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# Human Agency and Individual Responsibility

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# **Human Agency and Individual Responsibility**

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## **Introduction**

When it is a good achievement, men people tend to take credit for it. Humans look for glory and honour. When it is a mistake or a breaking of the law, the responsibility is assigned to another person, a combination of circumstances, or spiritual beings. Humans avoid when possible shame or guilt. The social environment we are living now at this beginning of 21st Century is filled evil, troubles and problems that tear down human lives. They experience with pain how things are affecting negatively their lives. In their attempt to make sense of what is happening around them, they particularly search for 'the agent' behind every event that is destroying their lives. They look for the cause, or the causal agent, or the medium of their misfortune that will have to be stopped, if it was possible.

Firstly, when the cause–effect relationship can be established by scientific methods, people look for scientific solutions. That is the raison d'être of sciences and technology. Secondly, there are social factors that affect people's lives. Social sciences search for factors behind social events and look for social solutions to people's problems. The third realm which operates outside the domains of sciences is the spiritual world. It also affects humans for the better or the worse, depending on what they believe in.

The present paper is addressing the challenge Congolese face as they look for the cause behind their troubles, sicknesses or other misfortunes. The cause or the agent behind those troubles or misfortune is often assigned to witchcraft. This paper will prove, using the biblical texts, that people are often themselves the cause of their own misfortune. They are reaping what they sowed. It does not negate the case of sufferings for which the victim is not responsible, and recognizes that we are living in a broken world where life is not always free of sufferings.

The paper looks at some narratives of the Old Testament. Then, it moves to texts in the New Testament; and adds, in the third section, some applications to real experiences in the DRC. It closes with some thoughts for action against witchcraft accusations.

# 1. Human agency in the Old Testament

## Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden

The first narrative in the Bible reveals to us the true nature of humans, in terms of taking or assigning responsibility. God endowed Adam and Eve with a free will. They had the freedom to choose between, obeying God or not by eating or not eating the forbidden fruit. Unfortunately, they made the wrong choice: they eat the fruit. As consequence, they were expelled from the garden and were from now on subjected to death.

Instead of accepting their responsibility, each one started to accuse the other: Adam accuses Eve saying, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." (Genesis 3.12). In man's scapegoating, we can see him assigning a responsibility to his fallen situation for having given him the woman. Eve accuses the snake of having misled her: "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." (Genesis 2.13).

God's judgement established each person's responsibility. So everyone got punished for what he they did. The story of Adam and Eve can be read as an historical event. But it can also be read paradigmatically as an explanation of all humans' behaviour. In this second perspective, it explains scapegoating as it happens in our relationship today.

## Lot chose to live in Sodom

When the flock of Abraham and his nephew Lot increased considerably, conflicts arose between their shepherds. So Abraham decided that for the sake of peace, they should parted ways company. He gave him the choice to go graze his flock where he wanted. Lot chose Sodom. From the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we know that they were evil cities.

As a consequence of the wrong choice Lot made, he was taken once as a captive. Abraham rescued him. Then he lost all his properties during the destruction of the two cities.

While running away from Sodom for safety, the wife disobeyed and looked back. No one else was accused, she suffered the consequence as responsible for her failure to stick to the strict order gave to them. Her punishment was to become a pillar of salt.

## Sarah (Sarai) gives her slave-girl to Abraham as wife

When Sarah was unable to conceive, she decided to give her slave-girl Hagar to Abraham. Culturally, a child born from a slave-girl with the husband of the mistress belonged to her mistress. Sarah had the choice not to give Hagar to Abraham, though it was 'culturally tolerated'. That choice brought more problems to their family life. Ishmael was born and Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress (Genesis 16.4). There arose a conflict between the two women.

By looking with contempt on her mistress, Hagar caused Sarah (Sarai) to be jealous and to send her away with her child. The child was innocent and the angel came to rescued him. But, Hagar was guilty of looking to on her mistress with contempt. So, the angels told her, "Return to your mistress and submit." (16.9). She did that and could continue to live in Abraham's household.

Though in African societies we may not have a slave-girl, there are customs that allow the husband to take a younger sister-in-law and have children with her if the wife is unable to conceive. Often, the husband is encouraged to take a second wife. Many are the conflicts generated by this sort of humiliation of the first wife. Relationships are not often harmonious between the co-wives.

