

Social Regulation of Witchcraft Among the Laguna People, Atchan (Ébrié), Southern Côte D'Ivoire, West Africa

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to analyze the mechanisms of social regulation of witchcraft in Atchan's community and its consequences. This study took place in five Atchan (Ébrié) villages in the municipality of Songon (Autonomous District of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire). The survey was conducted among thirty-five individuals using a qualitative data collection technique. The study revealed that the issue of witchcraft can be dealt with in three ways: mistreatment, banishment, and religious approach. And yet the concept of witchcraft appears to take on a subjective character. The difficulty encountered on this issue relates to the availability of evidence and the causal link with alleged offenses. Despite its subjectivism, witchcraft remains a socio-cultural reality that causes many inconveniences to the accused and their families and the entire community. This situation challenges the public authorities and calls for solutions to take into account respect for human dignity.

Keywords: Banishment, Mistreatment, Religious Treatment, Witchcraft.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Owing to the abundant literature on this issue of witchcraft, one might think that it has been fully addressed as Fancello and Bonhomme (2018) say there are still some aspects not touched upon things could never be any different since it's an issue that changes and fits in various social contexts. From this perspective, the flourishing literature on witchcraft that developed in the past fifteen years has set up a new paradigm linking witchcraft to modernity (Fancello & Bonhomme, 2018). *"If we thought that development, urbanization or modernization, schooling, Christianization or Islamization would contribute to the disappearance of witchcraft beliefs and practices"* (Cimpric, 2010), we realize that the social changes that happened in colonized societies have not changed anything. They rather invite modernity to address the persistence of witchcraft and the maintenance of these social and cultural perceptions. We are witnessing a very significant evolution of the phenomenon of witchcraft both in its nature and in its evolution. The belief in witchcraft is widespread in different countries of sub-Saharan Africa as demonstrated by the Gallup poll (2015) on the belief in witchcraft, 55% of the average population believes in witchcraft, this rate varying from 15% in Uganda, 64% in Tanzania, 76% in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 77% in Ghana and 95% in Côte d'Ivoire. These data show that in Africa, and particularly in Ivory Coast, witchcraft is deeply rooted and shapes the daily life of the population.

Belief in witchcraft in Atchan's culture dates back long before colonization. De Sardan (1989) notes that witchcraft refers to common sense, among the Atchan, people, members of the Akan ethnic and linguistic group, living in the southern part of Côte d'Ivoire mainly in the Abidjan region and in the localities of Bingerville and Songon. In this community, no event is contingent and the cause of misfortune is to be found in the neighborhood (Augé, 1976). In this context, the misadventures, and unusual events are the consequence of human collusion with "occult" forces. In this community, the action of witchcraft is exercised only in matrilineage. However, this community recognizes that an individual comes from a double belonging. That of the father to whose lineage the child does not belong and that of the mother which remains the true family of the child, and source of the agnatic transmission of wealth. In their social perception, the witchcraft of the maternal line is more dangerous because it can lead to death. On the other hand, the paternal line can only call down a curse, and cause misfortune, and suffering. Because of their vital role and their quality of progenitor, women resented practicing witchcraft even if the whole society is aware that men also practice witchcraft. The victims and the accused necessarily have a family tie since it is believed the evil never comes from outside but from those close to them. It's always a parent who hands over one of their own to death. The action of witchcraft can therefore only be effective among members of

the same lineage. To deal with this “harmful” action, social regulation measures have been implemented the aim of the study is not to demonstrate the existence of witchcraft as a practice, but one cannot hide the socio-cultural reality of this phenomenon. Besides the diversity of speeches related to witchcraft making it the source of misfortunes, emotions happen to be the best means of social regulation to the detriment of the reason for an elusive object. There is a reason to question the reality of this phenomenon insofar as it leaves ample room for reasonable doubt about the facts set forth which remain unfounded. This social fact remains based on collective subjectivism. Does the fact that a community gives credence to an idea give it the status of truth as an alleged fact? If the method of consensus based on the collective character of the experience and the testimony of the group brings social stability and homogeneity to the group or community, it can however prove to be a breach of the right to be different and to any dissidence or protest considered an offense. The consequence is violence against different people which can sometimes be extremely serious not only for the “victims” but also for their communities. Therefore, the problem aroused by the issue of witchcraft is that of justice. But we are witnessing such unanimity around the traditional practice of punishment that one might wonder about the reasons for such an attitude. Aren't the accusation and punishment of people called witches a violation of their basic rights? The witchcraft issue allows us to question social violence on its legitimacy or illegitimacy. The study seeks to examine the issue taking into account the Atchan culture. Thus, it was necessary to insert this research first of all in the anthropological field, then that of criminology; in other words, anthro-criminology. It will be a matter of analyzing the social regulation of witchcraft among the Atchan people and grasping from the field, the socio-psychological effects resulting from this practice.

