

A Case Study of Christian Response to Sickness, Death, and Witchcraft in Northwestern Tanzania.

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Introduction

When someone develops a serious illness or his child dies, people everywhere try to discover the real cause. Every culture has causal explanations for illness, but the usual options and emphases differ between cultures. For example, Eliphaz, one of Job's three friends from the land of Uz, attempted to explain Job's suffering suggesting, "Consider now: who being innocent has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it. At the breath of God they are destroyed" (Job 4:7–9). In contrast to this perspective, a Pentecostal minister from northwestern Tanzania describes the explanation for death found in his Sukuma community:

The relatives sit and ask, "Who has killed our relative?" Then they may go to the healer and ask. Then they have another meeting. And they decide maybe they will kill the suspected witch. But the Christians know that this is natural and everyone must die according to Genesis 3.

Non-Christians come: "Why did he die?"

"It is the plan of God."

"You Christians are fools! There are many witches in this place. Your relative has been killed by someone, and we know him very much. Come with us, and we will show you who." [May 17, 2007]

Schweder says people seek causes in order to establish what is "normal," control future events, and assign blame (2003:80). He focuses on three frequent causal ontologies: "[1] Interpersonal . . . the ill will of others . . . [2] moral . . . you reap what you sow . . . [3] biomedical . . . events that take place outside the realms of human action, responsibility, or control . . . a material event . . . morally neutral" (2003:84). Schweder says that people most commonly use biomedical treatment of some type to ease their suffering. However, people blame

the ill will of others (interpersonal causality) as the cause of their suffering much more than anything else. Especially at death, most people blame the evil of the deceased (moral causal ontology) or someone else (interpersonal causal ontology) “For most peoples of the world, there are no faultless deaths” (2003:87).

Just as Schweder suggests is common, fault was assigned in the communities of Job and the Sukuma pastor. Job’s community explained illness and death with a moral causal ontology and all of the discussion assumes this. Eliphaz accused the sufferer of causing punishment from God by doing evil. The Sukuma pastor’s community explained all serious illness and death through an interpersonal causal ontology. They accused a witch and prepared to punish her for causing suffering. The pastor argued unsuccessfully from the Bible for God, sin, and a moral causal ontology to be considered.

Sickness, Death, and Witchcraft in Northwestern Tanzania¹

Northwestern Tanzanians usually understand interpersonal causal ontologies as primary—the real cause. Moral and biomedical causal ontologies are secondary, reflected in these quotations:

1. This article comes out of my experience and dissertation research. I taught ministers at Lake Victoria Christian College (LVCC) in northwestern Tanzania from 1995–2008. In our first years especially, our family struggled with much sickness, a stillbirth, and panic attacks. Most of these pastors we taught had lost at least one child. We helped friends struggle to treat and sometimes bury their children. These experiences made me wonder how people in the region deal with sickness and death. How do pastors help their church members who are sick or bereaved? These questions formed the core of my dissertation research.

From 2005–08, I conducted research helped by local students, teachers, and pastors. They taped or wrote more than 150 stories of illness or death. I interviewed individually or in focus groups more than 100 Pentecostal ministers for more than 130 hours and spent uncountable hours doing participant observation. Nearly all of this was in Swahili. I collected information on discourses and practices during episodes involving illness and death in northwestern Tanzania with particular attention to the beliefs involved, and to the social outcomes of these practices. I then used this material as the basis for a critical contextualization and education process in which ministers grappled with the theological and pastoral issues these cases represent.

“Your failure allowed her to make you sick.” The ill person sinned, broke a taboo, or offended someone. As a result an ancestor, spirit, or God caused the illness or removed spiritual protection so that a “witch” or spirit could cause the illness.

“She used it.” An object or accident may be the means, but ultimately someone is responsible. Someone may ask, “Who sent the mosquito with the malaria parasite and prevented treatment from being effective so that my child died?”

Most Sukuma and other northwestern Tanzanians believe people in their community who they consider to be witches cause most serious illnesses and deaths through invisible means. Along with its explanatory power, witchcraft² causal ontology brings negative feelings like fear and negative social outcomes ranging from distrust and destroyed relationships to banishment, beatings, and death.

Many Tanzanians believe that witches may use spirits. Spirits such as ancestors, *majini* (jinn or genies), or demons may themselves cause illness or death, or remove their protection. They do this because the afflicted person has broken their taboo, or they want to motivate a person to take a particular action. People who are not witches can also cause illness through the invisible means of *dawa* (“medicine” including poison and objects with spiritual and not just chemical powers), bad luck or curses.

Northwestern Tanzanians choose, mix, and argue from three primary options to explain, treat, and evaluate illness and death: local and neo-traditional, biomedical, and Christian. Where does each system look for causes and cures? The local and neo-traditional explanation and treatment

2. People intentionally causing illness or death by invisible or spiritual means is what I mean by “witchcraft” in this article. Various people throughout the world and history use the term for so many things that conversations and comparisons become confused.

system focuses on relationships with present “witches,” but also invisible witchcraft and sometimes ancestors or spirits. The biomedical system focuses on non-moral material objects like parasites, bacteria, viruses, and medicines. The Pentecostal Christian system says that the creator through Jesus and the Holy Spirit is powerfully present to heal and protect Jesus’ followers from sickness and powers of darkness (demons, Satan, and “witches”—who are human servants of the demonic, empowered by Satan to harm, just as God’s servants heal through Holy Spirit power). It identifies all spirits as demons, whether called ancestors, majini, or other names. Pentecostal ministers cast out these demons with the authority of Jesus, rather than negotiate with them for peace, health, wealth, or divination powers. Pentecostals say that not all deaths are caused by witchcraft. God’s will, sin, and biomedical causes also play a role in many deaths. They mix the three causal ontologies.

