

Africa: Diversity and Development

The Intersection of Witchcraft and Development in Malawi

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Literature on the intersection between witchcraft and development too frequently ignores the role of national and international elites in encouraging witchcraft beliefs. Instead this body of work often utilizes context specific ethnographies to make generalising statements about possible meanings of all supernatural occurrences. It typically understands witchcraft accusations as impediments to development which it claims would be reduced through increased development. I reject this narrative and will use literature from Malawi to argue that western powers and national elites have encouraged the linking of development and the supernatural. This has both entrenched rural Malawians' dependence on these elites and obfuscated their elites' role in the nation's underdevelopment.

This paper will detail how the relationship between development and witchcraft is commonly operationalised in development literature. It will briefly summarise anthropological treatments of the supernatural; highlighting the disjuncture between ethnographic studies of specific witchcraft accusations and a normative body of literature which conflates all utilizations of the supernatural and generalises them as responses to increased modernization. It will then show how these normative understandings of witchcraft generate a narrative within the development literature where witchcraft accusations are seen as both an impediment and a reaction to development by 'unscientific' villagers.

This paper will compare these assumptions to a historic unpacking of Malawian development and witchcraft narratives. It will explore how colonial and post-colonial governments encouraged rural Malawians to believe in witchcraft and to understand the state as having a relationship with the supernatural. It will then consider how this has influenced the nation's development discourse; supporting a narrative where "development" is infrastructure projects that are financed from outside a rural community, and where these are linked to the

potentially supernatural wealth of donors and the government. The paper concludes by claiming that this relationship between witchcraft and development both increases rural Malawians' dependence and exonerates those who benefit from it.

Witchcraft in “Africa”

Much of the literature on witchcraft in Africa fails to distinguish the variable conditions under which specific witchcraft discourses operate (Englund 1996). This literature often makes broad observations about the power dynamics that manifest through witchcraft accusations and the economic circumstances under which these occur. Problematically, works that operationalise the relationship between witchcraft and development utilize supernatural stories from varied African cultures to make generalizations about how “African”¹ witchcraft beliefs impede development (see Harries 2010; Kohnert 1996). These works rarely unpack the historical, economic and social conditions which are unique to any witchcraft accusation. This creates a body of literature that is often proscriptive, contradictory and that silences the role of the powerful in encouraging witchcraft beliefs.

Ethnographers have observed witchcraft utilizations and accusations by almost all demographics across varied African societies². However, each of these observations take place in specific geographic, cultural and social locations with differing cosmologies and ecologies. These factors enable and guide each accusation; for example Colson (2000) examines how Zambian history, Gwembe creations of the family and changing intra-household power dynamics interact to generate witchcraft accusations against a small number of Gwembe fathers. In contrast Dolan (2002) details increased witchcraft claims by husbands against wives as female initiated horticulture increases in significance for rural Kenyans.

Some themes frequently occur in ethnographies that examine witchcraft. These include: the disintegration of traditional society; apprehension over increased inequality; and a distaste for an imposed, westernized market system (see Austen 1993; Golooba-Mutebi 2005; Masquelier 1993; Mgbako and Glenn 2011). While global powers and national elites are critical to all these processes, their role in encouraging people to conceptualize these

¹ A core role of this paper is to problematize the troubling use of generalisations about the whole of Africa based upon specific case studies of varied African communities. For expediency the terms Africa and African will be used when these generalisations appear in the literature, however they are rarely helpful ways to discuss myriad people's beliefs relating to the supernatural.

² These include accusations by the poor that the rich are using witchcraft to subvert their community's wealth (Bastian 2001) and by the rich that the poor curse them out of jealousy (Austen 1993); men have been observed accusing women of witchcraft that either makes them impotent or that diminishes their ability in the market (Mgbako 2011), while women have accused men of using witchcraft in land disputes (Dolan 2002); young Africans are frequently detailed accusing the elderly of witchcraft (Koning 2013), and older people, women in particular, accuse daughter-in-law of being witches and fear orphans that are bewitched (Auslander 1993).

changes through the lens of the supernatural is rarely explicated and is almost never foregrounded.