This study will be based on the theory of symbolic interactions developed by Mead (1934). This asserts that a person's participation in a social group largely depends on his understanding of the symbolic environment of the group and his ability to function with this system of symbols. Thus, each social group also has its own identity, and the members who form it necessarily share a common set of meanings. Goffman (2013) presents interaction as an order in the sense that it is subject to regulations, and imposes a certain number of constraints on its participants. Thus, interaction is perceived by the latter as a model of social order, which he defines as the consequence of any set of moral standards that regulates the way people pursue their goals. The interest of this theory lies in the reciprocity that the individual and society are both active in defining roles and in determining the behaviors associated with them. The theory of symbolic interactions has therefore made it possible to analyze the process of acquiring human behavior or roles and reminds us that the different situations are strongly influenced by the symbolic systems in force and by the prevailing social context.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is based on empirical data. These were collected in five (05) Atchan villages in the municipality of Songon. The corpus of data was obtained from semi-structured interviews on the attitudes that justify the use of physical violence against people accused of witchcraft. Participants were also asked if it is good to hit “a sorcerer”. This interview was administered to the notability and the population of the following villages: Abadjin-Kouté, Abadjin-Doumé, Abia-Kouédo also called Audoin, Songon-Dagbé, and Songon-M'Brathé. The appropriate tools and techniques of the qualitative approach made it possible to validate the survey process, data processing, and analysis. The sample for this study is 35 respondents including two (2) people per notability and five (05) people per village. This study was only possible after a documentary search. However, it should be noted that this work was prompted by a lived experience of accusations of witchcraft in Abadjin-kouté, our village of origin.

A comrade Age-class, who was also a lineage head saw his health deteriorate rapidly. He was diagnosed with kidney failure. His condition was considered abnormal by the age group which believed it was the sign of a witch attack. It is in this context, that, the niece of the sick made the revelation that, it was the sick's older sister who wished to put an end to the life of her younger brother. This was enough to unleash the passions. The suspect was thus forcibly dragged into the public square to confess her "crime", then to the cemetery to suffer the fate she reserved for her younger brother. Today, this woman lives outside the village. This situation offered us a privileged field of observation for criminology. Long before this scene, we witnessed two similar stories in our youth. The first encounter with this phenomenon took place when we were in primary school and the second experience when we were in university. Witchcraft has been particularly addressed by anthropologists and jurists. Product of the social body, it leads to serious social excesses, hence the criminological interest in this subject.

III. RESULTS OF THE DATA ANALYSIS

In the first part of the work, we will present the traditional modes of social regulation and in the second part expose their consequences.

A. Mode of Social Regulation Among Atchan's Community

1) Mistreatment

Mistreatment is to coerce, intimidate or subjugate an individual. Hence, she brings in violence, which comes in a fiery character, fierce in the sense of irresistible and sometimes brutal force. It manifests itself in behavior, words, or aggressive, sudden, and repeated actions. It must be said that abuse can be physical and/or psychological with bodily and psychological consequences. It is a matter in this work of collective mistreatment which aims to undermine the physical and moral integrity of people.

