

MECHANISM OF WITCHCRAFT ACCUSATIONS AND POSSIBLE INTERVENTIONS

1. NOTIONS OF EVIL:

The way that tensions are experienced in society is related to the notions of evil that are held. Related to this are concepts of personhood, of the human body, and of the spiritual world. How do specific witchcraft beliefs link up with such wider notions?

Intervention: engage with the worldview that underlies witchcraft discourses, appreciating its insights but also challenging the witchcraft discourse with a Christian discourse. The witchcraft discourse can lose some of its grip if alternative discourses can stand next to it side by side.

2. TENSIONS IN KINSHIP RELATIONS:

Witchcraft accusations take place often within wider families. How are family relations structured? Along which lines do these relations often fracture? Is there competition for authority? Who carries the burdens of work? Who has control over resources? How transparent are resources handled? How easy is communication? How easy is it for family members to point the accusing finger at each other? This is a level of suspicions.

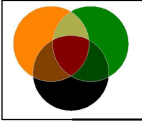
Intervention: Address family relationships (improved communication, etc.) to reduce suspicions. Prevention is better than cure. Stress the family apostolate (1st African Synod) in pastoral care. Also the person who feels suspected of being a witch may ask himself / herself some questions: Why am I accused so often? Do I abuse my authority? Am I fair to my family?

3. TENSIONS IN INTER-GROUP RELATIONS / CLASS STRUGGLES:

Witchcraft accusations that started in the families are fueled on a higher level. Frustrations within wider society are often projected upon the alleged witch. This is the level of gossip. The accusing finger can point to the elite (being rich / powerful through witchcraft), but it can also point to the marginalized (people tempted to practice hidden witchcraft out of jealousy or powerlessness within the official structures). Gossip touches issues of power, authority and justice: Who are the power brokers / political / economic elites? What tensions are found between men and women/ young and old? Who has access to the best land, best fields, to the chief/ government resources, to influential persons? Who can command labor from the wider family for the fields during agricultural peak-time? Who are the people not gaining much from their hard work? Etc.

Intervention:

- Call to transparency, openness, justice & peace. Name & clarify the issues with which people struggle.
- Build up relations with the authorities (chiefs, police) whose cooperation may be vital in future for saving lives. Acknowledge & encourage dealing with ritual crimes (child-



defilement, manipulation of graves...) where it takes place for the purpose of practicing witchcraft or gaining occult powers.

- Address tendencies of finding scapegoats in the community. Penitential service: focusing on our own sins rather than the sins of others.

4. DIVINATIONS:

People approach a diviner, who names the witch. Will the accusation stick? When the diviner confirms rumors which are already there, the accusation is likely to stick. Gossip now transforms into full blown accusation. The person from now on is seen as “proven guilty”.

Intervention:

- Challenge the discourse of the diviner with a Christian discourse.
- Encourage the accused to seek recourse in court to have his reputation restored. The accusers (including the accusing diviner) may be brought to justice if this is necessary. Look with the accused at the reasons/threats/fears that may prevent him/her to seek legal action. Help the accused to remain focused rather than intimidated.
- Identify possible helpers and peace-makers within the family and give them backing.
- Encourage the accused to keep a factual diary of the daily events.

5. PUBLIC PRESSURE & VIOLENCE

Can the accused counter the allegation? Or is he willing to be cleansed of witchcraft by a diviner? What will be the consequences? Accusation escalates into real agitation. The witchcraft discourse now may enter into a violent phase taking its full swing. Alleged witches are forced to confess & be cleansed. Group pressure is high. Pastoral intervention / peacemaking now is difficult. “You are protecting the witches!” Accused witches are often killed secretly or even openly.

Intervention:

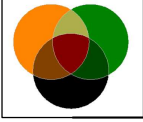
- Security for the alleged witch. Hiding the alleged witch from the mob.
- Involving law-enforcement: Police, chiefs, headmen, according to the Zambian law.
- Sometimes involvement of the public media helps to put pressure on chiefs & authority figures to keep by the Zambian law.

6. AFTER THE CLEANSING

The Zambian law protects against witchcraft accusations. But the ability to enforce the law can be very limited. Agitation often turns to mob violence and witch-hunts. Whole communities become fractured for years and even for generations.

Intervention:

- Provide legal aid. Restore the reputation of the name of the alleged witch & be close to immediate family.
- Long-term community building



- Don't allow the victims to be silenced by the community

Literature: Walter van Beek, "The Escalation of Witchcraft Accusations" in Gerrie Ter Haar (ed) *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*. Africa World Press, 2007.