

Watching the witching world: The role of superstition in contemporary Malawian film

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Abstract

As controversial and mysterious as it may be, witchcraft is considered very much part of the Malawian world view. Despite their invisibility, witches are believed by many to exist. This paper aims to articulate an analysis of the common portrayal of such superstition in the contemporary Malawian film. It argues that the portrayal of witchcraft reflects an attempt by filmmakers to display a local ontology, and that this worldview enables the filmmaker to best articulate a number of issues, culminating in the archetypal struggle between good and evil, in a language that their potential viewers are bound to understand. This paper examines the depiction of witchcraft in a number of Malawian films - *Magwiragwira*, *Chigulumwah*, *Black Angel*, *Dangerous*, and *Mapatidwe* – with the objective of illustrating how this daring representation by the filmmakers potentially holds the key to opening a conversation on various superstitious practices, and could help to reveal, and correct, harmful ignorance and superstition within local societies. This examination is made by drawing on current scholarship on African film and on the phenomenon of witchcraft, from theological and philosophical perspectives.

Keywords: Witchcraft, African cinema, superstition, Malawi, magic

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The Malawian film industry, even as I write this piece, is still in its infancy. This is in comparison to the film industries of other countries. None of the books written on African film ever mention the Malawian film industry. It does not register as even a blip on the scope of the movie critics in Africa.

However, this should not lead us to suppose that the industry does not exist. There is a lot of bustling activity in Malawian filmmaking. The only problem is that this activity has received very little attention. In recent years, the names that have received some attention are those of Shemu Joyah and Michael Usi. The former has had his films nominated at the Africa Movie Awards, and the latter has been quite prolific in the release of his films, and has an uncanny knack for attracting popular celebrities to the premieres of his films. However, a huge percentage of filmmakers are unable to hold such flamboyant premieres. Their films go straight to DVD, and as a result, they are rarely known to serious film analysts.

There are various angles from which one could examine the Malawian film industry. In this paper, however, my focus is on the representation of witchcraft in the Malawian film. Incidentally, the films that I have chosen, and indeed the films that often depict witchcraft and superstition, are among the relatively unknown ones in the country. They tend to be very low budget, and are produced by individuals for whom filmmaking is more of an adventure or a hobby rather than an economic endeavour. In focusing on these films, part of my intention is not only to draw attention to the Malawian filmmaking scene, but also to draw attention specifically to the films that are neglected by the media even in this already struggling industry.

In commencing the research, it was deemed important to examine the phenomenon of witchcraft as it exists in Africa, since that is the context of the movies that are examined in this paper. Current scholarship is indeed interested in the belief in witchcraft among people, but hardly ever takes a look at witchcraft as it has been depicted in various forms of media, such as the films. One of the earliest – but still relevant - texts on witchcraft in Africa is E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1922). In this text, Pritchard sets the pace for many other scholars, locating the basis for witchcraft in people's need to explain various misfortunes. His is very much an anthropological study of the behavioural patterns of a given

society. In his scholarship, John S. Mbiti also considers witchcraft specifically as an aspect of African religions, as seen in his *Introduction to African Religion* (1975). Mbiti (1975: 165) defines the phenomenon of witchcraft as “a manifestation of [...] mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited, or acquired in various ways.” For the purpose of my own study, however, I was particularly interested not just in witchcraft, but in the way it is portrayed on the screen. This is particularly interesting because witchcraft is not immediately evident. For me, therefore, the film acts as a manifestation of the filmmaker’s vision of what witchcraft is. After all, the belief in witchcraft often stems from narratives that abound at the level of everyday conversation and social belief systems with regard to this phenomenon. As Samuel Waje Kunhiyop (2008: 378) observes,

Africans believe that witchcraft is real because they have heard scores of stories about it. They have heard the confessions of perpetrators and the testimonies of victims. There are thousands and thousands of such stories told by old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated.

