



Witchcraft Practices Among the Bolo People in the Eastern Niger Delta of Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

Witchcraft and its attendant practices are very rife in Africa, Nigeria, Rivers State and Bolo. The act is a spiritual exercise that entails both women and men, mostly women, to cause havoc in society. In Bolo the act is branded an anti social one and those involved are usually ostracized, since they are believed to cause sickness and even death of people. In the modern day to a large extent, Christianity has stemmed the tide of witchcraft accusations and confessions in the town. The advent of law enforcement agencies and social welfare ministries have had a lot of impact to change such beliefs in the traditional religion of Bolo.

INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft could be seen as a spiritual exercise that leads to the harm of human beings, through diabolical means. This practice could be seen to be found in every part of the world, but it is very prevalent in Africa and has contributed greatly to the state of underdevelopment, poverty of the continent and Nigeria. This is seen in cases where through it people fall sick and eventually die. This practice is very rife among the Bolo people in the Eastern Niger Delta of Rivers State in their pre-modern and modern times. The witches and wizards are believed to have caused so much havoc to people – barrenness for women, sickness, taking away of people's luck and making their destiny – so to be bad and causing so much hardship, poverty and eventually death. It is very rife in the African religion of the people. When such witches and wizards are found out through divination Ikianwaki they are banished from the community, tied with blocks and dropped in the River, their houses are destroyed and when they die they are not buried in the

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town. They are cut in pieces and thrown into several directions, so that they would not come together. In this paper there would be a brief conceptual definition and outlook at witchcraft ideas in Africa, location and environment of Bolo, the African religion of Bolo, briefly and witchcraft acts in Bolo.

CONCEPTUAL OUTLOOK AND BRIEF REVIEWS ON WITCHCRAFT AND SORCERY

The Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary (1992) saw a witch as a woman carrying out sorcery through an evil spirit. It went on to say that sorcery could be seen as the use of magical powers got from evil spirits. Sorcery in addition could be seen as use of physical objects imbued with magic that implies an individual's control of supernatural powers, to prepare medicine in potions through the use of roots, padlock, dry lizards, and other objects to harm people. They maybe buried in the ground in one's house. We see witchcraft, sorcery, magic as used in combination to cause havoc.

A manual of the National Open University (2003) asserts that to the Africans witches and wizards are seen as imbued with spiritual powers to carry out negative things in the world. It went on to say that some of the witches may have got their powers to help their children (protect them, make them succeed in their life time) and that majority of those involved are women, though some men are involved. It went on to say they operate nocturnally.

The channels of acquisition of these powers it saw as through:

- a) Acquisition at birth
- b) Through sharing of food infected with witchcraft powers.
- c) Possessing the powers without realizing it.

It saw sorcery is the use of "bad magic" on people or objects to cause harm. Tanto and Sango (2006) looking at Cameroon said that sorcery, witchcraft are all activities in the invisible world, where only those with magical and supernatural powers operate. They said it entails the use of invoked spirits as channels, divination and rites, to acquire powers to cause mayhem. They said that witchcraft and sorcery cannot be proved empirically, though several people hold to the beliefs. They showed how in present day Cameroon any mishap that cannot be scientifically examined, finds answers in sorcery and witchcraft. The politicians use these powers for protection and election victory (also seen in Nigeria).

Dzurgba (2005) looking at TIV religion saw witchcraft called Tsav is an intrinsic part of it. He said that Tsav is a supramundane organ a person is born with. It is located either in the heart or liver or lungs. This belief was very pervasive in the pre-colonial era. Thus wizards are called lombatsav, (while witches are called Kasevmbatsav. They are all called Mbatsav (those with Tsav). It is believed that they are interested in human meat and act miraculously. They operate in day or night. Mbatsav are believed to have spiritually invisible bicycles, motorcycles, cars aeroplanes. The people

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believe the nature of an Mbatsay are wickedness, cruelty, mercilessness. They therefore cause sickness, infertility, impotence, pestilence, economic hardships, snake bite, accidents and death.

Awolalu (1981) said that witches are an embodiment of evil in all its forms. A witch he shows does not carry out rites, no spell and possesses no medicine strictly. It is more of a psychic performance. He saw women as rife in the trade. He showed that to the African witchcraft is real to the literate, illiterate, high and low. He said it is a secret act, confessions are made, practitioners are real, those bewitched are real. They showed that among the Yorubas the main contribution at their nocturnal meetings is a human being. The more human beings brought the higher one's rating. A woman needs the witches council. He showed how among the Yorubas witches have a kind of bird that flies to the meeting venues.