Instead significant academic discourse about witchcraft views its re-emergence as a response to “modernity³”. This field of analysis understands an increased interest among Africans in witchcraft as a signifier for the contradictions and tensions that emanate from urbanization and globalization (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Dolan 2002). Some of this literature claims that witchcraft accusations are either increasing, or re-emerging after being dormant in the colonial period (Parish 2001). It sees African discussions about witchcraft and spiritual rituals as a way for the marginalised to assert control over a rapidly changing world or to comprehend structural relations between the local and global (Auslander 1993).

Africans are understood to use witchcraft to simultaneously enact modernity and communicate their discontentment with it. Through witchcraft these Africans are seen to be able to maintain control over changes to their intra-community networks (Geschiere 1995; Golooba-Mutebi 2005). For example Bastian (1993) observes rural Igbo use curses to demand access to the resources of increasingly wealthy urban relatives. Witchcraft is simultaneously interpreted as an idiom for discussing the changes to roles within a community, with new skillsets becoming more valuable and traditional roles diminishing in social and economic importance (Mgbako and Glenn 2011).

The relationship between modernity and witchcraft has been infrequently critiqued. Ferguson (2006), and others following him (Ngong 2012), have questioned whether African utilizations of witchcraft are a way for them to engage with modernity or a response to the lack of modernity on the continent. More importantly for this paper, Englund (1996) claims that the belief that witchcraft reflects contemporary anxieties obscures both the historic causes of those anxieties and the reason specific understandings of the supernatural are used to communicate and examine them. His claim is particularly pertinent when academics naturalise witchcraft accusations as an (irrational) fear of development without considering either the validity of this fear or the role of elite actors in encouraging villagers to conceptualize their unease through stories about the supernatural.

Development and Witchcraft

Many academics and development practitioners instrumentalise witchcraft as an impediment to development and then proscribe further development to diminish the influence of witchcraft. The development that these people describe is typically modernising, and is

³ This paper understands modernity as a collection of materialities and cultural styles that both research subjects and academics generate through comparison with an imagined, idealised past (see Ferguson 1999)

associated with presumed increases in economic and social outcomes through either market access or external interventions (Fisiy and Geschiere 1991; Golooba-Mutebi 2005; Leistner 2014). Some of these authors acknowledge that witchcraft accusations are occasionally ways for the weak to temper the elevation of the powerful. However they argue that these accusations create drag on development activities. For example Kohnert (1996):1350 claims that:

“Witchcraft beliefs have limited “emancipatory effects” – if any at all – and even those are outweighed by negative side effects. Therefore we strongly advise against utilization of witchcraft beliefs for promoting development”

At its extreme, this discourse presents supernatural beliefs as be incompatible with development as they encourage anti-scientific thought and curb individual economic growth. Ngong (2012) accuses social scientists who take witchcraft claims seriously of encouraging Africans to not think scientifically, which he believes is a pre-requisite for development.

Other authors believe that witchcraft claims signify African’s rejections of the hard work and resulting inequality they see as necessary development. Leistner (2014):58 states that:

“The very concept of personal advancement as a result of personal endeavour, hard work and knowledge is not an inherent part of African culture...rather people have the same amount of cosmic good which can only be increased, by taking, with magic, from another person.”

Authors in this tradition (see Harries 2010; Kuman 2011) interpret witchcraft accusations as jealous responses to individual success associated with development and marketization. They see further accusations of witchcraft discouraging individuals from investing in their own advancement and therefore hampering liberalizing, modern development.

Authors who see witchcraft as impeding development proscribe further development to reduce witchcraft accusations. They attribute these accusations to the discomfort that development temporarily causes the marginalised or to disillusionment with existing development outcomes (Fisiy and Geschire 2001; Leistner 2014). They therefore suggest increased industry, improved anti-sorcery legislation, and healthcare and educational spending as ways to diminish the appeal of sorcery (Kuman 2011).

