Majority World Theologies

Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth

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CHAPTER 5

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Bible Translation, Theology, and Witches

In a 2002 interview, Eugene Nida, the "world's most influential Bible translator," complained that many translators fixate on, and worship, words, but fail to understand that "words only have meanings in terms of the culture of which they are a part" (Nida and Neff, 46). He suggested that far more problems in Bible translation result from bad cultural anthropology than they do from bad theology (ibid., 49). That is, bad anthropological understandings on the part of translators can contribute to bad Bible translations. And bad Bible translations can lead to bad theology and bad practice. This chapter makes a case for this having happened with the generic word "witch," e.g. in Exodus 22:18, which the King James Version translates as "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

BACKGROUND

Between 1450 and 1750 approximately forty-five thousand Europeans were executed as witches (Levack 2006, 1–29). These executions were carried out by formal judicial authorities, with Christian religious leaders often playing key roles in accrediting the ideologies underpinning the charges. But because these events are often understood merely as a distant historical reality, most contemporary American and European theologians do not devote sustained attention to the theological issues involved.

Yet the issues are anything but moot in much of the world today. When Christianity spread around the world, it often entered cultures that already had long-standing beliefs that certain people were witches—the malevolent source of harm to others. And while colonial and postcolonial judicial structures in Africa, Asia, and Latin America largely prevented anyone from being charged with having harmed others through witchcraft, the belief that some people truly are witches—i.e., the belief that some people truly are the occult source of others' misfortune and death—remains pervasive in many societies today. While contemporary accused parties are seldom if ever prosecuted and punished through formal judicial structures, there may nonetheless be a widespread consensus that the accused truly are malevolent murderers that merit death. Thus, extrajudicial informal sanctions ranging from avoidance to gossip, beatings, eviction, and lynching are often directed at accused "witches," who are often vulnerable widows, orphan children, the elderly, the poor, or the disabled.

In the fall of 2017 I was an invited presenter at a UN human rights conference in Geneva focused on the violence perpetrated against persons accused of harming others through witchcraft. Roughly ninety scholars, activists, and human rights leaders with a central focus on witch accusations and violence were present. We heard stories of women burned alive as witches in New Guinea or North India, of orphan witch-children abandoned to the streets of Kinshasa, of elderly men murdered as witches on the coast of Kenya, of elderly women lynched with machetes in Tanzania, and of thousands of vulnerable women who have sought refuge from lynching in the witch camps of Northern Ghana.

The witch idea, of course, existed in most of these societies long before Christianity was present. But in earlier eras the non-Christian diviner or shaman was the primary religious authority accrediting people's ideas about witches and witchcraft as the cause of poverty, affliction, infertility, and death. And while such non-Christian diviners and traditional healers have lost much of their former influence, this diminished influence has not resulted in a diminished belief in witches. Quite to the contrary. In much of Africa today Christian pastors and prophets authoritatively teach people much of what they think they know about witches and witchcraft as the reason for poverty, affliction, and death.

A particular feature of this UN conference was the invited presence of missionaries, church leaders, and theologians, most of whom came from Africa, and the constantly articulated concern that witch ideologies, beliefs, and accusatory practices all too often are propagated through Christian religious institutions and networks. That is, speakers not only implied that Christianity had played a historical role in helping legitimate the ideas that led to European witch hunts, but argued that Christian communities today sometimes continue to accredit ideas that contribute to the aggressive actions directed at those alleged to be witches. The reason for inviting various Christian leaders to participate in the conference, including me, was clearly with the hope that Christian leaders could help their Christian communities adequately rethink the issues involved and help forge more helpful beliefs and practices.

This chapter examines one possible contributor to the process by which Christianity has ended up influencing witch ideologies and accusatory practices. Specifically, it identifies issues in Bible translation that I would argue contributed to problematic theologies and pastoral practices. While by no means the only relevant consideration, the impact of Bible translation on African theological understandings merits attention.

