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is dedicated to*

*Cherry Gertzel OA (1928– 2015)*

*Former Editor of the Australasian Review of African  
Studies; Founding member and former President of  
the African Studies Association of Australasia and the  
Pacific*

*For your inspiration and dedication to African  
Studies.*

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# Development, Witchcraft and Malawi's Elite

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## **Abstract**

Among the myriad witchcraft narratives which operate in rural Malawi is the understanding of the supernatural as empowering the nation's elite and its international donors. This narrative clashes with academic and other literature that ignores contextual understandings of the supernatural and reduces witchcraft accusations to a resistance to development, and leads to the belief (on the part of some academics and many development practitioners) that the solution to witchcraft accusations lies in more development. Conversely, however, this particular Malawian intersection of development and witchcraft/supernatural narratives creates a situation where further development can inadvertently entrench both rural Malawians' renderings of the supernatural and their disempowerment vis-à-vis donors and technocrats. To support this claim, the article builds upon works detailing the intimate relationship between witchcraft and development and foregrounds the Malawi case to show how those invested in development may reinforce witchcraft beliefs.

## **Introduction**

This article begins with a summary of academic and practitioner attitudes regarding the relationship between witchcraft and development. It will briefly recount some common anthropological treatments of the supernatural; highlighting that many ethnographic studies focus on simply explaining specific witchcraft accusations, while another normative body of literature conflates narratives about the supernatural with responses to increased modernisation. It will then detail how witchcraft is treated in development-focused literature, differentiating between works that see witchcraft as simultaneously an

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impediment and reaction to development (the solution to which is more development) and ethnographic works which explain the interplay between witchcraft, development and local and national circumstances.

This article will compare common themes in the literature on witchcraft and development with an historic unpacking of Malawian development and associated 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 powerful relationship with the supernatural. It will then consider how this has influenced the nation's development discourse; supporting a narrative where 'development' is conceived as infrastructure projects financed through the potentially supernatural wealth of donors and the government. The article concludes by claiming that this relationship between witchcraft and development both increases rural Malawians' dependence and insulates those who benefit from it.

### **Witchcraft in 'Africa'**

Some 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 made manifest through witchcraft accusations, and the economic circumstances in which these accusations occur. Problematically, works that operationalise the relationship between witchcraft and development utilise supernatural stories from varied African cultures to make generalisations about how 'African',<sup>2</sup> witchcraft beliefs impede development (see Harries, 2010; Kohnert, 1996). These works rarely unpack the historical, economic and social conditions unique to any witchcraft accusation. This creates a body of literature that is often prescriptive, contradictory and that silences the role of the powerful in encouraging witchcraft beliefs.

Ethnographers have observed the use of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations by myriad demographics across varied African societies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A core role of this paper is to problematise 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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

The first and most famous of these is Evans-Pritchard's (1937) study of the western Sudanese Azande. In this he argues that witchcraft accusations are both epistemologically and sociologically rational. They are epistemologically rational in that the witchcraft beliefs were indicative of the conflict-ridden interdependence of Azande society, and sociologically rational because these accusations fostered cohesion. Observations of witchcraft accusations necessarily take place in specific geographic, cultural and social locations with differing cosmologies and ecologies that enable and guide each accusation. For example, Colson (2000) examines how, in Zambian history, Gwembe creations of the family and changing intra-household power dynamics guide witchcraft accusations against a small number of Gwembe fathers. Further, Dolan (2002) observed an increase in witchcraft claims by husbands against wives when female-initiated horticulture increased in significance for rural Kenyans.

Some common underlying factors have been highlighted by ethnographies examining modern witchcraft accusations. These include: the disintegration of traditional society; apprehension over increased inequality; and a distaste for an imposed, westernised market system (see Austen, 1993; Golooba-Mutebi, 2005; Masquelier, 1993; Mgbako and Glenn, 2011). Global powers and national elites are critical to all these underlying factors. However, the simultaneous role of national elites in encouraging people to conceptualise these changes through the lens of the supernatural is rarely explicated and almost never foregrounded.

