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Critical thinking is one of the powers and abilities which we humans have and can exercise to apply in our daily lives. It enables us to identify gaps in our thinking, ideas and outlook. Critical mindedness is humankind's most potent weapon against erroneous credulous notions and superstitions. It helps us to explore new frontiers of knowledge, explode myths, debunk claims, dispel mistaken ideas and beliefs that darken and destroy our society. Critical consciousness drives our curiousity and ability to generate new ideas, renew our society and enhance human enlightenment. Most importantly, critical thinking saves- and can save- lives. Many lives are lost or wasted due to dogma, blind faith and unreason. History is replete with instances of wars waged and killings perpetrated due to irrational beliefs. Infact, right now many people around the world suffer and die or are subjected to so much suffering due to fanatical creeds and mistaken notions of the world. As Socrates once said, an unexamined life is not worth living. Critical thinking can propel us to examine and re-examine our lives. It shields us from the terror and truama of worthless existence. We need to spread the Socratic wisdom around the world.

Recently, Papua New Guinea (PNG) has been in the news. The report of the brutal killing of a 20 year old woman, Kepari Leniata, has outraged the world. But it was not the first time such killing had taken place in that country. There have been reports in the past of horrifying abuses, torture and murder of alleged witches in PNG. So the belief in witchcraft is strong there. Witch belief is taken seriously. Witch hunting persists across the nation. Clearly efforts to tackle the problem over the years have not been very effective. They have not yielded the desired results. As a matter of urgency, we need to critically examine the belief in witchcraft and the notions associated with it. We need to identify the gaps in witch thinking, and highligh the absurdities therein. We need to publicized the gaps,the illogicalities and absurdities of witch mentality so as to weaken the grip of witch belief on the minds of the people. Witch burning is caused by certain beliefs about witches. Those beliefs are grounded in certain notions of the world. We need to identify these notions and the grounds on which witch belief rests in order to shine the critical light on them. We need to shake the foundation of witch-based epistemology and cosmology.

We need to promote the critical evaluation of issues and encourage people to cultivate and apply the value in all areas of human endeavour. We need to spread the message of reason and make the logic of critical thought a permanent feature of the society.

First of all it is important to stress that the belief in sorcery is not specific to the people of PNG. Witch belief is found in most cultures of the world. It is not only in PNG that people burn witches. Witch burning is still taking place in many parts of Africa and Asia. For centuries witches were burnt at stake in Europe and in America. Drawing lessons from societies is important in putting the case of sorcery related murder in PNG in proper perspective.

The belief in sorcery is founded on the idea that some people have supernatural powers and

that these supernatural powers can be used to perpetrate evil- cause death, diseases, accidents etc. Witches are believed to be those who can kill or harm others through magic. Hence in many communities, many people attribute their misfortune- death or disease- to the malevoment magic of sorcerers. People embark on witch hunting to identify, smell out and eliminate these 'enemies within'.

And now let's critically look at this. Is there any evidence that some people have supernatural powers? What does supernatural power actually mean? How do we differentiate supernatural from natural powers? Is there any proof to demonstrate that people actually exercise their alleged supernatural powers for good or evil?

If there really are people with supernatural powers who can do anything, why do we need to set up institutions to educate our children, secure our streets or care for the needy? Why do we need to set up factories and employ factory workers? Why do we have humanitarian organisations? Why do we have infrastructure? Many people believe that witches have the powers to flying around in the night. Then why do we have aircrafts? Won't it be cheaper or easier to travel across the country and the world using spiritual means rather than by boarding planes, ships and trains?

It is true that people can inflict harm on others. People can kill or harm others using knives, matchetes, guns, stick or by lynching them. But where is the evidence that people can harm others using the supernatural means of sorcery? If we cannot explain how a particular harm is done or who did it, does that mean it is witchcraft, or that the harm is inflicted through supernatural means? And if some people can really inflict harm- death or disease- on others through sorcery why do people still employ guns, bullets and bombs to kill others? If witchcraft truly exists, there will be no physical arms; there will be no need for arms. There will be no market for arms. Witches, not the police or soldiers will be employed by the state to protect and defend it.

In most cases, people invoke the belief in witchcraft to explain instances of death or illness. But death and diseases have natural explanations and do not need supernatural agencies to take place. The imputation of spiritual agency on human experiences is no longer necessary. Supernatural explanation of misfortunes like deaths or accidents is flawed, absurd or nonsensical.

For instance, Kepari Leniata was accused of killing a 6-year old boy through sorcery. The boy

reportedly died in a hospital. If one may ask, what does killing someone through sorcery mean? What is the evidence that anybody can be killed through this means? If a human being can be killed through sorcery, can an animal or an insect be killed through sorcery too? If yes, how many insects or animals did Kepari kill using her alleged magical powers? If no, why not? And again why is it that it is often women who are accused of sorcery related crimes and it is often men who constitute the witch hunting gang or the lynch mob?

To end the wave of sorcery related accusations, abuses and killing in Papua New Guinea, people need to rethink and re-examine their belief in sorcery, magic and supernatural powers. People should have the courage to probe and inquire into sorcery-related claims. Sorcery is a belief- mere belief, a make belief. Sorcery is a belief which people entertain due to fear and ignorance. It is a scapegoating mechanism used in occasions and under circumstances where people are looking for somebody to blame for their woes and ills. So we need to get people to begin to question and demand evidence for sorcery from those who make such accusations including those those who claim there are supernatural powers or that they have supernatural powers. The burden of proof lies with the claimant, so it is with witchcraft and sorcery.

Leo Igwe is a skeptical activist in Nigeria and a former representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. He is partnering with the JREF to respond in a more organized and grassroots way to the growing superstitious beliefs about witchcraft throughout the continent of Africa.