

A Community-Education Strategy to Counter Witchcraft-related Crime.

It is impossible to begin to understand Africa without facing up to the chronic and widespread fear of witchcraft curses. Many people see witches behind every calamity. They can also see witchcraft behind someone's remarkable success. In fact, it can become an impediment to economic development. A farmer near our Africa base used modern agricultural methods and got a bumper harvest, while his neighbours got the usual poor harvest. The locals decided he must have used charms ("medicine") to boost his crops at the expense of theirs; they beat him up and nearly killed him. Fishermen have told me that if one of them gets too good a catch, the others can accuse him of using witchcraft, and when he lands his catch, customers can pass him by: who wants to buy from a witch? As we try to tell people, fear of witchcraft is the friend of poverty and the enemy of development.

For many people, the fear of witchcraft can be so great that they think they are doing a community service if they kill suspected witches. Witch-hunting is very much alive here. Children can even accuse their own grandparents. On the other hand, the witch-hunts can be a way of exacting retribution or money (extortion), or avoiding paying a debt, or purely an excuse to satisfy their blood lust. Near our city, two years ago, a young man died and since one side of his face had collapsed shortly before he died, and this seemed so strange (Bell's palsy?), locals suspected he was killed by a witchcraft curse. A diviner was consulted, and then, just after the burial, a sixty-five-year-old lady was dragged away from the group of mourners, tossed into a second grave they had dug, and buried alive. A man in a nearby village told us, "These days, we old folk are living in a climate of fear."

About four years ago, Inspector Peter, a thickset criminal investigation officer in our city, asked me to come alongside an indigenous body called MUJATA, who are seeking to address witchcraft-related violence and other community issues, using traditional networks. You might describe MUJATA as a community reconciliation program. What is especially interesting to me is that even traditional cultural leaders in this group are openly questioning some aspects of their own culture. This is no culturally-insensitive, foreign project imposed on nationals, but a fully home-grown initiative. They were already well up-and-running when Insp. Peter asked me to help them set up a community-education strategy.

The police know the hotspots, and that is where we try to go. I am not there every time, but if I am present they usually get me to do the teaching on witchcraft, although one or two others are doing more of that now. We try to set up local groups in the towns we visit, and leave them with teaching materials, so they can continue the work. But the key message is very simple, and a simple arm gesture can pass it on.

If a group comes along with knives and clubs, and accuses someone of being a witch, I urge folk to ask them, “Unajuaje?” (“How do you know?”) As we yell it out, each of us throws up an arm (as an action to help the word stick and spread). “*How do you know*” that this one is a witch? If the “doctor” (the traditional diviner) told them, how does *he* know? I tell them what God’s word says about His creation of all the angels, before he made Adam and Eve, how some rebelled, and it is they who are the evil spirits, or demons. I tell them how satan and his evil army are deceivers. Satan deceived our mother and father and is still a deceiver. As the father of lies (John 8:44) satan can falsely accuse innocent people by lying to the diviner when he has his ‘revelations’. Demons may imitate the voices of the dead (who are not even here as the ‘doctor’ thinks, because God’s word makes it clear they are either in paradise or in God’s spirit gaol, and God severely warns us not to try to talk with them). Evil spirits can play with the diviner’s mind (or he can work himself up into a highly suggestible state!) so that he thinks he is speaking with ‘the fathers’. Then he can be given the name of a helpless, innocent old woman (or man) and name her as a witch. That naming can be a death sentence. Again, as Jesus said in John 8, satan is a murderer.

I urge people, if they want protection from demonic curses, not to go to the ‘doctor’ who claims to contact the dead, since he will not be the servant of God but the slave of demons. I like to tell them about Clement, a man once feared across Zambia and beyond. At first, he was amazed at his divination powers, but after many years he was driven to despair, as he discovered that he was the prisoner of the powers. *He* did not have *them*: *they* had *him*, and were using him as a tool, as a farmer uses a hoe, until God set him free. Instead, they should get onside with the Great Protector: it makes no sense to ask bandits and burglars to protect your home. Why seek spiritual protection from your worst enemy, the deceiver. Why go to the “doctors”, who may convince you they are protecting you but in fact serve the very worst enemy of your tribe and family? Their masters, the demons, may miraculously heal you today, to build people’s trust in the diviner, and tomorrow give him the word that you are a witch, and so kill you.