WORDS ONLY HAVE MEANINGS IN TERMS OF THE CULTURE OF WHICH THEY ARE A PART (NIDA)

I grew up overseas, and my favorite sport was football. But when I attempted to converse with my cousins in the US about "football," we had a very confusing conversation. We used the same word, but with quite different referents in mind. Similarly, Americans and Europeans use terms such as *witch* or *sorcière* and imagine that each word comes with a natural fixed meaning. But in fact, Americans and Europeans use such terms with little understanding of the range of fluid and divergent meanings people attribute to them. And when they translate the Bible, they are insufficiently aware of how their own taken-for-granted meanings have been formed, much less the range of meanings present in the minds of others. For example, they may have learned to think of the diviner that King Saul consulted (1 Sam 28) as a "witch." Alternatively, they may have met a Wiccan or Neopagan neighbor that identifies as a "witch." Or, like the publishers of *Today's New International Version* (Zondervan), they may define the word *witchcraft* as "a title linked with the practice of predicting the future by interpreting omens, examining the livers of sacrificed animals, and contacting the dead—among other techniques" (1167).

However, for each of the above, these meanings would have diverged profoundly from the meanings in the minds of those Africans or North Indians who express a fear of witches and a desire for their removal. That is, none of the above meanings were the focus of concern at the UN Geneva conference on witch accusations. The human rights problem at issue was not that people wish to harm the shamans, diviners, traditional healers, or practitioners of alternative religions, but rather that many people do wish to harm a fundamentally different category of person that they associate with malevolent aggressive harm.

MORE PROBLEMS IN BIBLE TRANSLATION RESULT FROM BAD ANTHROPOLOGY THAN BAD THEOLOGY (NIDA)

If, then, we begin by considering patterns that anthropology reveals, and especially those patterns as they show up in target languages of Bible translation, then a common key distinction is important. In many cultures, one encounters two quite different categories (or two quite different clusters of categories) that are relevant for this translation discussion. Within each larger category (cluster) one will find commonalities, as well as a wide variety of smaller variations from one culture to another.

Category One

On the one hand, all over the world one finds named categories of people who claim to have special powers and special knowledge that they offer to employ on behalf of clients. Such named categories (*nganga, moodang, abvok, sangoma, inyanga, iwishin, mfumu, wetshi, houno*) are typically translated

into English by anthropologists as "shaman," "diviner," "traditional healer," or sometimes in popular parlance, "witch doctor." These magico-religious professionals serve either part-time or full-time. They actively recruit clients, advertise their wares, and make their living helping clients get answers and outcomes they desire.

Some will specialize in providing knowledge about things not usually knowable—whether by contacting the dead, examining the entrails of chickens, or examining the stars. To do this, they may use hallucinogens, enter altered states through drumming, or throw bones to determine outcomes. Some may specialize in the power to identify and counteract witchcraft, to appease the ancestors, or to heal. Some will sell magical potions or objects to protect from witchcraft, to achieve wealth, or to secure success in love or politics. Some will put on dramatic magical performances. What they share in common is a publicly claimed identity as part of a magico-religious helping profession that recruits and serves clients.

Category Two

On the other hand, many—but by no means all—of these cultures also have another term (or cluster of terms) for a different category of person thought to be the evil reason for misfortune in the lives of others. Anthropologists typically translate words for this category as "witch" or "sorcerer"/"sorceress." Cultures vary in whether these categories of people exercise power psychically, through learned magical techniques, or by means of relationship to spirit beings. But in any case, when someone is accused of being one of these categories of person, the core offense they are accused of is having caused, through evil occult power, someone else's misfortune, poverty, infertility, impotence, sickness, or death.

The central accusation implied whenever one of these Category Two terms is applied to a person is that they are a primordially evil person who has caused misfortune in the lives of others. They are understood as destroyers of life and human flourishing. Those labeled in this way are feared and hated. Unlike the Category One labels, these labels are usually applied by other parties, not by the individual so labeled.