According to Jacobs (2006) he said among the Berom found in Jos North and South of Plateau State, witchcraft was linked with innate supernatural powers (Bes), that make a witch to function. He said such supramundane forces could be used for either good or evil. He said a man could use his bes to be a great hero but later engage in witchcraft acts. This gives credence to the fact earlier stated that witchcraft is not only for diabolical purposes. It has sure traits of benevolence. He showed that the Berom believe that a witch is conscious of his/her acts, unlike other situations where their acts are seen as involuntary.

Devisch (2002) said both witchcraft and sorcery are learned occult techniques. He showed how bewitchment can be in the form of a witch using the "evil eye" to cause havoc to people which is the direct opposite of the loving, protective, watchful eye. Witches can through this act hamper, destroy or dry up the life substance and (re) productive basis, by (enviously) working, praising, staring at a person or property in one's vicinity. He said only diviners can authoritatively "see" and expose the plot of witchcraft. He went on to assert that:

"Witchcraft is at odds with the ontological and rationalist presupposition and foundations underlying the dominant concerns, and discourses of modern western science".

From the above it is seen that witchcraft beliefs are pervasive in Africa and other parts of the world. Some scholars see it as not real, but to the Africans it is real and to some extent operated alongside with sorcery. It is seen as the basis of evil, through supernatural powers used to cause havoc.

Location and Environment of Bolo

Oforibika (2008) saw Bolo as located in the Okrika confederation composed of 9 major towns – Kirike, (Okrika), Ogu, Ogoloma, Abuloma, Isaka, Ibaka, Ogbogbo and Ele in Rivers State. It is found in the Eastern Niger Delta made up of sandy, coastal ridges, saline mangrove swamp with brackish water,

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fresh water. The Niger Delta Region produces about 95% of the revenue of Nigeria, through its rich oil and gas reserves. Oforibika (2008) saw the Niger Delta region as prone to environmental hazards, political, economic, educational, social bastardization, resulting in total neglect and subject to gross discrimination. This has led to a spate of militant attacks on the oil pipelines and platforms by Niger Delta Youths, calling for development of the Area. The federal government Amnesty Offer, in August 2009 and creation of the Niger Delta Ministries, have not had any visible change on the area. The Niger Delta region is synonymous with the oil producing areas of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Akwa-Ibom, Ondo, Abia, Edo, Imo, Cross River State. The Bolo people are mainly fishermen and subsistent farmers. Bolo is an island with a population of about 17,500 persons in the 1991 census projected to 2006.

The African Religion of Bolo

Oforibika (2008) asserted that the Bolo people are very engrossed in their traditional religion. In the pre-modern times (the period before the coming of Christianity in Bolo in 1883 by Chief Joseph T. Koko) the people saw the Supreme Being as a female – Tamunoba – in charge of fertility, compared to women in the physical world. This was changed to a masculine view, with the coming of Christianity – Tamuno (God), but many traditionalists still stick to the feminine conception. They have several divinities in their pantheon called Oru. Fenibes is the head divinity of Okrika confederation others are Amakiri – earth divinity, Iku, Ogbolodo, Agba, Ijibaso (Protector of women's rights). They are all used in warfare, protection, success in endeavours. Water spirit called Owuamapu are Ogwein, Seki-Crocodile, Ofirima – Shark.

There are ancestors – Duein in their pantheon to protect the lineages, houses and the town. There is belief in divination Ikianwaki, to find out issues. Oil bean seed was used in the pre-modern times and slices of plantain are used now. There is the strong belief in witchcraft – Ari, sorcery in the town. From the above it would be seen that the Bolo people are thoroughly religious in that their physical world is controlled by the dictates of the spiritual world, for there to be order and harmony.

Witchcraft Practices in Bolo

Awoala (N.D.) saw witchcraft in Okrika (Bolo implied) as an anti-social practice, that entails supernatural powers used in word or deed. He said that a wizard, pronounces evil against his neighbor or poisons him to death. Oforibika (1996) showed how in pre-modern Bolo, witchcraft was practiced and entails projection of the spirit of a person to go out and harm others. It was not clearly differentiated from the use of medicines by sorcerers. Witches and wizards were called Amusu Ogbo Apu members of the Amusu group, Ariapu or Pulo Nonju Apu-blood suckers who usually are believed to

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project their spirits at night to scratch or suck the blood of sleeping victims, which might lead to serious sickness and eventually death. An informant asserted that people have testified of waking up from their sleep with visible signs of scratches on their bodies and blood coming out.

