 Stud Tribes Tribals, 10(2): 163-172 (2012)

Witchraft and Social Life in Zimbabwe: Documenting the Evidence

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KEYWORDS Beliefs. Evidence. Occult. Power. Sexuality. Social Life. Witchcraft. Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT This concept paper examines and documents the evidence of witchcraft and social life in Zimbabwe. The information contained in this article was largely derived from literature. However, oral data also formed part of the information used in this article. This paper reveals that beliefs in witchcraft are deeply rooted in Zimbabwe. The paper also reveals that in Zimbabwe, witchcraft is associated with power/politics, economic activities and sexuality. The paper concludes that since witchcraft, as an occult practice, is by nature secretive, it is difficult to substantiate empirically in most cases. For this reason, witchcraft beliefs are usually expressed in rumors and allusions. The paper calls for systematic, empirical and grounded studies on occult as it interacts with politics, economics and sexuality to get a better understanding of the phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

The realm of the occult, as reflected through witchcraft discourses, is a hot topic the world over (Geschiere 1996). Magic, witchcraft and sorcery are important features of the everyday life of many Zimbabweans. Beliefs related to these phenomena continue to constitute an endearing and enduring aspect of social life in Zimbabwe in spite of modern education, science and technology (Chavunduka 2001; Bourdillon 1998; Kohnert 1996; Lagewerf 1992; Mbiti 1991). The researchers dedicate this paper to an examination and documentation of the evidence of the relationship between the occult and aspects of social life, particularly politics, economy, and sexuality in Zimbabwe.

Although this concept paper focuses on Zimbabwe, the researchers also refer to research and information from other parts of the world to illuminate the Zimbabwean material and information on the occult in general and witchcraft in particular. The intention is to synthesize the available information in the search both for what is known and what requires more investigation and research. The materials used to build this article were largely derived from journal articles and textbooks. Oral data also formed part of the information used in this article.

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE OCCULT?

It has become common for academic writers to use the term "occult" as an analytic category to which various types of mystical belief and activity including witchcraft and magic are assigned (Ter Haar 2009). Witchcraft is a complex and multifarious phenomenon in its perceived nature, effect, and function. It covers a variety of practices, from gruesome rituals, through the secret use of physical or magical poisons, to "bizarre behavior that goes against the social norms of society without necessarily doing harm to anyone" (Bourdillon 1997: 2). According to Chavunduka (1980), the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) defines witchcraft as the use of harmful medicines, charms, magic and any other means or devices in causing any illness, misfortune or death in any person or in causing any injury to any person (Mafico 1986; Simmons 2000). Witches are perhaps the most horrific manifestations of humanity's dark side in the Zimbabwean imagination, flying or riding the backs of night animals through the darkness of the night, consuming the flesh of corpses (Chavunduka 1980; Galangwe 2009; Mbiti 1991). In Zimbabwe, popular perceptions of witchcraft associate it with the use of harmful

magic and any other means or devices in causing illness, misfortune or death in person or animal or in causing any injury to any person or animal or property. It is the paradigm of all evil and anti-social behavior (Chavunduka 2001). Chavunduka (1980) distinguishes between witchcraft and sorcery and notes that while witchcraft is seen as something intrinsic to the person, to his soul or his personality, sorcery is a technique or a tool employed by an individual under certain circumstances. Sorcery is evil magic against others (Zvarevashe 1997). Recourse to sorcery is always on deliberate, conscious, voluntary basis while witchcraft may be unconscious and involuntary. The main difference between a sorcerer and a witch is that the former achieves his evil end by magic (the art of controlling impersonal supernatural forces held responsible for the succession of events) whereas the latter (often conceived as a woman) achieves her evil by some mystical power inherent in her personality (Lagerwerf 1992). While witchcraft is usually distinguished from sorcery, the Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe do not make such a distinction as terms *varoyi* and *abathakathi* are used respectively to refer to witches and sorcerers. That is, the Shona use the term *varoyi* to refer to both witches and sorcerers while the Ndebele use the term *abathakathi* to refer to the same. Witchcraft is the antithesis of social order (Geschiere and Fisiy 1994). In Zimbabwe misfortune of any kind may be attributed to the work of witches who are said to have the propensity to do evil (Rodlach 2006). Witches put themselves beyond the norms of society.

