



RELIGIOUS CONCUBINAGE, COVID-19 AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF WITCHCRAFT IN KENYA

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Abstract:

In contemporary times, one might well say that the traditional public spaces are irreversibly shrinking and collapsing. Even more so, they argue that the loss of traditional 'form' secular engagement, are a consequence of globalisation. However, many Africans are increasingly invoking indigenous constructions of illness to offer explanatory models of ill health as opposed to dominant biomedical paradigms. In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, an upsurge numerous deaths happens to be linked directly to witchcraft. COVID-19 has once again exposed the shortcoming of Western medical practices in African cosmology. In this paper, we examine the concept of disease, health, and healing in the context of changing economic, cultural, and political relations in Kenya. We will pay attention to social/public responses to disease, questions of power, agency, and controversies surrounding COVID-19. We examine how both the sacred and secular spaces as sites of conflict: conflicting memories, conflicting values, conflicting interests, conflicting narratives of place and so on.

Keywords: epidemic, COVID-19, witchcraft, religion, medicine, healing, public life

1. Religion and Public Life in Kenya

It is well established that religion has been a strong correlate of Kenya's public orientation for more than five decades. Cultural factors such as ethnicity and religion have become more important in people's search for fundamentals on which to build their hopes for the future. However, the precise analysis of the impact of religion in the society depends on how one defines the public's degree of "religiousness" in Africa. According to Sindima,

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religion is the heartbeat of African ways of life while to Mudimbe, it is a practice of cultural metisse' rather than the sentimental essence of a continent.² In examining the strength of Mudimbe's assertion, one quickly captures its evocative discussion of the politically significant ways in which African intellectuals as well as politicians practice their religious faith.³ Most important is his biographical passages on the narrative of one Rwandese priest and scholar – Alexis Kagame, the author of *Bantu-Rwandan Philosophy of Being* in 1956. Mudimbe shows how for example, Kagame's practice as seminarian and then as an "*indigenous clergy of Rwanda*" served to challenge racism within the colonial seminary. African life is increasingly becoming more intertwined with religion and sacrilegious acts.

Kenya like elsewhere in Africa is no exception to this ecclesiastical quagmire and to what Lonsdale calls the "*African rule of energetic Christianity*".⁴ Paradoxically, almost 70 per cent of its 40 million Kenyans claim to be Christians, and of these, 90 per cent do attend church publicly and regularly.⁵ So that, in fact, like other Africans, "*it is largely through religious ideas that Kenyans think about the world today*". Religion and public life are topics that obsess them, whether in hotels, bars or bus queues.⁶ Not only do people regularly choose to make appearances in churches, synagogues, or mosques, but leaders of such religious bodies can mobilize their worshippers through various means: encouraging members to participate in public.

Does this confirm therefore, that Kenyans like many Africans are *notoriously* religious?⁷ Or they are what Tshishiku Tshibangu calls "*incurably religious?*"⁸ Mbiti shared this unitary view of the pervasive religiosity of "*African traditional society*". Tshibangu used the set phrase "*Africans are incurably religious*"⁹ and asserted that they deserve this reputation, for they had traditionally been, and still were, "*deeply religious*", lived in "*a religious universe*", and possessed "*a religious ontology*".¹⁰ He claimed that "*religion permeates all the departments of life, so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it*".¹¹ Moreover, he added, "*religion is the strongest element in traditional background*

² Sindima, 1998: 203.

³ Mudimbe, V. Y. *Tales of Faith: Religion as Political Performance in Central Africa*. (London and Atlantic Highlands, 1997), p. 231.

⁴ J. Lonsdale, "Religion and Politics in Kenya" The John Lonsdale "Religion and Politics in Kenya". The Henry Martyn Lectures 2005, Trinity College, Cambridge, Lecture 1: Monday 7th February 2005.

⁵ See National survey of churches in Kenya, (Nairobi, 2004).

⁶ Spear, Thomas 'Christianity and Society', in Thomas Spear and Isaria N Kimambo, (eds) *East African Expressions of Christianity*, (Oxford, 1999).

⁷ According to Mbiti, Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament..... See also, Awolalu J. O., *West African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan, 1979; Parrinder E.G., *West African Religion*, London, 1961 and Olodumare Idowu E.B. *God in Yoruba Belief*, London, 1962.