Many societies lexically differentiate these two opposed sorts of categories, as illustrated below in selected African languages.

Table 2: Shaman/Diviner/Traditional Healer vs. Witch
in Selected African Languages

Country	Language	Category One shaman/healer, diviner	Category Two witch, sorcière
Democratic Republic of Congo	Kikongo (of Bas-Congo)	nganga-nkisi, umonanga-mambu, ngunza, n'sadisi	ndoki
	Kanioka	nganga, nganga buk, lubuk	muloj
	Kisonge	nganga, shalubuku	ndoshi
	Kituba	nganga-kisi, nganga-ngombo	ndoki
	Lingala	nganga-kisi, nganga	ndoki, ntshor
	Lomongo	nkanga, akunda	boloki
	Lugbara	odjou	oleu
	Ngbaka	wi de so	wi doa, wi tunumo
	Ngombe	nganga	mwemba
	Sakata	muu-ni-ngee	ngee, ilue
	Swahili	mfumu, mganga	mulozi, mchawi/ muchawi
	Tetela	wetshi	doka
	Tshiluba	muena mbuku, muena manga	muloji
Kenya	Kikamba	mundu mue	muoi
	Kikuyu	muragori, mundu mugo	murogi, karogi
	Kisii	omoragori	omorogi
	Swahili	mganga	mchawi
Malawi	Chewa	singanga	mfiti
	Tumbuka	ntichimi, nganga	fwiti, mthakati
Nigeria	Hausa	mai duba, boka, mai schiri	maye
	Jju	abvok	akut, akut yabanet
South Africa	Zulu	inyanga, sangoma	umthakathi
Tanzania	Swahili	mganga	mchawi, mrogi
Togo	Mina	houno	azeto

When translating the Bible into these languages, the meanings implied in the target-language words are critical. And what needs to be clear is that English does not have any word that reliably differentiates the core meanings specified in the Category Two column of African words from those in the Category One column.

Some anthropologists, following the lead of Edward Evans-Pritchard (1937), have suggested using two words in English to correspond to the Category Two listings. They suggest reserving the term *witch* for the reputedly evil person (male or female) said to harm others through inborn psychic power and the term *sorcerer/sorceress* for the evil person said to harm others through learned magical techniques. But few cultures or languages differentiate these two lexically. And the English *craft,* often tacked onto *witch,* makes *witch* an odd word to reserve for the person who has no "craft"—only psychic power. With both words, there are ambiguities in English usage. Prominent anthropologists sometimes apply the term *sorcerer* to what is a Category One shaman (e.g., Levi-Strauss 1963), with other anthropologists critiquing the *witch* vs. *sorcerer* typology as inherently flawed and unhelpful (e.g., Turner 1964). In practice, the terms *witch* and *witchcraft,* when used by anthropologists, are usually used to translate Category Two indigenous words into English.

But outside of professional anthropology, English speakers often apply the terms *witch* or *witchcraft* also to Category One identities and activities. In short, most English speakers fail to differentiate lexically what the above African languages clearly distinguish. For purposes of this chapter, except where specified otherwise, I will use the terms *witch* and *witchcraft* only with meanings informed by and congruent with African language Category Two words, not Category One words.

My usage of the terms fits common anthropological usage, but not common popular English-language usage. When Wiccans and Neopagans identify themselves as "witches," for example, this is a fundamentally different use of the term than one finds in Category Two African words and meanings. And, of course, it is African words and meanings that are relevant to Bible translation in Africa. Alternatively, when some individuals wish to refer to the diviner of 1 Samuel 28 as the "witch of Endor," this "witch" label also is discontinuous with standard anthropological usage, and far better fits the Category One words and meanings for someone who recruits and serves clients by contacting the dead. Again, when the Zondervan publishers of *Today's New International Version* associate the English word *witchcraft* with "the practice of predicting the future by interpreting omens, examining the livers of sacrificed animals, and contacting the dead—among other techniques," they are applying the term *witchcraft* to Category One behaviors of magico-religious professionals seeking clients. But *witch* and *witchcraft,* in

standard anthropological usage, better corresponds with Category Two terms and meanings.

