



The Socio-Economic Context of Witchcraft Accusations

Dr Timothy D Stabell, Coordinator of Intercultural Studies Programme at the Briercrest College and Seminary in Canada, and Senior Lecturer at the University of Bunia and the Bilingual Christian University of the Congo in the D.R.Congo.

Introduction

Historians, anthropologists and sociologists have often observed a link between the socio- and politico-economic conditions of a society and the ideas that people hold about witchcraft.

Social sciences can help us better understand politico-economic systems, cultural beliefs and the conditions under which a society is more prone to an increase in the number of false accusations.

In May 2003 I returned to Beni in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo after an absence of seven years. I noticed that there was a real hope for improvement in the political and economic state of the country after much suffering because of the war. But that hope was mixed with uncertainty. Would peace last? During my visit I had two conversations that exemplified two differing points of view.

First, I ran into an old friend. I told him that I'd noticed that there was a lot of building work going on, and that there were far more motorbike taxis than when I was last here. He said, "My friend, there are some people who don't want the war to end. These houses are built with the blood of the Congolese people".

On a second occasion another friend – a local minister – responded to my question saying, "Some say that these motorbike taxis come from the powers of darkness".

The businessman explained things in terms of the visible socio and politico-economic realities of the time. The young pastor referred to a form of witchcraft. Both however, refer to the unjust exploitation of others, to a kind of robbery or misappropriation, even to murder.

The link between social injustice and witchcraft

Anthropologists and historians have often noted a link between oppressive socio- or politico-economic conditions and experiences of witchcraft throughout history. In England in the 17th century society was undergoing an important socio-economic transformation known as the enclosure movement.

Before these changes people depended on common land to graze their animals and cultivate crops. But as wool became more profitable, the rich enclosed the pastureland for their flocks and the poor became poorer.

At the same time there was an increased number of people accused of witchcraft. Mostly they came from the class that had lost its right to the land and had to beg. The rich had grown weary of those who were begging from them and began to accuse them of witchcraft. Suspicions of witchcraft grew in this atmosphere of social tension.

The African slave trade

The slave trade also contributed to an increase in the number of Africans being accused of witchcraft. Before the 16th century, witchcraft did not have any great importance or social prominence. However, 100 years later, when the trade in black Africans was at its height, witchcraft accusations multiplied. It often happened that people were being accused of being witches so that they could be sold into slavery. There was a financial motive for accusing them of witchcraft. So once again, we can see a link between an oppressive politico-economic system and an increase in witchcraft accusations.

New forms of witchcraft

Here in Africa for some time a number of new forms of witchcraft have made their appearance. The idea that the acquisition of wealth might be the result of a contract between an individual and evil spirits who offer riches in exchange for the sacrifice of a family member was not always so popular. It's a relatively new view, linked to the arrival in Africa of capitalism, a system under which some people get rich much more quickly than others. Tensions arise leading to gossip about witchcraft.

The phenomenon of child witches is also relatively new. Once again, many observers believe that there is a correlation between this phenomenon and other realities in society.

In the DRC, alongside war and catastrophic social, political and economic change, we find extreme poverty and urbanisation weakening traditional family structures. Children therefore have to negotiate life in households that are already troubled.

In such a context, conflicts easily arise. Childhood meanwhile, is a time when one is psychologically fragile. Children need love and affection. But living in an environment which is already embroiled in antagonism and jealousy, where the child is not given the tenderness and understanding they need, can lead to negative behaviour.

Even children in peaceful households can go through stages of development during which they display negative behaviour. How much more so for children in households suffering from poverty, unemployment, divorce, conflict and so on?

I do not believe that we should completely deny the existence of witchcraft. The Bible does not do so, although it attributes far less importance to it and defines it differently from that which we see here in Africa. However, even while accepting the reality of occult powers of witchcraft, we should also consider the perspectives of social sciences. They can shed light on our subject and help us better understand both why the Congolese people suffer and why they are willing to accuse or suspect those around them of witchcraft, even children in their own households.

We must oppose as much as possible the injustices that produce such bitterness. Such accusations are much less likely to occur in a social context where people are actively seeking to relate to one another with love and biblical justice. I believe that, according to the Bible, the Church was created – among other things – for this purpose.

Biblical perspectives on socio- and politico-economic systems

The Bible recognises the realities of oppression and injustice in human societies. According to biblical doctrine, human beings, sinners that we are, often seek to gain political and economic power for ourselves in selfish ways and in order to do this, we are all too willing to exploit and crush our neighbours. The Lord, however, asks his people to pursue justice in their social relationships.

The story of God delivering his people from Egypt shows this. But it's worth also looking at prophets such as Micah too.

The Church as a place of justice

Matthew 5 talks about the people of God hungering and thirsting after justice. So, the Church should be a place where we work for social justice. The members of the early Church sold their houses and fields to ensure the survival of the widows among them (Acts 2:42-47).

When Jesus said that we should store up treasures in heaven instead of on earth (Matthew 6:19) he was speaking of our duty towards the poor and the weak.

So the Church should be an alternative society where love prevails, without regard for social status. The poor man should be honoured as much as the businessman (James 2:1-9). We must have the same concern for the weak as the strong.

According to Jesus, the politics of the Kingdom of God are an alternative politics – different from the world's in both their aims and in their way of acting. We are to serve others, especially those who are marginalised. And who is potentially more marginalised than children?

So Jesus calls us to serve our children and to sacrifice ourselves in their defence in order to give them the protection they need in a society so characterised by injustice, corruption and the misappropriation of wealth (Mark 9:36).

Jesus calls us to be an alternative society where we help one another to blossom and flourish so as to realise our full God-given potential as creatures made in His image.

I truly believe that where the Church, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit, strives for justice, there will be no room for accusations against children or against other people who are marginalised by society, but who are precious both to God and to His people.

for the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

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