This narrative neither considers legitimate critiques of the development narratives offered to rural African communities, nor how the actions of the powerful encourage and interact with beliefs in the supernatural. Not only are manifestations of witchcraft (and the supernatural more generally) embedded in specific local historical and social circumstances, but so are understandings of development. Rural Malawians conceptualize development as

infrastructure paid for by powerful outsiders (Msukwa and Taylor 2011). These outsiders, in particular the government and westerners, appropriate the supernatural (consciously and unconsciously) to maintain their control over the rural population (see Englund 2006; Kaspin 1993; van Dijk 2001). In this context, further development may entrench both the belief in the supernatural and the understanding that development is provided by external actors that the community has little control over.

Development and Witchcraft in Malawi

Changes to Malawian beliefs about appropriate ways to live are negotiated and communicated through discussions about witchcraft. Witchcraft, and the supernatural more generally, has a long involvement in Malawian social regulation; frequently being used to negotiate the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. For example, since the pre-colonial period, village headmen⁴ have maintained their legitimacy at least in part through a spiritual protectorate role (Chinsinga 2006). Traditional dancers dress up as *Nyau* (animal spirits) and attack villages. They are turned away by the headman, who through this shows his dominance over the spiritual realm (Kaspin 1993). Yet simultaneously, colonial era villagers could communicate their displeasure at their leaders' power through vesting power in quazi-religious cults. These were made up primarily of younger villagers and could challenge local power structures, including threatening the stability of chieftainships.

Malawian supernatural beliefs guided individuals' witchcraft claims. Stories that elucidated local norms, often relating to sexuality, typically had mystic elements. A common image was people transforming into snakes. This symbol was also used in intra-community witchcraft accusations, demonstrating the links between a general supernatural and daily village life (Hargreaves 1894). Witchcraft accusations were such a concern for the colonial administration that in 1911 they criminalised accusing a person of witchcraft (Mgbako and Glenn 2011). A law which is still utilized today.

Missionaries in Malawi both influenced and were guided by witchcraft beliefs. Witchcrafts' links with religion in Malawi are often contradictory; with Christianity adopting Malawian witchcraft beliefs, being used to protect against witchcraft and to deny its legitimacy. Christianity has both been linked with Malawian witchcraft accusations and seen as an antidote to them since the early 1900s. *Mchape*, a witchcraft cleansing movement that swept Malawi in the 1930s, would skip villages that were 'Christianised' and therefore free of witches (van Dijk 2001). Through this western actors legitimized the belief in witchcraft and foreshadowed the understanding that western imports like Christianity were more powerful than local beliefs. Traditional healers as late as the 1980s would combine symbolism and

⁴ Currently the lowest rank of administrative chief

legitimacy from various African churches with mystic healing practices and were accused of being witches and used to defend against them (Van Der Meer 2011). In the modern era, Pentecostal preachers adapt long standing Malawian beliefs in spirits by claiming an association between these spirits and Satan to give their sermons gravitas (Van Der Meer 2011). Further, accusations of Satanism often rely on similar troupes to witchcraft accusation (Englund 2007a).

Malawians did not begin (or restart) utilizing witchcraft claims as a response to modernity. Instead specific social strategies and negotiations have utilized witchcraft claims since pre-colonial times. Simultaneously, various beliefs about the spiritual have interacted with material realities in Malawi in ways which frame the meaning of various economic circumstances and relationships, especially those that regulate the relationship between the rural majority and the national and global elite.

The Malawian State and Witchcraft

The Malawian state has a complex relationship with the supernatural. It has suppressed village rituals with a supernatural element and kept accusing a person of witchcraft illegal. However both under its dictatorial president and during democratic rule, Malawi's government has engaged with witchcraft beliefs in a manner which encourages villagers to believe in the supernatural.

