

## WITCHCRAFT: BELIEF AND REALITIES: A DEBATE

### BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT

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BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT is a subject which has been studied by sociologists and other specialists over a long period of time.<sup>1</sup> Their conclusions are as diverse as they are many. Looking at some of the latest research done in Zimbabwe by some authorities on witchcraft beliefs, one is immediately convinced that the subject still bristles with difficulties. My contribution to the current discussion on witchcraft beliefs will, however, focus on Professor G. L. Chavunduka's inaugural lecture which was subsequently published in *Zambezia*.<sup>2</sup> The thrust of Chavunduka's thesis is on trying to resolve the dichotomy which exists between the traditional courts and the formal courts by their differing attitudes towards witch beliefs. To do this, Chavunduka prefers to draw most of his key material from Zimbabwe for three main reasons: a) ideas on witchcraft are not universal, although they are widespread; b) there is information on the existence of witches in Zimbabwe; and c) the traditional and formal courts of Zimbabwe differ sharply in their approaches to the problem of witchcraft.<sup>3</sup> To do justice to this wide subject, Chavunduka has drawn together some of the important conclusions on the subject made by other sociologists, including social anthropologists, medical practitioners and courts of law.

The author goes on to point out the pitfalls of the formal courts. These emanate from the fact that while the traditional courts accept the existence of witches the formal courts do not.<sup>4</sup> Exercising the Witchcraft Suppression Act (Ord. 14) passed in 1899, the formal courts do not 'punish witches but those individuals who name others as witches'.<sup>5</sup> The Act was based on the premise that

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, J. Middleton and E. H. Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); U. P. Mayer, *Witches* (Grahamstown, Rhodes Univ., Inaugural Lecture, 1954); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1937); M. Gelfand, *The African Witch* (Edinburgh, E. & S. Livingstone, 1976); and R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia* (London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

<sup>2</sup> G. L. Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', *Zambezia* (1980), VIII, 129-47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 130. Notice that the Witchcraft Suppression Act is against anyone who, according to Chavunduka, *names* others as witches. Surely the law would not be against someone who *proves* beyond doubt that some people practise witchcraft.

the 'so-called witchcraft' was 'a pretence and a sham, something which in actual fact has no real existence'. While the formal courts agree with the Witchcraft Suppression Act, Chavunduka has noticed that 'some African lawyers appear to have some doubts in their minds concerning the correctness of the Act'.<sup>6</sup> He cites court proceedings to prove the scepticism prevailing in the minds of these African lawyers. Surprisingly, and without convincing argument, the author blames the Witchcraft Suppression Act for defining witchcraft as 'the throwing of bones, the use of charms and any other means or devices adopted in the practice of sorcery'.<sup>7</sup> Contradicting himself, he tenuously argues that the throwing of bones 'is not necessarily done to identify or drive out witches... Throwing of bones is a means of divination, that is to say, a means by which a diviner or medical practitioner determines, or attempts to determine, who or what caused an illness or other misfortunes complained of by an individual or group'.<sup>8</sup> Chavunduka refuses to associate charms with witchcraft for some charms serve as a prevention against specific types of illness and others confer good luck on an individual.<sup>9</sup>

After labouring the question of charms and divination, Chavunduka attempts to distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery, noting that both terms were used interchangeably in the Witchcraft Suppression Act.<sup>10</sup> Regrettably, it is not clear from the article whether the author agrees with social anthropologists on the definition of witchcraft and sorcery or not. When he attempts to make his own definition, one quickly gets confused because it appears as though the author's statements imply that both the sorcerer and the witch perform the same evil of killing people. The difference between these types of witches, if there is any at all, seems to lie in the means by which they achieve their wicked ends.<sup>11</sup> This is solidly supported by his observation of what he calls a misunderstanding of the Shona and Ndebele names for a witch, *muroyi* and *umthakathi*.<sup>12</sup> The author goes on to mention that these terms, according to these two communities, refer to troublemakers, people who commit anti-social acts such as incest, those who burn or attempt to burn other people's property secretly at night, and 'those who fail to carry out the necessary ritual for their dead relatives, and so on'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, when a person accuses another of witchcraft, he does not necessarily seek a legal decision on the matter, but he goes to court to seek advice on how he and his neighbours might resolve their social problems.<sup>14</sup> Chavunduka then goes on to demonstrate

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 131-2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>11</sup> According to traditional societies, witchcraft is used not only to kill but also to make a good football team lose a game. Witchcraft is complex and multifarious in its effect and function.

<sup>12</sup> Traditional societies do not see a distinction between sorcery and witchcraft. Both evils are used to kill or harm others. Chavunduka observed the same fact from those who confessed that they were witches, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 140.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 133.

that the Shona or Ndebele 'may well be right' when they accuse other people of witchcraft, meaning sorcery.<sup>15</sup> Sorcerers, according to him, can harm their victims by doing physical harm, that is, putting poison in food, or can harm by psychological means, one of which may be remotely inflicted by means of the *gona*, usually a horn with medicines in it.<sup>16</sup> In a rather self-contradictory explanation, the author alleges that the *gona* is by itself harmless, 'but it is an offence to use such charms for the purpose of injuring somebody because through fear it can cause injury to persons or property'.<sup>17</sup>

