

The Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo Community of Mtongwe

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Abstract

This study examined the perception of witchcraft at the Coast of Kenya focusing on the Digo Community of Mtongwe. The aim of the study was to analyze how witchcraft is perceived among the Digo community of Mtongwe area. Through a qualitative research design, data were gathered using personal interviews and questionnaires with 25 local leaders of the area. The major findings that emerged were: 1. Witchcraft practice is a reality in the area. 2. It also established that the belief in and practice is strong among the youth, especially the female and 3. That witchcraft is practiced for various reasons among them jealousy, protection, love, material wealth, for healing among other reasons. The study concluded that some members of the Digo community still maintain their indigenous belief in and practice of witchcraft despite many years of Islamization. This means that these Digo still have and maintain trust in their traditional worldview more than in popular Islamic worldview about power and influence of sorcery.

Keywords: Digo, Perception, Witchcraft.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This article analysed data on the perception of witchcraft within the Digo Muslim community, residents of Mtongwe area, Mombasa County. Data gathered about the perception of witchcraft was mainly by interviews and focus group discussions where unstructured questions were applied. The article did not only display data on the perception on witchcraft but also attempted to examine the existence of witchcraft in the area of the study and why people continue practicing it. It also attempted to highlight Islamic guidance on protecting and curing effects of witchcraft from literature review. The level of perception is arranged in form of themes and discussed in depth and progressively, reflecting on some of the questions raised in literature, whether they may be answered, while also engaging with the theory adopted by the study. Has the perception of witchcraft influenced decisions people make in any way? The article additionally, explored findings of the research on Islamic spiritual well-being of members of the community. It further examined the effects of witchcraft on decisions and conduct on governance and leadership. It finally analysed the Digo's attitude towards witchcraft.

2. Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo.

The study set out to find out the existence of witchcraft among the Digo community. The researcher posed a question of yes or no to the selected respondents. The data has been tabulated as follows:

Table 1: Table Showing Existence of Witchcraft

| Yes | No | Don't know |
|-----|-----|------------|
| 88% | 10% | 2% |

The question of whether witchcraft is real or not has been a concern to many people world wide. It may be argued that sometimes innocent people are accused of witchcraft, but among the people living along the coastal regions, witchcraft is a common practice as observed by Mutuku (2010) and Dzovu

85 The Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo Community of Mtongwe

(2013) in their research among the Digo on witchcraft. This research established that 88 % of all respondents believe that witchcraft is real. During an interview, Ustadh Salim Bakari (O.I., 13.4.2019) observed that witchcraft in the area is a reality and that Digo community still associate calamities and some kind of problems facing them with witchcraft. He agrees with functionalist perspective that some people seek traditional methods of solving socio-economic problems. Example of this is untreatable sickness in the family, frequent and unexplained deaths, intractable economic problems and more so longstanding marital problems.

The study established that the belief in the existence of witchcraft is strong among the Digo community. This is based on the question posed to the respondents and their affirmative answer. From the categories of respondents over 88% believed it existed in the area. Reason being the belief has been there since time immemorial. This view is supported by majority Muslims whose holy book (Quran 2:102) acknowledge its existence among people. Other than teachers, a few secondary school students and some few government officials, the rest had 100% belief in the existence of witchcraft. While 10% of respondents did not believe that the area was deeply in the belief of witchcraft. This could be attributed to the fact that this category of respondents had formal schooling, and hence, had little or no regard for witchcraft. Lastly, 2% of the respondents indicated that they did not know whether witchcraft existed or not in the area. This category of respondents could be foreigners who had no historical knowledge of the area.

3. Belief in Witchcraft among Youth

The study sought to find out the opinion of the youth both in school and outside school on the issue of witchcraft. Do they believe it exists and being practiced in the area of the study? The following were their responses;

Table.2 Table showing belief in witchcraft among the youth

| Girls in school | Girls out of school | Boys in school | Boys out of school |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| 25 | 35 | 30 | 20 |

The research found out that 25% of girls in school and 35% of girls out of school did not actually believe in the existence of witchcraft. This could be attributed to their inexperience or maybe ignorance of its existence. The study, too, found out that 30% of boys in secondary school and 20% of boys out of school did not believe that witchcraft existed in the area. This could also be attributed to their ignorance and inexperience on the matter or insistence, like the study of Schlyter (1999) indicated that they believe in one God, therefore, to them there is no any other power to scare them. To this category of respondents, witchcraft as a functional structure of society has become dysfunctional. Table 2 illustrates this information as indicated:

4. Why Witchcraft is practised by some Members of the Digo Community

The research set out to find out what makes some members of the Digo to fear and hence seek witchcraft protection. Among the reasons given:

a) Jealousy

The study found out that jealousy about development and success of others is among major reasons why witchcraft is practiced in the area. Out of 100% of the reasons given, jealousy scored 23 % of the respondents who mentioned it as a reason why some members of the Digo community engage in witchcraft to harm those they perceive to be developed or successful more than themselves. Ustadh Karega (O.I., 12.3.2019) observed that among the reasons for witchcraft is jealousy of some people using witchcraft to separate seemingly successful married couples among other success. To support his view he quoted the verse of the Quran that Allah says:

*“And they followed [instead] what the devils had recited during the reign of Solomon. It was **not Solomon who disbelieved, but the devils disbelieved, (by) teaching people magic and that which was revealed to the two angels at Babylon, Harut and Marut. But the two angels do not teach anyone unless they say, “We are a trial, so do not disbelieve [by practicing magic].”** And [yet] they learn from them that by which they cause separation between a man and his wife. But they do not harm anyone through it except by permission of Allah. And the people learn what harms them and does not benefit them (the*

87 The Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo Community of Mtongwe

*Sahir is in a state of loss in his life). But the Children of Israel certainly knew that whoever purchased the magic (practiced it or had it practiced for them) **would not have in the Hereafter any share.** And **wretched** is that for which they sold themselves, if they only knew.” (The extent of their loss in this life and the next) (2:102)*

In his interpretation he says that there are people who use witchcraft to separate a successful married couple as it is indicated in this verse.

According to Kombo (2003) witches are motivated by jealousy and act against those who excel or stand out in society or those who are seen as economically successful. Those who do not stand out are believed to face fewer attacks so the witchcraft mentality can actually have a negative impact on creativity and the desire to get ahead in life. This confirms Ustadh Karega's (O.I., 12.3.2019) view about jealousy being one of the reasons for practising witchcraft. For those who benefit from witchcraft, witchcraft is a functional structure in society that should be maintained because it's a tool they use to harm people they perceive to be their enemies or rivals.

b) Protection

Protection against the evil perpetuated by other people is among reasons why witchcraft is practiced as confirmed by 10% of the respondents. Ustadh Hamza (O,I 7.7. 2019) responded that the Digo did not view witchcraft as something bad but as something necessary to practice to protect the family. This view concurs with Akrong (2007) who says that witchcraft can provide supernatural power to “enhance one's ability to perform extraordinary feats”. This view holds that witchcraft powers can be used for personal improvements, social advancement, gaining of material wealth, protection from sickness and danger, and giving people the ability to reveal secrets and see into the future. This view is also held by (Bongmba, 2007; Danfulani ,2007; and Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015)

In order for people to be freed from these malevolent forces which are believed to be everywhere, they resort to protection from medicine men and diviners' as stated by Sheikh Hamisi Mohammed (O,I 6.7.20190) .The Sheikh further said that the specialists provide charms, amulets, medicines, or other protective articles placed in secluded places in the house or in the fields. The

protective gear may be visible or invisible, secret or open, and can be said to be a characteristic of some traditional Digo families to help people secure a feeling of safety, protection and assurance. Diviners and medicine men are employed to perform ritual cleansing of households or people who have been victims of malevolent witchcraft. This explains well why torturing and killing of some old people presumed to be witches was not common among the Digo as stated by Ustadh Hamza (O,I 7.7.2019).

Sperling (1988) observed that the Digo customs co-existed with Islam. He says:

"Mtongwe is the most thoroughly Mohamedan community, but even there the elders regularly attend and sacrifice at their ancestral Kayas for protection against malevolent forces".

This is confirmed by sheikh Ismail (O.I 14.4.2019) who says that even though the Digo have embraced Islam, some of them are still traditionalists mostly for protective reason. According to him, the Digo integrate their traditions within Islamic practices including marriage, burial rites, healing, among others. The belief and practice of witchcraft is still going on in the area of the study as confirmed by Dzovu (2013). Dzovu (2013) noted that the Digo of Kenya believe in and fear sorcery such that many things are explained in relation with it. This follows the respondents' views showing witchcraft still exists. Reliance on traditional religious healers is most prevalent among some members of the Digo who turn to traditional healers to help cure someone who is ill.

