

UNDERSTANDING WITCHCRAFT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The Gospel tune “Omundu Omulosi” (meaning, “a man who practices witchcraft”) hit the charts in Kenya early in 2000 and still is popular in many radio stations today. It laments the fact that witchcraft has destroyed a home. An educated man who had just come from the United States died unexpectedly and the only cow of the family also died leaving the family poor. But is witchcraft real? And is it an impediment to the advancement of the community socially and economically? This paper uses the theory of community development as advanced by Robert Chambers which posits that “people can only support that which they help build.” The theory also continues to assert that the outsider’s view of the communities is always “distorted and explained using our own language and experience.” (Chambers, 1983). The study examines witchcraft from the African perspective and its impact on community development. If the Bible is to be taken as the word of God – and if the Bible is true then as Christians we are cognizant of Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 6:12, “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.” The questions this paper attempts to address are: Is witchcraft real or is it part of the wild imagination of the human mind? How does witchcraft impact community development? and, what can we do as Christians to counter the “forces of evil in the heavenly realms”? The paper explores literature available in order to define witchcraft arguing that witchcraft has its origin in Satanism. It also examines the phenomena of witchcraft accusations and why they are taking root in modern-day community life. In addition, the author relies on personal testimonies of people who have had encounters with this phenomenon. The paper concludes that indeed the “powers of this dark world” are still in force and that they are causing stagnation in community development in areas where witchcraft is practiced, affecting both individuals and communities. Finally, practical ways of ensuring that these powers are conquered are provided.

Key Words: Christian, Community Development, Satanism, witchcraft, witch accusations, demons, possession

INTRODUCTION

When Shisia, an evangelistic musician, released his Gospel music entitled “Omundu Omulosi”¹ (literally, “a man who is a witch”) in early 2000, it became an instant hit. The song laments how a witch has “finished off” his home. It goes to state that the cows die mysteriously and his healthy son dropped down dead after landing from America following successful completion of his studies. This song was a hit because many people identified with the contents. Those interviewed for the purpose of this paper told stories of how they were sick and could not be cured using conventional medicine. They were only cured after deliverance. They attributed their sickness to witchcraft. But what is witchcraft? The subject of witches has occupied the minds of thinkers. Many argue that the evil which is associated with witchcraft does not exist. Witchcraft is not limited to the poor alone; Brain reports that “At least two heads of state of Africa have accused their political rivals of bewitching them (Brain, 1982, p. 371).

Understanding Witchcraft

Cletus Chukwu, in his celebrated book, *Introduction to Philosophy in an African Perspective*, states that those who advocate the school of thought that witchcraft does not exist argue that “if God created the world or supervises it, then how can we explain all the pain and evil, all the sin and sorrow and suffering...” (2002, p. 226). In other words, this school of thought explains things from a human perspective or a scientific perspective. The common name we give to such people is atheist, following the dictionary definition of atheism which refers to an absence of belief in the existence of a deity or deities. Foremost in people’s minds is the question, “Does witchcraft really exist?”. Felicia Priest, in an unpublished paper presented at a symposium in Africa International University in 2015, argued that witchcraft is a myth. She posited that,

¹This song is found in this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ee3SOLw8iw> (Kamzzee, Luhya songs – Omundu Omulosi

Witchcraft belief enables people to explain why bad things happen to them and proffer remedy. Along with ancestor and spirit attack, witchcraft is invoked to explain the incidence of suffering or of economic or political success. For certain people, scarcely any misfortune or death can be explained apart from witchcraft. This explains why when medical treatment or diagnosis fails to heal, victims and families typically interpret the condition as a spiritual disease and then seek the appropriate spiritual centre for help. Most Kenyans suppose that someone must be responsible for every misfortune, hardship, death, accident, strange behaviour, disaster, difficulty, or sickness (Priest, 2015).

This view is held by theologians who believe that witches are a creation of the brain and that witches are usually forced to confess. Kunhyihop puts it even more succinctly, “Confessions which many times are done under duress/pressure are taken to be the final proof of witchcraft practice.” (Kunhyiop, 2014).

