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# **Contemporary Beliefs about Witches and Witchcraft in Kenya**

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Concept of Evil in Africa

The last witch trials in Europe and the USA were held in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Enlightenment and the emerging of modern rationalism have paved the way to a worldview where the suspicion of witchcraft is not needed to explain the mysterious phenomena of this world. This is not the case in Africa. The belief in the existence of witches, evil persons who are able to harm others by using mystical powers, is part of the common cultural knowledge. The African worldview is holistic. In this perception, things don't just happen. What happens, either good or bad, is traced back to human action, including ancestors who can intervene by blessing or cursing the living. According to African Religion, the intervention of ancestors is always justified because they correct the community only if members have broken the moral law of the clan. It is an educational measure. Witches, on the other hand, harm because they want to destroy life. Every misfortune or problem can be related to witchcraft, especially if natural explanations don't satisfy – in fact, they never do. Additionally, the victim has to be convinced of his innocence that the ancestors are excluded as a potential source.

African Religion doesn't know a cosmic principle of evil like the devil in the Christian and Muslim faith. Therefore, evil is located within the human heart. The symbol of total human wickedness is the witch.

### 1.2. Objective and Methodology

In this paper, I present beliefs about witches and witchcraft in Kenya. Africans experience witchcraft in many situations. How does this influence their lives? What measures do they take to protect themselves? And how do they get liberated from witchcraft?

The principal source for this paper is the field research as it is documented in the appendix. With one exception from Western Kenya, all my informants live in or close to Nairobi where the witchcraft belief has mixed with modernity and Christianity. It is not anymore the traditional conception found in remote areas. But this research is valuable to understand how Africans interpret today the origin of evil and misfortune in their lives.

The literature review gives an overview about the discussion among scholars concerning the theme of the witch in Africa.

In the conclusion, I will summarize the cultural patterns that are connected with the belief in witches and share my personal evaluation from a Christian perspective.

## 2. Field Research

### 2.1. General Opinions about Witches

According to my informants, witches are evil persons who are using mystical powers to harm people. Their actions are directed to disturb the harmonious order of society. Almost everybody is convinced that witches exist. This is independent of religious belief or education. One informant rejects a lot of African superstitions like taboo breaks, which supposedly bring curses, but is sure that witchcraft is real (app.: research no. 3, 25/9/2005). A professor of Philosophy describes witchcraft on an empirical basis (app.: no. 5, 26/9/2005). He can't lift the mystery of this force or give a scientific explanation. Our lives are controlled by forces which we don't understand, and the force of evil in the world is obvious to everyone. Witchcraft is true because it has a real and evil impact on the people. According to a Catholic sister, witches use the demonic powers that are known in the Christian tradition. They can be compared to Satan worshipers in Western countries (app.: no. 12, 30/10/2005).

Witches are the source of all kinds of sicknesses and misfortunes. They can cause barrenness or impotence (app.: no. 1, 2, 7, 9, 10), accidents (app.: no. 1, 4, 5, 12, 14), death (app.: no. 2, 4, 7, 11), stomachache, especially to small children who are sensible to witchcraft (app.: no. 5, 6), a strange and uneasy feeling in the body (app.: no. 2, 3), dry skin (app.: no. 3), unemployment (app.: no. 10), and prevent that people find someone to marry (app.: no. 7). Witches operate just by thinking of somebody and cursing the victim (app.: no. 4, 5, 6), or they use charms in a ritual to bewitch others (app.: no. 3, 7, 14); important is the personal contact. In the case of charms, witches take hair or body excrements of the victim. It is believed that witches can turn into animals like hyenas (app.: no. 2, 4, 6, 14) and eat human flesh (all informants, who believe in witches).

During my research, I tried to meet a witch. Everybody told me that this would be impossible because no witch would ever acknowledge his/her "profession".

I asked some informants how they would identify them. In most cases they are helpless. A sign could be the sudden sickness of a child during a visit of a stranger. If this happens more

than once, the suspect is a witch (app.: no. 6, 1/10/2005). Other indirect signs could be the refusal to eat together or to greet on the way (app.: no. 1, 3, 4). But this doesn't make a person a witch if there are no mysterious incidents happening. A (very) bad person who has not developed supernatural powers is not considered a witch. Diviners may reveal that a certain individual is a witch. Eventually, it is not important to know who has caused the affliction. The treatment of witchcraft, or the protection against it, works independently. I will describe below how diviners or Christian healers counteract witch attacks.

