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## Albinos' Plight: Will Legal Methods be Powerful Enough To Eradicate Albinos' Scourge?

Methusela Mishael Masanja

Local Government Training Institute, Dodoma, Tanzania.

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### Abstract

*In Tanzania, persons with albinism commonly known as albinos, continue to be less valued, rejected, attacked and killed for ritual purposes. In response, the police force has been arresting witchdoctors as part of a campaign against albinos' ritual killings. Albinos are believed to possess magical powers, source of misfortunes but able make people prosperous economically and socially. Eradication of witchcraft beliefs for long had been a concern of Africans throughout East and Central Africa. Despite harmful impact of witchcraft and witchdoctors activities, use of legal methods alone to eliminate the beliefs and practices have never been successful. Combination of legal methods and properly designed awareness creation programmes can be effective measures in fighting against negative beliefs and attitudes towards albinos leading to their brutal attacks and killings.*

**Key words:** Albinos, Witchdoctors, African Communities.

### Introduction

Tanzania has announced a ban on witchdoctors who are believed to have been targeting the country's albino population in mistaken beliefs that their body parts can bring wealth, luck and power (Laing, 2015). Tanzania has arrested more than 200 witchdoctors in its effort to put an end to murder of people with albinism (Azuakola, 2015). Witchdoctors are reported to fuel the killings by inducing local people to believe that "magic potions" made from albinos' part can bring good luck and wealth (Nzwili, 2015). According to Inquisitr (2015), more than 100 crimes against albinos were reported over the past eight years, many of them being killed and sold to witchdoctors for black magic purposes. The attacks are so brazen that the government has opened boarding schools for children with albinism's protection (Kandoya, 2015). This paper tries to show how witchdoctors for long have been consulted for various purposes and therefore reinforcing witchcraft beliefs in the community. For example, African rulers depended on witchdoctors to maintain political rule and strengthen the nation and chiefdoms (Flint, 2008). In

fact witchcraft is seen as part of African traditional religion and thus a way of life. The main question in this paper is, will banning, detaining and prosecuting witchdoctors in Tanzania be fruitful and how long?

## **Status of Witchdoctors in African Communities**

In African traditional knowledge witchdoctors are central characters in their respective communities because they are regarded as the link with ancestors (Røkke, 2004). Ancestors are believed to be more powerful and having influence on their living descendants. Therefore spiritual assistance is important in order for one to obtain good life on earth (Westlund, 2006). Traditional healers, witchdoctors or herbalists in principle are the same thing in African societies and therefore in most cases the words are used interchangeably (Beck, 1979). For example herbalists are expected to diagnose and prescribe medicines for ailments and illnesses, to prevent and to alleviate misfortune or evil, to provide protection against witchcraft and misfortune, and to bring prosperity and happiness (World Health Organization, 2002). According to Robinson (2009), witchdoctors are also spiritual specialists who attempt to counteract the powers of the witches who are believed to be causes of all undesirable situations in the community. In an attempt to combat a rise in the killing of people with albinism for their body parts in Tanzania, the government currently has banned activities of witchdoctors (IPPMEDIA, 2015b). The killing of people with albinism is said to ruin the nation's image (IPPMEDIA, 2015a). The government is taking such step after being accused for lacking political wills among leaders to end these macabre killings of people with albinism (Reuters, 2015; NYTimes, 2015; The Guardians, 2015). The UN has warned that such attacks are increasing ahead of elections in Tanzania in October, with politicians turning to witchdoctors to improve their luck (The Guardians, 2015; IPPMEDIA, 2015c). The warning is in line with the allegations that the killings are known to peak during election times as demand increases for magical portions by politicians seeking to win in election or to be re- elected (Uromi, 2014).

Issues related with witchdoctors can be traced back before colonialism era (Mesaki, 2009). Witchdoctors are believed to use witchcraft for good purposes contrary to witches who are believed to use the craft for bad purposes (Røkke, 2004). Beck (1979) describes witchdoctors as the greatest evil in Africa. According to Semali (1986) as cited by Machangu (2015), Germans used brutal measures such as imprisonment or execution against those who claimed to identify witches as a means of eradicating witchcraft beliefs. The practice continued to be illegal during British Colonial era in Tanganyika (Machangu, 2015). After independence (in 1970s) for the same purpose the government of Tanzania collected Waganga and Basumu (all words refer to witchdoctors) from lake zone (Mwanza and Shinyanga Region by that time) and gathered them into a forest in Ng'wang'holo and tortured them (Røkke, 2004). The Minister of Home Affairs Alhaj Alli Hassan Mwinyi in that time took responsibility of the killings by resigning from his position (DailyNews, 2015). Despite the impact of witchcraft and witchdoctors activities, use of

legal methods alone to eliminate the beliefs and practices has never been successful (Machangu, 2015; Mesaki, 2009; Røkke, 2004).