When Chavunduka turns to what he himself observes as 'real' [*sic!*] witches, that is, those people who are said to eat corpses, dance naked in the fields at night and cause sickness, death and other misfortunes,<sup>18</sup> he struggles to produce evidence, but in vain. The author blames the courts for regarding witchcraft as myth by accepting the erroneous Western academic view held by many sociologists and anthropologists.<sup>19</sup> Referring to E. H. Winter, whom he recognizes as 'an authority on witchcraft in Africa', Chavunduka notes that Winter found 'no reason to think that anyone does in fact practise witchcraft or even that anyone could practise it'.<sup>20</sup> The same line, according to Chavunduka, was supported by another authority on African studies at London University, I. M. Lewis, who declared:

I certainly do not believe in witchcraft. I make this declaration because one of my aims in this discussion is to show that we do not need to share other people's beliefs in order to understand them sympathetically: we can see the sense in beliefs even when we are convinced they are based on false premises.<sup>21</sup>

Turning to Zimbabwe, Chavunduka noted three types of witches. The first one is possessed or said to be possessed by a spirit of a deceased relative who was a witch. The second type becomes a witch after being possessed by a stranger or alien spirit. Finally, a person may become a witch by sponsorship of a witch.<sup>22</sup> All

<sup>15</sup> In a surprising shift of mind, Chavunduka seems now to agree with the Ndebele and Shona who regard both witchcraft and sorcery as witchcraft. Chavunduka does not prove them wrong in so doing. He now seems to justify their classification, *ibid.*, 132.

<sup>16</sup> How a simple horn scares a person to the point of causing injury is mythical, if not miraculous. Chavunduka admits that the *gona* itself is harmless. In other words, those who believe in it are ignorant. Witchcraft is therefore a 'science' perpetuated by either ignorance or blind faith.

<sup>17</sup> After asserting that the *gona* is harmless, one wonders why Chavunduka goes on to call it a charm, the use of which is punishable by law, *ibid.*, 134.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Throughout the article, Chavunduka shows that he agrees with many sociologists and anthropologists (see, for example, *ibid.*, 142). Chavunduka admits that traditional courts are not suited for dealing with certain cases involving witchcraft charges.

<sup>20</sup> Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 134-5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-6.

this analysis led Chavunduka to his main 'proof' of the existence of witches, that is, personal confessions. These confessions are made in church and in traditional and formal courts. Unfortunately, when the police investigated the plants which some of the so-called witches are alleged to have used to kill people, they found them to be benign. Furthermore, post-mortems performed on some people alleged to have been killed by the so-called confessing witches proved that the victim had died of natural causes and not by poisonous plants or other poisons. The author admits that so-called witches 'who claim to operate at night all use medicines and plants in much the same way as sorcerers do'.<sup>23</sup> This statement is a contradiction of his main argument that witches and sorcerers are different. He now overlooks the fact that earlier he had blamed the Shona, Ndebele and authorities on African witchcraft for failing to note this fact which to him is a very important distinction.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Chavunduka testifies that post-mortems have proved that corpses which, according to the so-called witches, were mutilated and eaten were found to be completely intact.<sup>25</sup> To me, this creates two problems: why the witches make these fabulous confessions, and why Chavunduka, in spite of all the medical, police, sociological and anthropological research, still holds the witch view which is contrary to popular and learned opinion.

Chavunduka admits that cases of witchcraft he examined 'seem to indicate that sponsored witches practise their art using methods of sorcery'. He concedes that it may be mythical for the so-called witches to claim that they 'fly at night, possess familiars, or keep hyenas for riding on their night excursions'.<sup>26</sup> He asserts, however, that the claims by certain witches that they use medicines or poisons to harm others should be investigated, a task one would assume the author to have done before making most of his affirmative statements on witches and sorcerers. He should realize that the 'authorities' on witchcraft in Africa had already investigated and found witchcraft beliefs to be a figment of the imagination.<sup>27</sup> By dispelling the existence of traditional witches who ride on broomsticks to witch-dances and by accepting those who poison others as witches, Chavunduka vacillates between accepting and rejecting the existence of what he himself has called 'real' witches who practise witchcraft.

His analysis of witchcraft based on the cultural, social, psychological and legal aspects is very unconvincing. It is not common practice among the Shona or

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> See above, fn. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 139.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> I. M. Lewis, *Social Anthropology in Perspective* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), 68; E. H. Winter, 'The enemy within: Amba witchcraft and sociological theory', in Middleton and Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, 277-99.

Ndebele to accuse each other of witchcraft on a cultural level which only seeks reconciliation. As Chavunduka himself admits later when he refers to the detection of witches,

Methods of detecting a witch or a sorcerer which are commonly used, such as the boiling water test, divination either by spirit possession or the throwing of bones or the poison ordeal, are very unsatisfactory. Such methods often lead to the punishment of innocent individuals. In the boiling water test the accused person is normally instructed to remove an object from a pot of boiling water. If no injuries result the person under suspicion is deemed innocent. The other common method beside divination is the poison. If a person to whom the poison is administered vomits the poison she is believed to be innocent but if she retains the poison she is defined as a witch.<sup>28</sup>

Surely, trial of innocent people by ordeal is unjustifiable by any criterion, be it used by traditional courts or by formal courts, whether this practice be based on cultural or legal grounds. Trying anybody by divination of any kind, including the throwing of bones, is more than criminal in offence. Chavunduka should remember that as far back as the tenth century BC the Hebrews, realizing the superstitions inherent in the belief in sorcery or witchcraft, decreed capital punishment on anyone practising or claiming to practise sorcery or witchcraft, either as a medium or a diviner.<sup>29</sup> For us in Zimbabwe, living in the twentieth century AD, to perpetuate such belief is sadly to believe in a dangerous and outdated myth.

