

A Philosophical and Theological Analysis of Uruan-Phobia and the Stigma of Witchcraft

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Abstract

The phenomenon of witchcraft is central in multifarious cultures of the world in general and in a particular sense, African culture. In the Ibibio society, the belief in witchcraft is a principal element of the traditional cosmogony. In Akwa Ibom State, there is rather a stereotypical correlation between the Uruan people and witchcraft that has engendered what has come to be known as “Uruanphobia”, the fear of the Uruan people mainly because of this stereotype. Hence, the paper, adopting the historico-descriptive method, delineates the correlation between Uruan people and witchcraft in the attempt to mitigate the intensity of this overblown stereotype. The paper traces the historicity of the Uruanphobia to the witch-hunting activities of Akpan Ekwong in 1978, who with gusto, wanted to eradicate witchcraft in Uruan and the entire Ibibioland; and points out that such witch-hunting activities did not only violate human rights but exposed the victims to physical and psychological brokenness. The paper theologically establishes that the sovereignty of God transcends and undermines the assumed powers of witchcraft; hence, the human person should rid himself of any fear and find strength in the salvific work of God through Christ Jesus. The paper recommends that clerics in the state should utilise the disposition of the pulpit to propagate confidence in God's power over all evil powers on the members and by so doing abate the high level of witchcraft fear inherent in the psychology of the average Ibibio person.

Keywords: Philosophical, Theological, Uruan-Phobia, Stigma, witchcraft

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Introduction

Humanity in every clime has had its fair share of ambiguities and questions of things beclouded with mysteries seeking redress and answers. It is in fact an act of fate that humankind is created into an obscure world, with the responsibility to, through interaction with his environment, find meaning, purpose and essence. The quest, therefore, to discern good from evil, uncover their causes and make life worthwhile has opened windows for interactions between humanity and the universe, including its forces. The curiosity of every human then to uncover why evil happens especially sometimes beyond his/her control has engulfed humanity in a conscious dread of the unknown. In Africa, however, the belief in the abundance of supernatural powers in the universe which could be tapped for benevolent and malevolent purpose is rampant and would not be presumptuous to assert that a typical African lives in the fear of evil spirits, including witchcraft. Although the phenomenon of witchcraft has thus far defied empirical and epistemological definitions, it has occupied a central place in African spirituality till this dispensation. Every now and then, in Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, for instance, cases surface where children and old people are accused and stigmatized as witches and wizards.¹

Over the years in Akwa Ibom, the stink of witchcraft allegations has sunk deep into the shores of the State, and particularized among the people of Uruan Local Government Area of the State. Indeed, the stereotype is so well known that is as if witchcraft is a profession of the inhabitants of the area. This, of course, is not withstanding modern skepticism about the existence of witchcraft. The people of Uruan have since the inception of their identification as witches and wizards been derogatorily referred to as “flyers”, “air force marshals”, etc., which are descriptions of how witches and wizards are said to operate, and this stigma has affected the social life of Uruan people so greatly that some outsiders feel disinclined to marrying from the area for fear of witchcraft. An aide to the speaker of the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly in 2015 had labelled Uruan people “witches” on Facebook, trivializing their travails on the demolition of buildings in Ekpene Ukim, an Uruan community, and its environs with the comment “they can now fly”.² It is against this background that this study is conceived to

exculpate the people of Uruan from being unjustifiably dreaded and stigmatized for a vice that is yet unsubstantiated.

