**Report on Child Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Southern Malawi**

**Introduction**

This report is based on research done on behalf of Stichting Afrika Zending and Across Outreach in Malawi in order to provide relevant information concerning child witchcraft accusations in the Southern African nation. The main aim of this research is to gain a better understanding of child witchcraft beliefs and accusations in Malawi and to contribute to more effective intervention on behalf of vulnerable children and other vulnerable groups in Malawi.

**Background**

The issue of child witchcraft accusations in Sub-Sahara Africa has been highlighted in the media ever since Stepping Stones Nigeria released their compelling documentary Saving Africa’s Witch children in 2008 (Foxgroft 2008). This documentary focuses on child witchcraft beliefs and accusations made by Charismatic and Pentecostal pastors and prophets in Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria. Recent reports by UNICEF and UNHCR also describe how child witchcraft beliefs in Sub-Sahara Africa have led to untold suffering (Bussien 2011; Cimpric 2010). Earlier in 2006 the organisations Save The Children (Molina 2006) and Human Right Watch (HRW 2006) had reported on child witchcraft accusations and the resulting abuse and abandonment of children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Similar reports have followed from Angola (ICN 2009; LaFraniere 2007) and even from among African migrants in the United Kingdom (Schnoebelen 2009; Woodward 2012). However, child witchcraft accusations may be more widespread throughout Africa than previously thought and also affects South and East Africa. This report is based on research done in Southern Malawi into the prevalence of child witchcraft beliefs, witchcraft accusations and persecution of witches.

**Methodology**

The research for this report consists of 88 semi-structured interviews of randomly selected adults and 35 unstructured in-depth interviews with influential key-persons in rural, semi-urban and urban communities in four districts in Southern Malawi, namely Thyolo, Blantyre, Zomba and Balaka districts. The respondents in these communities came from throughout the Southern region with a few originating from Central and Northern region. The key-persons interviewed were 2 child right activists, 2 police officers, 20 clergy, 10 teachers, 3 village headmen, 2 medical doctors, 2 lawyers as well as 1 magistrate. Focus group discussions took place with two groups of youths aged 10 to 17 who had been victims of abuse resulting from witchcraft accusations in Southern Malawi. In addition a literature review was done of over a dozen newspaper reports and articles on the issue of children and witchcraft which appeared in the Malawi newspapers over the past five years. The data collection was done over a period of 90 days.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Findings**

We must stress that the findings of our research may not be representative for the whole nation and additional country-wide research is necessary. Nevertheless, the findings of our limited research are sufficient cause for concern with more than 65 out of 88 respondents in the semi-structured interviews believing that children can be witches representing 74%. Many of the respondents, 71 out of 88, have observed children accused and punished in their communities as witches and reported that these are subjected to traditional cleansing ceremonies, exorcisms, arrest, imprisonment, beatings and banishments. All of the respondents have heard reports of children being killed but no-one reported to have witnessed this. Severe beatings were very common as well as traditional cleansing ceremonies which included the drinking of unknown and potentially harmful substances. In the focus groups as well as interviews with key-persons it was reported that many children are chased away from their families and are forced to live on the street and as a result may die of exposure. These children are also vulnerable to trafficking or may end up in prostitution or become involved in criminal activities to survive. Out of the 7 underage girls in a safe house in Blantyre reported to have lived on the streets, surviving by means of prostitution even as young as 12 years of age. In spite of the harm that can befall children on the streets 15 respondents were of the opinion that banishment of children accused of witchcraft was a good solution. Similar sentiments were found among the specialists who were interviewed with one special needs teacher explicitly stating that all children suspected of witchcraft should be burned to death. Elderly men and women who are suspected of having taught witchcraft to children faced even less mercy with 60% of the respondents calling for them to be beaten and chased away from the community or else be imprisoned. Although only 2 out of 88 respondents called for suspected witches to be executed and only 1 of the key-persons who were interviewed it is still reason for serious concern, particularly in the light of recent extra-judicial executions of suspected witches in Malawi and other parts of Africa (Kasawala 2008:1, 3; Petraitis 2003; Somanje 2011:1,3).

