The Impact of Beliefs in Witchcraft and Magic on Attitudes towards Sustainable Agricultural Productivity in Gucha District, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of beliefs in witchcraft and magic on attitudes towards sustainable agricultural productivity in Africa based on field study findings in a rural District in Kenya, Gucha. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate that in Africa, agricultural problems are not explained only by objective scientific factors such as climate, quality of soils and inputs but also invisible human factors such as belief in witchcraft and magic. The study was done using qualitative and quantitative research designs on a purposively and randomly sampled population of 300 respondents. The discussions are informed by the psycho-analytic theory as initially fathered by Freud and Jung (1859-1939) and (1875-1961) respectively and as employed by recent students such as Faber (1994) and Michele (1999). The findings suggest that belief in witchcraft and magic play significant roles in explaining declining agricultural productivity such as crop failure and milk production and death of domestic dairy stock. It is argued in the paper that although the meaning of these concepts is not particularly clear at the rational level, they play ideological and epistemological roles such as explaining and rationalizing fate for example: poverty and disease. The beliefs are sustained by among other factors: scientific ignorance, poverty, culture and negligence on part of Government. The paper concludes that belief in magic and witchcraft negatively affects attitudes towards sustainable agricultural productivity and urges government and other stakeholders in the enhancement of agricultural productivity to intervene and avail to peasant farmers in rural Africa the badly needed scientific agricultural knowledge to help improve agricultural productivity.

Keywords: Witchcraft, Magic, Psycho-analysis, agricultural productivity

INTRODUCTION

‘In her book Witchcraft in Africa, Bloomhill tells the story of a European farmer in Rhodesia who lived next door to another European farmer. Both were unmarried. The man proposed to the woman and was accepted. She unexpectedly visited him one evening and was infuriated to discover that he was having love affairs with his African maid. She burst out in fury and calling the maid a filthy black bitch, broke off the engagement never wishing to see him again. The next day the woman saw a black bitch and a white ram on her farm: and a few moments later, her dog was dead, as if bitten by a snake. Two days later, the same black bitch and a white ram entered her cattle kraal; and a few moments later, her finest jersey cow was dying, with the front legs broken off. Disaster after disaster came upon this woman farmer, and every time it occurred after she had seen a black bitch and a white ram. Finally she sent for an expert African’ medicine’ man. He prepared the right medicine and, taking her with him, secretly followed the two animals the next afternoon. The animals dived into a river near by, emerged and went to the home of the European farmer. The woman and the medicine man followed them there and found them dripping water. But they were no longer animals; they were the farmer and his African maid; the medicine man gave them his medicine from a
horn, and cured them from the power to change into animals. This also ended the disasters of
the woman white farmer’ (Mbiti, 1969, 196).

This story is relevant to the argument in this paper. There would be no point belaboring on
the fact that agriculture is the backbone of the Kenyan economy in terms of foreign exchange
earnings, food security and employment creation. Conventionally, there are objectively
known factors that affect sustainable agricultural productivity which include climate, capital
(including land, machinery and inputs), Market for the produce, technology and soil, among
others. The above narrative by Bloomhill as cited by Mbiti (1969) does not feature anywhere
yet in African social cultural context, the narrative constitutes reality regardless of whether or
not it is scientifically objective.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate, on the basis of research findings in Gucha
District, that in Africa, sustainable agricultural productivity is not only affected by
conventional factors discussed above but also social cultural factors and in this case beliefs in
witchcraft and magic.

**Theory**

The analysis of the impact of beliefs in witchcraft on attitudes to sustainable agricultural
productivity in Gucha district is based on the psycho-analytic theory as fathered by Sigmund
Freud (1859-1939) and Carl Gutav Jung (1875-1961). This theory has been lately employed
by Faber (1994) to explain why individuals join cults in contemporary western society and
Michele (1999) who explained witchcraft and Sorcery in terms of unresolved childhood fears
and images of the destructive father. This theory has been applied in understanding the
attitudes of residents of Gucha district to sustainable agricultural productivity. Based on this
theory, the findings which shall be discussed shortly suggest that witchcraft and magical
beliefs are childhood inheritances passed on from generation to generation because of their
critical role in explaining evil and the mysteries of life including and not limited to declining
agricultural productivity. This paper understands witchcraft as belief in an invisible non
rational force or power which has immense influence in the life of the community; which
understanding puts witchcraft within the purview of religion (Ellis and Ter Haar: 2004). Equally,
this study understands magic as belief and use of invisible and non-rational force or
power in material forms to influence the cause of nature (Gehman, 2002 and Mbiti, 1969).

**METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of field data collection in respect of this study, both qualitative and
quantitative research techniques were adopted selectively. Questionnaire and interview
schedules were administered on snowballed and purposively selected sample population of
300 adults, with each one of the six administrative divisions of the district represented by 50
adults. Special significance was given to their demographic characteristics such as age,
school education, social economic status, occupation, residence and gender. This mixed
methodology gave voice to all segments of the population under study.

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1. The six administrative divisions are abbreviated as follows in the text; Sta- Sameta, Nche-Nyamache, Ombo-Ogembo,
Nnbe- Nyamarambe, Kaya- Kenyenya and Etgo- Etago.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the phenomena of witchcraft and Magic in Africa has undergone two distinctive intellectual phases namely; colonial and postcolonial phases. The colonial phase is made up of works by western anthropologists (ethnologists) who doubled as travelers and missionaries. They were mainly Darwinists in the sense that they were propagating the theory of evolution which had assumed monumental popularity in the western society having been proposed earlier on by a British scientist named Sir Charles Darwin in a book, *On the Origin of Species*. They believed that witchcraft and magic represented the first stage in the evolution of religion. In fact they went ahead and studied witchcraft and magic as part of ‘primitive’ African religion. This phase is represented by Frazer (1922), Smith (1923), Pritchard (1937), Malinowski (1948), Parrinder (1958), Debrunner (1963), Levine (1966), Hobley (1967), among others. Being evolutionists, they perceived witchcraft in particular as transitory, fiction and primitive. Some of them misunderstood the whole concept and either dismissed the idea as an impossibility or as hereditary physical trait or substance lodged somewhere in the bodies of witches and wizards then transmitted biologically from mother to daughter and from father to son. One thing these studies have in common is their failure to address the functional significance of beliefs in witchcraft and magic in an African community and especially as instruments of dealing with life’s challenges including those experienced by peasant farmers in agriculture.

The second phase of studies on witchcraft in Africa is represented mainly by African reactionaries and nationalists. These studies are best represented by Mbitt (1969), p’Biteck (1970 & 10977), Ndeti (1972), Idowu (1973), Bahemuka, (1983), just to name but a few. Generally, these studies were committed to the view that western anthropologists were wrong and ignorant about witchcraft and magic in Africa and especially the view that they were apart of African religion. They were actually opposed to the theory of evolution which they thought was racist (and surely it was) and meant to demean Africans. In the process however, they were carried away emotionally and made exaggerations here and there. In other words, they lost objectivity in assessing the ramifications of witchcraft and magical beliefs on societal activities including agricultural productivity.

During post colonialism, studies on witchcraft have been dynamic in the sense that approaches have been changing. There are three distinctive phases that have emerged namely; first is the evangelical /theological and pastoral phase, second is the psycho-social and developmental phase and third is psycho-social functional phase. The first one is represented by works such as Gehman (1989 and 2002), Magesa (2006) and Domingue (2000). These studies appreciate beliefs in witchcraft and magic as pastoral challenges to the Church in Africa and argue that the beliefs require informed attention from the Church. The second category, the psycho-social and developmental is represented by Mesaki (1994), Miguel (2005), Onyancha (1989 & 2010), among others. These studies tend to link beliefs in witchcraft and magic in Africa to poverty levels and under-development. Mesaki for example argued that old women were blamed for poverty and social economic problems in sukumaland, Tanzania, and lynched. Tarimo and Onyancha argue that if social economic development is to be achieved in Africa, retrogressive beliefs such as beliefs in witchcraft and magic must be discarded and scientific beliefs and practices be embraced in their places. Taken together, these studies are of the view that beliefs in witchcraft and magic thrive in the context of poverty and scientific ignorance, a view that informs this paper.

Third is the psycho-social functional phase whose leading lights are; Douglas (1971), Swesse (1979), Simpson(1980), Ekosso (2004), Green (2005), (2010), Botchway (2011) and Kareithi (2011), among -others. These studies attempted to res pond in different ways as to why
beliefs in witchcraft and magic in Africa. They seem to be in agreement that these beliefs perform a number of psycho-social functions such as releasing communal tension, explaining mysteries of life, cautioning against defeat and bad luck generally such as in soccer and enforcing moral values that cannot otherwise be enforced legally. This paper is anchored on psycho-social functionalism in interpreting the phenomena of witchcraft and magical beliefs in relation to sustainable agricultural productivity in Gucha district.