Instead, significant academic discourse about witchcraft views its 're-emergence' as a response to 'odernity'<sup>4</sup>. This field of analysis understands an increased interest among Africans in witchcraft as a signifier for the contradictions and tensions that emanate from urbanisation and globalisation (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), and see African discussions about the

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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 daughters-in-law of being witches and fear orphans that are bewitched (Auslander, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> 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)

supernatural as a way for the marginalised to assert control over a rapidly changing world and comprehend shifting relations between the local and global (Auslander, 1993).

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

The posited relationship between modernity and witchcraft has been infrequently critiqued. Ferguson (2006), and others following him (Ngong, 2012), have questioned whether African utilisation of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations are a way to engage with modernity or rather a response to the *lack* of modernity on the continent. More importantly for this article, 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 both understand and respond to 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 conceptualise their unease by recourse to the supernatural.

### **Development and Witchcraft**

While many of the anthropologists already mentioned touch on the relationship between witchcraft and development, there is also a distinct body of literature which overtly explores this relationship. These works can be simplistically divided into two: the first is a practitioner-and-economist-oriented tradition that sees witchcraft as an irrational impediment to development, while the second takes place in an anthropology-of-development framework, which unpacks more thoroughly the situations which create an intimate relationship between understandings of witchcraft and development.

As stated, many academics and development practitioners frame witchcraft as an impediment to development. This development is conceptualised through a modernist paradigm. It is associated with presumed improvements 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 a belief in the supernatural impedes development activities and should therefore be discouraged. For example, Kohnert (1996) 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 the utilisation of witchcraft beliefs for promoting development. (p. 1350)

This discourse further presents supernatural beliefs as incompatible with development because they are seen to encourage anti-scientific thought (Ngong, 2012).

Other authors believe that witchcraft claims signify Africans’ rejection of the individualist hard work and resulting inequality these authors see as necessary for (modernist) development. Leistner (2014) 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. (p. 58)

Authors in this tradition (see Harries, 2010; Kuman, 2011) interpret witchcraft accusations as jealous responses to individual success. They see intra-community discussions about witchcraft as discouraging individuals from investing in their own advancement and therefore hampering liberalising, modern development.

Many development practitioners subscribe to this view. Smith (2008), when interacting with Kenyan development professionals, states that:

He [a civil servant for the ministry of development] informed me that he understood his work to be undoing the terror and inequities that these witches had engendered by establishing development projects (such

as a vegetable cooperative) in communities that had been abused or sidelined by witches. (p. 74)

Similarly, Bornstein (2001) observes that Zimbabwean NGO workers see part of their role as banishing 'traditional beliefs', yet are simultaneously concerned that the economic development they bring will encourage witchcraft accusations.

Authors and practitioners who see witchcraft as impeding development prescribe 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 push through this discomfort/disillusionment and thereby diminish the appeal of witchcraft (Kuman, 2011).

This narrative neither considers legitimate critiques of the development offered to rural African communities, nor how the actions of the powerful encourage and interact with beliefs in the supernatural. In this context, ethnographic work problematises the perceived antithesis between witchcraft and development. These works instead consider how manifestations of witchcraft (and the supernatural more generally) are embedded specific local historical and social circumstances. The most significant work in this field is Smith's (2008) *Bewitching Developing*. Smith claims that witchcraft in Kenya is the inversion of development. It is simultaneously understood as the opposite of development and an externality arising from development activities. Building upon Wilson's (1951:313) conceptualisation of witchcraft as a 'socially standardised nightmare', Smith claims that witchcraft rumours serve as hieroglyphs that provoke action towards a positive future by showing the consequences of doing or being surrounded by evil. Other works in this area include Green's (2007) *Priests, Witches and Power* and Siegel's (2006) *Naming the Witch* (which is an ethnography of Java rather than Africa). These argue that witchcraft accusations distract villagers from more significant causes of their disempowerment and that witchcraft narratives are a response to a fear of social disintegration, respectively.

Understandings of development are similarly embedded in local histories and societies. As I will now explain, rural Malawians conceptualise development as infrastructure paid for by powerful outsiders (Msukwa and Taylor, 2011). These outsiders, in particular the

national government and westerners, appropriate the supernatural (primarily unconsciously) to maintain their control over the rural population (see Englund, 2006; Kaspin, 1993; van Dijk, 2001). In this context, further development may rationally (in the Evans-Pritchard sense) entrench both the belief in the supernatural and the understanding that development is provided by powerful external actors whom the community has little control over.