Unlike the Bassari society which does not allow any severe reprisals against sorcerers (Di Muro, 2013), the Atchan society strongly condemns them. Serious and repeated illnesses, death, and failures can be grounds for an accusation of witchcraft. The accusation opens the field of judicial response with mistreatment as the first instrument of the judicial ceremony which is expected to produce the confession and by the way, determine where the truth is before the whole village. Mistreatment is part of the punitive arsenal, whose role is to mark the body of the accused and to permanently affect the mind of the public (Foucault, 1975). Within the Atchan community, when a person suffers from a sorcery attack, he confides his situation, which means, his state of health or what he is going through, to his age group of belonging called in the Atchan language "Amê". When the state of health seems worrying to them, the friends must seek out and identify the culprit in order to put an end to the suffering of the bewitched. In this perspective, we refer to an intermediary who can be a witch doctor-diviner or a "servant of God" to determine the culprit of the evil because we cannot content ourselves with suspicion. This allows Terrail (1979) to observe that the system of sorcery is always a three-place system involving the bewitched, the sorcerer, and the specialist in mystical matters. After consultation and designation of the guilty party, the age class to which it belongs sends the case to the chieftain and demands that the latter summon the accused to the public square in order to bring him to confess his harmful actions on one of their own, even his relative. Since it is a matter of life and death, the chieftain feels compelled to give their consent for the light to be shed on the case. In this judicial scene, the accused is unfortunately not allowed to benefit from any assistance from a lawyer, and anyone who dares show sympathy for such a person is automatically viewed as part of the witchcraft brotherhood. By resorting to chieftain, the aim is to involve everyone and make the exercise of mistreatment of the accused legitimate. But also, above all have it endorsed by the village, and by the way by everyone. It is therefore not an action led by a few uncontrolled individuals, but rather a collective action. By its desire to save one of its own, the age group shows its bond of friendship and solidarity. Through this attitude, the group refuses to lose social strength, especially if it is a safe bet for the age group. On the other hand, someone who is not a member of a category cannot claim to benefit from the game of solidarity that membership in an organization confers. In this society, it is not good to be qualified as a sorcerer, called in the local language "logbô". Because it is a name that ruins reputation, as one respondent confided to us. Witchcraft is a nocturnal activity that confers a certain opacity and inaccessibility on ordinary men. His invisible actions and practices have harmful consequences on the lives of others.

Of the public nature of the mistreatment, it is a question of making examples while bringing the accused to confess and repent of the harm he causes to his peers and to the community. The summons to the public square aims to shed light on the works of the shadows. The use of mistreatment is seen here as self-defense against the asymmetry of the strength of the "sorcerer" with regard to his victim who lacks a means of defense. It is necessary to bring order and above all to remember that the victim is the property of the community. This mistreatment reflects the state of tension and imbalance in society. Throughout this judicial scene, the cardinal values of African society such as the family, respect for human beings, tolerance, forgiveness, and respect for elders do not resist the trial. In this situation, the public or collective interest takes precedence over any particular consideration. These moments open the door to intentional blows and injuries that can sometimes lead to homicide. While attempting the life of others is highly condemned and unthinkable homicide, in the case of witchcraft the use of mistreatment is not perceived as social deviance, but the consequence of sacrilege, namely the attack from the community. Faced with such acts, society must repress and put out of harm's way the sorcerer considered here as a murderer. For respondent "D": *"the sorcerer is afraid of those who confront them and treat them harshly. People think that sorcerers only understand the language of violence"*. It is in this perspective that respondent "A" fits in, saying that: *"one cannot negotiate with the sorcerer by being gentle and hoping that he will confess. Given that he uses violence against their "victims", so must he. It's the only way to get confessions out of him"*.

2) Banishment

Banishment is a very heavy punishment inflicted on the "sorcerer". It consists in depriving the "offender" of his anchor point, in particular his village. This ultimate punishment is intended not to amend the culprit,

