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Consequences of accusing older people of practicing witchcraft on local communities: empirical evidence from rural and urban Zambia

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Abstract

A gap exists in the scientific knowledge on the consequences of witchcraft accusations. Research on the consequences of witchcraft accusations has not adequately brought out the negative consequences of such accusations on the local communities where the accused live. This study sought to describe and understand the negative consequences of accusing older people of practicing witchcraft on the two communities of Zambia – one rural community and one urban community. By undertaking qualitative research with 31 local community leaders involved in addressing cases of witchcraft accusations involving older people, the study established that accusing older people of practicing witchcraft has huge negative consequences on the local communities where the accused live and on the whole Zambian community. The three main negative consequences that emerged from the data are: family and community divisions, low participation in community activities, and generational hatred. On the basis of the present findings, the article concludes that the consequences of accusing older people of practicing witchcraft in Zambia have far reaching negative consequences on the Zambian communities both in rural and urban Zambia than what is documented in the existing literatures. Thus, the article recommends that since witchcraft accusations is a common problem in different regions of the world, future research should investigate the negative consequences of such accusations on the local

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communities where the accused live. This is essential in broadening scientific knowledge on the consequences of witchcraft accusations.

Introduction

The concept of witchcraft and the belief in its existence has existed throughout human history. It has been present or central at various times, and in many diverse forms, among different cultures and religions worldwide. This applies to both “primitive” and “highly advanced” cultures and continues to have an important role in many cultures today (Ankarloo & Clark, 2001; Kabelenga, 2014 & 2018). However, witchcraft is a complex concept that varies across different cultures (Zguta, 1977; Farrar & Farrar, 1984; Buckland, 2002). Because of this, there is no universally agreed upon definition of witchcraft. Notwithstanding this, witchcraft broadly means the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities that are able to be exercised by individuals and certain social groups that are intended to hurt. Witches are commonly associated with harm to the community and transgression of societal standards (Ankarloo & Clark, 2001). They are believed to travel in secret and do harm to the innocent (Laveck, 2006). For example, common powers typically attributed to European, Asian, African, American, and Latin American witches include turning food poisonous or inedible, flying on broomsticks or pitchforks, casting spells, cursing people, making livestock ill and crops fail, and creating fear and chaos (Leon & Morgan, 1998). There are different categories of people who are accused of practicing witchcraft. These include women, men, children and older people (Farrar & Farrar 1984; Worobec, 1995; Russell, 2013). In this article, the focus is on older persons. This is because they are the majority who are accused of practicing witchcraft in Zambia (Kamwengo, 2004; Senior Citizens Association of Zambia 2012; Kabelenga, 2014 & 2018). However, actual statistics of older people accused of practicing witchcraft in Zambia is not available due to lack of national surveys (Zambia National Ageing Policy 2013; Kabelenga, 2014 & 2018).

Buckland (2002) and Kivelson (2003) indicate that in all the societies across the world, the central dominant societal concern about witchcraft practice is that witchcraft cause harm to other members of society. Thus, witches are generally feared in every society. As such, many people do not want to be called a witch. This is because witches are seen as ‘black sheep’ in society and as such witchcraft practices have severe negative consequences on those labeled as witches (Kamwengo 2004). Notwithstanding this, one major gap exists in the literature. That is, there is inadequate information at global level about the negative consequences of accusing older people of practicing witchcraft on the local communities where they live (Fuller, 1972; Fry, 1990; WHO, 2002; Kamwengo, 2004). Thus, the central question which is not adequately addressed by existing literature is: what happens to the local communities where older people live when they [older people] are accused of practicing witchcraft?

In light of the above question, the aim of this study is to describe and understand the consequences of witchcraft accusations on the local communities in Zambia using the conceptions of the community leaders who had participated in addressing cases of witchcraft accusations involving older people. From the interview data collected from the community leaders who participated in this study, an older person is defined as any person who is in their 50s and above, and or/with grey hair.