**DISCUSSING THE FINDINGS**

Table 1. Responses from each division of Gucha to the question of whether or not they believed witchcraft had any impact on agricultural production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sameta</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogembo</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyamachache</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenyenya</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etago</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nyamarambe</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>257</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 demonstrates the widely held belief that witchcraft impacts on crop production as shown by majority responses.

Table 2. Chi-Square showing the relationship between where the subjects came from and the kind of responses they gave to the question of whether or not witchcraft had impact on agricultural production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Chi-Square</td>
<td>10.234*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Discussion of Tables 1 & 2**

From table 1 above, the distribution of belief in witchcraft in relation to its impact on agriculture is fairly even throughout Gucha District with minimal variations. The reason(s) for the variation can be a subject of conjecture since, to a very large extent; all the divisions have a lot in common. They are rural and poor being with minimal income generating activities. Probably one would rightly suggest that Nyamarambe is more rural and poorer than the rest being at the far south western end of Gucha District. Thus the more rural and poorer a division is the more likely it is for residents to believe that their problems and in this case agricultural production are caused by witchcraft.

According to the chi-square test, Table 2, there is no significant relationship between the division where the subjects came from and the belief that it has an impact on agricultural production since the P-value of 0.69 is greater than critical value of a 0.05.
Impact of Beliefs in witchcraft on Attitudes towards crop Production

The relevant research question required respondents to state ways in which witchcraft affects crops.

Question: In what ways does witchcraft affect crops?

Table 3. Responses from each division of Gucha district to the question about how witchcraft impacts on crop farming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Crop Yields</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crop Failure</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destroys Soil Fertility</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 demonstrates the widely held belief that witchcraft causes low crop yields as indicated by majority responses.

Verbatim Interview

Researcher: Does witchcraft have any impact on crop production in your area?
Mwebi: Yes it has an impact

Researcher: Explain briefly the kind of impact
Mwebi: If a witch and especially one with evil eyes passes by your shamba when the crop is very promising: it will wither away and dry up. Crops may even fail to germinate in spite of sufficient rain.

Researcher: What other ways do witches affect crops or how do they bewitch, exactly?
Mwebi: There are several ways. A part from use of evil eyes, other witches bury food substances or dead reptiles at the farms. Once treated that way, such a farm may not produce as it should.

Researcher: Have your crops ever been bewitched?
Mwebi: Yes. My tomato crop has always failed. There is one man who does not want me to progress. He hates tomatoes and whenever he passes by when the crop is sprouting and putting on flowers, it starts to wither and finally fail. I have since given up growing tomatoes.

Further Discussion of Table 3

From table 3, we infer that there is a belief by the majority of the people that witchcraft causes low crop yields or that witchcraft interferes with crop production. These beliefs seem to be fairly evenly distributed across all divisions of Gucha district with minimal variations.

Our respondent Oyar (OI) described this situation as follows: “farms are bewitched through the burial of ugali (maize meal), dead reptiles such as frogs, (Ebioto sing: egoto) lizards (chinsagara sing: ensagara), chameleons (chinyambu sing: enyambu) along with some seeds and medicines. Consequently, crops may fail year after year and the farmer is finally discouraged and may give up. Witchcraft causes stunted growth in crops”.

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The above statement represents popular belief across Gucha District. There is sufficient reason to believe that it could be having a negative impact in terms of attitudes to crop production, a phenomenon that would require further investigation.

The problem is its validity especially since the claims could not be verified objectively. What could be objective here perhaps is the one that people bury certain substances on shambas (farms) for their own reasons. It could objectively be difficult, from a scientific point of view, to see a connection between these substances and crop failure. Herein lays the contradiction between witchcraft and magic on the one hand and Science on the other. In an environment whereby scientific thinking is absent, this belief is likely to create anxieties that would be affecting agricultural production. From the psychological and anthropological perspectives, the burials of these dead reptiles at the farms constitute symbolic communication. Since ugali (cooked maize meal) is considered dead, the farm is “killed” and all that is on it including the owner of the farm. “Killing” the farm here symbolically means that it can no longer produce food crops.

