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Women, Witch-Hunting and Enclosures in Africa Today

It is by now well documented that the past three decades have seen thousands of mostly African and Indian women accused of being witches and killed or maimed or chased out of their communities. Since their inception, these attacks have been expanding to new regions and new groups, also targeting children and elderly men. Long reported only by journalists and a handful of anthropologists, witchcraft killings have lately come to the attention of human rights organizations and the United Nations.¹ But the driving forces behind them and their implications, especially for women, are only superficially analyzed. It is clear, moreover, that there is hardly a commitment, at a local or global level, to investigate their causes and find remedies against them, although it is recognized that improving the economic status of women and the elderly, for example through the introduction of pension schemes, would have a positive effect.²

¹ In September 2009, during the 12th session of the UN Council on Human Rights, held in Geneva, the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the world union of humanist organizations and a number of NGOs and representatives from the countries affected presented a report detailing the worldwide spread of witch-hunting. Later, the UN published with the IHEU a joint statement on the subject. See [www.iheu.org/witchcraft-united-nations] (accessed 15 March 2010).

² Evidence for this comes from South Africa, where a universal pension scheme was adopted that “transformed [the elderly] from a net household liability into an ‘asset’”, leading to a decrease in the number of witchcraft accusations against them. See PDES, *Toils and Troubles: Accusations of Witchcraft as a Protection Issue*, Witchcraft Displacement and Human Rights Network, 8 July 2009, [maheba.wordpress.com/2009/07/08/toil-and-trouble-accusations/] (accessed 15 March 2010). See also Amanda Heslop / Mark Gorman, *Chronic Poverty and Older People in the Developing World*, Chronic Poverty Research Center (CPRC) Working Paper Nr. 10, [http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/WP10_Heslop_Gor

Social movements have generally not addressed this subject, plausibly for fear of contributing to the hostile ideological campaign to which Africans and other colonized populations are subjected in the international press. The criticism directed at US feminists for their denunciation of female genital mutilation during the 1980s may also have been a consideration. I myself have wondered whether my concern with this subject might not be viewed as an undue interference in matters that can be manipulated to justify imperial agendas. I have however set aside this preoccupation given that my objective is precisely to highlight the role played in these witch-hunts by the neo-liberal economic policies which the international financial institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund above all) have imposed on the countries of the global South during the 1980s and 1990s. I argue, in fact, that the current persecution of 'witches' is rooted in the intense social crisis that economic liberalization has produced in much of the world, to the extent that it has stripped entire populations of their means of subsistence, torn communities apart, deepened economic inequalities and forced people to compete for diminishing resources. There is evidence, for instance, that many witch-hunts are linked to the breakdown of communal land ownership patterns and the land privatization drives that neo-liberal economists have prescribed. Such land privatization drives see local authorities, businessmen and landowners cooperate in grabbing land and striking at those less capable of defending themselves or resisting expropriation.

To make these points is not to underestimate or exonerate the deep-seated misogyny and patriarchy that these attacks on women reveal. It means, however, to recognize that the governments and international financial institutions that have promoted this new round of 'primitive accumulation' bear a responsibility for these killings. Such recognition constitutes a necessary step, in my view,

man.pdf] (accessed 15 March 2010), p. 12, 20. Heslop and Gorman point out that the pensions received by elderly persons in South Africa are shared with other household members, who would otherwise view their elderly as 'passive recipients.'

both towards identifying the causes of this phenomenon and towards undermining the assumption that witch-hunting is no more than a legacy of African or Indian traditions.

1. Why Speak of Witch-Hunts?

In contrast with the persecution of so-called witches that took place in Europe from the 15th to the 18th centuries, and which was primarily instigated by clerical and state authorities, the present attacks would seem to come from below, as a response to local rivalries, familial jealousies or fears generated by sudden, inexplicable deaths. But the scale of the persecutions, their geographical extension across cultural and religious boundaries, the similarities of form and context and the fact that the same social groups are victimized suggest broad underlying causalities and even unarticulated schemes whose nature I will try to identify.