Dr Banda was Malawi's dictatorial first president. His treatment of *Nyau* dancers exemplifies how he framed the relationship between the state and the supernatural. Kaspin (1993) observes that men from Chewa villages would dress as *Nyau* and perform 'the great dance' at the request of their village headmen. The dancers were perceived to be violent spirits who would attack members of the community. This dance was typically performed at initiation rites, where younger men and women become adult members of the community, typically shortly before their marriage. It ends with the defeat of the *Nyau* and tributes to the headman by those who wish to marry "his" maidens (Kaspin 1993).

Claiming to fear for the security of uninitiated village members, the Malawian government began interfering with the *Nyau* dances in the 1960s. They would identify the most disruptive members of a *Nyau* group, strip them of their masks and issue them fines or prison sentences. Kaspin (1993):54 argues that:

“Unmasked by the police, the dancers lost their mystique as spirits...they became more comical than dangerous. At the same time, the authority of the chief was further diminished, as the state laid down its rules and regulations over and against rural

protocols. Contrary to the symbolic logic of *Nyau* ritual, “power” came less from the bush than from the metropole”

However van Dijk (2001) observes that Dr Banda would regularly dance with the *Nyau* in Lilongwe, the nation’s capital. He was therefore not destroying the validity of the spiritual, but appropriating it into his rule. The *Nyau*’s relationship with village was questioned as the government challenged the local spiritual supremacy of headmen. However the state did not refute the existence of the supernatural as much as assert mastery over it.

Dr Banda’s regime kept in place the colonial ban on accusing a person of witchcraft. Despite this, courts under both his government and his democratic successors have imprisoned people who were perceived to be witches (Byrne 2011). In the 1960’s Dr Banda banished Chikanga, a famous witch-hunter, who combined aspects of the supernatural with Christian ritual. However he returned to the country in the 1980s, seemingly under the aegis of the Malawian Government (Auslander 1993). Witchcraft rumours and accusations in Malawi increasingly involve state employees. They respond to these by admonishing “ignorant” villagers but simultaneously employ anti-witchcraft techniques. Malawi’s state may therefore seem to have some mystic element, where local witchcraft is neutered by metropolitan actors who may obtain their wealth and power through their supernatural means. In some cases, their wealth is tied to their relationship with international donors and development.

Many Malawians understand the wealth of donors and foreign nations to be generated through the supernatural. Malawians do not believe that white people perform witchcraft in the same way villagers do⁵. However, they interpret donors’ actions in ways which reinforce witchcraft beliefs. For example, after independence and continuing into the nation’s democratic era, donors have frequently pressured the government to achieve human rights goals (Englund 2006). They have lobbied the nation’s president to release people imprisoned under anti-gay laws but not those accused of witchcraft (McNamara 2014). Similarly, visiting preachers from the west often convolve Malawian understandings of witchcraft with their own warnings about Satan (Van Der Meer 2011).

Englund (2006):170 claims that many Malawians believe that westerners use poor Malawians’ body parts for a variety of supernatural purposes that help to maintain their seemingly infinite wealth. They believe that the Malawian government and wealthy citizens provide these body parts as a way to insulate themselves from the nation’s increasing economic stagnation. The combination of the neutering of local witchcraft and the association of the supernatural with the state, and the state’s relationship with the west, has

⁵ in fact many Malawians see this as a core difference between Africans and white people (see Englund 2007b)

implications for Malawi's development narrative. Rural Malawians understand development as provided by powerful external actors; typically international donors, the government or wealthy relatives who live in the city (Kishindo 2000). In this manner, development may be enabled by the supernatural, yet further diminishes the power of local witchcraft.