⁸ Mazrui, 1993.

⁹ Mbiti 1969: 1, 15, 262; 1975: 27, 198.

¹⁰ Mbiti 1969: 1; 1975: 27.

¹¹ Ibid, 29.

and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned".¹²

In Vol 8 of UNESCO's General History of Africa series, Tshibangu writes:

"The African is profoundly, incurably a believer, a religious person. To him, religion is not just a set of beliefs but a way of life, the basis of culture, identity and moral values. Religion is an essential part of the tradition that helps to promote both social stability and creative innovation."¹³

This means that religion is deeply embedded in the African psyche. It is a solution or cure to political, social and medical crises or ills that affect Africans. Defying modernity and holding on to African science therefore in the Christian sense could be seen as an act of religious concubinage. The implications therefore, of African theology, are that imported theologies do not sufficiently touch the hearts of African believers because they are couched in a language that is foreign to them.¹⁴ And, that the building of communication between Christianity and the African cultural and religious heritage is best left for African theologians because they know how best to contextualize Christianity in a manner that can fully communicate with their African cultural and religious heritage.¹⁵

Social change and the commercialisation of religion has transformed most Kenyan Christians to resolve to live by double standards, professing to be Christians in public, while reverting to the practice of traditions in private.¹⁶ As such, Mbiti aptly describes this phenomenon as "*religious concubinage*", whereby believers acknowledge one religion in public while they practice another in private. Mathema¹⁷ contends that these are professed Christians who derive some form of satisfaction from African traditional practices.

This move transcends and defies what Drakard spoke of a "*God-hungry Kenya*", where churches provide the answers to spiritual and social needs? Where "*Christ is the Answer*", where preachers are very forthright and know neither fear nor respect of men; country where worship is lively and vibrant; where Kenyans are constantly aware of their dependence on God and God's laws regarding their personal behavior; where public meetings normally begin and end with prayers.¹⁸ Precisely, it is the notorious use of Biblical imagery and metaphor almost in all aspects of their lives. To him, the premises are twofold: the fact is that Kenya is predominantly Christian or because the bible has

¹² See also Metogo That atheism could not be squared with '*the Negro mentality and soul*' (1997: 148).

¹³ Tshibangu, T. "Religion and Social Evolution in Africa Since 1935" in Ali Mazrui (1993) (Ed.) UNESCO's *General History of Africa* series Vol. 8.

¹⁴ M. H. Gwinyai. *The Origins and Development of African Theology*. (Maryknoll: 1985).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ N. Luvuyo. 2015. The Trajectories of Christianity and African Ritual Practices: The Public Silence and the Dilemma of Mainline or Mission Churches. *Acta Theologica* 35: 104–19.

¹⁷ M. A. Zacchaeus The African Worldview: A Serious Challenge to Christian discipleship. *Ministry, International Journal for Pastors* 79: 5–7, 2007.

¹⁸ D. Martyn, The Mercatornet, Kenyan churches here to stay, Thursday, 17 August 2006 http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/focus_on_developing_world_christianity_kenyan_churches_here_to_stay/, accessed 12/5/2020.

become the nearest thing to a national narrative, a storehouse of universally recognized moral and political images.¹⁹ How comes Christianity and modernity has not been able to permeate into the peoples very fabric of life? How comes in times of crises many do not turn to Christianity for solution? How comes that Christians themselves turn to witchcraft, magic and sorcery in times of emergencies?

Generally, the stakes of religious coexistence have changed radically in postcolonial African states as the new discourses of democratization and development gradually displace the structures of autocratic and customary rule.²⁰ Mainstream religious organizations that have long enjoyed the patrimony of colonial and post-independence governments now find themselves threatened by newer religious formations. With democratization and globalization have come new forms of religious competitiveness and militancy.²¹ These changes have mediated forms of religious expression has opened up new possibilities for religious communication and conversion, providing increased visibility and audibility for minority religious groups.

