Putting Witch Accusations on the Missiological Agenda: A Case from Northern Peru

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As I write this article, I am in Kinshasa at a conference on child witchcraft (August 21–23, 2014) with fifty Congolese pastors and three other speakers (Andy Alo, Opoku Onyinah, and Timothy Stabell) who are part of an emerging network of theologians and missiologists focused on witch accusations today. Thousands of Kinshasa’s orphans have been accused of causing the death of their own parents through witchcraft, the accusations frequently endorsed by pastors, and the accused children often abandoned to the streets. But the pastors at this conference, as part of the organization Equipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse, led by Pastor Abel Ngolo, focus on the well-being of accused children as they struggle to make sense of theological and pastoral issues involved, and as they strategize and work to turn the tide on the mistreatment of accused children.

From the street children in Kinshasa to the killing of male witches in Peru or of elderly female widows in Tanzania, to the witch villages of Ghana or the witch burnings of New Guinea, witches in Peru or of elderly female widows in Tanzania, to the witch villages of Ghana or the witch burnings of New Guinea, it would be difficult to come up with a missiological topic that is more timely, or a topic that missionaries, pastors, and theologians should become evident, however, similar patterns and issues are present around the world wherever witch ideologies and accusatory practices exist.

A Brief Case

Shajian (a pseudonym), a brilliant leader of bilingual education in Peru, was known among Aguaruna Christians for his opposition to the church. Yet as he told me his life story, Shajian momentarily grew wistful and nostalgic as he described early experiences as a young Christian with answered prayers and Gospel witness. I asked him what the turning point for him had been, and he told me the following story about prayer and witchcraft.

My daughter, at four months, was sitting up and crawling. She would smile in recognition of me and hold out her arms to be picked up. She was healthy and intelligent. I was proud of her.

One day an uncle of mine, suspected of being a tunchi [witch], came to my house for a visit. I glanced up from [reading] a paper and caught him looking at my daughter with a contorted face, with malevolence. It shocked me. Then he asked, “How come you have such an intelligent, good-looking, healthy daughter while my children are sickly and not intelligent?” That night my daughter came down with a fever. At the time I was studying while my children are sickly and not intelligent? That night my daughter would die and I would be to blame. That night I dreamed my clothes were floating away down river. In the morning I told my wife about the dream, and she said, “Yes, it’s our daughter. She’s going to die.” We arrived at the hospital only to learn she had died in the night.

When I returned to my community, my uncle did not come to greet me. I didn’t say anything to anyone about my suspicions. Later my uncle got drunk and fought with his own son. Then he took the poison barbasco and died alone. He was a womanizer and dedicated himself to the use of tsuamuk and pusanga [love magic]. The old men said it was doubtless his use of such strong pusanga and constant thoughts of women that caused him to be so disoriented as to commit suicide.

After this I said, “I prayed much to God, and he didn’t hear me.” So I distanced myself from God.

Assessing the theological and pastoral issues posed by this account requires us to consider pre-Christian cultural patterns, new dynamics introduced by Christianity, and broader patterns present in both older and more recent Aguaruna witch narratives.

Pre-Christian Cultural Patterns

Anthropologists find that people within any given society tend to share with each other cultural assumptions about what causes prosperity or misfortune. Depending on what those assumptions are in a given society, there will also tend to be characteristic response patterns—something that is certainly true for the Aguaruna.

Cultural assumptions. In every society bad things happen to people—material setbacks, infertility, illness, and death. For the Aguaruna bad things also include high rates of snakebite, drownings in dangerous rivers, and injuries while felling trees, as well as illnesses such as dysentery, influenza, hepatitis, infections, intestinal parasites, leishmaniasis, malaria, measles, meningitis, tuberculosis, and whooping cough. In most societies, practices exist that treat afflictions as material events calling for medicinal remedies. The Aguaruna are no exception; they possess complex understandings of and numerous biomedical remedies for all sorts of medical conditions. But when material interventions fail to achieve success, people in many societies often appeal to other causal ontologies to account for and address misfortune. In the culture of Job’s comforters, unresolved misfortunes were attributed to the sin of the sufferer. One reaps what one sows. A variety of cultures around the world operate with such karmic
moral causal ontologies. But if Job had been Aguaruna, wise local counselors would never have attributed his misfortunes to his own sin, but rather to the agency of a third party, an envious, malign neighbor or relative thought to have caused harm through occult powers. Worldwide, such a witch causal ontology is much more common than the moral causal ontology evident in the Book of Job.4