Witchcraft can be inherited from one's mother or some maternal ancestor who was herself a witch or possession by an alien spirit or acquired through medicines provided by another witch (Bourdillon 1998; Mafico 1986). Similarly, men can also inherit witchcraft from their ancestors and may acquire it through means such as those already alluded to in relation to women. In this connection, witchcraft is a manifestation of mystical forces which may be inborn in a person, inherited, or acquired (Mbiti 1991). The commonly used methods of detecting witches in Zimbabwe include divination either by spirit possession or the throwing of bones or poison ordeal (Mafico 1986). A diviner (*n'anga* or *sangoma*) may identify a witch under the influence of the divining spirit in him or her. Throwing of bones is done by a diviner as a way of identifying a witch or witches. The direction in which the bones fall to the ground indicates to the diviner who the witch is. The poison ordeal is administered on an alleged witch. If a person to whom the poison is administered vomits the poison, she is believed to be innocent but if she retains the poison, she is defined as a witch (Chavunduka 1980).

In Zimbabwe witchcraft charges often emanate from quarrels, jealousy, envy, cruelty, status competition, hatred towards a successful neighbour, and so on. It is only when reconciliation is impossible that witchcraft charges provide the only means for permanently sealing an end to a relationship.

OCCULT BELIEFS IN ZIMBABWE

The belief in occult forces is deeply-rooted in Zimbabwe. Regardless of their levels of education, religion and social class, Zimbabweans generally tend to believe that a realm of the occult exists and regularly interacts with the physical sphere of existence (Bourdillon 1998; Chavunduka 1986, 2001; Lagerwerf 1992). In spite of modern education, it is very difficult to eradicate this belief (Lagerwerf 1992; Mbiti 1991). For example, Chavunduka (2001) noted that many Zimbabwean Christians believe in witchcraft and that some even practise it or attempt to practise it. Thus, many Zimbabweans are convinced that witchcraft constitutes a real threat to society. When something goes wrong in the welfare of the individual or his family, in most cases he will suspect that someone has used evil magic, sorcery or witchcraft against him or his household, animals and fields (Rodlach 2006). Linde (1996) established that a rural Zimbabwean man attributed the appearance of needles in his leg to witchcraft while medical practitioners suspected that the needles were self introduced. If there is a dispute between neighbours or relatives, one party may want to get rid of the other by means of mystical forces (Bourdillon 1998).

Far from disappearing in the face of modernization, the occult, expressed through various acts of witchcraft and use of secret 'medicines', is ubiquitous in Africa, implicated in conflicts between rural and urban, state and community, the elderly and the young, rich and poor, and men and women (Federici 2008). Secret

medicines are closely associated with witchcraft (Bourdillon 1998). One of the most striking aspects of post-colonial Africa has been the re-emergence of witchcraft in public discourse (Dolan 2002). Such re-emergence in Zimbabwe is evidenced by the legal recognition of witchcraft in Zimbabwe in 2006. The Zimbabwe Witchcraft Amendment Act of 2006 now recognises that there is, indeed, the practice of witchcraft that had been deliberately downplayed by the successive colonial governments (The Herald 2006). Witchcraft is very much alive in the average Zimbabwean's everyday life (Bourdillon 1998; Chavunduka 2001). The Shona and Ndebele of Zimbabwe very often explain disease and misfortune in terms of witchcraft (Chavunduka 2001; Rodlach 2006). According to Rodlach (2006), the interpretation of HIV and AIDS as a result of sorcery has some obvious implications for HIV and AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment in Zimbabwe. In other words, those who believe that sorcery is behind HIV/AIDS may not take the necessary precautions during sexual encounters because they see HIV/AIDS in the doing of some evil agent. Occasionally some people admit to performing witchcraft. These confessions are usually made in church and in traditional and formal courts (Mafico 1986). Cases of infants refusing to breastfeed from their mothers are cited in everyday life as evidence that the mothers are witches. Very often the mothers confess their witchcraft and this result in their babies sucking. There are a number of reported ritual killings associated with the occult in Zimbabwe. The occult, as epitomized by witchcraft, is intertwined with politics, economics, and sexuality as will be explicated below. The three aspects that interact with the occult are also inextricably linked in some cases.

