

A Witch in Africa

By Andi Fisher – 26 August 2007

Introduction:

“Eight words the Wiccan Rede fulfill, An it harm none do what ye will.” (1)

A witch in Africa is a feared and hated figure, considered to be a terrifying agent of destruction.

According to the South African Health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, *“more than 80 percent of people on the continent use traditional medicine to meet some of their health needs.”* (2) And, according to Kas Kasongo, educator at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, it is estimated that *up to 80% of African people culturally prefer traditional medicine.*(3) Dr Mathole Motshekga (4) founder of the Kara Heritage Institute (5) confirmed to Andi Fisher in a conversation on 28/08/2007, that these statements are to be understood to *include* the spiritual needs of Africans, as the *“roots of the African legacy are based in the spiritual realm.”* We can therefore safely conclude that up to 80% of Africans subscribe to traditional values and belief systems in an African world-view.

Pagans in South Africa are almost exclusively Caucasian, with few exceptions. The question that I hope we will ask ourselves is: why would we want to invite trouble (harm) to ourselves by publicly adopting the terms *Witch* and *Witchcraft* as they are in direct conflict with the African world-view which labels witches as something that is the opposite of what Wicca and Paganism represents? In Europe and Britain the terms *Witch* and *Witchcraft* have been reclaimed with a measure of success. Here in Africa however it is highly unlikely that we will enjoy the same. In order to justify this opinion, we first need to understand how “witch” and “witchcraft” are perceived in Africa, and, perhaps more importantly, we need to understand *why* they are perceived by the overwhelming majority of Africans (6) as evil.

Witchcraft - a Traditional African world-view

(a) Conceptualised image of a witch

According to the late David Hammond-Tooke in his book: *Rituals and Medicines – Indigenous Healing in South Africa* (7),

“Witchcraft is the mystical ability to cause harm to others,” [an ability] *“believed to be possessed by certain individuals.”* [...] *Witchcraft is believed to be inherited, thus running in families. “There are other individuals who, although not endowed with mystical powers, are also believed to act in an anti-social way [by using] medicines and other*

magical substances to harm others. Unlike witches, who inherit their powers, these others are normal human beings who obtain the medicines from herbalists. Anthropologists have tended to use the term “witchcraft” for the former activity and “sorcery” for the latter, but comparative studies have found that the two approaches are not always easily distinguishable and the distinction is not always made by a people themselves. However, in South Africa these terms are appropriate, for, while one basic term is used for both these activities (ubuthakathi – in the Nguni languages and baloyi in the Sotho) the Nguni, if pushed, can distinguish between ‘ubuthakathi with little animals’ (witchcraft) and ‘ubuthakathi with medicines’ (sorcery) and the Sotho between ‘night baloyi’ (witchcraft) and ‘day baloyi’ (sorcery).” (P. 73)

The terrifying thing about a witch is that it could be anyone. A witch would blend in with his or her community, and is therefore very difficult to identify. In Africa the witch is a hated and feared figure to be eradicated at every opportunity. Hammond-Tooke writes: *“The essential malignity of witchcraft is that witches (and sorcerers) tend to harm people close to them – people like kin and neighbours whom, in any normal society, one should love, cherish and co-operate with.”* (Ibid.) p 80

All communities strive for normality. Normal morality that includes harmony, love, support and co-operation is the cornerstone of any community, without it a society could not exist. In the extract below, Hammond-Tooke describes the conceptualised image of a witch, demonstrating why the witch is such a hated and feared figure in African society: (Ibid.) p 80-81

“It is not surprising that the image of a witch should so often be conceptualised in terms of inversions, for it is this very normality, and the basic values on which it is built, which is overturned by these agents of destruction. Mpondo witches ride backwards on their baboon familiars, and it is widely believed that witches approach the homesteads of their intended victims backwards. Witches do their [diabolical] work at night when all reasonable people are asleep, and they go about naked thus shamelessly flouting normal conventions of propriety. They kill babies and eat human flesh; they cohabit with animals. Worst of all, they harm kinsmen and neighbours. All this is the reversal of normal human behaviour, and these images are strikingly appropriate because witches do indeed reverse all that is accepted as “good” in society. If the good resides in harmonious social life, what the witch myth is expressing is nothing less than the opposite of good, the presence of evil in the community and the dangerous ways in which this harmonious balance can be upset.

