

Witchcraft, Conflict and Mediation: The role of Semantics and Rhetoric for conflict resolution in the village Dhauliguri of Kokrajhar, Assam, India

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Abstract

Northeast India, a hub for various tribal communities, witnesses innumerable conflict in the past many decades. However, with the strong role of traditional leaders working under the customary laws, such conflict is kept under control and solved. Against this backdrop, the paper wants to attempt to highlight that traditional leaders can solve the conflict that arises out of witch-hunting practices in tribal areas of Assam. Witchcraft and its impact are deeply rooted in the form of insecurity across the tribal societies. Often labeling somebody witch also includes personal motives such as revenge based, property dispute, male chauvinism or patriarchy, sexual orientation, or scapegoating for perpetrating witch-hunting. The victim can be blamed for illness or diseases to her family or neighbors, dying of the cattle in their neighborhood, or failure in crop cultivation during the harvest seasons (Islam & Ahmed, 2017). Using Max Gluchman analysis of the concept of semantics and rhetoric in the study of ritual and judicial processes and how judges manipulated culturally constituted notions to inform their rhetoric and finesse the ambiguity inherent in rules. Its emphasis on communication and dialogue enveloped by ritual and judicial processes is essential for conflict resolution. It has been argued that mediation and dialogue played a significant role in the litigation of conflict arising due to witchcraft. Although there is no doubt that beliefs in fear of witchcraft persisted, and witch-hunting is still widespread, however the atmosphere of conflict between parties can be resolved.

Key Words: Witchcraft, Conflict, Resolution, Tribals, North-East India.

Introduction

The conflict has been a core part of human society. Conflict of various forms occurs because of multiple reasons; however, mainly because of human interaction. In the present paper, the conflict has been attached with arising from interpersonal relations and witch-hunting. Concerning conflict arising from witchcraft, different factors are involved. Sometimes personal grudge towards a person or family, and finally, such interpersonal jealousy and hatred towards others may turn into labeling someone as a witch. Such interpersonal hostility can find in various societies. Witch-hunting may also reveal the underlying conflict between genders. The roots of this go very way past. We today are surrounded by various cases of witch-hunting, which are widespread because of people who harbor jealousy, doubts, hatred either directly or indirectly because of a false rumor, or news and information, and so on. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that 768 women were murdered in India following accusations of being 'witches' in 2008-12 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2011). A report published by the North-east India

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Studies states that there were more than 65 cases of witch-hunting in Assam alone in the year 2007-2012 (Chakraborty & Borah, 2013). The Murder of people, predominately women, labeled as witches, appears to follow a pattern of brutality which has been of concern to various women's groups and media. A large number of victims are humiliated through community punishments and ostracized. These fears of witchcraft and black magic will not leave the minds of tribal people so quickly. Witchcraft not just brings a tragic end to the person labeled as a witch but also generates a sense of fear among the community subjected to such feeling. In any way, what is required is to deeply understand the human psychic, which time and again are subjected to such surface individually and in a group, as individuals generate the masses and the masses as well reciprocate the same. As in social psychology, that has been widely accepted.

There is, therefore, a deep, complex, and ambiguous relationship between witch-hunting and conflict. However, amidst this ambiguity, if a platform of dialogue and interaction between conflicting groups can be opened up, the varied doubts and anxiety-related witchcraft can be resolved. Furthermore, the venue for amicable exchange under the presence of traditional healers through mediation and dialogue can clear not just the doubts, it will also open the hearts of people consumed by disrespect for human life.