Northwestern Tanzanians believe cures or protection come primarily from ancestors in the local system, Jesus in the Christian system, and chemicals and procedures in the biomedical system. These cures are sometimes administered by their respective experts: local healers, pastors, and doctors. In the following table, the primary and secondary focuses of diagnosis and treatment in the interpersonal, moral, and biomedical causal ontologies are listed according to the three systems: local, Pentecostal, and biomedical. The capitalized words are the primary focuses of diagnosis and treatment and the lowercase are the secondary focuses, which support the primary focuses.

Table 1 Focuses of diagnosis and treatment in the three Tanzanian systems according to causal ontologies

CAUSAL ONTOLOGY	LOCAL, NEO-TRADITIONAL SYSTEM	PENTECOSTAL SYSTEM	BIOMEDICAL SYSTEM
Interpersonal “She made you sick”	WITCHES, ancestors, and sometimes majini	Powers of darkness, including witches and SATAN/DEMONS (may be disguised as ancestors or majini). God	

<p style="text-align: center;">Moral "You made you sick"</p>	<p>Offense against an ancestor or witch (or possibly against a normal person who gets help to bewitch you from an expert)</p>	<p>Sin angers God or allows powers of darkness (In the Bible and in preaching sin is primary, but not in most stories I heard.)</p>	<p>Lifestyle choices: drinking impure water, smoking, not sleeping under a mosquito net, etc.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Biomedical "It made you sick"</p>	<p><i>Dawa</i> (poison or object) used by a witch or other person</p>	<p>Biomedical causes acknowledged and treated, but less important</p>	<p>"GERMS": parasites, bacteria, viruses, cancer cells, etc.</p>

Sometimes, fearless trust in Jesus allows Pentecostals to restore relationships broken by suspicion of witchcraft. Other times, fear causes them to passively follow the community in suspecting and even shunning a neighbor. When a suspected witch joins the church, church members' opinions remain divided on whether the newcomer is fully converted or still dangerous.

The following case study and analysis demonstrates some of the realities that Christians face and some of their responses.

Case Study: A Pastor's Response to the Accusations of Witchcraft against Four Women and their Banishment

Between August and October of 2007 I interviewed four eyewitnesses, each at a different time, about the recent banishing of four older women suspected to be witches. The public judgment of three of the women took place approximately July 21, 2007. It occurred in a village I had ministered in, located in Geita district of Mwanza region in northwestern Tanzania. Many from the Sukuma ethnic group have moved to this area and now form the majority. As you read this case study, consider how you would respond if you were this pastor in this village.

Accusations Against and Banishment of Three Suspected Witches

A man told village leaders that he was dying because he had been bewitched by a 50-year-old woman. He had lived with her as his landlady and sexual partner. He claimed she had threatened to kill him for not paying three dollars for rent and sex. When called to the meeting, the accused woman said she had no power to kill her sexual partner, but would not say if she had threatened him. A few days later the man died at the local healer's house who was also the commander of the Sungu-Sungu.³ (He never saw a medical doctor.) The Sungu-Sungu soldiers gathered all the village residents to the football field to hear the accusations against this woman. After some beatings and testimony, she and two other women were accused and banished from the village. The local leaders took the man's former partner and another of these women and their materials for making distilled liquor to the police. These two women had moved to the village within the last few years. The police charged these two women in court with illegal brewing, but did not mention witchcraft. The court put the landlady in jail for six months and gave the other woman a large fine of \$435. These two never returned to the village.

The houses of these three women were burned down in the night by residents who were never identified. Another woman I will call Kabula also had her house burned down. She and the other long-term resident rebuilt their homes and stayed. All of the accused women's husbands had died or divorced them. Three of the women have daughters who attend the local Pentecostal church. The church members accept the daughters as faithful Christians, but believe the mothers are witches. The church did continue to relate to the families even when they had been ostracized by the village, but they did not help them to rebuild their houses.

³Sungu-Sungu is a neo-traditional vigilante organization that arose in the eighties in response to the failure of police to catch and convict thieves, especially cattle thieves. They also prosecute other criminals, including "witches."

Accusations Against and Banishment of Church Member: “Kabula”

The pastor of this Pentecostal church lives with the church on one side and Kabula with her daughter on the other side. Kabula is a member of his church. Here is a summary of her story, as the pastor told it to me in an interview of several hours on October 5 and 6, 2007:

She was originally from this village and married here. After her father died, she asked repeatedly for a share of the cows, especially since many had been given as bride wealth for her. But her brothers said, “No, just let the oldest brother be like the father of the family and keep them all together.” When he died the remaining two brothers accused her of bewitching him. Finally she and her husband moved to a village a little ways away and were neighbors to me and my parents. There people also said she was a witch, and they moved again to a third village where her husband left her. Then she moved to a fourth and fifth village, each time because of suspicions. She has six girls and three boys, but two of her sons died. Apparently, divination showed that she was responsible for sacrificing her boys for the sake of power in her witches’ fellowship. Finally, she moved back to her original village.

