

# **NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH**

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**Seeking meaning:  
an anthropological and community-based  
approach to witchcraft accusations and  
their prevention in refugee situations**

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## Introduction

An excellent overview by Schnoebelen has shown that accusations of witchcraft have occurred in many situations of concern to UNHCR, for example amongst internally displaced in Northern Uganda and in refugee camps and settlements from South Africa through to Chad (2009). Accusations against children in refugee and IDP communities have also been a focus of particular attention in a recent report (Bussein et.al 2011).

However detailed anthropological accounts of such accusations are still rare in the refugee studies literature, exceptions being the discussion by Harrell-Bond of ‘poisoning’ amongst Ugandan refugees in Sudan (1986) and a paper by Golooba-Mutebi (2004) on accusations amongst Mozambican refugees and their South African hosts.

For a phenomenon as complex as witchcraft accusations it is arguable that an anthropological approach is particularly useful because it:

- concentrates on the social and cultural understandings of witchcraft within a community;
- examines the subject as part of broad patterns of continuity and change in various aspects of life;
- draws on insights from long-term participatory fieldwork; and,
- is informed by many years of anthropological theorising and research into witchcraft.

We hope then that this paper will be a valuable contribution to our understanding of witchcraft in refugee situations. We should highlight however that it departs from a classic anthropological approach to witchcraft in one important respect. Whilst most anthropologists have been content to describe and explain witchcraft accusations, we join with those seeking to find ways to minimise accusations and the harm that they cause; the relative powerlessness of the vulnerable individuals most often accused, and the consequences that they suffer including expulsion, violence and even death, makes this imperative (Ter Haar 2007, La Fontaine 2009). The last section of this paper is therefore an account of different community-based interventions that non-governmental agencies have used to help reduce the number and severity of accusations.

Accusations of witchcraft flow from the core idea that some people have the capacity to cause harm to other’s person or property, or to accumulate wealth and power by mysterious, illegitimate means (Ashforth 2001:206). For many in Africa and elsewhere<sup>1</sup> witchcraft is a part of taken-for-granted knowledge about the world and the nature of human beings: knowledge that

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<sup>1</sup> Although we will be referring to examples in Africa, witchcraft beliefs occur in many parts of the world, including pre-revolutionary Russia, France, India, and in tales of Satanic abuse in US and UK (Niehaus 2001:199) and in Papua New Guinea (Stewart and Strathern 2004).

permeates the routines of daily life, gossip, story-telling and song, and most importantly shapes the interpretation of events including sickness and death. In most communities there will be specialists whose work it is to identify with some certainty the causes of misfortune and suspected witches. These diviners may use long-standing techniques such as the divination basket in Central Africa, or they may develop their own novel means to reveal the invisible world.

Some anthropologists are unhappy with using the word ‘witchcraft’ as an analytical term. They argue that the word has only negative associations with evil whereas witchcraft phenomena are sometimes seen as more morally ambiguous. They also argue that the word witchcraft implies a similarity between contemporary phenomena and historical European witchcraft, an implication that is potentially misleading and unhelpful. They prefer the broader more inclusive term *occult*<sup>2</sup>.

However the situation is not straightforward as the word witchcraft has long been part of everyday parlance in much of Africa (Moore and Sanders 2001:4-5). In this paper we will use the word witchcraft, and in fact we will also use the word sorcery: where an inherent involuntary capacity is indicated this will be translated as witchcraft, and where a more deliberate malign activity is being suggested this will be translated as sorcery (following Evans-Pritchard 1976:1).

In the first half of the paper we focus on a case study. This is the story of an Angolan refugee called Peter<sup>3</sup> who was living in Meheba Refugee Settlement in Zambia in the mid-1990s. It was recorded and translated by Powles during her long-term fieldwork in the settlement<sup>4</sup>. We present it in Peter’s own words as this allows us to see particularly clearly and vividly the experiences and motivations of a key individual in the situation<sup>5</sup>. He describes how his young son died unexpectedly and how initially he himself, and also an old man living nearby, were accused of causing the death by means of sorcery.

He goes on to recount how when a diviner investigated, the accusation was redirected against a distant elderly aunt of his wife called Kakweji. The old woman was forced to leave the community and was too afraid to return. We shall look in detail at the story and explore it using a framework of simple questions that could be used as a pathway to understanding similar scenarios:

When were the accusations made? What did the accusations consist of? Who made the accusation, who was accused and why? These questions have immediate answers embedded in the interpersonal and community relationships involved but also link to wider issues in the refugee settlement such as changing power structures and emerging inequalities.

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion on use of the word ‘occult’ see Ranger 2007 and Ter Haar and Ellis 2009.

<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym.

<sup>4</sup> A total of nearly three years fieldwork: 1992-93, 1994-96, with short revisits in 1998 and 2002. In 2005 she visited the same individuals post-repatriation in Angola.

<sup>5</sup> Narrative approaches have become well accepted in anthropology during the last twenty years; see Powles 2005 for a full discussion.

Peter's story was not an isolated incident in Meheba during this period. On the single 'road' of fourteen homesteads where Powles was based for the ten year span of her fieldwork in the settlement there were three such serious episodes involving the road's residents, all emerging in the wake of a sudden death in the community and all leading to violence against the person accused of causing the death by witchcraft (in one case it is alleged that the accused witch was killed, see Powles 2002).

There was a pervasive fear surrounding witchcraft in the settlement; successful individuals were afraid that they would be bewitched by jealous neighbours; old women would privately express their fear that they might be accused. The Zambian Government Refugee Officer said that he was frequently called on to deal with witchcraft cases that were time consuming and difficult to resolve<sup>6</sup>. And yet the work of Help Aged International (HAI) and its local partners in Sukumaland in Tanzania suggests that this situation could, possibly, have been different.

Working in an area known for frequent witch killings they have seen a reduction of more than 90% in witchcraft related violence in programme villages. As we shall see this was achieved through a community and rights based approach focused on improving the social and economic position of elderly women, as well as more specific interventions.

### **Witchcraft in a refugee settlement in Zambia**

In 1994, at the time of the incident that will be described, Meheba Refugee Settlement numbered nearly 30000 refugees, most of them Angolan. Some had been there since the early 1970s; others had fled the civil war in Angola much later and only arrived in the settlement in the late 1980s or early 1990s when it had to be extended.

It was an agricultural settlement, in the early years each household was given 5 hectares and later 2.5 hectares. Plots were spread out along so called 'roads', tracks stretching the breadth of the settlement and treated as administrative units by the Zambian Government and non-governmental organisations in charge of running the settlement. Plots were assigned to refugee households according to their time of arrival.

The refugees living in the so-called New Extension were mostly from the Eastern parts of Angola and were Luvale and Lunda speaking. It was here on a road with a refugee family that Powles settled for the duration of her research. Peter was a prominent nearby resident: Luvale, about forty years old, one of the few wage earners on the road, and as will become clear, a recent Road Chairman. In Angola he had been an MPLA Government soldier for over three years. After he left the army he was captured by the guerrilla movement UNITA and forced to work for them exchanging clothes for food. He finally fled Angola in 1988 with his wife and children. His parents and eleven siblings remained behind.

This story was recorded as part of a wide ranging unstructured interview. At the time of the interview Peter was living alone and complaining of poor health. A tentative question about the death of his son followed on from a discussion of his chairmanship.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview August 1996.