Arguably, films can be taken as one of those phenomena. The chosen films here do not attempt to debunk the belief in witchcraft. On the contrary, they uphold the acts as very real factors of human life. From another perspective, I was interested in finding out if we can deem such movies authentic Malawian movies due to the fact that they present a phenomenon that is believed by many within the country, and indeed, within the continent. As Kunhiyop (2008: 376) argues, many Africans “strongly believe that evil forces such as witchcraft, secret societies and evil spirits are ultimately responsible for all the suffering, sickness and death that afflict God’s children.” It is “a means by which rural and urban Africans alike confront contemporary problems” (Englund, 1996: 257).

Where does one place films on witchcraft, within current theorising in African film studies? In African film scholarship, the films that are often valued are those with important redemption messages, films that return power to the people. In a way, this forms the basis for the categorisation that Manthia Diawara suggests in his seminal *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (1992). Diawara (1992: 140) observes that current filmmaking on the continent falls

roughly into three categories: “[films] which put into play the theme of the return to the sources, an Africa without the presence of outsiders, [films] which make the colonial question their main subject [and] social realist narratives that deal with questions of modernity and tradition.” The revered African film therefore acts like its novel counterpart. Ousmane Sembène’s filmic oeuvre, for example, is praised for his depiction of African ways of life, redeeming the African from the marginal representation in Hollywood. The same point holds for various other well-known African filmmakers. The films with the witchcraft theme at their centre are a relatively new breed, which does not fit into this conventional view of the African film. There are nevertheless quite a number of African films in this category, mostly from Nollywood. They have begun to form a sub-genre, called *filamu ya kichawi* (witchcraft film), in Tanzania (Böhme, 2013: 331). And although they have not yet been placed in a specific genre, quite a number of Nigerian films also deal with the theme of witchcraft (Adeleke, 2003; and Becker, 2013).

At the end of the day, although I adopt perspectives from a number of areas, this paper is not a defence of or an argument against witchcraft. Rather, it is an attempt to rationalise the portrayal of this phenomenon in the Malawian film. The perspectives from theology, philosophy and other disciplines aid in providing explanations for the phenomenon.

The films chosen for this study, namely *Magwiragwira*, *Mapatidwe*, *Chigulumwah*, *Black Angel*, and *Dangerous*, have in common the portrayal of witchcraft and superstition in film. For most Africans, witchcraft is “the traditional way of explaining the ultimate cause of any evil, misfortune or death” (Kunhiyop, 2008: 377). In his research on the Azande, Evans-Pritchard (1976: 63) came to a similar conclusion: “The concept of witchcraft nevertheless provides [...] a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events.” Kunhiyop and Evan-Pritchard provide examples of anthropological research concerning witchcraft beliefs. This paper attempts to examine the representation of this phenomenon in the form of imaginative creativity and social portraiture that is the film genre.

One of the often mentioned weaknesses of the Malawian film is the fact that it tends to borrow heavily from other filmmaking traditions, including

Hollywood, Nollywood and Far East martial arts (Gray, 2014: 988). This borrowing is especially evident due to the poor filmmaking quality of most Malawian films, as a result of their aforementioned limited budgets, in addition to the lack of training for directors, cameramen and editors, among other technicians. Nollywood films, in particular, are very popular among Malawian audiences.

Critics of the portrayal of witchcraft in Nigerian films have pointed out that the “lengthy depictions of witchcraft and magic [...] constitutes a clear setback to the emancipatory politics of African auteur cinema” (Krings & Okome, 2013: 2). In other words, the focus on witchcraft is not supported by the majority of critics. Such depictions, in their eyes, act as a confirmation of the primitivity of Africans. African cinema should, in their view, serve instead to show how the modern African has advanced. It should play the role that other modes of representational discourse have done – erasing the skewed histories of Africans and other negative presentations of which one of the classic texts is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. As is famously known, Achebe reacted to Conrad by publishing “An Image of Africa”, in which he highlights the misconceptions of Africans often found in Western authored texts. African cinema should ideally serve in the same critical fashion.