When I asked my informants how a person becomes a witch, all of them answered spontaneously that it would happen through inheritance. Parents pass it on to their children. Is this the only way? Only one informant affirmed this, with the addition that marriage into a witch-family has the same effect (app.: no. 4). Others answered that witchcraft can be contagious (app.: no. 3, 6). A witch can place her power on a path. The next person who passes by can catch it involuntarily. Another way is through initiation with a ritual by other witches (app.: no. 12), naming a child after a deceased witch whose spirit then possesses the person (app.: no. 7) or by cultivating evil in our heart (app.: no. 1, 6, 14). This would mean that everybody is potentially at risk of becoming a witch. Asking another informant's opinion, she admitted this possibility but believes it would be highly improbable (app.: no. 3). Witch powers can also appear without being able to trace back their origin. The witches are compelled. They feel driven inside and radiate evil powers, even without wanting to.

Since all informants assume that witchcraft is normally inherited without asking for it, harm might be done unintentionally. This can go so far that there is the type of a "good witch" who protects others with a blessing against her own powers. One informant knows a woman who does this (app.: no. 5). It reverses totally the original idea that the witch is the incarnation of evil in this world.

## 2.2. Personal Experiences with Witchcraft

### 2.2.1. Possession by a Witch Spirit

Six years ago, one informant visited his family in Ethiopia (app.: no. 4, 25/9/2005). His married sister was celebrating with her friends and suddenly fainted away during the feast. Foam came out of her mouth, and she almost died. The hospital couldn't find any cause. Finally, somebody recognized that it was witchcraft and brought her to a Christian healer in the village who dropped medicine in her nose. The sister sneezed and started talking with the

voice of the neighbor to my informant. The neighbor explained that he had bewitched her because he was not allowed to marry her. The family had refused the marriage because this man belongs to a witch-family. It is believed that others who intermarry with these clans also become witches. The possessed sister demonstrated superhuman strength that it was difficult to contain her with four men. The healer ordered the spirit of the witch to return to his family, but it requested to enter into another person or an animal. The spirit finally left after a long struggle. When the sister woke up, she couldn't remember anything.

The family never dared to confront the neighbor personally, and the incident was not commented upon publicly in the village. For my informant, it is "exactly what has happened in the Bible" when Jesus drove out the demons and they requested him to enter the swine (cf. Mt 8:29). The fact that, in the Bible, only demons (fallen angels) possess people, but never the spirit of a neighbor, makes no relevant difference to him. Real life proves that it is possible.

In Ethiopia, budas (witches) are a reality for all, whether they belong to the traditional Religion, to Christianity or to Islam. Witchcraft is treated by specialized healers who give medicine. It is not just a spiritual affliction that can be overcome believing in Jesus. It is an objective attack – like a punch on the nose – and has to be treated with corresponding measures, not just prayer. Because it is not a matter of faith, the source of healing-power is the same for everybody, independent of religion. Whoever has the knowledge of preparing the medicine can heal. On the other hand, it is a sacred ritual based in the sacredness of nature. For example, the leaves of the tree that are used to prepare the medicine are a secret. If everybody knew, the ritual wouldn't have power. It is also impossible to heal oneself. There is a relational, holistic dimension to being liberated from witchcraft. A mystical, non-rational element can't be denied, although personal belief is not required. A baby and a suspicious foreigner are healed with the same ritual. The Ethiopian-Orthodox Church has established a special ministry to deliver people from spirit possession or witchcraft.

According to my informant, witchcraft often happens unconsciously. It flows out of the person like bad odor. People accept it as a normal part of their life because it is not the fault of the witch to have inherited this power. Therefore, witches as members of the community are never condemned; only their behavior is rejected. But it happens that notorious witches are beaten during the night. People put masks on their faces so that the witch can't identify them. To keep the witch population small, other families don't intermarry with them.

I have described this incident in detail because it shows well how witchcraft is part of the common African experience. Other witchcraft attacks are presented now more briefly.

### 2.2.2. Other Incidents related to Witchcraft

The professor of Philosophy has witnessed how his cousin was bewitched with the “evil eye” (app.: no. 5). The cousin was still a small child when an unknown woman was gazing at him for a long time. The same night he got serious stomach pains. The doctor couldn’t detect any physical problem, and medicine didn’t help. Eventually, they decided to look for a traditional diviner. He recognized that the stomach pain was caused by witchcraft and cut small slices in the surface of the skin near the umbilical region from where he removed undigested food. Afterwards, the cousin received a syrup as medicine and got well.

A similar experience is reported by a man who himself got bewitched (app.: no. 6, 1/10/2005). In a ritual in his church, they cut the surface of his skin and removed pieces of glass and cow skin. He has no idea who did this to him. The procedure is similar to the traditional method besides the Christian prayers. In spite of that, the man believes that the healing powers behind the rituals are totally different: African Religion uses demonic powers, Christianity use the Holy Spirit.

A Kikuyu told me about a group of thieves from his village (app.: no. 11, 21/10/2005). They stole a cow from a man who is considered to be a witch. One after another died until there was only one thief left. When he realized that he would be the next to be killed, he confessed. That saved his life.