In as far as accusations are concerned the general consensus among all respondents was that the testimony of the children is sufficient for someone to be identified as a witch. Nevertheless, normally confirmation by a traditional healer or charismatic prophet is recommended. This of course gives the latter the enormous power to acquit or condemn and in a way the power over life and death. Out of the 88 respondents, 76 indicated that they first heard about children being witches in the late 1990s or later. This suggests that on the one hand the concept of children being witches is a relatively new phenomenon in Malawi but on the other hand already widely spread. It is also interesting to note that 20% of the respondents (18 out of the 88) no longer believed in the existence of witchcraft at all. Those who rejected the concept of witchcraft did so mainly due to higher level education. Of this group 8 went through the experience of being falsely accused of witchcraft and as a result started to reflect critically on the issue. This group also insisted in more thorough investigation and great caution in entertaining accusations against someone as it is common for parents to influence their children into making allegations. It was also suggested that some children are influenced by the many witchcraft stories circulating in the community combined with the witchcraft themes in Nigerian movies which are often featured in informal cinemas. Psychological factors have also been mentioned such as the sense of power one has when accusing someone of witchcraft or even when asserting to possess some witchcraft related powers. Most of the respondents believed that false accusations occur frequently out of jealousy, conflict or power struggles within families or between families or within the community. Many respondents believe that counselling is the best way forward to deal with children who are suspected to be witches (41 out of 88) while 9 believe that nothing should be done at all as they contend that witchcraft does not exist. The respondents included people from various tribal and religious backgrounds but no significant differences in witchcraft beliefs could be discerned on the basis of tribal background or religious affiliation.

**Evaluation**

The findings of our research suggest that beliefs concerning child witches in Malawi are similar to those found in Akwa Ibom state in Nigeria, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo but with less hatred being expressed towards the children who are believed to be witches. Many see the children at least partly as victims who have been misled by some of the elderly who taught them witchcraft. Generally the elderly bear the brunt of the witch hunts in Malawi (Gondwe 2008; Kandiero 2007:15; Semu-Banda 2008) although our research has shown that violence against children accused of witchcraft is on the increase in the country. In the past five years newspapers reported the murders of several children who were accused of being witches (Gondwe 2008; MANA 2009:3; Muwamba 2012; Somanje 2011). These are likely to be just a fraction of the real number as many murders are disguised as accidents or suicides.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is also sobering to reflect on the fact that the current situation in Nigeria, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo with extreme violence against children accused of witchcraft was in the past similar to what it is in Malawi at present today. In these countries socio-economic problems, rapid urbanisation, the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the influence of some Nigerian religious movies are some of the factors which caused child witchcraft accusations, torture and murders to reach epidemic proportions as highlighted in the UNICEF report (Cimpric 2010). From discussions with various NGOs who work among street children, local human rights organizations, the department of social welfare and from discussions with victimised children themselves it is likely that in Southern Malawi there are several hundred children who are subjected to violence and abandonment on the basis of witchcraft accusations. In the whole of Malawi there may be even a few thousand victims. Many children living on the street have been chased away from their homes due to witchcraft accusations and also several of the teenage prostitutes we interviewed were forced into the trade after they had been accused of witchcraft and chased away from their homes. It was also observed that 12 of the 15 ‘witch children’ placed in safe houses in Blantyre, Malawi have lost one or both parents. This suggests a link between the high number of orphans due to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and child witchcraft accusations. Several respondents mentioned in the interview that people accuse children of witchcraft because they are orphans and their upkeep is too much of a burden to the host family. However, culturally it is unacceptable for anyone in the extended family to refuse to take care of a needy family member. However, once the family member is labelled as a witch it becomes socially acceptable to mistreat and abandon such a person. One respondent related seeing how a 5 year old boy was severely beaten by relatives after the witch doctor had identified him as the witch who was responsible for the death of his parents who had succumbed to Aids. The child became so traumatised that it is now behaving as if mentally disturbed and as he is neglected by the same relatives his survival changes are small. A research by UNICEF in several other African countries has shown that many of the children accused of witchcraft there are orphans as well (Cimpric 2010:1-3).

Some respondents mentioned that they witnessed children being arrested by the police after they were accused by the community of witchcraft. However, we did not come across any evidence that any minor was ever convicted of witchcraft by any magistrate. The cases of arrest may refer to cases where children were taken into protective custody. Some of the children in the safe houses had been taken to the police by the relatives who accused them of witchcraft but the children were not arrested. A 16 year old girl in one of the focus groups related how she was rescued by the police from being beaten to death and taken to hospital. Until date the police has failed to arrest the step-brother who had assaulted her for being a witch. Nevertheless, the police officers and magistrates who we interviewed expressed their frustration with not knowing how to handle witchcraft accusations and an unwillingness to enforce the witchcraft act under which witchcraft accusations are in fact illegal. To complicate matters some magistrates have actually entertained witchcraft accusations against adults accused of witchcraft while admitting evidence from children who allegedly had been taught witchcraft by the accused (BBC 2010). Apart from the problems associated with accepting testimonies from impressionable minors the evidence presented is of a supernatural nature and at the same time the whole procedure of entertaining witchcraft accusations let alone conviction and sentencing is unlawful under the witchcraft act.