1.The Manchester theoretical approach of conflict resolution

The Manchester theoretical approach developed by Max Gluckman is characterized by an interest in conflict and a methodological focus on analyzing actual situations (Colson 1979). The main strands of Manchester's theoretical approach are rhetoric and semantics (Werbner, 1984) have been used to define the problem. Werbner considered the efforts of Manchester anthropologists in the study of ritual and judicial processes to have been pioneering. He placed these developments under the label semantics and rhetoric. It investigates how judges manipulated culturally constituted notions to inform their rhetoric and finesse the ambiguity inherent in rules (Werbner 1984). Its emphasis on communication and dialogue enveloped by ritual and judicial processes is essential for conflict resolution. The present paper also looked for a rhetorical and semantical communication approach to resolving conflict arising out of witch-hunting in a Boro tribal setting village called Dhauliguri in Kokrajhar. The face-to-face case study has been explored through the lenses of Gluckman's theoretical approach. It is assumed that the traditional Mediation method, a simple but effective method for conflict resolution, involves an objective third party- the mediator- assisting people to negotiate is an effective way of social control. The role of the mediator is to encourage the necessary communication exchanges of information, feelings, and interests- that will lead people to their resolution of the dispute. The resulting agreement is voluntary, being the choice of the participants in the mediation. Having helped the people reach their agreement, the mediator may provide further help by writing up the people's deal (Biddington, Hansen, & Pavelka). In the village, the headman facilitates the mediation.

Further various conflicts in the village, from family level to village level, mediation is the approach taken by the village council so that the disputes originating from the ward can be settled without forwarding them to the village council. This is argued that mediation is an art of using semantics and rhetoric intervening in a conflict situation. This interventionist process allows for installing common ground for restoring friendly relations. Mediation entails standing shoulder high above others toward interceding and ensuring peaceful relations in the society (National Open University of Nigeria, 2010, p. 43). Keeping in mind the above argument, the paper highlights two primary objectives.

1.1 Objectives

1. To discuss witchcraft and gender conflict
2. To describe the role of traditional leaders to resolve conflict arising out of witch-hunting

2. Methodology

The present work is the result of the fieldwork in Dhauliguri, a village located about 15 k.m. from the main town in Kokrajhar. Dhauliguri is one of the very old villages of the Kokrajhar district. It is a traditional village and it seems that the people still show much respect to the Gaonbura (Headmen), Halmazi (advisor), and village administration by and large. The present President, Headmen, and advisor are highly respected due to their way of handling issues that involve the tribe. The village is comprised of rather 7 hamlets with a total population of 1572. In the village, the headmen work with the president and advisor to deal with cases from their local wards. A total of 7 headmen and 7 advisors in the village work collectively to resolve the conflicts. In the following work, both primary and secondary sources have been used to present the situation. The primary data is collected through in-depth interviews and the case study method.

3.Witch-Hunting and Gender conflict in Tribal Society

The tribal belief system molds the behavior of each member. In many instances, various beliefs exist that need look into from the native point of view. However, experts do believe that some occurrences do can be connected with certain acts such as misfortunes. For example, heavyweight crushes a man, wild beasts attack hunters, crop failure, a man falling ill when he has previously been well, why a small wound festers instead of healing, a poisonous snake biting a man, and then dying. Here beliefs in witchcraft enter. For example, among the Azande, among whom Gluckman (1965) did extensive research shared ‘why particular warriors and not others, are killed by enemy spears: but an internal enemy, the witch, has this particular death...this witch is held responsible in internal tribal relations’.

Western Civilization, once upon a time, not only believed in witches but “hunted” them. The reason may vary from place to place. The infamous European witch hunts happened because people believed that witches conspired to destroy Christian society (Pavlac 2009). People throughout history have thought there were and are witches that could harm society. Likewise, certain people have even claimed to be witches. Yet, no good evidence exists that witchcraft has ever hurt anyone or anything through magical means. Most historians, scientists, and theologians do not believe that witches or magic have any real transformative power. However, such belief exists among the tribal people, which later leads to conflict and mostly killing women labeled as witches.

It is by now well documented that the past three decades have seen thousands of primarily African and Indian women accused of being witches and killed or maimed, or chased out of their communities (Federici, 2012). Mehra & Agarwal(2016) have found in their study that witch-hunting primarily targets women. In the 46 out of 48 Case studies collected, the primary victims were women. In all, the police records and the reported judgments indicated 86% of direct targets of witch-hunting to be women. Such women are trialed, branded as witches, and after that hounded, banished, flogged, raped, burnt alive, and in most cases, ruthlessly murdered. These trials and hunting have existed socially acceptable tolls for weeding out the anti-social, mala fide intention driven witches from the society (Alam & Raj, 2018).

