

The social side of possession (in Zambian “Satanism”)

by Bernhard Udelhoven

February 2009

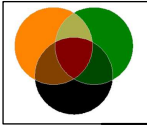
Satan is as much a social demon as an individual demon. “Deliverance” is often understood as a mere individual endeavour. A holistic approach will look at the communitarian aspect of deliverance, especially the family. Yet beyond the family, still a wider aspect needs to be looked at: how oppressive social structures play themselves out in the community, the family, and the individual. Real deliverance has to link up with the issues of peace and justice.

Already the New Testament hints at a relationship between oppressive social structures and individual demons. Walter Winck has looked in detail at the various Biblical concepts of spiritual powers.¹ A case study is Mark 5:1-20, where a group of demons who call themselves “*legions*” possesses a Gerasene demoniac. On one hand we have an individual tormented by demons. But it is clear that the experiences of this individual mirror back the fears, traumas and paranoia of the whole community. The individual man possessed by his demons reflected what in fact all the Gerasenes (and the people of the Decapolis) were experiencing: the struggle with the Roman legions. The Decapolis and the Gerasenes (located outside the traditional land of Israel) consisted mainly of Hellenised people, and (unlike Judea) did not fall

directly under Roman rule. People here were striving to guard their independence from the Romans but the Roman legions were all around with whom one had politically to engage. The Romans were too many to fight, as also the demons called “*legio*” were too many to cope with for the demoniac. The Bible passage brings out clearly that people of the Decapolis were fascinated by the demoniac who, struggling with his *legions*, broke his fetters every day. Within the story the focus shifts several time from the demoniac to his community and back to the demoniac. His possession and deliverance from the legions are seen in connection with the fears and After his deliverance, the man wanted to go away with Jesus, but Jesus sent him to his own family: “Go back to your family and announce to them what the Lord has done for you.” (5:19). The delivered demoniac, now radiating peace and in his full senses, and dressed in dignity, started giving testimony throughout the Decapolis (5:20). Having been delivered from his own Legions, he could announce peace to people tormented by the Roman legions. The Gospel passage suggests that social conditions do play themselves out in individual possession, and that “deliverance” from individual possession also can radiate back into social life.

A possessed person is flooded with dreams, images and symbols. These symbols derive their power not only from the individual psychic make-up, but also from the fears, suspicions and uncertainties of the surrounding community. The names or types of the “demons” can stand for the social ills and conflicts, and there is a long history for

¹ Walter Wink. 1984, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Walter Wink. 1986. *The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Walter Wink. 1992. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.



this in Zambia. Zambian spiritual concepts are in fact very diverse and therefore difficult to translate if one wishes to carry forth the nuances given by the terms. The different types of spirits often allow us to get a glimpse of the social conflict that accompanies them: dreams of a family member (in Bemba a *mupashi*) may hint at an unresolved family conflict; experiences with a *cibanda* (the spirit of a dead person belonging to a different lineage than oneself) can hint at a conflict with the family of the in-laws; experiences with *ngulu* often signals to the community that a sickness does not go back to family issues or witchcraft (*ngulu* are often acquired accidentally), and some historians postulate that the concepts of the *ngulu* only arrived onto the Zambian scene with the advent of long distance trade, when the social field of a given family had widened far beyond the own families and was drawn into complex and more global forces.

Spiritual realities in Zambia always have something to do with social issues. What is described today by Satanism people could as well have described in terms of the older terms of witchcraft or spirit possession. The fact that urban people needed a new word lets us suspect that people are dealing with new experiences that cannot be captured adequately by the old concepts of witchcraft and spirit possession. Modern urban life has changed dramatically since the advent of the 3rd republic, and the popular concepts of Satanism link up with how modern life is experienced by many. Consumer goods are everywhere around and they are greatly desired, but few can afford them. Modern life is very opaque. Few can see through. Somebody working very hard can hardly feed his family. Others become rich seemingly out of nowhere, are lazy yet get promoted. Modern life in Zambia depends on the right connections, but these connections remain hidden and "underground". People ask where all the money is coming from in Lusaka for all the new buildings. In the meantime horrible road accidents happen every single day, accidents that could have been avoided. The concepts of Satanism links them together. New desires and new possibilities also bring new tensions and new fears into breaking

family structures. Nothing may explain such experiences of modern life better than Satanism.²

Satanic possession can address social and economic realities. While Satanists testify to a secret underground world of Satanic riches, most people in Zambia experience access to political and economic power as opaque and secret: they cannot see through. While Satanic demons demand sacrifices, and especially the sacrifice of close relatives, people everywhere in Zambia experience that the discrepancies between the rich and the poor demand also sacrifices: poor people die of cholera, the rich are treated in South Africa.

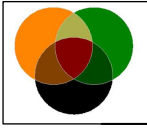
The point here is that an individual's own inner struggles and demons (be they real demons, or be they psychological realities) often mirror the wider social conflicts that are in fact experienced by many people. Many Zambia Satanists confessed that conflicts in the family proved to be the entry-point for the Satanic forces. Tensions in the family again can result from the wider social realities that play themselves out in the family and that can bring divisive effects. A Zambian Satanist (very different to the Western Satanist) is a family member sacrificing other family members, who was himself drawn into Satanism accidentally and involuntarily. While the traditional witch acts out of jealousy, greed or hatred, the Satanist is himself a victim of the "underworld" – initiation happens against one's own will. The "underworld" has swallowed him, made him their own, and manipulates him. The Satanist follows a line of command, has to follow it and is trapped. The Zambian Satanist is himself a victim of the "underworld" which in turn mirrors back the modern globalising forces that push themselves on the old family structures.

Individual inner struggles are often conditioned by wider social issues or repressive moulds of behaviour, cultural

2

See

http://www.fenza.org/files/fingers/satanism_new_tree_old_roots.doc.



expectations, and role-models. In this case the demon, like a prophetic dream, resonates with the experiences of many others, and it can become a prophetic voice for the community. In the past, some people (often women) with *ngulu* or *mashawe* could be such prophets. Demons (be they real or imagined) can represent unconscious issues, and these issues are sometimes felt by many more people than by the possessed alone. The possessed can make such forces visible to the whole community.

Great artists were rarely "stable" people. More often they were persons torn apart by inner conflicts, struggles and desires that affected in fact the whole community. Such artists managed to find a way to accept them, express them, and to integrate them into their own personalities. Such inner struggles were also reported of many saints. Delivered Satanists and other possessed people may be regarded as potential artists and potential saints. But often they and also their families need help in the great struggle with such inner forces.

The widespread symbolism of Satanism pictures in a very dramatic way what is at stake in social life in Zambia: wealth for some and poverty and sacrifice for the others. Unfortunately, redress is sought usually in a purely individual and personal manner (self-protection with prayers and holy water.) Satanism is seen a non-political issue divorced from social realities of inequalities. This accelerates the fears, and does little or nothing to address it. Real deliverance may require to translate the symbols of the satanic world into issues of corruption, selfishness and greed in modern Zambia that impose themselves on the family structures based on solidarity, where the good of the whole family had priority over the achievements of the individual. Satanism maybe is a new word for something that we knew all along in Zambia: namely that power and wealth are to be shared. The modern world brings many opportunities and benefits. But greed for money and power can also destroy our families and society. A lack of transparency in economics and politics, together with jealousy and greed, creates a

world of suspicion and mistrust where people are being "sacrificed" for individual gains.