****

**Public Health and Beliefs in Witchcraft: Preventing Human Rights Violations of Persons with Albinism**

**Paper Presented at United Nations International Crime and Research Institute (UNICRI) Side Event.**

Gary Foxcroft, Executive Director, Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN)

UN Human Rights Council, Geneva. 7th March 2016

[**www.whrin.org**](http://www.whrin.org)

1. **Organisational Background**

The Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) was established in response to the widespread violations of human rights that take place around the world due to beliefs in witchcraft, spirit possession and other malevolent spiritual beliefs. Our work aims to raise awareness and understanding of these issues so that solutions may be developed to prevent further abuses from taking place. WHRIN does this by training frontline practitioners; monitoring and documenting cases of human rights violations; advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups and sharing good practice across our network of member organisations and individuals.

1. **Understanding Terminology**

The misuse and misunderstanding of terminology is a significant challenge faced by practitioners working on the issues contained within this report. The writer, Marina Warner, captured this perfectly when she stated:

“The supernatural is difficult terrain; of its very nature, it resists discourse; or, to put it more accurately, it is always in the process of being described, conjured, made, and made up, without ascertainable outside referents”.

Despite this challenge, WHRIN believes that it is of utmost importance to attempt to clarify our organisational stance on this. WHRIN’s position on some key terminology can therefore be found below:

**Persons With Albinism (PWA)** WHRIN supports the call for the abandonment of the use of the term “albino” and the call for greater dignity for persons with albinism by using the term “Person with Albinism (PWA)” throughout this report and all future communications.

**What is witchcraft?** There is no universally accepted definition of witchcraft and the term means different things to different people in different places. Primarily witchcraft can be seen as a negative, malevolent force, which is used by people – witches – in the spirit realm to bring about harm in the physical realm. It is the art of doing evil by means of spiritual powers. WHRIN classifies human rights abuses brought about by these beliefs as “Witchcraft Accusations and Persecution” (WAP).

**What is muti?** Muti is a word used in Southern Africa, and other parts of the world, to refer to magic that enables people to gain power or wealth. It literally translates to “medicine”. The most extreme form uses human body parts and people may be killed to provide them.

1. **Background**

Murders of People with Albinism (PWA) is part of a larger global problem where violence is perpetuated due to beliefs in witchcraft, juju, muti or spirit possession. It is almost always the most vulnerable groups - children, women, the elderly and disabled - who are targeted. WHRIN’s case files highlight how the majority of such cases relate to family or community members perception of a public health condition such as albinism. However, despite widespread media coverage of cases, this is still a world-wide phenomenon that remains largely unrecognised and poorly understood.

This brief paper will explore how malevolent spiritual beliefs, such as those in witchcraft and the power of muti, are often triggered by community misconceptions of the root cause of public health conditions. It will then further outline how these beliefs lead to human rights abuses of vulnerable groups, such as PWA, in Africa and other parts of the world.

WHRIN classifies the recent phenomenon of People with Albinism (PWA) being murdered for their body parts to be used in magic as ‘muti murders’. This is a separate, but related, issue to that of witchcraft beliefs and accusations. This is an important distinction that the paper will attempt to clarify. The position taken by WHRIN is that the primary contributory factor in the muti murders of PWA is the malevolent spiritual belief that their body parts can be used in magic in order to bring greater wealth or power to the beneficiary. WHRIN contends that this belief is triggered by community misconceptions of what albinism is.

1. **Public Health Issues Affecting Witchcraft Accusations and Persecution**

Belief in witchcraft can be conceptualized as an attempt by people to rationalize the misfortunes occurring in their life; it shapes perceptions and provides an answer when disaster strikes.[[1]](#footnote-1) “Unexpected hardship or bad luck, sudden and incurable diseases, all can be accounted to the actions of evil people, to magical forces…the diagnosis of witchcraft opens up the possibility of combating the causes of hardship.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Put simply it provides an explanation for what would be otherwise unexplainable or unbearable.