**Conclusion**

The issue of child witchcraft accusations is a growing phenomenon in Southern Malawi as child witchcraft beliefs have been adopted by the majority of the people (Chandilanga 2008:4-5). It appears that in the case of Malawi these beliefs are partially a foreign import with Nigerian movies and the growth of Pentecostalism as contributing factors[[3]](#footnote-3). It also appears that these beliefs found fertile soil in Malawi due to pre-existing witchcraft beliefs which include the belief that children can be taught witchcraft by elderly witches (BBC 2010; Byrnie 2011).The well-known African theologian John Mbiti described the fear of witchcraft as one of the most disturbing elements in African religion and life (in Westerlund 1985:36-37). Nevertheless, we need to recognise that apart from deep-seated beliefs, witchcraft accusations are also an effective way to scapegoat those who are perceived as a burden or a threat to the community (PRA 2012).[[4]](#footnote-4)Witchcraft fears, witchcraft accusations and witch hunts may well represent a general feeling of insecurity, unhappiness and helplessness in society. While witchcraft fears appear to have been part of the various African cultures in Malawi for many centuries, its recent revival and media attention has various underlying sociological causes. The rapid modernization of Malawian society has brought with it new socio-economic and political problems, this combined with adverse climatic conditions and natural disasters in the form of floods and droughts, results in a lot of frustration in society. This frustration in the community may be translated in the scapegoating of orphans, widows, the elderly, foreigners and other outsiders as witches, sorcerers and Satanists (Lagerwerf 1987:33; Schoeneman 1975:529ff). Nevertheless, witchcraft accusations represent a counter-productive way of resolving social tension as they in themselves produce more tension and perpetuate fear and repression (Bourdillon 1990:203-204, 212; Schoeneman 1975:532ff). There appears to be a link between witchcraft accusations against the elderly and children. It has been suggested by several respondents that since these segments of society are the least infected with HIV/AIDS they are looked upon with suspicion by those who belong to the age groups most infected. With more than half of the respondents still believing that most disease and death is caused by witchcraft it is likely that without intervention witchcraft accusations of children, the elderly and other vulnerable groups will continue to increase.

In terms of legislation it has become increasingly clear that existing legislation dealing with witchcraft allegations has not been properly enforced and has often been misinterpreted and misapplied to convict people of witchcraft and jail them (BBC 2010; Phiri 2007:10; Semu-Banda 2008). At the same time there has been a cry from the general public in Malawi for the government to further criminalise witchcraft and revise the witchcraft act so it can be used effectively to convict people of witchcraft (BBC 2010; Byrnie 2011; Chandilanga 2008:4-5, Gondwe 2008). However, rather than giving in to the outcry of a majority to criminalise witchcraft as they have been influenced by a mixture traditional and modern witchcraft beliefs and other magical notions, partially inspired by Nigerian movies, such a thing would expose vulnerable groups in Malawi to even more unfounded accusations, abuse and unjust punishments. It is by far better for the government of Malawi to decriminalise witchcraft and at the same time decriminalise witchcraft accusations as both are in essence spiritual and religious matters. In any secular country where religion and state are separate entities no court is competent to pass ruling on matters of faith and belief. Freedom of belief including the belief in witchcraft, the belief that someone or one-self is a witch is enshrined in the constitution and cannot be criminalised. However, as soon as people commit human rights abuses these should be objectively be dealt with by the law and on the basis of factual evidence regardless of whatever belief the accusers or the accused hold. The courts must limit themselves to matters covered by the law and deal with physical evidence in the natural realm. Under no circumstances should the courts be allowed to admit supernatural evidence from religious experts, nor entertain testimonies from children about supernatural experiences some of which have made headlines in Malawi (Mmane 2007:1,3). The courts should not entertain or admit self-incriminating confessions of people of who claim to have supernaturally hurt or killed other people, let alone convict them as has happened in the past (Chibaya 2007:15; Kandiero 2008:4). Such confessions are religious and not criminal in nature. Also one must keep in mind that self-incriminating confessions can be made for a number of reasons such as social pressure and coercion, but also religious indoctrination, delusions and various physiological and psychological causes. Even the presence of charms, amulets and traditional medicine in someone’s possession does not constitute evidence of a crime, they are religious artefacts. Many people in Africa have such artefacts in their possession in order to protect themselves against evil supernatural forces or to gain good luck. The court must deal only with crime and tangible evidence in the physical realm and stay out of the realm of religion. Beliefs no matter how unacceptable or irrational they may appear to those who hold differing beliefs cannot and should not be legislated, only unlawful behaviour and unlawful actions flowing out from such beliefs can be and should be regulated. In particular extrajudicial executions of people accused of witchcraft must be dealt with strongly as it is a serious threat to the whole of society when people start taking the law into their own hands (Kasawala 2009:1, 3).