During this study it was observed from the respondents, witchcraft is not holistically condemned because of the value it plays in the society as mentioned by Ustadh Hamza (O,I 7.7.2019). Tembo (2010) also argue that in African tribal communities, witchcraft and other closely related practices like sorcery and magic are believed to have a repertoire of functions on a continuum. On the one extreme witchcraft is believed to be responsible for mindless death and extreme social discord through persecution of innocent citizens. In his expeditions in Central Africa, Campbell (1922) documents instances in which accused witches were tortured and killed in the most gruesome ways. This is identical to cases like the European witch hunts which were known as inquisitions in which thousands were tortured into confessing to practicing witchcraft and were burnt alive on the stake in the Middle

Ages as stated by Harris (1983). This is contrary to the Digo community. The research did not find any evidence that witches were or are being punished or even burnt alive as sometimes highlighted by the media elsewhere in Africa and in Kenya in particular.

c) Material wealth

The study established that in as much as witchcraft can be used to acquire material wealth, only 6% of respondents believed it could. Some members of the Digo community, like other communities, are aware of what some people believe about people with albinism. The belief is that certain body parts of people with albinism can transmit magical powers (PWA, 2014). Such **superstition** is present especially in some parts of East Africa region. This has been promulgated and exploited by witches who use such body parts as ingredients in rituals, concoctions and **potions** with the claim that their **magic** will bring prosperity to the user. The research reported no such incident in the area despite members of the community being aware of it. Interview with Maalim Salim (O.I. 12.6.2019) observed that it was not easy to identify a person who has used any form of witchcraft to acquire material wealth.

It is the view of some scholars that traditional environments where people hold cultural beliefs in witchcraft see any ascendancy to a higher social status as the result of witchcraft as observed by Geschiere (1997). This belief has implications for other aspects of social and economic life, including law enforcement, aid donations, and even public health. As a result of this attitude, traditional healers are consulted for almost every affair of life, from healing diseases to placing curses on rivals, as well as for personal, political, and financial gain as noted by Radford (1972). Generally, this practice makes some Africans' lifestyle more or less grounded in witchcraft.

Gaining a lot of material wealth more than the rest is an issue in some parts of Africa. Akrong (2007) concurs with Kombo (2003) on matters of accumulation of material wealth. He says that,

“When family members accumulate wealth that is not shared with the extended family or when personal advancement or educational achievement lifts a person above the average, suspicions of witchcraft are aroused. In such cases, witchcraft accusations are used as a levelling mechanism that does not

allow for the success of the individual to undermine the kinship structure and its associated values.”

This also fits with the theory of Limited Good where in many traditional societies people believe that there is a *limited* amount of *good* to go around, therefore the amount of land, material wealth, and higher education is finite, so when one person gets ahead or has more of something the rest of the people have less (1965). When jealousy and envy are added to the mix of a belief in a limited good, witchcraft accusations are often the devastating consequence that tears apart the fabric of family, friends and associates. This is seen in many African communities, the Digo included. In fact this could be the reason why many respondents believed jealousy to be the main reason for witchcraft especially among family members. From the focus group discussions Ustadh Rashid (O.I 6.7. 2019) confirmed jealousy was the main reason for witchcraft.

d) Healing

The study established that over 14% of the respondents stated that witchcraft was used as a mechanism to heal the sick. Mzee Pawa (O.I. 12/6/2019) told the researcher that he had in his shop some oil used by traditional healers to treat people struck by spells from witches. On the positive extreme, traditional healers help cure ill-stricken citizens and act as a positive force or antidote against the otherwise debilitating fears of witchcraft as observed by Evans-Pritchard (1937). Many anthropologists and other scholars have consistently emphasized the positive functions of the belief in witchcraft and the role of the witchdoctor in the African society.

Evans-Pritchard (1937) observed that besides explaining illness, the belief is used to explain misfortune; “*Why did the granary accidentally collapse and kill or seriously injure a man who happened to be sitting beside it at that particular time?*” In contemporary times, lack of success in employment, failure in examinations, or inability to gain promotion may be attributed to witchcraft. This is the view held by over 14% of most respondents including Mzee Pawa. (O.I., 1/6/2019). He observed that traditional healer heals those who are thought to have been bewitched by others: “Far from being a witch, he is the chief enemy of witches. He is the man who fights witchcraft, by use of magical and material medicines.

