Encounters With Witchcraft  
Field Notes From Africa  
*By Norman N. Miller*

Curriculum Topics
- World Studies
- Human Rights
- Women’s Issues

Grades: 9-12

Other Topics
- Biography: Adventures & Explorers
- Economics and Politics of Belief Systems
- Violence in Society
- Field Work in Foreign Cultures

“This intriguing memoir holds up a mirror for Western society to think about their own myths and beliefs.”
- ForeWord Reviews

Visit the author’s website for additional resources: www.NormanMillerArchive.com
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Prologue: First Encounter
This is the true story of the author’s journey to understand the practices of witchcraft in Africa. What event triggers his interest upon his arrival in Africa? What is witchcraft?

Chapter 1: The Colonial Days
What is meant by “duality of mind?” (p. 50) Why does this concept present a conflict for the understanding of witchcraft in African society?

How did the British handle witchcraft in the colonial government? Did they ever allow it? Why or why not? (p. 20-23)

What are the effects of missionaries on African society and specifically on witchcraft? (pp. 10, 21, 23-25)

Chapter 2: Living With Witches
What evidence is needed to convict a witch? If found guilty, what are the consequences for the “witch?”What are the consequences for the village/society?

What is the difference between a healer and a witch doctor?

Chapter 3: Through African Eyes: The Arts
What signs and symbols are used by a “witch”? A “witch doctor”? How do we use art and symbols in our own belief systems?

Who benefits most from promoting witchcraft “myths” during times of economic scarcity and drought, or personal tragedies?

How is African art and culture tied to witchcraft? (p. 84-98)

Write a list of characteristics and actions that might make one an object of a witch hunt. (p. 82)

Chapter 4: Witch-Hunters and Witch-Cleansers
What is the relationship between witchcraft and religion?

“None of them--no one in Africa--is ready for your kind of democracy anyway.” (p. 109) How do you interpret this quote? What determines if a country is “ready” for democracy and is this logic at all validation for Fyala’s rigging of the election?

Chapter 5: Witchcraft and Violence
Witchcraft is often used by those in authority as a way of scapegoating individuals, and as a means to establish political control through random violence and terror. How do secret societies and underground groups operate? Do we have similar groups in western society?

In what ways is witchcraft used strategically as a threat to intimidate people versus as an accusation to incriminate people?

Define the term vigilante. Cite an example of this in the book and one from a different society.

Chapter 6: The Spirit Wars
Why do agricultural societies promote witchcraft while mobile societies like herders do not? (p. 168)

Explain the demographics of societies where witchcraft beliefs proliferate.

How is witch-hunting used to recruit sect members into evangelical cults? What is the purpose of witchcraft cleansing?

Chapter 7: Witchcraft and Juju Economics
Describe how “juju economics” affects all strata of African society (from the village to the city, including transportation networks) in the marketing and sales of paraphernalia and human body parts.
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Why are women more tied to witchcraft? How do you view their role in African society and do you buy into the idea of the "hidden equalizer"? (p. 163)

What is meant by "wealth leveling" and how does the practice of witchcraft facilitate this? Is it possible to combat peer pressure and climb out of poverty? (p. 169)

Describe the notion of "life boat reality" and how economics are used as motivation for self preservation. (p. 171)

Chapter 8: Political Witchcraft
How have government-sponsored home-protection campaigns backfired? (p. 178-181)

Witchcraft has been used extensively to influence political outcomes. Describe the ideology that explains why witchcraft is a “closed, self-encased system that provides all the answers,” and why it is a serious threat to stable governments across Africa. (p 190-191)

Explain what Kasubi means when he says, “Norman, if I want to live here, I have to keep that in mind.” (p. 181)

Chapter 9: Lessons Learned
Explain what is meant by “death by suggestion.” Why is this hard to prove or disprove? (p. 200)

Describe where threats to sense of community and economics (p. 201) fit into the cycle-circle (p.195) and the resulting by-products and reactions.