She moved close to her older brother there. Then . . . he got very sick. They took him to the hospital, and they couldn’t do anything. . . . When they were taking him home, they went by the local healer’s. He told them . . . she had done this. It was necessary for her relatives to warn her. They sat her down for a meeting and said “This brother of yours, he must recover.”

And later she told me herself. Isn’t she my church member? So I asked her, “Why are they accusing you of things like this, you? Are you involved with such things?”

She said, “No, pastor. I don’t know anything about it at all. They are just slandering me.”

I tried to help her that if she was involved in such things she should leave them. I used all of my ways to try to counsel her. . . . But . . . I left her (or she left him—*kamwacha*). So she has these accusations until now [a year later]. And that is why her houses were burned.

Three times recently people had tried to attack her and cut her with machetes at night but were discovered and chased away. But the third time . . . she herself discovered them. . . . She went to accuse them at the office, herself—two young men. One was the child of her older brother. The one who she tried to kill, the one who they thought she tried to kill. . . . They gave them a fine of 50,000 [Tanzanian shillings, about \$44] each. Right there they told her that she should leave our village.

Everyone in the village and her family “knows” that she is a witch. But she supposedly got saved in one of the other villages she was in. She has faithfully attended this Pentecostal church as well. How do the church people and pastor see her? They do not believe she is really a Christian.

One reason the pastor gave was that he has never heard her pray. She comes to prayer meetings, but she refuses to pray aloud. The church members believe she is a witch. As the pastor explains:

Pastor: There are some who are very afraid of her. And especially, there are some who . . . say, “Pastor, you should tell her that she should stop coming to church.”

I said, “Church is where she will get the truth of her life. If we prevent her, we will have deprived her of her chance to change. . . . If it is the choice of God, she can leave her bad ways and turn to God. But if it is a plant that God did not plant . . . in the end . . . she will get tired of church, and she will just leave it. So for us to chase her out straight away—no! Let us help her.” . . . And that is why we sat with her, and we tried to ask her why she is the one that people say this about. . . . We have many old grandmothers in the church. Why don’t they accuse others?

Author: So even in church . . . others are afraid of her and avoid her?

P: Umm, Umm (Yes).

A: And there are others who try to greet her?

P: Yes, those who understand God is able to defend them in this kind of condition. So they don’t care about her character. They don’t care what they hear about her. . . . They can go to her house and also talk to her.

A: They eat and drink there?

P: No, I think the only one who is that bold is just me. [laughter] . . . But you know she can’t do anything to me . . . Yes, my wife also. Although I haven’t witnessed my wife drinking there, she goes there. . . . She is our neighbor.”

The pastor says that he and his wife have continued to greet Kabula, visit her, and love her, despite his wife becoming very ill with pain in her chest, tiredness, and weakness. They tested in two different medical facilities and she was hospitalized in the nearest town, but the only diagnosis was possibly overwork, which they dismissed since it wasn’t farming season. The pastor’s wife was simply given pain relievers and rest in the hospital. The couple debated going to a hospital in a bigger city, but decided it might be the power of darkness, so they should just pray. However, when they returned, they told people she had been hospitalized and treated so that people did not assume she had been bewitched and spread rumors.

When the couple returned from the hospital, others in the church and neighborhood told the pastor that Kabula had been seen naked outside his house, along with others who somehow were

trapped and delayed in their bewitching. The pastor heard this from many people, but he has never found the one who actually saw it. At about the time this was reported to have happened and when his wife got sick, Kabula requested prayer in the church for bleeding. Kabula's daughter said this lasted a whole month which is very unusual especially for a 60-year-old woman. The pastor's response:

Pastor: The thing to do is just to pray to God and to leave it to God . . . We thought it was just a different power of darkness. . . . It is possible that the condition of harassment could be there. This is simply happening in various places. But if you trust in God, he just helps. There is no trouble at all. Because these things I have seen many times. When you talk about things like this, like witchcraft, you talk about things that are not there. But the results show that this thing is there. Yes.

For example, When I moved [from my village to the church] where I am now, there was great opposition. And there are things that were taking place, like a sign. For example, you go to bed at night, you close the door and then it is opened, and you don't know how. . . . You go and close it, and then it will be opened again. That's it (*basi*).

One night we were sleeping. We woke up, and we no longer have our sheet that was covering us. It was taken away. So it is things like that which are evidence (*vidhihirisho*).

But if we trust God, he is able to help. He is able to guard.⁴

Author: Yes, so now your neighbor [Kabula] has bothered you for a long time?

P: Maybe it is just this one time. I have not heard anything or felt anything about her. But I have heard and heard. . . . from people. . . . But I didn't know that she could do that. But . . . she began to be VERY afraid of me So when someone begins to be afraid of you, you begin asking yourself, "Why is she so afraid of me?"

But it didn't shock me because I am not a stranger to these things. I am not a careless person (*mlegevu*). I have already been bereaved before. I have had my children die there at home. So I understand.

A: You were bereaved of your children because of witchcraft?