On the other hand, there are those who believe that witchcraft is real and that it exists. Emmanuel Eni in his book published by Scripture Union narrates how he encountered witchcraft. He says,

One night, I woke up in the dead of the night and found a boa-constrictor beside me. I wanted to shout but could not. Some nights, I would wake up to see Alice’s body as transparent as a cellophane bag. Some nights, she would disappear and reappear. Some nights I would hear strange noises or dancing in the living room etc. I could no longer bear these fearful happenings so I decided to ask her, and the first reaction was violence and serious warning. She said: “Do not ask me this question again or else I will deal with you.” From then I knew my life was in danger. (1996, p. 10)

This testimony which Eni says is true has been read by people all over the world. The book has been reprinted sixteen times since its publication in 1987. If he were a fake, his testimony would have been denounced by now. Seraph and Mitula (2012) are more categorical about the source of the power of witchcraft. They assert that witchcraft is sourced from Satan.

It is therefore imperative that in understanding whether witchcraft exists or not, a deeper analysis is necessary on why many look at it with scepticism. The writer agrees with Wylie (1973), who argues that despite a certain difference of opinion on matters of research technique, these investigators have continued to regard the accusation, rather than the confession, as the most significant expression of witch beliefs. The Henry Center has devoted its energy arguing that there is no witchcraft, that many cases of witchcraft are indeed accusations aimed at the accuser to benefit economically. In a colloquium organised by the Center in Nairobi in 2013, with the main theme of addressing “Witch Accusations and Violence” (Carl F.H. Center, 2013), the presenters were of the opinion that many innocent lives have been lost as a result of witch accusations. Indeed, witch accusations are a reality that many communities have faced. Witchcraft accusations can be traced in Europe in the 15th century (Beaver, 2009). History also records the Salem witch trials in North America. The Salem witch trials were a series of hearings and prosecutions of people accused of witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts between February 1692 and May 1693. The trials resulted in the executions of twenty people, fourteen of them women (Roach, 2013). Then there is the French girl Joan of Arc, a woman who in 1431 was burnt at the stake after being accused of being a witch. She was only 19 years old. History has proved that those who suffered death were not witches. It is the conviction of the writer that this has provided evidence to the school of thought that believes that witchcraft does not exist and that those who are accused of witchcraft are indeed innocent. But should that be the end of the story? It is time we went to the drawing board, and tested the evidence to come up with conclusions that are realistic. As Asamoah-Gyadu (2015) avers,

The emphasis (*on witch accusation*²) is understandable in the work of anthropologists who have operated primarily in societies of Central and East Africa, where witchcraft 'cases' invariably appear to be initiated by an accuser, who is either the imagined 'victim', or someone acting on his behalf (p. 24).

In addressing this issue, a more elaborate definition of witchcraft should be made and then its origin traced. De Villiers defined witchcraft as an inherited capacity for causing evil to others (1987, p. 45) but also hastily adds that witches are mostly female. Brain has a more detailed definition. According to him, it is a “power to exert supernatural harm upon another person or his possession, that power depending upon inherent evil qualities in the witch himself (Wylie, 1973; Brain, 1982, p. 372).

²Paranthetical addition mine

Tom Otieno, who is an Anglican and has taught about witchcraft for many years, posits that witchcraft is the use of evil spirits to meet human needs. He goes on to differentiate two types of witchcraft; those that are harmless and those that are harmful. Harmless witchcraft includes the use of witchcraft to get a child or to secure employment, whereas harmful witchcraft involves causing injury to a victim. This harm includes sickness, suffering, poverty, mental illness or even death.

But where does the power to do all this come from? To address that, we must turn to God. It is impossible to understand witchcraft if one does not believe in God. Derek Prince is of the opinion that it is not only what we see, touch, hear and taste that are real items. There are things that are not seen and which have far-reaching effects (2006, p. 12). Second Cor. 4:18 states, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (NIV). So in understanding witchcraft, one should not limit oneself to the physical realm but also understand the spiritual realm. Derek adds that when dealing with witchcraft, one should understand that one is dealing with two opposing kingdoms that are invisible and spiritual. One is the Kingdom of God and the other the Kingdom of Satan (2006, p. 13). This paper posits that there should be a difference between sorcery and witchcraft. Brain states that; Sorcery is:

