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# Witchcraft Accusations Amongst The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Malawi and Modes of Dealing With Them

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## Abstract

Although the practice of witchcraft and making witchcraft accusations are illegal in Malawi, many Malawians believe that witchcraft continues to flourish in most areas of the country, including amongst the Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi. The disparity between the Witchcraft Act of the Laws of Malawi and current Yawo beliefs and practices means that there are no lawful means for resolving such accusations to the satisfaction of the Yawo community at large, and which simultaneously protect the accused. In light of the current review of the *Witchcraft Act* in Malawi and the ongoing debate about its relevance to the current situation, this article presents some past and present modes of dealing with witchcraft accusations used by the Yawo. Second, it examines these modes for their ability to resolve witchcraft accusations, protect the accused, and restore both victims and perpetrators to their communities.

## Introduction

There is an ongoing debate about how to deal with accusations of witchcraft and sorcery in Malawi. This is due to there being a disparity between the beliefs of the majority of Malawians about the practice and efficacy of witchcraft and sorcery, and the laws of the country.<sup>1</sup> National newspapers, such as *The Daily Times* and *The Nation*, report regularly on incidents associated with witchcraft that take place in the country. They report incidents of children and adults being killed for being witches, children and adults being mutilated for body parts and

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<sup>1</sup> According to a study by the National Statistics Office (2008), “76% of sampled Malawian households said that they know of witches in their community.” Charles Chilimampungwa, George Thindwa, “The Extent and Nature of Witchcraft-Based Violence against Children, Women and the Elderly in Malawi,” (Zomba: University of Malawi, 2011), 9. [www.norway.mw/Global/SiteFolders/weblii/Final%20Witchcraft%20Report.pdf](http://www.norway.mw/Global/SiteFolders/weblii/Final%20Witchcraft%20Report.pdf). In his study of the beliefs and practices of sorcery by the Chewa people of eastern Zambia, Marwick says that, “belief in sorcery is almost universal.” M.G. Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting, A Study of Northern Rhodesian Cewa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), 19 & 72.

organs, people being arrested for exhuming bodies, the trading of body parts, and the occasional crashes of ‘witch aeroplanes.’<sup>2</sup>

Despite witchcraft being recognised widely by the majority of Malawians as a real ‘occult phenomenon,’<sup>3</sup> it is not recognised under the Laws of Malawi as such. *The Witchcraft Act* (1968, Cap. 7.02) of the Laws of Malawi, established in 1911 under British colonial rule, does not recognise witchcraft as a real phenomenon, but prohibits people from representing themselves (pretending) as a “witch” or “wizard,” accusing others of being a “witch” or “wizard,” employing “witchfinders,” and participating or instigating a “trial by ordeal.”<sup>4</sup> The discrepancies between people’s beliefs and practices and the Laws of Malawi have been a cause for debate as some call for the law to be reformed so that the state recognises witchcraft as a real activity, while others call for it to remain unchanged in order to protect people from such accusations.<sup>5</sup> The debate regarding witchcraft, witchcraft accusations and their effect on society is also a current and critical issue in other countries in the region and throughout the continent.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “A 10 year old boy is battling for his life at Queens Central Hospital after surviving a malicious attack resulting in both eyes being gouged and private parts cut...” Wezzie Nkhoma-Somba, “Boy Alive With No Private Parts,” *The Daily Times*, 10 May 2010, pp. 1, 3; Caroline Somanje, “3 Beat Boy, 12, to Death Accuse Him of Witchcraft,” *The Nation*, 27 January 2011. Yamikani Simutowe, “Witchcraft Plane Crashes, Suspect in Police Custody,” *The Daily Times*, 19 December, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘occult phenomenon’ to refer to forces or powers that are used for destructive, constructive or productive purposes, resulting from interaction with the spirit world and/or by the use of other forms of magic. I use the term occult because, like Geschiere, I believe that it is more neutral than other terms, such as supernatural, non-natural or magic, and allows for the ambiguity that occult power is used for both good and evil purposes in a Yawo context. See Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (University of Virginia Press, 1997), 12ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Laws of Malawi*, “CAP 7.02- Vol. 2, Witchcraft Act of 1911” (Zomba: Government Printer, 1968). See also the Law Commission Review Programme Issues Paper, which states that, “The Act assumes that witchcraft does not exist.” Isaac Nkhono Songea, “Witchcraft Act Review Programme Issues Paper,” *Malawi Law Commission*, April 2009, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac Nkhono Songea, “Witchcraft Act Review Programme Issues Paper,” *Malawi Law Commission*, April 2009, pp. 5, 6. Chilimampungwa and Thindwa, “The Extent and Nature of Witchcraft-Based Violence against Children, Women and the Elderly in Malawi,” 77, 78.

<sup>6</sup> See N. Bussien, F. d’Ovidio, L. Graziani, K. McCreery, L. Marfisi, B. Ramaboea, F. Ross, “Breaking The Spell: Responding to Witchcraft Accusations Against

Modernists predicted that with development, education and urbanisation, witchcraft beliefs and practices would recede to being ‘African traditions’ of the past.<sup>7</sup> This however, is not the case. Aleksandra Cimpric for one says, “Far from fading away, these social and cultural representations have been maintained, transformed and adapted to contemporary realities and needs.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, some suggest that such practices, amongst the young particularly, are not past traditions, but “modern inventions,” or in the least “reinvented” ones.<sup>9</sup> The main problems with such arguments is that they ignore past anthropological studies, which show that current witchcraft and sorcery beliefs and practices are not new inventions, but reconfigurations from the past that are found in rural and urban areas of Africa today. By looking at past and present beliefs and practices of the Muslim Yawo<sup>10</sup> of Southern Malawi it can be seen that witchcraft and sorcery are not new, but ‘enduring traditions.’<sup>11</sup> Moreover, their witchcraft beliefs and