It is obvious that harmonious social life is fundamentally threatened by negative emotions such as envy, jealousy and pride, which are present in every community, and the people themselves often explain witchcraft in these terms. These universal features of the human psyche feed on rivalry and competition, and are found in even the most apparently

tranquil community. After all, the good and desirable things in life are always in short supply. Competition is endemic to the human condition. This is the seed-bed in which witchcraft and sorcery beliefs have originated and in which they flourish."

(b) Witch-hunts

Most people want to impose *meaning* on the things that happen to them. According to Hammond-Tooke the logic that lies behind beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery rests on the Traditional African assumption that there is no such thing as chance in life. Everything happens for a reason. "*Events are always caused and the prime cause of sickness and misfortune is the witch.*" (Ibid) p 83. Here the author usefully distinguishes between *immediate cause* and *ultimate cause*.

*"Suppose, to take a famous example from Evan-Prichard's book on Azande witchcraft (Evans-Prichard 1937), a man is sitting under a granary and its supports collapse so that he is crushed to death. The Azande are perfectly aware that the immediate cause of the death was the collapse of the granary, or perhaps the activity of termites, but they are not satisfied with this explanation. They ask further questions: Why was **this** man, and not another, sitting under the granary when it fell? Why did it fall **then**?" (Ibid.) p. 84*

Science cannot provide answers that are psychologically satisfying when we question the reasons behind events. It is for this reason that so many people turn to religion in pursuit of answers that science cannot provide. In Africa, most people turn to traditional belief systems to find answers to these and other questions.

"The first question that comes into the mind of people told that they are being troubled by witchcraft or sorcery is not "Why me?", but "Who?" This question is imposed on them by their world-view, and prompts them to scan the range of their associates for the possible culprit – and the person their suspicions are likely to fall on is someone whom they believe hates them. What actually happens though is that the person they select is probably someone whom they themselves hate and who is thus, often unjustly, labelled as the evil-doer. The reason for this hatred is typically to be found in the competition for scarce resources referred to earlier. An imaginary example from western society will make the point. Supposing a professional tennis player, a believer in the power of witchcraft, falls and breaks her arm and asks the question "Who?" It is clear that the most likely person she will suspect is a fellow champion, in competition with her, the one who would be most likely to gain from the accident. There is no doubt that the relationship between witch and victim is always one that has conflict as its basis. Where there is no conflict there will be no witchcraft." (Ibid.) p. 84

To emphasise the chilling reality of witch executions in Africa, Hammond-Tooke writes:

“A witch execution has been likened to a morality play. In it, the community as a whole rises up in righteous indignation against this attack on its integrity, and symbolically (and literally) destroys the evil element in its midst. In a very definite sense the witch-sorcerer is evil personified, and the witch-image objectifies this so that something can be done about it.” (Ibid) p. 82

Crime statistics in South Africa pertaining to witchcraft-related crimes were obtained (with difficulty) for a report (8) published on Inside Politics. The report *“...paints a picture of a country in which reported witchcraft-related crimes are both widespread and increasing.”*

Sufficient doubt

There seems to be sufficient doubt over whether adopting terms that are perceived as evil and harmful in Africa will serve the greater good. It may even be argued that this could go against the code of ethics enshrined in the Wiccan Rede, as it almost certainly could cause harm to Pagans and Paganism in South Africa. If not physical harm, then at least harm in the sense that Pagan Witches and Witchcraft in Africa will always be viewed with the greatest suspicion and mistrust. Ultimately while self-definition **is** a personal choice for every individual Pagan to make, as responsible practitioners we *have* to ask ourselves how the choices we make in defining ourselves will affect the manner in which the collective Pagan Movement in South Africa is perceived? And what will the consequences of our choices be?

In his well written article entitled: Part III. Indigenous paganisms versus European Paganism: (9) Damon Leff states:

“Most, but not all, self-defined Pagans in South Africa also define themselves as Witches. [...] This self-definition is a cause for some concern amongst Pagans who have been tracking the ongoing instances of acts of violence against men and women accused of being a witch or of using witchcraft to cause harm, instances which have taken place throughout the African continent and which occur with alarming regularity within our own borders.”

Leff further states in the same article:

“Witches who are white and African (born on the continent), live in societies, however modern, permeated with an underlying mistrust of anything vaguely connected with the idea of Witchcraft.”