The supernatural power to cause another person or that person's possessions harm through the use of various substances or acts. Witchcraft on the other hand is "the power to exert supernatural harm upon another person or his possessions, which power depending upon inherent evil qualities in the evil person (witch) himself/herself." (1982 p. 372)

In parts of West Africa, however, we have reports of witchcraft in which specific accusations against others are rarely made and where the self-accusing witch initiates witchcraft enquiries. This confession-oriented, or introspective, form of witchcraft has been described in Ghanaian studies by Debrunner (1961), Field (1960) and Ward (1956), while Ruel (1970, pp. 333-350) has shown that it exists among the Banyang of West Cameroon and suggests that it is found also among neighbouring Cross River peoples such as the Ejagham, Efik, and Ibibio. Further indications of the presence of introspective witchcraft in West Africa are offered in studies of the new 'spiritual' or 'prophet-healing' sects, whose leaders perform witch-cleansing functions for persons-mainly women-who confess to involuntary witchcraft activity (Baeta, 1962; Parrinder, 1953; Peel, 1958; Turner, 1967). It should be noted that witches can also identify themselves as witches.

How Witchcraft Affects the Community

Within a community, witchcraft has the effect of interfering with the already set up of the community. See Figure 1 below:

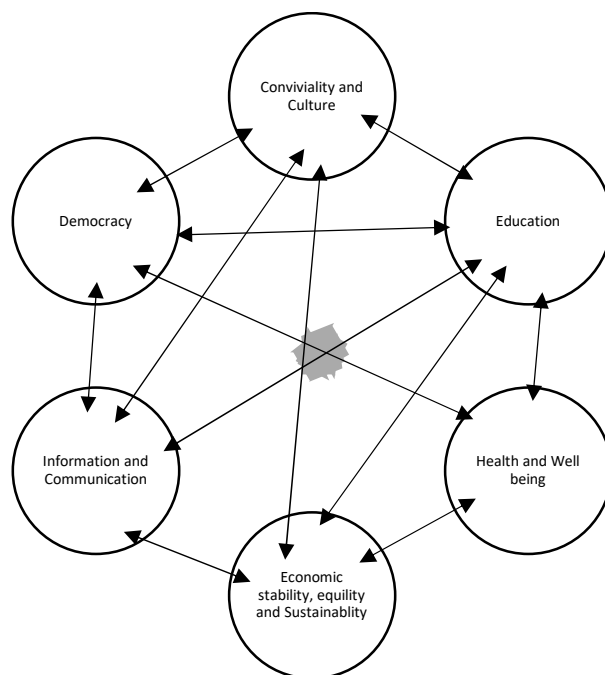


Figure 1: Understanding the Community
Source: Ledwith, (2005)

According to Ledwith (2005), a community is a system made up of six sub systems. Each system is necessary to have a holistic community. The systems are: First, economic stability, equality and sustainability. The community's life is sustained through economic activities through small scale businesses, selling off their goods, be it agriculture or otherwise. This should be done so that all members of the communities have an equal chance of participating. Second, information and communication. Members of the community have a right to access information and should be able to communicate their aspirations, desires and needs in a way that best suits them. Third, members of the community need to be given the opportunity to belong to groups and to exercise their right to choose the leaders they want. Fourth, people should be allowed to practice their way of life the way they know best. They should be allowed to socialize – celebrate their success and grieve over their failures. Fifth, the community should be able to get an education that is relevant to their needs and be able to decide what a good education is. Finally, a community is entitled to good health. It is their right. Well-being leads to communities realizing their full potential.

If any of these needs are not met, the community experiences skewed growth. Witchcraft interferes with one or more of these fundamental pillars. Igo states, "Satan knew only too well the gift that God gave humanity, and so his goal and aim is to steal this gift to deflect us and to sow a seed of chaos in our very bodies" (2009, p. 145). Witchcraft interferes with the ability of the human being to achieve his full potential. As Mulwa puts it, if human beings are not facilitated to participate in their own development, it will lead to "people losing their sense of dignity" (2010, p. 129). Innovation is suppressed and the community finds it difficult to participate in communal activities. No one needs to be reminded that this will lead to widespread poverty.

