



WITCHCRAFT IN THE LIGHT OF HAUSA CULTURE AND RELIGION

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Abstract: *It is a living fact that culture, religion and modernism are in constant struggles. Witchcraft, though a global phenomenon, seems to be perceived and treated in a unique way within the Hausafolk. Consequently, that gives it a new shape and portrays it as having unique characteristics symbolizing the socio-cultural stand of the Hausa in that regard. This paper is geared towards investigating the phenomenon of witchcraft otherwise known as maita in the Hausafolk. It also pays attention to the recent religious influence, which has brought a significant transformation in the perception of the subject in question. The methodology employed for the research is ethnography, in which it is based on the description and analyses of witchcraft in the light of Hausa culture and religion. The paper learned that the primitive Hausa's position on witchcraft and their responses to it were barbaric. However, religious teachings have helped considerably in enlightening the Hausa on the subject, though with a lot of tenses, especially within the rural areas. Finally, the paper suggests among others that, there shall be a greater effort towards educating and enlightening the Hausa against their wrong perception of the notion. This could be done through public lectures, publications, rural visits and through the media to mention but few.*

Keywords: Witchcraft; Hausafolk; Hausa Culture; Islam

1.0 Introduction

The concept of *maita* is one of the most pronounced phenomena (be it true or superstitious) within the Hausafolk before the advent of Islam. The spread of Islamic knowledge and indeed formal education resulted to the Hausa communities doubting their initial belief on the concept. Gradually, education and socialization led to the discarding and condemnation of many of such beliefs. With time however, some Hausa scholars as well as Islamic scholars amongst the Hausa begin to publicly condemn *maita*, describing it as superstitious and barbaric. Many literatures are also written to this regard.

On the other hand, a number of scholars insist on the existence of *maita*, the argument which they tried to justify in many different literatures.¹ For the less educated Hausa, how could

they imagine that this seemingly living fact with which they live their daily lives is a false belief? It is in line with these arguments that this paper set to revisit the “concept of *maita*” in the light of the religion and culture of the Hausa.

Bunza, (2006) described *maita* as a form of sorcery in which the sorcerer obtains an evil supernatural power that enables him to cause harm or even kill another person without necessarily having any physical contact with the individual. He also maintained that, such acts are never possible without the help of evil spirits. In this paper, we shall see if the entire Hausa community has perceived it the same way or otherwise. The paper is also interested in studying such factors that led to the disharmony between Hausa religion and culture on the phenomenon of *maita*.

1.1 Scope of the Study

(1991); Fashola, (2001); Bn Sa'eed, (2003); Yarson & Inikori, (2005); Bunza, (2006); Atuwu, (2009), (2013)

¹ Voluminous literatures have been written on the concept of *maita*. Some of them include: Guily, (1989); Offiong,



The paper is geared towards studying the concept of witchcraft in the light of Hausa culture and religion. The population of the study is made up of the Hausa speakers, which is more than fifty million.² The area of the study is limited to Northern Nigeria, where majority of the citizens are Hausas and that the population is large enough for the result to be generalized.³

2.0 The Hausafolk and Culture

Hausa language belongs to the Western branch of the Chadic language super family within the Afro-Asiatic language phylum. The home territories of the Hausa people lie on both sides of the border between Niger and Nigeria. In Niger, about one-half of the population speaks Hausa as a first language, whereas about one-fifth of the Nigerian population speaks it as a first language (Ekkehard, 2012). However, the language is carried and spread to almost all major cities in West, North, Central, and Northeast Africa. Musa, (2012) noted that, the spread of the Hausas and the Hausa language across near and long distance to be indeed, among other reasons, the result of their tradition of long-distance commerce and pilgrimages to the Holy Cities of Islam. Hausa is the most largely spoken language in West Africa (Sarbi, 2005).

The history of the Hausa is always ornamented with some beliefs and cultures, both material and non-material. It has been proved that, the Hausa had well-established kingdoms since before their contacts with strangers, such as the Arabs traders, the Missionaries and the colonizers. “Hausa society has a strong division of labor according to age and sex” (CCF, 2009). The main activity in the towns is trade and agriculture. Many Hausa men have more than one occupation. In the towns and cities, they are mostly civil servants while some engage in

trading. In rural areas, they farm, as well as engage in blacksmithing and crafts.