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Children,” in *New Issues in Refugee Research* (Geneva: UNHCR, Research Paper No, 197, 2011); Aleksandra Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft, An Anthropological Study of Contemporary Practices in Africa* (Dakar: UNICEF WCARO, 2010) [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/1930\\_1279627028\\_unicef-apr2010.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1930_1279627028_unicef-apr2010.pdf); Tony Tate, *Democratic Republic of Congo, What Future? Street Children in The Democratic Republic of Congo, vol. 18*, ed. Karen Stauss (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft*, 1; Bussien, d’Ovidio, Graziani, McCreery, Marfisi, Ramaboea and Ross, “Breaking The Spell: Responding to Witchcraft Accusations Against Children,” 7; Javier Aguilar Molina, “The Invention Of Child Witches In The Democratic Republic Of Congo, Social Cleansing, Religious Commerce And The Difficulties Of Being A Parent In An Urban Culture” (*Save The Children*, 2003-2005), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Historically the Yawo’s name has been represented differently due to the absence of a standardized orthography of their language. Different representations include Wayao, W̄ayao, Ajawo, Ajao’wa, Yawo, Chiyao, Ciyao, Ciyawo, Achawa, Adsawa, Adsoa, Ajawa, Ayawa, Ayo, Djao, Haiiao, Hiao, Hyao, Jao, Veiao, Wajao. Yohanna B. Abdallah, *Chiikala Cha Wayao*, London: Frank Cass, 1919, p. 8, and [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_country.asp?name=MZ](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=MZ). For this article I have chosen to follow the rules of the Ciyawo Standardised Orthography set by the Centre for Language Studies, Zomba, in 2005, which indicates that the tribe’s name should be represented orthographically as Yawo. The Center for Language Studies and E + V Publications, *The Orthography of Ciyawo*, Chileka, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Harri Englund suggests that there is greater public concern about children becoming witches in urban areas than there are in rural areas of Malawi, which he says is possibly fuelled by poverty, high-density living and the presence of strangers. My own research amongst the Yawo indicates that the rural Yawo share similar

practices have not been dislodged by the pressing in of ‘modernity’ or the adoption of Islam, but are being adapted and integrated because they are part of the majority’s worldview and continuing reality.<sup>12</sup> As part of the on-going debate regarding witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, I will present some past and present modes used by the Yawo for dealing with witchcraft accusations that I have observed in the course of extensive fieldwork in southern Malawi. Second, I will examine these modes for their ability to resolve witchcraft accusations, to protect the accused, and restore both the victims and the accused to their communities.

### **Witchcraft and Sorcery**

In this article I will mainly deal with Yawo notions and practices that use destructive occult power, usually referred to by the Yawo as *usawî* (witchcraft), and those who use it as *asawî* (witches).<sup>13</sup> The Yawo’s use of occult power for curative and productive purposes is outside the scope of this article and will only be dealt with in passing, as are most non-public methods of dealing with witchcraft in a Yawo context.

### **Differentiating Witchcraft And Sorcery in the Yawo Context**

For the Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi the lines of distinction between witchcraft and sorcery are often blurred as the two lay on a continuum where one can flow into being the other. Where one changes and becomes the other depends upon the nature of the occult power, the intention of the actor and whether the actor is seen as a victim or a perpetrator. The Yawo term *usawî*, witchcraft, is used by the Yawo for activities involving destructive occult power and the term *msawî*, witch, is applied to those who use destructive occult power and who kill for pleasure, because of a hunger for human flesh, as well as

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concerns with urban Malawians about children becoming witches. Harri Englund, “Witchcraft and the Limits of Mass Mediation in Malawi,” *The Journal of The Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13, No. 2, (2007), 300.

<sup>12</sup> Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Asawî* is the plural term for witches, whereas *msawî* is the singular term for witch. See some helpful definitions of witchcraft in Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft*, 1 & 10; Arne Steinforth, “Between Shrine and Courtroom, Legal Pluralism, Witchcraft, and Spirit Agency in South-Eastern Africa,” forthcoming in *Law of Possession: Ritual, Healing, and the Secular State*, ed. Basu, Helene & William Sax (New York: Oxford University Press) pp.- pp.; J. Middleton & E. Winter, “Introduction,” *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, 1963), 2 & 3.

those who injure and kill for malice, *lupuso*, and revenge, *mbusyo*.<sup>14</sup>

The activities of protecting or fortifying oneself from the destructive occult powers of others and of strengthening or benefiting oneself materially, using occult power, are not understood by the Yawo as being *usawî*, witchcraft, but as *ukomasi*, a form of sorcery, and the person who does this is generally referred to as a *mkomasi*. This is primarily because these activities are understood as beneficial, curative and productive and are seen in a positive light by the community at large.<sup>15</sup> When the intention, however, changes and occult power is used to injure or kill through a spell, *kuloga*, or a magic trap, *kutega*, this is usually referred to as *usawî*, witchcraft, by the Yawo.

In a Yawo context a *msawî*, witch, and a *mkomasi*, sorcerer, are not gender or age specific, with men, women and children being accused of involvement in the practice. *Ukomasi*, sorcery, however, unlike *usawî*, witchcraft, is practiced more commonly by ordinary people, on a more regular basis for protecting person and property and for gaining some form of advantage. The Yawo's classification of these two categories of occult activities is similar to other groups in the region. For example the Chewa use the term *mfiti* (*yeniyeni*) for a (true) witch who has a hunger for human flesh and "*mfiti m'pheranjiru*" for someone who kills for malice, revenge or as a protective act.<sup>16</sup>

### **Characteristics of a Yawo Witch, *Msawî***

The most commonly stated activities of a witch in the Yawo context is that they are said to dig up the dead and eat human flesh (necrophagous). Witches are also believed to injure people at night by playing games with their body parts, such as playing football with a person's head.<sup>17</sup>

They find people asleep in their house and just play games with their bodies. When they wake up in the morning it's like

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Msamu, Interview by Ian Dicks, 04/10/12.

<sup>15</sup> J.W.M. van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion* (Blantyre: CLAIM-Kachere, 2001), 224; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Taylor & Francis, e-Library, 2001), 1652.

<sup>16</sup> van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 212.

<sup>17</sup> This activity is known as *kutyamba* in Ciyawo. Ciyawo is the name of the Yawo language.

they had been to the field working, their bodies are tired. It is always happening, we call it *usawî*, witchcraft.<sup>18</sup>

A witch is also believed to have special power that enables them to fly long distances, and transform themselves into animals, such as owls, hyenas and lions.<sup>19</sup> They are also said to walk around naked at night and have red eyes in the daytime from a lack of sleep.<sup>20</sup>

Entrance into witchcraft for the Yawo is gained by eating human flesh, either consciously or unconsciously, which is believed to be given by a close relative who is a witch. Testing an incoming Village Headperson for signs of being a witch is still part of the enthronement ceremony of Village Headpersons in many Yawo areas. This test is conducted by observing which meat the incoming headperson prefers the most.<sup>21</sup> One Group Village Headman said that when he was enthroned he was too afraid to taste any of the red meat served to him in case he was accused of being a witch.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Mwayi*: An Oracle For Dealing With Witchcraft**

One of the earliest recorded methods for dealing with accusations of witchcraft by the Yawo was through the practice of *mwayi*. In Ciyawo, the term, *mwayi*, refers to a tree (*Erythrophleum guineense*), a substance made from the pounded bark of the same tree, and an oracle (made from the pounded bark of the tree), that when administered to chickens and people, indicates whether or not people are guilty of witchcraft.<sup>23</sup> The premise behind the *mwayi* oracle is that it judges this accurately and impartially. *Mwayi*, or the poison ordeal, as it is commonly referred to

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<sup>18</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, "On Witchcraft," 14/02/11.