2. Crises, Emergencies, Witchcraft in Kenya

The study of witchcraft in African societies, the concern with systems of logic and thought that has long engaged anthropology and philosophy continues. More recently, there has been a focus on indigenous systems of knowledge and hermeneutical traditions.²² More contemporary scholars are interested in forms of interpretation, scepticism, and cultural critique that come from within local thought traditions. Scholarship is now, more than ever before, poised to counter the academic practice of maintaining distinctions in forms of thought from Western and African societies.

African philosophy has provided some of the most critical assessments of Western scholarly traditions. In *The Invention of Africa*, V. Y. Mudimbe shows how concepts and terms used in the study of African religion, including witchcraft, developed through colonial practices and Western prejudices about African peoples and their cultures.²³ African philosophy has also engaged in discussion about the importance of acknowledging the role of individual philosophers in the creation of knowledge

¹⁹ J. Lonsdale Stanley Booth-Clibborn and Hake, A., "The emerging Pattern of Church and State Cooperation in Kenya", in E. Fasholé-Luke, et al., eds., *Christianity in Independent Africa*, (Bloomington: 1978)

²⁰ See Stephen Ellis & Gerrie ter Haar, *Worlds of Power: Religious Thought and Political Practice in Africa* (2004); Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (1998); Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Politics in Africa* (1996); Jeff Haynes, *Religion and Democratization in Africa*, 11 *Democratization* 66, 66–89 (2004).

²¹ Rosalind I. J. Hackett, *Radical Christian Revivalism in Nigeria and Ghana: Recent Patterns of Intolerance and Conflict*, in *Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination in Africa* 246 (Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im ed., 1999) [hereinafter Proselytization and Communal Self-Determination]; see also Rosalind I.J. Hackett, *Revisiting Proselytization in the African Context: Nigeria and Uganda Compared*, in Christine Lienemann, Wolfgang Lienemann & Stephan-Peter Blumbach, *Change of Religion, Change of Confession, and Conversion Within Confession in Religious Plural Societies* (forthcoming).

²² A. A. Ralp. "The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History. In "Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa", edited by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, 89–110.

²³ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

²⁴Drawing on notions of intersubjectivity from philosophy, Bongmba examines notions of *tfu*, used by Wimbum in Cameroon.²⁵ He shows that it is part of a discourse of power that includes both helpful and harmful aspects, and concludes that it gives people an opportunity to engage in face-to-face encounters. In a similar way, Ciekawy examines Mijikenda interpretations of the magical practice of *utsai*.²⁶ She argues that it is a way for people to conceptualize inequality and the exploitation of one human being by another, which makes it particularly useful for comprehending the world and considering the ethical choices available to human beings.

During emergencies and crises in Africa, witchcraft becomes central to many African conceptions of illness, disease causation and etiology. In many countries throughout the world belief in witches is common, and black magic is considered part of everyday life.²⁷ For generations, African beliefs and practices regarding witchcraft and traditional healing have been located at the intersection between the natural world and the supernatural world. Despite the impact of both colonialism and, in the contemporary context, modernization, the complex interplay between these worlds has not been reduced. The interaction between nature and religion, as a facet of culture, has long been a subject of inquiry in anthropology, and nowhere is this more evident than in the study of African witchcraft and traditional healing. A distinct relationship exists between witchcraft beliefs and traditional healing methods. This relationship brings these two aspects of African culture together in such a complex manner that it is difficult to attempt to understand the dynamics of African witchcraft without referring to traditional healing methods, and vice versa.²⁸

In many Kenyan communities, most of the people believe that diseases are caused by sorcery, breach of taboo, spirit intrusion, diseased objects, ghosts of the dead and acts of the gods and can be cured through the same metaphysics.²⁹ Africans invoke traditional medicine in an attempt to look for both the physical and metaphysical causes of diseases. Pre-colonial African societies had evolved their own medical technology before the coming of the "white man" to cure any form of illness. When sickness or death takes place in a family, someone else is usually blamed as being the cause of this misfortune. Receiving appropriate medical care is a secondary concern. As a consequence, people will only go to the hospital in the last stages of their illnesses when the medicine man/prophet has failed to cure them. In Kenya, traditional explanations for illness and healing are often

²⁴ H. Barry, and J. Olubi Sodipo. *Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy*. London: Ethnographica, 1986.