We had slept well and everything was fine in the morning. There was a programme at church, Youth Day, and we had arranged that everyone meet at the church on Road 15. I left the family at home as I normally do when I go to work since they were staying behind. I left them in the morning and went to church at Road 15. We did God's work from morning up to 16 hours, then we finished. They said 'the work is done, let us disperse, some of you come from a long way off'. I came straight home.

When I arrived my neighbour told me 'go to the hospital quickly, they took the child a while ago, he got sick around noon. It's serious, he has terrible diarrhoea and is very ill'. And so I ran to the clinic. When I arrived I found the child on a bed, the doctor<sup>7</sup> was struggling to help him... injections, pills... nothing was working. I went in and sat down, perhaps for an hour or so. Then he shut his eyes and began to fit, he was dying. The doctor suggested that he write us a [referral] letter so that we could rush by ambulance to the big hospital in Solwezi. We said, yes, good. And so he wrote us a letter. But on lifting the child up to put him in the ambulance, just then his life ended. And they brought us back home at 2300 hours during the night.

The boy was only about twelve years old and was still studying in primary school. The suddenness of his death was deeply shocking for all concerned. Family, friends and neighbours soon gathered for the boy's funeral. Peter went on to recall how the possibility of sorcery was raised.

The way he died was so strange, we couldn't understand it. When we were at the funeral I could hear people talking. They were saying 'this death is because of his FATHER - he has become important, as Chairman he is important now. And he has used his child for sorcery (*kupanda*) to make himself even greater'. Some other people were telling a different story, they were saying 'it is because [Peter] has taken Kambila's chairmanship from him. The old man Kambila wanted that chairmanship and when he sees that it has been taken by a young man it makes him angry'.

You see the Refugee Officer wants young men to be Chairmen and the people on the road want young men too. They think young men will represent them properly at the offices. And [that's why] people were saying 'on seeing that Peter was now Chairman, the previous Chairman, the older one, he was annoyed and said let me eat his child to teach him a lesson'. And so that was how people were interpreting it[...].

They had accused me of a dreadful thing and I was desperate. They said his father is a sorcerer. Me?! Eee...no. I said, 'my friends, these things that you are saying about me, my soul...(he failed to find words)...I have heard about

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<sup>7</sup> Peter referred to him as a doctor but he would have been a primary care worker as no doctors were assigned to the settlement.

them, they say there is sorcery, but I've just heard about it! I haven't ever seen it! My spirit is still far from those things, they aren't even close enough that I might desire them, far from it'. And I felt ashamed that wherever I went they would say 'that young man, they say he is a sorcerer – it's him, they say, who has eaten his child'. It was very difficult for me, deep in my spirit.

In the hope of clearing his name, Peter decided to arrange for a diviner to come and investigate the boy's death.

The diviner, came here to my home. He divines using a pounding pole. Two people hold it and he has a mirror in which he sees the witch. He sees them there in the mirror and he sees their home and wherever they are. He will tell you 'they have gone to so and so'. He knows wherever they have gone and can tell you.

When he had finished divining like that then he explained everything. He said 'this young man here, whom you are convinced is a sorcerer, I haven't seen him in my divining glass. You have blamed him unfairly. Wait and you will see who it is, the real enemy who killed his child'. And he began to divine. We went round the road, up to the end and then back to the home of my wife's paternal aunt, Kakweji. There he stopped. He said 'she is not at home. Go and fetch the owner of this house and bring her here'.

And so we left him and went to fetch her. When she came then he began divining. An eagle came out of her house, it was a big one but when he gave it medicines it vomited and became small. He tied it up. On one side of it were beads and on the other something else, I don't know what. And a bottle of blood came out [of the house] - there was old blood at the bottom with maggots in it and a little [other blood] at the top.

He said 'do you see the new blood?' We said 'yes'. 'Can you all see the new blood?' We said 'yes'. 'That is the blood of the child she has killed. That is his blood. The blood at the bottom that is rotten, whenever she brews beer at home and there are some young men or women drinking, then she puts a little into the beer and gives it to each of them. She appears to be so welcoming... 'here, have this beer my children. Oh that bottle is finished, take another'. And if you drink that beer regularly it will make you help her when she has a problem. It will make you think 'our grandmother, our mother, we have lived with her for a long time, we have all grown up with her and now we have children ourselves - there has never been a problem, how can you now say she is a witch (*muloji*)? No, you are lying, you are blaming her'. And when she cooks maize meal (*shima*) it is the same, putting this blood in the food and calling you to come and eat. You think the food is given out of kindness but really it is not, you are eating the things she has added to make your hearts soft so that if there is a problem you will help her. '

And finally the diviner said ‘I will take her with me and treat her<sup>8</sup>. Then if she decides to kill someone again, she herself will die. The person she intends to die, they won’t die - rather she herself will die’. And he took her and treated her. Up to now she lives there [at the diviner’s place]. She is afraid, she thinks ‘if I go back they will kill me.’ She drinks a lot. When she is drinking she is so happy and welcoming, you couldn’t believe she is guilty of anything. But by night she has a different character. They were a company of three who killed the boy, two women and a man on another road.

They wanted to accuse me of a dreadful thing but it was alright because of the way things worked out. Otherwise even now people would be worrying that I am a sorcerer. I acquitted myself.

It is difficult to imagine the distress that Peter felt on losing his son so suddenly and without warning. When those gathered for the funeral began to mutter accusations against him, that distress was clearly compounded by confusion. The transfer of blame from Peter to Kakweji brought relief for him but left the elderly woman permanently ostracised.

### **When were the accusations made? Explaining and experiencing misfortune and loss**

Witchcraft accusations must be understood firstly in the context of whatever circumstances precipitated them; here a young boy has died and this presents a profound existential and emotional challenge for Peter and for the community as a whole.

Seeking meaning is a significant part of what makes us human and it is not surprising that when faced with the sudden loss of the boy people asked questions about what had happened and the reasons for their suffering. No doubt they understood *how* he had died, the physical reason, the severe diarrhoea, but this could not explain *why* he had died, *why* this boy, *why* now? However the presence of witchcraft or sorcery could answer this more existential problem, and unlike a response of ‘he was just unlucky’, the notion that interpersonal illegitimate forces had been involved meant that there was some action that could be taken, a culprit found and punished.

The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard, writing about the Azande people of Sudan in the 1930s, showed very clearly that witchcraft and sorcery served this role of explaining the misfortunes in their lives, both small mishaps and significant losses (Evans-Pritchard 1976). Moreover far from being manifestations of some sort of ‘primitive mentality’, as had been assumed in Europe to that point, witchcraft beliefs formed a self-reinforcing and logical system of thought within which it was rational for Azande to operate.

Of course the accusations also sprung from a highly emotional situation; although death was tragically commonplace in the refugee settlement it was nonetheless keenly felt by those left behind. A new death in the community would stir up former losses, whether during the war in

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<sup>8</sup> He said he would make small incisions on her skin and rub medicine into them.

Angola or since the refugees' flight to Zambia. Attendance at funerals, particularly those of relatives, in-laws, neighbours or fellow church members, was always prioritized<sup>9</sup>.

No doubt many individuals responded to the cries of Peter and the boy's mother as they returned from the clinic with the body of their son, despite the lateness of the hour. And many returned each evening for the wake that took place over the following nights<sup>10</sup>, to cry, to wail, to talk, to sing and to pray together around the funeral fires.