<sup>19</sup> The Yawo most associate the *Naname*; *Tyoto alba* (barn owl) with witchcraft and being a witch.

<sup>20</sup> van Breugel, *Chewa Traditional Religion*, 217.

<sup>21</sup> A Yawo group village headman said that in the past some of the red meat was real human flesh. But now other kinds of meat are used instead. Ian D. Dicks, *An African Worldview, The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2012), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Dicks, *An African Worldview*, 113.

<sup>23</sup> *Mwayi*, *Erythrophleum guineense*. "A large leguminous tree furnishing very hard and heavy timber. The bark is used for making poison for the [poison] ordeal." G. M. Sanderson, *A Dictionary of the Yao Language* (Zomba: The Government Printer, 1954), 190. *Erythrophleum guineense* and *Erythrophleum suaveolens* are synonyms for the same tree. Brian Morris, *Chewa Medical Botany A Study of Herbalism in Southern Malawi* (London: International African Institute, 1996), 343.

in English, is not peculiar to the Yawo, but has been a common method for judging witchcraft accusations in other parts of Malawi and countries in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>24</sup> Brian Morris suggests that in Malawi, prior to colonialism, the “poison ordeal was the main way of dealing with witches.”<sup>25</sup> *Mwayi* was practised openly prior to colonial governance and was still reportedly being carried out secretly up until 1972 in some areas of Malawi.<sup>26</sup> It was considered by the Yawo to be a reliable test for witchcraft, unlike a trial held in front of a Village Headperson or names gathered through divination, which are open to error and fraud.<sup>27</sup>

## The Process Leading To The *Mwayi* Oracle

### *Divination*

In the past, when relatives suspected that a person’s death was the result of witchcraft, the first step was to determine the cause and those responsible through divination, *kulondola cisango*. There are variations to how this took place amongst the Yawo. In Traditional Authority Jalasi, Mangochi District it is reported that diviners, *fwakulondola cisango*, were engaged by Village Headpersons when death occurred inexplicably in order to find those who were responsible. On a specific day the diviner would arrive and construct a small thatched shelter, *ndawo*, on the edge of the village. The diviner would then name a person or people by putting a series of questions to their divining implement.<sup>28</sup> Different implements were used for this purpose, including a *cisasi*, which is a pumpkin gourd with specific medications

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<sup>24</sup> See David Livingstone, *A Popular Account of Dr. Livingstone’s Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries: And the Discovery of Lakes Shirwa and Nyassa 1858-1864* (Gutenberg, e-book # 2519, 2005); Macdonald, *Africana, The Heart of Heathen Africa*; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, And Magic Among The Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976); Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting*; Morris, *Chewa Medical Botany*.

<sup>25</sup> Morris, *Chewa Medical Botany*, 165.

<sup>26</sup> Jessie Williamson, *Useful Plants of Malawi* (Zomba: University of Malawi, 1975), 112.

<sup>27</sup> Evans-Pritchard found the same thing in his investigation amongst the Azande.

<sup>28</sup> Sanderson reports that a *ndawo* is a hut in which a person who is charged with witchcraft awaits the poison ordeal. Sanderson, *A Dictionary of the Yao Language*, 198; Informants whom I interviewed used the same term to refer to the place where people are tested by a diviner for witchcraft. They likened it to the dock of a courtroom. Ms. Aciwuja, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, “*Mwayi* Oracle,” 3/11/12; Village Headman M., Interviewed by Ian Dicks, “*Mwayi* Oracle,” 3/11/12.

placed inside that falls over on one side, whistles or shakes in answer to specific questions. Other diviners are said to have used the reflection from water in a bowl or the Quran as an instrument of divination.<sup>29</sup>

In the Zomba District of Southern Malawi, public divination of witches occurred in two parts. The first part of the ceremony typically comprised of dances through which the diviner identified the person or people who had caused the deaths.<sup>30</sup> The ceremony was typically spectacular and continued for several hours until a climax when the diviner identified the witches who were present. The second part of the divination ceremony took place when the diviner revealed where the witches had hidden their implements and medicines for undertaking their activities.

Taking a hoe and a pot of water, she marches off for the purpose, followed by hundreds of the crowd.<sup>31</sup>  
She goes to the forum, to the stream that supplies the villagers with water, and to their various houses. At a spot where she wishes to dig she pours out water to soften the ground.<sup>32</sup>  
She succeeds in finding the horns most readily.<sup>33</sup>

The diviner's lots, however, were, and still are not considered fool-proof. "Diviners sometimes lie and come up with the wrong suspects."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Marwick, *Sorcery in its Social Setting*, 89, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Macdonald uses a Chichewa term, *Mavumbula* when referring to the witch-detective. Macdonald, *Africana, The Heart of Heathen Africa*, 207; Chakanza refers to them in Chichewa as *M'bisalira*. J. C. Chakanza, "Provisional Annotated Chronological List of Witch-Finding Movements in Malawi, 1850-1980," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 15, Fasc. 3 (1985), 227; Garbutt says that "witch pointers," "*Mabvumbula*" (sic), were common to the Manganja and the Yawo. H. W. Garbutt, "Witchcraft in Nyasa (Manganja) Yao (Achawa)," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 41 (Jul.- Dec. 1911): 303.

<sup>31</sup> Macdonald, *Africana, The Heart of Heathen Africa*, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Macdonald, *Africana, The Heart of Heathen Africa*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Horns, *misengo* are implements for storing substances used in witchcraft. Traditionally people kept medicines in horns that were taken from various animals. Macdonald, *Africana, The Heart of Heathen Africa*, 210.

<sup>34</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

Therefore, the next step to knowing the perpetrator of witchcraft was to conduct the *mwayi* oracle on chickens.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Mwayi Oracle Of The Chicken***

There are variations to how the *mwayi* oracle was conducted on chickens even amongst the Yawo.<sup>36</sup> Hugh Stannus reports that the test was conducted as follows when suspects were in absentia.