Conceptualizing Witchcraft in Africa

Lately, especially since the 1980s, there has been renewed and active attention to witchcraft in discourses concerning development in Africa. Discourse on witchcraft has become increasingly manifest in African studies, especially since a great number of Africans consider the malicious and manipulative manifestations and or effects of witchcraft practices in even modern sectors of society including politics, sports, entrepreneurship and formal education. Hitherto, as opined earlier and even currently, there had been reluctance in scholarly engagements with the issues of occult and witchcraft belief and practices in modern African societies, even by anthropologists who claim certain degrees of expertise in this area, leaving the scanty attention given to the subject to journalists and theologians. Nonetheless, discourses on witchcraft cannot be avoided both in formal and in informal settings due to the centrality of the theme in traditional African religious beliefs. There are myriads of belief in supernatural forces which could be accessed and used either benevolently or maliciously. According to *Encyclopedia.com*, “among most social science scholars of Africa, particularly anthropologists, witchcraft is defined as an act of magic that results in harming a person or aspects of the material world on which he or she depends”³. Going by this definition, magic and witchcraft are interchangeably used, making glaring the assumption that magic used for harm and magic used for healing or enhancement can be distinguished conceptually or in practice. Witchcraft, according to Igwe, is a “prevalent belief and practice in the continent of Africa, it permeates and controls the thinking, perception and lives of nearly all Africans, both educated and non-educated. It is an integral part of Africa's traditional religious heritage.”⁴ Being a part and parcel of African religious worldview, witchcraft assumes an important place in the social life of Africans, it has become one of the evil powers which are sourced from good spirits to battle and or subdue a harsh reality to life. It is not then surprising that in Nigeria, for instance, the media and film industry have witchcraft, magic and occultism featuring prominently in their videos and other contents.

The concept of witchcraft and the belief in its existence has existed since the dawn of human history⁵; it has been central at various times and in many diverse forms, among cultures and religions worldwide including both primitive and highly advanced cultures. It is noteworthy the continuous important role witchcraft still plays in cultures today. While witchcraft can simply be seen as a possession of belief in, and the practice of, magical skills and abilities either individually or by a designated social group, Keith has rightly asserted that “witchcraft is a complex concept that varies culturally and societally, thus making difficult any precise definition”⁶. It is in this context that the uniqueness of the African variant of witchcraft needs special attention as an aspect of African sociology and anthropology. Pritchard, after a study of central African magical beliefs upon which his definition was based, opines that “witches do not use physical tools or actions to curse; their *maleficum* is perceived as extending from some intangible inner quality and that the person maybe unaware that they are a witch or may have been convinced of their own nature by the suggestion of others”⁷.

Mckinney who studied the phenomenon among the Bajju ethnic group in Nigeria notes that “witchcraft is an inherent capacity to exert supernatural influence over another person”⁸, this influence frequently causes harm and unexpected occurrence such as sickness, premature death and misfortunes. Therefore the belief in witchcraft is the traditional way of explaining ultimate cause of evil, unfortunate happenstances and mysterious deaths. Awolalu writes in this regard that “in the mental and social attitudes of the Africans in general, there is no belief more profoundly ingrained than that of the existence of witches”⁹. All strange diseases, accidents, untimely death, inability to gain promotions in office, failure in examinations, barrenness in women, impotence in men, failure of crops and a thousand other evils are attributed to witchcraft. Bahemuka in offering witchcraft beliefs as one of the solutions to the problem of evil in African societies, submits that “every social evil in African society is explained in terms of witchcraft.”

From the foregoing, one could see how witchcraft beliefs have been knitted in the fabrics of every African, notwithstanding whether one can substantively say what is or IS not witchcraft. Just as Ogungbemi has observed, “one wonders why the belief has such a

dynamic force on Africans in spite of the influence of western education, industrialization and modernization”¹¹. Could this be because Africans do not just have the means to eradicate the belief especially when it lacks empirical and philosophical foundations? According to Wyk, “questions on whether or not witchcraft is a reality, are typical white man questions, Africans never ask such question because to them witches and witchcraft are part of their everyday reality”¹². To this end, the presence of witches in the societies is not without purposes, they serve the purpose of pointing to the Africans the needs to look up in loyalty to the Supreme Being for protection and guidance. For instance, the Yoruba people believe that the witches were created and sourced their power from Olodumare, the Supreme Deity, so as to make the Yoruba people trust and worship God.¹³ It is believed that without the malicious activities of the witches, Africans would forget to offer worship to the Supreme Being and attribute their safety and successes to themselves.