4. The previous pastor told me that this activity was part of a threat from a woman who was upset that the village gave the church this land, which she claimed, and threatened to run him and the church off. During this time, the former pastor came to encourage and pray with this pastor. The village people said, "Now the elder has come to complete this young man." When he persevered, rather than be scared off, they said that he had been "completed in his witchcraft." In other words, many villagers identified the pastor's perseverance as coming from more powerful witchcraft. Since witchcraft is the most powerful force in their understanding, they identify this power as coming from witchcraft even though the pastors identify it as coming from Jesus. This same misunderstanding was reported in other cases as well.

P: I didn't know. I only knew that they died. But people said. Now that condition of people to say . . . It doesn't have a lot of meaning, because I didn't see. . . . Now for me to be told that it is possible it could be her. . . . Then I knew that if it was just this condition, then it was a normal condition and God was able to help.

Now, things like this are there. In our area, they are there. It does its work. But God guards us.

A: God guards, but still you are able to get sick. . . . even to be bereaved?

P: Yes, you are able. . . . But . . . we believe that you will go to heaven, and you will be received by God just fine. But if God has let it go . . . you could go. But even together with this, the hand of God will not have been reduced in your life. . . . God will continue to love you. . . . He has allowed this to happen. . . . like he did when they crucified Jesus. God had the ability to stop it, and he had the ability to guard and the ability to send down an army or fire. Even Jesus said so. But because it was the time of the leader of darkness, that is why God decided to act like he didn't see, like he didn't concern himself with it, and like he didn't have any power. . . . Until finally . . . everything was finished which he had purposed. But his ability was there for his son even.

So this is what we believe. And it is not able to change our faith. So that we start to worry because I have gotten very sick, so "what have I done or maybe my neighbor has bewitched me. Or how did this come about?" uh-uh (no). But this is something that wrecks many church members. Many of them run away from the church, because of hunting for the life of here on this earth. If a parishioner goes to the hospital and there is no obvious sickness, he knows straight away, "I have been bewitched!" . . . He knows that "my treatment is no longer in the hospital. It is with the local healers." So even if he doesn't go openly, he will use deception.

So we continue to trust God alone. And those who we teach and who understand us, they continue to use just this method—of trusting God alone. You know they know that the authority of death is not in the hand of the devil. . . . The one who allows death is God, if he desires.

Epilogue to the Case Study

When the pastor came into town, I asked for an update. He explained to me that his wife was feeling fine now. In the middle of a recent night, his neighbor Kabula had again been attacked and she had called for help, but no one came to her aid. He said he did not hear the call himself, because he had just returned from a trip and was very tired. His wife heard the call but did not wake him. Kabula ran away that night to another village. The church people were relieved.

When I saw him again in March 2008, he told me that she had returned. She was called to the village office for the fourth time and again was told that she must leave the village. They said that because no one knows when the attacks will come and they cannot put a constant guard on her house, she must leave. She finally left without saying goodbye. The pastor said the village did not use any violence or force. He said the church saw that she came very close to repenting several times, but she did not repent. In September 2008, a deacon from this congregation reported that the church had discovered that her trips away from the village were to seek treatment from a local healer to remove the curse that caused her relatives, such as her grandchildren, to die after they had been in contact with her.

Analysis

Did the pastor and congregation respond well? How would you respond in the pastor's situation? How do we do theology and ministry that address these issues? Paul Hiebert suggests a process of critical contextualization.⁵ Simply put, a group of local Christians should (1) investigate what is happening, (2) evaluate what is real and true, then (3) minister appropriately. He also advocates a "system of systems approach" that investigates the personal, physical, biological, cultural, social, and spiritual systems and how they interact with each other. By contrast, reductionist approaches look only at the biological causes of the man's death, the spiritual forces at work, the economics, or the cultural understandings about witchcraft and explain the rest as

5. Hiebert addresses the problem of people who claim conversion, but their discourse, practices, culture, and worldview are an incompatible mix of old religious belief and behavior and Biblical Christianity (Hiebert et al. 1999:15–19). He advocates a four-step group process of critical contextualization rather than uncritically accepting or rejecting old ways, both of which result in syncretism. Step One: phenomenological analysis, beginning with careful observation of discourse and practices. These are described, categorized, and understood without judgment as parts of larger systems of belief, logic, and worldview. Step Two: ontological critique which focuses on belief and tests the truth of beliefs and values based on Scripture and objective reality. Step Three: design a critical evaluative response to traditional beliefs and practices. The goal is discourse and practices that express Biblical teaching in an indigenous way. Step Four: transformative ministries that help people adopt these discourse, practices and beliefs (20–29). Hiebert and Tienou (2006) simplified this to a three-step process: Investigate phenomenology, evaluate ontology, and act out missiology.

caused by that. Unlike this linear causality, systems causality says that, like a body, every part of the system and other systems influence every other part and is, in turn, influenced and changed (Hiebert 2008:75–80). I will analyze this case using Hiebert’s three steps of critical contextualization and several systems and perspectives.

Step One: Investigate What Happened (Phenomenology)

I have explained what happened in the case study and the meanings the local participants gave to the events. Further analysis shows that in this village through a history of previous suspicious incidents and gossip, the reputation of a witch was ascribed. On this foundation, motive (envy or anger), accusation, and unusual illness provided sufficient evidence to convict a neighbor.

