



## Witchcraft! What is the right question?

**By Serge St-Arneault, M.Afr**  
Chezi Parish, Lilongwe, Malawi

According to some lecturers, scientists and most Westerners, witchcraft does not exist. But, for the majority of Africans, witchcraft is real. One view is right and the other is not erroneous. Actually, the question is not to know whether or not witchcraft is a “reality”. The question is to understand what we are talking about.

We do not need to argue about the existence or the “reality” of witchcraft. It is THERE by the simple fact of talking about it. Nobody needs to believe in it. It is something, meaning a “reality” which is irrefutable. It is THERE because we want it to be. We hate it, we fear it, we like it, we want it. Basically, we cannot live without it. Anything which is distracting us from the bitterness of life, from the boring burden of daily life, from the anxiety of the unknown, from uncontrolled changes, from deprivation, from unfulfilled dreams, from anger or resentment or bitterness towards a neighbour or a family member, anything which is unusual or uncommon or simply inexplicable, all of this and much more is associated with witchcraft.

We will never be able to understand one another if we fail to ask the right question. Moreover, anything related to witchcraft is primarily emotional. By ignoring it, witchcraft dies out like a plant without water. On the opposite side, like an addiction, witchcraft rises or increases by itself when it starts nourishing our lives through endless stories of flying, planes, baskets and flesh eaters. Actually, we are hungry for those stories as much as we are hungry for real food. There is an overall search, a social desire, a common will to eat endlessly in order to ease our physical and emotional hunger.

In Malawi, there is no food without *nsima* (which is the staple food, made out of maize, for most Malawians), even though we may eat other types of food. Similarly, there is no life without witchcraft. It is part of our culture or identity. Strangely enough, it brings some kind of safety and protection. This is the reason why some people are teaching children about witchcraft, to make sure that they do not lose entirely their grip on the evolution of society at a time of frightening changes imposed by modernity. Witchcraft is a way to regain or remain in control using a very simple tool: fear. It works very well indeed!

A lady who had a pretty nice house once was accused of being a witch by her mother-in-law. She was also successful in business. And her children were doing well at school. For her part,



the mother-in-law was living in a dilapidated house due to a lack of maintenance. She was not able to move around easily, feeling alone. Suddenly, the accusation brought some kind of life to this dull surrounding. Everyone was happy to comment about this event. Then, the chief intervened and said to the daughter-in-law: *"Do you agree that you are a witch?" "Of course!"* replied the accused. *"I learned to be a witch from a much stronger witch than me."* *"Who is that person?"* asked the chief. *"She is my mother-in-law!"* This true story brought some entertainment for a little while. It gave also to the mother-in-law a chance to be remembered as being part of the community. People were talking about her. She wishes now to be forgotten, as the curse fell back on her because of a clever daughter-in-law who was not paralysed by fear.

We are all witches, if we want to be, by using our ability to make others afraid. We all feel hungry for more, physically and emotionally, at the expense of other people if necessary. We also have the choice to make witchcraft obsolete through the conviction that we can progress in life, without fear of anyone or anything, through honesty, hard work and faith in God. It is up to us to make witchcraft a "reality" or not. The true question is: *What do we want in life?*