Two fowls are purchased; mwai (sic) will be prepared by a boy who has not passed through initiation ceremonies, and two of the party will be chosen as pleaders, one for the deceased, the other for the accused. One fowl is then selected to represent the accused and the poison administered according to the conditions laid down by the lot-thrower, while the two pleaders give injunctions to it, one saying, “you are guilty; you shall die”; the other, “You are innocent and you shall show your innocence by vomiting the poison and recovering.”<sup>37</sup>

If the *mwayi* oracle was conducted privately and a chicken died, the head was removed and singed with fire and then taken on a stick and shown to the Village Headperson.<sup>38</sup> On the following day an associate or relative was summoned and the whole accusation was recounted and the evidence of the singed chicken’s head was produced. Other reports on *mwayi* indicate that the accused were not always absent, but took part in the tests. In these instances the accused were made to bring a chicken and swear a statement of intention to the *mwayi* in order to reveal their

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<sup>35</sup> The bark of the *mwayi* tree needs to be taken in a special way. It is supposed to be only taken from the east and west sides of the tree. Only bark that falls face down is considered efficacious. If it falls and lands face up it will be ineffective. Traditionally only stones were used to cut the bark and not knives or axes. Lasile Loya, interviewed by Ian Dicks, “*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63,” 01/10/12. See also Hugh Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, ed. E.A. Hooton (Cambridge: Harvard, 1918), 298.

<sup>36</sup> See Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, And Magic Among The Azande*.

<sup>37</sup> Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, 297.

<sup>38</sup> Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, 297. In Evans-Pritchard’s study he says that the Azande present the chicken’s wings instead of the chicken’s head as a sign that the oracle medicine has judged guilt. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, And Magic Among The Azande*, 9, 59, 60.

guilt or innocence.<sup>39</sup>

Ms. Apiti Lasile Loya reporting on a *mwayi* oracle conducted on her mother and mother's sister during the late 1950's in Namwera says that each suspect was made to bring their own chicken.<sup>40</sup>

Each of the suspects brought a chicken. When it was their turn, they swore by the *mwayi* tree and its powers saying, 'You chicken, these people are accusing me of practicing witchcraft. So now you will take this *mwayi* medicine on my behalf. If this accusation is true, you will die. If, however, they are accusing me falsely you will not die.' All the chickens lived, except the one belonging to the mother of the deceased, Ms. Ujope Apiti Mpota.<sup>41</sup>

After the oracle was conducted on chickens, and it indicated guilt, a case was often brought before a Village Headperson. The person was then given an opportunity to defend the accusations publically, which was usually undertaken for them by a close friend or relative.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Mwayi Oracle On People***

If the trial ended without clearing the person of guilt the *mwayi* oracle may then be demanded by the chief or even be asked for by the accused in order to clear them of suspicion.<sup>43</sup> Such is the belief in the efficacy of *mwayi*, especially its ability to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent that it appears that people readily undertook the test rather than pay a fine, be banished from the area, or be recognised as a witch by the

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<sup>39</sup> A chicken that vomits the *mwayi* medication is referred to as an *ndeka*.

<sup>40</sup> Ms. Lasile Loya could not remember the exact date, but said that it took place during the time of Raphael "Roy" Welensky who was governor of the Federation between, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1956 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 1963. Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

<sup>41</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

<sup>42</sup> Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, 298.

<sup>43</sup> Following the *mwayi* oracle on chickens and a trial, in some situations people were forcibly made to confess their practice of witchcraft through torture. One method to extract a confession was to place hot fried beans in the palm of the accused's hand, which was then closed and held tightly. Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, 298; Mr. Kutuyokatyoka, of Makumba village also raised the same issue. 14/06/11.

community.<sup>44</sup> Ms. Apiti Lasile Loya, who witnessed her mother's sister die after taking the *mwayi* oracle says,

*Mwayi* does not lie. The tree does not make a mistake. If one has done something, it will reveal it. If one hasn't, it won't.<sup>45</sup>

When asked whether death could be determined by the amount of *mwayi* that is administered Ms. Apiti Lasile Loya answered emphatically no, saying,

Even a little bit of *mwayi* will kill.<sup>46</sup>

*Mwayi*, is not a poison. It does not kill people by itself. It is what they (the accused) have done and the fact that they call curses upon themselves, knowing that they are in the wrong, that kills them.<sup>47</sup>

The *mwayi* oracle conducted on people took place outside of the inhabited area of the village. In the case of Apiti Lasile Loya's mother and mother's sister it was conducted at the same venue as the oracle on the chickens. For the test on people, however, a pit was dug, which the accused knelt beside while taking the *mwayi* and a pile of firewood was present for disposing of the body of the guilty once the trial was finished. On the day of the trial the accused arrived having been made to fast from food beforehand. They were then made to kneel down and swear a statement of intention to the *mwayi*. After doing this they were made to consume the *mwayi*, which was placed in food and water.

My mother was the first. She went forward and knelt down at the designated place. Then she swore a statement to the *mwayi* saying, "If I am a witch, then I won't be well, *mwayi* kill me. If I am not a witch, I will vomit." Then she was given a small portion of ugali containing *mwayi*. She ate it, but nothing happened. Then she was given water also containing *mwayi*. She drank the contents. Immediately after taking this she vomited everything in her stomach. That

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander Hetherwick, *The Gospel and The African, The Croal Lectures* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1932), 74.

<sup>45</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

<sup>46</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

<sup>47</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63," 01/10/12.

determined it – she had survived the test. She was not a witch! The next participant was the birth mother of the deceased. She ate the portion of ugali that was given to her, then the water with mwayi in it. Nothing happened for a few minutes. Then she jumped up once, twice and then fell down dead!<sup>48</sup>

Once the oracle indicated innocence or guilt, the case was finalized. The innocent, who vomited, were greatly praised, their names were cleared of all accusations and they were often paid compensation.<sup>49</sup> Those who died, the guilty so to speak, their bodies were either left in the bush unburied or were quickly burnt at the place of the trial, both of which are highly offensive practices to the Yawo.<sup>50</sup>

Although *mwayi* conducted on people is not currently practiced, the use of *mwayi* by the Yawo for protection against witchcraft is still very popular.<sup>51</sup> The bark is believed to be a very powerful agent for protection against witchcraft. One Group Village Headperson said that he bathes regularly with *mwayi* to protect himself.<sup>52</sup>

### **Anti-Witchcraft Movements**

Although the creation of the *Witchcraft Act* in 1911 essentially put an end to *mwayi* ordeals in the public arena, it did nothing to change the worldview of the Yawo majority who hold firmly to the reality of witchcraft. It is no coincidence that during the period when making witchcraft accusations against someone, and the punishment of witches by the poison ordeal was being prohibited in Malawi and neighbouring countries other ways of dealing with witches and witchcraft were in ascendency, such as the ‘anti-witchcraft movements.’<sup>53</sup> The most famous of these anti-witchcraft movements in Malawi are *Mcape*, which

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<sup>48</sup> Lasile Loya, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, “*Mwayi* ordeal at Ce Namwera 1956-63,” 01/10/12.