This case study illustrates the sociology of knowledge. It is common knowledge in the village that witches kill people and that these older, husband-less women who fit the stereotype and have “criminal records” are witches. Even the local church people “know” this. With an interpersonal causal ontology guiding them, the villagers draw a line from reputation through motive to a result. Many empirical dots, which might otherwise be unremarkable, are found along the way and cited as additional evidence. Even though the line of witchcraft itself is never seen it becomes obvious to everyone. Connecting the dots in this way is a result of local worldview and the configurational nature of knowledge (Hiebert et al. 1999:41–43). A different causal ontology would suspect a different configuration. For example, a biomedical causal ontology does not believe that one person can make another sick through invisible means, and is more likely to believe that accusing these women as witches is simply about gossip, backed by diviners and motivated by envy.

Healers and diviners assist in this accusation process at every turn. Much of what “everyone knows,” including Christians, is based on gossip which has roots in divination by local healers.

Diviners also use their own knowledge of gossip to give a convincing diagnosis. In the case of the three women, the local healer also has local political and police power as the commander of the Sungu-Sungu.

Kabula's "witch" reputation began as a jealousy issue about wealth. The brothers did not want to share any cows with their sister, even those given as her bride wealth. When the oldest brother died, they identified Kabula's envy as her motive to use witchcraft against him. Once Kabula's reputation is established, it follows her. Every village found reason to suspect her and every time she left, the reputation grew. Because witchcraft is done secretly and has "no evidence, only results," it is impossible to prove or disprove. Therefore, the village believed that Kabula was proven to be a witch, both when her older brother died and when her younger brother recovered after the family threatened her. Every tragedy in her life adds to her reputation as a witch by making people more suspicious rather than sympathetic: the death of her brother, the deaths of her sons, abandonment by her husband, and banishment from villages. Each tragedy also increases the suspicion that she envies or is angry with others.

Kabula also lost the defense of her brothers, community, husband, sons, daughters, neighbors, church, and finally her pastor. Because this pastor grew up in the area he knew that his neighbor Kabula was considered a witch before he knew about Jesus. However, because of his Christian faith the pastor defended her to others in the church, visited her, and ate with her when no one else would, even after she has been ostracized by the community. He rescued Kabula's belongings from the flames of her burning house and responded to her other distress calls, but his wife let him sleep through the final attack. Apparently, the pastor's wife believed with everyone else that Kabula was a witch and might have attacked her. Did this belief contribute to the pastor's wife allowing her husband to sleep?

Faith in Jesus motivated this pastor and some church members to respond more lovingly to Kabula. Some church members did visit her, eat with her, and continue to relate to her. They did this even after her brothers had accused her, her nephew tried to kill her, village members had burned her house, and village leaders banished her. However, they never accepted her as a true Christian, one who is “saved”. Rumors combined with the lack of certain expected Christian behaviors produced doubt. In the eyes of these church members, she was a witch who might repent. The pastor understood her claim that everyone was slandering her as a refusal to repent. Ultimately she sought help from a local healer. This suggests that she wanted to change, but probably confirmed to the church people that she was not a Christian. For most local people nothing is sufficient evidence for conversion and transformation from being a witch. Ultimately, even the church was no place for Kabula to find protection and acceptance. Such protection and acceptance would be a big risk for the church in the community. In this case, the pastor and church found it impossible to completely counter social and cultural pressure.

The good news of the gospel has not changed the causal ontology of the pastor or church members to the point where they do not suspect neighbors of causing illness and death. However, the pastor’s faith in Jesus has greatly reduced his fear of witches or other powers of darkness. It has made him more suspicious of healers and more appreciative of biomedicine. It has made him believe that many illnesses are not caused by witchcraft and has caused him and his family to more often and more persistently seek biomedical help.

Step Two: Evaluate What is Real or True (Ontology)

One way to examine what is true is by examining the empirical evidence, but of course interpretations of evidence are influenced by one’s culture, worldview, and experience. We must also listen to the Scripture, the Spirit, and the saints from many cultures and contexts. When I continued to question and listen to whether people were killed by witches, the pastors in

northwestern Tanzania finally said that I just had not lived and ministered in the villages long enough to have experienced the reality of witchcraft. Discussions helped us both grow in understanding the other's interpretation of events and causal ontology. Comparing how Christians respond in other contemporary or historical contexts where there are or have been accusations of witches killing others can also help. Contemporary examples exist among the Aguaruna in South America, Catholics in Portugal, and many places in Africa (see for example cases in Ter Harr 2007).

