

Shaking the Cage: Witch Mongers & FAQ

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Introduction

Dr. Wayne Dyer says in *Pulling Your Own Strings* that instead of agonizing over other people's beliefs, you should quietly consider why you would never hold such foolish and incorrect beliefs.

But the recent discussion on witchcraft offers fodder for quiet reflection on the non-inquisitional attitude that makes people believe weird things. As a child, one bums around the village soaking up stories without questioning them and over time, the stories become part of their identity and become part of their reality and worldview. The stories are told passionately and honestly by old men around log fires in the night. But honesty is not synonymous with truth. We must be committed to determining the truth. And remember that however passionately we desire something to be true, that does not make them true.

At first, I wanted to take Wayne's advice and move onto other things. But I realized that silence in the face of myth is tantamount to approval. In fact, to let the claims of witchcraft hold up without shaking the cage holding them would be tantamount to what Darrel calls "becoming one with the dumbness." I explain below what Darrel means

Becoming One with the Dumbness

Darrel Bristow-Bovey writes in *I Moved Your Cheese*, "The world is awash with guff, with humbug and bush wash and just plain dumbness, and it is a full-time job to wade through it all without becoming so tired that you just lie down and let it roll over you and become one with the dumbness"

As a self-declared slayer of weird beliefs, I cannot afford the luxury of letting the curtain come down on that discussion without a critical summary. I will make some general comments and then end with the FAQ for Witchmongers.

Let us remember that religion and other bodies of beliefs are a way of coping with life, but religion is not the only one. Others use totemism, rituals, witchcraft, drugs and so on. Whether the claims they make are true and whether they are founded on fact is what we are interested in.

Let us not stop to ask ourselves why these witches are always poor women without financial or material wealth. If they can do magic, why can't they create wealth for themselves? Why can't they cure AIDS and cancer and become millionaires?

Hypocritical Throwbacks

The comment by the witchmongers in this forum exposes what a throwback some of us still are despite our education and instruction from the institutions of higher learning. We proudly define ourselves as Africans and dismiss questioning

voices as "western influence." Yet at the very same time, when we are sick we go to hospital to enjoy the benefits of western medicine. Right now you are reading this email because of everything "western."

Why the hypocrisy? The answer is rather simple really.

Why we need Witchcraft to Work

We believe witches have diabolical power because witches serve a social benefit for us. They are an excellent scapegoat for our personal failures. That is the same purpose witches served in the western society. They could be blamed for illness, impotence, lost property and so on. As we have seen, one of our colleagues lost money but instead of taking responsibility, he blamed it on witchcraft.

The burden of failure or loss of fortune can become so heavy, and the pain of loss so deep that we are not able to face them or handle them on our own thus we lay them on witches and enjoy the warm comfort of not having to act to get ourselves out of misery. All we have to do when our relatives suffer is turn round and point a finger at the witch. Burn them and their houses if possible. They thus offer a channel to direct our frustrations and bitterness. Societies that have not learnt healthy ways of grieving have no alternative outlet for their grief except witches.

As a result, we have made them part of our life and have them as part of our socio-psychological make up. They are pillars; they are the final lake where we can drown all our problems. To challenge their potency is ipso facto invalidating our identities, our intelligence and our existence.

That is why I have faced such opposition. I am threatening to take away a very important part of our coping mechanism.

Secondly, witches and the stories surrounding them are part of the fabric that is an African experience. They scare, entertain and introduce an element of unpredictability and control in our lives. It is so scary to believe that the world is brutish and uncaring. We want to believe that there is someone responsible for pain and suffering in our communities. Witches, unlike Satan, are accessible, mortal, and visible and can be manipulated at a price. As such they offer hope, however false, as being the last resort when everything else fails (including modern medicine). Their presence and physicality amongst us lends some immediacy to their use as recourse.

Thirdly, they conveniently fill knowledge gaps. Convenient because they are often a valley away or a village away. Or even a country away. It is easier to travel to someone we can hand the problem to than to do personal research. Because we don't understand why a baby would have a stomach-ache, because we don't understand why a baby would be born without a sound mind, we resort to witches to explain and offer solutions to such problems. We have given up our intellectual power to people with jugs and cowrie shells because we are too lazy

to take personal responsibility and are simply too ignorant to know where to get credible help, or are simply too poor to seek required medical help.

Witches take chances, pull nails out of crying babies and can always fall back to "the charms from your enemy were too strong" in case the baby dies.

But we know that science is the touchstone of truth in modern society. We know that money cannot disappear into thin air. We know that a cow cannot eat nails. Yet we choose to believe these patently false claims. Why? Witch doctors don't hypothesize about how nature works, but rather how it ought to work. Science uses evidence to explain nature as it is. And its claims

Because it captures our imagination. Because of the child in us who is enraptured by wide-eyed wonder. Because we are still blind and mystified, defined by the immediate character of our needs - the need for a simple and easily accessible explanation - for example why a bright boy suddenly goes insane. It is less demanding on our faculties to believe "a witch did it" than to study the history of mental illness in a family or study the mind of an individual. I am not endeared to the witchmongers because by questioning, I threaten to strip away their illusions. I threaten to take away part of them.

Most of the stories presented in support of the potency of witchcraft are based on recollections. But a memory is an interpretation, not a record and its not very useful if you don't have the facts.