On page 195, the witchcraft process is described and sketched. Provided examples from the book of situations where each step has occurred.

Why is it that witchcraft arises when communities are threatened? (p. 201)

Discuss the idea that “emotion trumps reason.” (p. 198, 202) Where else do we see this principle in action?

Discuss the importance of Doctor Ndeka’s comment “We are outsiders looking in.” (p. 202)

Chapter 10: Mohammadi’s Shadow
The author finally gets an explanation resolving the mystery of Mohammadi. What do you learn about family dynamics, economics and witchcraft in African society?

People force themselves to forget about past witchcraft executions. How does denying these past events allow the executions to persist? How would eliminating witchcraft from their culture change that, and perhaps help them move forward?

Epilogue: The Future of Witchcraft
What is the purpose of the epilogue? What does the author discover in the years since he researched the book and the book’s publication? Can you find recent evidence of activities supporting and defending the human rights of people accused of witchcraft?

Interpret Charles Ndeka’s last comment “Tell me, Norman. When will these things [poverty, superstition, and lack of education] end in your country?” (p. 214) How does this put witchcraft in a global perspective?

Define “sympathetic magic.” Why are people with albinism targeted? (pp. 158, 214)

**ACTIVITIES**

Design a brochure that would be distributed in a small African village to educate and stop witchcraft violence, using cultural symbols and terms from the book. Have the students create an online presentation of the information in their brochure and present to the class. (Use Powerpoint, Keynote, or Google slides.)

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-10.2, 11-12.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 9-10.6, 11-12.6.

Regardless of culture or religion, women are most often the primary targets of witchcraft allegations. During the Salem Massachusetts witchcraft trials of 1690’s, a disproportionate number of women were persecuted. Ask the students to write a paper examining the role of women during this early period in US history, and why this made them targets. Encourage peer editing for clarity of ideas, spelling, and grammar.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-10.1, 11-12.1.

Read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (http://www.youthforhumanrights.org/what-are-human-rights/universal-declaration-of-human-rights/articles-1-15.html) Ask the students to write a newspaper editorial explaining the case of Mohammadi and how her human rights were violated.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading Informational Text: Key Ideas & Details RI. 9-10.1, 11-12.1; Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RI. 9-10.7, 11-12.7; Writing: Text Types & Purposes W. 9-10.1, 11-12.1, 9-10.2, 11-12.2; Production & Distribution of Writing W. 9-10.4, 11-12.4.

Anthropology is the study of human societies and cultures, and how they develop. Miller uses his background as a journalist and field researcher to relay his story in memoir style from an anthropological perspective. For the first 20 minutes of each class for one week, send students in groups to different areas of the building and have them keep a journal of their observations of human behavior and interactions. Each page of the journal should have one column for observation and another for interpretations. At the end of the week, spend the remaining class time having groups compare their “field notes” and reflect on the similarities and differences in their interpretations.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-10.7, 11-12.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas 9-10.4, 11-12.4.

Interview people in your community or school about what comes to mind when they think of a witch and witchcraft. Take notes on the responses, particularly the keywords used. Make a word cloud to see what came up the most. (http://www.wordclouds.com/) Also see if there are any trends, for example did people of an older generation have a different view on witchcraft, or authority figures vs students?

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-10.6, 11-12.6, W. 9-10.7, 11-12.7.

Create a short video where students roleplay the different personalities involved in a witchcraft trial like Mohammadi’s or a Salem witch trial. Have one student interview the characters to get the point of view from: a victim, a traditional healer, a politician, a judge, a witchdoctor, a witch finder and an impartial observer.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas SL. 9-10.5, 11-12.5; Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-10.5, 11-12.5.

Research online newspapers in Africa and internationally, and look for modern cases of
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Part 1: Choose 10 of the most interesting articles and in one document paraphrase each article in a paragraph or less. In class discuss the articles and see which ones multiple people chose. Relate these modern witchcraft events to what students learned about witchcraft in the book.