²⁵ B. Elias. *African Witchcraft and Otherness: A Philosophical and Theological Critique of Intersubjective Relations*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.

²⁶ C. Diane. "Policing Religious Practice in Contemporary Coastal Kenya." *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 20, no. 1 1997, pp.62–72.

²⁷ A 2010 poll of 18 countries in sub-Saharan Africa found that over half of the population believe in magic. Witch doctors are consulted not only for healing diseases, but also for placing, or removing, curses or bringing luck.

²⁸ J. C. Nottingham, Sorcery among the Akamba of Kenya. *Journal of African Administration* 11 (1959): 2–14.

²⁹ A. S., Jagged, *African Culture and Health* (Ibadan, 2010).

very different from those offered by scientific bio-medicine. This is not to say that Kenyans do not accept modern biomedical explanations for illness, but rather that bio-medicine doesn't provide the only explanation. The indigenous healers appeal to both scientific and metaphysical means in an attempt to achieve a comprehensive cure of any malady. In African religion, the healer occupied a special place within the community.

From the foregoing viewpoints, it is worth noting that traditional medical practice in Africa cope with the challenges of today's health problems including the cure of COVID-19 that has not yet found contemporary technological solution. Indigenous medical technology and practice has headway in today's healthcare service. As such, the place of religion is vital in prevention of the disease diffusion in African set up. Indigenous healers are vital in meeting the health needs of the people. People perceive disease as a cultural experience and interpret illness from a cultural perspective. Disease is responded to through behaviours and attitudes learned within one's culture. The system of customs and beliefs, the social situations in which the client finds him/herself, and the stresses and strains to which the individual is subjected within the society determines whether or not indigenous healers should be consulted.³⁰ It is worth therefore to examine the role of indigenous medicine and witchcraft in curbing or cure of COVID-19 pandemic.

Even today, African religion forms an integral part of the African way of life. African indigenous healing is intricately connected to the religious belief that indigenous people are connected to the chain of deities through a specific system. The healer is the functionary closest to the ancestor and is significant in determining the causes of illness and misfortunes. Belief in witchcraft is not only typical to Africa but is also found among the people of Papua Papua New Guinea.³¹ Forssen³² notes that, in Tanzania the Zaramo consult hospital doctors for the relief of acute pain but will consult indigenous healers for discovery of the cause of health problems and for its removal. According to this author this behaviour is due to the fact that African patients do not feel that they are actually well or healthy until they are assured that the real reason for the disease has been identified and dealt. Among the Ewes and some of the northern tribes in Ghana, sacrifices are sometimes offered at the request of the spirits, gods, and ancestors. Sometimes animals are slaughtered or buried alive.³³

Sometimes rituals are performed in order to consecrate some herbs. Rituals constitute the way of consecrating African traditional medicine; medicine without consecration for Africans is meaningless. Divine and ancestral sanctions are considered

³⁰ G. L. Chavunduka, Witchcraft and the law in Zimbabwe. *Zambezia*, Vol.3, No.2, 1980. pp.129.

³¹ J. A. Griffiths. and R. W. S. Cheetham,. Priests before healers - an appraisal of the iSangoma or iSanusi in Nguni society. *South African Medical Journal*, Vol.62, 1982pp.95.

³² Ibid.

³³ J. K. Olupona, Owner of the day and regulator of the universe: Ifa Divination and healing among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, in M. Winkelman & P. M. Peeks (eds.), *Divination and healing: Potent vision* University of Arizona Press, Tucson, AZ. 2004, pp.103–117.

necessary before and during the preparation and application of medicine.³⁴ In some cases, herbs are prepared for the person to bathe with at specific times for a number of days. Sometimes an animal can be slaughtered and the blood would be poured on the head and foot of the sick person; the blood poured on the sick person serves as a way of cleansing.³⁵ In South Africa, traditional healers and up to 60% of South Africans" consult them regularly. African indigenous healers, therefore, regard the human organism as a whole, which is integrated within a total ecology of the environment and with the interrelated spiritual, magical and mystical forces surrounding him/her. Likewise, their conceptual model of health is couched in terms of a balance between a healthy body and a healthy situation and that set of circumstances that surrounds them.³⁶ The ancestors are believed to be primarily concerned with the welfare of their descendants, who are vulnerable to all kinds of misfortune without this protection. Not all ancestors have the power to punish or reward. Misfortune or illness due to the ancestors can arise under several different conditions. One is when a member of the family or some other person has acted in such a way to disturb the social order.³⁷ African witchcraft is little understood in the West. The power-house of witchcraft is envy.³⁸ For Kamba people of Kenya in contrast, "*witchcraft*" has ultimately been a way of making order out of disorder "*witchcraft-for-healing*"³⁹