On the other hand, Hausa women earn money by petty trading such as selling cloth scraps, pots, medicines, vegetable oils, and other small items. Hausa tradition highly respects the status and personality of women as does Islamic law. Thus, Hausa women do not expose their body and voices to men other than their lawful husbands and relations. For that, their children or maids go to other houses or the market on their behalf (CCF, 2009). The Hausa have festivals and events such as *bikin kamun kifi* (fishing festival), *bikin aure* (marriage ceremony), *bikin suna* (naming ceremony), *dambe* (boxing), *kokawa* (wrestling) and many others.

Not only witchcraft, the Hausa have many beliefs among which some are mere superstitions. Though some of such superstitions could be regarded as baseless and that they were formed out of ignorance or primitiveness, others are carefully constructed to impact certain moral lessons to the humanity, especially children. Some of the superstitious beliefs of the Hausa include:

SUPERSTITION	MOTIF
Cobwebs in a room bring poverty.	To encourage hygiene
Throwing stones during the day leads to insanity.	To stop children from the act of throwing stones, as it is an immoral act
Using left hand to collect or give things brings bad fortune.	To discourage using left hand in such situations, as it is an immoral act
An individual who eats while squatting will never be satisfied, the food will be escaping downward.	Food is supposed to be taken while seated.
If one shouts in the night, jinn may answer him.	It is inappropriate to be shouting especially at night.
Sitting on the door entrance invites jinn to oneself.	It is not ideal to sit on the entrance. Anyone going in or coming out would be inconvenienced.
Sweeping at nights leads to insanity.	Everything is supposed to be done at the right time. It is wrong not to sweep until when

² Since in (2010), a research conducted by Garba, S. A. founded the population of the Hausas above 50 million. As such, it would be by far more than that figure especially by considering the rapid growth in population of the Hausas. Perhaps that may have to do with their marriage tradition of polygamy.

³ Knowing that other variables such as environment may affect the data, there was effort to identify how much difference could there be as the conceptualization of *maita* among the Hausas living in Northern Nigeria on one hand and those living at Southern Niger on the other. However, the study learnt that, there is no considerable difference.



	it is already late.
Going onto dumping places leads to insanity.	It is well known that children are good in going onto dumping places in search of food remains or other things to play with. This superstition is aimed at scaring them from that act.

By paying close attention to these superstitions, it could be learned that they are technically formed to impact a particular moral lesson or the other.

3.0 Religion of the Hausa

Hausa scholars, though only few of them, believed the religion of the Hausa to be Islam. Population is taken into consideration during the analyses. The majority of the *Hausa* practice Islam. A small minority of Hausa people known as *Maguzawa* (pagans), practise religions other than Islam (ALS, 2015). Initially, the *Hausa* worship the sun, moon and spirits (idols) until after their contact with the Arab traders, when they embraced the religion of Islam (Mahamadu, 2016). In fact, religion is one of either of the four requirements, which Hausa scholars argued as qualification for an individual to claim Hausa indigene.⁴ However, there has not been certainty on the advent of Islam to the Hausa communities with regards to time. Notwithstanding, it is largely believed that Islam had spread across the Hausa land during the regime of Ali Yaji, a king of Kano, which was between 1349-1385.

4.0 Witchcraft Within the Hausafolk

Witchcraft is indeed a global phenomenon. It is traceable in the literatures of various socio-cultural groups in the world. Certainly, witchcraft and sorcery are increasingly being portrayed in the modern videos globally. Atuwu, (2013: 5) indicated that, there are many communities universally, which have even stronger belief in witchcraft than the Hausa. According to him, the concept was well established since in the

⁴ The other three are i. Birth (when a person is born within the Hausa land and his parents and grandparents are indigenes of the land), ii. Fluency in the language, iii. When an individual has it as the first language (such person must not necessarily be fluent)

15th century in countries including; England, France and Germany.

Hausa belief in witchcraft is evident in their literature. Witchcraft is traceable in various aspect of the Hausa literature both written and oral. As an instance, there are a number of Hausa proverbs, which indicates this belief. They include:

Proverb	Meaning
Ana tsoron mu ni da iya, inji diyar mayya	“My mother and I are feared.” Says a witch’s daughter.
Idan maye ya ci ya manta, uwar da ba za ta manta ba.	If a witch has forgotten that he has eaten, the mother to the child would not forget.
Karar kwana, ramamme ya zagi maye	A slim man is destined to die and that he insulted a witch.
Kwana nawa ne? Maye ya yi amarya	A bride to a witch will not last long.
Kurmus! Maye ya auri makauniya	Dead! A witch has married a blind woman
Abin kunya, uwar ‘ya ta cinye suruki ranar buki	What a shame! A bride’s mother has eaten up the groom on the day of marriage ceremony.