Macfarlane's method of analyzing the witchcraft present in an English county between 1563 and 1603 could apply to the case of these "four witches" in the Tanzanian village within Sukumaland. There are many parallels between the Tanzanian case study and the English account that was written by Gifford in 1587 and later analyzed by Macfarlane. A similar percentage of suspected witches were accused and killed during the forty years in the English county as in Sukumaland in recent decades.⁶ Macfarlane's analysis is as follows:

How there was a gradual growth of feeling over a long period, although no event was ascribed to the witch for several years at a time, and then how more and more disaster was laid at her door, are graphically illustrated. Gifford shows how the whole village community became involved in the gossip and tension. He also shows the process whereby a person cast about in his mind to see who might have bewitched him. In this case he selected a person with whom he felt uneasy and against whom he had offended. Mounting bitterness against an individual could not find an outlet until proof of her witchcraft had been discovered; then she was either forced to confess her guilt and promise amendment of life at the ecclesiastical courts, or removed from the community by imprisonment or death. . . . Witchcraft prosecutions, we have seen, usually occurred between village neighbors. They almost always arose from quarrels over gifts and loans,

6. At least 110 suspected witches died in prison or were executed out of a population of 100,000 in 40 years. By comparison out of a population of perhaps 4,000,000, "Between 1970 and 1988, 3,073 people were killed in the area of Sukumaland after being identified as witches" (Mesaki 1993:189). Police records says that 2,585 were killed in 5 years ending in 2009 in 8 regions of Tanzania, with 140 per year killed in Mwanza region and 105 per year killed in Shinyanga region (<http://www.humanrights.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Tanzania-Human-Rights-Report-2009.pdf>: 19). These regions had ~~with~~ a population of 6.1 million at the beginning of this period ([Remaining Task Mission 2005:30](http://www.humanrights.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Tanzania-Human-Rights-Report-2009.pdf)<http://www.humanrights.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Tanzania-Human-Rights-Report-2009.pdf>: 19).

when the victim refused the witch some small article, heard her muttering under her breath or threatening him, and subsequently suffered some misfortune. [1970:91–92]

Macfarlane says the key element was tension in close relationships prior to a misfortune, rather than the presence of a misfortune. The person who refused to give what had been requested assumed the one who made the request felt envy and anger for not receiving anything (like money, food, or cows). The feelings that the refuser then felt were self-interpreted not as guilt, but as fear from having turned away a witch. Later misfortune confirmed this fear. From then on the refuser would not accept any gifts from the suspected neighbor out of fear of being bewitched, further cutting off the relationship. Early modern European Christians found an exit from the value of loving one's neighbor even while claiming the value (1970:92–94). Similarly, in Sukuma culture, one must share with a relative, yet envious relatives are most often accused of bewitching. Kabula's problems began in this fashion with her brother refusing to give her cows and making her appear to be envious. The landlady's problems began when she demanded payment for rent and sex from her neighbor and former partner.

Pastors' responses in Early Modern Europe helped to foster, fuel, and later finish witch killing (in combination with other factors in other systems). During the witch-killing times, a sermon given in 1617 encouraged people to not give charity indiscriminately and to refuse food or hospitality to suspected witches. The sermon commanded church members not to seek the blessings or fear the curses of the witches but be courageous as Christians. Ten years after the witch-killing times, a preacher is quoted in a book published in 1656, saying that helping the poor is commanded by God. Therefore, if you become sick, you should not try to hang the old woman who was at your door because she bewitched you, but rather say that because you spoke harshly to the old woman instead of helping her, *God* is afflicting you. The preacher references Exodus 22:23, which says that if you afflict the widow, God will hear her cry and be angry with you (Macfarlane 1970:92–94). Notice how the later preacher used a moral causal ontology from

scripture, while the preacher less than forty years earlier preached an interpersonal causal ontology. In the English county that Macfarlane studied, the witch-hunts ended with the largest ones from 1645–47 when over 100 suspected witches were killed.

The craze of the 1640s did not mark the height of witch-hunting; it was the final act. As in other parts of Europe, the craze first silenced demurrers by offering graphic evidence of witchcraft, but in time raised more doubts than it suppressed. . . . The shift in opinion was driven by jurisprudential separation of ‘matters of fact’ from ‘matters of law’, but also mirrored a growing tendency among theologians to scrutinize occult phenomenon more closely. [Gaskill 2005: 279–280]

We also must ask, “How do we know about spiritual realities? What evidence can we accept? What does the Bible say?” Scripture usually blames our own sin and God’s judgment of it for sickness and death (Gen. 2:17, Lev. 26:16, Deut. 28:21, Ps. 38:3, Amos 4:10, 1 Cor. 11:30), but not all sickness is a result of the individuals sin (John 9:2–3). Scripture sometimes says Satan and demons caused a sickness (e.g. Job, Luke 11:14, 13:11). Scripture seldom suggests either biomedical or interpersonal and witchcraft causes. Medical science is right in examining God’s faithful actions revealed in creation, but not when it ignores God.⁷ Most Africans understand that spiritual beings regularly influence physical reality as scripture indicates. There are even a few biblical examples of God acting on the word of his messengers by bringing sickness or death on God’s enemies.⁸ I find no biblical examples of evil people through unseen means causing sickness or death alone or with the support of Satan. The sorcerers and magicians of Egypt produced snakes and blood to deceive Pharaoh into not fearing Yahweh, but they did not make anyone sick. They could not match God’s power to send boils, which they were also

7. Scripture has a few biomedical references. Paul may have recommended a biomedical precaution to Timothy to drink water purified with a little wine (1 Tim. 5:23). Isaiah commanded what seems to be a medical treatment as a means of God’s promised healing (2 Kings 20:4–7). But physicians also fail without God’s healing (Mark 5:26) so one should not rely on them instead of God (2 Chron. 16:12–13).

