**Why lightning kills so many people in Africa (Zimbabwe)**

February 11, 2017

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<http://www.chronicle.co.zw/why-lightning-kills-so-many-people-in-africa/>

OUR sister publication, uMthunywa, recently reported that two men in Nkayi District allegedly sold lightning to villagers for a $1 apiece.

When news of these “entrepreneurs” filtered, many found it hilarious because lightning is generally believed to be a natural phenomenon that no human being under the sun can control.

But a significant number of people believe lightning is a powerful voodoo or black magic tool. That it can be sent by the offended to strike and kill their target in order to settle certain scores.

Villagers in Zenka Village, Nkayi District are reportedly living in fear as some of their neighbours allegedly made the $1 lightning purchase.

They fear the “bought” lightning could one day strike and kill them. Some believe witches have the ability to send rain accompanied by lightning to strike and kill their target.

There’re witches who have the ability to send lightning to kill people although lightning itself is a natural phenomenon. One shouldn’t be afraid of being struck by lightning if they don’t go around wronging people. There’re witches out there and they can send lightning to strike you dead,” said a traditional healer David Muhabhinyana Ngwenya.

He said incidents in which one is struck by lightning among a group of people or infrastructure are as a result of black magic.

“There’re witches who have powers to send lightning bolts to kill people. In such cases, the witch is the only one who has the ability to control the lightning bolt. But anyone who has the guts to kill another human being in such a painful manner is beyond evil,” said Ngwenya.

The traditional healer said although it is difficult to prove witchcraft, perpetrators should be brought to book. As the rains continue to pound the country, thunder and lightning have also become a common phenomenon.

While rains are considered a blessing from the Creator, lightning has sadly struck some of the His beings dead either by chance or by design.

Six people who were among villagers attending a funeral in Binga District were recently struck and killed by lightning while three others sustained severe burns.

The deceased and the injured who were all from Chief Siachilaba’s area had taken shelter under a tree when the lightning bolt struck.

In another incident, a Masvingo woman and her two sons were burnt beyond recognition when a hut they were sheltering in was struck by lightning.

Ms Mercy Masvaure (31) and her sons, the Muneno brothers, Anywhere (10) and Tatenda (6) of Village 32 C in Mushandike Resettlement area under Chief Charumbira were in their bedroom hut when the bolt struck. The hut caught fire and the three were burnt beyond recognition.

Also, two Zion Christian Church congregants died on the spot and eight other church members were rushed to hospital in Lupane after they were hit by lightning during a church service in the bush.

Countless families have had to contend with the sudden deaths of loved ones as a result of lightning strikes prompting many to suspect black magic.

“I can’t outrightly say I believe someone could send lightning to kill me but I can’t also rule it out completely. These things happen. Actually, there are a lot of things that happen around us that are difficult to explain. At the end of the day, it depends on what an individual chooses to believe,” said Ms Colleen Ndlovu, a Bulawayo resident.

She said she has often heard of incidents of people who are struck by lightning while in their homes or under the shelter of trees.

“Most times, you discover that the circumstances in which someone was struck by lightning don’t make sense. That’s why it’s easy to conclude that witchcraft exists and your enemies may decide to kill you by sending lightning bolts to strike you,” said Ms Ndlovu.

According to scientists, thunderstorms are caused by rapidly rising and falling air currents.

They say the friction from this moving air creates electrical charges within a cloud. Water droplets and ice pellets fall, carrying charged electrons to the lower portion of the cloud, where a negative charge builds. A positive charge builds up near the top of a cloud.

Experts say when the negative charge in the cloud becomes great enough; it seeks an easy path to the positively charged ground below. The current looks for a good conductor of electricity, or a tall structure anchored to the ground (such as a tree or a tall building). The negative charge sends out a feeler, called a stepped leader, which is a series of invisible steps of negative charges.

According to experts, as the stepped leader nears the ground, a positive streamer reaches up for it. Only then, once this channel is made, does the visible lightning happen. A return stroke runs from the ground to the clouds in a spectacular flash.

“Though the bolt appears continuous, it’s actually a series of short bursts. Most lightning strikes occur in less than a half second and the bolt is usually less than two inches in diameter. A lightning charge contains 30 million volts at 100 000 amperes. The total energy in a large thunderstorm is more than that in an atomic bomb,” said a weather expert who spoke on condition of anonymity due to professional reasons.

He said most of the electrical energy in a thunderstorm is dissipated within the clouds, as lightning hops between the positively and negatively charged areas, adding that lightning becomes dangerous when it reaches for the Earth.

About 24 000 people die from lightning strikes each year around the world the majority of them in developing countries.

The discrepancy holds for Europe, where lightning kills a tiny fraction of the population each year, about 0.2 people for every one million.

Then there are parts of Asia and Africa, where lightning deaths can be 100 times higher. In Zimbabwe, it is around 20 per one million and in Malawi 84 people per one million. While lightning may seem to strike and kill at random, it is mostly a problem of the poor.

Before industrialisation in developed countries, lightning most commonly killed people asleep on their beds inside their homes. That does not happen anymore because if lightning strikes a home, there is enough wiring and plumbing for the electricity to ground out.

But in rural Zimbabwe, a significant number of families still lives in thatched huts which are not wired to resist high electricity currents.

While a significant number of people believe voodoo is the number one cause of lightning deaths in Africa, there are other reasons.

In developed countries, people work outdoors less, and so are at less risk of being caught in a storm and killed unlike in developing countries where many depend on subsistence farming and are outdoors more.

Outdoor leisure enthusiasts such as fishermen, campers and sport fanatics are also at risk of being struck by lightning. The advent of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) has helped reduce lightning deaths and another big factor has been information about lightning and safety in thunderstorm situations.

Meanwhile, national police spokesperson Senior Assistant Commissioner Charity Charamba urged members of the public not to seek shelter under trees or walk on open ground.

“Police would like to urge members of the public not to seek shelter under trees or walk on open ground during rain as lightning targets the tallest objects.

Members of the public should also install lightning conductors at their homes so that lightning bolts are easily conducted to the ground,” said Snr Asst Comm Charamba