Witch-hunting thus is more of an underlying conflict between genders and an attempt by men to alter the female dominance hierarchy. Whether witchcraft killing in medieval Europe (for gaining control over the healing process from non-professional women), France (in the name of acculturation), and among the Iroquois (for changing their matriarchal setup) its is quite evident that witch-hunting was an attempt of the males to change the ‘existing order of female dominance in social relation, gender relation, religious rites, symbols, marriage, inheritance system, economic rights, sexuality, norms of behavior, accepted forms of social excellence, access to knowledge and other spheres of social behavior’(ibid:128).

The tribal groups of North-east India have a conventional notion in witchcraft, that's a magic-spiritual practice, and at one factor of time or different that turned into normal amongst maximum ethnic groups of the world. Konwar & Swargiari (2015) found that the people of Assam had a deeply entrenched belief in witchcraft during their study of the Napaam, Badagaon, and Daifangkuthi villages in Assam, India. They assumed that a person suspected of practicing

witchcraft harms their community by abusing magical abilities. The best solution, which the region's people have internalized, is to eliminate the witch (by killing her or imposing severe punishments). In recent years, such trust has led to the deaths of many people, mainly comprising females among the Bodo, Mishing, Rabha, and other communities of the region.

In the studied Tribal village, it has been observed that gender conflict does occur in many layers. For the present paper, the interactional level of competition has been focused on related to the attempt of witch-hunting. Although such interactional conflict may go unnoticed, such seemingly trivial occurrences may have profound effects on the direction of the competition as the underlying causes are deeper social issues. It's been argued by the author that the witch-hunting attempt underlies an intense gender conflict. Birkhoff (1996), a conflict resolution scholar, expressed that gender affects and permeates conflict dynamics at the societal and individual levels. Her observance is that patriarchy is characterized by historical discrimination and injustice reproduced in institutions and ideologies at the societal level. Assumptions about male superiority permeate our thought processes. Further, she clarifies that all institutions, be it the church, the family, and the law, norms, rules, and laws reproduce in a biased way. Women have historically been subjugated politically, economically, and culturally. This institutional system of oppression and injustice directly creates disputes, sustains and escalates other conflicts, and invades other human interactions. At the interactional level, gender may surface in clashes in how parties interpret and give meaning to the competition.

Depending on the participant's language and communicative choices and their interpretation of the other party's behavior, participants may contribute to the escalation, maintenance, or resolution of a conflict. Empirical work focused on and their consequences have identified three sets of behavioral patterns in conflict interaction- reciprocal, opposite, and complementary-each with differing implications for the conflict and, therefore, the participants (Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart & Metcalf, 2008; Putnam, 2006). The opposite (sometimes called transformational) interactions are defined by participants using mismatched or opposite tactics, generally pairing cooperative moves with aggressive moves. This kind of behavioral pattern has the potential to move parties from a positive reciprocal interaction into a less positive productive and potentially more contentious exchange (Gasiorek & Giles, 2013). The following case study of witchcraft and conflict can be considered and constituted in 'opposite interaction' because of how the respondents are affected by each other contentious moves and the pattern of conflict course it takes. The case deals with a family blamed for witchcraft in Dhauliguri village in the Kokrajhar District of Assam.