During epidemics there are always replete stories of Kenyans visiting witchdoctors in Tanzania, Nigeria and Zanzibar. Witchcraft and other unflattering spiritual exercises are usually a symptom of two things: desperation to get something at any cost, even at the cost of flirting with evil and profound disempowerment in the face of injustice that has infiltrated the psyche and intimate relations.⁴⁰ "*Witchcraft*" has been used by officials of the post-colonial Kenyan state and aspirants to political power to explain why they have been unable to adequately access and/or retain power or why their opponents have been able to do so. For example, in 2003, gossip about malevolent "*witchcraft*" swirled around the election-eve death-by-drowning of a prominent Kamba MP, and six weeks later newspapers carried reports of the arrest of a "*suspected witchdoctor*" interfering in the campaign of another Kamba politician.⁴¹ As the Daily Nation reports:

³⁴ D., Westerlund, African indigenous religions and disease causation, Brill NV, Leiden. 2006 See also B, Idowu., 1973, African traditional religion: A definition, SCM, London.

³⁵ D., Westerlund, African indigenous religions and disease causation, Brill NV, Leiden. 2006.

³⁶ H., Ngubane, Body and mind in Zulu medicine, Academic Press, London. 1977.

³⁷ L., Swartz, Culture and mental health: a southern African view, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1998.

³⁸ Harries, Jim. 2012. Witchcraft, Envy, Development, and Christian Mission in Africa. Missiology: An International Review 40(2): 129–139.

³⁹ Michael D. Bailey, The Disenchantment of Magic: Spells, Charms, and Superstition in Early European Witchcraft Literature, The American Historical Review 111.2 (April 2006):383-404. 383.

⁴⁰ See for example (Rowlands and Warnier, 1988; West, 1997; Ciekawy, 1988; Behrend and Luig, 1999; MacGaffey, 2000; Heywood, 2000).

⁴¹ Katherine Luongo, "A Self-Evident Death? Reading Water and Witchcraft in the News of a Kenya MP's Death," The Journal of the University of Michigan International Institute (March, 2005).

*"The man was handed over to the police by agents of Mr. Charles Kilonzo, who accused him of having ill motives against their candidate. The suspect told his interrogators that that he was sent by one the aspirants to work against Mr. Kilonzo."*⁴²

If this is the case, the reports about an increase in consultations with witchdoctors indicate that the Kenyan population is instinctively aware that its country is profoundly flawed, but feels powerless to identify the cause of the problem or feels that they are too intimately intertwined with the problem to obtain the distance necessary to examine or resolve it. According to Florence Bernault⁴³:

*"At the twentieth century's end, religion and magic constitute one of the most powerful rhetorics of political culture in Equatorial Africa. Public rumors depict sorcery as the most common way to achieve personal success, wealth, and prestige in times of economic shortage and declining social opportunities. Political leaders are widely believed to perform ritual murder to ensure electoral success and power, and many skillfully use these perceptions to build visibility and deference. In the domestic arena, familial and social conflicts repeatedly crystallize around accusations of sorcery, especially during times of sudden deaths or personal disasters. Permeating the entire social and cultural spectrum, magic stands today as an ambivalent force that helps promote individual and collective accumulation as well as control social differentiation."*⁴⁴

Invocation of witchcraft clearly shows, as John Njenga Karugia explains that Christianity does not sufficiently tackle the fundamental problems affecting Kenya. And the problem emanates from Christianity's theological, cultural and historical roots. According to Karugia, Christianity has no geographical affiliations with Kenya...."The problem is not Jesus Christ. No he is a nice guy, who lived in another time in another place and we have confirmed he is not suitable for our Kenyan politics and for our time."⁴⁵ It therefore emerges that Christianity, like ethnicity, and even like witchcraft, are the proposed antidotes which the observer who diagnoses Kenya's problems must be willing to confront at the risk of alienation by believers, career ethicists and the not-so-noble religious practitioners. But there is a fourth god responsible for the quagmire that Kenyans are now trying to transcend: Kenya's balance sheet.