It is a general sociological or anthropological observation that belief in witchcraft in its multifarious forms is a valid manifestation of a nation's backwardness. Belief in witchcraft is always accompanied by poverty, rampant disease, groundless hatred, fears and the like — evils which retard national development and progress.<sup>30</sup> For Chavunduka, let alone anyone else, to support those 'many people in Zimbabwe [who] do not see the problem [of witchcraft] as one of eliminating the ideas but one of eradicating the witches and sorcerers'<sup>31</sup> is to encourage the nation to take a dangerous step backwards from civilization and progress. The problem with Chavunduka's thesis is that he refuses to come out with a categorical position with regard to witchcraft or witches. While he condemns the Witchcraft Suppression Act as being wrong, and while he justifies some divination, he extols the same Act at the same time as having 'undoubtedly removed the most dramatic dangers to life and liberty. Diviners and others are

<sup>28</sup> Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 142.

<sup>29</sup> I Samuel 28: 3-9.

<sup>30</sup> Except for the European witch-craze of the seventeenth century, witchcraft beliefs are rife in countries which are generally economically backward or academically poor. Developed countries, be they socialistic or capitalistic, have outgrown these primitive beliefs.

<sup>31</sup> Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 142.

now more cautious about imputing witchcraft out of fear of prosecution'.<sup>32</sup> This is Chavunduka's clear admission that countless atrocities were being perpetrated by the so-called diviners.

My position, like that of the Witchcraft Suppression Act and also of those Chavunduka calls 'authorities on witchcraft', is that belief in witches and witchcraft is belief in a myth. Moreover, sorcery, as described by sociologists and social anthropologists, differs from witchcraft only in the means employed for killing people. Thus, witches and sorcerers, according to the Shona and Ndebele, are *varoyi* and *abathakathi* (witches).

I could go on to show more pitfalls in Chavunduka's paper, but this is not necessary because he himself admits his inadequacy in dealing with the subject of witchcraft, as he states quite plainly:

As I have tried to point out in this discussion we are still unable to answer a number of questions concerning witchcraft and sorcery — questions relating to types of witches, the kinds of medicine that people say they use in bewitching others, the reason for the confessions that some people make in courts of law, and so on. In fact it is difficult at the present time to decide whether Ndebele and Shona witches are indeed witches or sorcerers. It could be that those who claim to operate at night all use medicines and plants in much the same way as sorcerers do.<sup>33</sup>

This quotation is significant in revealing a number of contradictions the author makes. Firstly, the quotation reveals Chavunduka admitting that many questions remain which demand serious investigation regarding belief in witches. Earlier, however, he listed those kinds of witches which he considers to be 'real' witches. Secondly, in this quotation, Chavunduka is no longer clear whether the Ndebele or Shona are wrong in regarding the so called 'real' witches and sorcerers as witches, without distinction. The quotation also shows that Chavunduka's whole thesis is based on tenuous evidence on witchcraft and sorcery, which he nebulously affirms. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that unless concrete proof of the existence of witches and the practice of witchcraft is brought forward, it is futile for anyone to try to challenge the Witchcraft Suppression Act which is doing Zimbabwe a great service by deterring malicious people from groundlessly accusing others of witchcraft and hurting them by trials by ordeal.

Having challenged Chavunduka's thesis, it now remains for me to prove the mythical nature of witchcraft. I shall do this first by referring to the Salem witch-scare, a New England myth-belief which escalated because of social and political problems which were besetting the country in the seventeenth century. In

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 143.

my conclusion it will become clear that witch-belief results from many psychological and social factors.

The Salem witch-scare began slowly and innocently at the home of the Revd Samuel Parris who was the minister of the local church in Salem.<sup>34</sup> His housemaid, a Black girl, Tituba, who was from Barbados, used to tell many horror tales of witches which she had heard at home. The stories were so fascinating that more and more White girls came to hear them. At some point in time, the little girls felt that they were seized by some supernatural powers. Several children began to suffer from a strange malady which manifested itself in convulsions, inhuman screams and other extraordinary behaviour. The town physician, Dr Griggs, quickly suggested a spiritual treatment since the illness was beyond medical capability. The Revd Parris called all the local pastors together for consultation. They were all unanimous that the Devil was asserting his authority in Salem as a springboard for his evil campaign in America.<sup>35</sup>

The girls, under pressure, admitted that they were bewitched. Three candidates for the charge of witchcraft were readily available. The first was Tituba, who was Black and a stranger, and who had initiated the witch-scare. The second was Sarah Good who was the town hag who smoked a pipe and wandered over the countryside begging from people and cursing them if refused. The third was Sarah Osbourne, who was of high social status. Her sin was to have lived with a man for a year before marrying him, and she had also not attended church for the past fourteen months. To the New England Puritans, this was a grievous sin.<sup>36</sup> The three 'witches' were brought for trial and only Tituba confessed under duress and warned of the presence of more witches in Salem. Taking her word seriously, consternation seized the city resulting in the stepping up of witch-hunting until it embraced neighbouring towns. The five-year-old girl Dorcas, the daughter of Sarah Good, Rebecca Nurse and her two sisters, Mary Esty and Sarah Cloyce (three of the most saintly and respected members of the church), John Proctor, Giles Cory, Abigail Hobbes, Bridget Bishop, Sarah Wild, the Revd George Burroughs and many other were accused of witchcraft. The belief became so wild that it even included the Governor's wife, Lady Phips, and the President of Harvard College and pastor of the First Church of Boston, the Most Reverend Samuel Willard. The Governor dismissed the last two charges as mistaken.