Whilst there was much that was positive in this collective response to death in the settlement it is easy to see how a murmur of witchcraft or sorcery could quickly spread. An accusation made during the particularly heightened emotional time of wailing around the body before burial could trigger an electrifying reaction, and violence often followed.

Whilst we need to be careful about drawing parallels between the ways in which death is understood and experienced in different cultures, since arguably there are no universals in this respect (Rosenblatt 1997), we can perhaps recognize some of the emotions behind the murmurs and accusations from our own more complicated experiences of grieving: anger, jealousy, guilt, mistrust and an urge to blame someone. The diviner was certainly alive to these disturbing dynamics, as well as those preceding the death, and gave them shape and form in his interpretation of events.

So it is important to explore *when* witchcraft accusations arise and how they relate to events. Most often this will be, as in this case, after a death, particularly if it has been sudden and unexpected.

### **What did the accusations consist of? Local understandings of witchcraft**

The accusations against Peter and the elderly former road chairman were both fairly vague: Peter says simply that the mourners accused him of 'using the boy to make himself more powerful', and that the old man had 'eaten' the boy to teach Peter a lesson. It is common for accusations to be voiced in this general way; after all witchcraft is the invisible shadow of the seen world and no one, other than a diviner, would want to be seen to know too much about detail lest they themselves be accused.

Nonetheless enquiries will normally offer some insight into local understandings of witchcraft and sorcery. Amongst the Luvale it is thought that individuals can magically remove body parts, blood and sinew, and incorporate them into a potion used to enhance their authority; it is probably this that people had in mind when they accused Peter of 'using the boy to make himself more powerful'.

It is an idea made all the more horrifying by the discovery of bodies within Zambia, and neighbouring countries, where the literal removal of body parts for ritual purposes has occurred

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<sup>9</sup> See Harrell-Bond and Wilson (1990) for a useful discussion of death and bereavement in refugee settings.

<sup>10</sup> The number of nights and the number of those attending would depend on the age of the deceased and the status of the family.

(Sanders 2001). Alternatively they may have thought that Peter had created a familiar, a creature sharing his identity and operating on his command, which needed 'human food'. Such familiars can be animals, a bird or dog for example, or the snake like *lilomba* with a human face, or even the fearful figure of Katotola who is personified by the dancers in the Luvale circumcision camp.

Women engaging in witchcraft were also said to have familiars, indeed the common expression for a female witch would be '*atwama navandumba*', meaning literally 'she has lions'. The bird like creature that was found by the diviner in Kakweji's hut was presumably meant to be her familiar and it was always mentioned when people told the story. Witches are often suspected of being part of a coven that meets secretly at night to devour human flesh; here she was alleged to have killed the boy to pay a debt of meat owed to her fellows. Refugees were able to point to a number of individuals they believed to belong to such covens, usually the older residents of a road, although it was only when there was a death that direct accusations would be made against them.

Witchcraft beliefs will often be gendered in some way so that here men are thought to acquire their familiars deliberately whilst women are believed to acquire them unintentionally and without their knowledge, stumbling upon them as part of their daily activities like collecting firewood in the forest, or when passing an abandoned homestead, or inheriting them from matrilineal relatives. These more active and passive roles are reflected in the differing Luvale words used so that for men it is a verb *kupanda* whereas for women it is the noun *muloji*. Witchcraft is distinct from ancestral affliction (in Luvale *mahamba*). In the latter case the dead, not the living, cause misfortune and must be ritually appeased.

The specifics of witchcraft beliefs do vary across Africa, from the *tokolotsi* familiars of South Africa with their pronounced sexual features (Niehaus 2001:50) to shape-shifting in Sierra-Leone (Jackson 1975), but the underlying themes in Peter's story are common: that witchcraft and sorcery enable some individuals to control others, and thereby make themselves richer or more powerful; that the most marginal will, out of jealousy, destroy the good fortune of the more successful.

Sorcerers and witches are frequently described as 'eating' their victims, a very resonant idea. That witchcraft discourse encapsulates the language of power, production and consumption is one reason, anthropologists argue, that it interplays with people's experiences of modernity and globalization and has not disappeared as some might have predicted (Comaroffs 1993, Moore and Sanders 2001).

### **Who made the accusation, who was accused and why were they accused?**

This brings us to the final questions: Who made the accusation, who was accused and why? It is important to take an historical perspective as far as possible and to open the lens wide so as to capture a full picture of all elements that could be relevant.

The pattern of accusations in Peter's story is not a new one. There is evidence that chiefs and headmen were suspected of using magical substances to bolster their power and authority in this

region as long ago as the nineteenth century (von Oppen 1994:367), and Turner reported that his Ndembu informants told many stories about individuals enlisting sorcery to gain office (1957:200). Moreover indications are that elderly women have long borne the brunt of serious accusations (White 1961:66)<sup>11</sup>. That there is continuity in the pattern of accusations indicates enduring conflicts around power, age and gender, although these conflicts are clearly taking on a particular shape and urgency in the refugee settlement.

The settlement administration in Meheba requires the residents of each road to elect a road chairman, to act as an intermediary between the administration and the road and to manage relationships within the road, including hearing minor cases between its residents. It was the perceived tensions around this role that first came to the minds of those attending the funeral of Peter's son. Could Peter himself have killed the boy to magically enhance his power? Or could the previous road chairman have killed him in revenge for Peter usurping his position?

As Peter made clear in his account, underlying these questions was the issue of age. In Angola it would have been older men who were the chiefs and headmen who heard cases, familiar with what had gone before and having a good knowledge of proverbs. But the Refugee Officer had banned chiefs from being elected as chairmen and there was a general feeling amongst the refugees that the new role required a younger man confident in dealing with the settlement administration: a man such as Peter who worked as a painter for Care International and who was well known at the nearby offices.

This was not the only case where tensions around the chairmanship were played out through witchcraft accusations. The assumed resentment of the older generation was the frequent theme, so that the Zambian Government refugee officer was able to point to at least three cases where young road chairmen had resigned because of their fears of the nefarious older generation<sup>12</sup>. Any resentment over the transfer of authority from old to young was underscored by the simultaneous shift in economic power.

Whereas in Angola it had been largely a subsistence economy of fishing, hunting and agriculture, the refugee settlement afforded new opportunities to engage in the market; many households cultivated sweet potatoes as a cash crop but the most enterprising, generally younger men, did this on a larger scale and used the proceeds to invest in small businesses. Between 1992 and 2002 new visible inequalities emerged in the refugee settlement. One popular theme of the songs made up by refugees and sung at social gatherings was the danger, because of witchcraft and sorcery, to young men and women tempted to 'show off' when they had done well for themselves.

Two of the accusations fell within the family and this is typical of witchcraft accusations in this region, both past and present, and is most frequently the pattern elsewhere in Africa. Bearing in mind the continued importance of the kin group to all areas of life it is not surprising; after all it is those with whom our lives are most closely entangled that we are most likely to have on-going disagreements, resentments and bad feeling. In a very memorable phrase Geschiere describes

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<sup>11</sup> Similarly during the great witch hunts of Europe, 75-80% of those executed for witchcraft were women, typically past child-bearing age (Ellis 2007:40).

