



THE SOCIAL SIDE OF POSSESSION (IN ZAMBIAN “SATANISM”)

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Satan is as much a social demon as an individual demon. “Deliverance” is often understood as a mere individual endeavour. A holistic approach will also look at the communitarian aspect of deliverance, especially the family. Yet beyond the family, still a wider aspect needs to be looked at: how oppressive social structures play themselves out in the community, the family, and the individual. Real deliverance has to link up with issues of peace and justice.

Already the New Testament hints at a relationship between oppressive social structures and individual demons. Walter Wink has looked in detail at the various Biblical concepts of spiritual powers.¹ A case study is Mark 5:1–20, where a group of demons who call themselves “legion” possesses a Gerasene demoniac. On the one hand we have an individual tormented by demons. But on the other hand it is clear that the experiences of this individual mirror back the fears, traumas and paranoia of the whole community. The individual man possessed by his demons reflected what in fact all the Gerasenes (and the people of the Decapolis) were experiencing: the struggle with the Roman legions. The Decapolis and the Gerasenes (located outside the traditional land of Israel) consisted mainly of Hellenised people, and (unlike people in Judea) they did not fall directly under Roman rule. People here were striving to guard their independence from the Romans but the Roman legions were all around and people had to engage with them politically. There were too many Romans to fight, as also there were too many demons called “legion” for the demoniac to cope with. The Bible passage brings out clearly that people of the Decapolis were fascinated by the demoniac who, struggling with his legion, broke his fetters every day. Within the story the focus shifts several time from the demoniac to his community and back again to the demoniac. His possession and deliverance from the legion are seen in connection with the fears and traumas of his community. After his deliverance, the man wanted to go away with Jesus, but Jesus sent him to his own family: “Go back to your family and announce to them what the Lord has done for you” (Mk 5:19). The delivered demoniac, now radiating peace and in his full senses, and dressed in dignity, started giving testimony

¹ Walter Wink (1984). *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Walter Wink (1986). *The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Walter Wink (1992). *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.



throughout the Decapolis (5:20). Having been delivered from his own legion, he could announce peace to people tormented by the Roman legions. The Gospel passage suggests that social conditions play themselves out in individual possession, and that “deliverance” from individual possession also can radiate back into social life.

A possessed person is flooded with dreams, images and symbols. These symbols derive their power not only from the individual psychic make-up, but also from the fears, suspicions and uncertainties of the surrounding community. The names or types of the “demons” can stand for social ills and conflicts, and there is a long history of this in Zambia. Zambian spiritual concepts are in fact very diverse and therefore difficult to translate if one wishes to carry forth the nuances given by the terms. The different types of spirits often allow us to get a glimpse of the social conflict that accompanies them: dreams about the spirit of a family member (in Bemba a *mupashi*) may hint at an unresolved family conflict; experiences with a *cibanda* (the spirit of a dead person belonging to a different lineage than oneself) can hint at a conflict with the family of the in-laws; experiences with *ngulu* often signals to the community that a sickness does not go back to family issues or witchcraft (*ngulu* are often acquired accidentally), and some historians postulate that the concepts of the *ngulu* only arrived onto the Zambian scene with the advent of long distance trade, when the social field of a given family had widened far beyond the local community and was drawn into complex and more global forces.

Spiritual realities in Zambia always have something to do with social issues. What is described today as Satanism people could as well have described in terms of the older idiom of witchcraft or spirit possession. The fact that urban people needed a new word lets us suspect that people are dealing with new experiences that cannot be captured adequately by the old concepts of witchcraft and spirit possession. Modern urban life has changed dramatically since the advent of the Third Republic, and the popular concepts of Satanism link up with how modern life is experienced by many. Consumer goods are everywhere around and they are greatly desired, but few can afford them. Modern life is very opaque. Few can see through it or understand the way it operates. Somebody working very hard can hardly feed his family. Others become rich seemingly out of nowhere; they are lazy yet get promoted. Modern life in Zambia depends on the right connections, but these connections remain hidden and “underground”. People ask where all the money is coming from in Lusaka for all the new buildings. In the meantime horrible road accidents happen every single day, accidents that could have been avoided. The concepts of Satanism link them together. New desires and new possibilities also bring new tensions and new fears that



damage family structures. Nothing may explain such experiences of modern life better than Satanism.²

Satanic possession can explain social and economic realities. While Satanists testify to a secret underground world of Satanic riches, most people in Zambia experience access to political and economic power as opaque and secret: they cannot see through. While Satanic demons demand sacrifices, and especially the sacrifice of close relatives, people everywhere in Zambia experience that the discrepancies between the rich and the poor also demand sacrifices: poor people die of cholera, the rich are treated in South Africa.

The point here is that an individual's own inner struggles and demons (be they real demons, or be they psychological realities) often mirror the wider social conflicts that are in fact experienced by many people. Many Zambian Satanists confessed that conflicts in the family proved to be the entry-point for the Satanic forces. Tensions in the family, moreover, can result from wider social realities that play themselves out in the family and that can bring divisive effects. A Zambian Satanist (very different to the Western Satanist) is a family member sacrificing other family members. He or she is drawn into Satanism accidentally and involuntarily. While the traditional witch acts out of jealousy, greed or hatred, the Satanist is a victim of the "underworld" — initiation happens against the person's own will. The "underworld" has swallowed him, made him their own, and manipulates him. The Satanist follows a line of command, has to follow it and is trapped. The Zambian Satanist is himself or herself a victim of the "underworld" which in turn mirrors back the modern globalising forces that push themselves on the old family structures.

Individual inner struggles are often conditioned by wider social issues or repressive moulds of behaviour, cultural expectations, and role-models. In this case the demon, like a prophetic dream, resonates with the experiences of many others, and it can become a prophetic voice for the community. In the past, some people (often women) with *ngulu* or *mashawe* could be such prophets. Demons (be they real or imagined) can represent unconscious issues, and these issues are sometimes felt by many more people than by the possessed alone. The possessed can make such forces visible to the whole community.

It is helpful to compare the possessed with artists and even saints. Great artists are rarely "stable" people. More often they are persons torn apart by inner conflicts, struggles and desires that affect the whole community. Such artists manage to find a way to accept them, express them, and integrate them into their own personalities. These kinds of inner struggles are also reported by many saints. Possessed people and delivered Satanists may

² See http://www.fenza.org/files/fingers/satanism_new_tree_old_roots.doc



be regarded as potential artists and potential saints. Frequently, however, they and also their families need help in the great struggle with such inner forces.

The widespread symbolism of Satanism depicts in a very dramatic way what is at stake in social life in Zambia: wealth for some and poverty and sacrifice for others. Unfortunately, redress is sought usually in a purely individual and personal manner (self-protection with prayers and holy water). Satanism is seen as a non-political issue divorced from the social realities of inequality. This escalates the fears, and does little or nothing to address them. Real deliverance may require translation of the symbols of the Satanic world into issues of corruption, selfishness and greed in modern Zambia, which impose themselves on family structures based on solidarity, where the good of the whole family had priority over the achievements of the individual. Satanism maybe is a new word for something that we knew all along in Zambia: namely that power and wealth are to be shared. The modern world brings many opportunities and benefits. But greed for money and power can also destroy our families and society. A lack of transparency in economics and politics, together with jealousy and greed, creates a world of suspicion and mistrust where people are being “sacrificed” for individual gains.