There has been a debate going on in different parts of Africa, involving anthropologists, lawyers, people concerned for the rights of the elderly, and others, concerning how to handle the issue of fear of witchcraft. Where we are, the official stance of the government, so I have been told, is that witchcraft is not real. On the other hand, there is The Witchcraft Act which prohibits not only witchcraft threats and naming of people as witches but witchcraft practice itself, and provides for accused witches to be banished to special compounds. Sometimes in the past, not only chiefs but even regional or district government leaders have called on the services of highly-respected diviners to ‘cleanse’ villages of witches – an activity which is arguably contrary to the Act, which prohibits the use of witchcraft for both harmful and benign purposes. Some debunk all talk of witchcraft, including the legislation, which has sometimes been viewed with disdain as a hangover from colonial times when they supposedly did not fully understand African culture!

However, the Act is not a dead letter; it is still revised from time to time, and we are still hearing news of successful convictions with imprisonment, especially for the offence of “Naming” (which is essentially incitement to murder). There is also legislation specifically governing traditional and alternative health practitioners. This, too, prohibits witchcraft. However, the wide-open advertising of such services as finding lost people, guarding farms (i.e., without guards!), finding you love, etc., shows the half-hearted attitude towards enforcing this. The debunkers of the law or of the existence of witchcraft insist that education is the answer. But for the killing to slow down, educators need to find ears, and the “enlightened” approach is not likely to win much of an audience in villages, where people are sure that witchcraft is real, and where the educators may be dismissed as out-of-touch townies patronizing them. The ‘listeners’ may show respect, but their ears may be blocked.

On the other hand, I, as a Christian missionary, can come to them fully agreeing that witchcraft is real, simply because I know from the word of God that satan and his demons are real. People often seem surprised that a European would believe that witchcraft is real, and it seems to compensate to some degree for the fact that I am only a guest. In fact, my friend, Peter, argues that an expatriate in this work has the distinct advantage of not being from any particular tribe, and therefore being outside of inter-tribal rivalry. People can see that we don’t dismiss them or their fears, and from the responses we get, their ears appear to be wide open. They hear me saying that witchcraft is real, and from this platform we can go on to talk about the deceitfulness of witchcraft because it is all simply the work of evil spirits – even if it claims to be benign – since the enemy disguises himself as an angel of light. The respected diviner may claim to have cleansed an area of fifty witches, but “*How does he know* [and up go the arms] that they were witches? *How do we know* that those fifty people banished as witches were not, in fact, fifty innocent old people?”

“Oh, the spirits of the dead told the ‘doctor’.”

“Really? *How do you know?* He claims that the spirits told him, but *how do you know* he is telling the truth? Or, if the names of the alleged witches *really were* revealed to him by spirits, *which* spirits?”

“Oh, of course, the spirits of the *fathers*,”

“*How do you know?* How do you know that the ‘doctor’, himself, was not deceived – by *evil* spirits?”

The challenge is to encourage them to be to be questioning (Is the diviner deceiving us? Or could he, himself, be deceived?) without our coming across as dismissive. It is always good if we can get the old men talking about how they have been deceived by ‘doctors’. If one is brave enough to say something, it can free up another to speak, ... and another. Then they become the teachers, and not us. And they can continue long after we have gone. Please pray with me that even the diviners, themselves, who believe that their revelations are from the fathers, might begin to ask, “Could demons be deceiving me? *How*

do I know it is really the fathers who have been speaking with me? And is it true that God has forbidden what I do?” There is another question we want all the villagers to ask: “Even if the diviner *were* to totally cleanse our village of witches, how do we know that the spirits would then leave us alone, and that more people would not come under their control to replace those witches? Will we kill the evil spirits?” Is it not better to go to the top – to God, himself, the Great Protector – rather than offending him by going to the diviners who claim to contact the dead, which God forbids?

Some ‘doctors’ may promise prosperity for your business, or promotion at work or in the university, but they may require you to bring them certain human body parts, and they will use them to prepare ‘powerful’ potions. That, obviously, requires a murder – perhaps of an infant or an albino. There is big money to be had through selling albino body parts, since they are believed to have great power. It multiplies the woes of these poor people who already have an unbelievably miserable existence. So we simply ask people, “Why should anyone believe these ‘doctors’?” If they are evil enough to order murders, aren’t they evil enough to deceive you? Why believe the promises of murderers? And if, today, you guard your family secret about a murderous ‘doctor’ in your family, so the police can’t find him and small children keep disappearing, don’t complain if, tomorrow, your own baby is murdered to supply a ‘doctor’ whom another family has protected. Today it’s someone else’s grandchild; tomorrow it could be yours. We tell them that children and albinos are murdered because people’s lips are sewn up tight with the ‘cotton’ of brotherhood (undugu). But again, when people say that a certain doctor’s powerful charms will bring you protection, or success in business, politics, sport, love or farming, the key question is, “How do you know?”