4.1 Witch-hunting Case

Some 5 years (Case was narrated in 2013) back a conflict happened on a particular day in the village *Sanjamakha* concerning witchcraft. Though witchery occupies a religious, divinatory, or medicinal role for local indigenous villagers' witchcraft often brings bad omen through black magical powers. The person engaging in witchcraft can take control of spirits and use them through black powers for one's benefit and the destruction of others. In the incident, some of the villagers suspected a person who stayed in the village of performing the ritual to a witch to create unhappiness in the village. The informant mentioned that superstition exists in their village like that of witch-hunting. He also felt that these kinds of superstition are prevalent anywhere in the world. Here the intensity was much bigger as the people are uneducated. The suspected person was religious and also an *Ayurvedic* practitioner wrongly interpreted by another fellow villager as performing rituals to a witch none other than the suspected person's wife. And as such he was creating sorrow everywhere.

As the person was performing various rites to some Hindu goddesses for his benefit and tend to wear objects such as amulet, few villagers took it differently. Also, he used to give such an amulet to other people who came to seek his help during illness. The person was well educated and a known person in the village as he also worked as a teacher in one of the schools. His children were also educated and working in the cities.

During the ABSU revolution, many things changed. The leaders also felt the need to transform society. One such step was to abolish and stop the witchcraft process. They argued that witchcraft was creating a

series of unwanted events in the societies. And people indulging in the Witchcraft process, directly and indirectly, should be punished. How can our society grow if such people remain? The person was also suspected by the villager to be a follower of witchcraft and was creating sadness in society. This suspiciousness led to conflict one fine day when a group of villagers surrounded the person's house and started a fight. Their main target was the women, the suspected witch. Two servants in the house came out to control the situation. The husband and the wife were completely worried when they are blamed for suspected witchcraft. The situation became worse when the large group of people started throwing burning flames at the house. The house immediately caught on fire. The husband and the wife seeing the situation immediately fled away. A fight started to happen between the outrageous group and some other villagers who wanted to stop the situation. One of the servants met with serious injuries when the group of villagers started beating him when they were unable to find the suspected person. His injuries were major. After a while, the situation became normal when council members and elders came to the spot. Many got injured and the servant was admitted to hospital. However, the doctors could save the servant. Higher authorities such as police were also informed by the village council as the matter was related to witch-hunting. For a couple of months, investigation took place. The Police did not go for any arrest and asked the village to solve the matter within them. The incident became more complex as the land was completely abandoned and many planned to grab it. Slowly the case turned into a land dispute among the villagers. The headman advised both the parties to cooperate. The headman asked the husband and the wife to call their sons living outside to come to the village to have a discussion. After a couple of days, the discussion took place between the family and the conflicting group. The family presented the point to the other parties that they are not into witchcraft and they are now afraid that the same suspicion may happen in the future. The family decided that they will move from the village to live with their children in the cities as they did not want any more controversy. However, they presented a point that in no way their land can be taken by any other person as it is their ancestral land. The party assured that the land still belonged to them and they would see that nobody occupies it. They did not want any further complications because any more problems may lead to the involvement of police through complaints from family members. The headman also issued a strict decision that nobody can grab the land and it must be returned to the family members. In case somebody tried to grab the land they would be strictly taken into consideration. Both the parties accepted the decision and they agreed with the headman's point of view. The family members didn't stay and covered their land with boundaries. Later after certain years, they sold their land.

4. Analysis & Discussion

The long history of the witch-hunting atmosphere is deeply embedded in Boro society and the above case presents a typical example of how through a sense of fear and mistrust labeling of witchcraft may occur followed by conflict. At most times the tribal consciences began to trouble them over such thoughts. In the above case the one group of people due to such troubled thoughts, and the impact of long witchcraft history and unconscious patriarchal mentality led to questions such as, why this person is wearing an 'emulate? Why is his wife have such a peculiar dress code? Was her behavior is not somewhat different? Such kind of peculiar questions has been a great cause of witch-hunting and later a small rumor led to an outburst of conflict, which has caused the family to be attacked by a group of people in the above situation.

Gluckman's work on the judicial processes helped him to look into a formula for handling the social situation in the life of a group which he calls the language of rules, and the logic of situations i.e. that the social drama of 'Semantics, rhetoric, and finesse' to come to judgment. Werbner(1984: 178) shared the num of the matter is that Gluckman opened up the problems of how culturally shared concepts of the person are used by the judges and inform their rhetoric and their manipulation of ambiguity in the rules.

