

Witchcraft Concepts in West-African Pentecostal Literature

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Introduction

Witchcraft and Development have been two topics perceived as contradictory right from the moment when missionaries thought that the word “witchcraft” fitted certain practices and words among West-Africans. Today one can still read this assumed contradiction of development and witchcraft between the lines of newspaper articles such as the following bit taken from the Nigerian Punch 2013:

“Nigerians believe in the existence of witches, they also believe in juju and the paranormal. They do not take responsibility for their failures and shortcoming. Plane crashes and automobile accidents are, for the most part, attributed to evil forces. If your car malfunctions, you blame the witch; if you have a heart attack or stroke or other health challenges, you blame your father’s second or third wife; if you do poorly in school or if you are denied admission to the school of your choice, you blame the woman down the road. And especially since 1999, if you lose an election, well, who do you blame? The witches, of course!” (Abidde 2013)

Among scholars one even finds the theory of the growing obsession with witchcraft in West- and other parts of Africa. Rosalind Hackett and others attribute this phenomenon to the Pentecostal or Born-Again movement that is especially strong in West-African countries like Ghana and Nigeria (cf. Hackett 2003:61; Marshall 2009:31).

Methodology

In this presentation I am going to explore witchcraft concepts in literature about West-African Pentecostalism and by West-African Pentecostals. My sources are the among African Pentecostals well-known testimonial “Delivered from the Powers of Darkness” by Emmanuel Eni who claims to have been a witch himself, sermons of Enoch Adeboye who oversees the probably biggest Pentecostal church in Nigeria, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, and an online interview with the Nigerian Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio who was recently banned from the UK for her message about child witches. Within the field of scholarly research I concentrate on Birgit Meyer’s findings among the Ewe of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Ghana and Opoku Onyinah’s theory of “witchdemonology” based on his research among Christians in Ghana. I will also refer to Rosalind Hackett, Ruth Marshall and Ogbu Kalu who are well-known experts on West-African Pentecostalism.

The questions which I applied to the texts are:

In which contexts do Pentecostals and researchers talk about witchcraft?

What kind of names and words are linked to witchcraft (e.g. the Devil, traditional)?

What kind of meaning is thereby established?

Theses and examples

I present my findings as the following four theses:

The Contested Modernity of Witchcraft

A Question of Power

Satan and Demons as Synonyms for Witchcraft or The Indigenization of Christianity

The Traditional and Cultural Origin of Witchcraft

The contents of these theses overlap and are not clear cut against each other but they give a little structure to my presentation.

The Contested Modernity of Witchcraft

In recent anthropological publications one can read again and again about the “modernity” of witchcraft (cf. Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001; Niehaus 2001; Sanders 2003).

Three different aspects of modernity are used in these accounts of witchcraft. Thereby witchcraft is either described as happening in modern times as a synonym for the Now like in the concept of multiple modernities (cf. Geschiere 1997). Or witchcraft is rendered rational and thereby structurally modern (cf. Niehaus 2001). Or witchcraft is declared a function of modernity even when claimed not to be modern at all (cf. Sanders 2003). Sometimes these aspects overlap.

Modernity also seems to be a topic within Pentecostal depictions of witchcraft. Modern inventions and technologies feature sometimes prominently in Pentecostal accounts of witchcraft e.g. in Eni’s “Delivered from the Powers of Darkness” when the domain of the Devil and the Queen of the Sea that he visits is depicted as a big city under the sea with laboratories (1987:9f). The biggest and most modern city in Nigeria, Lagos, also represents the place highly penetrated by witchcraft in Eni’s testimonial. Lagos is a city full of evil temptations for the country boy Emmanuel (1987:5f). Also Eni relates witchcraft to a secret Indian society which he has to visit to gain access to even greater power alluding to the topic of globalism (1987:7f). But in line with the third aspect of the term modernity, witchcraft itself is never thought of as modern by Pentecostals. Instead for most of them it is a feature of a dangerous pagan past.