Undoubtedly, the above proverbs showcase Hausa beliefs in the concept of *maita*. Moreover, there are certain statements, which are considered as protective measures from witches by the Hausa tradition. They are usually stated to witches who show some negative signs to an individual. Such statements include:

- Kurwata kur! Ka ci kanka ka sha bakin ruwa.
I dare you my soul! Eat yourself and drink ordinary water.⁵
- Kurwata daci gare ta.
My soul is bitter.
- Kurwata ta fi karfinka.

⁵ Imam, (1937: 451) has showcased this instance in his book titled *Magana Jari Ce 1*. A boy called Bawa laughs at an old woman who has the features of a witch. The old woman makes a bad wish upon Bawa. On hearing her and seeing her features, Bawa’s mother pronounces the statement: “Kurwarsa kur! Ki ci kanki ki sha bakin ruwa.” Meaning: “I dare you his soul! Eat yourself and drink ordinary water.”



My soul is beyond your power.

The Hausa however, considered a witch as an individual who is capable of:

- i. Seeing the body system of individuals⁶
- ii. Identifying or seeing the soul
- iii. Catching souls
- iv. Eating human flesh while the person remains physically present at another location⁷

By considering the supernatural powers associated with witches, the Hausa term ‘*maita*’ has been extended to mean any activity that is unusual or shocking. The term is also used to describe an extraordinary attitude or behavior. Today, *maita* is used synonymously with; wonder, extremism, persistence, heroism, uniqueness and outstanding among others. It is therefore not only used as a noun (witch), rather as an adjective to give supernatural attribute to someone, something or even a situation or an event. See the following examples:

Hausa Word	Meaning	Qualified by <i>Maita</i>	New Meaning(s)
Yaro	Boy	Mayen yaro	1. A wonderful boy 2. An outstanding boy 3. Extremely hardworking boy 4. A boy who never gives up
Akuya	Goat	Mayyar akuya	1. Extremely stubborn goat
Malami	Teacher	Mayen malami	1. Extremely good teacher 2. A teacher who so much insists and forces students to study hard. 3. A teacher who sharply detects lies and

⁶ There is a belief that, witches can see through the skin of an individual. They can tell what a person ate before coming out because they see what is in the stomach.

⁷ It is believed that, witches can put a human soul into an animal such as goat, ram etc. By slaughtering the animal, the person whose soul is in the animal will die.

			wrong deeds.
Gudu	Running	Mayen gudu	1. Someone who can run extremely fast ⁸ 2. Someone who so much like to be running

There are certain physical features, which to the Hausa all witches possess. They include:

- i. **Lips-Licking:** Witches are believed to be always licking their lips. This is especially when they meet humans or see them from a distance, just like a dog does at a sight of food. In line with this, Bunza, (2006: 108) quoted Alhaji Sani Danbaldo saying in his song:

Karamin maye ka korar kuda,
Dansani na fi korar kuda,
Sai dai in lashe baki tsabal.

Only an amateur witch drives away flies,
I Dansani do not drives away flies,
I only lick my lips

In the above stanza, Danbaldo tells that, only an amateur witch drives flies away from his mouth. A senior one is already used to licking his lips. This is telling more of the perception of the Hausa on this behavior of witches.

- ii. **Salivation:** The Hausa believe that witches are characterized by unusual salivation. To the Hausa, there are certain activities, which are accompanied by salivation by witches. Bunza, (2006: 106) has accounted for such activities to include:

- a. Salivation at a sight of meat
- b. Salivation when taking food into his mouth
- c. Salivation at a sight of a human being
- d. Salivation after shaking hands with a person
- e. Salivation if a human passes by

⁸ i.e. *Musa mayen gudu ne*. Meaning, 1. Musa could run extremely fast. 2. Musa love to be running all the times.



- iii. **Hands Tremor When Collecting Food:** The Hausa believe that, a witch always collects food with shaking hands. This is resulting from his eagerness to have the food.
- iv. **Constant Shedding of Tears:** According to the Hausa' belief, there are two reasons for the constant shedding of tears by witches. One is because they always cook in their rooms, not in kitchen or the surrounding.⁹ Therefore, constant contact with smoke causes the tears. The alternative reason is that a witch sheds tears by seeing a person he likes to eat, whereas he (the witch) is overfed or that the person is too powerful for him to have. As such, he resorts to shedding tears.
- v. **Red Eyes:** Ideally, there are courses of eye redness such as conjunctivitis, eye fatigue etc. Contrarily, the Hausa associate eye redness with witchcraft. According to the assertion, it is as a result of constant contact with smoke.