## **Conflictual relationship between Jacob and his brother Esau**

The narrative of Jacob and his twin brother Esau, the latter appears to be a victim of the brother and the mother's trick. However, there are mistakes that Esau made in the past. The narrator recorded them. First, he sold his birthright for food to Esau (Genesis 25.29–34). Then when he was forty years old, he married Judith (daughter of Beeri the Hittite) and Basemath (daughter of Elon the Hittite). These two foreign women made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26.34–35).

Esau suffered the consequence: Isaac blessed Jacob instead of him. Rebecca's cooperation with Jacob for Esau to lose the blessing could be her revenge for her pains in the hands of Esau's many wives (Genesis 27.1–39).

In this case of Esau, it is probable that he did not establish a relationship because connection between the misfortune that fell on him and his past behaviour. Social factors in our lives are so complex and intertwined that it takes time and meticulous thinking to entangle the cause–effect relationship. Humans tend to look for an immediate causality. The one with whom they do not have good relations at that time tends to be the first choice for the agent of the misfortune.

## **Joseph's brothers sold him to Egypt**

Many days after Joseph's brothers had sold him, they met again in Egypt. Joseph was then in position of power to take revenge and punish them for what they did. But he chose to forgive them.

However, they had recognized the wrong they did to their brother. They said to one another,

"Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us."

Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood." (Genesis 42.21).

Contrary to his brothers, Joseph made good decisions. He did not let himself to be enslaved by past events. The forgiveness of his brothers brought more peace and reconciliation within the family. His wise managerial decisions during the years of abundance in Egypt saved Egypt in the years of famine. The author insinuates God's intervention in the interpretation of dreams (Genesis 40.8). But Joseph is the agent who made the good decisions.

## **Moses was saved by his mother**

Other Hebrew mothers lost their children whom the new king wanted thrown in the river Nile; they did not think of ways to save them (Exodus 1.15–21). But Moses' mother did not give up her

hope to save her child. She conceived a risky plan (Exodus 2.1–10). While other women were helpless, she acted differently and got what she wanted: the survival of her son.

There are stories about people who did the impossible to save their beloved ones during the 1997–2010 wars in DRC. Others saw death coming and let it take them. This does not mean that everyone who tried to save himself or their family members or friends were successful. The point is never to give up in trying making good choices. The outcomes belong to destiny.

## **Choosing despair or hope**

(Numbers 13.1–33)

As they approached the Promised Land, Moses sent twelve spies to assess the land. They accomplished their mission. The reports they gave Moses about the same reality observed when they got back reveal a difference between two types of human beings. Some surrender to fear and disillusion; others take their destiny in their hand and see opportunity.

Ten of them said:

“We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there... We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we ...and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

Joshua and Caleb gave a different report of the same things they saw, and said; “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” (Numbers 13.27–33).

It is not the events or the realities that determine what a human can do or not do, but it is the power that lies in him. Rather than focusing on the negative, two decided to look to the positive, the opportunity to conquer the Promised Land.

Afro-pessimism, be it at the national level or the individual, is the inability to focus on solutions, trusting that we are the agent of change and improvement. Afro-optimism would be the belief that man is the agent of his destiny in the limits of his potentials God endowed him with. It is the conviction that man is ‘agent’ not a being at the mercy of circumstances, world super-powers, curses or evil spirits. It is refusing to say, ‘it happens to us like that since our forefathers;’ ‘our family is cursed, there is nothing to do come for stopping poverty, sickness, failure in business in our family,’ etc. This is the discourse heard in some communities.

## **Israelites to choose blessings or curses**

The last message of Moses is contained in a set of blessings or curses. Blessings will come if the Israelites obey God’s commands. Curses will fall upon them if they choose to disobey. He said explicitly,

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today ...then you shall live, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But

if your heart turns away and you do not hear ...you shall perish" (Deuteronomy 30.11–20).

This statement is paradigmatic for interpreting events that will happen to Israelites in their entire history, be it when they will be ruled by judges or by kings. The nation of Israel will suffer in the hands of other nations, when they disobey to God. They will enjoy peace and prosperity when they keep the commandments of the Lord.

The culmination of this warning occurs with the exile. They were deported to Babylon for their disobedience to the Law of God. The prophets foretold that punishment. And Israelites confessed that they went to exile because of their own sins. They did not blame anyone else; they took the responsibility of their wrong doings. They confessed their sins, then God forgave them and restored them.