It is worth noting, in this context, that state-led persecution of witches is not unheard of. A campaign against witches and 'black magicians' has been conducted for some years by Saudi Arabia's religious police, leading to several arrests and death sentences, including that of a woman accused of having caused impotence in a man.³ In March 2009, hundreds of people in Gambia were arrested by members of the presidential guard and driven to camps where they were forced to drink poisonous beverages; the detainees were charged with witchcraft.⁴ In Malaysia, Muslim clerics are calling for anti-witchcraft laws, arguing that robbers use magic spells. Moreover, anthropologists have noted a new tendency among African politicians to use magical claims to project political power ever since the early 1990s.⁵ These examples suggest a transformation in

³ Saudi Arabia: Kingdom Steps Up Hunt for 'Witches' and 'Black Magicians', in: Los Angeles Times, 26 November 2009.

⁴ Hundreds Kidnapped, Poisoned in Gambian Witch Hunts Amnesty, ABC, 19 March 2009.

⁵ Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Post-colonial Africa*, Charlottesville 1997; Jean-François Bayart et al., *The Criminaliza-*

the language and tools of power, of which the revamping of religion as a means of political legitimation is clearly a part. But they still belong to a different category than the broad campaigns against 'witches' that have developed in the last three decades, and which appear as a veritable war against women.

Exact figures are lacking, for many killings are not reported. But it is generally agreed that the number of people, mostly elderly women, who have been murdered on charges of witchcraft during the last three decades is in the tens of thousands in Africa alone. In parts of the continent (Northern Ghana, South Africa), there are now 'witch refugee camps' where women threatened with death, or expelled by their communities, live in exile, supported by local governments or NGOs.⁶ According to a UN report, 2,500 killings were recorded in India between 1987 and 2003, but it is agreed that the actual figure is much higher and that many more women were tortured, maimed, traumatized for life. Hundreds of attacks on 'witches' have also been reported in Nepal, Papua New Guinea, more recently East Timor, and in parts of South America.

As mentioned, the authorities generally fail to punish or even pursue the witch-hunters, though these often act openly and in the presence of bystanders. In Africa, many attacks on 'witches' are carried out at night, by groups of vigilantes usually composed of young men and acting under cover of darkness. But witch-hunts are also very public events, perpetrated in full daylight. A recent attack on five people accused of being witches in the Kisii region of Kenya was video-recorded and can be seen on YouTube.⁷ In some cases, witch-finders have gone from village to village, invited by local chiefs, submitting everyone to frightening interrogations and

tion of the State in Africa, Bloomington 1999.

⁶ Alison Berg, *Witches in Exile*, VHS and DVD, 79 minutes, USA and Ghana 2005 (available at: [www.newsreel.org]); Elom Dovlo, *Witchcraft in Contemporary Ghana*, in: Gerrie Ter Haar (ed.), *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, Trenton 2007, pp. 67–112: pp. 72–75.

⁷ Kenyan Elders Killed in Witch-Hunt, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dhg7I7ZZPYE] (accessed 15 March 2010).

punishments.⁸ Mob killings are frequent in India and Nepal, where the murder of ‘witches’ often occurs after a village court has sentenced the accused to death and she has been paraded naked through the streets. Some Indian states have passed anti-witch-hunting legislation (Bihar in 1999, Jharkhand in 2001), but few of the perpetrators have been brought to justice.

Why have governments been so unresponsive and, most crucially, how to account for these attacks on women reminiscent of the European 17th century witch-hunts? These are difficult questions to answer, if we wish to go beyond the immediate causes. What is certain, however, is that much more is at stake than ‘tradition’ and ‘superstition’.

We can note, in this context, that anti-witchcraft movements only emerged in Africa and India during the colonial period.⁹ Prior to colonization, Africans believed in the existence of evildoers, embodiments of evil spirits, capable of causing death, but rarely did they kill the suspected ‘witches’.¹⁰ A confession or the payment of

⁸ This is what happened in Zambia in the 1990s. In the summer of 1997, 176 witch-finders were operating in one district of Central Province; since then, witch-hunts “have proceeded unabated”, with the accused driven from their villages, expropriated of their possessions, often tortured and killed. Hugo F. Hinfelaar, *Witch-Hunting in Zambia and International Illegal Trade*, in: Gerrie Ter Haar (ed.), *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, Trenton 2007, pp. 229–246: p. 233.