<sup>49</sup> Hetherwick, *The Gospel and The African, The Croal Lectures*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Stannus, *The Wayao of Nyasaland*, 299.

<sup>51</sup> I was taken by Group Village Headman Mr. N. to the Lusangwisi River, which is about 2 km from Namwera Trading Centre, where he showed me two *mwayi* trees that people had obviously been taking sheets of bark from in large quantities. One was dead, but the other was alive and very much in use.

<sup>52</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interviewed by Ian Dicks, “*Mwayi*,” 01/10/12.

<sup>53</sup> Chakanza notes at least 21 anti-witchcraft movements in Malawi between 1850-1980. Chakanza, “Provisional Annotated Chronological List of Witch-Finding Movements in Malawi, 1850-1980,” 227.

started in Southern Malawi in the 1930's, Bwanali and Mpulumitsi, which also started in Southern Malawi in the 1940's, and Nchimi Chikanga, which was based in Northern Malawi in the 1950's.<sup>54</sup> There were also other less well-known anti-witchcraft movements in the country, including several in the Mangochi District amongst the Yawo.<sup>55</sup> Although they differed in their times, locations and their *modus operandi* they had common aims and functions. They "aimed at the complete removal of witchcraft from the country by the systematic destruction or reform of witches and by the protection of their potential victims."<sup>56</sup> Audrey Richards, outlines the main work of the witch-finders in the *Mcape* movement as follows,

Once assembled the men and women were lined up in separate files, and passed one by one behind the back of the witch-finder, who caught their reflections in a small round mirror by a turn of his wrist. By his image in the glass it was claimed that a sorcerer could be immediately detected, and thus discovered, he was immediately called upon to yield up his horns (nsengo) (sic), a term which included all harmful magic charms.

Horns wilfully concealed were apparently always unmasked. 'Look under the roof of his granary,' the Bamucapi would cry in case of a denial by the sorcerer, and there the hidden

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<sup>54</sup> *Mcape* 1995 is not considered a witch-finder movement. Probst's arguments against the connection with previous anti-witch finder movements are convincing. These include Chisupe's refusal and denial that his activity was an anti-witchcraft movement as well as a lack of structural elements associated with other witch-finder movements. Moreover, in *Mcape* 1995 there was no notion that the suffering was caused by 'others'. There was also no attempt to identify, discipline or medicate those who were causing the illness and death. Peter Probst, "Mchape '95, Or, The Sudden Fame of Billy Goodson Chisupe: Healing, Social Memory And the Enigma Of the Public Sphere in Post-Banda Malawi," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (1999): 120-123.

<sup>55</sup> Two anti-witchcraft movements conducted during the colonial period in Yawo areas were led by the diviners Ali Nani, originally from Makanjila, and Masonga from Mozambique. Ms. Aciwuja, Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "Mwayi Oracle," 3/11/12; Village Headman M., Interviewed by Ian Dicks, "Mwayi Oracle," 3/11/12.

<sup>56</sup> See Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders," 449; Marwick, "Another Modern Anti-Witchcraft Movement in East Central Africa," 111; Boston Soko, *Nchimi Chikanga, The Battle Against Witchcraft in Malawi* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2008), 22, 23; Alison Redmayne. "Chikanga: An African Diviner with International Reputation," in *Witchcraft Confessions & Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 106.

danger would be immediately brought to light.  
But with the detection of the sorcerer a cure was provided.  
Each man and woman drank a sip of the famous mucapi  
medicine...<sup>57</sup>

The anti-witchcraft movements were the new front in the fight against witchcraft. Their *modus operandi*, however, was not a completely new innovation, but based on the work of traditional witch-diviners mentioned above. Unlike the *mwayi* oracle, which has basically stopped, the role of public divination of the witch-diviners has continued to evolve into the anti-witchcraft movements, exemplified by *Mchape* in the 1940's and more recently into other movements such as the *Ŵakutyosya Usawî*, Witchcraft Removers, who worked amongst the Yawo in the Traditional Authority of Jalasi, Mangochi District in the year 2000, although with several differences.<sup>58</sup>

The main differences between the practices of the earlier witch-diviners associated with the *mwayi* oracle and the anti-witchcraft movements were that the latter used 'modern' apparatus, such as mirrors, for detection. More significantly, in the eyes of the community, the witch-finders in the anti-witchcraft movements also provided a cure for the witches, on-going control of their destructive activities through medication, and protection for the rest of the community through medications and charms, which as will be shown are the same goals offered by more recent Witchcraft Removers working amongst the Yawo.<sup>59</sup>

### ***Ŵakutyosya Usawî*, Witchcraft Removers, 2000**

In the year 2000 Witchcraft Removers, began working to eradicate witches and witchcraft from Muslim Amacinga Yawo villages in Traditional Authority Jalasi, Mangochi District, Southern Malawi. Collectively they were called, *Ŵakutyosya Usawî*, Witchcraft

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<sup>57</sup> Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders," 448, 449.

<sup>58</sup> Audrey Richards says that she witnessed the height of the Bamucapi movement in North East Rhodesia in 1934. Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders," 448. In Chilimampungu and Thindwa's study they found that 44% of heads of households surveyed in Malawi reported that witch-hunting takes place in their areas. Chilimampungu, and Thindwa, "The Extent and Nature of Witchcraft-Based Violence against Children, Women and the Elderly in Malawi," 12.

<sup>59</sup> See Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders," 449; Marwick, "Another Modern Anti-Witchcraft Movement in East Central Africa," 111.