THE OCCULT AND POLITICS IN ZIMBABWE

Zimbabweans often link politics with the occult, confirming the assertion that the omnipresence of witchcraft in modern politics is certainly no joke (Geschiere and Fisiy 1994). In Zimbabwe, witchcraft is associated with power and witchcraft beliefs are often instrumentalized for political purposes (Kohnert 1996). Writing within the context of the Shona in Zimbabwe, Bourdillon (1998) says any kind of power may be associated with witchcraft. There is a general belief that some of Africa's long-serving leaders only manage to hold on to political power that long on the sustenance of the magical powers of witchcraft (Kulishani 2007). Since there is no evidence to support this conceptualization of witchcraft, there is need for further investigation on this issue in Zimbabwe.

The association between witchcraft and power in Zimbabwe is very historical. Witchcraft was a significant concern for the colonial administrators in Zimbabwe as in other African countries. In 1899, in colonial Zimbabwe, legislation was passed that declared witchcraft to be a false belief in contrast to Western rationality (Rutherford 1999). According to the Act (Witchcraft Suppression Act), witchcraft had no real existence (Chavunduka, 1980). It was illegal to accuse anyone of being a witchcraft practitioner. Rutherford (1999) states that the holding of witchcraft beliefs by Africans was frequently taken to be a sign of their backwardness in comparison to Europeans. The Comaroffs, cited by Rutherford (1999), argue that witchcraft is not a sign of backwardness but a commentary on the ill gains, inequities and forms of domination found in Africa. In this regard, the government of Zimbabwe has in 2006 revised the Witchcraft Suppression Act to make witchcraft a punishable offence as long as there is sufficient evidence to that effect. Part VI of Chapter V of the Zimbabwe Witchcraft Suppression Act was amended and the amendments came into effect on 1 July 2006 (Government Gazette 2006). The Witchcraft Suppression Act had provisions very similar to those in Malawi and Zambia (Malawi Law Commission 2006).

The legal reform was necessitated by the recognition that the Witchcraft Suppression Act was alien to the common beliefs of Zimbabweans; it did not address realities in the Zimbabwean society. The reform recognizes the existence of witchcraft and makes it a criminal offence to use witchcraft to harm others. The revised Witchcraft Act (Part VI of Chapter V) however, deters malicious people from groundlessly accusing others of witchcraft and hurting them by trials and ordeals (Government Gazette 2006). It is an offence to groundlessly or by the purported use of non-natural means accuse another person of witchcraft. As such, implementation of the reform is difficult as it is difficult for the

prosecutor to prove that the accused indeed used supernatural powers to harm others. It can be noted that the colonial administration and the post-colonial administration show both continuity and discontinuity in their attitude towards witchcraft; continuity in the sense that there is penalty for one who accuses another of witchcraft. However, the same aspect shows discontinuity to some extent. According to colonial law on witchcraft, it was an offence to accuse someone of being a witch whether or not the accuser had evidence to that effect because legally witchcraft was non-existent. On the other hand, with the post-colonial revision of the Witchcraft Law, witchcraft is a punishable offence and one accused of witchcraft is subject to prosecution but the accuser must provide evidence. The issue of evidence may be difficult to come by and under such conditions the accuser may be prosecuted, a scenario reminiscent of the colonial era. The implications of the revised Zimbabwe Witchcraft Suppression Act (Part VI of Chapter V) in light of the challenge of supplying tangible evidence to prove that someone is a witch is an area that is yet to be thoroughly investigated.

In Zimbabwe, the potential of witchcraft in providing access to power in a community is widely acknowledged (Bourdillon 1990). Politicians thus readily use threatening language to instill fear, to give the impression that they have the power to harm by occult means. Occult forces thus become a weapon in the battle for supremacy among political rivals (Kohnert 1996). Kohnert further notes that there are autocratic rulers who allegedly use witchcraft and magic beliefs in an offensive way, either by attacking rivals directly by means of black magic or psychological warfare. It is often rumoured that some state functionaries keep protective charms, regularly consult *n'angas/sangomas* and in some cases keep *tokoloshis* or *zvikwambo* to further their own acquisition of wealth and power, which is usually at the expense of their constituents (Simmons 2000). This use of witchcraft by politicians is alluded to by Kohnert (1996) who states that the use of experts in occult as high-ranking councillors of African heads of state is well known. The implication is that political leaders in Africa allegedly use the occult specialists as advisors. Politicians in Zimbabwe are not an exception as Zimbabwe is an African country.