In terms of community organisation, witchcraft has been known to make individual members of the community leave their ancestral land or farms and go and settle elsewhere. In other cases, Nyabari and Dickson (2014) observes that witchcraft "can eat away the health and souls of their victims, attack people, cause misfortune and make life uncomfortable." This in effect means that the support systems of the community are weakened and cannot generate growth. The effects can be catastrophic. Africa Development Education Network in 1992 defined community development as a struggle against oppression and all that makes life less human (Aden, 1992). That which makes

life “less human” includes a low level of participation from communities for fear of being “seen” and bewitched. The other impact is in the education sector. Education is vital when it comes to boosting the productivity of the human factor and making people more aware of opportunities for earning a living. Many studies have highlighted its effect on both production and productivity. According to the World Bank, for example, a one-year increase in the average length of schooling could push up GDP by 3%.

FINDINGS

In order to assess the effects of witchcraft on community development, the writer used the survey method. The writer interviewed a cross-section of people who had been affected by witchcraft. In addition, the writer interviewed two people who are conversant with witchcraft and have helped people get out of slavery to witchcraft. Purposive sampling was used to get people who had been affected by witchcraft and were ready to testify. The people interviewed did not have any objections to their names being used, but in this write-up, other names have been used.

Respondent 1: James (not his real name).

James is a retired teacher in the northern part of Rift Valley, Kenya. He is a church elder and a committed Christian. Originally he comes from Western Kenya. His father had to move to the Rift Valley due to witchcraft which took three of his siblings before him. James, who is in his 80s now, confronted the supposed witch on the man’s deathbed. He told this researcher that he wanted to ask him whether it is true that he used witchcraft to kill three of his siblings before him. The supposed witch indeed admitted to James that he did cause the siblings to die. He asked for forgiveness from James. On being asked by James why he did so, he said that the death of the children would lead him to have children, as his wife was barren. He even explained how he caused the children to die. He dug a grave at night assisted by his wife, then started a burial process mentioning the name of the child they wanted to die. James reported that the death of his sibling occurred two to three days after each of the incidents. The man’s wife eventually had three children, one for each that he bewitched. One died in infancy and the two who survived never did well. One became an alcoholic and the other had mental problems.

Respondent 2: Catherine (not her real name)

Catherine was a postgraduate student at Kenyatta University. She told the writer that she was being raped by demons in her dreams. The rape was so real to the point that she could see the evidence in the morning. She dropped out of her postgraduate studies. Her body became numb and she had a hot face. She sought medical attention. A church minister who specializes in removing witchcraft curses identified her problem as witchcraft. She had been bewitched by her uncle. During deliverance, she was told that she had been bewitched by her uncle in order to prevent her from completing her studies. After deliverance, she was able to go back to university and complete her degree. She now has an income and is able to support her family.

Respondent 3: Tom (not his real name)

Tom claims that witchcraft caused him not to empty his bowels for as long as two months. It interfered with his relationship with his wife who eventually left him. He was also fired from his job. After deliverance, he got his health and family back.

Respondent 4: Jean Bosco (His real name)

Jean Bosco is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The respondent wanted his real name used as he says he is not practicing witchcraft. The respondent says his own father was a witch and he witnessed first-hand how it was done. He accompanied his father in practice several times. They used to visit cemeteries at night to perform witchcraft. He narrated to the writer that his father practiced *three* types of witchcraft. The *first* one he called spiritual. The spiritual witchcraft involved the father moving spiritually. In this case, the father could send witchcraft power to affect someone in another part of the country. This type of witchcraft would cause one to die in an accident that is unexplained or get ill and die suddenly. The *second* type of witchcraft is, according to the witness, characterised by the use of herbs and charms to give one power to do things like passing of exams, winning court cases or even see evil when it comes. The respondent says that it is this type of witchcraft that the Mai rebel fighters in DRC use to make themselves invisible. The respondent says he witnessed first-hand as the rebels inflicted casualties among the soldiers who looked confused. Jean Bosco says it is this type that is also used to detect whether someone wants to poison him and the danger can be diverted. This view is supported by Evelyn Amony, one of Joseph Kony’s wives, who in her autobiography says Kony has not been arrested to date because he has powerful

charms that he uses to avoid capture. At one time Evelyn says in her book that she saw Ugandan Defence Forces coming for them, but they did not see them and when they fired, no bullet hit them. The last one is astral projection in which the witness explained that the father could use the body of another person to perform evil. An example is to cause one person to murder another person.

