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# Human Agency and Individual Responsibility

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**Dr. Andy Anguandia Alo**, Associate Professor at Shalom University of Bunia and the Teacher Training College of Aru.

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## Introduction

When we've achieved something good, we tend to take the credit for it, don't we? People look for glory and honour. But when a mistake has been made or the law broken, we blame someone else, circumstances or even spiritual beings. We like to avoid guilt and shame.

In their attempt to make sense of what is happening around them, people search for the agent behind every event that is destroying their lives.

First, we look for scientific solutions to our problems. Second, there are always social factors that affect people's lives. And finally, there is a spiritual realm that is beyond both of these.

I'd like to look at the challenge facing the Congolese people as they look for the causes behind their current troubles. The cause is often assigned to witchcraft. But I'd like to suggest that people themselves are often the cause of their own misfortune. Sadly, they are reaping what they sowed.

## Human agency in the Old Testament

The first story in the Bible reveals humans' true nature, in terms of assigning the blame elsewhere. God endowed Adam and Eve with free will. They had the freedom to choose between obeying God or not by eating the forbidden fruit. Unfortunately, they made the wrong choice and ate the fruit. As a result, they were expelled from the garden and from then on were subject to death.

Instead of accepting their responsibility, they accused each other and the serpent (Genesis 2:13 and 3:12).

God's judgement established each person's responsibility. They were punished for what they did.

The story can be seen as an explanation of all human beings' behaviour. It shows how we make scapegoats of others even today.

Also in the Old Testament, when Sarah was unable to conceive a child, she gave her slave girl Hagar to Abraham. Culturally, a child born from a slave girl would belong to her mistress. Sarah had the choice not to do this, though it was culturally tolerated. But the choice brought more problems to their family life (Genesis 16:4). Ishamel was born and Hagar 'looked with contempt on her mistress'. There arose a conflict between the two women.

Today, in Africa, a husband is often encouraged to take a second wife. Many are the conflicts that arise from the humiliation of the first wife that naturally follows from this.

## Choosing despair or hope (Numbers 13:1-33)

As they approached the Promised Land, Moses sent 12 spies to assess the land. Their reports show the differences between people. Some surrender to fear and disillusion. Others take their destiny in their hands and see an opportunity.

It's not the events or realities that determine what a person can do or not, but it is the power that lies within them. Rather than focusing on the negative, two of Moses' spies decided to look at the positive: the opportunity to conquer the Promised Land.

Afro-pessimism, be it at the national or individual level, is the inability to focus on solutions. It is the unwillingness to trust that we are the agent of change and improvement.

Afro-optimism, conversely, would be the belief that humans are the agent of their destiny within the limits of the potential with which God has endowed them. It is the conviction that man is the agent of change, not a being at the mercy of circumstances, world super-powers, curses or evil spirits. It is refusing to say, 'It's happened like this since our forefathers' time. Our family is cursed. There is no way to stop the poverty, sickness and business failure that we experience.'

The book of Proverbs highlights many examples of the consequences of human action, whether good or bad.

## Human agency in the New Testament

In the Gospels, many cases of healing by Jesus are narrated. He healed people who suffered from many different diseases. But, in most cases, the narrators don't mention the cause of their misfortune. Generally speaking, seeking the cause of a sickness or misfortune was not Jesus' preoccupation.

In the Epistles there are sections that highlight human responsibility for the misfortunes that have fallen upon them. Paul warns the Corinthians about taking Holy Communion without

examining themselves (1 Corinthians 11:30). As a consequence of their behaviour, many became sick.

In Galatians (6:10) he summarises the responsibility Christians bear for shaping their future by the way they live today.

And finally, in Romans (5:2–5) Paul says that not all our sufferings are the result of sin. God, he says, sometimes allows us to suffer in order to make us grow more like Christ, or for His cause. So, he implies, there is no need to look for the author behind those sufferings.

The Bible establishes human responsibility about negative events that happen in life. However, sometimes things happen to us and the agency behind the misfortune is not known. We live in a broken world, so evil and suffering can happen to any of us, both individually and nationally.

## Human agency in our African daily experiences

Africa has experienced many calamities of different types. And that's led to a sense of helplessness and powerlessness in some people. For instance, because some basic services are not offered to the Congolese people, I've met those who deliberately drink untreated water because they have lost faith in the Congolese City Council Water Company (REGIDESO). They know they will get sick from the water, but they don't have enough motivation to boil drinking water.

No-one can live without water. Water-borne diseases affect many people in the DRC, especially children. Sadly, these can be fatal. This can perpetuate poverty in a family because of medical expenses. So, by just controlling the quality of water one gives to one's family, a great deal of pain and suffering could be avoided.

Yet, when diseases hit we often hear allegations of witchcraft as the root cause of the problem. But a basic knowledge of microbiology could avoid the problem altogether.

Equally, many families have received free mosquito nets to protect them and their children. But instead of using them, they sell them for five dollars. Malaria kills more children than AIDS. Yet, when a child gets malaria, people often say that a witch must be sucking their blood. Let us hope that as distribution of mosquito nets continues, attitudes will change.

Also, 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 two families. Yet, they choose to marry second and third wives. Financial strains are evident. Sooner or later family members start to fight for 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 their children or relatives. An easy way for a woman to get rid of the child born to a previous wife, is to accuse the mother of witchcraft.

## A plan of action

Following the examples seen in the Bible, it's time for the Church in Africa to help Christians to face their own responsibilities. 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 about what we intend to do and to take responsibility for our successes or failures.

In case of failure or misfortune, assuming our own responsibility contributes to healing our heart pains and prepares the ground for confession.

Rejecting the causes of our suffering and blaming someone else means we're running away from our own responsibilities.

When no-one is responsible for our suffering, as in the biblical story of Job, it's right to accept one's destiny without falling into pessimism for the future. We can rest our case in the hand of God, and trusting him for a better future.

## Witchcraft accusations and irresponsibility

So, accusing someone of witchcraft has been an easy, but unfair, way to scapegoat other people for our own failures, misfortunes or shame. It represents the inability to assume responsibility.

Congolese people believe so much in witchcraft that it can be said to be the cause for any misfortune or failure: death, sickness, failure, unemployment, poverty, childlessness and even losing elections.

Witchcraft accusations create innocent victims. They are an act that can have consequences. Victims suffer and this deprives the community of its joy and people who could have contributed positively to the life of the area.

Frustrations arise on the side of relations of the victims. If the accusations spread in the community, then every member potentially becomes a victim. In the end the best way to survive is to accuse first. So a spiral of accusation and suffering is perpetuated.

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

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for the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

précis of an Action Forum theological paper – Kinshasa, D.R.Congo, August 2014

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edition 2017.0721 EN – [stop-cwa.org](http://stop-cwa.org)