### **Witchcraft in Malawi**

Malawian beliefs about appropriate ways to live are commonly negotiated and communicated through the prism of witchcraft. Witchcraft, and the supernatural more generally, has been used in myriad ways, including serving as a form of social regulation. It has frequently been utilised to negotiate the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. For example, since the pre-colonial period, village headmen<sup>5</sup> 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). Simultaneously, colonial era villagers could communicate their displeasure at their leaders through vesting power in quasi-religious cults (Waite, 1987). 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 that of people transforming into snakes after or for sexual indiscretions. This symbol was also used in intra-community witchcraft accusations, often to do with theft or dishonesty, 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, a law which is still made use of today (Mgbako and Glenn, 2011; Van Der Meer, 2013).

Missionaries in Malawi both influenced and were guided by witchcraft beliefs. They, and other western actors, both legitimised the belief in witchcraft and foreshadowed the understanding that western imports, like Christianity, were more powerful than local beliefs. The links Malawians posit between witchcraft and religion are often

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<sup>5</sup> Currently the lowest rank of administrative chief

contradictory; with Christianity being used to both protect against witchcraft and deny the legitimacy of believing in witches. Christianity has been both 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 already free of witches (van Dijk, 2001). Traditional healers as late as the 1980s would combine symbolism and legitimacy from various African churches with mystic healing practices. They were accused of being witches, yet were used to defend against them (Van Der Meer, 2011). In the modern era, Pentecostal preachers adapt long-standing Malawian beliefs by claiming an association between Malawian spirits (like *Nyau*) and Satan in order to give their sermons gravitas (Van Der Meer, 2011). Further, accusations of Satanism often rely on similar tropes to witchcraft narratives (Englund, 2007a).

Malawians did not begin (or restart) utilising witchcraft claims as a response to modernity. Instead specific social strategies and negotiating practices have made use of witchcraft claims since pre-colonial times. Various beliefs about the spiritual have interacted with material realities in Malawi in ways that frame the meaning of various economic circumstances and relationships. For instance, witchcraft accusations among Malawi's Yawo now caused by increased land scarcity, whereas the past they were frequently caused by accidental deaths (Dicks 2013). This framing of meaning also applies to the relationship between the rural majority and the national and global elite.

Ethnographic evidence from Malawi challenges the literature that views witchcraft beliefs as a manifestation of development-related discomfort. When examining witchcraft accusations in Malawi's Dedza region, Englund (1996) observed that the community had been exposed to intra-regional markets, and associated economic inequality, since the precolonial era. He claimed that individuals were not accused of witchcraft for acquiring wealth from the market, but rather when they failed to share this wealth throughout the community. Similarly, Peters (2002) explored how intra-family conflict over land in Southern Malawi has often culminated in witchcraft accusations. Both communities in these examples used ideas and understandings about the supernatural to communicate and negotiate social and economic change. However, these accusations used narratives and expectations relating to family roles that had been present in the community since the colonial era, rather than merely emerged as a response to development.

## The Malawian State and Witchcraft

The Malawian state has a complex relationship with the supernatural. The state has interfered with village rituals that have a supernatural element and it has not decriminalised the act of accusing a person of witchcraft. However, both under a dictatorial president and during democratic rule, Malawi's government has engaged with witchcraft in a manner that encourages villagers to believe in the supernatural and to perceive the government as having power over the local supernatural. Dr Hastings 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. Their dance was typically performed at initiation rites, where younger men and women become adult members of the village 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 villagers, the Malawian government began interfering with *Nyau* dances in the 1960s. It would identify the most disruptive members of a *Nyau* group, strip them of their masks and issue them with fines or prison sentences. Kaspin (1993) argued 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. (p. 54)

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 villagers was thrown into question by the government in order to challenge the local spiritual supremacy of headmen. However, the state did not refute the existence of the supernatural as much as assert its mastery over it.