Removers, though each group was also known by the name of its leader, including 'Boko' and 'Mawusu'. The period leading up to the arrival of the Witchcraft Removers was a time of great suffering in Malawi as the HIV/AIDS pandemic was still in ascendancy and people of various ages were dying at what was perceived to be a higher rate than normal.<sup>60</sup> Many Yawo attributed this to witchcraft and therefore welcomed the Witchcraft Removers into their villages to remove those whom they perceived to be causing the suffering. The following is an explanation of their *modus operandi*.<sup>61</sup> The movement was initiated by Mr. Mawusu, "who felt called to expel witchcraft from the area."<sup>62</sup> Mawusu searched for other people to help him with this task. Once he found them he medicated them for their protection and also trained them about the important trees and medications for their work. Mawusu then split them up into smaller groups consisting of three or four men. Each group then went to different villages at the invitation of the villagers and with permission of the Village Headperson.<sup>63</sup> People would invite them saying,

We want to invite those people doing the job at such and such a village. We want them to do here what they did in that village. We want them to expel witchcraft in this village for us.<sup>64</sup>

Arriving at a village the Witchcraft Removers would find a platform, *sanja*, for their work already constructed. They then would set about

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<sup>60</sup> In 1994 it was estimated that 815,000 people in Malawi were infected with HIV. The prevalence rate was estimated to be 14% of adults between 20-45 years of age. Peter Probst, "Mchape '95, Or, The Sudden Fame of Billy Goodson Chisupe: Healing, Social Memory And the Enigma Of the Public Sphere in Post-Banda Malawi," 110. In 2005 it was estimated that "Malawi had one of the highest HIV/AIDS prevalence rates in the world, with 14% of those aged 15 – 49 years infected." Furthermore, it was estimated that in 2005 "there were about 790,000 adults and children living with HIV/AIDS in the country," resulting in "85,000 adult and child deaths annually." Ministry of Health Malawi, *Treatment of Aids Guidelines for the Use of Antiretroviral Therapy in Malawi*, (Lilongwe: Ministry of Health Malawi, 2006), 3.

<sup>61</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, "*Ŵakutyosya Usawī*," 26/01/11; Mr. Kutyokatyoka, Interview by Ian Dicks, "Participant in 2000, Witch Removers," 07/04/2011; Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, "On Witchcraft," 14/02/11.

<sup>62</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, "*Ŵakutyosya Usawī*," 26/01/11.

<sup>63</sup> Sheikh Mwamadi Mkwanda, Interview by Ian Dicks, "*Usawī*," 17/10/12.

<sup>64</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, "*Ŵakutyosya Usawī*," 26/01/11.

laying their medications and charms around the village, *kuwinda*, for protection and so that none of the objects used in witchcraft could be removed before they found them and destroyed them.

We did this at night. We removed our clothes. Then we took the medication and put it on sharpened sticks, which we placed at the edges of the village. We even placed one under the platform.<sup>65</sup>

On an appointed day each household in the village was asked to assemble at the area around the platform. People were told to bring their traditional medicines, *mtela*, with them to be tested. People were then made to enter one by one into a house near the platform where they were tested for witchcraft. For divination, the leader used a *mcila* (medicated tail-switch), a book written in Arabic, a *cilisi* (charm) and a *kompyuta* (computer), which was four bottles filled with an unspecified liquid.<sup>66</sup> As people entered the house all of the contents of the bottles frothed up. If one of the bottles kept frothing after the person had entered they were told that, “they had left some of their *mtela*, traditional medicine, at home and would they please go and get it.”<sup>67</sup> If the person refused, the Witchcraft Remover would say, “I have seen the *mtela* and I know where it is. Do you want me to go and get it for you?”<sup>68</sup> The accused then typically answered, “Ok, go ahead.”<sup>69</sup> Being guided by the *mcila* (tail-switch), and the *kompyuta* (computer/bottle), the Witchcraft Removers and the crowd would set-off towards the person’s house shouting, ‘*Go komko!*’<sup>70</sup>, which means ‘Go there!’ They would be led to the exact place where the witch was keeping their suspicious implements. Even if they were hidden underground they would be dug up. The majority of participants believe that the Witchcraft Removers possess the power to identify witches and their

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<sup>65</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, “*Wakutyosya Usawi*,” 26/01/11.

<sup>66</sup> The book written in Arabic was not specified.

<sup>67</sup> *Mtela* can also mean the implements for undertaking witchcraft. Mr. Kutyokatyoka, Interview by Ian Dicks, “Participant in 2000, Witch Removers,” 07/04/2011.

<sup>68</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, “*Wakutyosya Usawi*,” 26/01/11.

<sup>69</sup> Mr. Kutyokatyoka, Interview by Ian Dicks, “Participant in 2000, Witch Removers,” 07/04/2011.

<sup>70</sup> ‘*Go Komko*’, is a mixture of English and Chichewa. ‘*komko*’ is Chichewa and means ‘there’. *Go Komko* means ‘go there’.

implements in the same way that they believe witchcraft exists.<sup>71</sup> When asked if the *mcila*, tail, is ever wrong, one participant answered saying, “Never, it never lied!”<sup>72</sup> After the implements were found they were taken back to the platform. The Witchcraft Remover then asked the same person, “Weren’t you denying possessing these? Whose are they, then?” They would then answer, “They are mine.” The Witchcraft Remover would then say “Well then, come and let me medicate you with special medicine.”<sup>73</sup> The Witchcraft Remover then made small incisions on the accused person’s body and rubbed in the special medicine, *kwalembela mtela*.

We medicate them on the side of head here, on the neck, on the back of the head and on the elbow.<sup>74</sup>

The accused is then forbidden to undertake witchcraft again. If they continue, they are informed that the medication (*temeki*) will kill them.<sup>75</sup> After this the Witchcraft Remover would sing a song, which was answered in agreement by the crowd.

Grand-person, expel witchcraft from them.  
Witchcraft is clinging onto them.  
Today they will see painful things.  
Medicate them, medicate them with poison.<sup>76</sup>

Once testing and medicating was complete the village was declared cleansed and the Witchcraft Removers proceeded to the next village after receiving their payment. The activities of the Witchcraft Removers were welcomed and accepted by the Yawo generally throughout Traditional Authority Jalasi. Some villages, however, did not allow the Witchcraft Removers to come, mainly because they did not trust them.

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<sup>71</sup> A few people said in interviews that they thought the *Ŵakutyosya Usawî* were liars and that they received inside knowledge about suspects before starting and that they planted evidence themselves.

<sup>72</sup> Mr. Kutyokatyoka, Interview by Ian Dicks, “Participant in 2000, Witch Removers,” 07/04/2011.

<sup>73</sup> Mr. Kutyokatyoka, “Participant in 2000, Witch Removers,” 07/04/2011.

<sup>74</sup> Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, “*Ŵakutyosya Usawî*,” 26/01/11.