Although witchcraft beliefs have been a *sin qua non* of African socio-religious sphere, the question of the proof of its existence cannot be expelled as to not be confrontational to Africans from time. However, Kunhiyop opines that “Africans believe that witchcraft is proven by the scores of stories of the activities and confessions of the perpetrators and victims alive.”¹⁴ How reliable such confessions are, is difficult to confirm and perhaps do not concern a typical African. It is in fact the dread of witches that has kept the business of the church flourishingly in Africa. It seems the Christian and Islamic religion have been able to curtail the belief in deities for divine guidance and protection more than they have been able to curtail the beliefs in witchcraft afflictions and thus receiving much patronage for protection and immunity against the latter. From the conceptual clarification witchcraft could be seen as a cosmic reality to live with and a pointer to the Supremacy of God over evil force of social disorder and disintegration. Therefore, in a Christian age, the redemptive and salvific works of Christ should go a long way to rid Africans of the fear of evil spirits such as witchcraft spirits.

Uruan People and Beliefs

Uruan nation, apart from being a Local Government of Akwa Ibom State, has been a long standing and independent ethnic nationality

with unique people, culture and beliefs. The ongoing contention by historians as to which is the cradle of Ibibio between Uruan and Ikono people of Akwa Ibom State underscores the indispensability of Uruan in the historical tales and development of Akwa Ibom and in fact Nigeria. Uruan people are believed to have migrated in different waves from East Central and South Africa to Uruan Akpe in the area now called Idombi in the Rio del Rey near South Western Cameroun and Cross River border, where they settled for centuries. They are believed to have lived there in the 8th century AD before they migrated to Akani Obio Uruan due to the first Batanga war which caused economic and social disorder in the area. The River near the settlement was named Akwa Akpa Uruan (the mighty river of Uruan).¹⁵ Originally, Uruan comprised twelve clans but only largely unrecognized seven clans remain today; this is depicted by the presence of seven traditional bow-men, seven spear-men, seven sword-men, and seven royal staff-men during the coronation of *Nsobom*, the title/ nomenclature of the paramount ruler, each of which represents Essien Uruan Itiaba¹⁶ (seven clans in Uruan).

Uruan Local Government area was created in 1988 from Uyo Local Government Area. It covers an approximate land mass of 449km. Its population, according to the 2016 census, is 164,000¹⁷. The area lies in the rain forest belt with extensive arable land and the region abounds with the wild life, raffia palm and timber¹⁸. Uruan people are mainly fishermen, farmers and are also involved in other craft works abundant in the area. The principal deity of Uruan people is Atakpo, believed to be a great mother deity that associates with water. The Atakpo is believed to be an intermediary through which Uruan people could communicate with Abasi Ibom (God). She is believed to be domiciled in the Akwa Akpa Uruan and is capable of defending Uruan territories and to protect Uruan people against malevolent spiritual forces.

Other aspects of Uruan Heritage include *Ekpe*, *Ekong*, *Ekpo*, *Ebre*, *Nka* (age grade) fattening home etc. The *Ekpe* society is used for the maintenance of peace and order and for entertainment. The *Ekong* and *Ekpo* societies are traditional warrior societies used for encouraging chivalry or bravery among men in Uruan. The *Ekpo* society serves the purpose of giving regards to ancestors who are believed to always rise up periodically to bless and maintain decorum in the land. *Ekong* and *Ekpo* societies together are instruments for checking social ills, fostering

security and unity among the people. The *Ebre* is a traditional society used by women for social and political control and for promotion of women's rights while *Nka* (age-grade) were used for effective performance of different aspects of community work, mutual help and for discipline of their members¹⁹. Uruan people have since continued to maintain a good relationship with their neighbours and have clung to their heritage. Today, Uruan people are distinguished firmly in many professions and are active in the political and economic development of Nigeria and Akwa Ibom State particularly.