As I write this, a major crackdown on diviners is taking place, with several arrests made. However, many are already operating well underground (or, at least, the murderous side of their business is well underground), and it is notoriously difficult to uncover them – although their customers somehow find them, and their families – and the chiefs – must know them. One big problem frustrating the police is that so many mouths are firmly shut. Many villagers would believe that their diviner is a good diviner, who helps them and protects them. He is close to the fathers (at least, to *their* fathers – *other* diviners and their ancestral spirits may be seen as evil) and the fathers run the show. God is somehow far off. I have no doubt that the legislation is necessary, but how do you clamp down on a world view? Apart from that, many people will believe that exposing the powerful ‘doctor’ to the police, testifying against him in court, or, as a judge, giving him more than a suspended sentence, is suicide; it is inviting fatal retribution – to be cursed by the same powerful man. In this climate, where it is so difficult to root out these people from ‘above’, is there a way of attacking the problem from ‘below’?

What we hope to do is to chip away at destroying the *market* for the services of these ‘doctors’. And to do that, we have to sow seeds of doubt, and get people questioning the world-view that keeps the market alive. This is the goal of the “Unajuaje?” (“How-do-you-know?”) program. At the same time, if more professing ‘Christians’ become *true* believers, and are emboldened by the Holy Spirit to expose these evil ‘doctors’, and testify in court, the Witchcraft Act should begin to have more teeth. Of course, that is all very easy for us to say, but these brothers and sisters who testify will be in grave danger – not in danger of death by cursing (at least, not if they are *true* believers and have the Holy Spirit in them – something I like to stress) but they may still be killed by the vigilante guardians of family loyalty.

Since the real issue is one of world-view, believers in Jesus know full well what can demolish this market – a mass turning to Christ. However, since our meetings are semi-government activities, although I can urge folk to get onside with the Great Protector, and I can urge them not to *further* offend Him by taking the law into their own hands, I am limited in what I can say beyond this. The local pastor, though, is still there when we’ve gone. So it is important to work with him, to equip him to equip his people to explain *God’s* gospel to any who might now come and ask, “But just how do I get onside with God?”

All too often the local pastors will not know the gospel themselves. Another problem is that some Christians seem to have a dualistic view of God and satan, where the two are almost on a par. The Bible’s clear teaching on the sovereignty of the righteous God over life and death does not seem to be widely understood even in churches. Satan, demons and witchcraft are given the credit for calamities while God takes a back seat. It is a far cry from Luther’s classic statement that even the devil, himself, is God’s devil. Acknowledgement of one’s own sin and personal responsibility for evil and offense against God does not seem to feature large in church or society.

Sometimes, in doing this community education work, I am on my own with Inspector Peter, plus one or two local police officers and local government leaders. At other times, we are a large group including a sheikh, cultural leaders, such as priest-chiefs, especially Chief Soja, who is chairman of MUJATA, the ‘body-guards’ of some chiefs, some traditional ‘herbalists’ (to put it kindly!), and journalists. The meetings often make it onto national TV, and some of the teaching also! Sometimes our message is not exactly clear and uniform. We might all urge the people to stop taking the law into their own hands, but while I might say,...

“Don’t take the law into your own hands. Leave it to God alone to expose or deal with the witches; if we humans (chiefs or their diviners, sheihks , governments, pastors or MUJATA) get involved in that, it is too dangerous. Innocent people can be lynched by the mob or banished. Even if a diviner is not involved, tales against the accused can grow very tall on their journey from mouth to mouth (We even sometimes do a

‘Chinese Whispers’ skit’).”

... the chiefs might say,

“Yes, don’t take the law into your own hands. Bring the suspect to us. We have a committee of “experts” who will find out if she is a witch or not.”

So we would ask folk back home to be praying. Pray firstly for those I am working alongside of. In teaching the crowd, we are teaching one another. Please pray for wisdom – being salt and light in a dark place can be tricky going. Sometimes I have had to openly distance myself from what is said or done.

Pray for the Spirit of God to work on hard hearts and to give light to the blind. Pray for protection and for the work of evangelizing the ‘evangelists’, equipping them to proclaim the gospel of grace which is the only real solution to this horrible evil. Pray for the ‘doctors’. I love the promise of Jesus in John 6:37b:

“...*whoever* comes to me [Jesus], I will never throw out.”

JOHN ROWSE.