Witchcraft accusations have been seen as exceptionally useful instruments in local and national power struggles (Isak 1993). Isak further highlights that analysts have viewed witchhunting as an attempt to intimidate political opponents. During the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe, witches were killed by the "guerillas" (freedom fighters) as one way of showing dissatisfaction with the colonial Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1899. It appears that the execution of witches had the approval of local communities and their leaders (Bourdillon 1998). The execution of witches, according to Bourdillon (1998), indicates the strength of the feeling against the White Government's protection of people who were believed to be witches; a protest against the Witchcraft Suppression Act.

In Cameroon, power, wealth and success are viewed as the result of occult powers (Isak 1993). A similar scenario also obtains in Zimbabwe. Should villagers die or experience misfortune, the powerful or wealthy may be accused of witchcraft. Extreme success politically or economically is likely to result in suspicions of witchcraft among the Shona of Zimbabwe (Bourdillon 1998). There is a tendency to believe that people have to succeed up to certain 'normal' levels. When they are extremely successful, they are often charged with the use of occult powers since the occult is often associated with the unusual, the extraordinary or the realm of the supernatural.

In Zimbabwe, competition for headmanship or chieftainship is often marked by witchcraft accusations. Stories are told of chiefs and headmen ascending to power through occult means and being bewitched by aspiring candidates. Open accusations of witchcraft are almost always preceded by tension and conflict including conflict over succession and leadership within the community. Since chieftainship and headmanship are hereditary and not elective, witchcraft in this context is linked with power and kinship. Thus, relatives who have the potential to inherit headmanship or chieftainship are also likely to be the ones to be accused or suspected of using witchcraft to terminate the life of the incumbent so that they assume power. As Geschiere and Fisiy (1994) point out, there is a close link between witchcraft and kinship. In this connection, it can be argued that those who accuse one another of witchcraft are people who ought to like each other but in fact do not (Chavunduka 1980). Traditional political leaders in Zimbabwe allegedly consolidate their

power through use of the occult. Some leaders are believed to use secret medicines to instill a sense of awe and reverence in their subjects. Thus, through use of the occult they develop a mystique of authority, an acquired charisma.

While on the one hand the wealthy and powerful are accused of witchcraft; on the other hand they can also use anti-witchcraft activities to build political capital (Bourdillon 1998). Where political actors such as chiefs or village heads sanction witch-hunting or initiate this, they are viewed positively, as performing an essential social service. In Zimbabwe witch-hunters are referred to as *Tsikamutanda* (literally, step on the stick), based on their use of magic sticks to identify witches mainly among the Shonas. The operation of these occult practitioners often takes place at a communal level, hence the involvement of political leaders. The *Tsikamutandas* claim to have power to cleanse witches of witchcraft as well as to protect the innocent from future misfortune by neutralizing witchcraft.

Another theme that has informed the conceptualization of witchcraft in Zimbabwe is political violence. From the narratives which surround everyday life in Zimbabwe, it is evident that politically-motivated violence in Zimbabwe has led to increased incidence of witchcraft allegations. The 2008 election-related violence propelled the circulation of stories in which perpetrators of violence allegedly received and are still receiving their due. It is widely believed that some victims of political violence have resorted to witchcraft activities to revenge. Some perpetrators of political violence are believed to be insane as a result of being bewitched by their victims. Incidents of mysterious deaths are also reported in connection with use of witchcraft to counter political violence. Misfortunes and mysterious ailments on the part of perpetrators of political violence are often explained in terms occult activities by their victims.

