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On Believing in Witches

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss Polycarp Ikuenobe's view that it is rational to believe, in an African context, in the existence of witches and witchcraft. First, I attempt to show that it is not possible to prove empirically that witches and witchcraft are real, as Ikuenobe assumes. I argue that even though witches and witchcraft are part of the social reality in which many Africans live, they do not have the same ontological status as theoretical entities in scientific research. Second, I try to show that Ikuenobe's attempt to demonstrate that the belief in witches and witchcraft has a rational foundation is not convincing. Admittedly, Africans, who live in magic-ridden cultures, have reasons that locally justify their belief in witches and witchcraft. However, when the justification offered for this belief is assessed by external standards, employed within scientific discourse, it turns out to be insufficient.

In this paper I discuss the notions of 'witch' and 'witchcraft' in the African context. The recent philosophical discussion about magic and witchcraft has mainly revolved around the question whether it is rational or irrational to engage in magical rites and believe that there are witches who possess supernatural capacities or powers. I shall raise some problems about the view that Africans are rationally justified in believing in the existence of witches and witchcraft. Polycarp Ikuenobe has recently argued that Africans can rationally justify their belief that there are persons who are witches and that witchcraft influence is causally efficacious and not illusory. In what follows I want to discuss two aspects of Ikuenobe's defence of the belief in witches and witchcraft in the African context.

First, I shall try to show that Ikuenobe's view that the existence of witches and witchcraft can, in principle, be proved empirically, is beset by many problems. Although witches and witchcraft are culturally posited entities and forces, which are real to those who believe in them, they do not have the same ontological status as theoretical entities and forces in scientific research, as Ikuenobe believes. If the question about the

existence of witches and witchcraft is empirical, as Ikuenobe assumes, this means that it makes sense to try to demonstrate empirically whether some people are witches or not. However, attempts to prove empirically that there are witches who can harm their victims by using their supernatural powers convince only those who are already committed to witchcraft beliefs and who share tribesmen's magical conception of reality.

Second, I shall discuss Ikuenobe's view that the belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft is rational in the sense that Africans have reasons, provided by their culture, which justify their belief. I try to show that even though Africans' witchcraft beliefs are justified in the context of their culture (they are confirmed by their own experiences with witchcraft-related phenomena), westerners have no epistemic obligation to accept their justification, because it fails to meet the generally accepted requirements for adequate justification for rational beliefs. Ikuenobe is unable to show how this epistemic conflict between those who believe in witchcraft and those who do not can be resolved empirically. If it is an empirical matter to decide whether knowledge claims about the existence of witches and witchcraft are true or false, as Ikuenobe presumes, then it is irrational to hold witchcraft beliefs insofar as they conflict with common experience or with generally accepted well-confirmed scientific facts and theories.

I.

Ikuenobe argues that it is rational for Africans to believe in witches and witchcraft, because this belief is sufficiently justified in the cultural context in which they hold it. According to him, '[t]he belief in witchcraft is fundamentally the idea that the mind or the soul is what animates the living thing or the body' (Ikuenobe 1995, p. 156).[1] Ikuenobe stresses that

1 It may be noted here that Ikuenobe's analysis of the concept of witchcraft is considerably confused by the fact that he uses it in at least three different senses which he does not keep clearly apart from each other. In the first sense, he means by 'witchcraft', '[t]he ability of the soul to leave the body in order to do unusual things' (Ikuenobe 1995, p. 152). In this sense

