

# **Belief in Witchcraft and Sorcery in African Culture: A Philosophical Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

This paper undertakes a philosophical examination of the widely held belief in witchcraft and sorcery in Africa particularly, and by implication, in other societies of the world. Witchcraft, sorcery and their associated beliefs, have over the centuries, been sustained in the consciousness of humans by religion and culture, and find explicit focus in popular television, films (like Nollywood) and in fiction. The study grapples with a fundamental problem of ascertaining whether such beliefs can be justified on epistemological grounds. The big question is whether the belief in the existence of witchcraft and sorcery is simply a myth or an incontrovertible fact? In attempting to address this question, the paper employs a critical method using basic epistemological tools for its analysis. Our objective is to establish a rational basis for either accepting or rejecting, elucidating or deconstructing such widely accepted beliefs. Findings, here, however, show that such beliefs exist only at the realm of the mystical; and apparently lacks scientific and epistemological justifications. The paper concludes that, though, the belief in witchcraft and sorcery helps to explain some mysterious events beyond science, there exists some epistemological gaps and missing links begging for further explanations.

**Key words:** Witchcraft, sorcery, belief, knowledge, myth

## **Introduction**

As an ancillary discipline, the function of philosophy includes a critical evaluation of beliefs and values that individuals and societies live by, with a view to determining their plausibility and the extent to which they are relevant in coping with the challenges of life (Oladipo 2008: 18). Put

succinctly, philosophy helps to examine the intellectual foundations of life, using the best available modes of knowledge and reflection for human well-being (Wiredu 1980: 62). It conducts a reflective and critical thinking about the concepts, beliefs and practices which peoples and cultures use to organize their religious, moral and social experiences (Fadahunsi and Oladipo 2004: 16)

The belief on the existence of witchcraft and sorcery is strongly held among many peoples and cultures in Africa and beyond. However, on very many issues like that of witchcraft and sorcery, different people hold divergent and incompatible views or opinions. Some of these views or beliefs may probably be true and others false or erroneous. But since erroneous or false beliefs are often held just as strongly as true beliefs, it becomes therefore, quite problematic distinguishing the one from the other. In this circumstance, the most appropriate intellectual attitude and response would be that which does not take any belief or assumption for granted but rather examines the grounds for the elucidation and justification of any truth-claim. Philosophy does just that as a critical discipline.

In this paper, we shall undertake a philosophical analysis of the belief in witchcraft and sorcery to see whether it has any rational justification. Although belief on these phenomena cuts across both African and Western cultures, our emphasis will be limited to the African culture since African peoples present some of the clearest examples of belief in witchcraft today (Parrinder 1976: 13).

### **Philosophy and African Culture**

One of the objectives of this paper is to show the kind of contribution philosophy can make to the cultural development of society, particularly, in the African context. As earlier said, philosophy has a crucial role to play in the articulation, clarification and justification of concepts, beliefs and values that guide the thought and life of a people. As Bertrand Russell points out, philosophy by nature consists of speculations on matters as to which 'definite knowledge' has, so far been unascertainable. As a critical discipline, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation (Russell 1979: 13). Given the nature of philosophy, it serves the function of examining

the foundations and challenging established cultural views and belief as a way of promoting the understanding of such belief systems through the exposition of their logical structures and the assumptions on which they are erected (Oladipo 2008: 25). In other words, the relationship between philosophy and African culture is that the former critically engages the latter in an incisive analysis with a view to identifying its strengths and weaknesses, and to show the way forward. It is, therefore, apparent from the foregoing that the task of re-evaluating some African cultural beliefs as a means of enhancing societal development is a philosophical imperative.

In as much as re-evaluations may not have an instantaneous or immediate effect on the fallacious world-views and conceptions of the people resulting in immediate paradigm shift, its impact will, nevertheless be far-reaching. Such analysis or re-appraisals have the potential of promoting epistemic awareness and cultural dynamism (as against what Charles Sanders Pierce calls the ‘fixation of belief’) that would assist Africans to come to terms with the realities of contemporary human existence.