THE OCCULT AND ECONOMICS IN ZIMBABWE

Witchcraft is also a central feature of economic activities and discourses of livelihood in Zimbabwe. Idioms of the market, of capitalist production, and of the consumption of material goods are regularly invoked in witchcraft accusations in Zimbabwe (Parish 2000). Witchcraft accusations and fears become a symptom of the ways in which the distribution of wealth in the Zimbabwean society is skewed, with witches typically attacking those against whom they have a grudge, or of whom they are envious (Bourdillon 1990). Expressions of the occult are well documented in situations of economic change, where the introduction of new resources exacerbates social differentiation and accentuates struggles for power and control (Dolan 2002). Dolan (2002: 663) further notes that witchcraft allegedly seeks to ensure 'an ideology of equality'. While this could be true of the Kenyan society Dolan studied, it appears to be different from the Zimbabwean scenario where witchcraft is sometimes considered to be preoccupied with destroying for its own sake without necessarily being driven by the desire for equalization. Apter (1993), cited in Dolan (2002: 666), describes witches as the 'terror of development'. This description of witches seems partly tenable in the Zimbabwean context as witches are considered to be retrogressive as any development on the part of others arouses their envy and prompts them to exercise their occult in a malevolent way. The wealthy can also be accused of getting rich at the expense of others. Thus, both the haves and have-nots can be charged with making use of occult medicines. For the poor, magic and witchcraft may become a means in the struggle against oppression by establishing "cults of counter-violence" (Kohnert 1996:1347). In view of the preceding, the successful are either afraid of being killed by envious local witches, or they fear being accused and harassed as witches who have acquired their wealth by occult. Thus, in Zimbabwe both the wealthy and the poor can be designated as both victims and perpetrators of the malicious use of occult medicines. More insights are needed on the extent to which the behavior of the rich and the poor is shaped by witchcraft accusations or the fear of it.

In Zimbabwe, as in many African societies, it is common to hear witchcraft (*uroyi/ubutha-khathi*) being used as an explanation for crop failure, livestock failing to reproduce, daughters failing to attract brideprice (*roora/lobola*), and so on. As one interviewee said, "…witchcraft is frequently perceived as a means of settling the score against potential economic rivals." Witchcraft is thus attributed to economic differentiation and competition. This view echoes Green's study of the Rogoro of Tanzania

which showed that witches, motivated by jealousy and greed, attacked people whose 'main mistake was in surpassing their fellow villagers on the path of accumulation' (Dolan 2002: 666). In Zimbabwe the belief that business people may use witchcraft to outdo one another in business is common. This belief is consistent with Kohnert's (1996) assertion that the use of witchcraft in intra-elite competition for economic power is quite common.

In the context of the fear of witchcraft, it is believed that the best way to be a successful business person, who is immune to witchcraft, is to secure protection against competitors and the poor by visiting traditional healers or prophets in African Initiated Churches for anti-witchcraft medicines. The medicines are believed to have the power to counter the effects of witchcraft. Protective medicines in Zimbabwe may be administered on the body, the yard or items to be protected including kraals, among others. It is believed the medicines are repellant to witchcraft. When religious movements embark on programmes to counter witchcraft they claim to be fighting evil. In this connection, their use of the occult is viewed as establishing 'cults of counter violence' (Kohnert 1996: 1349), in which case witchcraft is perceived as an epitome of violence. A conception of the connection between wealth and witchcraft is evident in many African societies. In Cameroon, young entrepreneurs visit anti-witchcraft shrines in order to protect their wealth and prevent witches from siphoning money from these entrepreneurs' international bank accounts (Parish 2000). The shrines specialise in get-rich-quick and financial protection schemes. Protection schemes are also evident in Kenya where healers act to 'clear' or 'open' the way for a client to progress, and make protection medicines that 'close' the body to penetration by witchcraft magic (Ciekawy 1989: 5 cited in Ciekawy 1999:229). The combined effect is to ensure that the client will be able to achieve positive developments in his or her life. Get-rich-quick schemes are also a reality in South Africa as is evidenced by advertising pamphlets distributed to passersby along the streets of some urban centers. The pamphlets invite people with, among others, financial problems to visit certain traditional healers to get prescriptions for wealth. Witchcraft is also believed to be 'routed' or to travel through local commodities (Parish 2000). Local Zimbabwean stories tell of witches transporting witchcraft to their victims through gifts such as money. The unsuspecting recipient often realizes the malignant purpose of the gift after a mishap and diagnosis by a diviner. An incident is narrated among the Shona of Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, where an infant was offered a dollar as a present and it only surfaced years later when the grown up individual was failing to secure a job that he had been bewitched. According to the story, it was revealed to him by a diviner that the 'dollar' present he had received from his grandmother in infancy was the power behind his misfortunes. Parish (2000), writing about witchcraft in West Africa, tells similar stories of women transmitting witchcraft to men by means of a banknote or through sexual intercourse with the men (Parish 2000).