Another informant saw a woman from his village who got touched by a witch shortly before she got married (app.: no. 14, 12/11/2005). She shed her skin like a snake so that the wedding had to be postponed.

The belief in nightrunners is widespread (app.: no. 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 14). These are “harmless” witches who run naked during the night and cause a strange body feeling (sense of weakness or fear) to those who live in the surrounding area. But from all the informants, only one person has seen one with her own eyes (app.: no. 3).

### 2.3. Protection and Defense against Witchcraft

If my informants protect themselves, they do it with charms (app.: no. 2, 5, 7, 14) or pig oil (app.: no. 3). But the majority does nothing. In case of an attack, they go to a diviner or a Christian healer.

But not all the churches deal with this problem. Seventh Day Adventists, for example, teach that conversion to Christ itself is deliverance (app.: no. 8). An Adventist pastor has not

more power than a simple parishioner, and public prayers are as good as private ones. It is only the personal faith of the individual that helps. That is the reason why Adventists don't have healers. Pentecostals, on the other hand, believe that conversion is not enough (app.: no. 1, 6, 10). Deliverance is a necessary ritual administered by gifted persons who are appointed through the Holy Spirit. Still, the effect depends on the personal faith, but parents can intercede for their children. None of the informants shares the Ethiopian belief that Christians would use the same powers against witchcraft like traditional diviners.

How do people defend themselves against witches? My informants are all very comprehensive because witchcraft is usually an inherited evil. Nobody can blame others for their big nose... I spoke to a Christian healer who invites people to pray for witches (app.: no. 7). The church doesn't condemn, only non-Christians kill witches because they don't know better. A witch needs our prayer and help. The Catholic sister has told me the same thing (app.: no. 12). This is a contradiction to the literature, as we will see below. In theory, witchcraft is the expression of total human perversion, and one would expect a more severe reaction than beating a witch by night (app.: no. 3, 4). Newspapers occasionally report the killing of suspected witches. Either my informants don't represent the typical average Kenyan, or they were so afraid that they didn't want to tell how they really feel.

## 2.4. Deliverance from Witchcraft

### 2.4.1. The Traditional Diviner

To find out how Africans traditionally deal with witchcraft, I visited a diviner (app.: no. 9, 15/10/2005). She received her powers when she was a small child. Her skin around the neck is full of scars. They are caused by spirits who tormented her when she received her calling. Because there was no other client, I offered myself for a general check-up. The diviner didn't need me to explain my problems to her because she claimed that she would be able to find out by herself. I had to take off my shoes and was placed in the middle on a white blanket. To get in trance, she played a string instrument for quite a long time. Then, apparently under the power of divination, she "wrote" with a wooden stick on a piece of cloth and "read" the message carefully. It seemed as if a spiritual force moved the stick. During the session, she sighed loudly several times and made short exclamations.

Her divination then was poor. "You don't feel well at your work. There is a problem." "I'm studying, not working. And I feel fine. The only problem I have is that sometimes I

don't understand the African way of thinking." "That is what I saw. You don't understand because somebody has bewitched you." (This was perfect. Her diagnosis was exactly what I needed for my research.) "Who is it? Can you tell me the name?" "I see the witch but I don't tell you who it is that you don't get in trouble with this person." "What can I do to protect myself?" "Bring a book from your studies, and I will liberate you." "From which class? Which is the course where the witch has harmed me?" "Bring any book. The class doesn't matter." Fortunately, I had a book from one of my courses with me. She took a yellow powder, ate some and smeared it on her face. Then she opened the book and smeared it on a page, then I had to eat it from her finger, and she pinched vigorously several body parts with the powder (my head, hands and breast) that I turned yellow. She gave me the rest of the powder with the order to carry it with me during class. At the end, she laughed and welcomed me as her son.

#### 2.4.2. The Christian Healer

I interviewed a healer who calls himself a prophet (app.: no. 7, 8/10/2005). He belongs to an African Independent Church and offers healing to anybody who seeks help. The healer can see the past and the future of his clients by the power of the Holy Spirit and prays for deliverance if they are afflicted, including witchcraft. He received his ministry from God during a retreat where many people got healed and converted to Christ through him. The usual problems caused by witchcraft in his area (Kibera, Nairobi) are barrenness, impotence, madness and not being able to find a spouse to marry. The prophet pulls the witch powers out of the body of the victim and can destroy charms that are placed in distant locations – usually near the home of the client. The charms are "tied" and directed against the sender. But his power is limited. Sometimes, the Spirit reveals him the death of the patient.

Deliverance is accomplished always through the power of God. My informant sees himself as an instrument in service of his church. God gave different gifts in the body of Christ, and healing is one of them. The healer has prepared his living room like a chapel with an altar. When somebody seeks his help, he lights a candle and takes the cross in his hand while praying. The victim has to confess all sins for effective deliverance. Unfortunately, nobody came the day I was there.