Uruanphobia or Ambiguity in Ibibio Perception of Witchcraft

Witchcraft beliefs have permeated the fabric of society so much that awareness and campaigns against it does seem not potent enough to deter the general populace from considering it a focal point in the social sphere, thereby inducing deep sociological consequences. The Ibibio society is home to myriads of beliefs in spiritual beings and forces as well as the many channels they can operate. There are also beliefs in the benevolent and malevolent nature of some spiritual beings, the malevolent ones and those through whom they manifest are held responsible for the many misfortunes and mischiefs bedeviling the community, chief among them being witchcraft spirits and those they possess. In essence, according to Essia, "witchcraft is a socioeconomic reality among Akwa Ibom people, whether it exists scientifically or not."²⁰ Ibibio people perceive an intense combat in the world between the forces of evil and good and the personalization of evil in the figure of a witch has heightened the fear of witchcraft, instigating readiness to overcome it by any means. That witchcraft belief is strongly ingrained in the Ibibio society just as in other traditional societies must have compelled Ukpang to aver that "in Akwa Ibom State, the fear of witches is the beginning of wisdom as most murders are committed in its name"²¹. This perhaps follows a widespread hatred for witches and wizards as harbingers and perpetrators of every evil that befalls the community so much that those accused are at high risk of being tormented and even killed. Ajala and Nelson after studying the phenomenon of witchcraft, social relations and health security in Ibibio opines thus, "Ibibio people have a strong belief in witchcraft and use this faith to draw a line between the state of well-being, success, and good

behaviour and the state of illness, failure, wickedness and bad behavior.”²² This implicates the idea that the Ibibio strong belief in witchcraft is a serious factor in explaining why many people ignore modern health care facilities in favour of spiritual houses and performance of rigorous spiritual assignments and exercises to ward off the menace of witchcraft influence on their health, career and even education.

The Ibibio people believe that both men and women, young and old, even children can be possessed by the spirit of witchcraft and the children especially can be used as manipulative tools to wreak havoc on their parents, friends and other relations. The Ibibio believe that witches meet as a coven at night while their mortal bodies remain in bed. They can travel to the assembly by air through broom sticks, turn into fowls, dogs, cats, frogs and fly to the assembly and turn back to human beings while at the assembly. Though witchcraft is a spiritual affair, that is to say, it cannot be substantively explained or tangibly pointed, the Ibibio people still believe that one can be initiated through substance consumed or through some spiritual atmosphere one ignorantly exposes oneself to. On this, Essia notes: “the recent Ibibio beliefs is that witches possess a witchcraft substance which contains their mysterious powers that cannot be inherited, every witch must obtain this substance from an established witch either through physical cutting, eating it in a dream, or physically swallowing the substance through food and other ways”²³. There is also the belief in the physicality of the witchcraft substance in the stomach, which can only be known by a spiritualist in the process of catching the witch and purging them of the witchcraft. In fact, news abounds of children and others confessing to be witches and wizards vomiting mysterious substances while they are being exorcised of witchcraft in prayer houses.

The phenomenon of witchcraft is a common global reality and is a common belief of the traditional religious worldview of the Ibibio people. But the extreme consciousness raised about its existence and effects raises various questions. For one, it appears that the widespread belief in witchcraft is basically because people have refused to be responsible for the failures of their own and the society in general thus blaming it on a supposed existence and operation of witches. Further, Essien and Eyo identify religious profiteering and emanation of witch