Such experience is both communal and individual. The King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah (2 Samuel 11.1–13) and had him killed (2 Samuel 11.14–26). God got angry and sent a disease that killed the child that Uriah's wife bore to David (2 Samuel 12.15). David did not accuse anyone else. He confessed his sins, when he said,

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment."

The Old Testament is full of stories about people who went against the Law of the Lord and were punished with diseases, death, or other misfortune. Some of them are Eli's wicked sons (1 Samuel 2.12–17) and King Saul who disobeyed God by offering sacrifice himself instead of Samuel and by sparing the King of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15.1–9). God chose David to replace him.

## Misfortune on righteous people

Misfortune also happened to righteous people. The reason may be known like in the case of Job. He suffered without having committed a sin. His children died without committing sins. But Job did not accuse anyone else for his misfortune; on the contrary he asked himself what he had done to deserve such pain. His friends assumed that he must have done something wrong.

Anne, the wife of Elikanah, was without a child before Samuel came in her life. The narrator does not tell us why she did not have a child. Actually, many righteous women in the Bible did not have a child before miracles happened. It was the case of Sarah, Rachel, and Elisabeth in the New Testament. No one was accused for their barrenness. It simply happened.

## Wisdom in the choice to fear the Lord

In the wisdom literature, narratives give way to proverbs that highlight the consequences of human deeds good or bad. The call is to follow the way of wisdom that lies in the fear of the Lord. The condition to be happy is to follow the law. All the areas of life are covered: choosing (good or bad) friends, sexual life, laziness, etc. If one chooses wisdom in the keeping the law of the Lord, he will be happy; if he behaves foolishly, that is against the way of the Lord, then he will face consequences.

## 2. Human agency in the New Testament

### The synoptic Gospels

In the synoptic Gospels, many cases of healing by Jesus are narrated. He healed people who suffered of many different diseases. However, in most cases, the narrators did not mention the causes of their misfortune. It could be that in some cases, human knowledge of that time could simply not explain it, like the case previously mentioned of Elizabeth and Zechariah. They were righteous people. The misfortune of barrenness fell on them. It was not the result of a sin, or an evil act from any human being or spiritual being. It was simply a fact. Generally speaking, seeking the cause of a sickness or a misfortune was not Jesus' preoccupation.

When people raised the tragedy of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, Jesus rebuked them with these words: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (Luke 13.1–2). The second tragedy was that of eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. He then asked, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Luke 13.4–5). In both cases, we see Jesus discouraging them from trying to pin down the cause of the tragedies.

There are few exceptional cases where some causes are given. On a Sabbath day, Jesus healed a crippled woman. To the leader of the synagogue who protested because he had healed the woman on a Sabbath day, Jesus responded with a question, "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13.16).

In another occasion (John 5.1–18), Jesus healed beside the pool of Beth-Zatha a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years. He was healed and went away. Later Jesus found him in the Temple and told him: "Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you." (John 5.11). Jesus implies here that sin could be the cause of an illness.

In other cases, the cause behind sufferings or misfortune happens no because of the sufferer's sin, but God allows it to happen. Lazarus was very sick, about to die. His sisters informed Jesus about his sickness. Then, Jesus said: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." (John 11.4). No one has sinned. But God allowed things to happen so that He may prove to humans that He is above human calamities. When the news of Lazarus' death comes to Jesus and his disciples, he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." (John 11.14–15).

God again allowed a man to suffer of blindness since his birth. The disciples of Jesus, thinking in the sin-punishment paradigm, asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." (John 9.2–3).

## Acts

In the Acts and the Epistles, the diversity of the causes of sufferings, death or other misfortune re-emerges. People suffer because of their sins, for unknown reasons by humans, and (though strange it may sound) for God's glory.

After the Holy Spirit has come down on the apostles, they were empowered to heal as well. When Peter and John went to the Temple, they met a lame man whom Peter heals (Acts 3.1–7). No cause is given to his sickness.

But there are other stories in which 'human agency' is clearly established. Ananias and his wife Sapphira died because of their own sin of lie lying (Acts 5.1–10). They lied deliberately. They had the choice to tell the truth about what they had done. Peter told him:

"Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" (Acts 5.4)!

In the third case, misfortune can happen to people or Christians, not because they may have done something wrong, but because of their faith, the truth they are telling, the evil social behaviours they are condemning, etc. It is a case of persecution and martyrdom. It occurred to Stephen, James, Paul and many others not mentioned in the Bible but recorded in the history of the church.