In this chapter, I contend that theologians and biblical scholars seldom adequately appreciate the profound difference in African languages between Category One and Category Two words and meanings, and the importance of not confusing the two. Furthermore, they seldom adequately understand Category Two meanings, ideologies, and social processes in cultural context.

While Category One meanings are found in (nearly) all cultures, this is far less true of Category Two meanings. That is, one cannot assume that Category Two meanings exist in all societies. The societies that do have such meanings are identifiable through several larger cultural patterns.

First, such societies emphasize interpersonal causal ontologies (Shweder 2003). That is, in such societies cultural discourses explain evil and affliction (poverty, misfortune, infertility, impotence, illness, death) with reference to the idea that another person, a neighbor, relative, or colleague is truly an evil person with evil occult powers who has caused one's misfortune. In short, in such cultures, wise elders, counselors, and shamans will generate narratives attributing the cause of infertility, sickness, poverty, misfortune, and death to the agency of evil human third parties with occult power exercised malevolently. Cultures with interpersonal causal ontologies may be contrasted, for example, with other cultures that operate with moral causal ontologies, where misfortune and affliction are attributed to the sins of the sufferer—who is simply reaping what he has sown, perhaps even in a prior life (Shweder 2003). In such societies, respected elders, counselors, and shamans never attribute misfortune to the malevolent agency of an evil human third party. In societies where discourses of evil do not invoke the explanation of evil as caused by secret witches, the witch cultural complex is simply absent.

The second marker of cultures with Category Two meanings is the existence of one or more lexically specified terms for evil persons with occult powers thought to be the cause of others' misfortunes—as exemplified in the Category Two column above. While many cultures do have such concepts and terms, many others do not.

Third, when misfortune strikes in such cultures, there are immediate speculations and efforts to identify the witch. Since witch powers are typically understood as exercised in unobservable ways, cultures often elucidate signs that can be read as evidence of witchcraft—such as red eyes, a whisker on an old woman, white hair on an old man, etc. Magico-religious professionals (shamans, diviners, prophets, pastors) are consulted for help in identifying and dealing with the person thought to have caused other people's misfortunes. In situations where many people are experiencing misfortune of one kind or other, witch hunts will be conducted to ferret out the witch culprits, with professional witch hunters paid to help with the process.

Fourth, it is frequently the case in such cultures that witch accusations are directed at powerless, vulnerable people—at widows, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, orphan children, and strangers. A by-product of this is that discourses about these categories of people in these cultures will often feature negative stereotypes and will encourage antipathy and fear of the weak and vulnerable, rather than empathetic love and concern.

Fifth, since cultures the world over believe murderers should be punished for their murders, when deaths are attributed to murders through witchcraft, there is typically a strong culturally shared impulse to get rid of the accused person either by violent eviction or by lynching. When witch panics and witch hunts begin, this can sometimes result in the lynching of large numbers, as occurred in June and July of 2001 around the Lugbara community of Aru (in the DRC), where several hundred people were killed (unpublished research by Dr. Andy Alo).

Finally, there is strong evidence in such societies that people not only feel deeply insecure but that they respond to this insecurity by methods thought to protect from the witch attacks of neighbors, relatives, or colleagues. Such methods may include frequent use of protective charms and amulets or prayers to God for protection.

While all six markers above characterize many societies (Aguaruna, Lingala, Kamba, Lugbara), other cultures around the world (such as Koreans or the Siriono in Bolivia) lack all six and thus lack core Category Two understandings and dynamics. This fact needs to be understood by Bible translators.