### **Clarification of Key Concepts**

Two concepts stand out clearly in our discourse; namely witchcraft and sorcery.

#### **What is Witchcraft?**

Although witchcraft may share some common characteristics with related concepts such as sorcery and magic, it is, however, a totally different phenomenon. Parrinder (1962) notes that often witchcraft is mistaken for sorcery and magical practices in a similar way a witch-doctor has been confounded with a priest or even with witches themselves (122) This means that the concept of witchcraft is not the same thing as the concept of sorcery. It is, therefore, germane to clarify our use of these concepts in our everyday life in order to make their meanings clearer. Etymologically, the terms ‘witchcraft’ and ‘witch’ are derivatives of Old English noun *wiccecraft*: *wicca* pronounced “witchah” (masculine) or *wicce* pronounced “witchuh” (feminine), denoting a person who practices sorcery; and from *craft* which means “craft” or “skill” (Lewis and

Russell 2016: 1). Beyond this explanation, the term 'witchcraft' have different connotations and embraces a wide variety of phenomena that makes its meaning to vary according to linguistic, historical and cultural contexts. In other words, different cultures do not share a coherent pattern of witchcraft belief, which often blend with other concepts such as sorcery, magic and diabolism (Lewis and Russell 2016: 2; Gardener 2004: 1).

However, from the African cultural standpoint, Mbiti (1969), opines that witchcraft is a term used more popularly and broadly to describe all sorts of evil employment of mystical power, generally in a secret fashion (202). In his opinion, witchcraft is a concept used in designating the destructive and harmful employment of mystical power in all its manifestations. He claims that African societies seldom draw the rather academic distinction between witchcraft, sorcery and magic. The Mbitian conception of witchcraft could, therefore, be seen from an integrative and broad perspective. But this explanation seems to miss the mark because it presents witchcraft as an amorphous configuration of all sorts of secret and mystical display of destructive powers.

On his part, Parrinder describes witchcraft as an evil thing practiced by both men and women whose activities include nocturnal preying on human souls as vampires and a characteristic indulgence in spiritual cannibalism. Witchcraft, Parrinder (1962) posits, is a social activity like the sabbaths and covens in which medieval Europeans believed. The witch, he says, may be an old crone, living in solitude but at night she (since it is believed by most African peoples that majority of witches are women) is thought to abandon the solitary life to fraternize with her fellows in their covens (123-126).

For Idowu (1973), African concepts about witchcraft consists in the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind, or estate. In wrecking such havocs, it is believed that witches can operate singly or in collaboration with other witches in a surreptitious manner, either invisibly or through a lower creature like animals, birds and insect (175).

What is clear from the foregoing explanations is that witchcraft is simply an evil activity usually carried out by a person called a witch (usually a female) or a wizard (a male counterpart) who is purported to

possess some strange supernatural powers that are usually employed for harmful and destructive purposes. Witchcraft, therefore, involves the exercise or invocation of alleged secret, supernatural, and diabolic powers to manipulate or control fellow humans, their fortunes or destinies, and events.

### **What is Sorcery?**

Sorcery is said to be the art of casting of spells or the use of magical powers or invocation of spirits to achieve some purposes. It is believed that a sorcerer has some innate powers to influence the natural world through the occult as opposed to an open, empirical or observable means. Sorcery is system of beliefs and practices whose goal is to manipulate nature in order to bring about specific changes that is believed to be harmful or undesirable to society.

Belief in sorcery have existed in virtually all societies over the ages, including African and Western societies. The classical Greco-Roman and Hebrew societies from which Western civilization sprang entertained a great variety of beliefs and practices about sorcery, from public rituals that melded with religion to legends about hideous *striae* and *lamiae* reported by the poet Horace (Thomson Gale, *Encyclopedia of Religion* 2019). In most African traditional societies, there is a very strong belief in sorcery and its impact on human existence. It is believed that sorcery involves incantations supposed to summon spirits to aid the sorcerer which is beyond the ability of the ordinary people in society. These spirits could be either malevolent or benevolent.