The actual explanation of how witch power operates or is acquired varies from culture to culture. In some cultures this power is understood as inborn, perhaps located in the liver, the eye, or another organ of the body. For other cultures this power is socially acquired. The power may be thought of as psychic, magical (involving manipulation of substances or words), or tied to spirits of the dead. For example, the Aguaruna believe that witches (tunchi) have invisible magic darts (tsentsak) in their throat. Like the poison-tipped darts of Aguaruna blowguns, these darts can be shot into someone else in a way that is unfelt but eventually brings death. A tunchi, angry at his mother, might reply to her with sharp words, or tied to spirits of the dead. For example, the power of as psychic, magical (involving manipulation of substances or words), or tied to spirits of the dead. For example, the Aguaruna believe that witches (tunchi) have invisible magic darts (tsentsak) in their throat. Like the poison-tipped darts of Aguaruna blowguns, these darts can be shot into someone else in a way that is unfelt but eventually brings death. A tunchi, angry at his mother, might reply to her with sharp irritation—completely unaware that he has “shot” her with his tsentsak, thereby causing her death. That is, the power of the tunchi may or may not be consciously acquired and exercised. Cultures with witch ontologies differ in many beliefs, including which age or gender is likely to be a witch, where the power is located in the body, how the power is acquired, how conscious or unconscious one is in exercising the power, and the exact nature of the power being exercised. They are united, however, in the belief that, when misfortune strikes an individual, another person—a third party—has maliciously caused the misfortune through a mysterious power.

Triggering event. While the Aguaruna do not associate every passing illness with witchcraft, if the affliction is particularly intractable or mysterious, and especially if it results in death, then it triggers sustained talk about who is the guilty witch. Deaths by suicide or homicide (with shotgun, spear, or poison) are not attributed to witchcraft. But almost every other death—from snakebite or drowning to malaria or hepatitis—is blamed on a third party said to be a witch. Eventually, virtually every nonviolent death will be framed with a compelling narrative about a supposed witch, just as with Shajian’s narrative.

Retaliatory impulse. Among the most primordial of human impulses is the feeling that murderers should be punished. Often, as with the Aguaruna, this demand for justice is articulated in the language of debt (diwi). Among the Aguaruna every killing should be remembered and avenged, with masculine values of honor and family loyalty mobilized against those who kill relatives. And since all nonviolent deaths are understood as caused by witches—who in Aguaruna culture are male—each such death imposes the requirement of an additional death; someone else must die in retaliation.

Identifying the witch. Historically, when an Aguaruna is sick and approaching death, widespread whispered speculations about the identity of the witch emerge and intensify. In one respect the Aguaruna diverge from many cultures in that only men are accused. In other respects suspicions are similar to worldwide patterns where witch accusations are present. Anybody known to have exemplified envy or ill will toward the afflicted is a suspect. Any prior conflict with the afflicted is grounds for suspicion. Anyone who directly benefits from the death is suspect. But also suspected is anyone perceived in general as being envious, antisocial, angry, resentful, or unhappy. Quite naturally, the individuals most likely to exhibit envy, resentment, and unhappiness are often those who are themselves poor, blind, crippled, socially marginal, chronically ill, or mentally disturbed, and who are thus a continually resented imposition on others.

It is worth keeping in mind that usually many individuals are potential candidates for suspicion. Aguaruna village life is full of remembered slights and insults, adulterous affairs, conflicts over marriageable women, failures of reciprocity, and envy at the unfair advantages of others. Most of this is publicly known and much discussed. Thus with every death there are many people who might naturally be suspected of having desired the death. Since prior gossip triggered by prior deaths has already generated in each village a significant pool of “suspected” witches, their names quickly get recycled as suspects when the next death occurs.

Consider Shajian’s situation. When powerful foreigners selected him as a young lad to receive an education and arranged for him to enter a government salaried position, he was catapulted by his early twenties into comparative wealth and prominent leadership far beyond that of his “fathers” and “uncles” and “brothers.” When he and his “brothers” sought wives from the same small pool of eligible young women, he married the desirable one that others had hoped to marry. In a context where deficiencies in childhood nutrition and debilitating parasites and diseases are common, his daughter was unusually healthy and intelligent. Like Joseph with his coat of many colors, Shajian was surrounded by numerous deeply envious individuals, not just the one later named as a witch.

Traditionally, the stakes are high in terms of who is identified as the witch, since this person will likely be killed. Therefore when someone is sick and approaching death, anxiety builds, and gossip attempts to fix blame. The very people who naturally might be suspected because of their own prior grievances or sinful sentiments toward the afflicted will deny any witchlike sentiments in themselves and often dramatographically proclaim their own righteous indignation, moral solidarity with the afflicted, and willingness to help avenge the death. They contribute stories designed to deflect suspicion from themselves and fix it onto another. People kill witches for the very traits exemplified in their own lives. In such a climate few are prepared to defend another from suspicion, lest suspicion be redirected onto them. But many are prepared to immediately endorse and provide testimony against another party upon whom suspicion is coalescing, and to announce themselves willing to join in killing the witch. Dying adults, as a last act at the point of death, will often whisper to a close male relative the name of someone they suspect of killing them and will ask for a promise that their death will be avenged.