## Epistles

In the Epistles, there are sections that highlight human responsibility in misfortunes that fall on them. Paul warned Corinthians about taking the Holy Communion without examining themselves (1 Corinthians 11.30). As consequences of their behaviour, many became sick.

Paul's teachings in the book of Galatians (6.1–10) deal with how Christians ought to behave. Paul says,

"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up." (Galatians 6.7–9).

This metaphor summarizes the responsibility Christians bear in their Christian life in shaping their future by the way they live today.

Concerning the sufferings, the epistles also teach us that not all sufferings are the results of our sins. God sometimes allow us to suffer in order to make us grow or suffer like Christ and for his cause. As Paul says,

"We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5.2–5).

See also: Romans 8.18; 2 Corinthians 1.6, Philippians 3.10, Colossians 1.24.

So there is no need to look for the author behind those sufferings.

## Conclusion

The Bible establishes human responsibility about negative events that happen in life. However, sometimes, things happen to human beings and the 'agency' behind the misfortune is not known. We live in a broken or sinful world, so evil can fall on human beings. This happens at the individual level as well as at the community or national level.

There is almost no case where the individual misfortune of one human being is attributed to another human being. This is an opportunity for us to now look at some real African life experiences, having in mind the experiences of the Biblical personages.

## 3. Human agency in our African daily experiences

This section of the paper is an emic look at our experiences when it comes to human agency. Because of the risk of too much generalisation that may affect my observations, I will try to stick to cases observed than make general statements.

### Helplessness and powerlessness mentality

Africa has experienced many calamities of different types. Historical events since many centuries and current issues do confirm that. Those abundant negative events in the life of people have created some helplessness and powerlessness mentality. For instance, because some basic services are not being offered to Congolese, I have met people who deliberately drink non-treated water because they have lost truth faith in the REGIDESO (Congolese City Council Water Company). They know they are definitely going to get sick; their children are going to get sick of water diseases. They do not have enough motivation to boil drinking water.

The reason the example of treating drinking water is useful is multiple. First, no one can live without water. Secondly, water diseases infect many families in the DRC, especially young children. Thirdly, those perennial diseases cause many diseases usually fatal. Finally, too many diseases in a family perpetuate poverty because of the medical expenses. By just controlling the quality of water one gives to his or /her family, too much pains and sufferings can be avoided.

In some areas, cholera has become endemic, like on the shores of Lake Albert in Ituri, Oriental Province. The basic action one could take include among others washing one's hands before eating, drinking clean water, going to a proper toilet, etc. Cholera is also endemic in many other areas in different Provinces of DRC. Usually, people who live on the shores of lakes and rivers drink the same water in which they go for nature calls. They know it is non-hygienic, they know they are putting in danger people's health, the public health service is aware of that, but they feel certain helplessness about which actions to take.

Surprising, when diseases hit hard and there are many casualties, we hear discourses about some people accusing other of witchcraft for causing epidemic disease. Yet a basic knowledge of microbiology could avoid such pre-scientific thinking.

## **Responsibility in our choices**

Many families experience malaria as a fatality. They say they cannot afford to buy mosquito nets. That is what they say which is not true, because they choose to buy some items that may not be indispensable. For instance, they can wear expensive clothes, considering their income. They apparently feel helpless. What a choice between protecting one's family and looking nice in public!

However, there are other families who received mosquito nets free of charge, but instead of protecting their children, they sell them, each for five dollars. There is no need to say that malaria kills children more than AIDS. When a child starts to lose blood, that is red cells are being destroyed by malaria germs, then a witch must be sucking or drinking his blood. Let us hope that with the campaign of mosquito nets distribution, attitudes will change.

Wrong choices are not limited there. Secondly, there are some Christians 'filled with the Holy Spirit' (they think) who would choose to take a malaria sick child to a prayer room instead of taking him to the hospital. When such child dies, then we start to look for the witch or evil spirit, 'agent' of the death, because as it is believed in Africa there must be an agent or a reason behind every death (except the death of an old person).

Heart diseases and diabetes are frequent in the Congolese community due to a certain financial prosperity in some portions of the society. They are mainly caused by poor diet. Basic advices include not drinking alcohol, avoiding red meat, and too much sugar or sweet foods. They are people who cannot refrain themselves from eating and drinking these 'good' stuffs. When they die, usually people look for the witch who was jealous of the 'good life' the wealthy man and his family were enjoying. It could also be the members of the family of that person. They came to hate him because he was not sharing his wealth with the family members.

