**Experts dispel myths associated with lightning strikes (Zimbabwe)**

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**Dumani Moyo**

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BULAWAYO-BASED scientists have disputed the attribution of recent lightning strikes to witchcraft, and have instead urged Government to implement protection mechanisms.

This comes after about 10 people were killed by lightning in various parts of the country in the past few weeks, with relatives linking the deaths to witchcraft. These reports include six children and an adult who died when lightning struck two huts in Mugwinyi Village in Bikita, a girl from Gampu Primary School in Bulawayo, a 62-year-old woman from Emakhandeni in Bulawayo and a boy from Ntabazinduna.

A National University of Science and Technology lecturer in the Department of Applied Physics, Mr Gadzirai Nyambuya, said there is no link between witchcraft and science because science, as a human activity, concerns itself with physical experience that can be measured according to scientific methods.

“As far as I am concerned, no laboratory tests have been conducted to prove or disapprove the claims of witchcraft. It appears that witchcraft cannot be submitted to the conventional methods of science and as such, it makes no sense to talk of witchcraft from a scientific stand point. I am not at all dismissing witchcraft as being non-existent, but merely saying science has little to say about witchcraft,” he said.

“The issue of what really causes lightning has been a mystery for a very long time. It is only recently in 2013 that scientists have begun to uncover that cosmic rays interacting with water droplets within thunderclouds could play an important role in initiating lightning strikes. This is the claim of researchers in Russia like physicist Professor Alex V Gurevich of the Lebedev Physical Institute and his collaborators.

“Prior to the cosmic rays, an electrical potential exists between the earth and the cloud. When a cosmic ray interacts with the cloud, it triggers the discharge of electrons that travel to the ground. Cosmic rays are charged particles that originate from the distant space and these enter our atmosphere and make their way to the ground.

“A large number of these cosmic rays are shielded by the earth’s magnetic field. Without the magnetic shield life would have never been possible on earth. So, we must say thanks to this dire magnetic shield of the earth,” said Mr Nyambuya.

Another physical science expert Mr Jabulani Chirinda said there is a need to conduct research and implement lightning protections to avoid more electrocutions in the country.

“Zimbabwe being a country with a high prevalence of lightning should be a global centre for lightning-related research and development. If there is a well conducted research, there would be a prevention of these electrocutions. This can be done by producing do-it-yourself lightning protectors.

“People just have a tendency of linking lightning to witchcraft whenever somebody has been struck. There is a need to understand that Zimbabwe is a country with high temperatures, humidity and altitude which is prone to electrocutions. We also have granite rocks in our country which radiate high energy rays when heated and if the ground is a poor conductor, lightning can strike,” said Mr Chirinda.

However, historian and social commentator Mr Pathisa Nyathi said it all depends on what an individual believes when it comes to lightning.

“From an African perspective it is possible and believed that lightning can be caused by an individual aiming to strike someone. It is also believed that lightning is a natural phenomenon which strikes the tallest object in the area. I think this depends on what you believe,” he said.

Meanwhile, six impalas were on Monday killed by lightning while sheltering from the rain under a tree in the Matopo National Park.

Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority spokesperson Mrs Caroline Washaya-Moyo confirmed the incident.

“I can confirm that on Monday afternoon we received reports of six impalas that were struck by lightning under a gumtree just opposite the Hazel side office in Matopo National Park. We got the report from schoolchildren who saw the dead impalas while on their way back from school,” she said.