One of the arguments for the authenticity of African films is that they generally serve to showcase African cultures enduring even in the midst of modernity. Arguably, the superstitious beliefs are a part of that culture, as connected as they are to religion. According to Heike Becker (2013: 192), who comments on Namibia and South Africa,

[some people] made clear that they regarded the images of witches and magic as a dark underside, rather than as a valued part of African culture. Everyone agreed, however, that they presented realistic portrayals and challenges of contemporary Namibian and South African society and the conceptual uniqueness and unity of the continent.

In this regard, the portrayals of witchcraft are regarded as a phenomenon not only unique to Malawi or Nigeria, but also one that can be recognised throughout the continent. As a matter of fact, as Jonathan Gray (2014: 991)

observes, Nigerian films are valued by Malawians in part exactly due to the depiction of magic:

Several of [Malawian] viewers also valued the Nigerian media's interest in magic, spirits, and curses, as I was frequently told by viewers that 'this is how life is'.[...] American characters and plots [exist] in a different world, devoid of ghosts, magic, and witchcraft, and thereby less useful or representative of everyday life. One video show owner, for instance, noted that he rarely played American movies because his customers saw them as too fanciful, whereas 'the Nigerian film is real life. Most of the people from this area have experienced witchcraft problems in their villages. So when they are watching such movies, they just feel like real things happening.

Having observed the allure of the Nigerian film among their countrymen, this should provide a reason why some of the filmmakers have dared to represent witchcraft in their films. An extrapolation of this argument would suggest that the depiction of witchcraft in Malawian films – its methods, motives, and means – is not all that unique.

In some of the films, the portrayal of witchcraft seems necessitated by the desire to present Christianity in a positive light. At the heart of all these films is the ancient archetypal motif of good versus evil, with the need to present good as triumphant at the end of the narrative. In most cases, good is manifested through Christian belief as depicted in the films. In line with the traditional storytelling structure, the force of good needs an antagonist in the narrative, which in this case is presented as forces of witchcraft (and sometimes superstition). This is again in line with the African "understanding of ultimate reality [as comprising] two equal competing realities, one good and one evil" (Kunhiyop, 2008: 376). The filmmaker goes out of his way to show just how deadly the force of evil is. Inevitably, however, it collapses under the pressure or resistance of forces of good. Unfortunately, by the time that good triumphs at the end of the film, the evil force will have done a lot of damage, which upon close examination serves to show just how powerful a force this is. After all, as has been argued in other contexts, it is indeed entirely possible for these films to be seen as serving as instructional media in

the ways of evil, rather than having the intention of leading viewers towards a more Christian life (Pype, 2013: 216).

I would argue that these films are yet another in a series of psychic modes of escape for the economically, socially and politically beleaguered African. As was already observed at the beginning, they affirm the belief in witchcraft as a way of explaining phenomena in the world. This has both negative and positive effects: the negative is the assumption that everyone who is wealthy came to those riches through supernatural means; the positive effect is that the reinforcing of the beliefs in witchcraft, necessitates a strengthening in the belief in Christianity, as a way of protecting oneself from evildoers.

The first film that I will examine in this paper is Yusuf Kachingwe's *Magwiragwira*. The title of the film is a word stemming from a warning that one should recognize one's limits, and should not attempt to poke one's nose into matters that do not concern one. The literal meaning is that one should be careful what one touches, lest one touch something that causes harm. The film opens with the following song, sung in the background.

*Khalidwe lanu achimwene
Mukonda kudalira mankhwala
Moyo wanu achimwene
Wokonda kudalira za nyanga
Munthu wa mtundu wanji
Wokonda kuyenda mwa asing'anga?
Khalidwe la mtundu wanji
Lokonda kuzitama ndi matsenga?*¹

¹ I deplore your behaviour, my brother
Since you now depend on charms
I deplore your life style, my brother
Since you now depend on fetishes
What kind of person are you,
Since you like visiting witchdoctors?
What kind of behaviour is that,
Taking pride in your skills in magic?