Another area where people make arguable choices is polygamy and family planning.

There are many challenges that come with polygamy. The most pervasive are financial and relational. Not many men in the DRC can afford to support financially two families. Yet, they choose to marry second and third wives. Financial strains are evident. Sooner or later, members of that family start to fight for family resources. Those fights are filled with hatred, jealousy, and sometimes violent conflicts. Witchcraft accusations are at the corner of the street to explain any misfortune or to tarnish the good name of the hated person. Many witchcraft accusations are made among co-wives, or against the child of a co-wife or step-mothers/ or fathers, or against in-laws. An easy way for a woman to get rid of the child born of a previous union is to accuse him or her of witchcraft.

Most of the street children are victims of family rivalries, or simply but very sad, the inability of parents to feed their many children.

Family planning campaigns have never been successful in the DRC. Some educated families have understood the necessity of limiting the numbers of children. When there are too many mouths

to feed, especially when additional children from the extended families are brought in, the best way to reduce the number of children to feed is to accuse some of witchcraft.

Each of the above named wrong choices brings in poverty. Since poverty is a complex issue, it is easy for people to accuse others. People name the government, the politicians, fatalism (bad luck), but also and often witches in the family, in the estates, in the workplaces, etc.

Choices can concern apparently simple decisions that have tragic effects. This example helps to understand how people in the DRC pay less attention to the outcome of some decisions they make. In the DRC, it is against the law to ride a motorcycle without a motorcycle helmet. Very few care about the protection it offers. Many people have died as the result of a motorcycle accident. Then they look for the cause of death somewhere else.

If we had to check how many people wear their seatbelt when driving or seated beside the driver or elsewhere, the percentage of those who care about it would be very small. Some say it holds them tight. Seat-belts were made for the same reason. Many people who have died in car accidents could have been saved if they had used properly their seat-belts. Many of them probably have decided with their mind undisturbed not to wear it. They are definitely responsible for what happened to them. But when a young healthy and handsome young boy does, then it must be, people will say, witchcraft. They argue that he was healthy, polite, he quarrelled with nobody, owned nobody anything, etc. They forget that young people are often careless in driving cars or riding motorcycles.

## 4. Concluding thoughts for action

### Conscientisation for assuming responsibility

Following the examples seen in the Bible, it is time for the church to help Christians face their responsibility. To be created in the image of God means that we are co-creators with God. The consciousness of this reality helps us to think 'what we intend to do' and take responsibility for success or failure.

In case of failure or misfortune that results from our own action, assuming our responsibility contributes to healing our heart pains and prepares the ground for confession, like in the case of David when the child resulting from his adultery with Bath-Sheba died (Psalm 51).

Rejecting the causes of our suffering on someone else is an attempt to run away from our responsibility.

When no one is responsible for one's sufferings, like in the case of Job, it is right to accept one's destiny without falling into pessimism for the future, and resting one's case in the hand of God, and trust him for a better future.

### Witchcraft accusations, signs of irresponsibility

Accusing someone of witchcraft has been the easiest unfair way to scapegoat another person for our failure, misfortune or shame. It is the inability to assume responsibility. It is the easiest way because it cannot be proved by A + B. On the other side, Congolese believe so much in witchcraft

that it can be the cause for any misfortune or failure: all types of death (through sickness, car accident, bicycle accident, etc), sickness, failure in an exam, unemployment, poverty, barrenness, losing elections, etc.

Witchcraft accusations are ways of creating innocent victims. Creating victims is also an evil act that can have evil consequences, following the cause–effect law. Victims suffer and their sufferings deprive the community of its joy and people who could have contributed positively to the life of the community.

Frustrations arise on the side of people related to the victims. If the accusations spread in the community, every member becomes potential victim. Often, the best way to survive is to accuse first. The spiral of accusations goes on, with their trauma.

## **Need of stopping witchcraft accusations and being pro-active in life**

Stopping accusations is the first step towards successfully dealing with our failure to bring up our children. Because adults precede children in life, it is logical that they may be the agents of current happenings, rather than children who have joined them. To accuse them the children for what is happening now is somehow anachronistic.

Instead of accusing, the best action to take to deal with the real cause of misfortune and find appropriate solutions. Accusations do not solve problems, they create more. Humans are masters of their destiny; if only they care for what they believe sincerely, they think rightly, and they do conscientiously.

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**Dr. Andy A. Alo**, August 2014

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