Conceptual framework

An ecological model is used to frame the analysis of the issues discussed. Ecological model emphasizes that any social issue can be understood well by digging deeper into the four levels namely individual, relationship, community and societal levels. It provides a multi-level, nested systems approach to understanding the problem. That is, it highlights the importance of “levels” or layers of thinking when looking at any problem. In doing this, it attaches responsibility to micro, meso and macro levels (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973; Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Teaster, 2013). However, these levels are seen not as inseparable but rather as nested together. Because older people are part of the larger Zambian society, the deduction that can be made from ecological model is that if older people are accused of practicing witchcraft (which is micro level phenomenon), the meso level (such as older people’s and accusers’ families) and macro level (local community and the whole Zambian society) negatively gets affected. This is because these levels are interdependent. Thus, what happens at one level directly or indirectly affect the other levels. In other words, the model allowed in-depth analysis on how the macro level is negatively affected due to happenings at micro level (witchcraft accusations involving older people). In addition, I used the concepts of relationships and power as analytical tools to interpret the data. These concepts were chosen after critical reflections upon the data. That is, all the issues that the participants brought out seemed to revolve around the above two scientific concepts.

Materials and methods

To achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative approach that included 7 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 29 one-on-one in-depth interviews with 31 community leaders [19 from rural community and 12 from urban community] were conducted. This disparity in the number of participants was because they were more participants in rural community who were readily available to participate in the study than those in urban community. The community leaders selected were those who had participated in addressing cases of witchcraft accusations involving older people. Four (4) participants were once accused of practicing witchcraft and nineteen (19) had their older parents accused of the same by family and other community members. This allowed detailed and richer information to be captured using the voices of the peo-

ple who had firsthand information about the consequences of witchcraft accusations on their local communities (Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2002; Kabelenga, 2014; 2015a, b & c; 2016; 2017 & 2018). I conducted 36 interviews [22 in rural community and 14 in urban community]. The number of interviews conducted surpassed the number of participants (31) who participated in the study because some of the interviews were follow-up interviews with the same participants. On average each interview lasted between one hour and three hours. I conducted all the interviews myself because I wanted to make sure that I collect all the information that I needed to know about the negative consequences of witchcraft accusations on local communities in rural and urban Zambia (Kabelenga, 2016). Data were collected between 2014 and 2018.

In this article, the word community is used to denote a group of people living together in one geographical area, and thus they understand their local environment better (Fuller 1972; Fry, 1990; Kamwengo, 2004; and World Bank, 2008). On the other hand, community leaders referred to include ward councilors, chief's representatives, village headmen, youths and women leaders, church (religious) leaders, the police, court judges, community crime prevention units (CCPUs), area development community members, public health workers, elder people's representatives and social workers among others. The assumption for choosing these participants was that by virtue of them being community leaders who had participated in addressing cases of witchcraft accusations, they understood better the consequences of such accusations on their communities and would help in fulfilling the objective of this study.

Method of Analysis

The analysis was content oriented. First, I open coded the accounts in the transcribed interview material. I marked different consequences of witchcraft accusations. Second, I categorized the codes under three themes from the data: family and community divisions, low participation in community activities, and generational hatred. Third, I examined the themes interpretatively and reflectively (Mason, 2002; Nikupeteri, Laitinen & Hill, 2015). The participants and researcher's reflective discussions with experts on violence served as background that helped to elicit more detailed accounts of the consequences of witchcraft accusations that strengthened the participants' narrations. In addition, in the quotations, the participants' names have been anonymized to protect their identity. Thus, the names mentioned in this article are not the real names of the participants.

Results and discussions

Recognition of witchcraft accusations

In an attempt to adequately focus my interviews, the first question which I asked all the participants was: How serious is the problem of witchcraft accusations against

older people in this community? Findings from both communities indicate that by drawing on participants' daily interactions with their local communities and participation in addressing elder abuse, all the interviewees acknowledged existence of witchcraft accusations involving older people and described it as a serious social problem. For instance, Grandmum, the community leader for one of the older people's organizations that fights for the rights of the older people in both rural and urban Zambia acknowledged widespread of the social problem of witchcraft accusations against older people in these words:

I would really say that it happens on daily basis. Yes... In fact it is a pity that I didn't look up the old newspapers but every now and then you do see a story in press of an elderly person who has been assaulted because they are suspected of being sorcerers. If they are just assaulted they are very lucky because sometime they actually get killed. Yes. (Interview with Grandmum, Urban Community).

Ignatius, the community leader that attended to various victims of witchcraft accusations across Zambia, and who himself was once accused of being a witch by his fellow workmates also acknowledged the prevalence of the social problem of witchcraft accusations against older people during FGD.3:

The common elder abuse offences are witchcraft practice where older people are suspected of being witches or wizards. Most of the elderly patients that we have received as a hospital are related to being suspected of being witches or practicing witchcraft or where maybe one person dies in the family and then they suspect an older person who is then attacked and beaten. Some have been beaten to death, we have received some that have been brought in dead, and some come in badly injured so we take care of them... We do receive such case. Yes. (FGD. 3, Rural Community).