As in many African countries, wealth acquired through clandestine means, the occult, is considered evil in Zimbabwe (Parish 2000). Money may be an expression of asocial tendencies in the community such as ritual murders to secure material success. Ritual/*muti/umuthi* killing is believed to be very common among African business persons. For example, there is a belief among the Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe that some people get money or their businesses thrive through dirty means which may include, among others, committing incest, killing relatives and using their body parts to attract customers, employing *zvikwambo/tokoloshis* (usually invisible creatures that can bring wealth to their owners or 'persecute' people who have stolen from their owners) that will accumulate wealth for their owner but at the same time feeding on blood especially that of close relatives. In this regard, it is often advised by people of various religious persuasions that one should not envy the rich as they might have acquired their wealth through evil means. One bus operator in Zimbabwe was accused of allegedly causing accidents for his buses in order to feed his *zvikwambo/tokoloshis* with human blood. When the bus company was ordered to suspend its operations by the Ministry of Transport some time in 2009 following a spate of accidents claiming large numbers of lives, many people felt relieved. To many Zimbabweans, the suspension of the bus company's operations was synonymous with suspension of road accidents. When the suspension was lifted, people felt that the resumption of traffic deaths has been put in

place. People view the buses with suspicion and in a situation where there is a choice people opt for a different company. Following this boycott, the company's fares were lowered to attract customers. Those who still use the services of this transportation company are said to be doing so at their own risk. The bus company has since rebranded and it is now operating under a different corporate colour and a different trade name.

The occult can also be used for the purpose of protecting one's wealth from thieves. Among the Shona there is belief in the power of *rukwa* (a 'medicine' used to keep a thief hooked to the things he has stolen until the owner of the property comes and reverses the effects of the *rukwa* on the thief). Sometimes the *rukwa* would permit an individual to take away goods he has stolen but would not permit the goods to be put to use or put elsewhere. Under such a circumstance, the thief will only be relieved from the entanglement of the goods stolen if he/she returns the goods. Insinuations of this kind abound in Zimbabwe.

The protective use of the occult is articulated by Simmons (2000). Simmons reports a case in Zimbabwe in which a man who stole a sizeable amount of goods from a shop was attacked by a gang of *tokoloshis*. While witchcraft can be used to protect one's possessions, it can harm a thief. As such, one man's protection may be another man's witchcraft and this presents an ontological ambiguity (Simmons 2000). This ontological ambiguity is also expressed by Geschiere and Fisiy (1994) who claim that in matters of witchcraft, it is nearly always difficult to draw the line between good and evil. Thus, the occult may be used for good or bad ends.

A witch's medicines may be used for harm or for socially acceptable purposes such as luck in gambling, success in business, protecting one's home or property from theft or to obtain good crops (Bourdillon 1998). However, if a person is extraordinarily successful in farming, he may be regarded as a witch who has obtained a good harvest to the disadvantage of his neighbours. The person may be accused of using *divisi* (a secret medicine believed to 'steal' crops from other people's fields and put them into the perpetrator's granary). As such the perceived benign use of witchcraft is outweighed by the malignant one.

The picture that emerges from the review is that witchcraft can have positive uses and effects, but how tenable is this conception in light of the designation of witchcraft as an epitome of evil and antisocial behaviour (Bourdillon 1998)? The quest for an answer presents the need for further investigation in this regard.

THE OCCULT AND SEXUALITY IN ZIMBABWE

In Zimbabwe, tensions between men and women frequently emerge in beliefs about witches and their craft (Bourdillon 1990). Witchcraft practice and accusations are grounded in gendered power struggles, where culturally constructed notions of male and female are played out (Dolan 2002). Witchcraft discourses are subjecting the inequity of gender norms to public scrutiny. Inequalities between men and women are particularly important in understanding the basis of women's covert and overt role in constructing witchcraft suspicion (Ciekawy 1999). Among the Shona and Ndebele, when women challenge male authority in any way, they are likely to be suspected or accused of practising witchcraft since witches are conceived of as immoral people, who flout traditional values. It is no wonder that women who disobey their husbands are labeled as witches. Witchcraft in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere in Africa, is associated with women transcending the boundaries of appropriate social behaviour, thereby challenging their ascribed position within the social hierarchy. Women engaging in witchcraft have contested the realm of *doxa*- the tacit, unquestioned, 'naturalised' aspects of gender relations that define men and women's position in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1977 cited in Dolan 2002: 664). Women's perceived use of witchcraft is a threat to the viability of male control (Goody 1970 cited in Dolan 2002). In Meru, Kenya, the changing balance of power between men and women in domestic, economic, and political spheres has led to the emergence of witchcraft accusations by men against women (Dolan 1999). A similar trend exists in Zimbabwe.

