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Adventist Response to Witchcraft in Luapula, Zambia

SILAS CHABALA

Silas Chabala, D.Min. (Adventist University of Africa, Nairobi, Kenya), currently serves as district pastor in Woodlands Conference, Lusaka, Zambia. Previously he served as president of Luapula Zambia Conference, Ministerial secretary for Lusaka Conference, and departmental director and district pastor in Central Zambia Conference. Chabala is married to Reacy, and they are blessed with four children.

Witchcraft is generally perceived to be an integral element of the African worldview and cultural practices. “When Christians in Zambia struggle with witchcraft, they also struggle with African cultural and religious concepts that deal with life ambiguities and require discernment.”¹ This continues to be the case, to some extent, even in the modern Zambian culture and society.

Although the phenomenon and belief in witchcraft are more pronounced in some of the most remote, rural parts of the country, there are indications that it is not just the poor and uneducated who believe in it.² It is, therefore, expected that Zambians from all walks of life could have either heard of or do believe in the existence of witchcraft—at least as an intangible reality. The significance of this state of affairs can be seen in the fact that “in Zambia, people acknowledge that negative influences need to be divined or diagnosed, so that they can be expelled. Few people would come to a modern hospital to be treated against bad luck, the inability to find a husband ... or to have the name of a thief who stole [something] revealed.”³ This unconventional tendency of dealing with social problems has been observed particularly in the Luapula region, one of the rural regions in Zambia.⁴ The phenomenon of witchcraft practiced there affects many aspects of life at individual and institutional levels.⁵

The Practice of Witchcraft in Luapula

The effects of witchcraft on mission work in the Luapula region may be appropriately comprehended when its nature and practice are understood. Pardon Mwansa, who was born and raised in Luapula Province and later became a prominent Adventist leader and scholar, gave an apt definitive description of witchcraft. According to Mwansa, witchcraft is said to be the “use of powers by magical skills or some supernatural means to control and influence things.... Witches are therefore people who appear to possess magical skills or powers that are supernatural and as such are able to control or influence things, to bring about certain results, such as healing, killing, predicting the future, controlling events, et cetera.”⁶

There is a belief that the practice of witchcraft exists in three broad categories; the benign, malignant, and benevolent. It is noted, however, that the line between them is rather thin. Udelhoven observes that “the borderline between harming and doing good can be thin. *Umuti* [medicine] can do harm if misappropriated. The moment that *umuti* is used to manipulate others, one has already moved into the shadow of practicing witchcraft.”⁷

Witchcraft is assumed to be benign when it is practiced for personal benefit and protection. Malignancy is assumed when there is an ulterior motive to cause harm to others. In view of the latter, a counter form of witchcraft offers a supposedly benevolent service to the community by providing services using the paraphernalia that are supposed to either protect the intended victim or expose the witches and sorcerers, as well as incapacitate their magical powers and destroy or neutralize their charms.

A case in a rural area showed that “nearly all the women acknowledged that they were using medicines to keep their husbands faithful.... [The] women classified such practices as a legitimate usage of medicine.”⁸ The source of such medicines was to be a “benign” witch or diviner who was typically at the center of the spiritual life of the native society. This was and still is in keeping with the ancestral heritage of the ethnic people groups in the Luapula region. However, the mode and means of acquiring the magical powers of witchcraft are shrouded in secrecy and mysticism. It happens that “the inherent affinity of witchcraft with knowing and seeing creates an implicit distinction and boundary between those who know and see (like the witches, but also the diviners), and others who do not. People who do not see and know need the protection from those who do.... Diviners, chiefs, headmen, and family heads establish an alternative political space from inside. The church and modern state apparatus with its schools and hospitals are excluded and placed on the outside.”⁹

Jealous, covetousness, lust, love, power, and the desire for wealth are some of the factors that lead people to the practice of the various forms of witchcraft. Other drivers are fear, protection, justice, and revenge.¹⁰ In some instances, it is said that the paraphernalia of witchcraft as well as its practice are passed on from parents to children.¹¹

It seems safe to surmise that witchcraft is close to the core of functional indigenous religious systems. Whereas a Christian person would turn to God when faced with the challenges mentioned above, an unbelieving person in Luapula region inclines toward seeking the help of the witches and diviners.

Even today, the phenomenon of witchcraft, though usually intangible, apparently has a pervasive and subtle impact in the collective psyche of the people of Luapula.¹² The notion seems to be that it is an inescapable, undeniable, real element in society. The perpetrators are assumed to be as real as the victims are, and the latter tend to come forward as witnesses to these intangible realities. It is in this regard that Adventism, in particular, and Protestant Christianity in general, have sometimes faced challenges in such places and among such people as those found in Luapula. In responding to these challenges, divergent propositions have, subsequently, been advanced.