91 The Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo Community of Mtongwe

The study established that the traditional healer is often a medicine-man, leech, herbalist, soothsayer, and diviner, all in one. He has useful functions, even if one accepts the point of view that witchcraft is impossible. Parrinder (1963) noted that in the middle of the continuum are anthropologists and other scholars who assert that witchcraft helps explain the unexpected, the unknown, and the mysterious. It is believed also to help internalize and enforce strict norms that help create order and stability in small tribal communities. Ember and Ember (1992) and Middleton (1963) agree to this analysis when they say, "Ghost invocation and witchcraft provide important sanctions for social behaviour; the significance of these sanctions cannot be appreciated without a consideration of other mystical means of causing sickness - ancestral vengeance, cursing, breaking taboos, use of medicines and sorcery poisons, adverse public opinion, and so on - and also a study of the use of socially approved force." The traditional depictions, explanations, and incidence of witchcraft among the Azande (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), the Ndembu while Turner (1964) studied the Lugbara, Middleton (1967) and Marwick (1967) studied the Cewa. Mbiti (1969) and Kenyatta (1938) also studied other African communities. Their studies involved and encapsulated many dimensions of African traditional life style, dynamics, and customs.

e) Intimate love

Practicing of witchcraft for love is among reasons for the practice. From the respondents, 9% believe that witchcraft can be used to win intimate love. The use of witchcraft to win love is not limited to Africans only but it's also found in other cultures. Christole, (1974), in the story of Betty Parris and Abigail Williams whose accusations of witchcraft sparked the Salem Witch Trials in the U.K. Ten-year-old Betty and her sister, most of their activities centred on divining who their future husbands would be. This is because for a 17th century girl, the greatest indicator of how your life would play out was who you married and what social status you achieved through that marriage. To find this out, the girls used a form of alomancy, or egg magic, called a "Venus glass," which worked by dripping the white of an egg into a glass of water. By watching the shape the egg white took, the girls hoped to find clues about their futures. This kind of practice is still observed in some communities as mentioned by Ustadh Khalid in FGD (O.I., 4. 6. 2019)

In the Quran, the main reason for witchcraft was to separate between a husband and his wife as quoted earlier (Q2:102). Jabir (RA) reported that the prophet (SAW) said: *"Iblis would lay his throne on water and would send his brigade of demons. The lowest among them in rank is the one who is most notorious in stirring up fitna. One of the demons would, after a mission, come and say to Iblis, 'I have done so and so.' Iblis would reply, 'You have not done anything.' Another one would come and say: 'I have not left such and such person until I separated him from his wife.' Iblis would come closer to his demon and say, 'How good you are' (Nawawi, 2018).*

In Africa, presence of two or more women competing for the love, attention and money of one man can become a war zone. This as you might expect creates a lot of envy, jealousy, bitterness and rivalry among the women. Witchcraft and other forms of magic are used extensively to efficiently encapsulate the love and attention of the men involved and to cast out rivals from the marital home as observed by Odongo (2017). This confirms the observation of Ustadh Karega (O.I., 3.6.2019), who noted, a man with, three or more wives but who gives his utmost attention to the one least worthy of love, whilst completely neglecting the rest. Normally, what usually happens is the husband is magically 'forced' to either divorce the other women or to rough them up, thus giving them no choice but to leave the matrimonial home on their own accord. These stories of witchcraft for love are mentioned by most respondents among the Digo. African men on the other hand, have been able to win and have total control of the hearts of the ladies they desire so much with the aid of the magical rites and ritual, as confirmed by Ustadh Mabodza(O.I., 3.6.2019).