hunters they identified as *Nka Ukpoto* amongst other things as causes of witchcraft accusation and high consciousness of the phenomenon in Akwa Ibom State²⁴. This high consciousness of the evil of witchcraft is not without sociological consequences for the life and business of Ibibio people as well as the reputation of the area among other people. For instance, the Uruan people who make up a local government area of Akwa Ibom State have had their fair share of stigmatization, hatred and dread on account of the stigma of witchcraft. Children from Uruan receive first class suspicion as being possessed by witchcraft spirits when they relate with people and children of other local government areas of the state. They are usually the ones to be watched out for in classrooms and churches in case there is any mysterious event since they are from a supposed witchcraft headquarters of the Ibibio nation. Situations abound when children from Uruan are employed as home helps; their masters or mistresses upon reaching town would take them to their pastors first for spiritual examination and witchcraft diagnosis to prevent them from corrupting their children or becoming to them a source of misfortune, spiritual and economic decay. In the course of a conversation between a lady and the researcher during this study, among her objections to marrying a particular man, whom, according to her, has been seeking her hand in marriage, was the man's local government area of origin. It was not a surprise she mentioned Uruan. It was surprising to note that a young lady who has had the best of university education was still steeped in this stereotype. This can also be said about the many Uruan ladies who get abandoned by men after introducing themselves. Witchcraft suspicion among Uruan people has been heightened to the point that witchcraft has become a nickname of the area or can in fact be interchangeably used with Uruan as the name of the area.

However, the consideration and branding of Uruan the witchcraft headquarters of Akwa Ibom State is not without a cause. The area came into the limelight as a witchcraft centre because of the activities of an acclaimed witch hunter from Ekpene Ukim, one of the villages of Uruan nation known all over the state as Akapn Ekwong. Offiong offers a description of the man's activities: "In November 1978 a witch-purge crusade led by Edem Edet Akpan (alias Akpan Ekwong) took place among the Ibibio people... he would send messengers to a certain village to inform them of his coming on a certain day of the

week... On the appointed day Edem or one of his lieutenants would arrive and go around picking out those he believed were witches”²⁵. The suspects had their hands tied together and red pepper sprayed all over their bodies and into their eyes, ears, and noses. In addition, large quantities of black ants were poured on the suspected wizards and witches. Under agonizing pains, they were asked to confess all that they had done. Since this witch hunting activity concentrated mainly in Uruan, his place of nativity (although extended partially to other Ibibio land), Uruan came to be known as a safe haven for witchcraft operation, suffering devastating blows from stereotypes and marginalization from people of other extractions of the state. Uruan people thenceforth did not only get “notorious” for being witches and wizards, but also became unnecessarily feared, hence, the term *Uruanphobia*, the fear for Uruan people shown by people in other communities, in offices, marital homes, in schools and even churches for coming from an area where the greatest witchcraft purge had taken place. However, Edem's methods could have caused some mental coercion on victims who perhaps accepted the witchcraft status just to be freed. In fact, the fear of being tortured caused some older people to rush to the village to plead guilty of being witches and wizards and then pay some stipulated fines just so they would not fall victims to the many dehumanizing pain Akpan Ekwong and his lieutenants would subject them to. Essia submits that his approach raised fundamental concerns about human rights and psychological influence and he ironically was eventually labelled a witch and put out of business after some months²⁶.

It is then fallacious to label a particular locality as composed of mainly witches and then have them dreaded by a vast majority of other people based on a forceful and inhumane activity of an acclaimed witch hunter. It is crucial to lay bare the fact that witchcraft, as ambiguous a concept as it appears, is a general belief among Ibibio people as witches and wizards can be found (even if presumably) in other Ibibio communities, making the fear of one particular group needless. The phenomenon of witchcraft is conceived and believed everywhere the Ibibio people are found and, as we stated at the outset, it is a universal one. It has never been there in the annals of Ibibio history that a particular segment of Ibibio nation was saddled with the responsibility of being in custody of witchcraft as a cultural or religious heritage;

hence, the branding and fear for Uruan people as wizards and witches and harbingers of evil in Ibibio society is illogical, ignominious and infantile. It is high time education and fair knowledge catapulted the Akwa Ibom citizenry from the backwardness of unsubstantiated stereotypes to a state of mind where the agelong mutual suspicion and ethnicism, superstition etc. would be transcended. Witchcraft as far as we have seen is generally an element of African traditional religious beliefs, indicting every Ibibio community of the practice of it, thereby debasing the adumbrations of Uruanphobia and witchcraft stigma against Uruan people by other citizens of Ibibio nation and Akwa Ibom State.

