

Salem trials: a lesson from history

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Salem was taken from the word, “Jerusalem”, seat of Christianity. This is where Christ trudged on and lived a holy life but became ironically symbolized in America by people become crazy. It has gained notoriety due to cruelty that pervaded in 1692 in that village in Massachusetts. “Time is the Mother of Truth and Truth the Daughter of Time” (Hale), scholars have studied documents surrounding that incident in Salem. The truth was told through documented events of those fateful days when those innocent people were tagged as ‘witches’.

The people of Salem acted on suspicion without substantial bases for accusing one hundred fifty villagers of a crime that is ‘witchcraft’. They have admitted to a mistake that was horrible, became a controversy for ages, and a lesson for humanity. (Hale) Several factors influenced the villagers to act in such frenzy: politics, religion, and hysteria. For lack of a strong leader who can effectively give direction to the people’s thinking, the incident went out of hand. Even the leaders themselves were controlled by the situation, perhaps, due to hidden interests as well. (P. S. Nissenbaum) Internal bickering in the community is not exceptional for it also occurs in other New England communities at that time. Add to it a weak institution that can handle the population. They were claiming to see an apparition of the witches at their beds. (P. B. Nissenbaum) Having them hanged will not make any difference using that argument. The devil can harm them in whatever form using their kind of thinking. It is incomprehensible how individuals can be united to wreak havoc upon other individuals.

People of such ignorance have been put together to teach humanity how extremism and stupidity can cause such a tragedy. The lives of the people

who were innocent of a crime that is witchcraft which was not proven enough were put to waste due to the cruelty that beset upon them. They had to suffer in jail and have to go through torture because their co-villagers were obsessed with the idea of a devil that is lurking around their lives and is causing an illness which they do not understand. They used the words: “fits”, “odd postures”, “foolish, ridiculous speeches”, “distempers”, etc. to describe what are being manifested by the victims of witchcraft as they said. (P. S. Nissenbaum) One was seen crawling on the floor during an attack. (P. S. Nissenbaum) The symptoms that were being manifested by the said victims of witchcraft could be epilepsy. This illness has always been associated with demonic possession which can not be cured. The stigma that can be brought upon the individual experiencing this can be enormous that it is convenient to blame it on somebody performing witchcraft upon him/her experiencing it.

This can be genetic and in Salem during that time, having fifteen children in a family was the average. It is not negligible to note that this disease could be running in families. Not to mention the hysteria that came with it. Children were manipulated by adults to say things or even their musings were interpreted to mean according to how they wanted it to mean. (P. S. Nissenbaum) The colonies of England included Massachusetts which was under the laws that govern these colonies. In England, witchcraft was a capital crime as declared in 1641. Chronology of Events Relating to the Salem Witchcraft Trials) Anyone suspecting of witchcraft activities were hanged by the stake. The colonial village of Salem was a staunch believer of the Bible. They took to the letter every bit of the Scriptures. They have

become extremists that they have forgotten that 'love' was taught by Christ primarily. The ministers who were at a loss in governing the villagers conveniently blame witchcraft as the culprit in the disunity eminent among the folks. Disputes led the villagers to falsely accuse innocent citizens in response to the hysteria that pervaded them.

The early ministers who led them were also blinded by their desire for territory. It was a difficult time for this colonial town. Land was getting scarce while families were becoming big. They work very hard on their farms only to be obliterated by blights. (P. S. Nissenbaum) Children were not allowed to play: girls were taught to spin yarn and help in the household while the boys were brought by the men to help them to hunt. They did not have the opportunity to play as normal children would. These children were deprived of the happiness of childhood.

It is not surprising if they would deliberately act out abnormal behavior because opportunities to play were rare. It is possible that acting out those eccentricities was a form of 'play' for these deprived children. Their sense of awe and wonder were suppressed by the adults. Their words were twisted by the older ones to serve their purpose. (P. B. Nissenbaum) They lived at a time when there were no other forms of entertainment but chores. It was also a time for New England to be established. Institutionalizing law and order was especially difficult in this part of the colony.

Political disputes were prevailing in terms of who would minister the community. They were like a flock in need of a shepherd. But the shepherds who should be taking care of them also have vested interests. They carry

within them their wants and needs. The chronology of events is very telling about man's desire for power and control. The judicial system was used and manipulated according to the whims of the judges. (Chronology of Events Relating to the Salem Witchcraft Trials) The humble investigation of John Hale speaks of how erroneous the system is in handling the cases in Salem.

With all humility he explained that what transpired in Salem was a lesson learned for humanity. Quoting from the Scriptures, he reiterated that the innocent must not suffer. (Hale) The evidence against them was obviously weak based on spectral evidence that Governor Phipps opposed.

(Chronology of Events Relating to the Salem Witchcraft Trials) He was able to save lives due to be hanged in the Gallows. After fourteen years, one of the accusers, Ann Putnam, publicly apologizes for her actions in 1692.

The event in 1692 was very unfortunate for the people in Salem. Hysteria emanated in that village due to numerous factors. One would see how religious extremism can drive people to do harm towards others which are contrary to the teachings of religion. Greed and desire for power can attribute to people's insensitivity and delusions. It was formally admitted as a mistake by the government of Massachusetts in 1957 (Chronology of Events Relating to the Salem Witchcraft Trials) and a good reminder for everyone of the cruelty that occurred centuries ago.

This is a lesson learned which must be avoided. It is important that judicial system must be respected by honoring facts; biases must be avoided; and the right to be represented must be observed. Law and order are present for people's protection. These should not be used to cause harm to a nation's

citizens. Leaders appointed are also responsible of the people's safety. They must safeguard the lives entrusted them. It is important for them to ensure that due process must be served in the courts. This incident must never happen again.