Witch-Hunting

A Culture War Fought with Skepticism and Compassion

BY LEO IGWE

On January 1, 2024, a skeptic from Malawi named Wonderful Mkhutche shared a video of a witch-hunting incident that took place days before on December 28, 2023. In the video, a local mob is shown burying an elderly woman. According to local sources, the woman was accused of causing the death of a family member who had passed away the previous day. These accusations often arise after family members consult local diviners, who claim to be able to identify suspects. In this instance, a local vigilante group abducted the woman. They were in the midst of burying her alive as punishment for allegedly using witchcraft to "kill" a relative when the police intervened and rescued her.

While witch-hunting is largely a thing of the past in the Western world, the persecution of alleged witches continues with tragic consequences in many parts of Africa. Malawi, located in Southeastern Africa, is one such place. Mr. Mkhutche reports that between 300 to 500 individuals accused of witchcraft are attacked and killed every year.

The Malawi Network of Older Persons' Organizations reported that 15 older women were killed between January and February 2023. Local sources suggest that these estimates are likely conservative, as killings related to witchcraft allegations often occur in rural communities and go unreported. Witch-hunting is not limited to Malawi; it also occurs in other African countries. In neighboring Tanzania, for example, an estimated 3,000 people were killed for allegedly practicing witchcraft between 2005 and 2011, and about 60,000 accused witches were murdered between 1960 and 2000. Similar abuses occur in Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where those accused of witchcraft face severe mistreatment. They are attacked, banished, or even killed. Some alleged witches are buried alive, lynched, or strangled to death. In Ghana, some makeshift shelters—known as "witch camps"—exist in the northern region. Women accused of witchcraft flee to these places after being banished by their families and communities. Currently, around 1,000 women who fled their communities due to witchcraft accusations live in various witch camps in the region.

The belief in the power of "evil magic" to harm others, causing illness, accidents, or even death, is deeply ingrained in many regions of Africa. Despite Malawi retaining a colonial-era legal provision that criminalizes accusing someone of practicing witchcraft, this law has not had a significant impact because it is rarely enforced. Instead, many people in Malawi favor criminalizing witchcraft and institutionalizing witch-hunting as a state-sanctioned practice.
The majority of Malawians believe in witchcraft and support its criminalization, and many argue that the failure of Malawian law to recognize witchcraft as a crime is part of the problem, because it denies the legal system the mechanism to identify or certify witches. Humanists and skeptics in Malawi have actively opposed proposed legislation that recognizes the existence of witchcraft. They advocate for retaining

Posters in Nigeria that reinforce belief in witches

the existing legislation and urge the government to enforce, rather than repeal, the provision against accusing someone of practicing witchcraft.

Islam and Christianity were introduced to Malawi in the 16th and 19th centuries by Western Christian missionaries and Arab scholars/jihadists, respectively. They coerced the local population to accept foreign mythologies as superior to traditional beliefs. Today, Malawi is predominantly Christian, but there are also Muslims and some remaining practitioners of traditional religions. And while the belief in witchcraft predates Christianity and Islam, religious lines are often blurred, as all the most popular religions contain narratives that sanctify and reinforce some form of belief in witchcraft. As a result, Malawians from various religious backgrounds share a belief in witchcraft.

Witch-hunting also has a significant health aspect, as accusations of witchcraft are often used to explain real health issues. In rural areas where hospitals and health centers are scarce, many

individuals lack access to modern medical facilities and cannot afford modern healthcare solutions. Consequently, they turn to local diviners and traditional narratives to understand and cope with ailments, diseases, death, and other misfortunes.

While witch-hunting occurs in both rural and urban settings, it is more prevalent in rural areas. In urban settings, witch-hunting is mainly observed in slums and overcrowded areas. One contributing factor to witch persecution in rural or impoverished urban zones is the limited presence of state police. Police stations are few and far apart, and the law against witchcraft accusations is rarely enforced due to a lack of police officers and inadequate equipment for intervention. Recent incidents in Malawi demonstrate that mob violence, jungle justice, and vigilante killings of alleged witches are common in these communities.

Another significant aspect of witch-hunting is its highly selective nature. Elderly individuals, particularly women, are usually the targets. Why is this the case? Malawi is a patriarchal society where women hold marginalized sociocultural positions. They are vulnerable and easily scapegoated, accused, and persecuted. In many cases, children are the ones driving these accusations. Adult relatives coerce children to "confess" and accuse the elderly of attempting to initiate them into the world of witchcraft. Malawians believe that witches fly around at night in "witchcraft planes" to attend occult meetings in South Africa and other neighboring countries.

The persistence of witch-hunting in Africa can be attributed to the absence of effective campaigns and measures to eliminate this unfounded and destructive practice. The situation is dire and getting worse. In Ghana, for example, the government plans on shutting down safe spaces for victims, and the president has declined to sign a bill into law that would criminalize witchcraft accusations and the act of witch-hunting.