#### 2.4.3. Public Deliverance

My third attempt to witness deliverance from witchcraft was an open-air worship service of the Neno Evangelist Church in Nairobi (app.: no. 10, 16/10/2005). It was announced in TV

as a healing crusade to bond witchcraft and evil spirits. About 5000 people gathered in an open field. In his sermon, the pastor explained how we can defend ourselves against attacks from the devil and from witches. He praised his healing powers and told us that recently, after participating at his crusade, an American woman who suffered from infertility conceived a baby. The significant thing was that she didn't understand Kiswahili and didn't know what the pastor was praying for. Then he invited all barren women – about 30 came – and all unemployed men with a professional degree – about 40 came – to the stage and prayed for them. Procreation and being able to maintain the family financially are important issues in Africa. Therefore, barrenness and unemployment are serious problems. The pastor was wise enough not to invite all the unemployed because the mass of people would have congested the stage. The remarkable thing was that he didn't just pray that God would be gracious. The pastor “knew” that there is a cause behind barrenness and unemployment. These are the powers of witchcraft. It is the adoption of the African worldview that misfortune is always caused by somebody. A natural reason for barrenness is unthinkable. Neither is it considered that a high unemployment rate in a Third World country is inevitable because of the economic situation. The fact that somebody else got the job means that I am bewitched. The pastor told us that a school had invited him because the pupils had low marks. He detected witchcraft, and now they are doing considerably better.

During his sermon, the pastor mentioned casually that he senses the presence of witches among us. While the service advanced, more and more women (no men!) went hysterical and were brought to the stage. Next to me a woman became furious and started shouting and kicking so uncontrollably that I got hurt on the shinbone. Ushers came and carried her with difficulty to the front. The pastor explained that these are our witches and set them free in the name of Jesus: “Husssshhhh! Be free!” The women who were liberated started singing Christian songs. He asked the audience if we thought it is possible that he had bought the 30 women to act for us? This accusation has been made on other occasions. Looking at the money he receives during his crusades, he could easily buy more people. He also had employed 100 dancers.

The Neno Evangelist crusades are typical for many churches in Kenya. The Christian faith is a manual to control and direct spiritual forces. If they are used in the right manner, victory is guaranteed. For Africans, who experience witchcraft every day, crusades are a big attraction. To see that there are 30 witches less in Nairobi gives a sense of security. Compared to lynching the suspected witches, crusades are a much better option.

#### 2.4.4. A Catholic Way of Deliverance

A more decent way to pray for deliverance is practiced among Catholic charismatics (app.: no. 13, 5/11/2005). Before celebrating the mass, the priest prayed for about half an hour against any kind of bondage in our lives. This included negative relations with living or deceased relatives, demonic powers and witchcraft. But the priest didn't spot individuals as being bewitched or being witches. After the mass, he explained to me that he prays in private for possessed or bewitched victims in order to avoid public gossip and shameful exposure. But the spiritual attack has to be taken seriously. Witchcraft is no imagination.

#### 2.5. Is Witchcraft just an Imagination?

This is almost a heretical question in Africa. One woman, formally a catholic, doesn't believe in anything, neither in witchcraft nor in other explanations related to the supernatural (app.: no. 11, 21/10/2005). She is the only agnostic I've met in Kenya so far. Interestingly, she has never been abroad. If Africans take a distance from their cultural context, it is usually because they have lived in Western countries.

In a group interview with 14 secondary school students, two confessed that they don't believe in witches (app.: no. 14, 12/11/2005). From the other 12, only two have experienced personally incidents which they link to witchcraft. It is my impression that the majority of Africans never had a direct, unmistakably contact. But the testimony of others is so strong that nobody jokes about this issue.

The charismatic priest is convinced that witchcraft really exists, but we shouldn't use it as an explanation for everything (app.: no. 13). Not all misfortunes are caused by somebody. Africans have to be taught about natural causalities. A lighting is just electricity, and high blood pressure is caused by cholesterol. If a sick person feels bewitched, the priest sends him/her first to the doctor and makes sure that the prescriptions are followed. Only if all natural methods have failed, he considers supernatural causes.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. The Presence of Evil in the Community

The witch is presented in the literature as the enemy of life and society. African Religion has a pragmatic approach to life: Everything that promotes the well-being of the community is good, and everything that destroys the community is evil (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 149).

