

How and why bewitching and wickedness are created and maintained within small, specific segments of the South African population

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Abstract

Background

Beliefs in the supernatural are maintained by strengthening the evils which the witch or the bewitched person can do to his or her fellows. This system is perpetuated by the repetition of stories of how the witch may target the individual as well as why the witch is assumed to be capable of this kind of behaviour. Myths become truths in the minds of economically, educationally and socially deprived persons. Specifically members of poor rural populations seem to fall into this category.

Aims

The aim of the study was to reflect on how and why some South Africans still believe in witchcraft.

Methods

Literature on the subjects of bewitching and wickedness in the South African context is limited. This shortcoming regarding applicable information was overcome through the use of contemporary communications like newspapers and reports. This approach was realised via the use of the exploratory and descriptive method where objective viewpoints became possible as the research developed. Conclusions could be drawn so as to reflect on the role-players and determinants that are maintaining the concepts of witchcraft and bewitching in South Africa. The findings were offered in narrative form.

Results

The insights into the role-players and determinants that perpetuate beliefs in supernatural events, the upholding of this system and the selection of certain victims as well as a clientele making use and misuse of witchcraft, were indicated.

Conclusions

Witchcraft, a Dark Age remnant, is clearly still an active part of a specific segment of South African society. It is seen in community folklore as factual and thus well-exploited by the traditional healer to ensure a need for his services while other role-players also support it for personal interest and for pecuniary reasons.

What this study adds

What is known about the subject?

Little research with a focus on the maintenance of supernatural rituals and beliefs has so far been done in South Africa.

What new information is offered by this study?

Various role-players, specifically the traditional healer, misuse the fear and insecurity of a segment of under-developed South Africans to establish a belief system in bewitching and to enrich themselves.

What are the implications for research, policy, or practice?

The traditional healer's formal recognition as a health practitioner in the New South Africa holds serious consequences for the healthcare sector.

Background

Traditional healers are business people: they buy and sell commodities and their trade is facilitated by the use of the postal services, motor vehicles and cell phones. Their instrument of choice is the "scalpel" rather than the spear. Among their most prized clientele are themselves business people seeking advantage over competitors, success in new ventures or a widening of their customer base. Traditional health services, in common with many other features of South Africa's occult economy, can thus be understood as an attempt to re-create a sense of orderliness and predictability in an unruly post-apartheid, late-capitalistic world of rapidly changing markers of identity, failed political expectations, massive economic deprivation amidst the sudden and conspicuous enrichment of the few, and rampant criminality.^{3, 4}

This incitement to make money goes much deeper; namely the superficial maintaining of a self-fulfilling reputation of evil-diagnosis and -treatment by the traditional healer, solely for the purpose of more moneymaking. Thus, the role of the "good" traditional healer that the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (Act No 22, 2007) tries so hard to profess, can change very easily and fast from a person who endorses morality and doing kind, "to a charismatic charlatan who, through clever manipulation of his so called esoteric knowledge, makes total misuse of anxiety-ridden people".⁵, p5.

Thus the money-making intention – above morality and integrity – and the resorting to the manipulation and the abuse of the uninformed and the undereducated, even resorting to criminal acts to other people if necessary, becomes the obvious choice of behaviour for some traditional healers.

The aim of this study is to describe the role-players in the maintenance of a belief system in bewitching and wickedness by certain segments of the South African population.

Methods

The South African literature on witchcraft, bewitching and wickedness is scarce. To obtain an objective insight in the research matter, this shortcoming was overcome by the use of the modern-day historical approach in which contemporary sources like daily reports, overviews, communication and newspapers are consulted and analysed. For this approach the exploratory and descriptive method was the most appropriate. Data could be reflected on as the research progress and viewpoints developed. Objective conclusions were assured, reflecting the present role-players and determinants in the maintenance of supernatural beliefs. The findings were offered in narrative form.^{6, 7}

Results

To understand the phrase “credulous and anxiety-ridden people” in the maintenance of the traditional healer position and practice in the exploitation of superstition within a small but specific segment of the South African population, it is important to understand how and why bewitching and wickedness are created and maintained within this segment of the population.⁸

Established belief system in witchcraft and superstition

Descriptions like⁹, p. 6 “the witch’s most fearsome power in African minds is her ability to harm people, she is the opposite of good – the personification of evil or the evil of witchcraft attacks the living, causing people on earth to suffer and die”, bring to the foreground an established belief system in witchcraft and superstition. The most influential are the so-called causes of bewitching and remedies to alleged bewitching – that was indoctrinated as real from an early childhood in a certain societal sector in South Africa.¹⁰

It reflects a pre-modern social discourse where there is still an absence of scientific education and socio-economic upliftment as well as the presence of politically misleading doctrines, especially in this pre-modern thinking and living environment, mostly a poverty-stricken and under-developed one. Under such conditions, there is a daily life struggle to survive and a direct threat of serious personal or community misfortunes, disasters and illnesses, believed to be either the result of the ire of angered or jealous ancestral spirits or the evil-doing of other persons, like the witch. It is the belief in the alleged agency of the latter that evokes and strengthens the use of the traditional healer to identify, to blame and to punish someone for such putative deeds. This unlucky person is the witch.^{11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19}

In witchcraft accusation in pre-modern society – the belief that everyone in the community is at all times exposed to bewitching – forms the basis of the reasoning that if unexplained and unexpected misfortunes occur, which is believed not to be the result of ancestral spirits’ ire, then someone specific (who must be a witch), is responsible for the disturbance of the complainant’s or community’s harmony. Hence a witch must be identified and be punished with measures as serious as murder.^{20, 21, 22, 23, 24}