Our analysis is that the belief could be based on ignorance and especially the factors that affect crop production such as sufficient supply of rainfall, soil fertility and even having the right seeds. In Gucha District, although rain is sufficient round the year, soil fertility is highly in doubt. The average farms are small and have been farmed throughout the year, under the same crop causing soil exhaustion. This is one fact farmers do not take into account as they resort to belief in witchcraft.

Obviously, this belief has a negative psychological impact in terms of people’s disposition and response to crop production challenges. Their responses could be inhibiting the real problems which are basically natural and would require scientific redress rather than magic.

Impact of Beliefs in witchcraft on Attitudes towards Livestock Farming

The relevant research question required respondents to state ways in which witchcraft affected livestock farming in their areas. Question: In what ways does witchcraft impact on livestock farming?

Table 4. Responses from each division of Gucha District to the question about how witchcraft affects livestock farming

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>Sta</th>
<th>Ombo</th>
<th>Knya</th>
<th>Nche</th>
<th>Nmbe</th>
<th>Ego</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kills Exotic Cows</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>205 (68.33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Milk Yields</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>101 (33.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scare Farmers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>95 (31.67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infertility in Cows</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9 (3%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 demonstrates the popular belief that witchcraft kills exotic cows.

Verbatim Interview

Researcher: Do witches bewitch livestock?

Orenge: Yes they do.
Researcher: How exactly do they do it?
Orenge: They can do it by merely looking at the cow. If it is in calf, it will abort. Some milk animals at night or where they are grazing and the milk udder dries up. They may also feed them with poisonous substances such as polythene papers or even nails to induce gradual death.

Researcher: Mr. Orenge, do you have a personal experience of bewitching of your own animals?
Orenge: Yes. They have bewitched my three exotic cows.

Researcher: How do you prove witchcraft in this regard?
Orenge: When the animals died, we opened the stomachs and discovered polythene papers, nails and other indigestible substances. We confirmed our suspicions to be right.

Further Discussion of Table 4

According to table 4, it is apparent that witchcraft has some negative psychological impact on attitudes to livestock production as evidenced throughout Gucha district. More interesting is that the villagers have a way of confirming their beliefs, notably: “the presence of strange substances in the stomachs of their dead cows”.

The impression created is that they are objectives, in the scientific sense. However, their belief was contradicted by the explanation given by a real scientist, Dr. Daniel Ayienda (OI). He explained this situation as follows;

When cows do not have enough supply of mineral salts, they can scavenge and eat anything including polythene papers and nails. These substances have iron minerals which their bodies require.

Ayienda explained further that, “the belief that anybody can force an animal to eat and swallow any solid substances is untenable. It is simply impossible” Ayienda’s comments are held by this study as logical. Having said that, the conclusion is that the belief here is based on ignorance and this attitude may be psychologically unfavorable to livestock development.

Impact of Beliefs in witchcraft on Attitude to Crop and Livestock Problems

The research question required respondents to tick accordingly the below alternatives about what farmers do when confronted by problems of crop failure and animal diseases.

Question: What do farmers in your area do when confronted by problems of crop failure and animal diseases?

- a. They consult diviners and magicians
- b. They consult Agricultural officers
- c. They consult fellow farmers
- d. None of the above
- e. All of the above.
Table 5. Response to the question about what farmers do when confronted by problems of crop failure and animal diseases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Farmers Do</th>
<th>Division</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult div/magicians</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult Agric. Officers</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult fellow farmers</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 shows that farmers mostly consult magicians to solve crop and animal diseases.

Further Discussion of Table 5

Table 5 above illustrates that due to the underlying beliefs in witchcraft, farmers consult diviners and magicians whenever they experience problems. Farmers who operate in uniquely rural environment and poor, away from the world of modern technology, which in Gucha District is the privilege of the urban elite, are more likely to resort to diviners and medicine men to solve their farming problems. A wrong diagnosis to a problem leads to a wrong treatment. This statement is valid in Gucha District. The farmers look for medicine men to treat their livestock and crops instead of veterinary officers. This could be and indeed it is a costly attitude in terms of crop and animal health. It is an unfavorable attitude to animal and crop diseases. There is evidence of ignorance in this behavior.