Magesa suggests not to use the abstract Christian concept of sin but to speak of ‘wrong-doing’ or ‘destruction of life’. Evil is always attached to a wrong-doer. Evil persons commit evil actions even against their intentions. Modern psychology distinguishes between guilt and shame. Guilt is the feeling that I’ve done something wrong. Shame is the conviction that there is something wrong with me. Africans don’t make this distinction (cf. *ibid.* p. 156). Therefore, the central concern is to be in harmony with the community. Exclusion of an individual because of wrong behavior means a verdict about the offender itself. Africans try to avoid this label at all costs. The witch is that individual who is not concerned to stay in harmonious relations with others but finds pleasure in bringing disorder and chaos (cf. *ibid.* p. 170). It is the image of “unrepentant human wickedness” (Shorter, 1998, p. 67). Witchcraft (and magic and sorcery) are the “greatest enemies of society” (Mbiti, 1978, p. 164). But the English term is misleading (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 166). In Africa, it is not a ‘craft’ but the mysterious power of evil – potentially in every human being – that manifests itself in all areas of life (society, politics, economy, religion, etc.).

If something bad happens, people don’t just ask how it occurred but who did it (cf. Mbiti, 1978, p. 165; Shorter, 1998, p. 67). It is believed that every misfortune is caused by humans or spirits. There might be exceptions when it comes to global catastrophes, but personal or family problems are always caused by someone. If the individual or the clan can’t find personal faults that would justify a correction from the ancestors, witchcraft or magic are suspected. The offender is someone known because these powers don’t function anonymously. There has to be contact between the witch and the victim.

#### 3.2. Characteristics of a Witch

Shorter defines witchcraft as the “inborn power to harm others secretly and unjustifiably” (Shorter, 1998, p. 67). There is no reason, no revenge. Witches harm randomly because they

are driven to do so. According to Magesa, they operate psychically and project from the mind their powers on the victim. There is no rite preformed or spell uttered (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 167). The use of charms (magical objects) and personal belongings of the victim falls in the category of the sorcerer. He harms or kills knowingly with a clear intention against somebody – often against an evil person who deserves it – and can choose not to do it anymore (cf. *ibid.* p. 165). He even can cease to act as a sorcerer. Therefore, sorcery is predictable and considered less dangerous. In the witch, evil is part of his/her very nature. They always will be what they are and do what they do. Shorter makes the same distinction like Magesa (cf. Shorter, 1998, p. 64) but it seems to me an academic one. My informants didn't distinguish witchcraft from sorcery. And in a class discussion, an African student attributed, exactly contrary to Magesa, sorcerer characteristics to a witch and vice versa.

The phenomenological approach from Mbiti leads farther. He has observed that most Africans make no difference between witchcraft and magic (cf. Mbiti, 1978, p. 166). Therefore, he presents the two in his study as one way of dominating mystical powers. The witch/sorcerer usually inflicts harm on personal belongings like hair or clothes in a ritual. Charms may be dug in the ground. Passing over them bewitches the person. Witches also can send animals; seeing or touching them causes a disease or misfortune. Or their spirits visit the victim during the night and “eat” the soul. If there are tensions in between families of a clan or within a family, witchcraft might be used out of greed or revenge.

Other abominable actions of witches are: they avoid company, eat alone, act secretly during night (e.g. witch assemblies and nightrunning), don't observe sexual taboos (e.g. incest and sex with spirits or animals), turn into animals, make themselves invisible, eat human flesh of recently buried persons, resurrect the dead as their servants, etc. (cf. Magesa, p. 169; Shorter, p. 68; Domingues, p. 30). Therefore, Africans watch the graves of their relatives after a burial for some time.

Several organs are associated with wrongdoing: the head, the heart, the stomach and the eyes (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 151). Harmful intentions like hatred, envy, jealousy, lying and evil speech (perverted life-force) originate from there voluntarily or involuntarily. Especially the “evil eye” is associated with witchcraft. The victims are harmed or killed just by gazing at them. Witchcraft is inborn, inherited or acquired by contact with practicing witches (cf. Mbiti, 1978, p. 165; “Children drink in the witchcraft from their mother's milk”, Magesa, 1998, p.169). Magesa adds that potentially every person can become a witch if evil tendencies are cultivated. Normally, this power is asleep or “cool” in us; witches are “hot”

(ibid. p. 167.171). Witches can be recognized by their extremely ugly appearance (red eyes) or by their beauty, wealth and popularity (cf. Shorter, 1998, p. 68; Magesa, 1998, p. 168).

### 3.3. Protection and Defense against Witchcraft

To counteract or cure witchcraft afflictions, Africans use “medicine” (cf. Mbiti, 1978, p. 169). Religious specialists – diviners or herbalists – know how to treat the harm that is caused by mystical evils. It is a combination of ritual, prayer and healing herbs. Charms, placed on the person or in the house, are prophylactic measures to prevent attacks. Mbiti is not interested in the real power of traditional medicine. It is enough that it gives hope and security (cf. ibid. p. 174).

Shorter and Magesa present a slightly different picture. Although the help of diviners may be sought, the only effective reaction to witchcraft is eradication and extermination (cf. Shorter, 1998, p. 69). Witches are killed or expelled to protect the community (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 172). Mbiti is silent about the deep fear among Africans that causes violent reactions against the suspects.