⁴² Bob Odalo and Victor Nzuma, "Man Held Over Witchcraft Claim in Yatta," The Daily Nation 27 June 2003.

⁴³ In southern Congo, the political tradition relies in part upon the leaders' continuity with their descendants. In contrast, leaders of northern Congo have repeatedly seized power by annihilating or killing their predecessors. Most of their strength is associated with military and supernatural power. In many societies in Gabon, power and witchcraft are closely associated, yet leaders are chosen among remarkable individuals, not in a dynastic line.

⁴⁴ Bernault, 2000.

⁴⁵ Karugia, 2007: 4.

3. Performing Rituals and COVID-19 in Kenya

Across Kenya, COVID-19 has heightened tension between faith and science. As medics and scientists across the globe continue to strive in search of COVID-19 vaccine, some Kuria elders in Migori resorted to performing rituals to put the virus at bay. The elders drawn from the Bugumbe went on to Renchoka sacred mountains to seek intervention of the gods in the fight against the pandemic. One ritual performing elder had this to say:

"We have been casting away diseases through these rituals. We have had many diseases around this place and we have managed to dispel them. We believe we will send coronavirus away too."

In an effort to liberate the country from the hard-hitting COVID-19 pandemic, the Kikuyu Council of Elders performed a special ritual similar to those practiced by their forefathers whenever the Kikuyu nation was attacked by plagues. Among the calamities that used to call for special rituals are hunger and diseases which used to fade away after the elder's divine intervention. The ritual that involved slaughtering of a distinctive goat (one that is flawless). The spotless goat's meat was later burnt to ashes as the elders made prayers facing Mount Kenya in efforts to purify and seek restoration of normalcy in the country. For the ritual to be acceptable to God, the elders had cleansed themselves first and fast for seven days. They avoided sleeping on the same bed or enjoy conjugal rights with their wives for a period not below one week. In the previous years, the ceremony was conducted by staunch and informed elders who had retired from enjoying matrimonial rights with their wives. The ritual was conducted at the sacred meeting point of the Kikuyu near River Chania in Thika, ceremony being led by the reigning Kikuyu leader (Muthamaki) Njoroge Karatu who was installed some three years ago. After the slaughtering was done, the spilled blood, goat's defecations and pancreas were thrown into the river to signify how the virus would leave the country. One of the elders noted:

*"This virus is not local and it was not manufactured here. We have thrown the excretions and the blood that spilled during the slaughtering to the river for it to flow downstream to the Indian Ocean. The elders later, after burning the goat's meat to ashes threw the remains to River Chania as they reprimanded the virus to go back to the sender."*⁴⁶

In April, 2020, other elders from Kalenjin community joined arms and came together to 'curse' the Coronavirus. The elders along with residents from the community slaughtered a sheep, after which they spilled the animal's blood into River Ainamoi, chanting words as part of the ritual to cast out the virus. They also tied some logs to mimic the load carried by the country, that is, in this case, COVID-19 and let them into

⁴⁶ <https://www.pd.co.ke/news/national/kikuyu-elders-perform-ritual-to-rid-country-of-covid-19-photos-35171/>

the river to be swept by the water. The elders explained that the blood and logs would be carried into the "sea" thus signaling that the country would be set free of the virus.⁴⁷

In April 20, Kapterik clan elders from Epkee location in Elgeyo Marakwet also performed traditional rituals to curse the 'deadly coronavirus'. The elders, claimed that the disease will never cause death to Kenyans and in the world in future. It was a brief and succinct ceremony, where everything was done with military precision. A big pot that contained about 20 litres of traditional brew popularly known as *busaa* was placed at the centre. Alongside the traditional brew was a brown sheep. Immediately, a fire was lit at the centre of the community shrine and the half-naked men started the ceremony. The shrine turned into a ground of chants as the elderly men walked around the smoky fire lit using leafy branches. They went round the fireplace seven times cursing the COVID-19 pandemic, praying that the viral disease gets out of Kenya.