<sup>34</sup> In its abridged form in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, edited by M. Marwick (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), 151-77, the article by J. Bednarski discusses the topic, 'The Salem witch-scare viewed sociologically'.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-4. The real source of the belief in witchcraft was dualism: a belief that the Devil was re-asserting his authority in Salem. In other words, Satan was winning in a battle against God.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

Nonetheless a court for others was set up and matters kept spiralling from there. Nineteen people were hanged after being coerced into confessions.<sup>37</sup>

By empirical analysis of the situation, a position could be supported that the cause of the witch-scare in Salem was not only the political situation but also sociological factors. King Charles's decrees had caused uncertainties in the Bay Colony about the future. He stationed the royal commissioners to see that his unpopular decrees were obeyed to the letter and these included the establishment of the Anglican Church which had hitherto been outlawed in New England.<sup>38</sup> He sent in a new Governor, Andros, who was an Anglican and who hated colonial insubordination and wanted to whip the rebels into line. The Bostonians revolted in 1689 and arrested Andros. Had William of Orange not overthrown James, a reprimand of Boston's action would have caused more social problems and created more witches. Nonetheless, the Charter which was renegotiated with William changed the Puritan structure of the colony by allowing all religious groups except Catholics to settle. The political structure of the colony had collapsed. The impact of all this was severe strain on the people, a situation which required a scapegoat for the New Englanders to vent their frustrations. It was readily found in the witches, angels of the Devil, who were considered to be responsible for the State's hardship.<sup>39</sup>

The scapegoat hypothesis explains why an isolated incident in a small town of Salem became a major issue involving all social groups throughout the whole colony. The Puritan religious metamorphosis, the disintegration of the Bay Colony's tight and homogenous community feeling resulting from the coming of the other religious groups, and an elusive future — all contributed to strained community life. The Puritan ethic which stated that God gives and God takes away was now overtaken by circumstances. If there was adversity to progress, the Devil with his host in human form must be responsible. The reasons could be increased to include the wilderness-phobia in the new colony, the dangerous animals and the ever-present Red Indian threat. Now that the Bay Colony was facing insurmountable adversity, the witch-scare became a safety-valve for venting the social pressures which had built up.

It is very obvious to me that Chavunduka has ignored the following crucial aspects of African culture which are factors in determining why Africans and

<sup>37</sup> Notice that confessions were made under pressure. Besides, once it was assumed that one was a witch, confession or no confession made no difference to the people. Furthermore, it was believed that witches did not necessarily realize that they were witches because they inherited the craft from their ancestors. See also Chavunduka on this point, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', 135-6.

<sup>38</sup> Bednarski, 'The Salem witch-scare viewed sociologically', 157-8.

<sup>39</sup> Chavunduka also supports this point throughout his paper.

other 'primitive' cultures believe in witchcraft. In the so-called primitive traditional African and similar communities, there are two distinct worlds: the domain of magic and religion and that of science. In other words, there is a sharp distinction between the Sacred and the Profane.<sup>40</sup> The Sacred includes all the supernatural forces, observable and imaginary, which are regarded with awe. Unscientific man of this type cannot understand natural phenomena. He therefore cannot figure out why some people catch fish or hunt successfully while others fail even though they live in the same neighbourhood and use similar ideas. The explanation for him lies in magic and religion. To influence the supernatural, appropriate ritual must therefore accompany every move man makes. As Edward Taylor observed, the supernatural was believed to reveal itself through dreams, visions, hallucinations, cataleptic states and similar phenomena.<sup>41</sup>

'Primitive' man believes that he can control or rather influence the supernatural by appropriate magic. It should be borne in mind that whereas science is born of critical scrutiny of experience, magic is made simply by tradition with no criticism behind it. Science which is guided by reason is corrected by observation; magic, which is impervious to both, lives in an atmosphere of mysticism. As Malinowski puts it: 'Science is open to all, a common good of the community; magic is occult, taught through mysterious initiations'.<sup>42</sup>

To explain the source of evil in the universe, to explain why the loving God should snuff out an innocent child, or why an adult who is the family's only support should die, witchcraft offers a plausible explanation. To give a simple example, man can practise soccer diligently, or study hard for examinations, and still fail to succeed. To account for his frustration and predicament, witchcraft is blamed for the poor results. Notice that man does not believe in the direct intervention of the supernatural on the victim, but considers the supernatural to operate through the medium of human beings. This is why man affirms that witchcraft can be controlled by the annihilation of witches. According to J. D. Krige, this position is based on a premise that the world was originally created good, but the Devil has now seized it. That being the case, the elimination of evil — or at least its agents, the witches — would restore the world's goodness. Witchcraft, therefore, is viewed as criminality incarnate.<sup>43</sup>

Witchcraft charges effect social mobility and change in a community well-integrated and mutually interdependent. This is so because once a person feels

<sup>40</sup> M. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1959), 14–15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–16. Eliade discusses this point at length.

<sup>42</sup> J. Middleton (ed.), *Magic, Witchcraft and Curing* (Garden City NY, The Natural History Press, 1967), 171–2. See also B. Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York, Doubleday, 1954), 18.

<sup>43</sup> J. D. Krige, 'The social function of witchcraft', in Marwick, *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, 237.

threatened by a neighbour, often a relative, he will consequently detach himself from the community and migrate to a place where he will feel more secure. It is normally old women who are charged with witchcraft practices. The reason for this may be due to their feebleness. They make easy scapegoats with out much loss to the community. At their age they are generally resented by their daughters-in-law. In an extended traditional family they often complain that they are not well cared for. It is perhaps their implacability which fosters their susceptibility to witchcraft charges.