### **Witchcraft Beliefs in Lake Zone Regions (Sukumaland)**

According to Mesaki (2008), witchcraft is intrinsic to the Sukuma system of belief and way of life, being rooted in their whole system of knowledge and morality. Witchcraft in Sukumaland may be held responsible for almost any calamity or misfortune and it is believed to lead to material success to those who seek it at the cost of sometimes sacrificing human life (Magobe, 2008). Witchcraft practices in Sukumaland regions tend to increase or at least remain strong (Durand, 2010). Witchdoctors are still considered to be seers in the society and their position has allowed them to stretch the cultural categories they work with (Hinkkanen, 2009). According to Gelfand as cited by Mesaki (2005), the presence of great numbers of witchdoctors in these regions gives assurance to the whole community. It is in these regions where premature deaths or natural deaths under the approximate age of fifty years old are not accepted (Mfumbusa, 1999). This is the place which accommodate high number of witchdoctors for example Mwanza alone contains 3000 registered witchdoctors, making it the region with the highest proliferation of witchdoctors in the country (Dave-Odigie, 2010 citing Mushi, 2009). This may be reason why witch-related violence and albino killings are most prevalent in these Sukuma dominated regions (UNHCR, 2009).

Killings related to witchcraft beliefs are reported daily in Sukumaland and despite availability of laws and relevant legislation. Witchdoctors are believed to suggest that if the witch is killed, then it will help to remedy the problem facing the person or the community at whole (BBC, 2002). Disputes over property and land ownership and inheritance as a husband dies have often led to accusations of witchcraft which in turn result in violence, abuse and killing of the widow. The killings due to accusations of witchcraft beliefs do not only affect suspects physically but also psychologically thus some who are left alive after the attack are psychologically tormented due to the accusations (Essien and Ben, 2010). It is through such beliefs hundreds of people with albinism brutally hacked to death with machetes by people who are lazy and dreaming of becoming rich (Magobe, 2008). Such beliefs make witch related albino killings a daily event in Tanzania especially in Lake Zone Region (Shinyanga, Simiyu, Geita and Mwanza Regions).

According to WHO (2008), traditional medicine refers to the sum of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses. All over the world traditional medicines have been used for thousands of years before modern medicines came into existence (Tang, 2006). With the problems of increasing levels of drug resistance and difficulties in poor areas of being able to afford and access effective drugs, traditional medicines are seen as an important and sustainable source of treatment (Willcox and Bodeker, 2004). It is believed that the naturalness of herbal medications implies that they are safe (Ritter, 2008). In African countries, 80% of the population depends on traditional medicine

for primary health care (WHO, 2008). Ritcher (2003) describes traditional medicines as a kind of personalised health care that is culturally appropriate, holistic and tailored to meet the needs and expectations of the patient. Traditional healers in Africa use their connection to the divine in order to pray for health and fortune for their clients (Winkler et al., 2010). The health of African people everywhere has always depended upon the holistic aspect of mind, body and spirit (Lewis, 2012). In Tanzania witchdoctors (Traditionally responsible with traditional herbal medicines) are found in all regions. According to Chenya (1988), witchdoctors are doctors who diagnose and heal sickness of the body and soul. They know medicinal trees, roots and leaves from which medicines are produced. Chenya (1988) further describes that witchdoctors protect and know different witchcraft charms for protection of sick people who believe to be bewitched. It is through dreams at night when they are commonly shown secret things by ancestors (Chenya, 1988; Ouma, 2013).