This song is the perfect introduction to the theme of the film, and the viewer can easily miss the context if he or she is unfamiliar with the language. It makes the moral message quite clear from the start. The title song makes it clear that the film condemns the practice of witchcraft, through the repeated refrain “*Magwiragwira ndi oyipa*”. This is a line that reflects the abhorrence of witchcraft in many African societies. Paradoxically, despite the widespread condemnation of the practice, the fact that the belief in it abounds suggests that the practice itself still exists.

Unfortunately, such an overt statement of condemnation reduces the value of the film as a creative text, and too readily exposes its moralistic tone. This can also be observed in the opening scenes, which feature a besuited man reading his bible, within the confines of his house. As he sits deeply immersed in the holy text, a young man, who is presumably both a thief and a wizard, suddenly appears in the room, out of thin air, apparently by magic (since the doors are closed). This alarms the prayerful man, who immediately launches into what appears to be an attempt at exorcism or casting out of an evil presence. In doing so, he repeatedly shouts the words “Holy Ghost Fire!”

This scene clearly situates the film in the ongoing battle between Christ and witchcraft. The besuited man is the agent of Christ, who knows his role as a soldier, with the repeated invocation of the Holy Ghost fire. The directors actually go as far as graphically showing the fire raining down upon the man, in the form of a yellow lightning streak. The witch strikes back with his own beams of yellow (perhaps demonic) energy, which the priest blocks by holding his bible before him.

As the opening scene of the film, this moment is meant to entrench in the viewers the powers of witchcraft and of religious belief. The young man enters the house magically, presumably through the power of witchcraft, to steal money. However, the presence of the man of God at that precise moment, acts as an obstacle to his attempts, and simultaneously cements in the hearts of the viewers the protective power of God against all manner of vile machinations.

I want to emphasise here that both sides are shown as forces to reckon with: the witch and the pastor. This is a reflection of Kunhiyop’s argument that Malawians, like most Africans, tend to have a dualistic way of viewing the

world: belief in evil forces existing alongside trust in the power of good. Paradoxically, then, strengthening the viewer's belief in Christianity relies on showing witchcraft as a terrifying force. However, part of the reason (among many) that *Magwiragwira* is not ranked high in Malawi's film canon may be simply due to the fact that it does not present a convincing case against witchcraft.

The featuring of a female witchdoctor in the film is perhaps one of the more interesting plot complications in the film. Most scholars agree that witchcraft is often associated with women. It is assumed that the powers of witchcraft are easily inherited by a young girl from her parents or grandparents (Garrett, 1977: 461). Featuring a woman as a witch in *Magwiragwira* is testimony to this point, but also a way of according agency to the woman in this film, albeit agency of a rather questionable nature. In her provision of assistance to the protagonist (she tells him she will "cook" him to make him stronger in the art of witchcraft), she testifies to the widely held belief that female witches are always more dangerous than their male counterparts. Other indications of her power include her claim to discourse with owls and snakes, who reveal to her the secrets of men, and her mastery over *ndondocho* (zombies), whom she can command to commit foul deeds on her behalf.² The implication derived from their conversation is that witchcraft comes much more naturally to women than it does to men. This is a position that has been held throughout the world for quite a long time. The Salem witch trials are perhaps testimony to this (see Rosenthal 1993).

The question that sceptics have always asked is – If they truly possess magical powers, why don't witches make themselves rich? This film seems to raise the same question, largely because of the petty motives that the witches have. The protagonist, for example, seems to delight in the power to transform himself into a woman, for the purpose of stealing ridiculously small amounts of

² The *ndondocho* phenomenon is widely believed in several parts of Africa, including Malawi, Tanzania and Mozambique. It is believed that a person with magical powers is able to magically poison another so that they appear dead. Although the person is officially buried, the witch "keeps them at home, deprived of speech and independence. No longer fully human, they are nevertheless precious manpower" (Becker, 2010: 115)

money. Perhaps it is a deliberate tactic by the filmmakers to undermine witchcraft. However, it could have been much better handled.