### **Witchcraft and Sorcery: A Comparative Analysis**

One major distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is that witchcraft is a psychic phenomenon which does not involve the physical use of charms, spells, magic and incantations. Sorcery, on the other hand, involves the use of all these. Witchcraft involves the inner being or the soul of those involved while sorcery is merely an outward paraphernalia-based craft. This suggests that while a witch unleashes havoc (mostly at night) though her psychic powers (with no palpable apparatus of trade); a sorcerer, on the other hand, manipulates some tangible materials to harm people or accomplish some wicked acts whether by day or night. Again,

while it is believed that witchcraft can at times be carried out without one's conscious awareness, sorcery in contrast, is always a conscious, deliberate and voluntary act (Uduigwomen 2002: 33-42). Moreover, a witch carries out her activities in a clandestine manner and is not consulted by people desperate to harm others unlike a sorcerer who can be consulted for such purposes. The only point of convergence between witchcraft and sorcery is that both arts produce similar results they inflict pains, misfortunes, misery and havocs. Both are evil practices and they exert negative impact on the society. Their *modus operandi* or mode of operation, however, differs. While it may be said that witchcraft belongs to the night and its practitioners could be tagged night witches, sorcery on the other hand, mostly belongs to the day, hence its practitioners are tagged day sorcerers. It is believed in some African cultures that the former group (witches) injures by an inherent quality rather than by bad medicine, whereas the latter (sorcerers) harm people by performing magical rites (Parrinder 124; Cunningham 2002: 1). As Idowu (1973) puts it, magic, by definition, is an attempt on the part of man to tap and control the supernatural resources of the universe for his own benefit (190). In other words, magic is a resort ... to super causation by means of spell and rite (Nadel190) and rests on the manipulation and enforcement of supernatural benefits. Generally speaking, sorcery involves the use of poisonous or harmful medicine, incantations, magic and other kinds of mystical power to harm other people or their belongings (James1938: 72; Farrar 2010: 1).

### **Belief in Witchcraft: A Myth or Reality**

What is said in the preceding section of this paper is based on a popular African belief in the existence of witchcraft and sorcery. However, in describing what witches and sorcerers are claimed to be capable of doing, I do not intend to commit myself to any uncritical belief in the reality of such metaphysical issues. From the stand-point of science, such phenomena that are not susceptible to direct empirical observation are usually considered mythical or unreal. Although the arguments that some critics advance for rejecting these beliefs vary depending on philosophical or religious convictions, the point of convergence, however, is that these phenomena are scientifically unreal because they

have no communicable explanation. What this means is that they are not in consonance with the known laws of nature and are not verifiable through scientific methods (Sogolo 1999: 92).

What is a myth? From the etymological point-of view, the word myth is a derivative of the Greek *mythos* which refers to anything delivered by word of mouth. A myth, therefore, has to do with a word, a speech, a tale, a conversation or a story, as opposed to *ergon* which refers to a deed a work or an action (Ruch and Anyanwu 1984: 28). A myth may also be understood to mean a story or narrative regarding certain concepts or beliefs or a non-scientific explanation of natural events or experiences. In this context, myths refer to narrative of events and personages that are far removed from the ordinary range of experience that renders it unverifiable, and therefore authoritatively affirmed. This means that myths are not statements of the truth of which can be empirically and/or logically demonstrated.

At this juncture, let me reiterate that philosophy appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation (Russell 1979: 13). This is why the early Greek philosophers criticized Homer's myths as not being historical truths, but mere fables because they deal with imaginary things which cannot be rationally substantiated as being real. Suffice it to say that myths are prevalent in most, if not all, African cultures (just like other pre-scientific cultures) where people who believe in them and live by them seldom question their veracity and validity. The minds of such people are usually incarcerated by traditional authority and superstition that they accept such myths unquestionably and uncritically. As for the Homeric Greek society, a paradigm shift occurred when early Greek philosophers began to question the truth of myths and make a critical investigation of their origin and objective value. This acquisition of epistemic consciousness and critical mindedness are prerequisites to an objective analysis of African belief in the concept of witchcraft and sorcery.