Philosophical Analysis of Witchcraft

“Philosophy”, etymologically, has been defined as the love of wisdom, and such wisdom must transcend mere acquisition of facts or information to dispel general ignorance, to being able to say what is what and what is not what in logical manners and to solve existential problems for humankind. According to Esikot, “as love of wisdom, philosophy is concerned with the question of the meaning of human existence and the significance of the world in which man finds himself, answers to these questions touch the more specific and general concerns of man”²⁷. It is on this note that philosophy concerns itself with the phenomenon of witchcraft. Witchcraft as an important human concern belongs to the realm of philosophy called metaphysics. Metaphysics etymologically means the study of things beyond the physical including those issues that are intangible, abstract and immaterial. According to Archibong, metaphysics “is concerned with the way we think about the world and by inquiring into the concepts which are presupposed by the way we think.”²⁸ Witchcraft is an abstract human concern which defies precise definition and thus only known through the presupposition of what we think it is. Witchcraft is a psychic issue and lacks any philosophical basis of existence and should not pose serious threats to social relationships in Ibibio or any society in modern times. In fact, the thorny issue of witchcraft today among many is not unconnected with the serious problem of evil, an issue to which we now turn.

The Problem of Evil (witchcraft)

The problem of evil, according to Geisler, is the inability to explain the existence of evil in the presence of an all loving and all powerful God²⁹. Evil is a direct opposite of goodness, good fortune and natural order; it connotes an absence and a negation of good. For Bur and Goldinger, “the most powerful positive objection to the belief in God is the fact of evil, it is the appalling depth and extent of human suffering, more than anything else, that makes the idea of a loving creator seem so implausible”³⁰. To Africans, the Supreme Being is eternally loving and is not capable of causing evil upon the humans he created, therefore witchcraft serves the very purpose of explaining why evil happens to people and why natural orders are usually disrupted to even affect people negatively. Pritchard captures the logic about witchcraft:

*It is a system with its own natural logic, this explanatory system provides answers to questions of why particular occurrences happen to specific individuals at the time they do. It does not invalidate their understanding of empirical cause and effect of an occurrence; rather it deals with its ultimate cause*³¹.

From this, one sees the supplementary roles of natural and unnatural causes. Witchcraft is thus the very philosophical attempt to account for what science has not explained regarding the causality of certain occurrences. However, while no philosopher can sufficiently prove or disprove the existence of witchcraft, Ngangah has argued that “marginal topics such as witchcraft and sorcery deserve closer attention regarding how they really operate and how they affect victims, that witchcraft should be studied instead of being recklessly dismissed as a fake notion”³².

Philosophical Solution to Witchcraft

Enquiring into witchcraft poses great challenges as it is epistemologically very difficult to say fittingly what witchcraft is or how it looks like in shape, colour and size. Therefore a concept not tangibly and plausibly explained cannot be claimed to be the root cause of the problem and misfortunes of African or Ibibio people. It is, hence, illogical to label Uruan people wicked and malicious out of an insufficiently explained phenomenon. Kearney remarks that

“philosophy, it is said is not to be pursued in a vacuum. It is situated in its time and responds to its distinctive innovations and upheavals.”³³ This implies the idea that witchcraft, a philosophically insufficiently explicated phenomenon, has been a vacuum upon which many people are discriminated, tortured, maimed and ostracized all these while. Witchcraft has no philosophical basis for the misfortunes of the Ibibio or any other people. The solution to this phenomenon of witchcraft is, therefore, a better orientation of what constitutes misfortunes in human existence and the philosophical courage to face the realities.