The writer stated that on many occasions he accompanied his father to the cemetery to perform witchcraft in the middle of the night and return at dawn. Some included summoning spirits and commanding them to do the father's will. Astral projection, explains the respondent, can make one enter another being and cause harm to others. This will lead to accusations being levelled at the wrong person. He was told not to reveal the secrets lest he die. The writer, whose father is now dead, was caught up in the web of witchcraft until he got delivered and became a practicing Christian.

Respondent 5: Mildred (Not her real name)

This witness's son is married to an herbalist's daughter who uses a spirit medium to treat people. The witness stated that the herbalist has helped many women conceive who could not conceive before. He consults the spirits who reveal to him the nature of the client's problem. He is known not to use his powers to harm others. He is very popular, and he is visited by both Africans and non-Africans. He is also visited by academicians and religious leaders. One Protestant church leader whose wife could not conceive did conceive after a visit to this herbalist. No one has ever known how this is done but testimonies are there from people who have encountered him. The writer was introduced to two women who had been helped to get medicine through this herbalist and they were able to have children.

Respondent 6: Peter (not his real name)

Peter had a child who had been bewitched. The child believed he was Mohammed reincarnated. It was found during the deliverance session that it is the grandfather who had bewitched the child. The grandfather later on confessed that he was jealous because the son was not helping him.

Respondent 7: Reverend Tom (Real name)

Reverend Tom has been involved in deliverance for over five years. He believes that people allow themselves to be used by Satan for material gains. Once one is being controlled by Satan, it will be difficult for the person to free himself unless the person recognizes by his own power that he cannot fight the evil forces.

Respondent 8: Pastor Raphael (Real name)

Pastor Raphael is the lastborn of ten children. His birth was surrounded by unexplained events. His mother was overdue for three months. The mother had a brother who was a sorcerer and wanted his nephew to be one. However he was spotted by a man of God who removed the mark of witchcraft from the baby Raphael. Raphael says that witchcraft is based on rebellion, and that witchcraft is used for selfish gains.

The outcome of witchcraft is manifest in the testimonies of the respondents. Witchcraft interferes with personal endeavours of individuals, and by extension the communities. In the case of James, the father moved the whole family to Rift Valley to continue with their education. James adds that due to this, some of his siblings attained university education, a feat that would have been impossible had they not run away from the witch. His father sold the ancestral land. His uncle who remained behind lived in abject poverty and none of his children reached university level.

Figure 2 demonstrates how pillars of a community can be weakened by witchcraft leading to retarded community growth.