### **Roles of Witchdoctors in Health Services**

Traditionally, witchcraft has been a common explanation for diseases of which the causes were unknown (The voice, 2012). Therefore, when witchdoctors approach sickness, disease or misfortune, they strive to discover their root causes and how to prevent them from recurring and they do this by exploring the supernatural causes of ill-health (Mumo, 2012). For both rural and urban Africans, traditional medicine (medicines from witchdoctors) is a form of healthcare that is more available and it embodies an ancestral belief system that is uniquely African (Komba et al., 2012). According to Mbiti (1969) cited by Mumo (2012), in Africans view, health include many aspects such as diseases, witchcraft, sorcery, curses and misfortunes, which need attention from specialized practitioners to deal with all cases at once. While hundreds of albinos are thought to have been killed for black magic purposes in Tanzania, albino girls are being raped because of a belief that they offer a cure for AIDS (Foxnews, 2011). Treatments made from albino body parts are believed to be particularly powerful, even by rich urban dwellers (Malone, 2009; Thebody, 2011). Witchdoctors, who number in hundreds of thousands, claim to derive their curative power from other worldly forces and from special relationships with the ancestors (Tebbe, 2007). Unfortunately, witchcraft belief system runs across most of sub-Saharan Africa, such that every evil and misfortune that is incapable of rational explanation is attributed to witchcraft beliefs (Tebbe, 2007). Therefore, many illnesses, complicated health cases, miscarriages, infertility, and death are associated with the cruelty of the witches. Accused persons have been arbitrary killed without medical verification to ascertain the cause of death (Essien, 2010). Such killings still happen because community members believe every word from a witchdoctor and because witchdoctors continue to have strong appeal to their clients (Erdsieck, 2003).

### **Roles of Witchdoctors in Agriculture**

In some parts of Africa, albinos are believed to affect the agriculture sector by causing the land to dry and thus make it unproductive unless they are buried under special conditions when they die (Granjo, 2010). Tanner (2010) describes that Albino parts are believed to be used in various

rituals including the prevention of rain. Due to sensitivity of rainfall issue in Africa, a chief was a chief by the grace of the people, but in return a chief was required to ensure adequate rainfall for wellbeing of his people (Gewald, 2001). That is why rain making ceremonies are commonly known not only in Africa but worldwide (Dafni, 2007). Farmers in rural areas commonly consult witchdoctors specialized for rainmaking in case there is rain deficiency in their villages.

### **Roles of Witchdoctors in Politics**

Historically it is believed that African traditional leaders (Chiefs) relied on divination and mysticism (Mutiba, 2011). Witchcraft has played a role in rebellions, fighting wars, gaining independence and is often seen at election time (BBC, 2005). Witchcraft belief is abundant among politicians who are believed to use the belief to bring them luck needed to win in elections at all levels (The voice, 2012). Since African politics is mainly characterized by irregularities, power struggles and authoritarianism, selfishness and greediness dominates minds of politicians who want to be in power for personal gains (Maxwell, 2011). According to Gitau (2007), high number of politicians consulting witchdoctors proves how politics in African nations is associated with witchcraft. In several parts of Africa, during elections people with albinism are targeted by candidates who treat people with albinism as sacrificial lambs wanted for their heads or their genitals, considered as the body's strongest parts (Plasse, 2008). According to Machangu (2015) some leaders in Tanzania hesitate to openly condemn such beliefs and practices since they are themselves at times involved in such practices.

According to Makulilo (2010), since politics is dominated by witchcraft, therefore people with albinism's killings are associated with politics. Persistent killing of people with albinism are facilitated by lack of will of some political leaders to stop the killings (ESRF, 2009). Petrus (2012) emphasizes that, access to magic powers seems to be a prerequisite for an individual's ability to legitimate political influence. For example in the October 2005 elections, it was reported that witchdoctors were officially employed to provide magical spells to politicians to help them win votes in the elections (Petrus, 2009 as cited by Petrus, 2012).

Involvement of witchcraft beliefs in active politics in many parts of Africa is obvious. For example during freedom fighting, witchdoctors were regularly consulted by freedom fighters and political leaders who wished to receive protection, legitimacy and advice (Chavuduka, 2001). In addition to expressing grievances over the depredations and deprivations of colonial rule, the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya can also be understood as constituting a key juncture at which violence related to witchcraft beliefs and practices challenged the ability of the colonial state to maintain law and order (Luongo, 2006). It is obvious that Africans beliefs in magic, spirit possession, witchcraft are recorded to have played significant roles as motivational or morale-boosting factors relating to the combatants themselves (Møller, 2006). In Tanzania for example, the last hundred years of Africa's millennium began with the tragic Maji-Maji resistance of 1904-5. This demonstrated the dire consequences of magical thinking. Over 120 000 believers

were killed in the Maji-Maji revolt because a few spirit mediums promised to make all who used a special war medicine immune to German rifles (Petraits, 2000).