How important is the film media in this instance? It is one thing to simply fear witchcraft due to the third-person accounts that often proliferate in Malawian society – stories of people owning hyenas that they send to do their bidding; stories of children being forced to kill their parents through magic, and other strange narratives. However, the filmmaker takes it one step further, by presenting his interpretation of events. I would argue that witchcraft thrives mainly as a belief. The filmmaker's attempt to remove the mysticism of the practice through a concrete presentation ridicules it and should, ideally, diminish or undermine people's witchcraft beliefs. It is a noble endeavour, but one which is not likely to succeed – so entrenched are people's beliefs in witchery, as they are part and parcel of their worldview.

Just as *Magwiragwira* carries an explicit warning in its title, Chimzy Kachotsa's *Mapatidwe* similarly hints at the suspicion in Malawian societies of people who suddenly become wealthy. The main actor of the film, a character called Kandikole, initially starts off destitute. He believes that he is just struck by ill luck. He visits a friend of his, who is well-off. This friend reveals to him that he became rich through witchcraft. He then introduces his friend to the practice.

As a way of ensuring wealth, Kandikole is told never to reveal the secrets of witchcraft to another person. He is told that he must never bathe using water from any river, and must never sleep with a woman in the outdoors. He must also never jump over a pestle/mortar.

The tactics employed for undermining witchcraft in this film are similar to those in the film previously discussed. Once again, the witch is driven by something as petty as eating at a restaurant without paying, and lustfully watching women while they bathe. The underlying message is therefore that one meddles with such power, for very little gain.

One thing that ties several of these films together is the presence of violence. Lindiwe Dovey writes that various African filmmakers have depicted violence in their films since it is an actual feature of their realities. The violence she has

in mind, however, is that committed through acts of murder, war, genocide and rape (Dovey, 2009: 25) – negative realities of Africa that have come to be synonymous with the continent, at least when presented in Western media. The violence that she discusses in her book is therefore not of the magical variety. Few film scholars would acknowledge the existence of this violence, given the mystical means by which it is committed. After all, the violence committed by witches is said to include ritualistic eating of human meat; playing football with a person’s head while they are asleep, and forcing a person to work in the garden, also in their sleep. As Mbiti (1975: 166) observes, it is common belief “that a witch can cause harm by looking at a person, wishing him harm or speaking to him words intended to inflict harm on him.” The violence inflicted through witchcraft is therefore a totally new variety, which sometimes is not immediately physically noticeable. There are some instances when the violence is explicit, however. This can be seen in films involving martial arts and murder.

Martial arts films from the Far East constitute a large percentage of movies watched by Malawians in video shows (Gray, 2011). People tend to like them because of the explicit action depicted on the screen, and also because the requirement for English language literacy is relatively reduced. The popularity of such films has also led to a proliferation of Malawian films where young men engage in martial arts, usually with highly ridiculous motives for doing so.

Manase Chiwaya’s *Chigulumwah* is an example of such a film. There is hardly any coherent plot holding the narrative together. Right from the start of the film, there are various groups of men who engage in beating each other up in a wooded mountain location. However, in the midst of all the brutality, it becomes possible to piece together some kind of plot. There is a specific character, Chigulumwah, who is the leader of a certain group of muscular young men. They derive their power from a horned skull of some unidentified beast. The driving force of the film is that there is another group of men (led by a village chief) who are there to steal/retrieve this sacred artefact, which is to be used to return water to the village. The main magical fetish is therefore this skull, which is imbued with magical powers. However, the source of these magical powers is not explained.

The difference of *Chigulumwah* from the other films is that witchcraft or charms are presented as means of attaining physical power, so that one may win in martial arts against one's opponents. The movie therefore upholds the belief in attaining strength by means other than intense exercise, which is akin to the two previously discussed films in the emphasis on attaining wealth through magical powers. The seemingly chaotic fighting at the heart of the film – when coupled with the use of magic – reveals the underlying lust for power that is often associated with such films. For the filmmaker, the medium is not merely a genre to display choreography, but to critique evil means of attaining power, whether it is physical prowess in martial arts, or money.