Biblical Perception of Witchcraft

The fact that witchcraft is even given attention in the Hebrew Scripture - the Christian Old Testament corpus - goes a long way to support the claims that witchcraft has been rooted in primitive societies and is thus as old as other institutions of human civilization. Since the Bible constitutes the final authority on moral and spiritual matters for the Christians, it is then not preposterous to assert that the response and treatment of the church accorded the issue of witchcraft would depend so much on what is written about witchcraft practices in the Bible and even more on how individual Christians deem appropriate to apply the scripture. This accounts for why the latest whistle blown about witchcraft in Ibibio land has been through the instrumentation of some Christian clerics and denominations. To substantiate their stance on witchcraft detection and possible eradication, many religious leaders and lay Christian people quote the controversial Exodus 22:18- suffer not a witch to live. For Essien, “the most serious problem in the 'suffer not the witch to live' episode lies in the many Independent Churches and nativistic religious movements in Akwa Ibom State, having become centers of diagnosing witchcraft.”³⁴ It is on this note that many people have blamed emerging social ills occasioned by witchcraft consciousness on pastors and prayer movements. It thus raises the need to appropriate the Bible's perception of witchcraft in light of contemporary witchcraft discourse.

Theologically, God is sovereign and has dominion over everything, material and immaterial in the world. Exodus 22:18 should be understood first in the light of the oneness and sovereignty of Yahweh in that utilizing other spiritual channels in Israel was an abnegation of

the omnipotence and monotheism of Yahweh by the people who needed to be outlawed. Brown in the Jerome's Biblical commentary explains: "the preponderance of such laws in biblical codes seems attributable to the special role of Yahweh as sole God and hence authoritative law giver. Belief in one God means that the aid of spirit is not to be invoked"³⁵. God's people in both Old and New Testaments have been warned to have nothing to do with demonic powers and everything related to the powers. This, of course, is said in the light of God's sovereign power over all things inherent in the world. Exodus 22:18, apart from being a mere decree for the proscription of witchcraft practice, also serves as a pointer to the supremacy of God for the Christian people in all matters and areas of life, so that indulging in witchcraft and other demonic activities will not even be an option neither would its fear.

However, the Bible poses confident awareness of the existence and practice of witchcraft. In Deuteronomy 18:14, it is explicitly warned "let no one be found among you... who engages in witchcraft or cast spells". In the New Testament (Gal. 5:19-21) indulging in witchcraft practices is condemned and seen as an act capable of denying one the bliss of God's kingdom. However, some versions of the Bible translate the issue in Galatians as sorcery. Evidently, there are other passages of the Bible where witchcraft is mentioned as a real social issue in the society and culture the Bible was written, but it is safe to understand that these were only to show that it is detestable to God. The Bible perceives witchcraft as a deviation from the true worship of Yahweh. In fact, in the New Testament a man/ woman is said to be bewitched when he/ she replaces God for another (Gal. 3:1). To this end, scripture offers no justification for branding a certain people witches and instigating others to fear them and stigmatize them on such basis. The scripture calls on the Christians to lay emphasis on their relationship with God and acknowledge His sovereignty over evil than they do to the fear of witchcraft.

Theology of God's Sovereignty and Witchcraft Existence

Biblical principles demonstrate how God will eternally punish those who associate themselves with witchcraft and would not repent. As a matter of emphasis, concerning oneself too much with witchcraft worries, questions one's belief in the omnipotence and sovereignty of

God, the reason Semenya and Letosa have warned that “even in the most adverse circumstance of life, witchcraft must never be considered a viable option by Christian people.”³⁶ Note should be taken that even worrying about witchcraft as the source of one's misfortune is one way of considering it a viable option and discountenances God's claims of control over everything. By being sovereign, it means God is the supreme authority and all things are under His control. God is sovereign Lord of all by incontestable right as the Creator and owner of heaven and earth. (See John 1:1-5). Though there are scriptural indications of the existence of witchcraft, they are written in light of God's power over the phenomenon and His authority over it, to punish those who indulge in it. To this end, the power and stings of witchcraft have been overpowered and overcome by God for those who look to God for salvation and protection thereby posing no threats any longer. Koch acknowledges that “current believers do, however, have the assurance that victory is only in the name of Christ, because He overcame the powers of darkness on the cross”³⁷. This kind of assurance suggests paying adequate attention to one's responsibility for personal and communal development while trusting in God's perfect plans is more beneficial than overrating the power and abilities of witchcraft. Powlison accordingly advises, “the essential issue in combating evil is the consistent and repeated turning from darkness to light in the midst of assailing darkness”³⁸.