The Adventist Church's Response to Witchcraft

Adventist leaders in Zambia maintain that “first, the church needs to develop and teach members the doctrine of prayer and faith in line with the teaching of James 5:13-18. Secondly, the church needs to explore a clearer understanding of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the context of mission.”³

While the Advent message offers knowledge, conventional healing, and spiritual deliverance to those facing challenges, the practitioners of non-Christian traditions, on the other hand, offer an alternative package of solutions to the people. As such, new Christian converts were found to be at risk of falling into the trap of spiritual dualism. To avoid this the new Christian converts were urged to abandon their belief in witchcraft entirely—whether benign, malignant, or benevolent, and embrace the Adventist biblical teachings.

To some new believers, however, it seemed that Christian conversion was too much a sacrifice to make.¹⁴ Consequently, they opted to abandon the Christian faith, and/or outrightly refuse to accept the Adventist message. Furthermore, others chose to join the church with a superficial and half-hearted conversion. These posed the greatest challenge to the church because their insidious influence and example was found to be detrimental to the edification of the church.

It was further observed that the church's perceived limitations and inadequacies in delivering a wholistic Christian service to the members of society was denigrated by the priests of witchcraft and occult powers.¹⁵ These claimed to heal, disclose secrets, and foretell the future. Conversely, a gospel message that was perceived to fail to measure up to this mystical expectation was received with skepticism. Some of those who joined the Adventist Church were never content with the promised power of the gospel. Thus, the problem of spiritual dualism and hypocrisy became the unintended result. This problem tended to stunt or hinder the numerical and spiritual growth of the church.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Luapula has made strides over the years by teaching the converts and church members, not only the religious knowledge from the denominational doctrines but also the experience of growing in Christ. This requires having one's allegiance to Christ alone and experiencing the power of God's salvation. This concept of having a functional substitute takes cognizance of the fact that heathen practices are believed to provide for certain needs of societies--albeit through superstitious and shady practices. This competition for the souls of men and women is compounded by the fact that some well-known Christians have, in some instances, been caught in the dualist practice of being both professed Christians as well as practitioners of witchcraft. This has tended to embolden those who have either rejected the Adventist message or are known to subscribe to witchcraft.

The foregoing scenario has compelled the Adventist Church to take a stern approach with its own members who are found to be either practicing witchcraft or soliciting the help or powers from its perpetrators. A case in point is one family of believers in Luapula who were found to indulge in witchcraft rituals. One senior member of the family was accused of practicing witchcraft and casting magical spells on her relatives. The relatives subsequently sought the services of a witch doctor to authenticate their suspicions. After the witch doctor had done his incantations, he authoritatively declared that the suspect was indeed guilty. This was followed by a public confession by the accused. This brought shame and disrepute on the family and the church.

In this case the local church that held the membership of this family, removed from its roll the names of two of the family members who invited the witch doctor, as well as the self-confessed witch. Five other members of this family were placed on censure for expressing public support toward what the witch doctor was doing. This action involved naming, counseling, and disciplining the offenders. This and similar courses of action were meant to serve as deterrents to church members, as well as an avowal of fidelity to the church's doctrines and standards in the community in which the church is located.

The above measures, however, have not negated the gracious approach employed to woo prospective converts to the faith. The gist of the matter is that the former approach is meant to send a signal to the communities where the church has a presence, regarding the church's abhorrence of such evil practices in order to enable them to appreciate the fact that the church organization has moral standards. The latter position is a deliberate method of helping the less informed convert to start a new life without the fear of condemnation or blame. It is in this way that the church has realized phenomenal numerical and spiritual growth since Adventism entered the Luapula region a century ago. In 2019 there are 69,215 baptized Seventh-day Adventist members, worshiping in 278 organized churches in Luapula Zambia Conference.¹⁶

Lessons Learned

Superstition and the belief in occult powers predated the arrival of Christianity in general, and Adventism in particular. The fact that the gospel did not find a spiritual vacuum, entailed that mission work and the grounding of the church's teachings in the region is done with the understanding that there is an inherent spiritual competitor. The underlying spiritual and cultural mindset in the region needed to be studied and properly understood. This is because an existing worldview possesses such an almost impregnable allegiance to the belief system, practices, authorities, and deities. Dissuading a person from deeply imbedded value system requires radical but gracious approaches and a patronage of those providing the spiritual and religious oversight.

In some instances, converts cling to a belief on elements and practices of witchcraft while embracing certain values

and practices of the Christian faith. A continuous appraisal and teaching of church members is, therefore, essential. To apply discipline without demonstrating love and fellowship tends to alienate the erring church members. Permissiveness, on the other hand, tends to embolden the errant ones in the wrong beliefs and practices. In this regard a standardization of policies with regard to the application of the Adventist message is required. The presentation of the Adventist message and practice should consistently be biblically sound. This is to enable the church leaders and Bible instructors to have a united approach to meeting the challenges posed by the phenomenon of witchcraft in the face of mission work. The church must not allow for the blurring of the line between dark magical powers and the dynamism and charisma of the Holy Spirit.

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3. Bernard Udelhoven, *Seeing Witchcraft*, 123.?
4. Silas Chabala, personal knowledge from working in Luapula Zambia Conference from 2015 to 2018.?
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