5.0 Religion and Witchcraft

Islamic religion came with a lot of transformations among which is discarding the primitive concept of *maita*. Islam regarded it as a mere superstition. However, there are two concepts, which could have very related explanations with *maita* and that they are traceable in the Islamic teachings. They are:

i. **Kandun Baka (Evil Eye):** This is a supernatural power obtained naturally and effortlessly by individuals. Here, a person may have evil eye without the person himself knowing that he has it. Individuals with such power are capable of inflicting harm to others without necessarily touching them. They even cause destruction to inanimate things, such as fire outbreak in houses or shops etc. This could be done by uttering good or bad comment about the person or thing, or even by merely looking at it.

In the Holy Qur'an, Surah Al-Qalam (68: 51-52) it reads:

68: 51: "And indeed, those who disbelieve would almost make you slip with their eyes

⁹ Activities of the witches are believed to be always private and secret.

when they hear the message, and they say,

"Indeed, he is mad."

68: 52: "But it is not except a reminder to the worlds."

These verses refer to evil eye. The Qur'an here shows how powerful (negative) the statements of someone with evil eye are. Muhammad, (2018: 1) holds that, evil eye is reality and very effective. He quoted the Hadith of Abu Hurairah that: "The evil eye is real, and if anything were to overtake the divine decree, it would be the evil eye."¹⁰ This indicates the magnitude of evil eye and is therefore treated with all seriousness in Islam.

ii. **Sihiri (Magic):** Magic is otherwise known as sorcery (Gobir & Sani, 2018: 4). Sorcerer is a conscious individual endowed with evil intentions, malice and hatred, having magical powers (Samaram, 2008). However, Mariam Webster (2017), an online dictionary defined sorcery as the use of power gained from the assistance or control of evil spirits especially for divining. A magician is therefore capable of doing a lot of supernatural displays, hence with the help of evil spirits.

Qur'an, (2: 102) talks about magic as an evil act, which is perform with the help of evil spirits. It reads: "...Suleiman (Solomon) did not disbelieve, but the devils disbelieved teaching men magic..." God has even urged mankind to seek refuge from the evil of sorcerers. Qur'an, (113: 4) reads: "And (I seek refuge in God) from the evil of those who practice witchcraft when they blow on knots." In this verse, we can see that sorcery is termed as witchcraft. Therefore, it is in line with the argument of this paper that, witchcraft is nothing more than a form of sorcery.

6.0 Disharmony Between Religion and Culture on the Concept of Witchcraft

Considering the above discussions, the areas of disharmony amongst Hausa religion and culture with regard to the concept of *maita* could be singled out as:

- i. Since time immemorial, the Hausa culture strongly believed in the concept, whereas it is not traceable in the scriptures brought by Islam.

¹⁰ This hadith could be found in Al-Bukhaari (5048) and Muslim (2187) (Muhammad, 2018:1)



- ii. Some powers associated with a witch including seeing or catching souls are highly against the teachings of Islam. Such powers are only attributed to God.
- iii. Islam is highly against being negatively suspicious to individuals as well as encourages persons to always have positive feelings on others. On the other hand, traditionally however, individuals with certain characteristics are usually suspected as witches.
- iv. The barbaric way of treating suspects of witch crimes¹¹ is highly against the provisions of Islam in which justice is mandated.¹² Traditionally, a victim of witchcraft (sick person whose sickness is associated with the activities of witchcraft) is brought and laid on the ground. The suspect (witch) is then forced to cross over the victim three times naked.¹³

6.1 Harmonizing Religion and Culture on the Concept of Witchcraft

This paper is of the opinion that, witchcraft and witches truly exist. Magic is performed in different ways and for different purposes. The manner of performing a magic could depend on its objectives. Consequently therefore, it is not unbecoming if different names are given to the various forms of magic available. At this end, *maita* could stand as one of such many forms of magic.

The above assertion could be validated by studying the meaning of *maita* as presented by Bunza, (2006). He directly

¹¹ Suspects of witch crimes are usually beaten up and humiliated, which may lead to them admitting being guilty for what they are innocent.

¹² i.e. Qur'an, (16: 90) reads: "God commands justice and fair dealing..." Moreover, Qur'an, (57: 25) reads: "We sent Our Messengers with clear signs and sent down with them the Book and the Measure in order to establish justice among the people." See also Qur'an, (4: 135 & 5: 8).