Witchcraft Concept; the Problem of Meaning

Witchcraft is a much talked about concept in gucha district. It is without doubt in the mind of every villager. Ironically however, the meaning of the concept is not as clear to the villagers as one would expect of such a commonly shared belief. The respondents gave eight different meanings to the concept as follows: Belief that witchcraft is magic/mystical power 76%, that which causes disease and death to animals and humans (61%), night running(33%), cannibalism(25%) keeping wild animals(12%), jealousy (11%) evil eye(10%) and curse(8%) (Onyancha 2010) These meanings are perhaps expressions of the differing experiences of witchcraft belief by the respondents which would then lead to the conclusion that witchcraft concept in a sense means all these. It is probably necessary to also point out that it is the nature of religious beliefs of any kind. Different individuals respond in remarkably different ways under similar religious experiences (Pargetter 1992) That is why, for example there are different expressions of the Christian religion through Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as well as their respective sects the world over, but the same faith. The same can be said of Islam: there are those with radical opinions on the one hand and the moderates on the other, but the same faith.

Why do farmers in Gucha District use witchcraft and magic to explain their agricultural challenges?

This is of course an important question to this discussion given that we live in a scientific era. Indeed there are those who glorify the achievements of science in the last four decades.
(Pugsley and Bronowski 2001) and dismiss witchcraft and magic as regressive. Yet the villagers of Gucha district uphold these beliefs in dealing with agricultural challenges.

There was enough evidence on the ground to suggest that in Gusii community, witchcraft and magical beliefs are an integral part of what it is to be born and brought up as a member of the community. They are part of normal socialization. In sociological thought, socialization is lifelong process through which society equips its members with survival skills/knowledge. Beliefs in witchcraft and magic as obtaining in Gucha district basically appear to be culturally inherited and integrated instruments of explaining, rationalizing, dealing with and coping with tragedy. By saying that either magic or witchcraft is responsible for certain baffling challenges including those quite often experienced in agriculture, they are simply refusing to admit ignorance and defeat, albeit unconsciously. In the final analysis, witchcraft and magical beliefs assume the status of cultural ideologies – principles of explaining the perplexities of life. Life could be more unbearable when human beings are unable to explain difficult circumstances in their life.

The other reason that could be deciphered from the ground was the absence of professionally trained personnel and especially in the areas of both human and animal medicine. The villagers easily turn to these ‘ideologies’ for one, they are ignorant and, two, the experts to remove their veil of ignorance are unavailable for consultation. Consequently, quacks and magicians have a field day, conning the farmers all over.

The other reason is poverty. Poverty, which in this case refers to material conditions of existence, is evident in Gucha district. The residents are basically subsistence farmers. The capitalist land tenure system has increasingly reduced individual and family landholdings into unviable pieces. These have been farmed round and round the years. Unsupported by better farming methods or new technology, leave alone inputs, these farms cannot support any serious agricultural activity. Under such circumstances, neither arable nor livestock farming is sustainable yet the villagers must not only account for their poverty but also for crop failure and the plight of their livestock. Thus, crop failure, low livestock yields, hunger and financial poverty are the order of the day. Consequently, blaming others for one’s woes and in this case, crop failure and low dairy yields or death of livestock is part of life in gucha villages. The respondents indicated that in most cases, whenever livestock’s were sick, the magician is readily available and cheaper than veterinary officers who are not only rare but expensive too.

In summary, there are about four reasons for persistent belief in witchcraft and magic with regard to agriculture in Gucha district. They include the ideological roles that these beliefs play as inherited tools of explaining tragedy, the prevalent scientific ignorance, absence of professionals to deal with agriculture related challenges and poverty.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing discussion, it could suffice to conclude with a significant level of certainty that beliefs in witchcraft and magic have a negative impact on sustainable agricultural productivity in gucha district in terms of fostering unfavorable attitudes. These beliefs are enhanced by social cultural, epistemological and economic factors such as scientific ignorance, poverty and government negligence. Thus, sustainable agricultural productivity in gucha and Africa generally is not only affected by conventional factors as could be obvious elsewhere, it is also affected by cultural and religious factors such as beliefs in witchcraft and magic.

Given this situation, it is important to recommend as follows:
That relevant scientific information about sustainable agricultural productivity be made available to peasant farmers at all levels. In this regard, government should consider establishing demonstration units at its administration centers such as locations or/and divisions.

Those government agricultural extension officers are availed at such centers to offer free or affordable agricultural education and services to farmers. This will go a long way to curb the current trend where herbalists and magicians have capitalized on the apparent void to corn and exploit unsuspecting peasant farmers.

REFERENCES