Witchcraft charges act as a cohesive force. Estranged members of the family may air their social grievances and frustrations by means of a scapegoat, a witch, often the wife of one of the family members. Witchcraft therefore acts as a unifying factor in a strained family relationship. In traditional communities, the accusation and execution of a witch served a useful purpose in that it was cathartic — it purged the community of certain anxieties for the time being. The wrong done to the community was rectified by the hunt and execution of the public witch who caused them. But since most problems affect individuals on an individual basis, each person therefore identified his own witch in his own way.

Witchcraft allegations provide the ultimate answer to inexplicable and enigmatic circumstances. For example, the question often asked after death or after an accident is not 'How?', because the process is clear to everyone, but 'Why?' the accident occurred at this point in time. Why should two cars meet at that particular place; why should mine get the worst of the head-on impact, causing a fatal injury to a relative: this is what defies traditional man's rationale. In this case, only a charge of witchcraft on a jealous neighbour satisfies the question. In other words, the driver is not to blame for the accident. The policeman may accuse him of drunken driving, but his relatives would recall many times when the driver in question had driven in a worse state than on the day of the accident but had never crashed. Notice that if an accident, death or injury had not occurred, a charge of witchcraft would not have arisen. Thus, misfortunes, jealousy and malice foster and provide for the creation or intervention of witches.

That certain people should manifest these features in abundance is assumed to be indicative of their possession by the Devil. Once a person is suspected of witchcraft, she will be blamed for the subsequent misfortunes, death or illness of others. Thus, death which cannot be avoided must be blamed on someone. The question is not how it came, for there are many ways by which death is known to come, but why at this point in time, and why following some misunderstanding with a relative or neighbour. Notice, therefore, that if two people quarrel bitterly and one begins to encounter a series of predicaments, the immediate explanation would be that he has been bewitched by the other. For all these reasons we can see clearly that witchcraft is invented to serve a social function. This is what also makes witchcraft mythical.

Normally witchcraft is charged against people who are known intimately to each other, for example, a relative or neighbour, and not a stranger. This explains the myth that a White person cannot be bewitched by an African. Obviously a Black person was not intimate enough to a White person in colonial times to be able to bewitch him.

The foregoing discussion and analysis makes it clear that supernatural witchcraft is entirely mythical; it is a figment of the imagination. In the Third World, witches are created by certain bewildering phenomena within the community or in the world. The witch-craze arises from an attempt to explain evil of all sorts such as jealousy, envy, cruelty, status competition, hatred towards a successful neighbour, and so on. Thus, witchcraft charges often emanate from quarrels. If quarrelling people could be fully reconciled, witchcraft charges would not arise. It is only when reconciliation is impossible and the rupture of a relationship must result, that witchcraft charges provide the only means for permanently sealing an end to a relationship.

Some people confess to be witches because they claim to have practised and mastered the craft and to have the medicines which they believe transform them into real night witches. Are these 'real' witches, or do they live under a delusion that they are? I would like to take the position that they have surely become witch megalomaniacs.<sup>44</sup> At any rate, since the distinction between witchcraft, magic and sorcery is not generally made, many sorcerers and magicians have voluntarily confessed to witchcraft under interrogation without torture.<sup>45</sup>

The best challenge to 'witches', even in the form of sorcerers, and all mythical, imaginary so-called supernatural evil beings, is by having faith in oneself through the inspiration of the Creator in all His multifarious names (God, Allah, uNkulunkulu, Elohim, Yahweh, uTixo, Mwari, etc.). Since man (*adam*) was created in God's image, or has the breath of God (*ruach Elohim*) in him, he has God's power enabling him to ward off any evil, supernatural or mundane, which is haunting him by day or by night.

Several studies have exposed me to many religious and political ideologies and philosophies, all of which confirm the universal belief that man is a unique creature in the world. The Bible portrays him as the acme of God's creation (Ps. 8). This means that man, and no such imaginary supernatural forces as witchcraft and magic, has the capacity to reshape his environment for good or for

<sup>44</sup> Some people strongly believe that they are Jesus or prophets. But this claim does not transform them into becoming what they claim to be. Such is witchcraft confession.

<sup>45</sup> Voluntary confessions in a traditional court or church may result from the fact that, since no distinction is made between magic, sorcery and witchcraft, those who possess medicine of any kind, under the delusion that they can kill somebody, will confess to witchcraft voluntarily. This, however, does not make them 'real' witches.

ill.<sup>46</sup> To realize his full potential, man must devote himself to faith in God, education and hard work. Once man acquires this faith, he will be able to rise above the incapacitating fear of the so-called witches, sorcerers and magicians.

In His teachings, Jesus stressed this point in a more profound way. He repeatedly exhorted man not to fear. The exhortations 'fear not', 'be not afraid', 'be not dismayed', etc., appear in the Gospel again and again. Fear undermines one's confidence in oneself. It enervates a person and makes him prone to the debilitating feeling of failure and defeatism. Worse still, fear saps a person's will to confront adversity with hope because it deprives one of the purpose of life. Instead, it transforms the whole earth into an 'enchanted world' in which one's pre-occupation is to be vigilant and ready to run away from 'witches'. Panic causes one to lose all reason in one's behaviour. To eradicate fear, Jesus taught man to regard God as 'Our Father'. Instead of being anxious, man in faith can do what in his frailty seems impossible: he can move 'mountains' by faith (Matt. 21: 21). When man realizes his uniqueness in the world, he will have enough faith to confront evil with righteousness, challenges with valour, and failure with hope. Only then will God's Kingdom, which is latent in mankind (Luke 17: 21), become a reality in the world. When that stage is reached 'witches' and their craft will be buried once and for all. Furthermore, since the 'witch' malefactors tend to operate at night, in like manner those who walk in the light of God are immune to the scares and snares of 'witches' because they are perpetually in the Light. The best prescription against witchcraft is not to counter 'witch' medicines, but to have unwavering faith in oneself and, better still, faith in God, the Creator of heaven and earth — in whom is light which drives away darkness, the domain of 'witches', and fear, a pre-requisite of defeatism.