And, even more disturbing are his further comments in which Leff says:

“For self-defined Pagans who happen to be ‘real’ Witches [...] the very real potential for isolated but ongoing incidences of communal violence against alleged suspected witches to turn and focus its attention on ‘actual’ Witches is not one we should dismiss as impossible of occurring.”

” The often repeated analyses of the cultural beliefs concerning witches judge all who practice the Craft as not only potentially evil, but guaranteed to bring harm upon individuals and the community in which the witch lives.”

In Damon Leff’s article *Pagan Witches and Traditional Healers – On the Mpumalanga Witchcraft suppression Bill (10)*, the following is reported:

“...the revelation of the existence of self-defined Witches has been met with both shock and surprise. Although traditional healers knew who we Pagans were, they did not realise that many Pagans were also Witches.”

In an email response to Donna “darkwolf” Vos (11), dated 24/08/2007, when approached for his comments on this issue, Professor Ronald Hutton (12) replied as follows:

*“I hesitate to advise on matters in a country not my own, but in this case I would suggest that South African Pagans abandon any attempt to reclaim the word ‘witch’, and concentrate on safeguarding the labels ‘Pagan’ and ‘Wiccan’. Your easiest way out of the problem, in my opinion, would be to force a recognition of the **huge conceptual gap** between African and European tradition, and ensure that any law passed to satisfy Africans is amended to protect South Africans who practise modern Western-style Paganism. I personally feel that the law needs to be fought in itself, and (like Izaak Niehaus) that education of Africans and not surrender to them is the best response to the problem.”*

There was a tense atmosphere of unrest when Luke Martin (13) introduced himself as a Witch to a group of Traditional Healers who had met with him in opposition against the WC Bill in Mpumalanga recently. Even after the National co-ordinator of the Traditional Healers Organization, Phephisile Maseko, tried to restore calm, *“there was still some apprehension [...] because the healers come from communities where witchcraft is considered evil and where people have been evicted from their villages or even killed because they were suspected of being witches. Now here was someone standing up and admitting to being one.”*(14) The incident was published by the Mail & Guardian on 20 July 2007 entitled *Bewitched or de-witched?* (15)

The Mpumalanga Witchcraft Suppression Bill (16) defines ‘witchcraft’ as follows: *“Witchcraft” means the secret use of muti, zombies, spells, spirits, magic powders, water, mixtures, etc, by any person with the purpose of causing harm, damage, sickness to others or their property.* This definition is

supported by the traditional belief system observed by most Africans as demonstrated in Witchcraft a Traditional World-view, above. The Traditional Healers Organization, who also objects strongly against the Bill does not share the Pagan definition of “witchcraft,” and according to Dr. Mathole Motshekga, the THO *supports* government on suppressing witchcraft in South Africa. We can therefore not look to the THO for support in reclaiming the terms “Witch” and “Witchcraft”, regardless of the good relationships forged with them. If anything, a determination to collectively and publicly announce ourselves as Witches in South Africa will probably serve to divide us rather than unite us. In response to the Bill, the THO proposed a definition of “witchcraft” as follows:

- (a) *Any act or conduct, which causes or leads to the infliction of injury, illness, or even spiritual damage to another person through the use of ubuthi (17) or other destructive means;*
- (b) *Any act or conduct that leads to the death of another person through ukuthakatha (the practice of witchcraft)*
- (c) *Any act or conduct **which is perceived by the community** as unnatural and capable of causing danger or damage to the person or property of another through some negative energy;*
- (d) *Any conduct or act which cannot be explained in western scientific terms but which is **perceived or believed** to exist and can be proved so to exist by those trained in African Science through diagnosis.*

Pagan Witches have opposed the Bill on the grounds that it incorrectly defines Witchcraft. The THO has objected on the grounds of disputed definitions of words such as “Muti” (medicine.) Unless Pagans can miraculously change or eradicate the African world-view that supports belief in witchcraft, it is very unlikely that the Traditional Healers (and therefore Africans) will support the Pagan definition of Witchcraft. Traditional Healers are the sacred physicians of Africa who are recognised by Africans to protect their people from harm and deliver them from evil. And as we have seen, witches are widely believed to be the very agents who inflict harm on Africans through the medium of witchcraft.

