Magic, witchcraft, religion and knowledge

Introduction

There is hardly a way to talk about farming and knowledge in Mupfurudzi without reference to issues of magic, religion and witchcraft. Indeed, these issues had a way of cropping up in conversations with various informants whether they were specifically brought up or not. People would deny or acknowledge the existence of magic depending on the social context in which a particular question on magic was asked. However, no one in the sample denied the existence of witchcraft and all respondents claimed to belong to one religion or the other, Christianity or African Religion.

Letts (1991: 305, 306) regards magical beliefs, religious beliefs, and superstition as illogical, inconsistent and evidentially unfounded. For him the only legitimate questions that can be asked of these beliefs are why people hold them, where and when they originated, how they are transmitted and what functions they serve. For positivists like Letts, there is a real world out there in which people need to act objectively and scientifically to achieve results. To them, believing in witchcraft or magic is just like believing in Father Christmas and the tooth fairy. In this view, to be effective, local farmers should react to the dictates of the objective world and their magical and religious beliefs are considered as being out of touch with the ‘real’ world out there. Magical, witchcraft, and religious beliefs are regarded as retrogressive and as an obstacle to change. For Bourdillon (1989: 29) the term ‘magic’ can also be used to denote circumstances where ‘people confuse the logic of communication with the logic of material efficacy’. His argument is that this kind of confusion sometimes occurs and that it is convenient to classify such confusion as magic.

Accusations of witchcraft have been linked to jealousy (Fisiy and Geschiere 1996: 197; Daneel 1971: 68; Dolan 2002: 669; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998: 5), and for Evans-Pritchard (1937: 404): ‘The sickness is
the sorcery and proof of it’. However, it should be noted that Evans-Pritchard (1937) tried to show that witchcraft beliefs are rational and based on experience although he also was interested in explaining why the Azande people believed in these false beliefs. For instance in explaining why the Azande believed in magic in spite of contradictory evidence and beliefs, Evans-Pritchard (ibid.: 475) wrote: ‘Magic is very largely employed against mystical powers, witchcraft and sorcery. Since its actions transcend experience it cannot be easily contradicted by experience ... contradictions between the beliefs are not noticed by the Azande, because beliefs are not all present at the same time but function in different situations. They are therefore not brought into opposition’.

Although I do not deny that some witchcraft accusations are a result of jealousy, in most cases people consider the evidence before them before accusations are made. Some witchcraft accusations are dismissed by villagers (both rich and poor) for their lack of evidence. Although Niehaus et al. (2001: 116) recognise that often evidence is needed to ascertain whether witchcraft has occurred, he trivialises this evidence when he claims that sometimes evidence can be circumstantial. Thus, if his view on circumstantial evidence is taken to its logical conclusion, evidence that is normally permissible for those who believe in witchcraft is not substantive, is not able to link the witch to the witchcraft act, and indeed does not even prove that witchcraft has occurred at all. Where the witches confess, the confession is tied to political power games. Similarly, the poor are seen as using the confessions or threats of witchcraft to gain power within their households (see Dolan 2002: 667, on how women in a district in Kenya used threats of witchcraft against their husbands to gain access to resources within households). Niehaus et al. (2001: 9) regard witchcraft as a ‘weapon of the weak’, which they use to gain access to resources owned by the rich within their communities or families.

Elsewhere witchcraft beliefs and accusations have been linked to conflict and stressful situations. ‘In our extremely stressed society, traditional witchcraft beliefs provide apparent relief. At times of economic repression, suspicions of witchcraft abound as do the consequent witch hunts’ (Bourdillon 1993: 119; see also Dolan 2002: 663 on the link between witchcraft and friction within communities). Although these observations are relevant, there is a need to go beyond these economic and social tension approaches to witchcraft. This is so because as mentioned above, people consider different kinds of evidence before a person is accused of witchcraft, in spite of his or her wealth or lack of it.