## REALITIES OF WITCHCRAFT

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This article deals with the views expressed by Dr T. J. Mafico in his 'Belief in Witchcraft' which appears above. In that article Mafico has described what he

<sup>46</sup> In Isaiah (see 35: 4; 41: 10; 41: 13, 14; 43: 1, 5; 44: 2; 45: 7; 54: 4) there are at least eight references where Isaiah tells Israel to 'fear not'. Insecurity breeds irrationality, particularly in 'primitive' people. The New Testament also shows Jesus telling his disciples not to fear. There are at least six references in Luke alone (1: 13, 30; 2: 10; 5: 10; 12: 7; 12: 32).

regards as pitfalls in my inaugural lecture, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe', delivered before the University of Zimbabwe in 1980.<sup>47</sup> Mafico is angry because on that occasion I criticized some aspects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of Zimbabwe (Ord. 14 of 1899), and went on to raise the possibility that witchcraft, or at least certain types of it, may exist. To Mafico this is encouraging 'the nation to take a dangerous step backwards from civilization and progress' (p. 123). He goes on: 'unless concrete proof of the existence of witches and the practice of witchcraft is brought forward, it is futile for anyone to try to challenge the Witchcraft Suppression Act which is doing Zimbabwe a great service by deterring malicious people from groundlessly accusing others of witchcraft and hurting them by trials by ordeal' (p. 124). Mafico is convinced that witchcraft is entirely mythical: 'it is a figment of the imagination' (p. 129). To him, witchcraft can only be explained as an attempt by 'Africans and other "primitive" cultures' (pp. 126-7) to explain 'evil of all sorts such as jealousy, envy, cruelty, status competition, hatred towards a successful neighbour, and so on' (p. 129). He ends by suggesting that the 'best prescription against witchcraft is not to counter "witch" medicines, but to have unwavering faith in oneself and, better still, faith in God, the Creator of heaven and earth — in whom is light which drives away darkness, the domain of "witches", and fear, a pre-requisite of defeatism' (p. 130). I can understand the Revd Dr Mafico's anger. He is a very rigid and dedicated Christian missionary. His article reads more like a church sermon than an academic piece of work.

Unfortunately, many people in Zimbabwe, as in many other parts of the world, do not agree with Dr Mafico's position on the subject of witchcraft. Many people say that witches exist, while others, of course, say that witches do not exist. One object of my inaugural lecture was, in fact, to attempt to resolve this conflict between the two positions. In doing so I criticized some aspects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of Zimbabwe. One important criticism (there are others) was the failure on the part of the legislators to make a clear distinction between witchcraft and sorcery. A distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is important. I will return to this issue later.

I also criticized the definition of witchcraft given in the Witchcraft Suppression Act. Witchcraft is defined in the Act as 'the throwing of bones, the use of charms and any other means or devices adopted in the practice of sorcery'. Throwing of bones is a means of divination used by traditional healers; it is not necessarily done in order to identify or drive out witches. It is an attempt to discover the cause of illness or other misfortune complained of by an individual. I

<sup>47</sup> Chavunduka, 'Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe'.

also explained in my inaugural lecture that many charms have nothing to do with witchcraft:

A large part of the traditional healer's practice is concerned with prescribing remedies and preventive charms. Some of these charms confer or are believed to confer immunity against specific types of illness or to protect the individual against misfortune. Other charms confer or are believed to confer positive benefits such as physical strength, attractiveness to the opposite sex and other desirable qualities (p. 132).

The first important source of misunderstanding in discussing witchcraft is the definition of witchcraft itself. To many people there are three possible broad meanings of the term 'witchcraft'. The first is a social one. There are some people who are accused of witchcraft merely because they are bad individuals — persons who commit anti-social acts. Some are accused of witchcraft because they are hated or disliked by other people. Because of this social definition of witchcraft, I argued that when a Shona or Ndebele person accuses another person of witchcraft (meaning that the person was a bad individual), he may well be right. There are many bad persons in society. On this point I agree with Middleton and Winter<sup>48</sup> and others, that accusations of witchcraft may be a response to situations of anxiety and stress, or a means for the expression of social strains and tensions. At other times the accusation may be a means of social control or of social rupture, or a means of adaptation to rapid and disruptive social change. I made this point in my inaugural lecture (p. 141). These social aspects of witchcraft have been studied by sociologists, anthropologists, historians and others for a long time. There is, therefore, nothing new in Dr Mafico's so-called contribution. In his discussion of the social functions of the belief in witchcraft he has merely repeated, although rather badly, what is already known. In my inaugural lecture I attempted to go beyond what is already known. I suggested other possible avenues of research.

The term witch is also often used by the Shona and the Ndebele to mean a sorcerer or a poisoner. When pressed to define the term further, people make a distinction between types of witches by saying there are night witches and day witches. Day witches fit the anthropological description of a sorcerer. As I point out in my inaugural lecture (p. 132), sorcery is merely a technique or a tool employed by an individual under certain circumstances. Recourse to sorcery is always on a deliberate, conscious, voluntary basis. A sorcerer may cause illness or kill his fellows by blowing harmful medicine towards them; by putting poison in his victim's food, drink or tobacco; or by concealing the poison or the poisonous objects on a path where the victim will pass.