<sup>75</sup> *Temeki* is used here to refer to a poisonous medication that will kill the witch. Mr. L., Interview by Ian Dicks, “*Ŵakutyosya Usawî*,” 26/01/11.

<sup>76</sup> *Anganga mwatyosye usawî. Ukwamba kuti nganganganga usawî; ukwamba kuti nga. Anganga lelo, cayiwone yakupweteka. Ŵalembele, Ŵalembele temeki.*

One Village Headman said that he refused them entry to his village because he saw that their activities were just a business and he didn't believe that they had the power to find witches and deal with witchcraft. "They consorted with some villagers and planted evidence to make it look like they were removing witchcraft."<sup>77</sup> Even with such thoughts, it would have been difficult for village headpersons and *sheikhs* to refuse entry of the Witchcraft Removers because refusal places them under suspicion of being witches.<sup>78</sup>

In the Witchcraft Remover's movement of the year 2000 many people named as witches were shamed by the experience and refused to speak further about it. Surprisingly, few of these people, if any, left the villages permanently as a result of this activity, although some divisions between villagers due to the accusations are reportedly still felt more than 12 years after the event.<sup>79</sup> No one, however, was physically assaulted for being named as a witch in the course of the activities. This was due mainly to the holistic nature of the Witchcraft Removers' work. They named witches and identified their tools, however, in the eyes of the community, they also provided a remedy for witchcraft that nullified the witches' powers, enabling them to continue living in their communities, which was also the goal of the earlier anti-witchcraft movements.

### **Trials at Traditional Courts**

Trials at traditional courts are another public method currently used by the Yawo for dealing with accusations of witchcraft.<sup>80</sup> Most cases of witchcraft handled at a village court, however, go unrecorded in the official records. This is because it is known that to 'officially' conduct them is against the law. One Group Village Headman showed me his record book, which held the records of 50 cases that he had overseen in the previous five years. "Not one of them" he said, "was about

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<sup>77</sup> Sheikh Mwamadi Mkwanda, "Usawi," 17/10/12.

<sup>78</sup> Willis says that Headpersons are under pressure to accept witch-cleansers and that there would be "sinister implications" for those who refuse to receive them. R.G. Willis, "Instant Millennium The Sociology of African Witch-Cleansing Cults," in *Witchcraft Confessions & Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 130.

<sup>79</sup> Village Headman M., Interview by Ian Dicks, "Mwayi & Mawusu," 4/11/12.

<sup>80</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, "On Witchcraft," 14/02/11.

witchcraft.”<sup>81</sup> When asked why, considering that he had handled at least three large trials of witchcraft in the previous year and others before that, he answered, “*Boma*,” Government, meaning that the government forbids Village Headmen and women to judge witchcraft accusation trials, which is why they go unrecorded.<sup>82</sup> A reason for the continued handling of witchcraft accusations at a village level is because “witchcraft destroys the harmony of the village” and a trial is an attempt to restore harmony by exposing those who practice undesirable activities.<sup>83</sup>

Although accusations of witchcraft are heard in traditional courts it appears that many of these trials go unresolved. Even when confessions of witchcraft are forthcoming, Village Headpersons say they lack the power to punish those named as witches, as well as the means to restore them back into their communities.<sup>84</sup> The incapacity of Village Headpersons to deal with accusations of witchcraft comes mostly from a lack of evidence to convict a person of witchcraft and from a lack of power (spiritual and temporal) to deal with those who are considered guilty.<sup>85</sup> In the previous two years I observed both of these outcomes in three witchcraft trials that I have followed in the Namwera area.

### ***Trial 1***

The first trial of witchcraft was not open to the general public, but was heard inside the Group Village Headman’s compound. According to the Group Village Headman, this was due to the stature of the person being accused. In this case, one of the local *sheikhs* was accused of teaching other people’s children witchcraft. In the presence of the Group Village Headman and his councilors the *sheikh* admitted to the charge, but said that he couldn’t stop practicing witchcraft. When the Group Village Headman was asked why he didn’t take further action against the *sheikh*, such as expelling him from the village, he responded that he was

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<sup>81</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, “Witchcraft Court Cases,” 17/10/12.

<sup>82</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, “Witchcraft Court Cases,” 17/10/12.

<sup>83</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, “Witchcraft Court Cases,” 17/10/12.

<sup>84</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, “Witchcraft Court Cases,” 17/10/12.

<sup>85</sup> Group Village Headman N., “Recording of Traditional Court Proceedings,” 23/03/11.

afraid of his reprisals.

### ***Trial 2***

The second trial was held in public and was attended by more than 500 people. A woman accused a man from the same village of teaching her children witchcraft. The accusation began after her baby became unwell. “He just lay awake all night with his eyes wide open.”<sup>86</sup> “His body was cold and he wouldn’t breast feed.”<sup>87</sup> The following morning one of her other sons confessed to his grandmother that he had removed the heart of the baby at the instruction of a witch who had taken him and other children to a large meeting at the graveyard. The boy felt pity for his brother and so he returned the heart to his body, which he said, “is why he recovered.”<sup>88</sup> After an extended and ingenious time of questioning by the Group Village Headman, the accused admitted to teaching the child witchcraft. The trial, however, was postponed, never to be resumed, when to the amazement of the crowd, thirty other adults from the village were named by the boy as also being present at the graveyard. The Group Village Headman said that it was cancelled because too many people were named and it threatened to engulf the whole village. Months later, when asked again about the trial, he said that it was cancelled because of the government’s dislike of witchcraft trials. After the failed trial the accused left for South Africa, where it is said that he died in an accident.<sup>89</sup>

### ***Trial 3***

The third trial was also public, but with fewer people. The trial was between a village headwoman, Mrs. S. and her son Mr. G. Mr. G. accused his mother and her older sister of teaching his two children witchcraft. Mr. G. had returned home sick from the Central Region with his wife (who is not Yawo), and their six children. Their stay in the village, however, was not harmonious as Mrs. S. verbally abused her son’s wife when he was away from home. Mr. G. told the court that he had noticed that his children were always tired during the day-time. When he asked them why this was so, they told him, “We don’t sleep

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<sup>86</sup> Plaintiff, “Court Case Children Witchcraft,” 06/04/11.

<sup>87</sup> Plaintiff, “Court Case Children Witchcraft,” 06/04/11.

<sup>88</sup> Witness, plaintiff’s son, “Court Case Children Witchcraft,” 06/04/11.