There is a significant correlation between witchcraft accusations and public health crises. Indeed numerous witch hunts have been triggered by health crises in the past: for example during a tetanus epidemic in Benin and following dysentery and malaria deaths in Papua New Guinea and Tanzania.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is believed that the magical power of witches is responsible for the illness of other people in the community. Local people then become overwrought and start inflicting mental and physical torture. If people in a village fall sick, or there is a sudden death of anyone in the community, it is usually a woman, child or disabled person who is considered to be a ‘witch,’ and then blamed for all these tragedies.

WHRIN’s research[[4]](#footnote-4) highlights how the majority of cases of witchcraft accusation and persecution around the world are triggered by a public health condition. This condition often leads to a community member becoming ill or dying. The wider family and community members then often blame a vulnerable member of the community for this misfortune and accuse them of being a witch and therefore causing the illness or death. Some examples from cases recorded in February 2016 can be found below:

Assam State, India – ***Villagers Killed for Practicing Witchcraft*** – “Two persons killed and one seriously injured by a village mob in a suspected case of witch-hunting. Villagers consulted the local quack (witchdoctor) after their family members were afflicted by diseases. According to locals, the quack told the villagers that the cause of diseases were due to witchcraft.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Dezda District, Malawi – ***Witchcraft: Elderly Man Killed*** – “A 70 year-old man in Dedza has been murdered by his nephews who accused him of practicing witchcraft. The deceased was killed by his nephews after they accused him of bewitching someone in the same village who was shortly admitted and died at Dedza district hospital.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Obalantu Area, Namibia: ***Sentencing Awaits Witchcraft Killer*** – “A man who murdered a woman in northern Namibia after he had been told that she was bewitching him and his family is scheduled to be sentenced in the Oshakati High Court at the beginning of next month. . His explanation for the assault was that he had been told by several witch doctors, whom he had consulted about illnesses that he, his brother and his mother were suffering from, that the victim had bewitched him and his family.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

1. **Muti Murders of People with Albinism: The Quest for Wealth and Fortune at All Costs**

There are a number of key similarities, and differences, regarding the cases of muti murders of PWA and those of witchcraft accusations and persecution. The principle similarity is that they appear to be triggered by community misconceptions of public health conditions. However, whereas it is the misfortune of someone suffering a public health problem that often triggers witchcraft accusations and persecution, it is the quest for fortune and wealth, at all costs, that leads to the muti murders of PWA. Driving this belief are public health misconceptions about what albinism is and how it is brought about.

Medical science tells us that albinism is a rare, non-contagious, genetically inherited condition that affects people worldwide regardless of ethnicity or gender. It results from a significant deficit in the production of melanin and is characterized by the partial or complete absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes. Yet, across many African countriesalbinism is not understood in such a rational way. Here PWA are often seen as mythical, mystical human beings who contain a variety of magical powers. Beliefs in countries such as Tanzania and Malawi, suggest that PWA:

* Are ghosts who administer curses[[8]](#footnote-8)
* Will bring ill fortune if you come into contact with them
* Never die[[9]](#footnote-9)
* Have albinism as the result of a curse put on the family[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. **Money Magic (Muti)**

The perceived power of specific human body parts in magic (known as muti) has resulted in the murder and mutilation of countless PWA. Whereas witches are to be feared and despised, PWA are now being hunted and attacked for their body parts to be used in magic. Secondary reports suggest that this particular form of magic is believed by its adherents to be especially effective in terms of increasing personal wealth, power and prestige. It is not just PWA that are targeted in muti murders. Numerous cases have been recorded across Africa[[11]](#footnote-11) that primarily involved children being abducted and later found with their body parts removed. Indeed such is the scale of the challenge in Nigeria that the Daily Times recently stated in its editorial that: “The rate at which ritual killings (muti murders) occur in Nigeria is becoming something of a national embarrassment. No day passes without the gory news of Nigerians being killed by their fellow citizens in most gruesome manner for ritual purpose”.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Muti murders may be undertaken by practitioners of magic or else by third parties specifically commissioned for this purpose. They may be strangers to their victims since the killing is not motivated by specific inter‐personal conflict. This creates particular challenges for law enforcement in terms of identifying perpetrators whose only motive is financial gain. In Tanzania and many other countries, people with albinism have been specifically targeted for killing and mutilation by such practitioners of magic.