For me, these films are not merely means of entertainment. They are windows into a people's worldview. In that regard, we need to harness films as tools that can potentially reinforce or change people's mind-sets. The presence of witchcraft and superstition within these films is not exactly proof of the witchcraft itself, but is proof of the belief in witchcraft among the producers and consumers of the media.

Like *Chigulumwah*, Joel Mkandawire's *Black Angel* is another film with a loosely constructed plot, and emphasis on violence. The main character in this film is a masked man whose sole purpose for existence seems to be the ambushing and murdering of people who venture into a forest in which he resides. His tool of violence is a *panga* that he always moves around with.

Eventually, even this character is demystified, as it becomes evident that he draws his power from a female witch, who goes by the suggestive name of Queen Jezebel.³ This is the source of the title of the film. As has already been observed, females are believed to wield much more potent magic than males. In this film, the name accorded to the female is deliberately intended to evoke a sense of power and drama, drawing from the similarly named powerful queen in the bible. However, in addition to that it carries the suggestion of a woman who is able to use her wiles to keep men under her power. The female

³ Jezebel is a woman featured in the Christian Bible, specifically in 1 Kings, Chapter 16. She is famous for having held a lot of influence over her husband, King Ahab, in the process orchestrating the deaths of many people. Over time, her name has become synonymous with women who exercise control over men.

witch is therefore an evolved form of the *femme fatale*, particularly in the way she holds dominion over men. However, in *Black Angel*, the motif of petty crime is again repeated. Queen Jezebel sends her henchmen to steal money from people, through waylaying them on paths, for instance. One would expect these henchmen, wielding supernatural power, to engage in more grandiose pursuits. Instead, they are satisfied with acting as common bandits, attacking common, lower class folk.

Perhaps the most extravagant exploitation of the medium in depicting magical powers can be found in T. Kamnganga's *Dangerous*, a film that represents people's deployment of dark magic to perform certain incredible feats, and ultimately to attain power and prestige. The characters in the film explicitly identify their practice as Satanism, which is sometimes differentiated from witchcraft.

Dangerous has some merit in the way the filmmakers – whether accidentally or incidentally – employ colours to reflect the general idea of dangerous people. It features a group of young men who regularly practice the dark arts as a way of earning a living. Their leader, who is apparently the conduit of Satan, resides at the bottom of Lake Malawi, and regularly demands blood sacrifices from his devotees. When engaging in 'worship' the men are seen clad in red robes, which suggests their 'dangerous' nature, but is also connected to the blood sacrifice from which their power emanates. The moralistic message in this film is again explicit, as their demise occurs when they try to kill a faithful Christian, who uses the bible to defend himself.

From these examples, is there any positive value to the depiction of magic, witchcraft and sorcery in Malawian films? I would argue that the question is not only one of deciding whether it has a beneficial or socially uplifting purpose. Rather, it should be seen as a way in which the Malawian filmmaker attempts to expose a particular kind of reality. There are other Malawian films in existence; films that have been nominated for, and won, international awards. Adeleke (2003: 54) argues that "African filmmakers should intensify efforts to explore and exploit their own cultural resources rather than importing the valueless western culture." Could we defend the depiction of witchcraft on these grounds, perhaps? Is it an effort to depict a particularly

African culture, without trying to homogenise the various peoples of the continent?

For me, these films provide insight into an ontological base, one that should not be ignored. The portrayal of witchcraft and what we can so glibly dismiss as superstition is indicative of indigenous knowledge bases, and the genius of the film directors, hitherto unrecognised, is to tap into those knowledge bases. This ensures that they have a ready audience to watch their films. As a mode of the arts, we must therefore recognise the ways in which the film medium connects with a people. The language (in the broadest sense possible) of the film is one that people understand all too readily. This is a mode, therefore, that can be harnessed in the teaching of particular moral codes. As we have pointed out, the matter of witchcraft is evoked in these films not for its own sake, but rather as a way of showing how evil can be thwarted by good, mainly in the form of Christianity. After all, as Alexie Tcheuyap (2011: 227) notes, “thus exposed [through film], the occult would cease to be occult.”

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