When an illness does not yield to medical remedies, a shaman may be called to diagnose the problem, to counteract it, and sometimes to identify the witch. Aguaruna shamans have a single
diagnosis: “Somebody did this to you.” They work to remove the fetsentsak and cure the afflicted. Especially if there have been several deaths, a shaman is asked to name the witch. Usually he names a person that the community already suspects, thus professionally endorsing community suspicions.

Killing the witch. Aguaruna males are socialized to participate in homicides. As long as the ambush of a witch is organized by a relative of the deceased victim who himself initiates the violence, the accompanying group can with moral solidarity righteously join in the killing, with each person shooting into, or spearing, the body. Historically, only by participating in such a homicide could an Aguaruna male achieve the full adult status necessary for marriage, and only through such homicides could one acquire the coveted status of kakajam, “powerful one.” Every death then triggered great pressure toward identifying and killing the witch, with the relative of the deceased responsible to mobilize a group (ipamamu) that was usually disposed to respond with alacrity (asum) to the invitation to kill the accused. Since Aguaruna culture constructed fully respected masculine identity around participation in revenge homicides, making such participation essential to male status, homicide rates were high. According to Michael Brown’s study, undertaken after Christianity was already beginning to have an impact, 37 percent of Aguaruna adult male deaths were due to homicide, a figure he believes would have been higher in the past. Men like Shajian are less likely to kill a suspected witch these days, although they may still suspect that every death constitutes a murder.

New Dynamics under Christianity

Evangelism brought with it a message against retaliatory violence and with a promise of peace and goodwill. Widespread conversions to evangelical Christianity from the 1950s to the 1970s sometimes involved almost utopian expectations of peace and harmony, with a belief that sickness and death would be removed. The earlier ritual complex associated with spirit visions and retaliatory violence as the route to prestige and influence was displaced by bilingual education, with pastors and salaried schoolteachers the new influential leaders in the community. Shamans, with their single professional diagnosis (“somebody did this to you”), were less frequently consulted, and Western medicine became increasingly relied upon. But witch ideologies continued to present many pastoral challenges.

Prohibition against violent retribution. Today even non-Christian Aguaruna identify evangelical Christianity as having created a profound shift in moral consensus, to the effect that it is wrong to kill other people in “revenge.” Older men sometimes complain that “pastors control our community”—meaning that the moral suasion of pastors works against their own desires to mobilize retaliatory violence. A new folk belief has emerged that, if one’s death is avenged, one will not go to heaven—a reflection of the assumption that revenge killings are ultimately at the express wish of dying persons. Just as some Christians have wondered whether suicides go to heaven, Aguaruna Christians wonder whether a person whose dying act is to ask for retaliation will go to heaven. Christians take care as they die to forbid anyone to avenge their deaths, although they still sometimes name the person they think responsible. Both Christians and non-Christians continue to attribute many deaths to the agency of human neighbors and relatives acting through witch powers. Christians then find themselves living next to relatives or other neighbors who they continue to believe have committed murder by means of witchcraft, but against whom their only recourse is to trust God and endure. When repeated deaths occur, pressure often builds to avenge the deaths (and get rid of the person thought to be waging destruction in the community). Male relatives of the deceased who are reluctant to lead the witch killing are condemned for not having loved the deceased, for not being real men, and for not defending family honor. The result is that even church leaders sometimes cave in to social pressure and participate in a homicide. More frequently, the retaliatory violence is perpetrated by those not in good standing at church. Thus retaliatory violence against supposed tunchi continues, although at reduced rates.

Prohibition on recourse to shamans. Aguaruna evangelical churches have insisted that Christians not consult iwishin when sick. Herbal remedies, Western medicine, and prayer are employed. Since the single diagnosis of Aguaruna shamans is the socially destructive message that some neighbor or family member is to blame for each illness or death, the ban on consulting shamans has worked against shamanic influence, which converted every death into the need for a revenge killing. That is, the churches’ ban has mitigated the frequency of confident assertions that witches are at work.

Some Christians do, however, in moments of life-crisis, when prayer and medicine appear not to work, consult a shaman—and are disciplined by their church for doing so. When a village has several deaths sequentially, pressure builds to consult a shaman to determine the identity of the witch. If a majority in a village are Christians, a shaman will not be called. If a minority of villagers are Christians, a shaman may be called. Since every villager is expected to pay part of the cost, this step creates a crisis for Christians on whether to pay, with some thrown into village jails for not paying. When the shaman arrives, everyone is expected to line up and allow the shaman to determine if they are the witch. Christians typically refuse, retreating to their own church for prayer and singing, with the shaman (whose influence is being challenged) declaring, not surprisingly, that the witch is among the Christians. Non-Christians thus repeat the refrain that pastors and churches are protectors of witches, which they bitterly resent.