Under COVID-19 circumstances, such rituals continue to be practiced even in funerary procedures. Conventionally, the funeral ceremony is normally attended by family, close relatives, friends, colleagues, neighbours, well-wishers, church and even passer-by.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent orders, directives, and rules and regulations released from various leaderships and authorities has totally affected wedding and burial rites. Some communities like the Luo and Kisii of Nyanza have followed the orders whereby the deceased is removed from the morgue and buried immediately the same day against the cultural norm of having a vigil. This is a new practice that has gone against the cultural beliefs. The rules set up by the government witnessed during this pandemic and the imposed curfew, bodies are being interred immediately.

The traditional and religious leaders have followed such regulations without questioning the authorities. Through analysis of these online stories, we have shown how the association of narratives of witchcraft shapes individual and collective responses to the COVID-19 epidemic. We have also outlined some of the main elements common to many African cultures' understanding of illness and its causality, and have seen difficulties that this paradigm represents for 'orthodox' disease prevention and treatment.

Witchcraft beliefs are grounded in the concept of causation, which remains a guiding principle among Africans in explaining why misfortunes disasters and diseases take place. This principle suggests that all misfortunes are caused by some unseen powers. Most African groups have expressions alluding to such beliefs. For instance, the Swahili people of the Kenyan coast may exclaim when someone becomes sick, "*kuna mkono wa mtu hapa*" (there is someone's hand behind this).⁴⁹ Those sicknesses caused by

⁴⁷ Manyibe Ezra, "Elders Cast Out Covid-19 in Ritual", <https://www.kenyans.co.ke/news/52634-elders-cast-out-covid-19-ritual-video>.

⁴⁸ Kisiara, R. (1998). *Some Sociopolitical Aspects of Luo Funerals*. Anthropos, Bd. 93. H.1./3., 127136. <https://www.jstor/stable/40465784> (Accessed on 29 May, 2020).

⁴⁹ See for example, Mitchell 1977:68; see also Behringer 2004:14; Healey and Sybertz 1996:291, 291; Kirwen 2005:220; Manala 2004:1498; Mbiti 1991:117, 165, 166; and Opuku 2002:78, 79).

witches and sorcerers are regarded as severe and life threatening⁵⁰ consequentially witchcraft is viewed as “*the greatest wrong or destructiveness*”⁵¹ in the African traditional religious context. “*It is a life-threatening evil*” As such COVID-19 is viewed within this context. Traditional medicine people still exist in plenty in Kenya. Each ethnic group has at least more than fifteen most popular ones. They often ‘get their power from ancestral spirits. They help to heal and make predictions. Often, they would paint their faces white substance, mutter in a strange language and use objects such as antelope horns, waterbuck horns, impala jaws, eland hair or the reptile skins, birds’ peaks and claws to frighten their clients. They are different from a herbal healers, who use traditional medicine and whose medical skills rely on traditional knowledge, not spirituality.

4. Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya, witchcraft has increasingly become central to many African conceptions of disease causation and aetiology. Many people are looking unto it for protection and treatment. While a number of studies have alluded to a theoretical link between strange diseases and witchcraft, so far, there is little studies however that link the spread of COVID-19 and the prevention to such traditional beliefs. Using specific examples from recent available literature we have seen that many Kenyans belief that COVID-19 can be prevented or spread through witchcraft and cured by the same. We learn that witchcraft exists as a form of scapegoating and accusations—a method of explaining causation and healing and that understanding how societies understand factors that affect their health and how health seeking is influenced by local notions and perceived aetiologies of illness and death could better inform sustainable interventions and increased health promotion efforts.

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⁵⁰ Moila, M. P. 2002. *Challenging Issues in African Christianity*. Pretoria, South Africa: CB Powell Bible Centre, University of South Africa, p. 23.

⁵¹ Magesa, Laurenti. 1997. *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*. New York: Orbis Books; Maimela, S. S. 1985. Salvation in African Traditional Religions. *Missionalia* 13, no. 2:63–77.

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