It may be a wiser consideration for South African Pagans to approach government asking for exemption of Euro-centric Pagan practices from the WC Suppression Act, instead of challenging the widely accepted African world-view on this issue.

Conclusion:

As it stands currently, no amount of legislation (for or against) will change the traditional beliefs and world-views of Africa’s people. *No amount of Pagan protesting could eradicate the African concept of evil entrenched in witchcraft.*

If Pagans in South Africa want to move forward and be counted as equals we may have to consider the old maxim "*when in Rome do as the Romans do.*" There is nothing shameful about compromise (18). Sometimes compromise opens doors that otherwise remain firmly shut to us, and more often it indicates a spirit of co-operation and willingness to find solutions for the benefit of all.

I want to repeat that... *there really is nothing shameful about a willingness to compromise.* Nothing shameful about seeking a win-win situation. Particularly in South Africa, a country where we are *actively seeking reconciliation* and accord with one another as part of the *post Apartheid healing process.*

I am willing to speculate that if Pagans are prepared to meet Africans half-way by adopting less offensive terms with which to label ourselves *in Africa*, we would be in a far greater position to grow the Pagan Movement on this continent. While compromising on terms will certainly not solve all our problems, it would go a long way towards establishing a platform of trust with traditional Africans from where the Pagan Movement could potentially grow.

After all, the Goddess loves all her children, even here in Africa...

In service
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Chief Director & Priestess, CNCI-RSA

References and Footnotes:

- (1) The combination of Wicca with no harm to others and do what thou wilt made its first known appearance in *The Old Laws* by Gerald Gardner, 1953. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiccan_Redde
- (2) As reported by the Sunday Independent Newspaper August 20 2006 at 10:11AM. Article available online: http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=79&art_id=vn20060820090149612C388234&newslett=1&em=102873a1a20070822ah
- (3) As reported by the Cape Times Newspaper October 02 2006 at 12:09PM. Article available online: http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=79&art_id=vn20061002114338640C607347&newslett=1&em=102873a1a20070822ah
- (4) Dr. Mathole Motshekga
http://www.zoominfo.com/people/Motshekga_Mathole_457958990.aspx
- (5) Kara Heritage Institute
<http://www.kara.co.za/home.htm>
- (6) The Ralushai Commission of Inquiry appointed in 1995 to inquire into witchcraft, violence and ritual murders in the Northern Province found that the overwhelming majority of people interviewed, both rural and urban, including members of the South African Police Services, believe in witchcraft and therefore the existence of witches.

- (7) David Hammond-Tooke, Rituals and Medicines – Indigenous Healing in South Africa. Published by AD. Donker (Pty) Ltd. / Jonathan Ball Publishers: ISBN 0 86852 110 8
- (8) Witchcraft in South Africa - an introduction (Part 1-4)
http://www.insidepolitics.org.za/blog_details.aspx?EntryId=209&page=search
- (9) Part III. Indigenous paganisms versus European Paganism
<http://www.thepaganactivist.com/paganisminafrica.htm>
- (10) Pagan Witches and Traditional Healers
<http://www.penton.co.za/20070805.htm>
- (11) Donna “darkwolf” Vos
<http://www.cam.za.net/about/whoswho/donna.html>
- (12) Professor Ronald Hutton
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ronald_Hutton
- (13) Luke Martin, convenor: South African Pagan Council
<http://www.pagancouncil.za.net/>
- (14) Pagan Witches and Traditional Healers
<http://www.penton.co.za/20070805.htm>
- (15) Bewitched or de-witched?
http://www.mg.co.za/articlePage.aspx?articleid=314498&area=/insight/insight_national/
- (16) Mpumalanga Witchcraft Suppression Bill 2007
<http://www.pagancouncil.za.net/?q=node/55>
- (17) 'Ubuthi' is defined by the THO as: [(i) an object, act or substance used in the application of negative energy with an intention to kill or harm a person, (ii) the usage of any poisonous substance with an aim to kill or harm a person. (iii) any act that is evil in its nature and does not uphold the principles of humanity and nation building as enshrined in our constitution, and (iv) casting a spell on any person.]
<http://www.penton.co.za/20070805.htm>
- (18) "compromise." Roget's New Millennium™ Thesaurus, First Edition (v 1.3.1). Lexico Publishing Group, LLC. 26 Aug. 2007. <Thesaurus.com
<http://thesaurus.reference.com/browse/compromise>