<sup>48</sup> Middleton and Winter, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*.

The distinction between witchcraft and sorcery is important because it can be demonstrated fairly easily that sorcerers exist in society. I stated in my inaugural lecture that medicines used by sorcerers to harm people are derived from plants that can be pointed out and examined. Nowadays some sorcerers use arsenic cattle dip, insecticides and other poisons. I then argued (p. 133) that when a Shona or Ndebele person accuses another person of witchcraft, in this case meaning sorcery, again he may well be right. In fact, courts in Zimbabwe often investigate this type of witchcraft (sorcery), although these are not always labelled as such. Where an individual has died and it is believed that a poison may have been used, the courts usually make an attempt to discover the actual cause of death. The courts usually rely on the post-mortem examination. Where the sorcerer has indicated to the police the plants or roots used to harm another individual, such plants or roots are often tested in order to determine whether they are poisonous. Many people have been sentenced for murder or attempted murder as a result of such investigations.

The other types of sorcery often do psychological rather than physical harm to those who believe in sorcery. One example of this type of sorcery is where the sorcerer plants poison or dangerous objects on a path or in the victim's home so that people coming into contact with them become sick. Another sorcery technique is intended to operate at a distance without actual physical contact. In my inaugural lecture (p. 134) I gave an example of what is called the *gona* in Shona country. Some people believe that the *gona* has occult powers. It is usually an animal's horn with medicines in it. Through fear it can cause injury to persons or property or do psychological harm to those who believe that it possesses occult powers. Similarly, poison or poisonous objects or even harmless roots placed on a path or in someone's home can cause psychosomatic illness, especially when coupled with threats. There are certain conventional phrases often used in the heat of an argument which are often construed by many Shona and Ndebele people as threats of sorcery or witchcraft, and there are many instances of persons who have become sick as a result of being convinced that they have been so bewitched.

I now turn to what many Ndebele and Shona people call night witches. Mafico firmly believes that this issue has been studied adequately in the past; it does not need any further investigation. He writes that I 'should realize that the "authorities" on witchcraft in Africa had already investigated and found witchcraft beliefs to be a figment of the imagination'. Mafico also asks why I, 'in spite of all the medical, police, sociological and anthropological research, still hold the witch view which is contrary to popular and learned opinion' (p. 122).

I do not believe that witchcraft has been adequately studied in the past, and this was the main theme of my inaugural lecture. Sociologists and social anthropologists have been interested in sorcery and witchcraft in so far as these act

as social sanctions controlling anti-social behaviour. In sociology and social anthropology we have been concerned with finding out what is the basic reality underlying witchcraft ideas, and the kind of reality we have been searching for is social and psychological. These basic social and psychological realities underlying witchcraft ideas have been well documented by fieldworkers since the pioneering days of Evans-Pritchard.<sup>49</sup> But as Sister Mary Aquina points out, 'because sociologists are exclusively concerned with the effects of these beliefs on the social life of the people, they do not discuss the question whether or not witchcraft and sorcery beliefs correspond to metaphysical realities'.<sup>50</sup>

I ended my inaugural lecture by arguing that 'sociologists and anthropologists must, where necessary, shift from the social to the physical aspects of the problem under investigation.' And that

where these physical aspects of the problem fall outside the competence of the sociologist or social anthropologist, co-operation with other specialists should be attempted. Shifting our analysis to the physical reality of witchcraft and sorcery will not invalidate the sociological analysis itself but it may help us and the general public to understand more fully some of the puzzling aspects of the society in which we live (p. 144).

One hypothesis which, in my view, had not been adequately considered in the past is that witchcraft, or at least certain types of it, is objectively valid.

I have already shown (bearing in mind the Ndebele and Shona definitions of witchcraft) that when a Shona and Ndebele person accuses another of witchcraft, he may be referring to direct sorcery, that is, putting medicine or poison in someone's food, drink, and so on. There is no doubt that such sorcerers exist in society. On the other hand the person accusing another of witchcraft may be referring to indirect sorcery, that is, medicines, poisons or strange objects planted somewhere with the intention of harming those who see them or come into contact with them. These are techniques which can also cause illness to those who believe in them. There are many accounts of the effect of indirect sorcery. Many people have become and do become sick as a result of being convinced that they have been bewitched.

There is a lot which is already known about witches (night witches) in Shona and Ndebele country. Firstly, there is no doubt that some people attempt to practise this kind of witchcraft. I stated in my inaugural lecture (p.139) that in addition to court hearings, it is well known that there are confession meetings at which people confess to witchcraft and even exhibit human bones, poisons, hair,

<sup>49</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.

<sup>50</sup> Sr. Mary Aquina, 'A sociological interpretation of sorcery and witchcraft beliefs among the Karanga', *NADA* (1968), IX, v, 47-53.

finger-nails, and so on, which they say they have used on their night excursions. I have attended such confession meetings. I have also argued that the claim by some people accused of witchcraft that they ate people, that they have exhumed the body of the newly dead and eaten the flesh, cannot always be dismissed as fantasy or as a psychic act. There are instances where the police exhumed the body and confirmed that parts of the body were missing. In fact, cases of this nature are reported from time to time in the press of various African countries.