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Zambian Government Refugee Officer August 1996.

witchcraft as ‘the dark side of kinship’; he says witchcraft ‘reflects the notion that there is hidden aggression and violence where there should be only trust and solidarity’ (1994:325).

The circumstances of their displacement put particular strain on kin relationships amongst the refugees. In Angola extended family groups resided together or at least nearby; at the core of a village would usually be a group of matrilineally related men, brothers and their nephews, and older unmarried women. The civil war and displacement dispersed these groups so that family members were now scattered between Angola, the border area and the refugee settlements. Those that were in Meheba often did not share a plot since these were allocated according to time of arrival and not pre-existing networks. Some refugees made the choice when they arrived in the settlement to build with relatives who were already established, but in doing so they forfeited the right to land of their own to cultivate<sup>13</sup>.

Refugees asserted that this dispersal of family members across the settlement had eroded the sense of mutual support that the bonds of blood and marriage had previously entailed. Moreover they disliked being forced to live ‘amongst strangers’ and felt a new exposure to the enmity of neighbours. For the first time accusations of witchcraft and sorcery began to be directed towards these unrelated individuals. Fear and suspicion were increased by the feeling that people from unknown areas would have different types of witchcraft.

Strains in the social fabric were exacerbated by economic challenges. Refugees described how in Angola they could live by their own hands, growing and processing their own cassava, fishing in the many rivers and exchanging their produce for the few commodities they needed, such as soap, but in Meheba it was ‘all about money’. They needed money for the grinding mill to process maize, money for dry fish, and money for essentials such as clothing, cooking oil and soap. There were seasonal income-generating opportunities for the able bodied, cultivating a cash crop or doing piecework for others, but otherwise options were limited: importing dry fish for sale in the market, petty business, brewing or distilling.

As stated earlier some refugees managed to exploit these opportunities very effectively but that only made the majority feel more aggrieved; each meal they ate with nothing but green leaves to accompany the staple food *shima* was a very real reminder of how they were suffering (Powles 2005). There was a sense of loss that people were no longer willing or able to share with one another.

These social and economic difficulties felt particularly burdensome to older refugees, most especially those who were dependent on distant kin rather than their direct descendants. They did receive food rations because they fell into the category of vulnerable but these were nowhere near adequate to their needs. Research has shown that elsewhere in Africa, when times are challenging, it is such individuals who are the first to be ‘trimmed out’ (Cligget 2001:311). Old women like Kakweji found themselves playing a potentially dangerous game of trying to cajole, wear down and even threaten distant relatives into providing them with assistance.

On the one hand she offered Peter hospitality, generously sharing her beer with him, but on the other she had sometimes insulted him, saying that he was useless. When misfortune struck she

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<sup>13</sup> Arrivals in Meheba after 1994 were placed in a new pattern of villages, and not roads.

was an obvious suspect. The bottle of blood the diviner allegedly found in her house was a potent symbol of her draining presence: denied the material support that she had wanted she had taken what was not hers to have, the life-force of the child. The family's reluctance to help her was now justified; their guilt assuaged, she was a witch who had used her powers against them<sup>14</sup>.

Allegations of witchcraft could be taken to the Road Chairman for mediation but clearly in this case the Road Chairman was compromised in his role. She might have approached the General Chairman of the settlement section for help, or even the Government Refugee Officer, but this would have been difficult given the intensity of the situation and without anyone assisting her.

Whilst not mentioned in Peter's account others reported that she was beaten subsequent to the divination. She probably deduced that the safest course of action was to go with the diviner without protest. It is possible that she made a confession, either because she was guilty of the allegations, or because a confession gave her some control of the situation and protected her from further violence, or because she was no longer sure of who or what she was.

Refugees frequently stated that there was more witchcraft in the settlement than there had been in Angola, as one woman explained: 'witchcraft in Angola was respectful and its killing respectful. Not like the way people are dying here in Meheba... someone dies today, another person tomorrow... old, young, all the same. The witchcraft here in Meheba is just like the war that we have fled' (translated from Sangambo 1999:13).

Whilst they could identify specific causes for the high death rate, such as the more limited diet, denser population, poor medical services and a new disease environment, witchcraft overarched these. The feeling that witchcraft was out of control was heightened by a lack of confidence in the authorities. Whereas in Angola they thought that individuals had been able to kill witches without facing prosecution, in Zambia they knew such actions would be considered a punishable criminal offence<sup>15</sup>.

From their perspective the law was protecting witches, and allowing them to proliferate, rather than protecting their victims. In this situation of anxiety diviners thrived. Generally diviners were careful not to identify witches specifically, allowing those who had consulted them to put forward names and draw conclusions, but clearly in this case the diviner was less cautious.

There was a very significant increase in church participation following resettlement to Meheba but this did not fundamentally change people's belief in witchcraft or their propensity to visit diviners and traditional healers when need arose. In Angola there were only two churches, Christian Missions to Many Lands (Plymouth Brethren) and Roman Catholic; membership was limited and they were missionary led, at least until 1983 when UNITA took control of Eastern Angola and the missionaries were forced to leave.

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<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Macfarlane argues that during the Reformation in Essex, England, accusations of witchcraft against poorer individuals were used to justify a refusal of assistance (in Douglas ed. 1970:94).

<sup>15</sup> According to Brinkman, witches in Eastern Angola were executed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and by the MPLA guerrillas during the war for independence, but less severe punishments were used during other periods (2003:313).

In Meheba numerous new church denominations were established, led by refugees themselves, and by 1996 80% of refugees claimed a church affiliation<sup>16</sup>. For many being part of a congregation provided an important social network and sense of identity in the situation of displacement. Peter was a committed and prominent member of the New Apostolic Church. It was very explicit in its condemnation of traditional practitioners but he nonetheless called upon the services of a diviner.

In the minds of refugees a dichotomy became established between misfortunes that were ‘of God’ (*vyakalunga*), for which the clinic was the appropriate place of treatment and the church the place for support, and misfortunes that were ‘of people’ (*vyavatu*), caused by witchcraft and for which more traditional interventions were necessary.

There was one prophetic diviner and healer in the settlement who brought elements from Christian and biomedical discourse together with elements from traditional belief and ritual. Some refugees saw him as belonging to the ‘of God’ side of the dichotomy and others ‘of the people’, or even ‘of Satan’. He was very popular and a community of permanent followers formed around him.

Whilst he certainly did not reject the aetiology of witchcraft, he preached non-violence towards witches and developed extensive exorcism rituals for their treatment. In his hands witchcraft discourse became a powerful means to reflect upon the predicaments of conflict, displacement and under-development. Alleged and self-confessed former witches lived in the Mulwilo community as full and equal members.

It is a sad truth that in the end it was the least powerful person in the community who was held responsible for the death of the boy: Kakweji, the old woman whose broad toothless smile greeted passers-by from outside her rough grass hut by the termite hill, and who clapped so distinctively when something amused her, and not Peter, the relatively advantaged Road Chairman. The community was convinced by the diviner’s revelations about her and they acted upon them. Any residual loyalty individuals might have felt was dismissed by the diviner as resulting from her manipulation. There was no one willing to act on her behalf.