### 3.4. Witchcraft and Social Dynamics

Instead, Mbiti sees some positive aspects in witchcraft and magic because they have a stabilizing function in society. The fear of being bewitched keeps people from stealing or offending others. It also gives an answer to the question of evil in this world and recognizes the cosmic view that invisible forces are at work in our life. It is strange to list this as a positive aspect because Mbiti states in the next paragraph: “[T]hose who may be suspected of working witchcraft or sorcery or magic against others have their problems and things also go wrong for them. They, too, find scapegoats in their communities. The whole problem becomes a vicious circle, and almost everyone is a suspect in the eyes of other people.” (Mbiti, 1978, p. 169) Is this a positive, harmonizing worldview? Talking about scapegoats, he himself doesn’t seem to believe in those accusations which can destroy the lives of innocent members of the community. At the end of his chapter, he opens the path that Africans themselves may find other explanations to the question of evil and misfortune. He refuses to decide whether witchcraft is real or imagined (“discoveries or inventions”) but justifies this

way of interpreting the world because it is the “fruit of many and long experiences of life throughout the centuries.” (ibid. p. 174)

Magesa refrains from judging the witchcraft belief. He states as an anthropologist that the fear of becoming a witch, or just being accused, serves as a sanction (cf. Magesa, 1998, p. 172). People behave according to what is expected of them in society. Nonconformity is dangerous because others could become suspicious or, even worse, the “cool” witch potential might become “hot”.

Shorter is more critical about the effects of the witch phobia (cf. Shorter, 1998, p. 69). Suspicions and accusations are an outlet for repressed hostility, and men usually accuse women. A verdict of a diviner about an inexplicable misfortune is enough. This is also used to discredit politicians or other leaders. Witchcraft cleansing is a collective purification but only has a short-term effect. In the long run, it establishes fear. The belief of a secret presence of enemies in the midst of the community nourishes conspiracies. Witchcraft theories flourish in closed communities with a phobia towards strangers. Diviners and other authorities ensure that witchcraft accusations continue. But the decline of the traditional social institutions makes it possible to challenge the superstition (cf. ibid p. 68).

### 3.5. Christianity and the Belief in Witchcraft

#### 3.5.1. The Witch and the Devil

Michael Kirwen (cf. Kirwen, 1987, pp. 26-54) compares the function of the witch in Africa with the devil in Christianity. Both are *the* symbol of evil. Kirwen not only makes a comparison but asks: “What is the Christian belief about the devil that should and must be proclaimed in the African church? Is not the witch... the devil of Christian revelation?” (ibid. p. 54) Their total dedication to evil is connecting them. The difference lies mainly in the mono-sectional African and the two-sectional Christian worldview. The witch is a human being. The devil, on the other hand, is a purely spiritual being and stands for the belief that evil can’t be explained with a model that traces all things back to human action.

Kirwen leaves it open if the witch and the devil are merely mythical concepts, created to personalize the experience of evil in our lives (cf. ibid. p. 49). This would allow the theologian to accept the two models as legitimate attempts to explain the same reality perceived in different cultural contexts.

### 3.5.2. A Pastoral Approach

Fernando Domingues underlines the importance to integrate the holistic African worldview in the Christian pastoral. “African Christians will only fully accept Christ as their saviour and totally entrust themselves to him when *they* discover him as the one who totally responds to *their* need for holistic healing and salvation that will touch on all the relevant levels of their cultural and religious experience of sickness and healing... If Christ is the Saviour sent to us by God, then his salvation must be experienced precisely at that point where we experience the mystery of evil at work.” (Domingues, 2000, p. 51.56)

In the case of the deep-rooted belief in witchcraft, we have to acknowledge its effect on people. Domingues doesn't affirm that witchcraft really exists. He speaks of the “phenomenon of witchcraft... a ‘photographic negative’ of society” (ibid. p. 32), “belief in witchcraft may cause actual death” (ibid. p. 59), and the “theory of witchcraft... creates an atmosphere of suspicion” (ibid. p. 62). From a sociological point of view Domingues concludes that behind suffering and disorder there is a social responsibility which is personified in the concept of the witch. Christians should address the sickness of society and heal the social disintegration. Singling out individuals as suspected witches is the wrong way.

A Christian approach to healing and deliverance has to follow the example of Jesus himself, who was deeply touched by sickness and suffering in his contact with the people (cf. ibid. pp. 73-99). But his healing ministry didn't just remove sicknesses or cast out demons. His ministry revealed the love of God, the Father, and brought integral salvation. The encounter with the lame man (cf. Mk 2:1-12) demonstrates well this intention. Outward healing is a sign that God will conquer sin and evil in order to bring inward healing that unites the person in communion with God and with others. This is accomplished through the passion and resurrection of Christ. Human suffering and sinful alienation in all its dimensions are transformed by the voluntary suffering of Christ in obedience to the Father. Through the resurrection Christ is revealed as the last Adam and as life-giving Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 15:45). He has been elevated to a cosmic position to unite all people and reconcile all hostilities. Because of Christ, there is no inimical power that can trouble our lives or separate us from God.