The claim by some people, whom I have called sponsored witches (p. 136), that they practise their art at night using methods of sorcery, should not, in my view, be dismissed at this stage. There are many people all over the country who make such claims and any serious research worker should meet them and test their claims — admittedly a very long, costly, time-consuming and sometimes risky exercise. I have, so far, had long discussions with fifteen of them. I have also been shown the various medicines that they say they use at night. They have also described to me their methods of operation. They are normal men and women. Although my own study is incomplete I still hold the view that this kind of witchcraft may be possible. It was my intention in the inaugural lecture, therefore, to encourage my students and fellow workers to investigate this matter further.

It is a fact that many people in Zimbabwe, as in many other countries, will not at present accept Mafico's advice that 'the best challenge to "witches", even in the form of sorcerers, and all mythical, imaginary so-called supernatural evil beings, is by having faith in oneself through the inspiration of the Creator in all His multifarious names' (p. 129). Many people see the problem not only as one of eliminating the ideas but also of eradicating some witches and sorcerers. As I have tried to show, they are right, at least in part. More studies should be carried out.

There are certainly some sorcerers in our society who use poisons and medicines to harm other people. And it is possible that sorcery techniques are also used at night by some people. Mafico should not, therefore, ignore such bad people; they are sinners who should be identified and helped to conform to the acceptable standards of behaviour. Sorcery and witchcraft cases will decrease as people make more use of social and legal mechanisms for settling their disputes.

I still support all the statements and hypotheses presented in my inaugural lecture. Mafico has not always understood my argument, in certain parts has chosen to ignore them, and at times has misinterpreted them in order to continue his fight against what he regards as primitive and unchristian ideas — 'Satan winning a battle against God'. It is my job as a sociologist to investigate and encourage others to investigate all puzzling aspects of social life everywhere.

## A LAST WORD

T. J. MAFICO

This debate on witchcraft has a long history. It began in 1967 when Prof. Chavunduka convinced his Sociology students, of whom I was a member, that belief in witchcraft was nothing but a myth. He added that the only value to society of witchcraft beliefs lay in their social functions. His position then agreed with the views held by reputable authorities on witchcraft. Chavunduka's complete reversal of what was a sound academic stance has prompted several debates between the two of us, including one which was televised on the ZBC television programme, 'Forum'. This academic exercise should, therefore, be viewed as a 'quarrel' between a teacher and his former student on a subject of current importance and relevance to Africans and other peoples of the world where witchcraft beliefs are rampant.

The present debate has served a very useful purpose. It has enabled Chavunduka to clarify his position on beliefs in witchcraft. Whereas his inaugural lecture appeared to me to be muddled and full of self-contradictions, his rejoinder to my paper is very clear. I am now only summarizing significant points the current debate has established.

Chavunduka now categorically states that in his inaugural lecture his aim was to criticize some aspects of the Witchcraft Suppression Act of Zimbabwe. He then supported his critique by raising 'the possibility that witchcraft, or at least certain types of it, may exist' (p. 131). According to this statement, Chavunduka does not believe in the existence of witchcraft, but is noticing a dichotomy between the traditional courts which try 'witches' and the formal courts which punish those who charge others of witchcraft. One would therefore assume that Chavunduka has not deviated from the position he taught us in 1967 but is only shifting areas of research. This is a laudable academic exercise. However, when one re-examines this assumption in the light of the television debate and the general position emerging out of the inaugural lecture, one is only more confused by Chavunduka's position than convinced.

Chavunduka now clearly states that his main criticism of the Witchcraft Suppression Act is its failure to distinguish between witchcraft and sorcery. I would like to reply by reiterating that many people who believe in the existence of witches will care less about the distinction as long as both inflict death. This is why the Shona and Ndebele regard a sorcerer or a poisoner as a witch. The only purpose of distinguishing between witchcraft and sorcery, according to Chavunduka, is to show that sorcery in the form of poisoners exists.

Obviously no one would deny that poisoners do exist. Anybody could be a poisoner by choice. If Chavunduka wants to call poisoners sorcerers or witches, I have no problem with that and would like to assure him that even ministers of

religion would make no qualms about that. Furthermore, the Witchcraft Suppression Act would not prosecute anyone for charging another of witchcraft when referring to a poisoner convicted of murder by poisoning. On academic grounds one would still question the appropriateness of the terms 'witch' or 'sorcerer' when referring to poisoning by murderers. But there would be no one who would deny the existence of such killers in any society. Chavunduka's broad definition, though acceptable, would, however, create witches and sorcerers even in countries such as Great Britain and the United States where murderers by poisons and weapons are numerous nowadays.

I agree with Chavunduka that the subject of witchcraft should be a focus of research, particularly in Africa and other parts of the world where witchcraft is claimed to exist. I would suggest, however, that the emphasis should be on how to eradicate beliefs in supernatural witches who claim to practise witchcraft, rather than in trying to establish whether mythical witches are real. On this point, I would agree with Chavunduka that research on witchcraft should no longer be confined to anthropologists and sociologists. This is a noble invitation which should be a challenge to historians, theologians and medical practitioners working in Africa and in other parts of the world where witchcraft beliefs persist. The end result of these diverse researchers, I am inclined to believe, would confirm the futility of belief in supernatural witches. Only when that goal is achieved will Zimbabwe and many other developing countries free themselves from the shackles of witchcraft-phobia which retards the thrust of national development programmes.

It is because of this adverse effect of witchcraft that beliefs in mythical witchcraft must be eradicated before they eradicate our national developmental efforts. This is why countries which hold strongly to beliefs in witchcraft are poor, starving, and generally illiterate.