Unlike Peter she did not have the opportunity or means to organise an alternative divination to clear her name: he paid more than a month’s wages for the divination which was more than Kakweji was likely to earn in one year<sup>17</sup>. And yet what we have seen is that we need to think beyond the simple categories of perpetrator and victim if we are going to fully answer the questions ‘Who made the accusation, who was accused and why were they accused?’ We must consider what underlying conflicts, inequalities, tensions and insecurities are being reflected in witchcraft accusations, it is these that contribute to the building of a consensus within a community against a particular individual.

Peter’s story about the tragic death of his son shows how witchcraft accusations can develop: how initial murmurs, perhaps against more than one individual, can quickly become focused and lead to violence against the accused. Re-reading the story with a few simple questions in mind

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<sup>16</sup> Data from Repatriation Survey carried out by Lutheran World Federation February 1996.

<sup>17</sup> He paid approximately £30.

enables us to understand events more clearly: When were the accusations made? What did the accusations consist of? Who made the accusation, was accused and why? In this case witchcraft was the means by which people were making sense of their suffering and loss. Their ideas about witchcraft and sorcery were rooted in the past but also linked to the present. The accusations related to a number of contextual factors in the refugee settlement: inter-generational conflicts over power and authority, emerging economic inequalities, changing kin relationships and obligations, and new religious affiliations.

### **Witchcraft accusations in non-refugee settings**

Many of the themes and interconnections mentioned in the last section appear in the literature on witchcraft elsewhere in Africa. It is important to see accusations in refugee settings in this wider context when thinking about possible interventions.

Ashforth for example describes how witchcraft accusations in urban Soweto emerge from a context of 'violence, poverty and general hardship' (2001:206). Whilst some individuals have managed to 'get ahead', and have left the township for the suburbs, this has created jealousies and tensions with poorer relatives. These resentments and suspicions come to the fore when there is a premature death, either from illness or, sadly common in Soweto, murder or a motor vehicle accident.

As in the refugee settlement in Zambia older women are prime suspects, considered to have the motive and inclination but not more direct physical means to harm others (ibid:215-16). Ashforth uses the phrase 'spiritual insecurity' to evoke the feelings of fear and epistemological uncertainty which shape Sowetans' lives and of which witchcraft is a significant part.

According to de Boeck (2009) accusations of witchcraft against children in Kinshasa arise from a similarly challenging urban environment. Since the IMF and World Bank withdrew from the Congo in 1993 the country has not engaged in the global economy in any formal sense. There is a lack of employment and basic social services. It is common for a family to eat a cooked meal only once every two days. In this context of extreme poverty kinship networks and formal marriage arrangements have been eroded, leading to a failure of secure systems of care for children. Increasingly children are seen as a burden rather than a social asset and they have become newly vulnerable.

Meanwhile leaders in the recently founded charismatic churches and prayer movements have been preaching on the importance of caring for the nuclear family alone and have colluded with families in the ostracizing of certain children as witches (ibid:137). Social and spiritual insecurity have thus collided in a particularly shocking way to produce tens of thousands of street-children in Kinshasa, many of them forced out by their families because they are so-called 'witch-children' (ibid:130).

And there are numerous examples from rural Africa. In a gripping, if rather disturbing, account of mass witch-finding in Eastern Zambia, Auslander (1993) explains how the ensuing accusations of witchcraft against the elderly, particularly women, grow out of long-standing tensions between different generations and genders re-shaped by modern predicaments.

Meanwhile a study of witchcraft accusations in sixty-seven villages in Tanzania by the economist Miguel (2005) showed a strong positive correlation between the number of witch-killings and extreme rainfall (and therefore either drought or flooding). The study also found that the victims of those killings tended to be concentrated in poorer villages and households, and were predominantly older women.

Is there anything specific then about witchcraft accusations in the context of forced displacement and resettlement? This is a difficult question to answer. The issue mentioned repeatedly by refugees in Meheba, and which even appears in Evans-Pritchard's seminal 1930's study of the Azande who had been forcibly resettled by the colonial government, is the difficulties presented by having strangers for neighbours.

It is a point mentioned by Niehaus in his study of rural Bushbuckridge in South Africa too. He describes how following villagisation in the 1960s there was an increase in witchcraft accusations in the area and it was in particular the failure of strangers to meet the expectations of good neighbourliness that led to tensions and accusations (2001: 8).<sup>18</sup>

In addition to this issue of residential organisation is the general question of control and self-determination<sup>19</sup>. Golooba-Mutebi (2004) made a very interesting comparison of a self-settled Mozambican refugee community in Tiko and the host population of black South Africans who had been forced to move to the area again as part of a betterment villagisation programme.

Despite being less affluent than their hosts, and having a shared belief in witchcraft, there were less witchcraft accusations in the self-settled refugee community than in the host community. Golooba-Mutebi argues that the history of forced villagisation left enduring feelings of entrapment and isolation, jealousy and suspicion amongst the host population, whereas the process of self-settlement had depended on using pre-existing networks of trust and reciprocity and had established a much more communitarian ethic that was then less predisposed to witchcraft accusations. Finally, the speed with which changes can occur in situations of forced displacement and resettlement, including substantial demographic changes, is likely to be relevant, increasing tensions and thereby witchcraft accusations.

### **Interventions to reduce witchcraft accusations and related violence**

It is clear from Peter's story that there are unlikely to be simple answers to the problems associated with witchcraft accusations. A brief exploration of accusations in non-refugee settings

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<sup>18</sup> Other factors also came into play; increased labour migration and inequalities, conversion to the Zionist churches and a sharpened dichotomy between good and evil, and the Bantu Authorities Act that took the responsibility for settling witchcraft cases away from chiefs (2001).

<sup>19</sup> Also Hansen 1990.

suggests that they have much in common with accusations in refugee settlements and lessons learned from interventions in the former are likely to be relevant to places like Meheba, if with some adaptation. The Sukumaland Older Women's Project (SOWP) in Tanzania, run by Help the Aged International (HAI) and its local partners, is a striking example of a multi-dimensional community based project targeting witchcraft accusations. Reported witchcraft related violence has been reduced by over 90% in its 72 programme villages (2007:16).

The sort of interventions that have been employed in this project, and others elsewhere, can be divided into four categories: socio-economic, ideational, engagement with diviners, healers and churches, and finally issues relating to law and justice.

### *Socio-economic issues*

As we have seen, inequality, poverty and social exclusion lay the foundation for witchcraft accusations and should arguably be the first priority for intervention. Tackling these has been a key part of the Sukumaland Older Women's Project (SOWP).

According to the Tanzanian anthropologist Mesaki (2009), Sukumaland has experienced a number of social and economic challenges through the colonial and post-colonial period including population increase, villagisation, bureaucratisation, labour migration and a fundamental loss of community solidarity. These changes to rural livelihoods have had a significant impact on older individuals and particularly older women; their previously important roles have drastically diminished and they are increasingly disrespected.

They are given less family support and are often considered by themselves and others to be a burden when resources are scarce. There is little scope for them to be self-reliant because the customary inheritance laws in Tanzania disallow a woman from owning property and there is a lack of pension provision. In this context witchcraft accusations have become rife and have led to a large number of vigilante killings, mostly of older women.

SOWP was designed to reduce witchcraft related violence. It began in 2001 and one of its central aims was to improve the economic, political and social standing of older members of the community particularly women. One of the main ways in which this has been achieved is through the establishment of Village Older People's Committees (VOPCs). These committees provide a space for discussing the problems facing older people.