8. For example, Moses against Egypt (Exod. 9–11), Elisha against the mocking children and enemy soldiers (2 Kings 2:24; 6:18), Peter against Ananias (Acts 5:1–11), and Paul against Elymas (Acts 13:11).

unable to heal themselves of. The boils made the sorcerers too sick to appear before Pharaoh. The Egyptians used swords to kill Hebrew children, but they could not use spiritual power to kill them or to protect their own children (Exod. 5–9). Balak believed Balaam could use sorcery or spiritual power to curse the Israelites, but Balaam failed to harm them. Balaam only succeeded in indirectly harming the Israelites by enticing the Israelites to sin and then be killed by Yahweh (Num. 22–25). Thus the Israelites needed to fear God and his punishment of sin, but not the most powerful witch of their time. Balak believed an interpersonal causal ontology that did nothing, but it was the moral causal ontology which brought death.

“Take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:11–12 NIV). Why attack flesh and blood if our battle is against spiritual beings? In the case study, the church reduced the incident to spiritual warfare and therefore did not protect widows against social warfare. Demons were probably involved, but Kabula seems to be one of their victims rather than their commander.

Do we have any biblical evidence that attacking a widow suspected of being a witch either hinders Satan or makes God happy? One scripture says to kill a “sorceress” (Exod. 22:18), but this word may refer to diviners like Balaam whose activities were public and obvious, not invisible.⁹ This verse must be balanced against Exodus 22:21–24 in which God promises to kill anyone who oppresses widows or aliens. Both testaments clearly and frequently say Christians must protect and care for widows, orphans, and aliens, and the poor (e.g., Deut. 24:17; Prov. 23:10; Acts 6:1; 1 Tim. 5:3; James 1:27).

9. In Numbers 24:1 it says Balaam “did not resort to sorcery as at other times.” The previous times all were public divination-type activities. In Numbers 23:23 sorcery is in parallel with divination which suggests that it is similar if not the same, but it is used against people. More biblical research is needed on how this “sorceress” could be identified as well as on other uses of this and related words. Northwestern Tanzanians assume that these words refer to the same people they identify as witches, who did the same things.

Former diviners have explained and demonstrated to me the sleight of hand tricks that they used to deceive clients and make money. But the Bible tells us not to listen to diviners (Deut. 18). In the New Testament people know Elymas as a prophet and sorcerer, but Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, identifies his sources: “You are a child of the devil . . . full of all kinds of deceit and trickery” (Acts 13:6–12). Even if a few diviners actually have insight given from the spirit world, is it not insight from demons? If demons reveal something true, it is ultimately for the purpose of deceiving, accusing, killing, and destroying. Whether a diviner uses demonic powers or human tricks of deception, we should not listen to them. This instruction should also be applied to listening to diviners indirectly through gossip and accusations.

Step Three: Minister Appropriately (Missiology)

How do we minister in a context like this village? First we show love by listening. We need to deeply understand people in this village as this pastor has. We need to understand and feel their social, cultural, biological, physical, personal, and spiritual challenges. Any effective help must begin with people’s current situation, understandings, feelings, and values. Tanzanians usually ignore ministers, doctors or NGOs who simply deny witchcraft and go to local diviners for protection and healing that treats interpersonal, invisible causes. In the same way, middle class Americans would ignore a minister who told them not to seek biomedical treatment. Transformation of a worldview from an interpersonal and witchcraft causal ontology might be desirable, but this process could take years or generations and changes in all the systems.¹⁰ Americans may wish to transform the causal ontology in northwestern Tanzania to a biomedical ontology, but this has no more biblical support than interpersonal and witchcraft ontology. Of course, these arguments from what the Bible does not say are weaker than from what the Bible

10. Hiebert says worldviews can be transformed by discovering our worldview, being exposed to other worldviews, and creating living rituals. He reminds readers that worldview is not the basis for everything. It is only a piece of one system (the cultural) and all parts and systems influence each other (2008:319–325).

does say. Scientific biomedicine was not an option in biblical times. Yet, when Americans or Africans explain and treat *every* sickness or death in biomedical or interpersonal terms, which the Bible virtually never uses, is this not at least an error of overemphasis?

Proclaiming Jesus' power over sickness, death, and everything or everyone that causes it is a good beginning of transformation. In support of the pastor of the village in our case study, he appears to be doing this better than any other local church. Many Christians do not believe that Jesus' power is greater. Do not American Christians reveal their doubt and secular syncretism when the most they can pray is for God to help the doctor; when they pay more for biomedical care and insurance than they give to Jesus; and when the best help they can imagine for Africa is more biomedicine? As Christians we need to persevere in prayer. Job talked to God even when he could only complain. His friends only talked about God. Above all, people need to listen to the stories of Scripture more than local stories of witchcraft or "medical miracles," until Scripture's stories shape their understanding, feelings, values, social interactions, and political and economic actions.

Critical Contextualization and Responding to Particular Accusations

A process of critical contextualization may help in improving Christian's responses to accusations of witchcraft, even if their causal ontologies are not transformed. Ongoing discussions that wrestle with all of Scripture and the question of "how do we know?" could help, especially if people with varying worldviews are included in the discussion. Pastors using a critical contextualization perspective and discussion in the situations they regularly face can have an impact on lives.