TRANSLATING THE BIBLE INTO AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Western translators of the Bible into African languages often failed to understand some of the above dynamics. Consider Acts 13, where Elymas is identified as a *magos* whose most prominent client was Sergius Paulus. The Kenyan Kisii Bible translates *magos* as *omorogi,* and the Tanzanian Swahili Bible translates it as *mchawi.* That is, in both cases, translators did not use a Category One word for a magico-religious professional, but instead a Category Two word for secret killer, a witch. Nothing in Acts, of course, provides the slightest hint that either Simon or Elymas were believed to be witches secretly causing misfortune and death in those around them. Rather, as *magi* they exercised their supposed powers within the context of public professional roles. But while *magos* in Acts 13 sometimes gets translated with words for African witches, not a single translation of the Bible in any language I could find ever translated *magi* (the plural of *magos)* to imply that Category Two witches were bringing gifts to Jesus.

While there are various biblical passages that, one way or another, have been translated into African languages using either Category One or Category Two terms and meanings, it is likely that the most important passage is that of Exodus 22:18.

"Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (KJV)

The Hebrew word translated in the KJV as "witch" is *kashaph*. In African Bibles I've examined, only a few (Hausa, Lingala, Lomongo, Sango, Tschiluba) translate *kashaph* with a Category One word—that is, a word for a magico-religious practitioner that publicly solicits and serves clients. But a majority of translations consulted (Bambara, Bobo Madare, Chewa, Kanioka, Kikamba, Kikongo, Kikuyu, Kisii, Kisonge, Kituba, Lingala,[1] Ngbaka, Malagasy, Swahili, Tetela, Tumbuka, Yoruba) translate Exodus 22:18 with a Category Two word. And when I've spoken on the topic with Africans from a variety of countries, many have spontaneously quoted this passage using the English word *witch*—which they clearly understood with Category Two meanings.

When Exodus 22:18 is translated with a Category One word, then the passage will likely be understood as similar to other Old Testament passages (Lev 19:31; 20:6; Deut 18:10–12; Isa 8:19–20; Jer 27:9) that condemn various magico-religious practitioners—diviners, mediums, and so on. Since Category One professionals recruit clients during life crises and interpret the ultimate meaning of their life situation, while also prescribing the magico-religious solution to their problems, such professionals are religiously competitive with the meanings, spokespersons, solutions, and allegiances or relationships that God approves. Thus, the people of God should not become the clients of magico-religious practitioners not endorsed by God, and the nation of Israel should not permit such persons to advertise, recruit, and carry out their meaning-propogating activities within its borders.

But when the passage is translated using Category Two terms, Africans will be encouraged to understand that the Bible itself affirms the cultural belief that the real reason for misfortune is neighbors, relatives, or colleagues who are secret witches inflicting harm on others through evil occult power, and that the prescribed solution when faced with misfortune is to identify people who mysteriously cause misfortune and remove them. In cultures that already have witch ontologies, this translation will be seen as a Christian endorsement of prior cultural assumptions and prescriptions.

In some regions of the world (such as Korea), Category Two meanings simply are not culturally present, and the Korean Bible translates *kashaph* with the Category One Korean term *moodang* (shaman). Indeed, Category Two witches are completely absent, not only from Korean culture but from the Korean Bible. With respect to the reality of witches, most Africans read a fundamentally different Bible than the one read by most Koreans.

How should Exodus 22:18 be translated? The answer to this question is not easy. But I suggest that an anthropologically informed approach can help. The critical word *kashaph* appears only a few times in Old Testament texts, usually without enough context to guess its meaning. Etymologically,

[1] Lingala has different Bible translations exemplifying each pattern of translation.

it may have come from a word meaning "to mutter" (Bretherton 2005, 147). One clue to the Hebrew meaning of *kashaph* is present in the way the third-century BC Septuagint translated it into Greek using *pharmakous,* a word from which we get our term "pharmaceutical" and which appears to have been associated with incantations, potions, and medicines (ibid.). In short, the *pharmakous* translation in all likelihood implied Category One meanings rather than the primary notion of a secret killer. When the later Latin Vulgate translated Exodus 22:18 as *maleficos,* implying malicious harm, this more closely approximated Category Two meanings, parallel to many African translations.