but to curb the voracious appetite of the sorcerer. This denotes the impossibility of continuing to live with such an individual who is unable to abstain from harming those around him. This measure makes it possible to remove "evil" from the community and this attitude means that the group can no longer tolerate deviations. The banishment is testimony to the fact that his "formatting" is impossible and its formidable dangerousness. The community should then be protected from interior individuals who could destabilize the social balance. Consumption of human flesh is prohibited and is a violation of the bonds of brotherhood. Those who indulge in such practices harm the "common soul". Under these conditions, it is better to sacrifice the unrepentant sorcerer for the preservation of community peace. This serious sanction is the sign, the expression that the community is above each individual and must exist after him. This is a lesson that the rest of the group must learn. Banishment is not a moment of spectacle and entertainment but is intended to create fear through the breaking of family and community ties. In a word, it is death. Opposition against this judgment is not possible at first. But the family can sometime later ask for the village's pardon in order to bring back the banished person and thus end the sanction. This is what "A" reveals: *"My grandmother was driven out of the village because of witchcraft. Two years later, her health deteriorated. Faced with this situation, her children went to see the chieftom so that she could authorize their mother to return to the village. Which was done, but unfortunately a few months later she passed away with quite a bit of psychological trouble"*. This kind of social control is less and less used.

There is another type of banishment, which is not the direct action of the community, but of the individual who has suffered violence following his accusation of witchcraft. In these circumstances, some people are unable to bear the pressure of reproving looks, derogatory remarks, and lack of respect from others, pushing them to exile themselves far from home. This is what Awo points out: *"Since the humiliation suffered by my aunt, she now lives far from the village and refuses to return for her brother's funeral"*.

3) Religious treatment

The religious treatment is of two types: recourse to fetish healers and to Christian therapists. Before the arrival of Christianity and after, the populations resorted to traditional therapists to decipher the events of daily life, to designate the culprits of the misfortune, and the means of neutralizing them. The accused are taken to these people so that they proceed to the interrogation and the consultation of the spirits with the use of decoction to drink or to put in the eyes. In these places, sorcerers are asked to draw up a list of their crimes and their accomplices. Confession offers a way of salvation. Those who do not confess their misdeeds cannot claim help. In Atchan anthropology, each man has his double who can operate invisibly at a distance from the body and sometimes without its knowledge. This one can inflict great pain on those around him. Only "gôman" charmers, who are farseeing animated by a good spirit, have the power to neutralize the sorcerer, most often by rites given to genies and spirits.

To preserve themselves from actions against witchcraft, some people have individual ritual days in addition to collective protection through ancestor worship at the family level and at the community level of worship addressed to protective spirits (Bureau, 1996). To this traditional religion will be added, with colonization, the religion imported from the Occident, namely Christianity with its various currents. The strongly Christianized Atchan space and contrary to the writings only involving Christianity in the fight against witchcraft from the 1980s, as Cimpric notes (2010) is not correct. Because the arrival of William Wade Harris, in 1913, in Côte d'Ivoire, will mark the beginning of the fight against witchcraft (Bureau, 1996) and his disciples such as the prophet Albert Atcho de Bregbo (Augé, 1976), prophet therapists will continue the fight. The recourse to Christianity will be reinforced by the economic crisis which will be accompanied by a structural adjustment plan which will affect the States of sub-Saharan Africa. It is in this context that the Pentecostal Churches will take up the dual conception of the African imagination. This Protestant movement proposes to fight sorcerers, evil spirits and ancestral spirits. It should be emphasized, as Fancello (2006) shows, that the phenomenon of deliverance is *"at the heart of the explosion of Pentecostalism in Africa since the early 1990s"*. In the understanding of religious supporters, only the Church has the power to heal a "witch" and on occasion reinforces by its actions the idea of belief in witchcraft.

B. Consequences of Social Regulation

1) Human rights violation

Given the inability to objectively prove the existence of witchcraft and that it is only the production of the collective imagination, the trial against a phenomenon that is elusive by the uninitiated opens with cases of flagrant violation of human rights. The major difficulty encountered by this trial relates to the proof of witchcraft practices and their causal link with the damages. As a means of proof, confession is resorted to through pressure of all kinds or revelations which are not without risk. And the process used is not such as to guarantee the right of defence. The major consequence of witchcraft accusations is the use of violence based on arbitrary psychological and physical coercion. On the psychological level, there is humiliation, contempt and insults. On a physical level, the designated people face brutality, mistreatment and rejection.

This is why “D”, a respondent conceives: *“the accusation of witchcraft as a violation of human rights in the sense that the proof of this practice is never indisputably made”*.