we have to distinguish witchcraft from magic, sorcery and herbalism, for '[w]itchcraft as a source of supernatural power is neither necessary nor sufficient for magic, sorcery, herbalism, and talismanism' (ibid., p. 151). For instance, a sorcerer may 'see' future events and a herbalist healer may heal his patient without using any witchcraft. Ikuenobe assumes that his defence of the belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft in the African context is made plausible by two considerations. First, he points out that witches and witchcraft exist, as social phenomena, in the same sense in which such theoretical entities as atoms and quarks exist. According to Ikuenobe, the ways in which people talk about witches and witchcraft and respond to witchcraft accusations show that they take them seriously and that they are as real to them as any other social phenomena. Second, Ikuenobe holds that Africans can justifiably believe that witches do exist and that they possess supernatural powers which they can use to harm people, although their existence cannot be proved scientifically. He argues that 'the foundation for the belief in witchcraft, which is the possibility of a disembodied mind, for all intents and purposes is rational, legitimate, and logically coherent' (ibid., p. 158). He believes that Africans' experiences about witchcraft provide reliable empirical evidence, which justifies their belief in the existence of witches and their supernatural powers.

II.

Ikuenobe raises two fundamental questions about witches and witchcraft in African cultures. The first, ontological question concerns, he points

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a person, whose soul is able to leave the body and who can do unusual things, is a witch. In the second sense, Ikuenobe argues, 'witchcraft may be one of the many sources of the supernatural powers by which a person is able to perform magical and illusionary acts as in magic' (ibid., p. 151). In this sense the term 'witchcraft' refers to a supernatural power or force which a witch can use so as to harm his victims. In the third sense he contends that 'witchcraft is more or less a secret cult' (ibid., p. 151). Ikuenobe's third sense of 'witchcraft' can be ignored here, for witchcraft is not a cult, though its practitioners may form a cult. Thus, witchcraft is, in Ikuenobe's analysis, a supernatural capacity or ability that enables witches to leave their bodies in order to do unusual things and a supernatural power which they use in order to achieve their ends.

out, 'whether it is true that witches do in fact exist and how we can know such facts, and not whether they exist in principle (or can possibly exist), which will be a logical or a metaphysical question' (ibid., p. 148). Ikuenobe argues that when Africans posit the existence of witches and witchcraft, they are doing the same thing as scientists who posit the existence of such theoretical entities as atoms and quarks. He contends that 'as an explanatory device for organizing the experiences of Africans, there is no difference in kind between the belief in witches and physical objects or protons. This is so because all these entities are theoretical, and we posit them culturally as explanatory devices based on our conceptual scheme' (ibid., p. 145).[2] Ikuenobe may be right in claiming that Africans posit witches and witchcraft as 'explanatory devices' that enable them to organise their experiences. However, he overlooks the fact that as cultural constructs witches and witchcraft, which Africans conceptualise in terms of their everyday concepts, are, in many respects, very different from theoretical entities in science. When physicists posit the existence of such theoretical entities as protons and quarks, they can justify their claim that they exist by reference to generally accepted well-confirmed scientific theories and indirect observations about their effects on observable phenomena. These entities are conceptualised in terms of scientific concepts that may be unintelligible to laymen, for these concepts derive their sense exclusively from the ways in which they are used within scientific discourse. We are justified in believing that scientists' theoretical entities exist insofar as (1) their existence is compatible with the relevant well-confirmed theories in the field in question; (2) it is possible to prove indirectly that they exist, as they have effects on observable things and phenomena. By contrast, since Africans believe that witches and witchcraft exist, they are real to them, although their existence cannot (as Ikuenobe admits) be proved scientifically. The reality of witches and witchcraft shows itself in the ways Africans talk about them and respond

2 For a defence of the view that Africans are rationally justified in believing in the existence of witches and witchcraft, see Oluwole 1995, pp. 364-369.

to various contingencies or calamities that befall them (for instance, they take precautions against witchcraft influence). I do not claim that witches and witchcraft cannot exist as social phenomena. My point is that it makes sense to talk about the existence of witches and witchcraft only within the language of magic in which Africans make claims about them. Within scientific discourse, there is no place for witch-talk, as scientists do not share the ontological commitments that enable Africans to talk about witches and witchcraft as phenomena which are part of their social reality.