The belief that is considered to be the primary contributory factor in the muti murders of PWA is that the body parts of PWA contained special magical powers that can be used in order to create good fortune by enabling:

* People to gain greater wealth and prosperity
* Political elites to gain power via winning local and/or national elections
* Fishermen to catch more fish
* Miners to source greater wealth via striking more gold or other valuable minerals

Differing body parts of PWA are used in a variety of ways in order to create such fortune. For example, the hair of PWA may be woven into fishing nets or arms, legs, skin, eyes, genitals, and blood may be used in other forms of magic. This is very much in-line with other African beliefs in the power of body parts to gain specific powers. For example, in West African society, it is believed that ingesting or using eyes in magic will enable vision in the spirit world; penises will enable greater sexual powers; tongues better communication skills and so on.

1. **The Power of the Witchdoctor**

The key player in supplying the magic is the witchdoctor, who is often a powerful community leader, revered by many for his perceived supernatural powers and ability to carry out magic. Such practitioners have commercial interests in promoting both the notion that PWA carry certain supernatural powers and also that their body parts can be used in their charms, potions and incantations in order to bring about the desired outcome for the customer. The witchdoctor will incorporate different parts of the body of the PWA into his work in order to bring about the desired change for the purchaser.

In addition to this, witchdoctors may also charge for other services such as the provision of explanation for an individual’s misfortune or fortune and are able to, allegedly, identify both the human and supernatural causes for virtually any circumstance or conundrum.

Whilst all of these differing beliefs highlight the mystification of the PWA, for the purpose of this report, the primary belief that we are concerned with, is the one that a charm or potion made by a witchdoctor from the body parts of a PWA will bring the purchaser greater wealth, power and/or success.

1. **Driving the Demand for Body Parts**

It is widely believed that the demand for the magic of the witchdoctor, and the body parts to be used in it, is driven by the elites within African societies, most especially politicians who wish to gain power during elections. Indeed reports from numerous Africa countries detail rises in cases of muti killings around the time of elections.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Members of the NGO - Under the Same Sun – have stated their belief that politicians purchase body parts of PWA to bring good luck for an election. "We know that politicians in particular buy the body parts because it's well documented in Tanzania and Africa, the U.N. has confirmed this, there has been an upsurge in the number of attacks and killings in the run-up to elections," Peter Ash, the Founder of the group, says.[[14]](#footnote-14) This information has also been corroborated by the U.N. independent expert on albinism - [Ikponwosa Ero](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/IndependentExpertOnAlbinism.aspx).

Despite such widespread reports of politicians driving this WHRIN is yet to record a single case of such a person being arrested for paying for the body parts of a human. This is clearly an area that needs more consideration by policy makers and law enforcement agencies.

1. **Conclusion**

Community misconceptions of public health conditions, such as albinism, and beliefs in witchcraft and the power of muti are leading to widespread human rights abuses of vulnerable people across Africa and other parts of the world. Despite countless cases of such abuses being documented there appears to be a real reluctance on the part of UN bodies, faith groups and NGOs to challenge such harmful beliefs, presumably due to concerns about impacting upon people’s right to freedom of belief. However, WHRIN believes that failure to develop strategies that demystify public health conditions and challenge malevolent spiritual beliefs may lead to continuation of these forms of abuse. As such, interventions will need to address this issue if long-term solutions are to be found.