Witches are in most cases thought to be women although there are some male witches as well. In a similar vein, Isak (1993) states that although women are thought to resort to witchcraft more often, male witches are regarded as most potent. The Shona word *muroyi* for witch nearly always refers to a woman (Zvarevashe

1970). Bourdillon (1998), writing about witchcraft beliefs among the Shona of Zimbabwe, uses the pronoun 'she' to refer to a witch. Several theories suggest that women are predominantly associated with the occult due to their social marginalisation (Dolan 2002; Mukonyora 1993). Mukonyora, states that African Initiated Church movements such as Johanne Masowe indeed define one of their missions as the eradication of witchcraft. As such, they attract a large number of women who seek cleansing from the influence of witchcraft spirits. However, those that go to church, are sometimes and somehow accused of going to church to hide their witchcraft practices.

While men are generally associated with witchcraft employed to deal with inter-household or public disputes, women, on the other hand, are commonly regarded as perpetrators of intra-household witchcraft (Dolan 2002). While men are usually associated with witchcraft in the public sphere, women are associated with use of the occult in the private sphere. This perception seems to be hinged on the social construction of masculinity and femininity and gender roles. In Zimbabwe where men and women are allegedly involved in a joint operation of witchcraft, men are often thought of as the leaders, a perception in keeping with a patriarchal understanding of leadership.

Dolan (2002), writing about gender and witchcraft in Kenya, comments that while witchcraft accusations can expose women to risks of social alienation and financial deprivation, witchcraft nevertheless remains a powerful weapon through which women can level intra-household disparities and, more broadly, challenge the legitimacy of social practice. A similar situation obtains in Zimbabwe where women allegedly employ witchcraft in form of secret medicines to gain some freedom within the context of the domestic sphere. Use of occult medicine is believed to offset the burden of patriarchal oppression, both social and economic. Women may thus use witchcraft to reclaim their social and economic autonomy and purchase freedom from male constraint. Some women indeed consider witchcraft to be a legitimate way to assert claims for equity and power within their households (Dolan 2002). Asymmetrical power relations formed within the context of patriarchy result in cultural practices that prevent women from maintaining control over major resources, thereby propelling the appeal to witchcraft by women. Stories of women giving their husbands *mufuhwira/zwanamina,* a substance that women allegedly administer on their husbands that results in the husbands concerned leaving control of the household to the wife, are told among the Shona and Ndebele in Zimbabwe. M*ufuhwira/zwanamina,* a substance whose working is similar to that of *kagweria,* which is allegedly used by women of Meru, Kenya, has, according to Dolan (2002: 667), the effect of 'demasculinizing' men. One female interviewee, in support of the use of *mufuhwira/zwanamina* said "It is men who invite use of this medicine by their abuse of women. Using *mufuhwira/zwanamina* is one way of securing freedom in the household." Indicating the harmful effect of *mufuhwira/zwanamina* one male interviewee had this to say, "I told my brother not to beat his wife to avoid invoking use of *mufuhwira/zwanamina* but he did not listen. As a result, he was given *mufuhwira/zwanamina* and now the wife is the master of the household. It is pathetic that a man who used to think independently and sober-mindedly is now being used as a stooge by his wife." Seen from the perspective of the two quotations cited, witchcraft is a way of asserting freedom in a context of patriarchal constraint. The occult, as a weapon of the weak (Ciekawy 1999) may thus represent women's empowerment. Use of the occult is one manifestation of some space for women to manoeuvre and exert active and passive resistance in the face of oppression within the boundaries of patriarchy and cultural constraint (Dolan 2002).