¹³ Issues of sorcery are not left unconcerned. In fact, Atuwo, (2013: 15) has quoted section 214-219 of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria (1959) where it is indicated that, whoever is proved guilty of disturbing the peace of others with the acts of sorcery shall be punished accordingly.

associated the term with magic, a form which has to do with the sorcerer obtaining power to harm an individual without physically touching such person; hence, with the help of jinn. Perhaps, since Islam has indicated magic and magical activities in its scriptures, one is right to say that, the religion of the Hausa does not discard the concept of *maita*. To harmonize the status of the Hausa religion and culture on the concept of *maita* therefore, 'magic' must form the preamble of its definition.

With regards to the supernatural powers attributed to witches, they could be regarded as mere exaggerations. Activities of witchcraft inflict terror of highest order to the community. Atuwo, (2013: 17) indicated that, witches were feared so much to extend that even lawmakers could not question their activities. They used to go unchallenged despite being wrong. At market places, traders were never into long bargain with individuals who were suspected to be witches. Rather, they immediately sold to them the commodities demanded in the prizes they suggested. As such, it is not unforeseen that the powers of witches are exaggerated to the extent that they are ascribed some powers, which are unique to God.

The humiliation, which witches underwent in the years back (and which could still be found in some villages within the Hausa community today) is not enough reason to discard the concept of *maita*. It is widely known that history of all communities in the world is full of barbarism as far as it is traced back to the era of pre-socialization. Therefore, the fact that the Hausa were harsh in handling cases related to witchcraft simply indicates their ignorance as at that time. Similarly, it is quite expected of a religion, which gives knowledge priority to come with a lot of transformations as well as positive socializations.

7.0 Findings of the Paper

At the end of this study, the paper has learnt that:

- i. The primitive Hausa perception of witchcraft is erroneous and barbaric. In fact, the characteristics associated to witches¹⁴ would very much turn many innocent individuals victims. Almost all the characteristics are naturally found in some

¹⁴ The five physical characteristics of witches discussed above, which are: lips-licking, salvation, hands tremor when collecting food, constant shedding of tears and red eyes.



individuals either as normal behaviors, habitual actions or abnormal behaviors (which may be in form of sickness).

- ii. Some beliefs associated with witchcraft are not scientifically provable. For instance, it is never practically attested that an individual sees the soul of another, not to talk of catching it. Soul is largely believed to be abstract. Another aspect of witchcraft, which is contrary to scientific knowledge, is the ability of a witch to eat flesh of an individual while the person is practically present at another geographical location.
- iii. Islamic religion is neither in harmony nor in total disharmony with the Hausa culture on the concept of witchcraft. Islam disagrees with some of the powers associated to witches such as seeing or catching souls, as well as disbelieved with the assertion that, some individuals are naturally born as witches. Notwithstanding, Islam has similar concepts, which are *kandun baka* (evil eye) and *tsafi* (sorcery).
- iv. Witchcraft is an activity between magic and evil eye. Since magic is of different forms and serving different purposes, it is not strange for it having different names depending on motifs and ways of exhibiting the magic among others. Therefore, *maita* is just a form out of the many forms of magic.
- v. The primitive belief on the concept of witchcraft is being cast-off especially in the urban areas within the Hausa community. Currently, cases of witchcraft are mostly found in rural areas. This must have to do with the increase in knowledge and socialization within the Hausa communities.

8.0 Conclusion and Suggestions

The Hausa concept of *maita* and its original perception could never be discarded in its totality. Though the primitive perception of the concept is scientifically and religiously unverifiable, it still could be explained as real and existing phenomenon. This is especially when the concept is well understood as an activity between *kandun baka* (evil eye) and magic, which both are traceable in the Islamic religion. Therefore, as witchcraft and witches exist, so do their activities.

In line with this, the paper suggests further studies on this aspect as; *Harmonizing Religion and Culture on the Concept of Witchcraft*. The following suggestions are hereby presented based on the findings of the paper:

- i. The government, at various levels together with religious figures (imams, pastors etc.) should jointly see to the best ways to orient the communities in question. To this regard, relevant nongovernmental organizations could play a significant role. It could also be introduced into the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) scheme in form of Community Development Service (CDS).
- ii. Many of such primitive beliefs are due to ignorance. Therefore, the relevance of masterminded devotion to ensuring at least basic education to every Nigerian citizen could not be overemphasized.
- iii. Religious figures should utilize all possible means of educating the relevant population as to the conceptualization of the three terms i.e. witchcraft, evil eye and sorcery.
- iv. Since section 214-219 of the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria (1959) has taken care of cases regarding sorcery, the law makers should ensure that the law is enforced.

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