As stated earlier, Dr Banda's regime kept in place the colonial law against accusing a person of witchcraft. Indeed, courts under both his government and his democratic successors' have imprisoned people who were accused of being 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 are increasingly directed toward state employees. State employees and other Malawian development professionals respond to these by admonishing the 'ignorant' villagers, while simultaneously employing anti-witchcraft techniques (Anders, 2002). This in turn implies to villagers that Malawi's state may have some mystic element, a claim supported by Englund's (2007b) observation that rumours about the supernatural power of government employees and elites are frequently played by the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), the only national radio station. Combining Dr Banda's treatment of the *Nyau* with these rumours enables narratives where local witchcraft is neutered by metropolitan actors who may obtain their wealth and power through supernatural means. As will be shown, this urban wealth is often tied to a relationship with international donors and development.

Many Malawians understand the wealth of donors and foreign nations to have supernatural origins. Malawians do not believe that white people perform witchcraft in the same way that villagers do<sup>6</sup>; 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 Malawi's government about its human rights record (Englund, 2006). They have lobbied the nation's president to release people imprisoned under anti-gay laws but they have not lobbied on behalf of those accused of witchcraft. Through their seeming tolerance of witchcraft accusations, donor nations have reinforced their legitimacy. (McNamara 2014). Legitimising behaviours also arise in the form of visiting preachers from the west who appropriate Malawian understandings of witchcraft to incorporate into their own warnings about Satan (Van Der Meer, 2011).

Englund (2006) 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

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<sup>6</sup> In fact many Malawians see this as a core difference between Africans and white people (see Englund 2007b).

the Malawian government and wealthy citizens use the police force to dismember poor Malawians, and sell their body parts to westerners. These sales allow the elite to protect their lifestyle as the nation grows poorer. 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 implications for Malawi's development narrative.

### **Malawian Narratives of Development**

Malawi's primary development narrative is predicated upon an acceptance of the nation's economic dependence. Development is translated nation-wide into *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 essentially 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 (now paid), and where resources are provided by either the government or international organisations, remain the primary way most rural Malawians conceptualise development (Kishindo, 2003).

The most common other form of development that rural Malawians receive is training. This is often programs like 'AIDS awareness education' or 'wilderness conservation training'. Swilder and Watkins (2009) question whether these trainings have any concrete results, other than providing cash to participants in the form of travel allowances and cash grants that vastly exceed what most rural Malawians spend. Both infrastructure and training projects can be seen as a form of international welfare, where small amounts of cash are transferred to rural Malawians from the global north through the auspices of a project. 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 the government and by donors, they often perceive the former to be 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). To reiterate this

specific witchcraft narrative (one of many that permeate rural Malawi): the government is resistant to local witchcraft, while seemingly associated with a more powerful supernatural which is tied to an alliance between the nation's elite and westerners who obtain their wealth through the supernatural exploitation of the globe's poor. It is therefore rational for Malawians to conceptualise transnational governance (and development) as paid for through the supernatural forces that provide their government's power and the seemingly incomprehensible riches of western nations, a belief alluded to by Englund (2006). In this context, Malawi's development narrative is intimately tied to a supernatural wherein state-based magic overpowers local Malawian witchcraft; a narrative that effectively disempowers rural Malawians who desire either political change or a greater grassroots involvement in development.

### **(Under)Development, Witchcraft and Malawi's Elite**

The specific witchcraft narrative detailed above implies that further development can both reinforce witchcraft beliefs and entrench development as the responsibility (and power) of international donors and a small technocratic elite. I do not wish to claim that this is the most pervasive belief within Malawi's witchcraft discourse. Rather it is one of many ways Malawians conceptualise and utilise witchcraft narratives; it is, however, both 'epistemologically and sociologically rational' (Evans-Pritchard, 1937).

A superficial reading of Malawian witchcraft narratives could engender the belief that Malawians turn to witchcraft due to their distrust of science and technology (see Ngong, 2012). Notwithstanding the earlier arguments made against this reading, it also comes into conflict with Malawians' own expectations for development; they understand electricity and lighting as development and expect to be provided these by donors. Further, as discussed earlier, Englund's (1996) observation that Dedza residents have always used regional markets problematises the common assumption that increased marketisation encourages witchcraft accusations (see Harries, 2010; Leistner, 2014). Rather, growing inequality is symbolised and accentuated by a narrative where development is associated with a powerful, external force, operating at the expense of the locally-embedded supernatural.