A Question of Power

In the scholarly literature, witchcraft is often attributed to gaining power in face of political and economic uncertainties. For West-African Pentecostals, the dangerous power of witchcraft is an acknowledged fact. Most of the West-African sources present it as a hidden force attacking out of a sudden. Anybody could be a witch (cf. Onyinah 2012:185). Eni

describes the days when he used to be a witch such: “People saw me as young and innocent but never knew I was dangerous” (1987:9). Adeboye stresses the danger of witchcraft by explaining in a sermon that “demons don’t appear on x-ray” (2001). Adeboye thus depicts the sciences helpless in the face of witchcraft. However, he tells a story where he makes the witchcraft of a woman visible. After he bound the demon inside of her, she gets big as a balloon proving thus the existence of the demon. The fact that Adeboye succeeded to make the invisible power visible shows his own God given power over the dark forces.

The invisibility of witchcraft also gives rise to the assumption of signs which point towards it. Onyinah lists among them contractions in the body, restlessness, hallucinations, voices in the head, abnormal talkativeness or reservedness, inability to reason or listen and supernatural strength (2012:182). Unfortunately, these signs are not as distinct as one might wish. So witchcraft stays an unpredictable force, which makes guarding oneself and the spiritual warfare (aggression is the better defense) against it all the more necessary to Pentecostal Christians in West-Africa. Helen Ukpabio therefore described her campaign against witches as “battling the powers of darkness” (2009) and Adeboye declares Christians already the winners in the fight since God has made those dark powers and commands them (cf. 2012).

Satan and Demons as Synonyms for Witchcraft or The Indigenization of Christianity

In all West-African Pentecostal accounts Satan and Demons feature as synonyms for witchcraft. The most vibrant is the picture drawn by Emmanuel Eni in “Delivered from the Powers of Darkness”. In the book *the Queen of the Sea*, a figure resembling the among the Igbo well-known Mami Wata, the Devil and their agents, the witches, are all present in one hierarchy of evil.

Birgit Meyer saw the Devil as the vital link between missionary and Ewe worldview whereby the Ewe Christians learnt to equate Satan with witchcraft (1992:105f). Similarly to this thesis, Onyinah found that his respondents used the terms ‘witch’ and ‘witchcraft’ synonymously with the terms ‘demon’ and ‘evil spirit’ (2012:175). Onyinah likewise assumes that witchcraft fits in the African worldview or cosmology:

“African cosmology is characterized by a preoccupation with good and evil spirits. There is a Supreme Being who created all things and manifests his power through a pantheon of gods who can be evil or good. The principal evil is attributed to witchcraft, since it is held that all evil forces can be in league with witches to effect an evil act.” (2012:1)

According to Onyinah, the “witchdemonology” that Pentecostal churches concern themselves with presents a combination of a Western demon concept and an indigenous witchcraft concept (2012:171f).

Based on thoughts taken from the historical anthropology by John D. Y. Peel among the Yoruba, I want to counter that view of the indigenous concept of witchcraft brought into relationship with Western demons. Peel is of the opinion that the mission’s aim of translation between languages and cultures ultimately changed the Yoruba culture. Yoruba did not even

really exist as one linguistic or ethnic corpus before missionaries, often indigenous, ex-slave converts like Samuel Crowther formed a language out of many similar dialects and thus a culture (cf. Peel 2003:28.283). Based on Peel's concept Ruth Marshall describes the process of conversion as struggle (2009:45). The name 'struggle' introduces a concept in which components can neither be called purely African nor purely European as they are forged together in a difficult process of negotiation. It thus renders witchcraft less indigenous and more born out of the encounter.

Another hint to question the purely indigenous nature of witchcraft is the account that the American Evangelist Derek Prince who was born to British parents in British India gives. In his book "They Shall Expel Demons", which is well-known among West-African Pentecostal pastors (cf. Onyinah 2012:172), he writes:

"As we trace the tortuous, deceptive paths of demonic activities and the occult, we discover that they all proceed from one primal source: *witchcraft*. [...] Witchcraft is the universal, primeval religion of fallen humanity. [...] Each people group practices its own form of witchcraft but certain elements are common to almost all of them." (2009:129)

So how cultural and indigenous can witchcraft be when many Pentecostals take their ideas about it from a British-American who promotes witchcraft as a universal evil to mankind?