In the above argument over witchcraft that a family has broken some crucial norm through witchcraft and may harm exiting order of the village, the Headman's from cross-examination revealed that no specific norm has been broken, because the accused group itself are not engaged in witchcraft to practice. It is a sheer case of misunderstanding. Further, the headman had to now bring the conflicting group together and creating a platform of dialogue and accommodation. Thus various adjustive or redressive mechanisms had to be deployed to heal the breach and these lead to either to re-establishment of relations or social recognition of irreparable breach between the contesting parties. The mediation is done in such a way that the immediate conflict can be stopped to further escalate. The simple effective means is to lay stress on the values of Tribal ethics to which all men subscribe regardless of their particular interests through proper use of 'Semantics, rhetoric and their finesse'. In the very beginning, the Headman immediately calls the local authority, and after that, the local authority allowed the headman to took the initiative to solve the problem amicably. As when the village council took charge their approach was how to accommodate both the parties within this tense atmosphere of witchcraft. A time, date, and place have been fixed for parties to come together to have a face-to-face meet with the headman being the mediator. The headman after the prolonged discussion announced that the family blamed to be practicing witchcraft are innocent and the opposite group should apologize to it. And their property should also in no condition be damaged. The outcome of the discussion is the conflicting groups are accommodated back to the community through the effective process of apology and forgiveness. The effective use of the power of rhetoric by the council members leads to control of the dispute before it further escalates. In political theory, 'rhetoric' means a form of communication with great emotional appeal, rather than a discipline (Chambers, 2009:324). The Boro tribe displays strong ethnocentric sentiments within themselves and the act of deference to the headman is part of that sentiment. When the headman said "thon ba thon" i.e. do as I command (Boro, 2001), it does not display a force full submission but the art of finesse and the rhetoric behind it to which the conflicting parties adhere to.

In many cases, the entire community as the jury is involved at various levels in the resolution of the conflict. The community is both the jury and the judge in some situations unless the chief himself wants to make an ultimate rule over a case. In case of incidents like witch-hunting which is very much widespread in the entire Boro territory the community decision as a whole should be taken into consideration and obeyed? Mediation itself includes lots of challenges. It is not easy for the mediators to satisfy the interests of the parties to the conflict. The interest of the parties to the conflict must be satisfactorily addressed and accomplished which is so difficult to determine. In the above case to it is mentioned, how difficult for the headman to accept any conclusion as one party is seen to completely abandon their house and place out of fear of future conflict. Similarly, the other party too cannot live in fear of witchcraft as it imposed threat and negative impact in the society. The minds of the people especially in the Boro society are hugely impacted due to underlying factors that enable the targeting and victimization of innocent people.

As such the family may in the future have all the chance to be victimized as the tag of witchcraft has already been given to them. The decision taken by both the parties under the headman as a mediator is based on looking into present and future circumstances. It is not that easy to understand the psychic atmosphere which surrounds by witch-hunting which is religiously clothed in traditional Boro societies. The headman's role as a mediator has to live up to the expectation of safeguarding the dynamism in customs and norms.

5. Conclusion

Conflict will inevitably be the intrinsic part of tribal culture and will be explored in the academic circle so that new indigenous forums and modes of dispute management strategy which are culturally shared can be brought to light. The growing rise of witch-hunting and the related conflict attached to it needs immediate attention so that more forums and arguments of dealing with such kind of issue through culturally appropriate innovations can be unearthed. Following that interest, the paper has dealt with the argument in disputes related to witch-hunting which is on the rise due to deep disbelief and patriarchal mentality that still keeps women below, and the role of mediation and language that has the curative authority to control. The immediate challenge is to carry this exploration forward in a way that

interprets fine sequences of action and accounts for the imaginative, even idiosyncratic use of rhetoric, but at the same time gives full weight to processes of change in wider social fields.

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