Many shamans have converted to Christianity, but they are continually pressured to carry out shamanic healing. Since they are thought to have the same power as the witch, while no longer employing it to combat witchcraft, they are often the first to be suspected of killing through witchcraft. A high proportion of such converts are subsequently killed as witches, as happened with Sanchum, a locally famous former shaman, shortly after I collected his life story—despite his faithful church attendance and the fact that his son was a pastor.
Crisis of faith and new meta-narratives. While Aguaruna Christians sometimes robustly claim the power of God against their fear ofwitches and the illness and deaths they cause, Christians and non-Christians alike still get sick and die. On old assumptions, each such illness or death is credited to witches. While convertsto often tell striking stories of divine healing understood as God’s power over witchcraft, the same individuals later inevitably encounter illness and death that do not yield to medicine or prayer. These subsequent experiences regularly provoke profound crises of faith, as they did with Shajian. As long as one assumes that witches are the cause of all intractable affliction—with witches now being understood as doing the work of Satan, with the presence or removal of affliction being what is at stake in the battle between good and evil—then every illness and death that does not yield to prayers of faith creates a crisis. The witch has won.

The biblical message itself, as expounded by Aguaruna pastors, involves new metanarratives of evil. In place of the notion of shamans and witches as having a kind of psychic or magical power, Christians vacillate between two poles, either stalwartly denying their supposed powers or admitting that their powers are real but reframing them as satanic. In contrast to the ivishin, whose narrative of sickness and death features the diagnosis that “somebody did this to you,” pastors stress a metanarrative of death and suffering as a result of general human sinfulness. They teach that, just as Jesus underwent suffering and death, so we too must undergo suffering, and that a complete reversal of illness and death will occur only in heaven. They preach that God, who is mūun (big or great), “holds our lives in his hand” and that nothing can touch us apart from his control.

While traditional Aguaruna culture directed moral judgment away from self and onto others as the presumed repository of evil, conversion to Christianity profoundly shifted moral discourse so as to require a recognition of self as sinner on the part of all converts. Instead of a community self-righteously projecting all evil onto a single person to be killed, the new Christian message requires an endorsement that each of us has sinful (and witchlike) sentiments that must be acknowledged and repented of. This new element, I would argue, also undercuts the scapegoating tendencies present in witch accusations.

Summary

The overall effect of Christianity among the Aguaruna has been a reduced reliance on the socially divisive professional diagnosis of Aguaruna shamans, a reduced tendency to attribute every death to witchcraft, an increased willingness to confess sinful sentiments in one’s self and not just in others, and a reduced tendency to take violent action toward individuals thought to have caused misfortune.

But whenever deaths occur under conditions that paradigmatically suggest witchcraft (a sudden or mysterious death occurring after a social conflict or expression of envy or anger, for example), Aguaruna Christians often do suspect that witches are to blame. While few Christians support the killing of suspected witches, most do avoid them as dangerous. Since the accused are often the individuals with the greatest social needs, this social avoidance has adverse consequences for the accused. In a world where illnesses and deaths are both frequent and associated with neighbors thought to be acting through evil occult means, every affliction triggers deep anxieties about the dangers represented by secretly evil neighbors, relatives, or church members. Furthermore, each affliction understood as caused by a witch triggers a spiritual crisis that is structured in rather different terms than the crisis experienced when affliction is understood in a different frame of reference.

People in Europe and North America no longer commonly attribute misfortunes to the agency of neighbors, relatives, or colleagues thought to be acting through evil witch power. It is not surprising, then, that theological education in the West fails to substantively consider the theological and pastoral issues involved with witch ideologies. But since such patterns are common across major swaths of the globe, it is high time for this topic to move to the center of theological and missiological attention.

Notes

1. In this article “witch” refers to anyone, male or female, accused of maliciously having harmed another through evil occult power.
3. Ibid., 54–101.
6. Michael Brown, Una paz incierta: Historia y Cultura de las Comunidades Aguarunas Frente al Impacto de la Carretera Marginal (Lima, Peru: CAAAP, 1984), 197. Brown reports that in Jane Ross’s study of the less acculturated but closely related Achuar, fully 59 percent of male deaths were due to homicide.
7. For an analysis of the negative social consequences of this diagnostic system, see Michael Brown’s “Dark Side of the Shaman,” Natural History 11 (November 1989): 8–10.
8. To date, Aguaruna pastors do not claim the power to name and deal with witches, as sometimes happens elsewhere and which raises another whole set of issues. See my article “The Value of Anthropology for Missiological Engagements with Context: The Case of Witch Accusations,” Missiology (forthcoming).
10. Within selected immigrant communities such patterns are increasingly present in Europe and North America as well.
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