God's sovereignty does not reject the reality of the existence of witchcraft and other inferior powers; it only means God is Supreme and has the activities of everything on earth under control, just as Lumwe writes:

*Witchcraft power is real, so to counteract this reality, followers of Jesus need to know and demonstrate that Jesus Christ is more powerful than any spirit or power. They need to know that Jesus Christ has the power to subdue any and all powers of darkness.*³⁹

In light of this too, Dickason asserts:

Satan and demons are no match for Christ – the God-man. In the face of satanic opposition, the cross accomplished God's self-glorification, released the devil's prisoners, publicly routed evil spirits and

*sealed their judgment so that men would never have to fear or follow them again.*⁴⁰

To this end, the child of God through God's sovereign provision has power over the powers of witchcraft and has no need living in so much fear and suspicion of one another. Branding of people witches downplays the uniqueness of God's creative substance in the human person as *Imago Dei*. Accordingly, the fear associated with witchcraft to the point of doing anything possible to rid oneself of its powers and influences casts tends to suggest a doubting of the sovereignty of God as Chief executive officer of the universe. Having thus come to the realization of God's supremacy over witchcraft and the availability of same supremacy in God's children, there is no need living in fear of witchcraft and other evil spirits, let alone accept the stigmatization of any group on the basis of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

The belief in witchcraft is a global phenomenon which has asserted itself firmly among humans from primitive time. Africa, generally, and the Ibibio society, in particular, has been home to many conceptions or perceptions of witchcraft in that the belief has assumed a part of the DNA of Ibibio traditional religious views. But the brewing calamity and social disorder occasioned by incessant stigmatization, dread and popularization of the Uruan segment of the Ibibio nation as the witchcraft headquarters of the ethnic group is alarming and destructive to the development of and collective prosperity of the entire Ibibio nation. This unsubstantiated allegation has for a long while robbed indigenes of Uruan of good reputation, marital bliss and professional fulfillment as they are always the first suspects in events of mysterious happenstances wherever they are found.

Philosophically, witchcraft lacks the epistemological basis for existence. Nevertheless, for centuries it has served and still serves as a way of explaining the origin and cause of evil in most African societies, as was indeed the case in most societies all over the world. It then calls for the discountenance of witchcraft allegations and development of philosophical pragmatic approaches to solving human problems that cause unhappiness and discomfort. Theologically, the Bible on many occasions demonstrates how evil powers can only operate when they are permitted, indicating that God is sovereign and supreme over the earth, including witchcraft.

Recommendations

- I. Akwa Ibom people should come to terms with the reality of witchcraft belief in Ibibio cosmogony and confront this reality as a collective rather than considering it as only an Uruan affair since every community harbours some people believed to be practising witchcraft
- ii. Clerics in the state should utilise the disposition of the pulpit to propagate confidence in God's power over all evil powers on the members and by so doing abate the high level of witchcraft fear inherent in the psychology of average Ibibio people.
- iii. NGOs and Re-orientation agencies should intensify their campaigns of enlightening people on issues such as witchcraft whose belief has retarded development and caused mutual suspicion which is not healthy for a thriving economy.
- iv. Scholars should step up their studies of the phenomenon of witchcraft, organize public lectures to educate the Nigerian populace on what and what is not obtained on the issue of witchcraft, and by so doing re-engineer the nation's collective citizenship towards sustainable development.
- v. Pastors must obtain proper exegetical knowledge of scriptures concerning witchcraft so as to avoid wrong application often leading to hypa-ecclesiastical practices that contravene human rights.

Endnotes

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