Ikuenobe assumes that witchcraft is, as a supernatural power, essentially similar to those powers that scientists posit in order to explain events in nature. The powers that are assumed to exist within atoms, for instance, can be measured by using appropriate scientific methods and explained in terms of the relevant scientific theories and laws. In contrast, 'supernatural power' is something that cannot be measured by using empirical methods. The notion of 'supernatural power' is a metaphysical notion, which has no application within scientific discourse. Africans who believe in witchcraft do make a working distinction between ordinary causal influence and magical influence. When Africans blame witches for calamities that befall them, they recognise that there are limits to what adversities they can reasonably claim to have been caused by witches. For example, if a tribesman's crops do not flourish, because he is too lazy to take good care of them, he cannot blame witches. Africans often refer to events such as huts getting burnt down and people getting sick as reliable evidence, which justifies their belief that witches have brought about these effects. However, they can regard these events as evidence for their belief only because they already believe in witches and witchcraft.

Ikuenobe presupposes that witchcraft is a causally efficacious occult power, which witches use in harming their victims. When Africans maintain that witches have caused some events or phenomena, it is not possible to show, on empirical grounds, that they were actually brought about by witches. If a tribesman gets sick and dies, because he believes

that a very powerful witch had cursed him, the tribesmen and westerners explain this differently. The other tribesmen regard his disease and death as evidence for their belief in the efficacy of the witch's supernatural powers, whereas westerners dismiss this as superstition, because they are convinced that his disease and death have natural causes. However, it is impossible to demonstrate, on empirical grounds, that the tribesman got sick and died as a result of the witch's use of his supernatural powers (cf. Bodunrin 1995, pp. 373-77).

III.

The second, epistemological question concerns the epistemic adequacy of Africans' justification for their belief in witches and witchcraft. Ikuenobe propounds what he calls 'moderate cognitive relativism' which 'holds that the *undefeated justified beliefs*, which provide evidence and justification for whatever beliefs one may reasonably hold as having a high probability of being true, is relative to a conceptual scheme' (Ikuenobe 1995, p. 149, the emphasis is in the original). Ikuenobe claims that his version of cognitive relativism is not relativism about truth but about justification, because it has only to do with the justification of beliefs. He maintains that '[t]he problem of truth involved in strong cognitive relativism is not the legitimate question raised by the belief in witchcraft. The issue, I think, has to do with the *reasonable justification* for the belief that the phenomenon has a high probability of being true' (ibid., pp. 143-44, the emphasis is in the original). In his view, the question about witchcraft beliefs has only to do with justification for them, not with showing that they are true or false. This means that insofar as Africans can justify their witchcraft beliefs, they can rationally hold them although they cannot show that they are probably true on the basis of the evidence they use. Ikuenobe stresses that Africans understand their witchcraft beliefs from an internal point of view, for they use them to explain, interpret and understand social phenomena. In contrast, non-Africans describe African witchcraft beliefs from an external point of view, which means that they just observe and state

that Africans are committed to them without accepting or using those beliefs (ibid., pp. 148-149).

I have two objections to Ikuenobe's attempt to justify his position by means of his moderate cognitive relativism. Ikuenobe claims that '[p]eople may be scientifically in error in believing in witchcraft, but they obviously may not be philosophically or epistemologically in error, nor are they irrational' (ibid., p. 146). If Ikuenobe only means to say that people who believe in witchcraft are scientifically in error in the sense that their beliefs and claims about witches and witchcraft conflict with scientific norms, theories and facts, this may be plausible. However, I would suggest that even though Africans are mistaken in believing in witches and witchcraft, it is misleading to call their mistake a 'scientific mistake' within their own discourse. It is possible to say, within scientific discourse, that witchcraft beliefs involve scientific errors that can be corrected by appeal to the relevant scientific theories and facts. For instance, it is a scientific error to claim that a witch can make his victim sick merely by using his supernatural powers, as this causal attribution involves a mistake about what can be brought about by using magical means. Normally, when we say that someone is 'scientifically in error', we presuppose that his error can be detected and corrected by appeal to what scientists have established in scientific research. In this sense western astrologers make a scientific mistake when they claim that it is an empirical fact that the constellation of planets and their properties determine the lives of all people, because this contention conflicts with many generally accepted scientific theories and with the laws of physics.

