

Antiwitchcraft movements in Africa

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Movements aimed at the eradication of witchcraft periodically sweep across Sub-Saharan Africa. One of the best documented is the Mcape, which has been observed in different parts of Eastern Central Africa throughout the twentieth century by anthropologists such as Audrey Richards, Max Marwick, and Roy Willis. As opposed to witchdoctors who provide individual protection against witchcraft, these movements operate on a larger scale and aim at more radical objectives: they offer protection for the whole community and claim to root out all evil once and for all. Witchcraft is addressed as a general and collective threat, rather than being related to interpersonal conflict stemming from the family. The excessive ambition of antiwitchcraft movements explains their transient and recurrent nature. New movements are constantly emerging, rapidly gaining, then losing popularity when they fail to fulfill their promise, hence paving the way for the next movement to appear on this highly competitive marketplace. Compared to more structured cults, antiwitchcraft movements have little formal organization and rely on their leaders' charisma and reputation. They are deterritorialized movements, often led by itinerant witch-finders who cross ethnic and national boundaries. Antiwitchcraft movements are centered on mass cleansing (and must therefore be distinguished from more brutal witch-hunts). When the witch-finder arrives in a village, he authoritatively lines up all the inhabitants and proceeds to identify the witches by divination. He then asks the alleged witches to confess their evil deeds and surrender their harmful "fetishes" or "medicines." These paraphernalia are publicly destroyed or piled up at crossroads

as a demonstration of the witch-finder's supremacy. The accused are sometimes "branded" with razors, but are not put to death nor banned from the community. Finally all villagers are administered a witch-cleansing treatment, which is said to protect the innocent and kill those who will attempt to revert to witchcraft.

The literature dealing with antiwitchcraft movements in Africa revolves around two main questions: Are these movements essentially modern? Are they proto-political movements? Since Audrey Richards' seminal article, anthropologists and historians have tended to consider antiwitchcraft movements intrinsically modern. These movements incorporate many Western elements as icons of modernity. The witch-finders dress in European clothes (unlike traditional witchdoctors), use mirrors for divination and imitate colonial bureaucratic practices, such as stamps, written documents, and waiting lines. In French Equatorial Africa, the Ngol movement appropriated the figure of General de Gaulle, viewed as a "fetish that overcomes all other fetishes." Antiwitchcraft movements are considered to be inherently associated with the colonial situation: the brutal and rapid social change brought about by colonization causes anomie, which results in an increase of witchcraft, which in its turn leads to the emergence of antiwitchcraft movements. Following Jack Goody's critique of the anomie explanation, historians have shown that twentieth-century movements in fact continued precolonial traditions. Antiwitchcraft movements predate colonial times and, one should add, extend as well to postcolonial times. Yet colonial rule has undeniably stimulated the rise of new movements by prohibiting the traditional methods of witchcraft control, notably the poison ordeal, which was widespread in Africa. As Mary Douglas has claimed, antiwitchcraft movements have

emerged to fill the gap left by the suppression of precolonial ordeals. Colonization has encouraged a shift from judicial procedures controlled by local headmen and centered on punishment toward more popular movements centered on confession, healing, and purification.

Witch-cleansing movements have a strong millenarian dimension. They announce the imminent revitalization of society and give hope of a morally regenerated life and a new order free of all tensions. Roy Willis has described the “impression of incipient revolution” when witch-finders take over villages to perform mass cleansings. This atmosphere of “miniature revolution” raises the issue of the political potential of witch-cleansing movements. According to Willis, antiwitchcraft movements are proto-institutions specific to rural Africa, while more structured institutions, such as independent churches and political parties, developed in urban centers. Authors like Georges Balandier and Terence Ranger have even argued that antiwitchcraft and other millenarian movements represent “the prehistory of modern nationalism” in Africa. Ranger has however reconsidered his position and acknowledged that these movements cannot be reduced to a proto-political stage in the evolution of anticolonial protest. Directed against native witches and not colonizers, antiwitchcraft movements have more to do with local politics. They most often express conflicts between generations. Young men – those with low status in traditional society – are the ones who press to call in a witch-finder (usually an enterprising young man himself) to cleanse the village. Conversely, village elders are scapegoated: they are the ones accused and publicly humiliated during the witch-finding

ceremony. Moreover, the so-called evil objects confiscated are in fact paraphernalia of the old cults controlled by the elders, which were commonly used as protections against witchcraft. By asserting the superiority of new anti-witchcraft medicines over old ones disguised as witchcraft, witch-finding movements thus give young men the opportunity to challenge the elders’ authority and overturn – if only temporarily – the social order.

SEE ALSO: Age and social movements; Anticolonial movements; Apocalyptic and millenarian movements; Cults; Decolonization and social movements; Social change and social movements.

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