Recent research on Early Modern European witchcraft has revealed that some accepted understandings were mistaken. For example, beliefs and books about demons and witchcraft did

not produce accusations, trials, and killings. The social behavior of witchcraft accusations and trials preceded the books, which then tried to explain the confessions in the trials (Midelfort 2008:364). Accusations and social relationships produced beliefs about witchcraft as much as beliefs affected the social relationships. Also it was not more education or skeptics who stopped witch killings. “Again and again, from place to place, witchcraft trials were locally stopped by men who still believed in witchcraft” (Midelfort 2008:373), but were more careful about procedural safeguards and refusing false testimony. They asked more demanding epistemological questions about particular cases.

Catholic Churches in Zambia have had success reducing violence through local seminars about accusations and persecutions of suspected witches. Representatives from all the local churches, police force, judiciary, and political administration engaged in discussions. Witch-finding diviners’ tricks were re-enacted and exposed. Discussions about obstacles produced action. For example, churches began providing transport to police, initiating cases against witch-hunters, and helping victims write testimonies (Hinfelaar 2007:239–242).

Like these men, Benesta Misana is a Tanzanian Pentecostal pastor who is resisting some accusations of witchcraft, even though he believes in witches. A man who repented of witchcraft is an accepted member of his congregation. Benesta called a family meeting to stop rumors accusing someone of killing his mother. He ministers in an Abakwaya village outside Musoma where several witches have been killed including his brother and a former pastor. In this area, 80 percent of people go to the diviner before they ever go to the doctor (Nyaga 2007). I asked Benesta how he evaluated the outcome of a 13-hour critical contextualization course I led in Musoma, Tanzania a year and a half after he participated in it. Benesta reported that the class helped, for example during a recent, serious health crisis.

Benesta's daughter Flora had a four-year-old daughter, Grace, who was very sick. The hospital had difficulty discovering why for several days. Most locals were saying that she was bewitched. At least four different people were accused. Many pressured that, since the hospital had failed, Grace should be taken out to a local healer to deal with the witchcraft. Benesta recounted his story to me:

Grace's father, [Paul's] family said our side bewitched Grace. . . . My sister-in-law who they said this about, she is in our church.

My brother's sisters and other relatives said, "We told her [Flora] not to be married there, because they are witches." When my son-in-law, Paul, was still small, his father pushed out his wife for killing their child with witchcraft. His father's three remaining wives raised him. When Paul became a man, he got saved. He continued in the church and married my daughter. After three months he went and returned his mother from her home area to his house. When this illness took place, my relatives blamed his mother, "She killed her child, now she is doing it again to her grandchild."

When they talked about this, my daughter Flora started to be afraid and forgot her Christianity. My wife and I encouraged her, but her thoughts had moved. So we tried to encourage Paul and Flora and said, "Leave this and trust Jesus. Let the hospital do their work." Paul and his family wanted to take Grace out of the hospital and bring her to a local healer. They even brought local medicine into the hospital to give her. When my wife visited, she saw this medicine and asked Flora about it. Then she threw it in the toilet. Since, among all the relatives, only we contributed to the cost of the hospital treatment, Paul and Flora listened to us and did not take her out of the hospital.

[The hospital finally diagnosed poisoning.] Grace was scheduled to have an operation. Her stomach was swollen, hard, full of blood. [Delays and mismanagement delayed the operation several days until it never happened.]

Finally Grace was healed and everyone has changed their tune and said that, "Truly, God is able." Therefore the students who were in the class said, "You see the importance of this class? This is something that we haven't just heard about but is something that is happening right here. If they had not followed through and this child had died, there would have been a fight between these families."

The class helped me in this situation, because it made me doubt what people say. In the class discussions I noticed that everyone had heard many things, but no one had seen them. But, because they had heard many times, they said, "It is possible." So when people began saying Grace was bewitched by this person or that, I said, "If no one has seen it, let's forget it and just trust Jesus." What helped this situation was my wife and I's stand. Only the two of us stood.

So these things need lots of research. One of your students even called while I was here in Mwanza and said, "Her (Grace's) condition is bad. Why don't

we take her out of the hospital?” I said, “Didn’t you take the research [critical contextualization] class?” He hung up.

Another student who saw Grace before and after said, “If someone is healed from a miracle, it is this one.” So they saw it. They saw that God is great.

So the class was important because it helps you know where to stand when there is trouble. The problem is if you start to stagger, there are many who will take you away.

If they had taken Grace out of the hospital, she would have died because she did not eat for two weeks. The IV helped her so much. So they were surprised that finally she recovered.

So I think we need to keep teaching this class to each round of students. I think we can teach it now that we have seen it.

Christians (especially pastors) need to be trained as healers who understand and respond more lovingly in the spiritual, social, cultural, personal, physical, and biological systems. Critical contextualization discussions can assist in this training. We need to continue to listen to God and each other and improve our understanding of causes and cures in general and in specific cases.

Whether or not we discover truth in general about causes, we must love in particular relationships. Let us love, defend, restore, and pray for the sick, the grieving, the widows, and the accused. Job’s wise counselors used a biblical causal ontology, but did not understand the causes in his case. They ended up assisting Satan in accusing Job. God told them, “I am angry with you . . . because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). Job never knew the cause of his illness or his children’s deaths, but because he persevered in pursuing God, he defeated Satan, grew in faith, saw God anew, and also received blessings. Causes and cures may remain a mystery, but let us trust Jesus and love people.

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