

A parish-based response to witchcraft and witchfinding¹

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Where has the Zambian church been successful in the fight against witchcraft?

1. In cases of “anonymous witchcraft”, meaning where no concrete person has yet been labelled as a witch. People recognize something as witchcraft, but it is not yet fixed on a specific human face. Charismatic/Pentecostal churches cast out such types of witchcraft like a demon (exorcism). Satanism for example is very often such an anonymous type, and people trust in the Church’s remedies. House blessings, laying on of hands or other prayer rituals, holy water, incense, or reciting the rosary and wearing it are experienced as tangible forms of help.
2. The church has also been successful in educating people about the Law of Zambia. Sometimes we could stop witchfinding by recourse to the law. Sometimes the threat of calling the police, or callouts from the police to the headmen/women and witchfinders were enough.
3. Our policy of barring people who consult diviners about witchcraft from the sacraments has made people aware that consulting spirits about witchcraft is incompatible with the Christian faith. (Clear stance).

Where has the church not been successful?

1. Where people suspect a concrete person to be a witch (“named witchcraft”). It needs the two parties to sit down together and sort issues out. Not all parties may be Catholic, and the church has limited options for forcing the two parties together. Witchcraft issues are entangled in many other issues: property, means of income, duties & obligations. We have no direct power over such issues. But sometimes we also shun away from such tough meetings, because they are difficult to handle.

Why is the traditional diviner (*ng’anga*) successful in issues that concern “named witchcraft”? He/she does not shun away from directly calling the “witch” and to face the “witch”. The *ng’anga* is always embedded in an authority structure that has the power to call the two parties together and to enforce judgement, for example about compensations to be paid, or forcing the person to leave where no reconciliation is possible. When people go to consult a *ng’anga*, they always do so in conjunction with the relevant family heads who have “teeth” to deal with conflict.

→ How can we link up with the relevant authority figures and initiate meetings between conflicting parties? How can we address the objective & empirical issues that lead some people to be suspected of witchcraft?

2. Where people want a communitarian solution. The diviner is called by a whole village, even a whole area, to find out the witches once and for all (radical solution) and also to cleanse the villages from “bad medicines” (*mankhwala oipa*). Many may have used traditional medicines against thieves, for business, for keeping a spouse faithful, etc. If they are believed to work, then they can also go out of hands.

→ How can we address the usage of illegitimate medicines? In Lumimba we had good experiences where we could call together whole villages, and speak about “bad medicines” and witchcraft, and provide at least some answers to people’s questions.

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3. Witchcraft is the other side of trust.² The witch is always an insider, somebody whom one should trust but who abuses the trust. We have not managed to inspire trust in our Christian families. “Nowadays who knows what your husband is doing?” (or your uncle, grandfather...)

Trust needs measures of scrutiny. Traditional culture knew such measures of scrutiny. Examples: *ncila*, importance of mutual shaving, *mankowesha/midulo*. These are issues for family councils.³ We have despised such scrutinizing procedures but not replaced them with anything as efficient. Morality is preached in church and easily evaded at home.

→ How can we inspire procedures of trust-building and scrutiny in our families?

Suggestions for an action plan at parish level

1. Prevention is better than cure. Witchcraft is a reality mostly in our families (insider job). It pops up in an environment of mistrust in the face of tragedy and of mysterious circumstances and is discerned by the whole family. A single visit of a priest, sister or catechist to a family meeting where witchcraft is addressed is often already successful. Where we leave people alone in tragedy, they will find other solutions.
2. If witchcraft is discerned, people experience their sickness or other manifestations “as witchcraft”. For us to understand what is going on spiritually in people’s lives at that moment, before we give our own solutions, we need to listen to the language of the sick: understand their own vocabulary, and see how far “witchcraft” has already become symbolized through the own body and its manifestations. We can use the very symbols and try to transform them into a life-giving direction (see counselling).
3. Witchcraft as a spiritual matter can neither be proven nor disproven—as little as our own articles of faith. At the same time, the spiritual aspects of witchcraft (real or perceived) have always physical counterparts (*mankhwala*, threatening words, rituals, etc.) These should be addressed and outlawed.
4. Pastoral counselling principle: acknowledge and address people’s inner experiences with witchcraft in the interior forum (prayer, counselling). Deal in the exterior & public forum not with witchcraft, but with objective, empirical behaviour that was witnessed also by other people. This makes spiritual powers of witchcraft neither real nor unreal, neither true nor false, but allows us to differentiate between spiritual truth-claims and empirical truth-claims, and deal with each in the appropriate forum of pastoral intervention.
5. Aims & methods in counselling
 - a. lead the concerned families to recognise and to trust that the powers of the Christian faith, of a Christian marriage, of the sacraments, are greater than the powers of the witch.
 - b. We guide people from being victims of witchcraft towards acting from a Christian vocation (Christian agency).
 - c. We take the witchcraft symbols into prayer, but do not freeze a narrative inside the witchcraft perception. We creatively look for a life-giving direction. Even suffering and tragedy can become life-giving, where we have faith.