We should go on facts, not stories. Evidence, not suspicion. Probabilities, not guesses. Explanations, not imaginations. Otherwise we inherit the terrible burden of an undisciplined mind rushing purblind in a conceptual muddle based on the imaginations of bug-eyed goatherds.

Selective Recreation of Reality

Daniel Green, a literary critic says that magical and sacred stories are like other fictional narratives in their selective recreation of reality, but with the difference that the hearers passionately want them to be true.

Do people rise from the dead because they are Kisii? That fallacy is called special pleading in logic. If Kisii witches can raise dead people, they should raise Kenyatta. But they cant and they wont. Anyone who says "you must be a Kisii to..." is committing special pleading.

The witchmongers must explain why they would never offer "the witch did it" as an explanation about why Kshs 100,000 has disappeared from a cash box they are entrusted with in a bank.

FAQs & Discussion

OJ: Does it mean the things you don't understand, or you cannot prove are not real?

ALIET: No. I understand very well. I understand that the stories are not evidenced.

OJ: You say people who witness or experience witchcraft are poor or uneducated. Mmmmm! What about politicians?

ALIET: They are desperate. And as we have seen, even the educated can be seduced by the mysticism of witchcraft and the lazy, simple answers it offers as solutions.

OJ: We have also seen those who converted to Christianity and became preachers confess that they used to practice, or use the services of wachawi.

ALIET: Yep. Some also confess that they smoked bhang while preparing for exams. That is not proof that smoking bhang helps people pass exams.

OJ: Of course it is easy for me to accept that witchcraft is real because to begin with, it is talked about very prominently even in the Bible.

ALIET: The Bible also speaks about dragons. That does not mean dragons ever existed.

D.O: As I returned the dishes to my mother's house, we were with my younger brother when we met with the sight of a naked tall man running in our compound towards me...we screamed Jajuok! Jajuok! The man took off and jumped over the fence behind the home with such ease like he was stepping over a mound of fresh dung. He disappeared into the banana plantation ehind our home.

ALIET: At night, a scared boy can have visual and auditory hallucinations. It was probably a dog. How come you dont see these tall naked people during the day? The reason caveman decided to sleep at night and roam during the day is because human eyesight is very poor at night. Not only yours.

D.O: I caught the sight of a naked short man running about in the compound! He was so surprised that he stood there for a while. When I called out, he took off and jumped into the banana plantation.

ALIET: You startled the animal. Maybe it was a man. Or a dog. Men are not the only animals that walk at night.

D.O: I have since heard many stories about witches and wizards.

ALIET: Me too. Whats your point?

D.O: Why would a grown man be running in someone else's home in the nude at night?

ALIET: This is all the more reason why you should quietly consider that you may have seen a dog.

M. O.: Aliet's assertion that it has to do with poor and uneducated communities does not hold. The jajuoks as understood there mean what the bible says of lucifer "steal, kill and Destroy"

ALIET: Of course. That is the reason for their social construction. Even pornography is meant to titillate and arouse.

O. J.: they throw rock particles or sand onto your roof (hizo huwa mabati, bila ceiling board), or runs a stick around the edge of the roof to create such disturbance that you wont be able to sleep. Am not sure that would entertain.

ALIET: Nobody likes to lie awake at night. I agree.

Metal Will: You need to take a puff of smthing I could recommend privately . . ha,ha. Too much logic is not good bwana.

ALIET: Too much logic is not good for what. Evidence please.

MA: Your argument is as good as PNU asking ODM for 'evidence' that the elections were stolen because Kibaki was 'legally' declared winner and elected.

ALIET: False analogy.

MA: You are the leading in that modernity and civilization. I rest my case and don't want to continue with the debate. We have our positions anyway.

ALIET: Investing emotionally in a false belief does not help anybody. Why dont you want to continue? Quietly consider why you are feeling upset and frustrated.

MA: ...One person had died - the one who sat where I was supposed to sit.

ALIET: Coincidence.

MA: I withdrew Chacha, carefully put it in my inner pocket of the coat. It disappeared mysteriously.

ALIET: People lose money. You are neither the first nor the last one. Explain why it is more reasonable to believe that the money "vanished".

MA: They had something like a gun (toy or real). They were kitu six. They took everything that I had and threw some of my clothing on the wall

ALIET: Yes, robbers steal. Choose your hotels carefully and avoid night travel.

MA: To understand these events, you need to know that someone (I don't want to mention the name) had told my mother just before the above events that something was going to happen alie na kunyoa nywele yote. How I survived just leave it. There are many details that I cannot disclose.

ALIET: This is called special pleading.

MA: He was taken to the Kamba medicine lady for treatment on many days and he improved. One day the lady was doing major treatment. She ordered he be shaved and applied some oil on his head vigorously and moved then hand around the head. She'd then rest on place and tell me (I was there) that there was a lot of heat there. She'd struggle pulling something out and manage to come with something the size of a rubber eraser then throw it in water where it 'ran' as if it was alive (anybody seen how a mole comes out of its hole when water is applied?) then die down. She removed three such things.

ALIET: This is an interesting story. By your own admission you did not see or inspect what was allegedly removed from the head. I have also made coins "disappear" before audiences. It doesn't mean the coins vanished. It's a trick. You are not the first one to be tricked by a witchdoctor and you are not the last. I hope you weren't charged too much money.