According to Domingues, this message should be the Christian answer to overcome witchcraft or other afflictions. We have to practice this message in our communities by caring for each other like Jesus cares for us. Then people will experience the saving power that liberates them from evil in their lives.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. Cultural Patterns

The field research has shown that there are several cultural patterns which are shared by all or most of my informants:

- *It is a natural assumption for Africans that mystical powers interfere with our life.*

Mystical (supernatural) powers are real to Africans as electricity is real to Western educated people; we can't see them but their effects in life are obvious. These powers are neutral. Witches are using them to harm. The witchcraft belief serves as a common explanation for misfortune.

- *The belief in witches does not depend on education or religious conviction.*

Many have never met a witch, but the belief is rooted so deeply in the African cultural knowledge that nobody doubts it. University professors and simple farmers, followers of African Religion, Christians and Muslims believe in their existence.

- *Witchcraft is inherited.*

Although potentially everybody can become a witch, all informants said that clans primarily pass on this inclination by inheritance. This conviction takes the suspicion from members of other families and facilitates the labeling of scapegoats.

- *It is not proper to investigate too much or talk about it.*

I was warned that I might turn into a witch if I become too interested in these things. Others hesitated to talk with me because they weren't sure about my motives. When I tried to arrange a contact with a former witch who had converted to Christianity, not only did she refuse to meet me, but her pastor also refused to give an interview.

### 4.2. Differences between the Research and the Literature

- *Bad and "good" witches*

The literature only presents the utterly bad type of witch. Therefore, I was surprised to learn about witches who are sorry for their negative irradiation and bless with a protective spell so that no harm is done. According to the definition of a witch, this is impossible. Also the story of the thieves, who got punished by a witch, fits in more with the figure of a guardian who weeds out evil persons from the community.

- *Punishment or comprehensive understanding*

Some of my informants approach witches with real Christian charity. Their actions should be rejected but not the person. Instead, they need our prayers. The aim is conversion, not eradication or expulsion. One reason might be genuine love for the enemies. Another factor seems to me the conviction that witchcraft is inherited and not a personal choice. The literature states that, similar to the concept of original sin, the witch is evil in his/her very nature. But it is also possible to release him/her from personal guilt since he/she didn't choose to be born in a witch-clan.

### 4.3. A Personal Reflection on Witchcraft

The African concept of the witch doesn't exist in the Bible. The Hebrew root 'kesheph' (cf. Ex 22:18; Dtn 18:10; Mi 5:12; Nah 3:4) and the Greek word 'pharmakeia' (cf. Gal 5:20; Rev 9:21; 18:23; 21:8; 22:15) refer to sorcery – the use of drugs and spells – and not to witchcraft, as the KJV translates.

Noteworthy is the Bible passage in Wisdom 12:3-11 that explains why God had annihilated the Canaanites through the Israelites. God hated these peoples because of “their works of sorcery [pharmakeion, LXX] and unholy rites” (12:4) and “their sacrificial feasting on human flesh and blood” (12:5). “[T]heir origin was evil and their wickedness inborn... they were an accursed race from the beginning.” (12:10-11) In contrast, the Israelites are “a worthy colony of the servants of God.” (12:7) The Canaanites resemble African witches not in harming others by projecting randomly mystical powers but clearly in their inborn wickedness and anti-social behavior, the basic definition of an African witch. On the other hand, the Israelites are “good people”, the opinion Africans have of themselves when they don't cultivate evil tendencies waking up their witch potential (see 3.2.). This text is the closest that I have found in the Bible referring to the theme of my research. Does this mean that, from a biblical perspective, the African witch doesn't exist? Or is there no reference because these persons just lived outside the biblical world (chronologically or locally)?

African Christians affirm the reality of witchcraft because they experience it and the Holy Spirit, in any church, has not revealed anything contrary. Since witch attacks and demonic possessions have parallels, these bible texts serve as a matrix to interpret witchcraft and deliverance (e.g. Mk 5:1ff; 9:14ff). They are treated even as the same reality: Witches operate through demonic powers (app.: no. 12, 13). The people are more creative than Kirwen, who

has suggested to replace the concept of the devil with the concept of the witch. These are not alternatives for African Christians but the visible and invisible side of the same evil reality. Only that, according to Christian doctrine, humans never use the devil or demons but are used and possessed by them. In African thought, it is the witch who plays the active part.