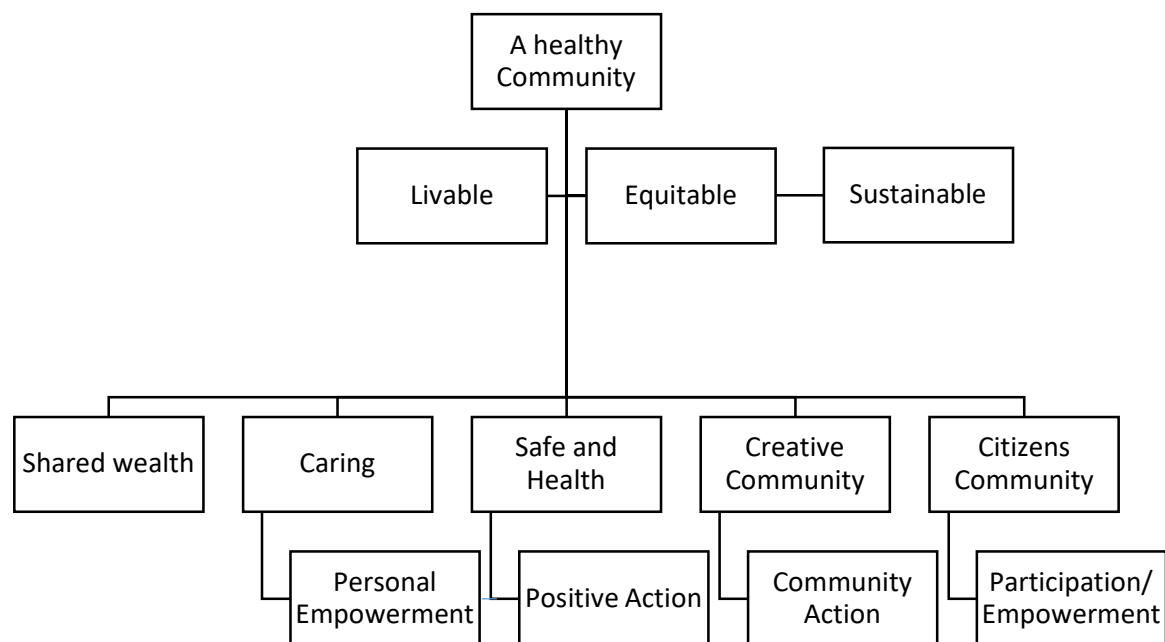


Figure 2: The Healthy Community
Source: Ledwith, 2005

Ledwith (2005) lists four pillars that a healthy community is built on. These are personal empowerment, positive action, communion action and participation/empowerment. Personal empowerment leads to a community member being able to contribute in group and community activities without fear of being intimidated, coerced or manipulated. Witchcraft suppresses this pillar to the extent that others even fail to attend group meetings. Positive actions are conscious actions that are made by individuals to improve their status. These may include education, educational tours, savings and adopting particular farming methods. Witchcraft suppresses individuals' initiatives to initiate action. This also leads to corporate failure by the community to organize and chart their destiny, living in fear and leaving their fate to God.

To completely remove the impacts of witchcraft, one must gain an understanding of what is needed to be made known and internalized. Elsewhere in this write-up, witchcraft is explained as originating from Satan. Satan is spirit and it follows that in addressing witchcraft, one must resort to spirituality. The Bible states that, "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." (Ephesians 6:12, NIV).

Witchcraft can be dealt with through the spirit. First, the person has to accept that without God, witchcraft will still reign. Those who practice witchcraft are able to access this spirit world, using various mediums and through it, control people and events in the material world for their own advantage (Baxter & Lowery, 2006). Tom Otieno during the interview outlined a process of ridding the spirit of witchcraft from a person and also ridding a homestead or a building from the spirit of witchcraft. In a chapter entitled, "The Problem of Evil in Africa. Survey of African views on Witchcraft and the Response of the Christian Church," Borsch is of the opinion that witchcraft must be gotten rid of. He goes on to suggest that invoking the supernatural powers to deal with witches is at times used (De Villiers, 1987). Tom Otieno has no doubt in his mind that it is only the power of Jesus that can rid humankind of witchcraft. He gives the following steps:

The first step involves the victim(s) accepting that indeed there is witchcraft that life has been disrupted by the same. Then a man or woman of God must secure the place by saying a prayer. Then a confession by the victim is made so that God in His mercy may allow His spirit to come into the person and fight the spirit of witchcraft. Then a cleansing ceremony follows and the victim is told to always from then on to trust God in all that he does.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study it was found that the mention of witchcraft invokes fear in those who have been affected by it. It is for this reason that it is being suggested that those affected by it should not be overcome by fear but be ready to face the consequences with courage and to seek help. It is the duty of those involved in community development and caregivers to encourage those affected never to give in to fear, for fear is one of the ingredients that the devil uses to subjugate the victim. Most of the writers reviewed agreed that the devil uses manipulation to trap the victims. This is done by trying to take the word of God and use it against the victim in his own twisted way. This includes putting down on those victims and those who practice witchcraft to believe that God is not able. However the word of God is very clear – it says, "Do not fear," "Do not be afraid," and "Do not fear or be dismayed," (Isaiah 41:10, Psalms 56:3, Philippians 4:6-7, 2 Timothy 1:7). It is for this reason that the caregivers and development workers should help the people have faith in the word of God and shun fear. So the people are encouraged to memorise Scripture verses that apply to the situation.

Holy Communion is a way of warding off witchcraft if it is taken in the fear of the Lord and with the respect it deserves. This should be accompanied by daily prayer. Since witchcraft involves sacrifice and blood, Holy Communion, which is the body and blood of Christ taken spiritually, will ward off evil planned through spirits. It should not be lost on us that the battle belongs to the Lord, and it is not ours.

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