2) Stigma and discrimination

With respect to the accusation of witchcraft, the accused persons are victims of stigma and discrimination. Thus the accused are condemned to live with this criminal label and are subjected to inhuman treatment. They must now live in humiliation and shame. Obviously, in this society, you can never completely recover from witchcraft. There is always a danger to living with such a being. This poses a problem of integration resulting in trauma. Witchcraft becomes a “social marker” of the accused, his element of definition or his frame of reference, and he is haunted throughout his life by this social representation. This stigma has as its corollary discrimination which leads to the exclusion of the individual from the social activities of the community and sometimes of the family. This leads to enormous suffering for the accused and his descendants who must also live in shame while bearing in mind the danger that this person represents for the community. If the modern sentencing system is open to individual punishment; on the other hand, in the general scheme of sorcery, the penalties are open to collective variables. The descendants are seen as the extension of the accused and could therefore inherit the witchcraft of the parent. In this context, the members of the family have a difficult social life, difficulty having friends, getting married, and even going to school. This is what “A” denounces: *“Since our grandmother was accused of a witch and dragged into the public square, our family is perceived as a family with which we must be very careful. When one of us or a brother is in relation with a third person, we tell him that you are with the sorcerers. This image has never left us”*.

3) Impact on society

Any idea of peace, order, and security is based on the recognition and respect for human dignity recognized by the declaration of human rights. No individual or group of individuals, no class can claim to be above the others and confiscate basic rights for its own benefit. Also, rejection outside a group carries the seeds of division within it. Everyone has the right to life corresponding to his means, his values, his merit. And this requires the suppression of violence and abuse of power against the weak and unproven accusations of witchcraft. When, in the name of tradition, people are subjected to humiliating ordeals to extract confessions from them on the pretext that they are witches, this hurts and offends the basic rights of human dignity. This situation should make the political and judicial authorities react or be challenged because legal certainty must be granted to every member of the human community. Justice must guarantee everyone's impartiality and strict respect for the law. Respect for the laws begins with the search for proof, and as long as the proof is not made, the individual benefits from the presumption of innocence under the terms of the law n° 2000-516 of June 15, 2000, in its preliminary article of the Code of Criminal Procedure which states: *“any person suspected or prosecuted is presumed innocent as long as his guilt has not been established. Violations of the presumption of innocence are provided for, remedied and repressed under the conditions provided for by law”*. But unfortunately, we create antagonisms and we avenge ourselves by accusations of sorcery. Some members cannot accept the indictment of their parents. This results in much bitterness, divisions and hatred. In these conditions, social peace is threatened. This is what a member of the notability denounces in these terms: *“the problem that witchcraft poses is that of living together. When a person is accused of witchcraft, this has repercussions on the members of his family who live badly with the situation. The family sees itself as dirty, creating rancor and animosities between the different families which can lead to conflicts”*.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study concerns the social regulation of witchcraft in Atchan country. The objective is to analyze social regulation and to show the consequences linked to accusations of witchcraft. This work was analyzed based on the theory of symbolic interactions. The regulation in its manifestations highlights three means of struggle which are: mistreatment, banishment, and religious treatment with consequences for the accused, the community and by extension the Ivorian State. The results of this study have made it possible to show the process of setting up the judicial scene and particularly rigorous collective retaliation measures with regard to witchcraft. The accusation is a process that has three phases. The first begins with an indictment which marks the start of the proceedings. It consists of the seizure of the age class to which the bewitched belongs. The second step is of verifying the information when the matter appears serious, by going to consult an intermediary who may be a diviner (fetisher-healer) or a spiritual therapist to identify the culprit. When the suspicions are confirmed and the culprit identified, we come to the third and final stage which is that of summoning the respondent under pressure from the age group to which he belongs in the public square in order to compel him to confess his crime and to stop his aggression. This is what Terrail (1979) notes, for whom the system of witchcraft is always a system with three places: the accuser, the accused, and the therapist. This is in line with the words of Augé (1976), for whom *“it is impossible to understand*

