



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Toil and Trouble

How Conflict and Climate Change are Triggering Witch Hunts

By Evan Fraser, Alexander Legwegoh, Krishna KC, and Marion Davis

In July, an angry mob in India dragged a 63-year-old mother of five out of her home and beheaded her after the local goddess accused her of casting evil spells. The victim was one of dozens in the southern state of Assam who have lost their lives due to accusations of witchcraft in recent months. But the problem is not limited to India or even the South Asian region. At the end of June, the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) beheaded two women for witchcraft. In February, an albino child from Tanzania was killed and mutilated for the very same reason. Last year, in Zimbabwe, a man stoned his 71-year-old uncle to death for sorcery. There are dozens of similar stories across the developing world.

Although it is tempting to dismiss these stories as anomalies, witch hunts are very much a modern problem. The [United Nations published a report in 2009](#) on the alarming number of cases around the world, regardless of

region. For example, in 2008, there were more than 50 sorcery-related killings in Papua New Guinea. In India, Nepal, and South Africa, there have been increased reports of violence against women accused of witchcraft in recent years. In a study of 41 countries around the world, the [Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network](#) found that there were over 800 abused or killed in 2013 alone for alleged witchcraft. Given that the majority of cases go unreported, and that accurate statistics are nearly impossible to find, these figures almost certainly represent only a very small portion of a much larger problem.



Bolivian indigenous witch doctors, June 21, 2014.

The majority of victims are women, but children are deeply affected too. According to the UN High Commission on Refugees, there are 25,000 to

50,000 children living on the streets of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Most of them were abandoned for being possessed. The report highlights that, before they landed on the streets, these children were often imprisoned, abused, and tortured. They might be the lucky ones; others are killed during exorcisms.

Although the problem is widespread, fears about witchcraft follow a pattern and typically occur under a certain set of conditions. Beliefs in witchcraft and mysticism crop up mostly among agrarian societies, and consequently are commonly triggered by environmental crises. For instance, the Indian state of Assam is suffering from major droughts and experiencing some of the lowest rainfalls in decades. It is unsurprising that the state has seen 100 witch-related murders in the last year alone. Magical thinking has even appeared, though in a milder form, among [Californian farmers](#). Desperate for water, farmers in the sunshine state are increasingly turning to diviners and spiritualists known as “water witches” to save their crops. These “witchers,” as they are called colloquially, charge around \$50,000 to locate a spot on the ground for a well. [John Franzia, CEO of the Bronco Wine Company](#), told the AP, “I’ve used witchers for probably the last 15 to 20 years. Seems like the witchers do the better job than the guys with all the electrical equipment. I believe in them.” The problem is so rampant that the U.S. Geological Survey spoke out against the practice, calling it “folklore.”

Political volatility is another condition that appears to correlate with an increase in witch-hunts. Tanzania is a deeply superstitious country to begin with—93 percent of its residents believe in witchcraft, according to a [2010 Pew study](#)—and witch-hunts rise steeply during election periods. In the lead-up to the parliamentary and presidential elections in October, a

number of Tanzanian ministers allegedly turned to black magic to help their campaigns. The magic includes possessing the body parts of murdered albinos or decapitated kittens, which are harvested by respected and well paid witch doctors. An albino hand, for instance, can fetch around \$46,000. The steep price means that it is likely Tanzanian elites who are the owners of these horrific talismans.



Kazungu Kassim (R), head of a Burundi albino association, listens to proceedings inside a courtroom in Ruyigi, eastern Burundi, May 28, 2009. Prosecutors in Burundi on Thursday asked for life sentences for three people on trial for allegedly murdering albinos to sell their body parts for use in witchcraft.

Other crises, such as the Ebola epidemic, also encourage a proliferation of superstitious beliefs. Western-trained doctors, working to fight the spread of Ebola, often bemoaned the fact that a belief in witchcraft hampered their efforts to diagnose the disease and isolate the infected. The U.S. Center for Disease Control was forced to clarify this on its website with the statement:

“Ebola is caused by a virus. Ebola is not caused by a curse [or] by witchcraft.” It is unknown whether this warning had any tangible effect.