Malawians do not always use witchcraft to conceptualise development driven inequality (see Fisiy and Geschire 2001) nor will increased development assuage their fears of the supernatural (see Fisiy

and Geschiere, 1991). Instead the specific narratives of development and witchcraft I have explored combine in a manner that further disempowers rural Malawians and increases their dependency on non-local developers. Malawians' desire for development paid for by the state and international donors is more easily justified if it is tied to a belief that these bodies receive their wealth through the supernatural. Simultaneously, increased development, in the form of externally provided infrastructure, may increase the perceived link between development and witchcraft when buildings provided by wealth from outside the village are juxtaposed with the poverty of rural Malawians. The seemingly supernatural wealth of the state and donors can further be tied to the state's perceived suppression of local magic, encouraging dependency. Rural Malawians may understand themselves as both economically and mystically unable to compete with the west. Therefore, if Malawians believe that western powers obtain their wealth through exploiting them supernaturally, it is both moral and practical, in their view, for these Malawians to rely on donors for development.

This brings into question Kuman (2011)'s call for anti-witchcraft education and increased enforcement of anti-witchcraft law as appropriate to the Malawian context. He suggests that if these two measures take place in conjunction with improved standards of health and general education then witchcraft accusations are likely to decrease. However, in Malawi one of the many ways these policies may be interpreted is as an increased control over the supernatural by the state, or a crackdown on local witchcraft while the government gains additional mastery over mystic forces. If anti-witchcraft education is provided by donors instead, a similar result is likely; that is, villagers perceiving an assault on local witchcraft by supernaturally empowered donors. Englund (2006) 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. (p. 170)

As put forward by this article, the relationship between witchcraft and development in Malawi must be understood through an examination of the specific causes underpinning these witchcraft beliefs. It is not unreasonable for the Dedza villagers, that Englund (1996) observed, to conceptualise the failure to provide to one's family 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). It is also futile for western developers and academics to call for a reduction in witchcraft accusations without addressing how the roles played by various western actors support and encourage Malawian notions of the supernatural.

Malawian rumours that the cause of the difference between their nation's wealth and that of donor countries likely has some supernatural element is a reflection of the physical conditions in which they live and 'development's' obfuscation of how the global north generates and perpetuates Malawi's under-development. Britain's GDP is US\$2.52 trillion, while Malawi's is US\$3.7 billion. This means that, as well as living twenty years longer, any British citizen lives on approximately 40 times the wealth of a Malawian (World Bank, 2012). It is epistemologically rational for Malawians to conceptualise this fantastic gap in terms of the supernatural, when almost no other explanation is made available to adequately describe the difference in life quality between rural Malawians and the white people they encounter. This witchcraft narrative is also sociologically reasonable, as it shifts responsibility for the costs of development to the national and international elite.

Donors, academics and NGO staff who wish to discourage Malawians from conceptualising 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. The wealth of the international and national elite can be understood to have been generated through: exploitative relationships that encouraged urbanisation in Britain while generating African nations that may never be self-sufficient (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. Malawians who understood their underdevelopment in this manner would likely no longer conceptualise development as gifts from external actors, nor understand these developers as supernaturally rich.

## **Conclusion**

Witchcraft accusations are too frequently interpreted as marginalised Africans' response to modernity and development. Particularly

problematic is the adoption of this narrative by development academics and practitioners, who operationalise witchcraft narratives as either uninformed resistance to development or legitimate concerns about increasing inequality that will be appeased as progress continues.

This article detailed the creation of practitioner and economic understandings of the relationship between witchcraft and development and made arguments against these. It then unpacked specific Malawian conceptualisations of the supernatural and of development. It foregrounded that witchcraft accusations emerge in accordance with specific local conditions and national discourses. In Malawi these contexts have included the actions of the nation's elite and white internationals. The relationship between this specific witchcraft narrative and the nation's primary development discourse has enabled the contextually rational belief that development is provided by donors and technocrats, who supernaturally exploit Malawi's poor. As argued, this understanding is one of the many narratives which entrenches the dependence of the rural poor on development's elite.

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