The Traditional and Cultural Origin of Witchcraft

Helen Ukpabio also stresses the universal factor of witchcraft by stating that "There is witchcraft in Nigeria. There is witchcraft in Africa. There is witchcraft all over the world." (2009). However, most of West-African Pentecostal accounts present witchcraft as a traditionally African force inherent in the indigenous cultures.

According to Onyinah, in Ghana Pentecostal Christians see traditional priests as witches although they are taken to fight witchcraft in a traditional setting (2012:176). "All the institutions and activities of the traditional cultures are seen as dangerous to healthy living, for they attract demons capable of torturing people." (Onyinah 2012:183) That is why most African Initiated Churches are thought of as witchcraft promoting churches by Pentecostals. The best example is the account given in "Delivered from the Powers of Darkness" where prophets from the AICs ask the Devil and his agents for help to perform miracles and the holy water is represented as water supplied by evil spirits (Eni 1987:13).

However, scholars find themselves occupied with one question when it comes to witchcraft beliefs in African Pentecostal churches: Why do people condemn 'traditional' practices and ideas when they obviously still hold on strongly to 'traditional' beliefs about witchcraft and evil spirits themselves (cf. Meyer 1992:103; Newell 2007:464; Onyinah 2012:5)?

Ogbu Kalu seeks to explain this through the inherently African nature:

"The size of the African continent and her myriads of cultures could defy any attempt to construct an African worldview. But scholars agree that there is a deep-seated and underlying cultural pattern that makes us all Africans." (2002:118)

Kalu's "cultural pattern" could refer to a rather ethnically essentialist notion of culture or a historical becoming due to the particular situations in African countries. I prefer the second option. As Hackett shows, these typically African patterns are often not as confined as they seem. She stresses the strong ties of Pentecostal Christians in West- and East-Africa to the US, South Korea and Brazil especially concerning demonology (cf. 2003:62f). So the 'Traditional' becomes more of a transnational traditional blend that traces its origins back to various countries.

Yet, if we take the by West-African Pentecostals as traditional and cultural perceived origins of witchcraft as false, we simply miss the point. The Pentecostal idea of overcoming or conversion alludes to a concept of the past as sinful and evil and the present and future as redeemed and therefore full of God's earthly and heavenly blessings (cf. Marshall 2009:65). But the reality on ground in West-African countries often shows that there is still danger and need for redemption. The evil past is still active in the present.

Conclusion: The Modern or the Traditional?

Scholars and Pentecostals alike are caught in their accounts of witchcraft between its globally influenced modernity and its traditional and local origin. This can be taken as a mirror of the history of witchcraft. In West-Africa, witchcraft can be traced back to the writings of missionaries, local agents of the mission and colonial administrators who often thought of the European homelands as modern and civilized finding themselves in a primitive and pagan present. This encounter supported the complex and struggle-like invention of conditions rendered soon-to-be past in order for a modern present to become. Scholars and Pentecostals are sometimes less obviously but all the same as their missionary and colonial antecessors historically influenced subjects. With their accounts of witchcraft they write a "history of the present" (Marshall 2009:51). So the modern/ traditional, the foreign/ indigenous aspects, they are all notions of the present, as nobody can invoke the past as it came to pass (Marshall 2009:24f). So the reality of witchcraft is necessarily multiple.

However, by this conclusion, I don't want to deny the reality of witchcraft. It is as real as its perceived counterpart, Development, and all the same, witchcraft is as historical as it, too. There are still many open questions concerning witchcraft concepts among practicing Pentecostals and how they themselves link those concepts to historical events in the local and global, individual and collective past and present. Some of these questions I hope to answer in my field research about "Witchcraft Concepts among Christians and Muslims in Ibadan, Nigeria".

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