

The Opinion Pages | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

The Persecution of Witches, 21st-Century Style

By MITCH HOROWITZ JULY 4, 2014



Credit Bill Bragg

Most people believe that the persecution of “witches” reached its height in the early 1690s with the trials in Salem, Mass., but it is a grim paradox of 21st-century life that violence against people accused of sorcery is very much

still with us. Far from fading away, thanks to digital interconnectedness and economic development, witch hunting has become a growing, global problem.

In recent years, there has been a spate of attacks against people accused of witchcraft in Africa, the Pacific and Latin America, and even among immigrant communities in the United States and Western Europe. Researchers with United Nations refugee and human rights agencies have estimated [the murders of supposed witches as numbering in the thousands](#) each year, while beatings and banishments could run into the millions. “This is becoming an international problem — it is a form of persecution and violence that is spreading around the globe,” Jeff Crisp, an official with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [told a panel in 2009](#), the last year in which an international body studied the full dimensions of the problem. A [report](#) that year from the same agency and a Unicef [study in 2010](#) both found a rise, especially in Africa, of violence and child abuse linked to witchcraft accusations.

More recent media reports suggest a disturbing pattern of mutilation and murder. Last year, a mob in Papua New Guinea [burned alive](#) a young mother, Kepari Leniata, 20, who was suspected of sorcery. This highly publicized case [followed a series](#) of instances over recent years of lethal group violence against women and men accused of witchcraft.

“These are becoming all too common in certain parts of the country,” [said](#) the prime minister, Peter O’Neill. Last year, Papua New Guinea finally [repealed](#) a 1971 law that permitted attackers to cite intent to combat witchcraft as a legal defense. But progress is slow. Although the police charged a man and woman in connection with the 2013 killing of Ms. Leniata, no one has faced trial, a fact that [drew protest](#) from Amnesty International in February.

One of the ugliest aspects of these crimes is their brutality. Victims are often burned alive, as in Ms. Leniata’s case and a 2012 [case](#) in Nepal; or accused women are sometimes beaten to death, [as occurred](#) in the Colombian town of Santa Barbara in 2012; or the victims may be stoned or beheaded, as has been [reported](#) in Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa.

It is tempting to point to poverty in the developing world, as well as scapegoating, as the chief causes of anti-witch attacks — and such forces are undoubtedly at work. But while Africa and the southwestern Pacific have a long history of economic misery, much of this violence, especially against children, has worsened since 2000. The surge suggests forces other than economic resentment or ancient superstition.

In some communities, it is chiefly young men who take on the role of witch hunters, suggesting that they may see it as a way to earn prestige by cleansing undesirables and enforcing social mores. That many of the self-appointed witch hunters are men highlights another baleful aspect of the phenomenon: The majority of victims are women. The Rev. Jack Urame of the Melanesian Institute, a Papua New Guinean human rights agency, [estimates](#) that witchcraft-related violence there is directed 5 to 1 against women, suggesting that witchcraft accusations are used to cloak gender-based violence.

Another factor, particularly in Central Africa and its diaspora communities, is the advent of revivalist churches, in which self-styled pastor-prophets rail against witchery and demon possession. They often claim to specialize in the casting out of evil spirits, sometimes charging for the service. Many of those congregations have emerged from Western evangelizing efforts.

One of Nigeria's most popular Pentecostal preachers, [Helen Ukpabio](#), wrote that "if a child under the age of 2 screams in the night, cries and is always feverish with deteriorating health, he or she is a servant of Satan." As that implies, children in those communities are especially likely to be identified as possessed. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [reported](#) that most of the 25,000 to 50,000 children who live on the streets of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, were abandoned by family members who accused them of witchcraft or demonic possession.

The etiology of this epidemic is complex, but human rights observers point to overpopulation, rapid urbanization and the hardship of parents forced to relocate to seek work, as well as the sheer stresses of raising children amid dire poverty. Superstitions are stoked by local "healers," who charge parents to exorcise evil spirits.

Witch hunting is far from limited, however, to acts of sadistic vigilantism or profiteering. Some legal systems even sanction the killing of accused witches.

In 2011, courts in Saudi Arabia [sentenced a man and a woman](#), in separate cases, to beheading after convictions for sorcery. In 2013, Saudi courts [sentenced two Asian housemaids](#) to 1,000 lashes and 10 years in prison on charges of casting spells against their employers.

A Lebanese television psychic, Ali Hussain Sibat, was arrested in 2008, while on pilgrimage to Medina, by the Saudi religious police for hosting a television show in his native Lebanon, “The Hidden,” where he would make predictions and prescribe love potions and spells. After an outcry by Amnesty International and others, the Saudi courts stayed Mr. Sibat’s execution by beheading, but sentenced him in 2010 to a 15-year prison term.