The evil of a central right to equality

Reasons for the accusation directed against a person or persons of being a witch and of practising witchcraft are sometimes very complex and contradictory among believers in witchcraft. Central to these reasons is the belief that each member of a community has an equal right to the community’s prosperity – the same right that one community has in relation to another community. When this right seems to be denied or is not experienced by a member in his daily life, especially over a long period, accusations of witchcraft – and a person to be blamed for economic, personal and social misfortunes and dilemmas – come to the fore.^{25, 26, 27}

Origin of accusations

The origin of accusations can take various forms – it can vary from simple neighbourhood strife to personal arguments, bad business deals to jealousy about another’s prosperity and wealth, up to a community’s displeasure at the moral behaviour of a specific person, such as adultery and the alleged desire for someone’s wife or husband or other community-dividing behaviour. It seems, especially, to be the person who prospers beyond the others’ level in his community that falls prey to being named a witch, or to attract and be attacked by the so-called witch and his bewitching because of the witch’s jealousy of this person’s prosperity. The fundamental reasoning is that, to be richer and more prosperous than the rest of the community, this prosperous person must use witchcraft or is a witch with the power to impoverish others.^{28, 29, 30, 31}

In other cases, contrary to the rich-victim-identification, it is the poorest in the community who is blamed of being a witch because it is believed that this deprived person is jealous of and hates others due to their better position and belongings and uses witchcraft to harm them. How imbalanced these allegations of witchcraft are, is reflected by the fact that most complainants who say they are bewitched by a person, are older, less successful persons who have reached a life stage where the ability to prosper is absent, or who, over a long period of continuous efforts, failed to obtain success through their own shortcomings. An individual is then identified, accused and blamed for these life dilemmas and inequalities.^{32, 33, 34, 35}

Personal conflict, tension and especially meanness in daily life, as said, play a strong role in allegations of bewitching. Private scores are to be settled this way, while selfish motives to cover up own wrong-doing, are often the basis for these fraudulent accusations and blaming other individuals of being dishonest and mean. The community as a whole is also sometimes involved in stirring up accusations of witchcraft and identifying an individual to be blamed of being a witch in times of large community disasters, such as protracted droughts, death by epidemics and death as a result of disasters like earthquakes. Even the reinforcement and maintenance of moral values, customs, beliefs and the habits of a community are abused by communities, leaders and individuals to accuse others. Because their “unsocial” behaviour, it is believed, they have invoked or are going to invoke harm from the ancestral spirits.^{36, 37, 38, 39}

The handicapped as a victim

It frequently seems to be the emotional, cognitive and mentally handicapped individual, who is less capable of defending himself, that is picked as victim and branded a witch by the “good” traditional healer. These unfortunate people are indoctrinated over time to believe not only that they are “witches”, but that they even believe that they did transgress when they are in fact not really guilty. Such an “identified witch” confesses:⁴⁰, p. 58 “I do not remember doing it, but I believe I was the cause”.

Physical torture, as part of this indoctrination to break them into their role as a witch and bewitching by the “good” traditional healer with the community’s cooperation, is also evident:

“The child’s family accused me. The village elders decided we should visit a famous witch-finder in Mozambique. The journey was long, five days, and the diviner immediately knew that I was the one. On the journey back they made me carry a large rock as punishment and they beat me with a stick the whole way. I fainted. They gave me water and made me carry on. They tried to make me ride on the back of a dog. Then they filled my blanket with sand and made me carry it”.⁴¹

Witchcraft beliefs offer a catharsis to assuage fear

In short, Holland⁴², p. 16 describes the dangerous aims and intentions of witchcraft beliefs and practices, in which the traditional healer plays a dominant role, when she concludes: “Witchcraft beliefs offer a kind of catharsis to assuage fear, the need for revenge feelings of jealousy in the face of disparity of circumstances, and the misery of inexplicable misfortune. They provided society with scapegoats”.

Discussion

The diagnosis of assumed supernatural phenomena, like witchcraft, is fraudulent and without any scientific basis to support it. It is clear that the traditional healers and the local culture of societies are responsible for the creation and the maintenance from generation to generation of the belief system of bewitching and wickedness. Here the healer stands central in his manipulation and management of the supernatural solely for his benefit. His witch-hunting and -finding leads to harming others’ lives, property, personal, social and economic rights; he brings immense hardship to many through his false and malevolent practice in his self-promotion for status and money.^{43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48}

Strength and limitations

Enough research evidence was available to reflect the dynamics that perpetuate and maintain witchcraft in South African society, although the phenomenon is limited to a small segment of the population.

There was in the past and there still is today a very low interest in the activities surrounding and role-players involved in witchcraft. This study's informative impact on witchcraft will be limited in light of the official status that was awarded in 2007 to the South African traditional healer and which canonises him as a proper health practitioner.

Conclusions

It is time to stop romanticising the evils and the misdemeanours of the traditional healer: only in this way will society, the law, religion, politics, culture and health be free from the tyranny of superstition, witchcraft, religious dogmas, occultism and paganism that are such an inherent part of the traditional healer's practice.⁴⁹

Notwithstanding the auspices of the Traditional Health Practitioners Act (Act No 22, 2007) and the scape-goating of the witch as the sole practitioner of ritual, occult and muthi murders by the Witchcraft Suppression Act (Act No 3, 1957), parliamentarian sympathy and conferring an "African Science" label on traditional healing, the door must be closed in South Africa for the traditional healer to misuse the insecure, under-educated and to commit improper and criminal conduct to ensure an income and maintain personal power. He is a true Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.⁵⁰, ⁵¹, ⁵², ⁵³