### **Role of Witchcraft in Economic Development**

Beliefs in witchcraft are not specific to Africa (Osei, 2003). Bangkok Post (2013) reported on the rise of witchcraft beliefs Papua New Guinea in which the beliefs were reported to impede economic development because people were often afraid to be too successful fearing to be accused to use witchcraft while the beliefs also led to increased crime. According to IHEU (2007), Africans believe witches are real, active beings that act to influence, intervene and alter the course of human life for good or evils. The belief is linked to people's economic status because people facing economic hardship are more compelled to engage in evil things including killing fellow humans in order to become rich. Thus the widened income gap has been a source of many evils including the people with albinism's killings that are currently experienced (ESRF, 2009). A study in South Africa revealed that rural communities being characterized by poverty, people seem to be trapped between progressing or not, as both options could lead to suspicions of witchcraft (Petrus 2012). It is in such situation that the poor can be accused of jealousy induced witchcraft, and the rich can be accused of practicing witchcraft to acquire wealth (Goloba-Mutebi, 2005).

Tanzania being highly affected by the killings of people with albinism due to witchcraft related reasons faces the problem as an additional obstacle to attain economic development and improve the living standards of its people (Developmentafrique, 2009). Geshiere et al.(1996) mention witchcraft beliefs as an obstacle to economic initiatives through which villagers cannot dare to construct modern houses and acquire wealth considering being dangerous. Witchcraft thus hinders community economic progress because witchcraft fears result in people living in constant fear while directing resources not towards the maximization of profit or output but at minimization of witchcraft jealousy (Harries, 2010). According to Gabriel (2011), witchcraft beliefs and practices continue to enslave people, causing development stagnation and disintegrated families, communities, and societies at large.

### **Roles of Witchdoctors in Sports**

Sports refers to all form of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental wellbeing and social interaction such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport as well as indigenous sports and games (Dejonghe, 2006). UNICEF (2002) cites football as a universal language of scores of millions of people around the world, including countless children and teenagers. According to Leseth (1997), today the practice of witchcraft takes place in modern sports and games being most widespread in football. Formally witchcraft was commonly practiced in ngoma (traditional dances) competitions, but currently the practice and belief in juju (witchcraft) is common both in dance and football (Leseth, 2010). Juju does exist in African football and it has a powerful role being believed to be a force at play when sports are played.

Magic is as vital as the training, and the witchdoctor is as vital as the coach (Stollznow, 2010). It is no wonder that players would rather undergo spiritual rituals than to train hard to improve their football skills (Pannenberg, 2010). According to Botchway (2011), Africans believe in the existence and influence of unseen spirits and deities, majority of the people consider it foolhardy to engage in a business venture or a social activity without first soliciting divine inspiration and intervention. However, even when the world cup competition was in South Africa, Africa did not retain the cup in Africa besides prominent beliefs on juju. Beliefs in witchcraft are widespread in Tanzanian football and top teams hire witchdoctors for key matches who also get official travel with teams for international matches (BBC, 2006). According to Royer (2005), sports teams employ magicians for the belief that they can produce victory by either causing opposing team members to suffer blurred vision, or causing the opponent's ball to slow down in midair. Thus, losing sports teams blame their loss on witchcraft, for it is well known that witchdoctors are hired to help thwart the opposing team and thereby ensure victory. However, Pannenberg (2010) explains that juju is considered an African secret since players, coaches and officials commonly deny that they are into juju and claim to be Christians or Muslims and only pray while the fact is that the majority of football teams are in one way or the other involved in these spiritual practices. Since witchcraft in Tanzania is claimed to provide answers to misfortunes, executive committees use huge amount of money to bring victories to their clubs through witchcraft, making witchcraft a big business in which witchdoctors enrich themselves through wages they receive from different club leaders (Leseth, 1997). Leseth (1997) further explains that, witchcraft is associated with football because there are people who believe in its positive outcomes, as well as because there are commercial interests who believe in promoting the beliefs for their own remunerative benefits. Those who believe in witchcraft are deeply convinced that practitioners in this field possess natural super powers (Muhanika, 2012). Such people can readily engage themselves in fatal business like using PWA parts to fulfil their interest. But according to Stolloznow (2010), in whatever activity, there is no alternative to proper planning, hard work and professionalism.