In the cut-throat business enterprising ladies of the night will do anything to gain an edge. Apparently, they now visit witchdoctors to guarantee them a stream of clients, if not husbands. "Beauty alone will not help. Beauty will attract a man, but the most important thing in this business is retaining a man. That's why we employ any possible method to retain the men who come here," said Martha (not her real). (12/6/2011)

f) Miscellaneous Reasons

The study established that majority of respondents stated that practice of witchcraft in the area was not based on a single factor. Over 24 % of the

93 The Perception of Witchcraft among the Digo Community of Mtongwe

respondents gave miscellaneous reasons. Ustadh Abdulqadr (O.I. 15/8/2019) is among the respondents who held such view. To them all mentioned reasons and others not mentioned could be factors motivating the practice for witchcraft. The same motivations for witchcraft are consistently cited in the modern African society. Ngulube (1989) concluded from his field studies in urban and rural Zambia that there are up to seven motives for being a perpetrator of witchcraft; loaning, seeking revenge, jealousy of someone's achievements or wealth, cruelty directed randomly at others, punishment for close relatives' wrong deeds, and individuals being driven into witchcraft because they have been possessed by evil spirits. These motives for witchcraft, as the case in traditional society, mean that anyone can become a witch or can be a victim of witchcraft. One can be a victim of witchcraft if one is perceived by close social acquaintances as being very rich, too powerful, selfish, too arrogant and boastful, daring, has too many wives and children, too happy, too old, or too beautiful. This is an observation of many respondents in including Bahassan. (O.I.,3. 6. 2019). This may also explain why miscellaneous reasons is among major reasons for practicing of witchcraft in the area. What is significant in these explanations is not that witchcraft in itself is believed in, but that it can be used to explain virtually any illness which is sudden, whose cause is mysterious or cannot be cured by modern medical science and technology.

g) Don't Know

Some 11% of the respondents said they did not know if witchcraft existed in the area or not. For this reason they could not tell what witchcraft was for. The study established that these respondents were young people with no knowledge of historical facts of the area, others had no experience of witchcraft practiced in the area, while others were mostly foreigners to the area. Interview with Mwachilole (O.I. 21.6. 2019) actually confirmed that he had no experience of witchcraft in the area. The study also established that other than not knowing, others denied its existence in the area. To them witchcraft is just a fallacy. Geschiere (1997) agreed with this observation when he noted that witchcraft has been more often dismissed by scholars as an imaginary or unreal phenomenon. Because of its complexity, some people have concluded that the language used to describe witchcraft and sorcery is actually a coded language that means something else. In other words, witchcraft is not real. So, is witchcraft in Africa real or an imaginary phenomenon? Do

people outside Africa use this terminology to make Africa look diabolical and backward, or is witchcraft part of a general African cultural phenomenon? This could be the view of those who deny its existence. This information has been summarised in table 3 below:

Table 3: Table Showing Why Witchcraft is Practiced In Mtongwe Area

| Jealousy | Miscellaneous | Wealth | Protection | Love | Fame | Don't know | Healing |
|----------|---------------|--------|------------|-------|-------|------------|---------|
| 23.125 | 23.625 | 5.625 | 9.815 | 9.255 | 2.585 | 12.265 | 13.835 |
| 23 | 24 | 6 | 10 | 9 | 3 | 11 | 14 |

5. Conclusion

The article discussed the perception of witchcraft among the Digo. The discussion examined the existence of witchcraft in the area of the study, why people practiced it, why some people still practice the tradition, what Islam has given as guidance on protecting and curing effects of witchcraft. This makes Digo community not different from other communities on the belief about the existence of witchcraft. The difference could be the perception, what it is done for and how it is done.

In terms of the distribution of numbers on how people believe, the research confirmed that a big number of 88% actually believe witchcraft exist in the area. Only 10% don't believe in its existence while only 2% don't know whether it exists or not. Major reasons for practicing witchcraft in the area were identified as jealousy, protection, material wealth, intimate love, healing and fame while others took all these to be reasons for witchcraft. Despite Islamic guidance on protection and curing of witchcraft, some Digo believed to be Muslims resort to the power of witchcraft for the reasons already discussed. Hence, the perception of witchcraft in this community is still strong. This perception is supported by the strong indigenous Digo worldview.

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Conflict Of Interests

The authors declare no competing interests such as financial or personal relationship, regarding the writing of this article.

Authors' Contributions

The authors designed the study and gathered the literature and wrote the article.

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Respondents in the study

Ustadh Salim Bakari (O.I., 13.4.2019)

Ustadh Karega (O.I., 12.3.2019)

Ustadh Hamza (O.,I 7.7. 2019)

Hamisi Mohammed (O.,I 6.7.20190)

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Ustadh Mabodza(O.I., 3.6.2019)

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Mwachilole (O.I. 21.6. 2019)