The similarities in the above episodes from the participants in both communities are unlikely to be mere coincidence. Rather they have emerged from the firsthand information and experiences that the participants had as individuals, institutions and local communities. Thus, participants talked about the phenomenon which they were very much familiar with (Kabelenga, 2018). From the above narratives, the data suggest that poor social relationships that some older people have with their family and community members is what make them to be accused of practicing witchcraft. In light of this, the data connote also that if individual and group powers are misused, it can lead to witchcraft accusations (Kamwengo, 2004; Kabelenga, 2014; 2016 & 2018).

Consequences of witchcraft accusations on local communities

Having acknowledged existence of the social problem of witchcraft accusations against older persons, I asked each participant to talk about the common consequences of such accusations on local communities. Results indicate three main consequences: bringing about family and community divisions, low participation in

community activities, and generational hatred. Each of these consequences is presented in detail below:

Family and community divisions

From the data, it is clear that witchcraft accusations against older people bring about havoc among family and community members. Data indicate that besides arrests and imprisonments of the perpetrators, some community members are forced to leave or run away from the community, others voluntarily relocate to other places and others resort to refusing giving help to other community members. For example, in the interview with Simon, the community leader who witnessed an incidence of an older person who was buried alive due to witchcraft accusations, he talked about the family and community divisions such an incidence has brought about in his community as follows:

Researcher: what bad thing did the incidence of burying alive an older man bring about?

Participant: even their families are hated saying those are the ones with a witch/wizard who 'ate' that person. Note: 'Ate' in this context refers to killing.

Researcher: that is bad. How does the relationship come to be?

Participant: they hate each other. That kind of hatred does not finish

Researcher: Sure?

Participant: because it looks like a person has a wound and it keeps hurting. Yes. (Interview with Simon, Rural Community).

Similar consequences are mentioned by participants in the Urban Community. For example, Eunice, the community leader who had the responsibility to look after the abused elder people in older people's homes summarized the consequences in this way:

Family disturbilisation. Families won't be close anymore. The community won't work together as a team. (Interview with Eunice, Urban Community).

The above data indicate that witchcraft accusations against older people bring about troublesome family and community relationships. Unfortunately enough, these types of relationships are detrimental to the family and community welfare. This is because families and communities falter (Raab & Setznick, 1959; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987; Loseke & Best, 2011; Kabelenga, 2018). Thus, the result agrees with the World Report on Violence and Health (2002) where it is reported that violence can destroy the families and communities in which it takes place.

Low participation in community activities

From the data, it is evident that because of the aforementioned social confusions, witchcraft accusations bring about low participation of community members in local

and national community affairs. This is because community members live in fear of each other. For instance, the Local Community Public Health worker had this to say:

They [older people] are actually affected very much. You will find that these old persons start isolating. That is what I have discovered. If somebody has died, they will not even go there. Yes, they will stay at home. When there is a meeting, they will be at home because they know the consequences in case they are not protected by any person. So actually this is something that we have seen (Interview with Patrick, Rural Community).

Similar community life style emerges from the data from the Urban Community:

...the community won't work together as a team. That will lead to poor participation in community based programmes. Laws obviously. Disorderliness. You know. (Interview with Eunice).

The above data suggest that witchcraft accusations generate troublesome social relationships among family and community members. As can be seen from the above narrations, older persons despite having ample wisdom and lived experiences about community affairs, they become powerless in their own communities. The danger of having these types of social relationships is that they can even kill good traditional values, norms, beliefs, customs and practices because the troubled intra, inter and community social relationships cannot allow transmissions of good culture for example between the older generations and younger generations. Inglehart (1990) and Hagestad & Uhlenberg (2005) advise that for any society to exist and perpetuate itself, community members should co-exist so that the knowledge that older people have about society, for instance, is passed to the younger generation and vice versa. This is only possible if older generations and younger generations relate well (Kabelenga, 2016; 2018). Unfortunately, from the above episodes, it is evident that such relationships can be disturbed. Thus, the data agree with the World Report on Violence and Health (2002) argument that violence destroys the communities where it takes place. However, critical reflections upon the above episodes suggest that from the participants' experiences, community destruction entails not only physical destruction of the community infrastructure as shown in the above world report, but also include destructions of the norms, values, beliefs and principles upon which community life is built.

