**Winter lightning strikes increasing because of climate change, not witchcraft - scientist**

 **– South Africa**

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By Michelle Banda

Lightning strikes that happen outside the rainy season and kill people should not be associated with myths about witchcraft and while some people believe lightning “can be bought” to strike people, that is not scientifically possible.

This is according to Nthabiseng Letsatsi, a scientist with the SA Weather Service, who presented her study mapping lightning incidents and their effects in SA during the International Conference on Climate Resilience – Smart and Sustainable Futures, organised by the Vaal University of Technology’s faculty of human sciences.

While lightning is linked to thunderstorms, climate change is influencing their frequency and effect, Letsatsi said, leading some to occur in winter unaccompanied by thunderstorms.

“Those strikes are often misinterpreted as witchcraft or blamed on the mythical serpent, but the truth is that these strikes are caused by climate change,” she said.

There were at least 327 recorded lightning strikes in SA between 2004 and 2024 that resulted in 392 deaths and 380 injuries, she said.

While lightning is commonly associated with thunderstorms during summer, some theoretical models show that lightning will intensify due to climate change, and some effects were already being felt in parts of SA, Letsatsi said

“As much as we are not expecting lightning around June, we do have some events that took place recently in the Western Cape and Gauteng. This is showing that there is a problem. Lightning is expected in summer months, but now there is a potential that it can happen at any time of the year.”

Lestatsi said that apart from killing and injuring people, lightning strikes affect infrastructure, aviation, tourism and forestry.

“Despite the widespread belief that you have to be in contact [with it] to be struck by lightning directly, there are different ways you can experience lightning shock,” she said. “Lightning may injure or kill people through direct strikes or side flashes – when it strikes a tall object or [when people] touch a [metallic] object that has been struck.”

Letsatsi said some people in SA were justifiably scared of being struck by lightning, but that others believed in myths that would protect them from it.

“For example, people believe that when there is lightning, there is what is called *inkanyamba –* a lightning snake – or in other areas, a lightning bird. Because people fear the snake and the bird, they get to stay away.

“We also have ... people [who] believe they are chosen as ‘heaven heads’, meaning that even if they go out looking after animals on hilltops when there is a terrible thunderstorm, they will not be struck. These bad myths cause loss of lives.”

Other speakers at the conference spoke about the other damaging effects of the climate crisis.

Professor Goodwell Nhamo, a climate change researcher at Unisa, said the country’s climate vulnerability index has worsened over time.

“Between 2017 and 2024, the eastern seaboard – KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape – shifted into a high vulnerability category because of flooding,” he said.

“Meanwhile, landlocked provinces like Mpumalanga and North West are experiencing more heat stress, drought, and water scarcity.”

And Samkeliso Takaidza, a senior technologist at the Vaal University of Technology, said climate change was reducing the availability of certain medicinal plants, some of which are used to treat cancer.