Development in Malawi

Ethnographic evidence from Malawi challenges literature which views witchcraft beliefs as a manifestation of unease relating to development. When examining witchcraft accusations in the Malawi's Dezda region, Englund (1996) observed that the community had been exposed to capitalist markets, and the inequalities these necessitate, since the precolonial era. He claimed that individuals were not accused of witchcraft for acquiring wealth from the market, but instead when they failed to share this wealth throughout the community. Similarly, Peters (2002) explores how intra-family conflict over land in Southern Malawi cumulated in witchcraft accusations. Both communities used ideas and understandings about the supernatural to communicate and negotiate social and economic change. However, these accusations utilized narratives and expectations relating to family roles that had been present in the community since the colonial era, rather than that merely emerged as a response to development. Further, these Malawians would not have conceptualized these changes as development. Instead they perceive development to be infrastructural advancement brought by outsiders.

Malawi's primary development narrative is predicated upon an acceptance of the nation's economic dependence. Development is translated nation-wide to *chitukuko* a chiChewa (the nation's largest ethno-linguistic group) word meaning change for the better (Msukwa and Taylor 2011). This term is included in the slogan of all Malawian political parties and providing development is how these parties obtain and maintain electoral legitimacy. During his dictatorial rule between 1966 and 1994, Dr Banda framed development as rural infrastructure projects (Vajja and White 2008). In these, a village would provide free labour and the government would organise physical resources, like bricks for school buildings, gravel for a road or poles and wires for electricity. To this day building projects where villagers do manual labour and resources are provided by either the government or international organisations remain the primary way most rural Malawians conceptualize development (Kishindo 2003). These Malawians are rarely excited by the results of the development projects they are asked to partake in, but welcome them due to a lack of other options and opportunities.

While Malawians differentiate between development organised by their government and by donors, they believe the former is paid for by international aid. Many Malawians see their

government as entirely dependent on foreign donors and view the development provided to them by their international patrons (especially British citizens) as a moral right (Msukwa and Taylor 2011). These people may conceptualize this development as paid for through the supernatural forces which provide their government's power and the seemingly incomprehensible riches of western nations. In this context, Malawi's development narrative is intimately tied to a supernatural where state-based magic supersedes local Malawian witchcraft.

(Under)Development, Witchcraft and Malawi's Elite

Normative understandings of the relationship between development and witchcraft must be reconsidered in the context of Malawian experiences of both. Lax reading of Malawian witchcraft dialogues could support the belief that Malawians turn to witchcraft due to their distrust of science and technology (see Ngong 2012). However Malawians' expectations for development hamper this reading; they understand electricity and lighting as development and expect to be provided these by donors - a group whose wealth may be supernaturally obtained. Englund (1996)'s observation that Dezda residents have always utilized the markets problematizes the common assumption that the increased marketization that comes with development encourages witchcraft accusations (see Harries 2010; Leistner 2014). Rather, growing inequality is symbolized and accentuated by a narrative where development is associated with a powerful external supernatural, at the expense of local witchcraft.

Malawians do not conceptualize witchcraft as the failings of development (see Fisiy and Geschire 2001) nor will increased development assuage their fears of the supernatural (see Fisiy and Geschiere 1991). Instead narratives of development and witchcraft combine in a manner that further disempowers rural Malawians and increases their extraversion⁶ to non-local developers. Malawians' desire for development that is paid for by the state and international donors is more easily justified if it is tied to a belief that these bodies receive wealth through the supernatural. Simultaneously, increased development, in the form of externally provisioned infrastructure, may increase the perceived link between development and the supernatural; with buildings provided by wealth from outside the village juxtaposed against the poverty of rural Malawians. The seemingly supernatural wealth of the state and donors can be tied to the state's perceived suppression of local magic in a way which encourages dependency. Rural Malawians may understand themselves as both economically and mystically unable to compete with the west. If they believe that western

⁶ See Bayart (1989) the community exploiting the resource of dependence as a moral justification for assistance.

powers obtain their wealth through the supernatural exploitation of poor Malawians, it is both moral and practical to rely on donors for development.