Second, I would claim that Ikuenobe is wrong in arguing that Africans who believe in witches and witchcraft cannot be philosophically or epistemologically in error.[3] As noted previously, Africans are justified, within their magical belief-system, in believing that witches and witchcraft

3 It is noteworthy that Ikuenobe at times treats witchcraft beliefs as non-empirical, unfalsifiable 'metaphysical beliefs' and sometimes as 'empirical beliefs' which are sufficiently warranted by Africans' experiences with witchcraft and witches' activities to be accepted as true.

exist, as they are part of the social reality in which they live. However, it can be argued that since there is no reliable, intersubjectively checkable empirical evidence, which would justify witchcraft beliefs for those who do not share them, we have good reason to believe that they are false. For example, it is irrational to believe, from westerners' perspective, that witches can leave their bodies (as disembodied spirits), turn into some animals and harm their victims by using their supernatural powers, as Ikuenobe suggests (Ikuenobe, 1995 pp. 157-158). This means that those Africans who believe in witches and witchcraft are epistemologically in error. These Africans' epistemological error could be corrected, not by conducting empirical inquiries into the existence of witches and witchcraft, but by showing that the justification they offer in support of their witchcraft beliefs is epistemically inadequate.

Ikuenobe remarks that 'it is unfair to deny these people [those who believe in witchcraft] any rigor in their thought system, since they only question and revise their beliefs internally within the context of their complex belief system and conceptual scheme' (ibid., p. 155). Since witchcraft beliefs form the core of Africans' magical belief-system, they do not question or raise doubts about them. The belief in witches and witchcraft is not among those beliefs that they normally subject to a self-critical scrutiny. Yet, Africans may, in specific epistemic circumstances, come to question their witchcraft beliefs and raise doubts about the grounds on which they are justified. This involves envisaging a different set of basic beliefs, which they recognise as a viable alternative. My point is that when they have questioned the justifiability of their witchcraft beliefs, they may not any more see any point in holding them, because they realise that the grounds on which they are justified are epistemically inadequate. Consequently, some of the tribesmen may come to reject their witchcraft beliefs as false and witchcraft-related practices may, in the course of time, lose their foothold in their community. For instance, they may realise, under the influence of the successes of western medicine, that it is more rational to account for diseases in terms of such entities as bacteria and viruses than to claim that witches have caused

them. If they adopt the western basic belief that all diseases have natural causes, it replaces their basic belief that many diseases are caused by witches. They would recognise that they had after all been in epistemological error in holding their witchcraft beliefs, which appear unfounded, when they assess them from the viewpoint of their new set of basic beliefs.

If the truth-value and rationality of beliefs are relative to conceptual schemes and belief-systems, as Ikuenobe presupposes, this implies that it is only within African cultures that it can be determined whether Africans' witchcraft beliefs are true or false, rational or irrational.[4] Similarly, if the justifiability of beliefs is determined by agents' conceptual scheme and belief-system, as he assumes, this means that those who believe in witchcraft could dismiss any criticisms of their witchcraft beliefs by pointing out that they are justified in their culture. In fact, Ikuenobu admits that witchcraft beliefs and the justification offered for them can be assessed by external standards when he says that Africans may be scientifically in error and yet justified in holding these beliefs. It may be noted here that although we normally presuppose that justified beliefs are more probably true than unjustified beliefs, unjustified beliefs may nevertheless turn out to be true on some occasions. To claim that one is justified in holding p is to presuppose that one can provide some good reasons for believing that p is true. Yet, a belief, which we regard as false because it is not properly justified, may turn out to be true when we get more evidence. When Africans claim that they are justified in believing in the existence of witches and witchcraft, they presuppose that their witchcraft beliefs are true. But since westerners do not share their background beliefs and commitments, they have no good reasons to believe that they are true.