In describing witchcraft operations, it is generally believed that the witch's body remains on her bed asleep while her soul leaves the body and goes away for nocturnal meetings. It is even held that if anything prevents the return of her soul, her body will die (Parrinder 1962: 125). This quickly raises some questions about the ontological

status of the witch. Is it possible for the soul to leave the body at any time and the person still remains alive since the soul is the animating principle? Or do we assume that as a metaphysical phenomenon, the ontological status of witchcraft is outside the bounds of human reasoning? The point is that the existence or non-existence of witchcraft in reality is not a question that may be settled with finality through mere exercise of human rational powers. Our argument borders on the fact that witches by their very conception, as metaphysical entities are not subject to any form of empirical or scientific investigation (Sogolo 1999:93). Therefore engaging in any speculation in this direction may end-up as an unhelpful and unrewarding exercise. It is also a fact that knowledge about witchcraft is almost entirely derived from the verbal confessions said to have been given by or extorted from the people accused of witchcraft. Hence, basing our judgment on the information extracted from such sources may be fallacious and misleading.

In addition to the foregoing, the belief in the existence of witchcraft may be seen as mythical since it is far removed from the ordinary range of experience that could be verified. There may be some kind of relationship or nexus between witchcraft and dreams. Since it is widely believed that dreams are the activities of the soul, which travels to places the dreamer thinks about and relates with people, it is possible that a great deal of belief on witchcraft has an implicit connection with dreams (Parrinder 1962:125). Some skeptics like Evans-Pritchard even claimed that witchcraft is an imaginary offence because it is impossible and that a witch cannot perform those acts associated with her because witchcraft has in fact no real existence (Evans-Pritchard 1937:21). This position, however, can be challenged on the ground that it makes absolute claims on a metaphysical issue that is still under investigation and thus forecloses the possibility of arriving at a definite knowledge on the issue in the future.

In concluding this section, let it be said that whether the existence of witchcraft is a myth or reality is an episto-metaphysical problem that requires both empirical and non-empirical facts to establish or justify. There is no doubt that every culture, including Africa, operates its own perception of objects and its own conception of reality. There exists, therefore, in each, a divide between the world of common-sense, which



is, between the reality based on our direct perception and experience through the human sense and the reality beyond which our senses can capture (Sogolo 1999: 91) One plausible assumption in this direction is that witchcraft is a psychic phenomenon usually practiced surreptitiously with diabolic bent and hence may not be empirically observed or demonstrated overtly. Moreover, the outward manifestations of witchcraft in the lives of their victims such as some unexplainable and incurable diseases, sicknesses, afflictions, poverty or even mysterious deaths appears to lend credence to its reality because such problems usually defy scientific explanations and solutions. Here, the principle of causation comes to fore because as a natural principle it is believed that for every effect there must be a corresponding antecedent cause.

### **Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft**

In addition to the foregoing, it is germane that we conduct a brief epistemological analysis of the issue on hand. To start with, it must be stated that a substantial part of the mystery surrounding witches derives from the veil of secrecy behind which they live and practice their art (Hallen and Sodipo 1986: 86). Consequently, any attempt to understand witchcraft must penetrate this veil of ignorance. To do so requires that one must, of necessity, acquire the relevant knowledge about witchcraft and the mode of operation of witches. But how possible is this?

There are two main sources of knowledge namely: through sensory perception or experience (empiricism) and through the exercise of human rational powers or reason (rationalism). Every other form of knowledge whether inferential, revelational, mystical or intuitive are subsumable under either empiricism or rationalism (Ozumba 2001: 49). The problem here is where to place our knowledge about witchcraft? Do we place it under empirical knowledge or rational knowledge? Within the religious circles, such knowledge-claim usually comes under revelational or mystical knowledge. Beyond this, it is difficult to make any knowledge or truth claim about witchcraft apart from the confessional statements of those who claim to be involved in it.

