.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have been able to highlight the roles of witches and sorcerers on the social life of the people especially the Yorùbá people. This provides an avenue for people to blame their misfortunes on others. This infers that these evil forces are used to explain reasons for the societal problems.

We have also established the fact that man cannot escape from experiencing one form of misfortune or the other that is unexplainable to man because according to the Yorùbá saying: "*bó ti wù kí òòrùn mú tó, sánmò dúdú diẹ yóó wà*" literally meaning that things cannot be rosy for man at all times. There are bound to be occasions of misfortunes, but as earlier mentioned, people often blame some powers such as witches and sorcerers for these.

The belief is that witches and sorcerers disrupt the good rapport existing within the society and the cooperation between the society and these two groups is further strained. This situation no doubt is to the disadvantage of the entire society. The belief that there is always danger hunts the society, hence people believe in the need to take refuge somewhere to escape experiencing the influence of the evil powers or their imaginary enemies.

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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 witches and a sorcerers, and this no doubt portends great harm even to the economy of the society because many who could have become useful to the nation must have been be-witched and their progress retarded and this results into a backward trend for future generations.

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

Despite the claim of some people that they have the power to combat witchcraft and sorcery, experience has shown that many of such people merely use the victims as sources of living for themselves. Until today, witches and sorcerers are still fingered as being responsible for man's misfortunes. Many who could have been assets to the society are believed to have been bewitched and died prematurely. Many people still put the blame for their misfortunes on others especially their rivals, the truthfulness or otherwise of such allegations notwithstanding. The paper therefore suggests that man should accept his fate, and continue to struggle and battle whatever difficulties that come his way.

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