In this context Kuman (2011)'s call for anti-witchcraft education and increased enforcement of anti-witchcraft law is inappropriate in a Malawian context. He suggests that if these take place in conjunction with improved standards of health and education then witchcraft accusations are likely to decrease. However in Malawi these policies may be interpreted as an increased control over the supernatural by the state, or a crackdown on local witchcraft while the government gains additional control over mystic forces. If anti-witchcraft education is provided by donors instead, a similar result; villagers perceiving an assault on local witchcraft by these supernaturally aligned donors, is likely.

Englund (2006):170 claims that:

“rumours [about the supernatural relationship between the Malawian government and donors are] easily dismissed as superstition by those who do not live under the conditions in which they emerge”.

The relationship between witchcraft and development in Malawi must be understood through examining the specific causes of these witchcraft beliefs. It is not unreasonable for the Dezda villagers Englund observed to conceptualize the failure to provide to one's clients as witchcraft in an environment where the state maintains its legitimacy through its suppression of local witches (Kaspin 1993); its links to a broader (and in some ways acceptable) supernatural (Englund 2006); and through political patronage (Gilman 2002). More importantly, it is manifestly hypocritical for western developers and academics to call for a reduction in witchcraft accusations without addressing their role in encouraging Malawians to believe in the supernatural.

Malawian's belief that the difference between their nation's wealth and that of donor countries likely has some supernatural element reflects the physical conditions in which they live and "development's" obfuscation of how the global north generates and perpetuates their under-development. Britain's GDP is 2.52 trillion US dollars, while Malawi's is 3.7 billion. This means that as well as living twenty years longer, any British citizen lives on approximately 400 times the wealth of a Malawian (The World Bank 2012). It is not unreasonable for Malawians to conceptualize this fantastic gap in terms of the supernatural, especially when Britain is conceptualized as a benevolent donator to the nation.

Donor, academics and NGO staff who wish to discourage Malawians to conceptualize development in terms of the supernatural should highlight the mundane forces that have made both the British and the nation's exploitative government rich and which continue to

contribute to rural Malawians' poverty. Were Malawians to conceptualize the wealth of the international and national elite as generated through exploitative colonial relationships that encouraged urbanization in Britain while suppressing it in Africa (Blackburn 2011); Britain's support for the nation's cold war dictator, who stole huge amounts of the nation's wealth, which he then turned into a company he owned and floated on the British stock exchange (van Donge 2002); and the continued effects of climate change on an almost exclusively agrarian economy; they would likely no longer conceptualize development as gifts from external actors, nor understand these developers as supernaturally rich. They would likely also have other places to make witchcraft accusations rather than at others in their village.

Conclusion

Witchcraft accusations are too frequently interpreted as marginalised Africans' response to modernity and development. Particularly problematic is the utilization of this narrative by development academics and practitioners. They operationalise witchcraft narratives as either uninformed resistance to development or legitimate concerns about increasing inequality that will be appeased as progress continues.

This paper detailed the creation of dominant understandings of the relationship between witchcraft and development and then rejected these. It began by detailing how ethnographic explorations of specific witchcraft accusations have been collapsed into a literature that conceptualizes all witchcraft narratives as reactions to modernity and as impediments to development. It then unpacked Malawian conceptualizations of the supernatural and of development. It foregrounded that witchcraft accusations emerge in accordance with specific local conditions and national discourses. In Malawi these included the actions of the nation's elite and white internationals. The paper also highlighted that Malawians primarily conceptualize development as externally financed infrastructure and that some believe that this infrastructure is paid for by a relationship between their government and donors that may be predicated upon the supernatural.

Conceptualising witchcraft beliefs from various African communities as ill-conceived reactions to development dismisses their role as challenges to national and international elites. Malawian understandings that their government and donors engage in a supernatural alliance that exploits the rural poor reflects both the actions of these elites and valid criticisms of the development they offer rural Malawians. Both the government and international Christian groups have utilized Malawians' beliefs in the supernatural to reinforce their legitimacy. This fact, when combined with the grotesque and growing division of wealth both within the country and between it and its donors encourages a belief that

these actors have supernatural powers. This belief should be read as an indictment of the failings of the nation's development narrative, not a call for its increased expediency.

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