Use of *mufuhwira/zwanamina* may result in men having very low esteem in the presence of their wives and in a bid to restore their damaged ego and assert their masculinity they may engage in extra-marital relationships thereby exposing themselves and their wives to HIV and AIDS. Domineering wives who allegedly use *mufuhwira/zwanamina* are not easy to divorce because of their occult power. Some men who are outspoken in public are docile in the domestic sphere because of the alleged powerful influence of *mufuhwira/zwanamina.*

There is no necessary incompatibility between being a Christian and being a user of occult medicine. In Kenya, women have responded in seemingly paradoxical ways to the erosion of their rights (Dolan 2001). Some undergo Chris-

tian conversion while others bewitch their husbands using *kagweria.* Either way, the occult is at the disposal of women and often these women see no contradiction between being a Christian and using *kagweria* or some occult medicine as the goal is noble – the creation of peace especially for those women suffering violence in their marriages. This scenario is applicable to Zimbabwe whereby women suffering from domestic violence go to prophets in the African Initiated Churches to get occult prescriptions. Usually results from the traditional healers and prophets are similar- the women gain more power in the household and get some freedom from domestic violence.

A man who suspects that his wife is being unfaithful may go to a *n'anga/sangoma* (traditional healer) and get a type of medicine to place in her drink (Simmons 2000). This medicine has the effect of bringing a type of affliction called *runyoka*. If any man has sexual intercourse with her he will suffer from ill-health. A wife who suspects that her husband is having extramarital affairs may also use secret medicines to 'lock him up', that is to make it impossible for him to have an erection outside his marriage. This will ensure faithfulness and thus minimisation of HIV transmission. Extramarital lovers may administer similar medicines in which case the legal wife will be robbed of her conjugal rights. She may go to a prophet in prophet-type churches or traditional healers to get the effect of occult medicines reversed.

In Zimbabwe, it is common to hear stories about love portions used to attract lovers and to ensure that the lovers are not attracted to any other person (Chavunduka 1980). Wives may administer these on their husbands to ensure they do not go out with other lovers. A prostitute may do the same to make her lover forget about his family and develop negative affectivity towards his wife. The aim will be to control both the funds and the personality of the man in question. A wife whose husband has been 'snatched' by a new lover may seek assistance from a traditional healer or a prophet to reverse the effects of the occult medicine.

Some polygamous men are believed to add to their households' new wives, courtesy of their appeal to the occult. A story by Sibanda (2006) in the Sunday Mail of 12-18 November 2006 can be depicted as a classic example of the power of the occult to attract lovers. Sibanda (2006) reported the marriage of a Zimbabwean man from Shamva to 21 wives that they were all comfortable in their marriage. They said that they were satisfied with their husband's sexual prowess which comes from the holy water he gets from the prophets. Locals believe that the husband uses *juju/umuthi* (secret medicines) to get the young, beautiful women as well as to get sexual strength. He is not alone in being suspected of using occult powers to attract lovers. There is also the belief that some people, mainly men, can use secret medicines to have sexual intercourse with others without their knowledge. The Shona call this *mubobobo*. The women on whom a man tries out his *mubobobo* may even sleep next to their husbands but neither they nor their husbands will be aware. Only diviners are said to have the ability to reveal this. In Zimbabwe, infertility is sometimes attributed to witchcraft. If a woman fails to conceive or has had a series of stillbirths, she might be assumed to be a witch (Bourdillon 1998), who has some secret vice that stops her from bearing children. It is often narrated that in some cases, jealous neighbors may use the occult to cause some women to be barren, especially if the women are happy in their marriages.

CONCLUSION

Since witchcraft, as an occult practice, is by nature secretive, it is difficult to substantiate empirically in most cases. For this reason, witchcraft beliefs are usually expressed in rumors and allusions. Witchcraft beliefs are highly relevant to many Africans even in modern contexts. Witches are believed to possess the power to harm others for personal power, monetary gain, or personal satisfaction motivated by jealousy or revenge. Despite the horror with which they are viewed, witches are an essential part of Zimbabwean society because their presence often explains the puzzles of life. Witchcraft is thus a mode of explanation, of perception and interpretation of problems. Fear of witchcraft also acts as a form of social control, to curb theft and pride.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The documented evidence implies the need to conduct more systematic, empirical and grounded studies on the occult as it interacts

with politics, economics and sexuality to get a better understanding of the phenomenon. The good and bad use of the occult also calls for systematic investigation.

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