An informant said that the idea of witchcraft in Bolo became fashionable as a result of contacts in commerce and spiritual acts with the Igbo, Ogoni and Calabar people, believed to be very verse in this spiritual act. People started to talk of some men and women “buying” witchcraft powers from these neighbours and using such powers to cause harm to others and stifle progress in the town. Witches and wizards were believed to meet in Nondu a grove of mighty trees in the town, set apart as a male toilet. When they spiritually project their spirits out of their normal bodies they are thought to take the form of bats, cats – Posi. People in the town believed that the killing of a bat or cat at night resulted in the death of a witch or wizard. Men are seen more as involved in witchcraft in Bolo.

It was observed in Bolo that there is a very dangerous trend as par witchcraft. The young men in the community are seen to be more involved now in witchcraft practices. They are seen to join several secret cults, where they are imbued with spiritual powers to cause havoc. They go to Ogoni land, Calabar Igbo Land, to get witchcraft and sorcery powers. Some are seen as involved in militant acts, gangsterism and they feel that when they get such powers, they would move fast in the political “ladder” to get good appointments. They carryout acts of wickedness, evil in the town.

It was observed in the town that in December 1990 there was an incident that occurred that shook the town and even brought people all over to come and see. It was the manifestation of an Aribo – wizard that was not diagnosed as such at death and buried in the town. Miraculously people saw human faces on leaves of pepper and the faces look like that of the late man. Divination was carried out in and outside the town, which confirmed he was a wizard. His corpse was exhumed and taken to the sea, cut into pieces and thrown into different directions, so as not to come together again, to cause havoc in the town.

How Witches and Wizards are Discovered

Awoala (N.D) showed ways, how witches, or wizards and sorcerers are discovered as:

- a) Through their utterances (the spoken word)
- b) Through organizing weird dances in secret places late in the night, this dance is done naked.
- c) Through divination at death of such persons at the shrines of the divinities.

When such discoveries are made in Bolo, the witch or wizard is flogged, made to go round the town singing:

Iri Iwo Aribo aae

Ma a wini ba kae

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Taloo, taloo”

I am a new witch or wizard

I have not killed anyone

After this such persons in the pre-modern times were sent to a place called Oguguchukwu in Ogu in Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area, where it was believed there was a divinity that would either convict or free such persons. If convicted one was killed and thrown in the sea, but if not, one stayed there and did not go back to Bolo, to avoid further acts of casting aspersions on such persons, by people. In the modern times when such persons are detected, they were flogged, their houses burnt down and driven out of the town. Some were even thrown into the sea with blocks tied on their neck to drown.

The Church in Bolo and Witchcraft and Sorcery Accusations

The church in Bolo that started in 1883 through the instrumentality of Chief Joseph Tomonitemeka Koko, who brought Christianity; the Anglican variant and several others now, does not encourage beliefs in witchcraft, sorcery and punishments metted out to them in the town. Rather it preaches stern belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour and that all powers on earth and above, must bow down at the name of Jesus. Even in burials, they bury all members in their cemetery in the town. What they do is to enjoin the family members of such persons to express their faith and not carry such dead and cut them into pieces. Few family members that are Christians with alleged witches and wizards, bury them in the town. This goes to show that the coming of Christianity to Bolo, did not out rightly obliterate such beliefs among the Bolo people.

Factors Responsible for Witchcraft Accusations in Bolo

- 1) Superstitious beliefs. These are very rampant in the community and most assertions are not tenable.
- 2) A very firm grip of the African religion of Bolo on the people. This accepts beliefs in witchcraft accusations and mettes out punishments to suspects accordingly. It is prevalent even among some Christians.
- 3) The spirit of hatred and animosity. This is very rife among such accusers, who see it as an avenue to get out vendetta on certain persons. This is so because some accusations have been found to be untrue.
- 4) The location of Bolo. This is seen in the fact that it is the last town in Okrika confederation. There is to a large extent “jungle justice” in such accusations because communication to the area is difficult, and no police post in the town to maintain law and order.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) The society of Bolo, should work out a mechanism to take in repentant witches and wizards who have confessed and make them live a “new” life, just like federal government amnesty for militants in the Niger Delta.
- 2) Acts of flogging, and even death metted out to such “alleged” witches and wizards should be stopped. Rather they should be handed over to the police authorities or social welfare people, to reform them.
- 3) Christianity’s teaching of forgiveness of such persons should be preached, because some allegations cannot be scientifically proven.

CONCLUSION

From the above, it had been seen that witchcraft beliefs are rife in Africa, Nigeria, Rivers State and Bolo in Ogu/Bolo Local Government Area of Rivers State. In most areas it is believed that women are the principal actors, but in Bolo it is seen that the men are the principal actors and both young, old are involved in it and carry out clandestine acts that even lead to death in the town. There should be scientific proofs of such allegations and such persons should be forgiven and pardoned as the federal government of Nigeria has granted amnesty to repentant militants.

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