a story of witchcraft without taking into account the accused, the victim and the denouncer at the same time". If witchcraft can be done by both sexes in the Atchan social representation, women seem to be the people whose practice of witchcraft is most to be feared. Indeed, they can reach a higher level of power than men (Augé, 1976). This could certainly be explained by the fact that it is a society based on exogamic matriclans. This aspect is also highlighted by Di Muro (2013) who shows the involvement of women in witchcraft affairs among the Bassari. Gessain (2006) observes that "if civil power is denied to women, certain supernatural powers are obviously granted to Coniagni, Bassari and Bedik women to whom religious responsibilities are not forbidden (...). The Coniagni and Bassari women, therefore, have a privileged role in the relations of their societies with the spirits and the masks, in particular with regard to the health and fertility of both women and wild and cultivated animals and plants (...)". In these conditions, women constitute the majority of people who are accused of witchcraft and are victims of violence.

Faced with witchcraft, measures or traditional modes of regulation based on violence to settle this question are adopted. The act of anti-witch social violence represents a form of normative coercion of the social order (Cimpric, 2010). Violence appears for these people as an implementation of the normal "force" in the face of witchcraft insofar as social and cultural practices encourage violence against those accused of witchcraft. This situation has led to making it an essential element of scientific work (Ashforth, 2005; Martinelli & Bouju, 2012) because of the consequences of the violation of human rights. How, in a highly urbanized and Christianized region, do we witness the persistence of the practice of witchcraft? The persistence of this phenomenon conveys sociology which is a specific cultural expression of this society. Witchcraft thinking is a legacy that is one of those things that goes without saying (Mary, 1987). It is therefore necessary to think more objectively in order to understand the phenomenon in its real dimensions and to determine the means to combat it and not see it as inevitable. Faced with the rise in violence relating to witchcraft, the authorities are called upon to provide an answer to the violation of fundamental human rights because the violence exercised against the accused undermines the bases of social consensus.

The colonial administration had already shown itself to be attentive to the problem of witchcraft because it engendered disorder (Henry & Tall, 2008; Kassia, 2005). It will be taken over by certain new States which, to put an end to this state of affairs, will vote anti-witch laws. Côte d'Ivoire has passed a law in article 205 of the penal code against witchcraft. However, the concept of witchcraft remains vague among the Ivorian legislator in the sense that the text of the law does not define either witchcraft or practices, making its application difficult. It follows that the only sanctions applicable under the text are disturbances of public order. Given the difficulty of making the link between cause and effect, this must lead us to review our way of thinking about the phenomenon of witchcraft, which remains beyond the reach of the mind. Thus, to avoid any overflows that we are witnessing with its corollary of violence, it is necessary to strengthen the judicial system and the protection of the most vulnerable. It is necessary to decriminalize witchcraft and to sensitize the population with particular emphasis on dialogue with religious leaders and fetish-healers because of the religiosity of the population for the social integration of all in order to combat abuse.

Since witchcraft is a product of the imagination, we can no longer logically continue to oppose it with the violence resulting from popular reprobation. Witchcraft, considered a product of the social body, cannot fail to arouse reactions, and positions of capital interest: rejection or assimilation by our society of its own secretion. However, to do nothing against this phenomenon would be to condemn our fellow citizens to certain death if they are accused. During the survey, a woman had swollen feet with sores. I approached her, to find out more about her state of health, and she told me that she was the target of a sorcery attack on the part of her cousin and that this certainty comes to her from a revelation made by nuns. Later, she was sent to the hospital where she was diagnosed with diabetes. One can easily imagine the drama we would have had if she had reported these words to her age group.

Witchcraft has a long history and an inclusive geospatial expansion as noted by Geschiere (2017), for whom "witchcraft is not an African particularity(...)". It, therefore, appears as a universal phenomenon whose present study requires a limitation of space. For this fact, we have restricted the search to the Atchan space, particularly the commune of Songon.

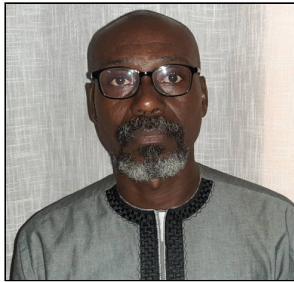
CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that I don't have any conflict of interest.

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