Generational hatred

This consequence emerged strongly from the Rural Community. Responses of most of the participants indicate that witchcraft accusations have brought about generational hatred among community members especially between the accused older person's family members and the accuser's family members. By generational hatred, it means that the negative consequences of witchcraft accusations do not only affect the people that are directly involved in the confrontations but also negatively affect the next generations of the family and village members of the accused older person and the family and village members of the accusers. Participants disclosed that if the

particular older person was murdered, the surviving family members passed that information to the younger generation and discouraged them from association with the family or village members that murdered their older parent. For example, during the first focus group discussion with community leaders, these consequences were brought out in this way:

Participant 1: hostile. The abused family and those who hit him is hostile.

Participant 2: These are public enemies like politicians (laughs everyone...).

Researcher: No, that

Participant 1: that family is a family of wizards. If you marry there, they will just be 'eating' your children, you will be wasting your energy.

Researcher: Really?

Participant 2: If you are brave, because she is a beautiful girl you go and marry, ohoo, the grand, the mother in law will give him some of the charms. So there is no relationship.

Similar revelations are made by Royd, the community leader who was once accused of practicing witchcraft by his fellow civil servants and community members:

Even enmity comes in because the other party of the family will not relate well to other community members. There will be enmity which will go on and on and it will remain like that and permanently – your grandfather did this to my mother and your grannies did this to what and so it goes on like that and again it will be an issue.

The above data indicate that witchcraft accusations negatively affect intra and inter family/village relationships both in short-term and long run basis. This is because it produces generational anger and vengeance among the parties involved and their family/village members then and in future (Kabelenga, 2018). Interesting also is that the results are also similar to the study findings established by Addiss (1985) and Leo (2012) on the effects of witchcraft of Tsukimono-suji in Japan on the accused and their families. Both studies established that the accused and their families are not only feared, but are also openly shunned to the extent where it is often nearly impossible for women of such families to find a husband whose family will agree to have him married to a Tsukimono-suji family. This means that despite cultural differences, witchcraft accusations may produce similar consequences on local communities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following are the conclusions: To begin with, the results of the study have indicated that creation of family and community divisions, bringing about low and restricted participation in community activities and generational hatred are the unintended negative consequences of witchcraft accusa-

tions. This is because from the above episodes it is clear that whilst witchcraft accusations are targeted at individual older persons, the trickledown effects are that the family of the accused older person, the accuser and his/her family and the whole community negatively get affected. This analysis and interpretation of the results agree with ecological theory of violence which shows the interdependence between micro, meso and macro levels when talking about the consequences of violence (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973; World Report on Violence and Health 2002; Teaster, 2013; Phelan, 2013). Thus, the findings of this study are in tandem with the assumption which I made using ecological model that when older people are accused of practicing witchcraft, the local communities where older people live are likely to get affected as well because older persons are part of the local communities. This is because of the interdependence between individual persons and their human ecology (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

When all the above consequences are taken together, it is deducible that the negative consequences of accusing older persons of practicing witchcraft in the Rural Community and Urban Community of Zambia are far much broader than what is widely documented in the existing literatures (see Farror & Farror, 1984; Worobec, 1995; Buckland, 2002; Illes, 2004; Lolis, 2008). On the basis of the current results, it implies that there is need to reconstruct the existing literatures to include the consequences of witchcraft accusations on local communities. Inclusion of the negative consequences on local communities in all the literatures would greatly help in widening scientific knowledge on the consequences of witchcraft accusations.

Notwithstanding the above, this article has one major limitation. That is, the article is written on the basis of the qualitative data collected from one rural community and one urban community. Although the data were provided by community leaders representing not only the two communities but the whole Zambia and as such have provided useful insights in describing and understanding the consequences of witchcraft accusations not only on the two communities but throughout Zambia, the findings should be cautiously applied to other rural and urban communities of the world. This is because what may be true in one setting may not be true in other settings (Kabelenga 2014; 2015a, b & c; 2016 & 2018). This is important to consider because how local communities are organized across the world differ from society to society (World Report on Violence and Health 2002). As such the consequences of witchcraft accusations on one local community or country might be different from other communities or countries.

In light of the above limitation, the author recommends that in future, different studies should be undertaken in different parts of Zambia and the whole world to ascertain the negative consequences of witchcraft accusations involving older people on local communities. This may bring about a varied and richer ways of describing and understanding the consequences of such accusations.

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