They are comprised of a balance of men and women and have been trained to organise and carry out projects in the community. Several hundred people have been trained so far. Efforts that have directly addressed material concerns include setting up savings and credit schemes, co-ordinating the building of low cost homes, and building fuel efficient stoves.

The committees have also worked to gain the support and resources of the rest of the community and to achieve a realignment of community obligations towards older people. Representatives attend village assemblies and have thus secured village resources for the older people's trust funds and older people's village farms as well as the new low cost homes and stoves.

The training in community organising that the VOPCs received helped them to catalyse community cooperation and begin to rebuild networks of support beyond immediate family. They actively led initiatives and were not merely passive recipients of assistance. The problem of the marginality of older people was thus addressed simultaneously with issues around economic security.

Such community based interventions may need to be complemented by state action. In this case HAI, the biggest partner in SOWP, have helped to establish a network of twelve human rights organisations within Tanzania to lobby the government for reform of the customary inheritance laws mentioned above which disadvantage older women. The introduction of state pensions in South Africa appears to have helped reduce the number of witch killings in Northern Province (Singer in Miguel 2005:1170).

Writing about Northern Zambia Hinfelaar argues that struggles over land play a very significant part in causing witchcraft accusations and again state action might make a difference. Witchfinders move through an area ‘cleansing’ villages; those accused are chased out and their land and property confiscated often to the benefit of the witch-finder and local chief. Improving the system of centralised title-deeds introduced in the 1990s, making it much more affordable and accessible to rural communities, would prevent this from happening and make witchcraft accusations less likely (2007:241).

How do these insights and experiences translate into refugee camps and settlements like Meheba? In a sense they underline the significance of elements that are likely to be there in the programmes of UNHCR and its implementing partners already: helping all refugees to secure an adequate livelihood, including those who are most at risk because of specific needs related to gender, age or disability; making sure that all refugees are represented in the planning, maintenance and leadership of refugee communities; having community workers involved in the community so that points of tension are identified and addressed before they begin to escalate and difficult moments, such as a funeral, are carefully monitored; and so on. These goals are difficult to achieve (CASA Consulting 2003; Bakewell 2003; Groves 2005; de Vriese 2006) and it is important that other approaches to the problem of witchcraft related violence in refugee situations are also pursued.

### *Ideational*

Witchcraft accusations are made and sustained by the exercise of power in a community through cultural discourses and social practices. Consensus will be formed in particular ways with some voices being more clearly heard than others. There will be assumptions and stereotypes drawn upon in the characterisation of certain individuals as witches. Sometimes a witchcraft accusation will serve the interests of one person over another, securing them access to land, property or social advantage.

The SOWP has attempted to address these, what can be termed, ‘ideational determinants’ of witchcraft accusations by trying to establish alternative narratives as well as by equipping older women with the confidence to claim their rights and take part in decision making in the

community. Performances by local drama groups have been used to provoke reflection on witchcraft, issues of ageing, HIV/AIDS and civic and legal rights.

VOPCs have been trained to facilitate seminars and discussions on gender roles and responsibilities and issues facing vulnerable groups. The concept of individual rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is made a central focus of these. The sessions have been attended by a wide cross section of the community. The SOWP evaluation, based on a sample of 18 of the 72 programme villages, reported that over the course of the intervention the number of women holding leadership positions rose from 121 in 2004 to 396 in 2007 (2001:iv). Moreover focus group discussions found real changes in attitudes towards older women and their place in the community.

As an extension of these efforts to provide an alternative narrative 'on the ground' SOWP have engaged with regional and national media. They encourage them to report abuses as a result of witchcraft accusations and to promote the sort of discussions that SOWP are facilitating at the local level. As a result the media coverage of issues related to older women's rights increased by an average of 71% over one year (2010:7). One television programme aired on Star TV discussed older women's rights and community policing and referred directly to the work of SOWP.

Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN), an organisation aiming to prevent accusations against children in the Niger Delta, also uses drama troupes to provoke discussion about witchcraft accusations. In addition they have developed a wide programme of 'creative media advocacy'; for example they helped to produce a film called 'The Fake Prophet' which highlights the vested interests of the pastor-prophet who confirms a witchcraft accusation, as well as the misery that such accusations can cause and alternative means of dealing with misfortune.

The Nigerian film industry, or Nollywood, has produced a number of films that are widely perceived as exacerbating the phenomenon of accusations of witchcraft against children, with their vivid depictions of them communing at night and eating the flesh of their adult victims<sup>20</sup>. SSN have lobbied the industry to censor such portraits of children. They engaged Tecu Benson, the director of a film called 'The End of the Wicked' which includes flying witches, to direct their own counter-narrative and thus drew him into the debate. Meanwhile they have also collaborated with Nigerian rap musicians on a record that carries a child rights message and produced a children's book on the topic called 'Eno's Story'.

It is not only Non-Governmental Organisations engaged in this work. Hinfelaar (2007:239-241) describes how between 1996 and 2000 the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in Zambia initiated a series of seminars across the country in an effort to help stop witchcraft accusations. They were attended by representatives of various Christian communities, members of the police, the local judiciary and the district administration.

Discussions tended to focus on the role of witch-finders, and participants made suggestions as to how their activities might be curbed (see next section). Two videos were also made and broadcast on national television. The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR), based in

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<sup>20</sup> Also an issue in Ghana. Dovlo 2007:89.

Lusaka, subsequently produced a study guide for discussion and prayer in small Christian communities that includes scenarios involving witchcraft accusations that can be role-played, questions for discussion, and biblical exegesis (2004).

There have been seminars organised in refugee settlements in response to witchcraft accusations. After a disease outbreak amongst refugees from Central African Republic in Dosseye camp in Chad a number of people were accused of witchcraft, assaulted and their homes burned. Initially action was taken against those who made the accusations and protection for the accused organised. UNHCR and its implementing partner then convened seven awareness raising meetings which focused on 'health, sanitation, community cohesion and the danger of accusing people [of witchcraft] without evidence' (UN News Service 2007). There were no further accusations in the ensuing months (Schnoebelen 2009: 26).

In the same year there were five instances of mob violence amongst returnees from Uganda to Kajo-Keji County in Sudan. For logistical reasons the police struggled to contain the problem. UNHCR organised four community-based protection workshops and no further instances occurred (Ibid:27). In protracted refugee situations there would be scope for longer-term projects to facilitate community discussion on issues relevant to witchcraft accusations, for example through the inter-generational collection and publication of oral testimonies (Slim and Thompson 1993).

### *Engaging with diviners, healers and churches*

The role of the ritual specialist who identifies an individual as a witch either by inference or explicitly is clearly an important one and any intervention must involve them in some way. Mesaki describes how the Sukuma have historically consulted diviners for a whole range of issues from the relatively minor through to seeking explanations for serious afflictions and misfortunes(2009: 82). Divination was the preserve of a few experts and was considered an 'honourable profession'; forthcoming accusations were dealt with by local systems of governance (ibid: 77). He argues that this is no longer the case, many diviners are 'charlatans' more interested in making money than helping people and bureaucratization has led to a vacuum in how to treat alleged witches which these diviners and vigilantes are exploiting. They have a vested interest in propagating conflict in the community.