In order to find solutions to prevent further attacks against persons with albinism and the discrimination they are confronted to, in depth research on the belief systems, stereotypes and traditional practices in regions affected by the attacks is clearly necessary. WHRIN is therefore greatly encouraged by the UN Independent Expert on Albinism’s recent statement that understanding this phenomena and its implications would therefore be one of the priorities of her mandate. There is a great deal of work to do here and the fact that these abuses appear to be spreading to new parts of the world highlights the urgent need for greater understanding and action here. It is the hope of WHRIN that this brief paper will make a small contribution to this need and help stimulate further action if we are to prevent more of the 21st century’s most horrific human rights violations.

1. **Recommendations**

Education has to be the best tool to fight such harmful beliefs and practices. In particular the demystification of medical conditions, such as albinism, needs to be addressed via community level advocacy and training. Faith and community leaders will be part of the solution and should be encouraged to spread positive messages and understanding of public health conditions. Some of the steps that could help provide solutions here include:

**Production of Demystification Toolkit -** UN bodies, such as UNHCHR and UNHCR, should look to collaborate with the World Health Organisation and NGOs to produce a training toolkit to demystify public health conditions associated with beliefs in witchcraft and the power of muti. It should be produced in a manner that will allow for it to be adapted and used in different cultural settings in order to demystify albinism and various other public health conditions, such as ebola, epilepsy, autism etc. This toolkit should enable communities to cultivate scientific answers and explanations for the problems that they face and enable them to solve their own problems rather than seek assistance from witchdoctors.

**Global Conference -** This would bring together UN Bodies, WHO, government officials, academics, NGOs, faith groups, humanitarian aid agencies and the international media to share experiences of working on these issues and debate what can be done to prevent further human rights violations. Such a conference should also look to clarify the definition of “witchcraft” and its impact on the human rights of people with albinism. It should also focus on identifying and recommending regulations, legal instruments and other effective and sustainable measures to prevent human rights violations emerging from beliefs in witchcraft and other malevolent spiritual beliefs. This would allow for more effective and cohesive interventions to be planned and implemented in order to protect PWA, and other vulnerable groups, from attacks.

**The Need for More Research -** There exists a huge gap in terms of reliable research that focuses on the belief systems that lead to the muti killings of PWA. Much of the information available is from secondary sources and no comprehensive research project has been carried out to help practitioners and policy makers better understand these beliefs. Ultimately, this needs to be addressed if effective solutions are to be identified. In particular, academics should be encouraged, and funded, to visit countries where the killings of PWA are taking place and carry out in-depth field research that helps to answer some of the following questions:

* What are the nature of the beliefs that drive the demand for the body parts of PWA?
* How common are these beliefs? Who, or what, is promoting them and why?
* Are these beliefs and practices spreading?
* What examples of good practice exist?

For more information about the issues contained within this report please see:

[**WWW.WHRIN.ORG**](http://WWW.WHRIN.ORG)

1. UNHCR. Witchcraft Allegations,Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence, (Jan 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Behringer, Wolfgang. Witches and Witch-Hunts: A Global History, Polity Press (2004) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service. Witchcraft Allegations, Refugee Protection and Human Rights: a Review of the Evidence, (Jan 2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 21st Century Witchcraft Accusations – at http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/WHRIN-UN-report\_small-FINAL.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.nelive.in/assam/news/two-villagers-killed-practising-witchcraft-assam [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://malawi24.com/2016/02/11/malawi-witchcraft-elderly-man-killed-in-dedza/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. http://www.namibian.com.na/index.php?page=read&id=37584 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/saving-fellow-albinos-from-killings-in-africa-87755027.html?device=mobile&c=y> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc2013/perspective_hosea.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7327989.stm> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example: <http://newsone.com/2029220/nigerian-man-spiritual-ritual/> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See - http://dailytimes.com.ng/editorial-alarming-ritual-killings-in-nigeria/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example see - https://www.enca.com/africa/four-arrested-ritual-killing-5-year-old-nigeria [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See - http://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/12/05/454690248/tanzanian-diplomat-attacks-film-about-attacks-on-albinos [↑](#footnote-ref-14)