Criticisms of beliefs and belief-systems in other cultures can take various forms. Formal criticisms of beliefs and their justification apply in all cultures. Beliefs and belief-systems that are criticised on formal grounds

4 Ikuenobe argues that 'what one person will reasonably hold as having a high probability of being true is determined by the person's conceptual scheme or background belief system' (Ikuenobe 1995, p. 150).

involve violations of the rules of logic. For instance, if people hold contradictory beliefs we may criticise this and justify our criticism by referring to the rule of contradiction. Epistemological criticisms of witchcraft beliefs and their justification may question the grounds on which they are justified in the culture under investigation. A critic may claim that if witchcraft beliefs are false, in an objective sense, those who believe that they are true are mistaken, because they cannot be true and false at the same time. It does not follow from the fact that people in some culture are convinced that their belief in witches and witchcraft is certainly true that it is true. I would suggest that if witchcraft beliefs are said to be true, although they are false when assessed by external standards, this only means that those who hold them believe that they are true.

Ikuenobe argues that '[o]ne may not understand how rationality underlies the belief in witchcraft if one does not accept the Africans' general belief system in relation to their various experiences, and hence cannot give a proper account of it in order to 'prescribe' or present it as reasonable' (ibid., p. 153). If Ikuenobe's position were correct, this would mean that anthropologists could understand the rationality of witchcraft beliefs only if they accept the belief-system to which they belong. It may suffice to point out here that sharing the beliefs of the people under investigation is not a necessary condition for anthropological understanding. An anthropologist can understand why Africans maintain that they are rationally justified in holding their witchcraft beliefs without accepting them, if he grasps the reasons they have for holding their beliefs. If anthropologists could not make cross-cultural comparisons of beliefs, actions, practices and institutions, they could not do anthropological research. Anthropologists must understand the concepts that Africans use in describing witch-related phenomena, but they can describe them in terms of their anthropological concepts that may be unintelligible to Africans. They can also criticise witchcraft beliefs and question the justification that Africans offer in support of these beliefs without presupposing that they must satisfy the standards employed within scientific research.

IV.

To conclude, Ikuenobe may be right in arguing that it is rational for Africans to believe in the existence of witches and witchcraft in the sense that they have reasons that justify this belief in their culture. However, as we saw in the foregoing, westerners need not accept the justification that Africans offer for their witchcraft beliefs, because it falls short of what is generally regarded as adequate justification for rational beliefs. Africans who believe, on the basis of their experiences, that witches and witchcraft do exist, are convinced that their belief is certainly true, while most westerners claim that this belief is false, because there is no reliable evidence which could justify it. Ikuenobe does not tell us how the epistemic conflict between those who believe in witchcraft and those who do not could be resolved empirically. Witches and witchcraft are, as social phenomena, real to those who believe in them, but they do not have the same ontological status as theoretical entities in scientific research. Scientists can normally indirectly prove the existence of theoretical entities in scientific research by studying their effects on observable phenomena. But even though the existence of witches and witchcraft is regarded as a contingent, empirical matter in cultures where people hold this belief, it is difficult to see how it is possible to prove, whether scientifically or otherwise, that they exist or that they do not exist. Whatever proofs Africans provide to justify their belief in the existence of witches and witchcraft, they do not convince most westerners, as they do not share their commitments and magical conception of reality.

I have argued above that westerners can assess and criticise African witchcraft beliefs and practices without sharing them. This presupposes that they grasp Africans' self-understanding of their witchcraft beliefs and practices and that they understand their magical conception of reality as well as the grounds on which they justify them. When westerners evaluate and criticise African witchcraft beliefs and practices by standards taken from their own culture, they are not ethnocentric, if they understand these beliefs and practices in the wider cultural context

in which they occur and take into consideration the local standards and practices of justification.

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