Traditional practitioners were targeted for special attention by the Sukumaland Older Women's Programme from the start and they attended the sessions and seminars organised by the Village Older People's Committees (VOPCs) discussed above. As part of this dialogue an agreement was reached: diviners would practice divination but abandon the naming or designating of witches; in return they would be given training in simple biomedical procedures and links to local health authorities to whom they could refer clients. The diviners are apparently proud of their new legitimacy and social role and were more receptive to the SOWP than had originally been anticipated.

The Catholic Church in Serenje District in Zambia arguably took a more confrontational approach to local diviners or, as Hinfelaar calls them, witch-finders. These individuals do not reside in a particular village but move through the area ‘cleansing’ whole communities at a time often with devastating consequences. In the first instance the church assisted those accused of witchcraft to make a report to the police.

Then in the subsequent seminars that were organised on the issue (see previous section) a number of young men, who had been part of the entourage of the witch-finders, revealed some of the ‘tricks’ that had been employed: how charms were planted in people’s homes before the witch-finder arrived; the use of permanganate to give water the appearance of blood; methods of intimidation and so on. Hinfelaar explains, ‘witch-finding ceremonies were re-enacted so as to ‘objectify’ the ritual and disperse the fear with some humour and plenty of laughter, which had a liberating effect’ (2007:242). A follow-up study would be necessary to assess the longer-term impact of this approach.

Some of the criticisms made against diviners have also been made against the charismatic pastor-prophets of a number of African revivalist churches. In their sermons witchcraft is equated with the devil and his forces of evil, conspiring to bring about disorder, misfortune, hardship and unhappiness. Harnessing the power of the Holy Spirit through the leader’s orchestration of collective prayer and ritual intervention are stated to be the only way to combat these forces.

Such churches have become extremely popular across Africa and in Diaspora communities, helping to create the spiritual insecurity that they then claim to allay. In her report for UNICEF Cimpric (2010: 34) identifies pastors as playing an essential role in accusations against children in several western and central African cities as well as in their Diasporas around the world, either by making or confirming an accusation. Afuilar-Molina describes a ‘profit-making frenzy’ amongst pastors in the Democratic Republic of Congo who invariably make money out of performing deliverance ceremonies at parents’ request (2005: 28). La Fontaine explains that the ordeals and violence sometimes used in exorcism rituals can be an attempt to either make a child confess, or to force the evil spirit out of the child’s body (2012).

The SOWP involved church leaders in the seminars and workshops run by the VOPCs. They say that this has led to religious leaders challenging witchcraft accusations and promoting women’s rights in their sermons and preaching. SSN meanwhile has demanded that church leaders sign a declaration stating their commitment not to promote or practise accusations of child witchcraft and related abuse in either their church or community.

This includes cooperation in child protection procedures, agreeing to robust theological and child protection training and accepting the regulations issued by church associations like the Pentecostal Fellowship Network and Christian Association of Nigeria (SSN Church Pack:4). SSN is also trying to facilitate an international Christian Coalition to help persuade and pressurize church leaders in the Niger Delta to reject accusations of witchcraft against children.

There is a danger however in placing too much blame for witchcraft accusations on church pastors and missing the potential they offer for non-violent resolution of witchcraft accusations. De Boeck has pointed out in relation to the accusations made against children in Kinshasa that an accusation rarely begins with a pastor; generally the pastor confirms an accusation that anxious parents already have in mind. The fear of witchcraft is all too real.

Pastors do earn money from exorcisms but this is not always their only motivation. Nor should children and youth be seen as simply passive victims of accusations: children sometimes implicate elders in accusations thereby putting them in serious danger and young people may claim to have witchcraft powers and threaten to bewitch elders and individuals in positions of authority. The church, through exorcism and collective prayer, can be a therapeutic 'healing space' and try to bring about reconciliation within families (2009:142-146).

In any refugee setting in Africa there is likely to be a range of diviners, healers and pastor-prophets and this was the case in Meheba settlement described in the first section of this paper. The practices of those in Meheba varied: some were diviners only and would often cite ancestral affliction as a cause of misfortune rather than witchcraft; others were essentially herbalists treating a range of physical and mental disorders; still others, like the man in Peter's story, would carry out divination and cleansing rituals; lastly there was the self-proclaimed prophet who had a group of permanent resident followers including self-confessed former witches.

Their charges ranged from a minimal amount at the discretion of the client to very large sums of money. Refugees would express surprise at the proliferation of practitioners in the settlement and they would exchange views on the relative merits of different individuals, weighing up their personality, effectiveness and motivation. The decision to use their services was often hotly contested within families divided by different religious views and access to resources. However there was no public debate about their activities and whilst some of the practitioners had been registered by the Traditional Healers Association of Zambia they were not regularly monitored.

It has been argued that traditional healers can have a positive impact on refugees' health and well-being but that a co-operative relationship with providers of Medical Health Services is essential to avoid potential exploitation (Hiegel 1990, WHO and UNHCR 1996). In refugee communities where witchcraft beliefs are common there is a risk of authorities either being too repressive towards traditional practitioners and losing the possible benefits of their activities, or colluding with them and thereby sanctioning subsequent abuses (for an example see Harrell-Bond 1988:321).

The SOWP set up a system of local regulation which was very effective, giving village assemblies the responsibility for administering punishments to diviners who had identified a witch; this may be a useful approach in refugee settings if grassroots governance structures exist.

## *Law and justice*

A statutory approach to witchcraft accusations is a legacy of colonial administrations in Africa but has certainly not succeeded in suppressing their occurrence in the way intended. For example the Zambia Witchcraft Control Act of 1914<sup>21</sup> still stands, with minor amendments, and under this legislation offences include naming or imputing the name of a witch, conducting a poison ordeal, and professing knowledge of witchcraft.

In Zambia and elsewhere enforcement has always been a challenge, since witchcraft accusations are often made in communities remote from administrative centres and police units and the individuals concerned are likely to be reluctant to report on one another. In the colonial period it was sometimes more expedient to allow chiefs autonomy in dealing with witchcraft cases than for colonial officers to interfere, at least as long as violence and disruption were kept to a minimum (Niehaus 2001b:187).

In the post-colonial period limited resources and sometimes alleged corruption in police and judiciary systems can place considerable constraints, and prosecutions under witchcraft control legislation are rare (Niehaus 2001b:193, Hinfelaar 2007: 234 and Mesaki 2009:85).

The situation is further complicated by the resentment many communities feel towards such legislation; as mentioned previously in their eyes it is not the accuser or the diviner/witch-finder who has committed a crime but the alleged witch. In the absence of recognition of witchcraft by the authorities, and lawful punishments for witches, violent direct retribution and even murder can be given tacit approval.

Cameroon has changed its witchcraft legislation in order to reflect this indigenous moral framework and Malawi and South Africa have both undertaken consultations on possible reform (Malawi Law Commission 2009, Niehaus 2001b). In Cameroon committing an act of witchcraft can now be tried in state courts and those convicted given long jail terms, fined and made to pay compensation to the witch-doctor who identifies them (Geschiere 1994:328).

Whilst it could be argued that through involving itself in the prosecution of alleged witches the state will reduce the sense of spiritual insecurity that leads to witchcraft accusations, and pre-empt vigilantism when accusations do occur, a number of serious concerns have been raised such as the issue of evidence. Bewitchment is generally considered to be primarily a psychic or supernatural act that leaves little or no material traces.