### **Reality of Witchcraft**

Witches and witchcraft in Africa are real and part of African's everyday reality (Wyk, 2004). Welbourn (1968) emphasizes that, in Africa the existence of ghosts and witches is as real as the existence of electricity or magnetism. Schmidt (2005) further explains that, mystical (supernatural) powers are real to Africans as electricity is real though electricity can't be seen but its effects in life are obvious. Highly learned and simple farmers, followers of African Religion, Christians and Muslims believe in witchcraft existence (Schmidt, 2005). Considering the impact of witchcraft in community, Wyk (2004) explains that witchcraft has been one of the biggest problems of humanity. Muhanika (2012) emphasizes that there is no evidence to prove or disapprove how witchcraft works, for the whole business is an attitude of mind, shrouded in secrecy, and represents idealism at its worst. Witches are believed to defy rules of nature and are capable of the impossible (Gram, 2011). That is why though witchcraft has been studied by

several specialists for long, many conclusions reached are as diverse as their number (Mafico, 1986). Due to deep rooted beliefs in witchcraft, witchcraft beliefs have not declined with independence and development level but it has rather flourished in unexpected ways and entwined itself in political action and political thinking (Siegal, 2003). Due to adverse effect of witchcraft, there is a cry that witchcraft and its beliefs must be eradicated before they eradicate our national developmental efforts (Mafico, 1986). This is because communities which hold strongly to beliefs in witchcraft are poor, starving, and generally illiterate. In such communities, every misfortune or problem is related to witchcraft, especially if natural explanations don't satisfy giving chance for witchcraft beliefs (through witchdoctors) to give explanations (Gufler, 1999). According to Brennan (2006), the eradication of witchcraft beliefs had long been a concern of Africans throughout East and Central Africa. But the reality is that the beliefs in witchcraft are still prevalent in most African communities.

### **Consequences of Beliefs in Witchcraft**

In places where witchcraft beliefs are abundant, development and its process are distorted due to fear of attacks through witchcraft therefore people hide their economic strength. People in rural areas believe that establishing business or building modern houses may lead to premature deaths or face serious problems. It is obvious that witchcraft beliefs slow down economic growth, political advancement, technological development and social progress (Essien and Ben, 2011). Beliefs in witchcraft have serious negative economic implications as well. Those who are afraid of being bewitched are forced to spend a fortune to acquire the strongest protective medicine from witchdoctors which is renewable each year (Manala, 2004). Witchcraft crimes related continue to be a problem especially because that law enforcement structures often find it difficult to deal with cases of this nature (Petrus, 2010). Witchcraft beliefs continue to be a problem in health sectors due to different perceptions on causes of diseases or illness. In most cases disease or illness are believed to be due to intervention by an agent such as another human, witch, sorcerer, non-human, or supernatural force (Vaughn et al., 2009). In Tanzania mining zones, many believe that most activities of the living are shaped or affected by unseen forces of other spirit world (Bryceson, 2010; Makulilo, 2010). According to Makulilo (2010), this is because people do not rely on scientific principles on how to become successful in their career.

### **Conclusion**

Beliefs related to PWA killings, attacks and discriminations are reinforced by witchcraft beliefs which regard PWA as abnormal beings. It is believed that albinos' body parts can make solutions against bad luck, poverty, witchcraft and politically in winning in elections. Use of people with albinism's body parts is a common though a not openly spoken phenomenon in Sukumaland which went on silently for long. This proposes that it is very hard to replace this old belief by simply criticizing or confining witchdoctors. Witchcraft belief is still believed to influence people in their daily activities thus making them rely on witchdoctors for their success.



Awareness on albinism should be accompanied with socialization of children with positive attitudes towards albinos and other people with disabilities. This will ensure having a nation with positive attitudes towards albinos as well as to other people with disabilities. Community members should have properly designed sessions to re-evaluate cultural beliefs which affect people with albinism. This will assist in getting the in-depth views of community members on the beliefs and practices which affect people with albinism. This approach can be helpful in taking proper measures to eradicate unwanted behaviour and practices in the community by the community itself. A special behavioural change programme can be designed to discourage the practice of using albino parts in preparation of “medicines”. The programme should focus on changing the community perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards albinos among community members, witchdoctors, and traditional leaders.

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