² See especially Peter Geschiere, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

³ Bernhard Udelhoven, “Domestic morality, ‘traditional dogma’, and Christianity in a rural Zambian community” in *Zambia Social Science Journal* 8 no 1 (2022): 1–27.

- d. We encourage the victim not to avoid the alleged witch but to encounter the suspected person in openness and courage as a fellow human being in need of redemption, like all of us. And to address with the person the empirical issues that have led to suspicions, including issues of injustices.
6. The topic of witchcraft is already part of the catechumenate programme (*I Chose Christ*). We can extend the lesson by teaching about the usage of *mankhwala* (what types of medicines are allowed for a Christian, what is not allowed, and why), and about concrete Christian responses to witchcraft. Clearly explain our stance: The church has remedies against spiritual attacks of witchcraft. When Christians consult the *ng'anga* to divine witchcraft or participate in a public cleansing, they openly profess their lack of faith in the Church. Let them continue to entrust their spiritual lives and their souls to the *ng'anga* – they have left the church. We need to help catechumens and Christians to make a clear decision.
7. The above point does not mean that we should condemn and demonise the *ng'anga*. As little as we demonise other faiths. Priests and leaders should personally know the *ng'angas* in our parishes, and be frank with them: “We genuinely respect you where you heal people, even if we are not familiar with your methods. We would like to learn more from you. But when you start looking for witches, you will face the law!” Many *ng'angas* are gifted and very sensitive to people’s afflictions, sometimes even more than we priests! Many will become yet better healers, when they feel appreciated and recognised. Also: we should not penalise Catholics who seek herbal treatments from our local *ng'angas*. Instead, we need to be very clear where we draw the red line: at *kuombeza* (calling on spirits in divination) and the identification of witches. And these too should be distinguished: the invocation of spirits is incompatible with our faith, but not necessarily evil, if no witchfinding is involved. Dancing for *vimbuza* spirits throughout the night and invoking them for healing may be incompatible with our faith in some aspects, but that does not make the practice evil. It may actually be very therapeutic (when done well). All “people of good will” who are in touch with the unseen world should be respected by us, the more so when they are guarding the traditions of our land.
8. Visits to the chiefs (Catholic and non-Catholic) are essential encounters for all priests / leaders. It is advisable to personally talk with each chief in the parish about our approach to witchcraft, while also listening to their grievances. Many chiefs know our own Catholics as main culprits of witchcraft practices and also as the main clients of the *nganga*! Meetings with chiefs are helpful especially if they take place before the time of actual conflict and entrenchments. Ideally, we should invite chiefs, headmen and all resident healers to a workshop about witchcraft in which we explain our position (see later).
9. We should always protect those who are accused of witchcraft and treat them as not guilty of the crime of witchcraft (unless they confess themselves). At the same time, we ask them to be frank and honest with us about what has happened = to speak the same language to us as to others. We regard them as innocent, not because there is no witchcraft, but because we cannot ascertain it. But: when the accused are guilty of other family crimes, these should be clearly addressed.
10. To concentrate on the legal aspect (“Witchcraft Act”) should not be our first response, but the last, when everything else has failed. People genuinely feel threatened by witchcraft and should find a listening ear in the church when they feel attacked. Invoking the Witchcraft Act before we have listened to people’s grievances about witchcraft in their midst places us in a position in which we are seen to protect the witches. But: where accusations have been uttered and our meetings have failed, and where headmen and *ng'angas* force people to pay up and be cleansed, we should not hesitate to invoke the law and call for help from the police and from the courts.
11. Keep discussions and reflections alive.