In Cameroon the testimony of the witch-doctor has proved to be decisive in court and yet his evidence cannot undergo the usual process of examination because it is not visible (Bar Human Rights Committee 2011). It is an additional concern that the witch-doctor is not only a witness but a claimant in a witchcraft case and it is therefore in his interests for a person to be convicted.

At the same time the perceived power of a witch is not neutralised by the court process nor are relationships healed, so no fundamental or long-lasting change is effected. In fact it is arguable that in prosecuting witchcraft the state is at risk of further reinforcing economic and generational inequalities (Niehaus 2001:198).

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<sup>21</sup> Zambia Control Act available at [saflii.org](http://saflii.org).

It seems then that neither approach, prosecuting those who make accusations of witchcraft or prosecuting alleged witches, is unproblematic or even likely to eradicate witchcraft. Another strategy is to use local systems of justice to address community conflicts which, if unaddressed, may feed witchcraft accusations at a later date. It is important that such local systems of justice respect the rights of all individuals equally, whilst being embedded in local systems of governance otherwise they will not be trusted or utilised.

With this in mind the SOWP trained 420 older people, half of them men and half women, as 'paralegals'. They preside alongside village government leaders using a combination of customary and statutory law and are recognized and given legitimacy by higher courts. Cases brought to their attention often concern matters such as land and property ownership, or marriage conflicts, and a high percentage have been won by women.

Since the beginning of the programme there has been a steady drop in the number of cases presented to the paralegals which, with the concomitant decline in witchcraft related violence, suggests that they have played an important role in changing attitudes and expectations.

Issues around law and witchcraft are even more complicated in refugee settings where parallel systems of justice often operate: formal host state law and customary law, refugee camp or settlement by-laws, and refugees' own customary law or dispute resolution systems (da Costa 2006; Veroff 2010). In some instances camp or settlement authorities have asserted host state witchcraft control legislation.

In Chad refugees who attacked three alleged witches were sentenced and fined, helping to prevent further problems (Schoebelen 2009:25-26). In Tongogara camp in Zimbabwe the dissemination of information on witchcraft control legislation appears to have been sufficient to quell accusations (ibid:22). Similarly a recent report on Meheba settlement suggests that, in contrast to the 1990s, refugees avoid the use of violence against alleged witches owing to the firm communication of witchcraft control legislation on their arrival (Veroff 2010:18)<sup>22</sup>.

In the camps in Sierra Leone an alternative approach has been adopted (UNHCR Operational Protection Guide 2005:A4-A6). Here witchcraft, rather than making witchcraft accusations, is included as an offense in the camp by-laws. This came about when the authorities invited refugees to participate in the drafting of camp by-laws on minor offences and the establishment of refugee led grievance committees to hear and adjudicate cases.

The refugees insisted that both witchcraft and adultery by wives be included in the by-laws and, whilst reluctant, UNHCR did in the end agree so that the project could move forward (the adultery offense was modified to include both sexes). Punishments are limited to fines or community work and the activities of the committees monitored by the Refugee Executive, camp management and UNHCR Protection Unit.

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<sup>22</sup> The significance and the causes of this change from the situation described in the first section of this paper would require further research.

The grievance committees hear 90% of crimes reported in the camps and are clearly the preferred option for refugees because they represent a system of justice that is familiar and accessible. However their impact on the perceived level of witchcraft amongst refugees, the number of accusations, the scale of punishments and the longer-term consequences for accused witches is not clear.

## **Conclusion**

We began with Peter's story about the death of his young son and the ensuing multiple accusations of witchcraft. Re-reading his narrative with a set of simple questions, and from an anthropological perspective, provided a number of insights. It suggested that witchcraft was a means to explain, and respond to, misfortune and suffering.

We saw that the accusations were shaped by long-standing ideas about witchcraft, sorcery, the nature of people and their inter-relationships; and those ideas tended to be expressed in resonant images and language. And we learned that the accusations related to significant features of life in the refugee settlement itself, especially conflicts over power and authority, emerging inequalities and a general feeling of uncertainty and insecurity.

At the end of the story the accusations focused in on the elderly aunt of Peter's wife, a socially marginal figure who had no children or other close relatives in the settlement to defend her against the allegations. She was beaten and ostracized by the community. Whilst an anthropological analysis may help to make the story more comprehensible, the issue of how a vulnerable individual might be protected from physical abuse and long-term hardship remains.

Having looked at some successful interventions targeted at reducing witchcraft accusations and associated violence in Tanzania and elsewhere, what can we now say? What interventions might have made a difference to Kakweji and other women like her in Meheba?

It is clear that addressing structural and socio-economic problems is of primary importance. In Meheba this might have included changing the procedure for distributing residential plots so that extended family groups could stay together more easily. From Peter's story it was evident that older men were feeling, or perceived to be feeling, marginalised from decision-making processes and this needed to be considered.

The emerging inequalities in the settlement were a significant source of tension and suspicion and any efforts to make opportunities, like cash-cropping sweet potatoes, fully accessible would have been beneficial. Obviously it was essential to support individuals likely to be at risk of failing in their basic needs, or social exclusion, such as Kakweji.

Some of these interventions were indeed on-going in Meheba but their relevance to helping prevent witchcraft accusations was not appreciated. The establishment of Older Peoples Committees, as in Sukumaland, might have been one very useful way to bring different elements together and push them forward.

Spaces to encourage reflection on witchcraft beliefs, practices and particularly accusations might also have been helpful. In Meheba one of the Non-Governmental Organisations printed a community newspaper and this could have been one vehicle for public debate. The process, and final publication, of an inter-generational Oral Testimony Project in the settlement, facilitated by Panos, touched on the issue of witchcraft; the theme could have been developed, perhaps with an additional publication, or through drama and song, to provoke further discussion including a human rights perspective.

The churches were very active in Meheba. Some, including Peter's own church, often attracted those who were in need because of the informal social welfare that they provided. Church representatives often attended funerals. Sermons would sometimes refer to witchcraft beliefs and practices. For all these reasons inviting churches to participate in seminars on witchcraft would have been one way to ensure a relevant audience who might have been able to make an impact. Clearly more engagement with the diviners that operated in the settlement was also needed.

Finally given that the Road Chairmen were the elected grassroots leaders in the settlement, their potential to prevent and mitigate witchcraft accusations, and their limitations in this area, could have been more recognized. Good participatory training in conflict resolution, the justice systems operating in the settlement and human rights would have been very valuable and Chairmen expressed a willingness to undertake this (Veroff 2010: 23). Also a system needed to be established so that if a Chairman's neutrality was compromised his place could be taken by the Road Secretary or another suitable individual.

It is difficult to know which, if any, of these interventions might have made a difference to the number and intensity of witchcraft accusations in the settlement. To establish the best chance of success programmes must be worked out through a process of dialogue with the communities concerned.

Solutions will vary according to the answers to the questions we began with: When are accusations made? What do they consist of? Who makes the accusation, who is accused and why? In a recent reflection the anthropologist La Fontaine comments that the only countermeasures that are likely to be really effective are widespread peace and prosperity, which no one can provide, and she may well, ultimately, be right (2012, also Ashforth 2001:221).

However we hope that this paper has shown that in the meantime it is possible and worthwhile to attempt to understand witchcraft accusations in refugee situations and to explore appropriate, multi-faceted, community-based interventions aimed at their prevention.

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