Many informants said that deliverance from witchcraft and other afflictions in Christian churches is of supreme importance if they want to be relevant for African believers in their daily lives. How should the ministry of deliverance be practiced? Would a strong faith in Jesus Christ be enough to protect oneself, like the Adventists preach? Most African Christians deny this. Witchcraft is not just a spiritual attack that would have no effect on a spiritually grounded person. Like a broken leg has to be treated in hospital, witchcraft is a physical attack that requires skilled specialists to repair the damage.

Scholars hesitate to affirm clearly or deny clearly the reality of witchcraft. Sociology can take this agnostic standpoint. But in the pastoral work one has to know with what realities people are surrounded. According to the diagnosis, the treatment would be very different. Either Christian leaders accept witchcraft as a reality and take appropriate measures or, if they are convinced that it is an artificial construction to explain strange coincidences, they have to inform the believers with rational arguments. It is not upright to assume that witchcraft is an imagination but in contact with the people to pretend to take them seriously.

After this course, I am still a doubting Thomas. The testimonies published in this paper are all credible. I haven't used weird stories, for example one of an unpaid prostitute who in return had bewitched the penis of the customer on his forehead. Still, even if I trust my informants, I felt like chasing a phantom. I was not able to meet one witch. The reasons seem very comprehensible: A practicing witch would never reveal his/her identity; those who have been bewitched don't know the offender or don't want to tell me because they are afraid; Nairobi was a difficult place to investigate because witches usually live in the countryside... The anonymity of the witch is a factor that helps suspicions to survive easily.

I conclude my paper narrating a group discussion we had in class: Somebody suspected that the power of witches can't be very strong because they weren't able to kill the European colonialists and Arab slave traders. Probably, their influence is limited to the community where they live. Another student answered, since witches support wicked actions, they simply didn't want to stop the colonialists. This is an example of how the belief in witches continues today without being able to dispute its reality on rational grounds.

## Appendix: Field Research Summary

1. 8/9/2005, Lenana – Nairobi: Interviews with a Seventh Day Adventist, a Pentecostal from the Redeemed Gospel Church and a Pentecostal from Brooks Restoration Center about their Christian faith. All believe that witchcraft is real. But the power of Jesus is stronger.
2. 19/9/2005, Ongata Rongai: Interviews with three Massai and two Kamba about witchcraft, the role of African Religion in the moral lives of the people and factors that define them as members of their community.
3. 24/9/2005, Kibera – Nairobi: Interview with two Luo women. They only have experience with nightrunners and protect themselves with pig oil against witches.
4. 25/9/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with an Ethiopian Amhara. His sister was bewitched by the neighbor because the family refused to give her for marriage. Witchcraft in Ethiopia is passed on exclusively through inheritance.
5. 26/9/2005, Consolata College – Nairobi: Interview with a professor of Philosophy. He describes witchcraft on an empirical basis. It is real because it has an impact on the people.
6. 1/10/2005, Rambula – Western Province: Interview with a Pentecostal who has been bewitched. In a ritual, they removed pieces of glass from his body. African Religion works with different powers although the ritual is the same. A witch can be identified when the child suddenly gets sick.
7. 8/10/2005, Kibera – Nairobi: Interview with a prophet. He delivers people from witchcraft and has the power to destroy charms. Witches should be converted to Christ, not punished.
8. 14/10/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with a Seventh Day Adventist. They don't practice deliverance because a pastor has not more power than a simple believer. It is the personal faith in Christ that helps.
9. 15/10/2005, Ongata Rongai: Visit at a traditional diviner. She detected witchcraft in my life and liberated me through a ritual.
10. 16/10/2005, Uhuru Park – Nairobi: Visit at a deliverance service of the Neno Evangelist Church. The pastor explained what to do against witchcraft and demonic attacks. During the service about 30 women became furious and were brought to the stage. The pastor explained that these are witches and liberated them in the name of Jesus.
11. 21/10/2005, Lang'ata – Nairobi: Interview with two Kikuyu. One of them knows a group of thieves who had stolen a cow from a witch. All died except the last one because he confessed the crime. The other Kikuyu doesn't believe in witches.
12. 30/10/2005, Catholic University of Eastern Africa – Nairobi: Interview with a Catholic sister. The Church should take witchcraft attacks seriously and help the believers. If not, they will go to diviners. But the sacrifice of Jesus has the power to liberate us from all afflictions. The sister knows a converted witch.
13. 5/11/2005, Franciscan Convent – Nairobi: Participation at a Catholic charismatic workshop. Before the mass, there was a general prayer for deliverance from all negative influences in our lives, including witchcraft. Possessed individuals are helped in private.
14. 12/11/2005, Ongata Rongai: Group interview with 14 pupils from a secondary school. Two don't believe in witchcraft. The pupils wondered why I am interested in this topic. It is not proper to talk about it.

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