As in Africa, the wave of anti-witch activity in Saudi Arabia is fairly new. The Saudi religious police devised an [Anti-Witchcraft Unit](#) in 2009, resulting in the arrests of 215 alleged “conjurers” in 2012. Some observers attribute this sudden interest in witchery to the royal family’s attempts to appease its religious inquisitors by keeping them busy targeting a handful of vulnerable individuals.

A final motive driving modern witch hunting may be more venal than spiritual: The police in Indonesia, where there were about 100 suspected witch killings in 2000, [point](#) to fraud and graft directed against vulnerable women, who, lacking family or community protection, fall prey to banishment or murder on slim pretexts, while their homes and property are seized by their accusers.

Globalization means that paranoia over black magic and spirit possession are no longer confined to developing nations. Mass migration has made this a pervasive problem. In January, a Queens, N.Y., man [was arrested](#) for beating to death with a hammer his girlfriend, Estrella Castaneda, 56, and her daughter, Lina Castaneda, 25; Carlos Alberto Amarillo told the police that the women were “witches,” who had been “performing voodoo and casting spells” on him. (Voodoo, more properly known as Vodou, is an authentic Afro-Caribbean faith based in deity worship and ritual, practiced in New York and many American cities. Other belief systems that retain or reinvent

ancient nature worship and spell practices sometimes go under the names of Wicca or neo-paganism.)

It has not been confirmed whether the Queens victims had ties to Vodou (neither they nor the suspect were Afro-Caribbean). Accusations like those made by Mr. Amarillo, who is under psychiatric evaluation, often prove unreliable or are misreported in a sensationalist way. But the theme has nonetheless become alarmingly familiar in Western news coverage.

In 2012, The Guardian [reported](#) that London police had during the last decade investigated 81 cases of “ritual abuse” of children accused of possession or witchcraft, a phenomenon that British social agencies [fear is on the rise](#), particularly within African immigrant communities. In 2010, a 15-year-old boy, [Kristy Bamu](#), was tortured and killed in East London by his older sister and her boyfriend, both Congolese, who had accused him of sorcery after he wet his bed. In the wake of that case, the British police started to receive [special training](#) on witchcraft-related abuse.

Because anti-witch violence is rooted in the belief systems of traditional societies, it would be easy to slip into the fatalistic view that this crisis is a tragic repetition of ancient aggressions. But where local superstitions explode into violence or migrate across a wide range of settings and societies, we can and must act.

Western branches of Pentecostal and charismatic Christian congregations must work closely with the more fervent ministries of their denominations among African and immigrant communities to foster an understanding of how “exorcisms” can spiral into deadly abuse. No African congregation wants to feel dictated to by the West, but there is a place for exchange and cultural pressure. Western ecclesiastical bodies can specifically enact prohibitions against for-profit exorcisms.

Laws should be enacted against accusing children of witchcraft throughout the countries of Africa and the southwestern Pacific, as one Nigerian state [has already done](#). And countries like the Solomon Islands that still criminalize witchcraft should strike down those statutes.

Police indifference to crimes of witch hunting must also be tackled, especially in societies where police officers themselves may share in traditional beliefs about “black magic.” A 2012 British government [report](#) on combating

faith-based violence against children provides a valuable guide to instructing the police on signs of abuse, asking religious leaders to condemn violence and protecting vulnerable witnesses.

Legal efforts must be paired with increased social awareness. In a promising model, a 2010 Oxfam International [report](#) noted that some Catholic parishes in Papua New Guinea have been teaching congregants about the natural causes of death and illness (common triggers for anti-witch paranoia), providing shelter to accused witches and denying the sacraments to those who accuse others of sorcery.

Crucial, too, is that the United Nations and international human rights organizations start compiling yearly statistics on these crimes. We're severely hampered in understanding the scale of this crisis when our most recent global data are already five years out of date.

Most important, witchcraft-related violence should be branded as hate crimes by international courts and by all jurisdictions where anti-hate statutes exist. This is vital to gaining wider recognition of this criminality and preventing it.

In too many places, the accusation of witchcraft has become an incitement to mob violence. It is time to lay the ghosts of Salem to rest.

[Mitch Horowitz](#) is the author of "Occult America" and "One Simple Idea: How Positive Thinking Reshaped Modern Life."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on July 5, 2014, in The International New York Times. [Today's Paper](#)|[Subscribe](#)