For this reason, in 2020 I founded Advocacy for Alleged Witches (AfAW) with the aim of combating witch persecution in Africa. Our mission is to put an end to witch-hunting on the continent by 2030. AfAW was created to address significant gaps in the fight against witch persecution in Africa. One of our primary goals is to challenge the misrepresentation of African witchcraft perpetuated by Western anthropologists. They have often portrayed witch-hunting as an inherent part of African culture, suggesting that witch persecution serves useful socioeconomic functions. (This perspective arises from a broader issue within modern anthropology, where extreme cultural relativism sometimes leads to an overemphasis on the practices of indigenous peoples. This stems from an overcorrection of past trends that belittled all practices of indigenous peoples). Some Western scholars tend to present witchcraft in the West as a "wild" phenomenon, and witchcraft in Africa as having domestic value and benefit. The academic literature tends to explain witchcraft accusations and witch persecutions from the viewpoint of the accusers rather than the accused. This approach is problematic and dangerous, as it silences the voices of those accused of witchcraft and diminishes their predicament.

Due to this misrepresentation, Western NGOs that fund initiatives to address abuses linked to witchcraft beliefs have waged a lackluster campaign. They have largely avoided describing witchcraft in Africa as a form of superstition, instead choosing to adopt a patronizing approach to tackling witch-hunting—they often claim to "respect" witchcraft as an aspect of African cultures. As a result, NGOs do not treat the issue of witch persecution in Africa with the urgency it deserves.

Likewise, African NGOs and activists have been complicit. Many lack the political will and funding to effectively challenge this harmful practice. In fact, many African NGO actors believe in witchcraft themselves! Witch-hunting persists in the region due to lack of accurate information, widespread misinformation, and insufficient action. To end witch-hunting, a paradigm shift is needed. The way witchcraft belief and witch-hunting are perceived and addressed must change.

AfAW aims to catalyze this crucial shift and transformation. It operates as a practical and applied form of skepticism, employing the principles of reason and compassion to combat witch-hunting. Through public education and enlightenment efforts, we question and debate witchcraft and ritual beliefs, aiming to dispel the misconceptions far too often used to justify abuses. Our goal is to try to engage African witchcraft believers in thoughtful dialogue, guiding them away from illusions, delusions, and superstitions.

The persistence of abuses linked to witchcraft and ritual beliefs in the region is due to a lack of robust initiatives applying skeptical thinking to the problem. To effectively combat witch persecution, information must be translated into action, and interpretations into tangible policies and interventions. To achieve this, AfAW employs the "informaction" theory of change, combining information dissemination with actionable steps.

At the local level, we focus on bridging the information and action gaps. Accusers are misinformed about the true causes of illnesses, deaths, and misfortunes, often attributing these events to witchcraft due to a lack of accurate information. Many people impute misfortunes to witchcraft because they are unaware of where to seek help or who or what is genuinely responsible for their troubles. This lack of understanding extends to what constitutes valid reasons and causal explanations for their problems.

As part of the efforts to end witch-hunting, we highlight misinformation and disinformation about the true causes of misfortune, illness, death, accidents, poverty, and infertility. This includes debunking the falsehoods that charlatans, con artists, traditional priests, pastors, and holy figures such as mallams and marabouts exploit to manipulate the vulnerable and the ignorant. At AfAW, we provide evidence-based knowledge, explanations, and interpretations of misfortunes.

Our efforts include educating the public on existing laws and mechanisms to address allegations of witchcraft. We conduct sensitization campaigns targeting public institutions such as schools, colleges, and universities. Additionally, we sponsor media programs, issue press releases, engage in social media advocacy, and publish articles aimed at dispelling myths and misinformation related to witch-hunting in the region.

We also facilitate actions and interventions by both state and non-state agencies. In many post-colonial African states, governmental institutions are weak with limited powers and presence. One of our key objectives is to encourage institutional collaboration to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. We petition the police, the courts, and state human rights institutions. Our work prompts these agencies to act, collaborate, and implement appropriate measures to penalize witch-hunting activities in the region.

Additionally, AfAW intervenes to support individual victims of witch persecution based on their specific needs and the resources available. For example, in cases where victims have survived, we relocate them to safe places, assist with their medical treatment, and facilitate their access to justice. In situations where the accused have been killed, we provide support to the victims' relatives and ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice.

We get more cases than we can handle. With limited resources, we are unable to intervene in every situation we become aware of. However, in less than four years, our organization has made a significant impact through our interventions in Nigeria and beyond. We are deploying the canon of skeptical rationality to save lives, awaken Africans from their dogmatic and superstitious slumber, and bring about an African Enlightenment.

This is a *real* culture war, with *real* consequences, and skepticism is making a *real* difference. S

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