The word *kashaph* appears only twice in Hebrew usage with enough context to see whether it better fits Category One or Category Two meanings. In Exodus 7:11 Pharoah calls for his guild of *kashaph* to see if they can come and perform the wonders Moses performed. And in Daniel 2:2 Nebuchadnezzar calls for his *kashaph* to see if they can interpret his dream. In both instances, *kashaph* is applied to magico-religious professionals employed by a king who are asked to do precisely the sorts of things that Category One professionals characteristically do. That is, in the only two instances where Hebrew speakers label actual people *kashaph,* both clearly pertain to Category One, not Category Two, identities. In the absence of any supportive evidence from Hebrew usage for *kashaph* ever being applied to a Category Two sort of identity, and in light of the clear evidence of it being applied to Category One identities, I suggest the weight of evidence presses us toward a preference for Category One translation options.

But there is another anthropologically informed line of evidence that also bears on this question, and this relates to the anthropological recognition that many cultures simply do not operate with Category Two meanings. For *kashaph* to lexically specify a Category Two meaning, it will need to draw its meaning from a larger cultural context characterized by five other accompanying traits outlined above.

First, it will derive its cultural meaning from a broader underlying causal ontology that is interpersonal. In short, cultural discourses about infertility, poverty, suffering, sickness, and death will continually attribute misfortunes to the occult evil agency of malevolent neighbors, relatives, or colleagues. But while such attributions are pervasive in Category Two cultures, and while the Bible is filled with narratives about infertility, poverty, suffering, sickness, and death, there is not one single example anywhere in Scripture in which someone's misfortune is attributed to the evil occult agency of another human person. The book of Job, for example, is one long narrative about precisely the misfortunes that in other cultures would be explainable only in terms of evil third-party witches. But the wise counselors of Job's culture explain misfortunes by appealing to a radically different causal ontology—a

moral causal ontology. Never once do they even hint at the idea that some neighbor, relative, or colleague of Job might be causing his misfortune through witchcraft.

Second, whenever misfortune strikes in such cultures, major efforts are exerted to identify the evil witch causing the problem, with special techniques and special Category One practitioners deployed to hunt and identify those thought to have caused the misfortune of others. Again, there is no evidence for any of this from Hebrew narrative.

Third, such cultures often attribute negative characteristics to orphans, widows, the poor, disabled, elderly, and strangers—who are frequently accused of being witches—and encourage a lack of empathy for them. But these are precisely the categories that the Old Testament Israelites were called to love and care for, rather than to fear.

Fourth, such cultures will often experience witchcraft panics and witch hunts designed to ferret out and kill the many people presumably to blame for causing the misfortune and death of others through their antisocial, hostile occult aggressions. Again, such a pattern is completely lacking in Old Testament Israelite culture.

Fifth, in such cultures people seek safety from witches through magical or religious means. But while many Christians in cultures with Category Two concepts regularly pray for God to protect them from witches, and while the Bible is filled with prayers, one cannot find a single instance in the Bible of a prayer for protection from witches.

In sum, I argue that in the absence of the larger cultural patterns associated with, and essential to, Category Two meanings, the Hebrew word *kashaph* cannot possibly have been understood by Israelites as having similar meanings to *mthakathi* for the Zulu, *muoi* for the Kamba, *ndoki* for the Lingala, or *mchawi* for the Swahili.

CONCLUSION

In much of Africa today church leaders teach their followers to attribute their misfortunes to neighbors, relatives, or colleagues understood as hostile and powerful witches. One reason they do so is because they have read their Bibles. Of course, how their Bibles were translated, and with what cultural, theological, and pastoral implications, matter profoundly. Good translation is an essential foundation for good theologizing and good pastoral practice. It is hoped that this chapter will contribute to revised assessments of earlier translations that will form foundations for an ongoing global theological reformulation of the issues involved.

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Part 3