Part 2: On a wall map of the world, have the students mark the countries where the events occurred. Use different colored pins to denote instances of: political intimidation and vigilantism; violence against women, children, and elders; discrimination against people with handicaps such as albinism; fundamentalist church-related witch-hunts; and diagnosis by traditional healers and medicine.

Part 3: Using the chart from the book on page 120, categorize each article into a segment indicating opportunistic vs spontaneous cases.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Writing: Research to Build & Present Knowledge W. 9-10.8, 11-12.8; Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-10.2, 11-12.2; History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RH. 9-10.7, 11-12.7

Watch the movie “The Crucible” (1996) to better understand the issues of the times during the Salem witch trials.

Part 1: Have the students break into small groups to discuss how fear, hysteria, and scapegoating can overtake logic and have very serious consequences.

Part 2: Research why Arthur Miller wrote the original play as an allegory in the era of McCarthyism (anti-Communist hysteria of the 1940s and 1950s). Why was the movie called “The Crucible?” How would you connect the themes in the movie to the topics in the book?

Correlates to Common Core Standards Reading Literature: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RL. 9-10.7, 11-12.7; Speaking & Listening: Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas 9-10.4, 11-12.4; History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RH. 9-10.3, 11-12.3

Ask students to break into groups and research the albinism gene mutation. (pp. 158, 214) What are the characteristics of albinism and why does this gene mutation occur more frequently in the African populations? Ask students to compare the genetic cause of albinism with other visible gene mutations, such as Down’s syndrome. Have each group present their findings and a recommendation on programs that would help educate and lessen the stigmas.

Correlates to Common Core Standards Speaking & Listening: Comprehension & Collaboration SL. 9-10.1, 11-12.1; History/Social Studies: Integration of Knowledge & Ideas RH. 9-10.7, 11-12.7

Encounters with Witchcraft

About This Book

This is the personal story of a young man’s fascination with African witchcraft first discovered in a trek across East Africa and the Congo. The story unfolds over four decades during the author’s long residence in and many trips to Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. As a field researcher he learns from villagers what it is like to live with witches, and how witches are seen through African eyes. His teachers are healers, cult leaders, witch-hunters and self-proclaimed “witches” as well as local policemen, politicians and judges.

Resources

Author’s Website: http://encounterswithwitchcraft.com/
Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network: http://www.whrin.org/

Selected Bibliography


“An astounding book, full of insights on the very murky world of witchcraft in modern Africa. It explains so much—how witchcraft–based intimidation works, how and why women are victimized, why witch-hunting goes on.” - David Gregory, PhD, anthropologist

“…an authentic, enlightening reading experience about a subject that has been overly distorted and sensationalized in popular culture.” - Journal of Folklore Research

“With his entertaining, academic, and accessible style, Miller thus paints a complicated picture of witchcraft as discourse, myth, business, and tool in a coherent structure accompanied with numerous images. The author gives those in need of accessible reading materials for teaching African, or even world history, yet another wonderful book choice.” - The Middle Ground

“Miller… navigates his way through the hazy language and world of witchcraft. His first-person account of its impact on various facets of African life over the course of forty-five years is revealing and refreshing…” - David Kofi Amponsah, Harvard University, Journal of the International African Institute

“…full of valuable insights for anybody interested in doing field research in Africa.” - African Studies Quarterly

About the Author

Norman Miller has spent many years traveling and working in Eastern Africa, in the role of correspondent, university teacher, researcher and documentary filmmaker. An author and social scientist working from an anthropological perspective, Dr. Miller is currently professor emeritus at Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College. He is president of the African-Caribbean Institute, a UN and Ford Foundation supported research organization. He has led development projects for the UNDP, WHO, UNAIDS (HIV/AIDS prevention), and UNEP (African wildlife evaluation). He holds a PhD from Indiana University and a certificate in Swahili from UCLA.