However, the issue of witchcraft accusations against children the elderly, the disabled, refugees and other vulnerable groups in society needs more than legislative reform and needs a concerted effort by Government, especially those dealing with gender, disabilities, child welfare and social welfare in general. We need to involve the churches, the academia, international NGOs, civil society, human rights activists, the media and other stakeholders in Malawian society to create public awareness and promote behavioural change but also a change in the underlying worldview and beliefs which contribute to the trampling of the rights of vulnerable groups in society (Mgbako 2011).[[5]](#footnote-5) There is also need to engage religious leaders including traditional healers, leaders of indigenous churches, the Malawi Council of Churches, The Evangelical Association of Malawi and encourage them to self-regulate in order to control unscrupulous traditional healers and Christian witchcraft specialists who are engaged in abusive witch hunting and witchcraft eradication practices which are unlawful and violate the rights of the accused. However, such engagement needs to go beyond just focusing on the rule of law and human rights principles and also engage the underlying worldview in a constructive manner. In as far as churches are concerned this could partly take place in the seminaries and theological college where clergy are trained. Workshops and seminars are also useful instruments for awareness creation and discussion, for clergy as well as other stakeholders in society.

Some intervention is already taking place as in 2010 a small coalition was formed by Human rights activist Emmie Chanika of Civil Liberties Committee, Reverend Aubrey Goliat, Children’s rights activists Frank Phiri, Samantha Antonio and others under the banner of ‘The Coalition against Witchcraft Stigmatization of Children in Africa’. In spite of lack of sufficient funding the coalition has since organised over forty workshops throughout Southern Malawi reaching about 1500 clergy and community leaders. The first consultation about child witchcraft allegations for child care organisations in Blantyre was organised in February 2011 and another at the 20th anniversary of Civil Liberties Committee. The coalition also teamed up with the association of secular humanists to sponsor a weekly radio broadcast about the issue of witchcraft allegations and the witchcraft act (Mlozi 2012:35). With the support of Across Outreach and the help of Stepping Stones Nigeria and the Bar Human rights association of the United Kingdom a contribution was submitted through the Malawi Law society in 2011 addressed to the special law committee which was established in 2009 to review the witchcraft act. The aim of this contribution was to point at internationally accepted rule of law principles and internationally recognised human rights norms and standards. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done in terms of awareness creation and intervention at community level and on a national scale.

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1. Most of these articles have been cited in this report and can be found in the list of references. Others may be found in Short & Bedford (2010:113 ft. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One may think of reports of 10 year olds committing suicide by hanging themselves and other suspicious incidents (Chimzimu 2012; Croome 2010). Unfortunately the Malawi Police is ill-equipped for thorough forensic investigation and in the rural areas many cases are never reported as the victims are quickly buried and the matter is kept quiet. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an in-depth study of how Pentecostal and Charismatic spiritual warfare theology has affected African Christianity one can consult the writings by Onyinah (2002) and Van der Meer (2008; 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It also should be noted that witchcraft accusations and the killing of people accused of witchcraft is not just an African phenomenon but also is common in parts of India (Paul 2010). Witchcraft accusations and execution of witches including some children was also a common occurrence in Europe in the late Middle Ages (Van der Meer 2008:228-229). We may also consider the well documented case of the execution of witches in Salem in North America where the testimonies of children played an important role while other children were jailed together with the adults who were suspected to be witches (Lalwani 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example the right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, including physical and psychological violence as stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Committee on the Rights of the Child - General comment: No. 13 (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)