The political and environmental conditions of today’s witch-hunts bear a striking resemblance to those in Western Europe and North America hundreds of years ago. In fact, [some scholars](#) trace the earliest witch-hunts to the outbreak of the Black Plague, in 1348. European witch trials peaked in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, with around 40,000 deaths in total, but reached an all-time high between 1550 and 1650. At that time, European society was heavily dependent on agriculture, and it too was in a developing state—poverty and inequality were the norm. These challenges were compounded by what scientists now call “the little ice age”: a drop in temperatures that led to harvest failures and a disruption of northward fish migration, which limited a key source of food across Europe. On top of all that, Europe was entangled in the Thirty Years’ War between 1618 and 1648, which involved constant clashes between Catholics and Protestants. Philipp Adolf von Ehrenberg, a prince-bishop in Germany, conducted one of the more infamous purges in the region of Würzburg. By 1630, he had allowed 1,000 men and women—from peasants to nobility—to burn at the stake.

Scholars [Emily Oster](#) and [Edward Miguel](#) have collected extensive statistical and anecdotal evidence that reveal how witch persecutions often spiked after particularly bad harvests. Oster notes that in 1484, a book known as *Malleus Maleficarum* became the definitive text delineating the treatment of witches. In the book, Pope Innocent VIII linked the destruction of crops to supernatural practices of witches and sorcerers. He wrote, “It has indeed lately come to Our ears...many persons of both

sexes...have blasted the produce of the earth, the grapes of the vine, the fruits of the trees, ...vineyards, orchards, meadows, pasture-land, corn, wheat, and all other cereals...” Oster also collected data on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century weather patterns and concluded that “there is overlap in the time period of the colder weather and the witchcraft trials.”

Miguel’s work is similar to Oster’s in its data-based approach, but it focuses on Tanzania. He analyzes the amount of rainfall over an 11 year period and demonstrates how in times of either drought or flood, the number of witch-hunting incidents significantly increases even though all other acts of violence or murders remains constant. Specifically, there are twice as many witch murders in years of extreme rain patterns—either too much or too little rain—as in other years.



John Dimo, a traditional witch-doctor in Kogelo, Kenya, performs an ancient rite to predict the outcome of the U.S. elections, November 5, 2012. Kogelo is the ancestral home of U.S. President Barack Obama.

Today, it appears that a mixture of deep-seated inequality, political instability, and agricultural disruption from climate change is sending the modern world back to the days of witch-hunting. During such periods, human scapegoats provide an all too easy answer for things that people can't control or explain, such as extreme weather or Ebola.

But there is some good news. Last March, human rights activists in Ghana made some headway in returning home some of the hundreds of accused and exiled women and children who reside in squalid "[witches' camps](#)." They did so by convincing villagers to allow the accused to undergo a cleansing ritual. These witches' camps are also in the process of being shut down, a move triggered by the brutal murder of a 72-year-old woman who was set on fire in the northern city of Tema in 2010. This horrific crime ignited public outrage and gave global exposure to the problem. Since then, the government of Ghana has gradually disbanded the camps, of which there are a total of six, some of which have been around for decades. But shutting down the camps has not resolved the issue of witch hunting since not all of the so-called witches are accepted back at home.

In some parts of the world, a legislative approach is used to prevent witchcraft-related violence. In 2006, the British government tried to tamp down on the widespread belief in witchcraft among its African communities following a case of child abuse linked to witchcraft allegations. In 2013, Papua New Guinea repealed its controversial 1971 Sorcery Act, which legitimized defense against witchcraft as an excuse for murder. Similarly, several African countries, including Cameroon, South Africa, and Tanzania, have enacted legislation to criminalize witch-hunt-induced violence. While these are all steps in the right direction, the NGO HelpAge International

has noted that legislation does not always work because it is not properly enforced. More effective approaches include addressing the underlying causes, such as poverty, inequality, and gender discrimination. Most of all, it begins with the recognition that the belief in witchcraft is not a historic problem of some 300 years ago but a modern one with modern causes.