<sup>89</sup> Group Village Headman N., Interview by Ian Dicks, “Witchcraft Court Cases,” 17/10/12.

father, we move around at night.”<sup>90</sup> Because of this and the verbal abuse, Mr. G. suspected that his relatives were practicing witchcraft on them. During the case Mr. G. called two of his children (both under 10 years of age), to testify against his mother. They told the court that,

At night our grandmother, (Mrs. S.) and her older sister come and take us out of our house through the corner of the room. At first we assembled on the rubbish heap and then we went to the graveyard. At the graveyard they gave us pills to swallow, which we did not vomit, but which stuck in our throats.<sup>91</sup>

Mrs. S. defended herself ably. She said she had been generous to her son by providing food and fertilizer. She was even humorous saying, “If she was a witch she would have eaten the children already, which was not the case as the court could see they were all alive.”<sup>92</sup> She also said that the story told by the children about being taken to the grave was a lie, adding that they were coached to say these things. Finally, she said that Mr. G. was the aggressor, not her. He was trying to get rid of her so that he could assume the role of Village Headperson.<sup>93</sup> The Group Village Headman concluded that this was not a case of witchcraft, but a case of interpersonal conflict. The case was resolved in favour of Mrs. S. and her name was cleared. Mr. G. was told to reconcile or leave the village. He told the court that he could not stay, as he feared for the lives of his wife and children. He left the village soon after the trial and now lives in Mangochi with his wife and their children.

Although the trials that I attended appeared to be run in a fair manner, in which the Group Village Headman weighed the arguments of the plaintiff and the accused, they mostly lacked resolution and did not restore the accused to their communities. They also did not resolve the actual issue of witchcraft in the minds of the villagers, therefore giving the accused, and the plaintiff in Trial 3, few options but to leave the places where they were living for fear of physical or occult reprisals.

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<sup>90</sup> Witness, Mr. G.’s child, “Recording of Traditional Court Proceedings,” 23/03/11.

<sup>91</sup> Child witness, “Recording of Traditional Court Proceedings,” 23/03/11.

<sup>92</sup> Mrs. S., “Recording of Traditional Court Proceedings,” 23/03/11.

<sup>93</sup> According to Yawo culture the role and name of the village headman is passed onto his eldest sister’s son when he dies. However, if the headperson is a woman it can be passed on to her son or daughter.

## ***Kukomala- Fortifying Oneself Against Witchcraft***

A common alternative to making public accusations of witchcraft in a Yawo context is for people to take precautionary and retaliatory measures themselves. This is done with the help of a traditional healer, *jwamtela*, who makes medicines for protection and retaliation. These medications are usually made from substances that are gathered and procured, then rubbed into incisions on the body, made into charms that are worn on the body, or placed in strategic places around the home and garden, or drunk.<sup>94</sup> Some Yawo *Qadiriyya sheikhs* also offer help to those who are affected by witchcraft by making protective talismans and praying special prayers over people who are troubled.<sup>95</sup> One experienced *sheikh* said that it is “more common in his village for people to seek help first from the *jwamtela* before they come to him.”<sup>96</sup> When people do come, he writes specific verses from the Quran and other books (*Alufaki*), and makes them into wearable charms, *yilisi*, or drinkable talismans, *makombe*. A *hadith* is cited in which a goat is protected from a wild dog by verses from the Quran that are hung around its neck, *Taaweez*, to show that people can be protected from attacks of witches with the help of the Islamic Holy Scriptures.<sup>97</sup>

Some people, however, want more than protective medicine. They also want to make a curse return and attack the sender. In this case a willing *sheikh* recites for the person Scriptures from a book such as *Alubadili* from beginning to end. After the recital the person suffering from witchcraft is made to swear before God that they have told the truth about the situation. If what they have said is untrue, the sworn intention will return and be done to them.

## **Conclusion**

This article has shown that the Yawo have a long history of attempting to resolve witchcraft accusation issues within their midst. Some of the modes used for resolving witchcraft accusations have dealt harshly with people, resulting in humiliation, painful punishments and even death. The extent and gravity of these modes, as well as their reconfiguration over time shows the seriousness and continuing nature of the problem

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<sup>94</sup> Dicks, *An African Worldview, The Muslim Amacinga Yawo of Southern Malawi*, 241.

<sup>95</sup> The *Qadiriyya* are a Muslim *Sufi* brotherhood.

<sup>96</sup> Sheikh Mwamadi Mkwanda, Interview by Ian Dicks, “*Usawî*,” 17/10/12.

<sup>97</sup> Sheikh Mwamadi Mkwanda, “*Usawî*,” 17/10/12.

for the Yawo, which should not be under appreciated. In regard to their ability to resolve witchcraft accusations, protect the accused and restore the accused into their communities, this article has shown that these modes have limited and varied ability to do this to the satisfaction of the majority of the Yawo community. In regard to the modes, it can be seen that the *mwayi* oracle and the Witchcraft Remover modes generally reach a conclusion, although in the case of the *mwayi* oracle this conclusion is intolerably harsh, often resulting in a person's death. In order to reach a conclusion these two modes rely upon different forms of evidence: material evidence, the testimony of people and occult power. In the case of the Witchcraft Removers' mode, occult power is also used to nullify the power of witches, enabling a person found guilty of witchcraft to remain within their community after conviction. Although this mode appears to offer a holistic solution, and is the least harsh in terms of punishment, it is seen by some Yawo as fraudulent, merely a business. It is also said to be used by people to settle personal disputes and often leaves people humiliated and suspicious in the eyes of their community.

Traditional courts, although appearing objective and fair, lack a key element for resolving a witchcraft accusation case; occult power. This makes them largely ineffective in dealing with the issue of witchcraft for the majority of the Yawo community. In traditional courts accusations of witchcraft are often aired, but seldom resolved. This is because even when people do confess or are convicted by a traditional court, the powers of the witches are not nullified in the eyes of the Yawo community. This makes it virtually impossible for the headperson to give a suitable punishment or for the convicted witch to remain within that community after the trial because people fear the continuance of their activities. The convicted witch is also aware of this and would fear occult reprisals against them if they remained.

Finally, since public modes of dealing with witchcraft accusations are problematic for getting a resolution and for avoiding conflict with the State, other modes of dealing with the issue will continue to evolve. This does not mean that witchcraft and witchcraft accusations will diminish or cease. Rather, witchcraft accusations will be dealt with increasingly at a private level, with people seeking occult power in order to protect themselves and to retaliate when they feel threatened or wronged.

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### **Informants**

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