The problem that needs to be addressed here borders on the nature of knowledge; that is, the conditions under which knowledge claims about witchcraft can be duly regarded as proper or adequate

knowledge. There are many people who erroneously consider knowledge as a mere belief, opinion, state of awareness of something or the adequate judgment of our perception in terms of a supposed agreement between what is out there and what we think we see (Ozumba 2001: 49). This is perhaps the consequence or outcome of their epistemic naivety because knowledge and mere belief are not one and the same thing.

Some questions that need to be addressed in this regard include: does knowledge claim always imply the existence of what is claimed to exist? Does knowledge claim at times transcend what is, to include what is created by language? How do we know that we know what we claim to know? However, for any knowledge claim to stand justified, it is imperative that certain pro-indubitability criteria be applied such as objectivity, clarity, verifiability, impartiality and absolute justifiability. In this and other circumstances, knowledge must be clearly distinguished from mere belief, opinion, perception and even from the traditional criteria of justified true-belief which is not incontrovertible. Obviously, these are the criteria that make the characterization of knowledge of witchcraft a knotty issue (Ozumba 2001: 49).

The fundamental problem with the notion of belief is that it does not permit anything like the precision of analysis and exactitude of expression that ideally we require in the determination of human capacities (Needham 1972: 233). The problem is where do we place witchcraft? Do we place it in the realm of knowledge or in that of belief? Who provides the objective standard for the justification of our claims? Is it the individual, society, religious adherents, philosophers or scientists or do we look for a neutral and impartial abstract standard of justification? Or still, do we recourse to Quine's relativistic principle of indeterminacy? These are questions begging for answers.

### **Witchcraft, Sorcery and Negative Occurrences**

It appears, from our analysis so far, that belief in witchcraft and sorcery functions as an attempt to explain the reasons for the occurrence of otherwise unexplained negative events; such as natural disasters, accidents, illnesses, deaths and other calamities. Consequently, it is argued that these beliefs persist in the absence of a logical and scientific explanation regarding their occurrence. This belief system is called the

“magical worldview” (Gale, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2019). The thought processes of this belief system are speculative rather than analytical, but sometimes they have their own internal logic, and are thus not always irrational. However, philosophical reasoning and empirical science ignores such explanations because of lack of logical connection and evidence. If a building collapses because of a faulty foundation, we do not need to explain it from the point of view of witchcraft. If one drives carelessly on the highway and dies of auto crash, we need not hold witchcraft responsible. Witchcraft related explanations comes into the picture when rational knowledge fails. Witchcraft explains the diseases whose causes are scientifically unknown, the mystery of untimely deaths, and more generally, strange and rationally inexplicable misfortunes (Lewis and Russell, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2016). One thing is certain here, the emphasis on witchcraft in art, literature, theatre, and film has little relation to concrete reality and verifiable, empirical knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

In all, we have seen in this paper that belief in witchcraft and sorcery is commonly held among various African peoples. However, our major emphasis so far has been on the concept of witchcraft because of its apparent epistemological implications that makes it quite controvertible. It has been argued here that knowledge of witchcraft and mere belief on its existence are two different conceptual schemes. At best knowledge claims about witchcraft exists substantially in the realm of belief and not in that of knowledge because of its inherent epistemological inadequacies.

Moreover, such a belief lacks scientific method of investigation because its practice as claimed appears shroud in secrecy and cannot be empirically verified. This tends to give us the impression that the existence of witchcraft is not real but simply a myth. This notwithstanding, we have also argued that though the metaphysical nature of the art of witchcraft may not permit any empirical investigation of its reality, it provides a missing link and explanations to some scientifically unexplainable and mysterious afflictions that are experienced by people world over.

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