⁹ On the rise of anti-witchcraft movements in West Africa during the colonial period see: Elom Dovlo, *Witchcraft in Contemporary Ghana*, in: Gerrie Ter Haar (ed.), *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*, Trenton 2007, pp. 67–112; Andrew Apter, *Atinga Revisited: Yoruba Witchcraft and the Cocoa Economy, 1950–1951*, in: Jean Comaroff / John Comaroff (eds), *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Chicago / London 2006, pp. 111–128. On witchcraft and colonialism in India see Ajay Skaria, *Women, Witchcraft and Gratuitous Violence in Colonial West India*, in: *Past and Present*, 155 (1997), pp. 109–145.

¹⁰ As Elizabeth Schmidt writes of Shona society, some women claimed the title of ‘witch’ and gained prestige from it. They challenged their accusers to defy them, exploiting for their own interest the association that was made between elder people and ancestral spirits; this association “made them feared individuals.” Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives. Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe, 1870–1939*, London 1992, pp. 18–19.

a fine was usually sufficient for reconciliation. It is even questionable whether we can speak of 'witchcraft' with reference to pre-colonial times, as the concept is a European construct, the product of a specific historical and political trajectory, irreducible to any African belief system. In India, it was with the coming of the Europeans that the shamanic powers attributed to women were assimilated to black magic.¹¹ In any case, no appeal to 'tradition' can explain why it was during the 1980s and 1990s that witch-hunting became a serious problem in so many parts of the world. Indeed, all the evidence indicates that today's witch-hunts are not a legacy of the past but an effect of the deep crisis that globalization and the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy have produced within the fabric of social life in much of Africa and Asia.

2. Witch-Hunting and Primitive Accumulation

A powerful description of this crisis is found in *Contemporary Witch-Hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya* by Justus Ogembo,¹² an anthropologist and a native of the area who has given us one of the very few studies of the social context in which witch killings are occurring. Ogembo points a finger at the structural adjustment and trade liberalization programs that were introduced in Africa in the mid 1980s by the World Bank and the IMF, ostensibly to attract foreign investment and make African labor more competitive on the world market. But instead of being a path to economic development, these programs have so destabilized African communities, so weakened their reproductive systems that many people have become convinced of being the victims of an evil conspiracy.¹³ Structural adjustment has created massive unemployment, devalued the

¹¹ T. K. Rajalakshmi, In the Name of the Witch, in: *Frontline*, India's National Magazine, 17: 23 (11–12 November 2000), quoting K. S. Singh, the former Director General of the Anthropological Survey of India and author-editor of India's Peoples Project.

¹² Justus M. Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya*. Lewinston 2006, pp. 111 ff.

local currency and placed basic commodities out of reach of most of the population. It has also gutted public services (health, education, transport). Its effects have thus been traumatic for millions of people who have found themselves unable to provide for their families and communities virtually overnight. As Ogembo points out, rising inequalities and mortality rates, the latter due to malnutrition, poor road maintenance and the spread of AIDS, have contributed to fuel the suspicion of foul play. In Gusii all these factors played a role. In the background of the 1992–1994 murders there were the collapse of the price of pyrethrum, one of the two commercial crops grown in the area, an astronomically high unemployment rate following massive retrenchment in the public service sector and the presence of a youth unable to access any form of education or income, thus ready to be hired as vigilantes or in paramilitary operations.

At the same time, many accusations are evidently manufactured to rob people of their property and particularly of their land. Indeed, land plays such a key role in the present witch-hunts that it is tempting to hypothesize that they are primarily a means of land grabbing.

Those most vulnerable to this sort of expropriation are single, and more specifically widowed or divorced women. Typically, women whose husbands have died and who insist on keeping the land the couple has acquired are accused of being witches by the relatives of the deceased. This is as true in Africa as in India and Nepal, especially in regions that have strong patrilineal traditions and where the wife is never completely integrated into the family structure. Accusing women of being witches is an easy way to avoid attending to their land claims.¹⁴ But the land question is also central to

¹³ Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunting* (as cited in note 12), p. 125. In referring to Ogembo's work I have maintained his use of 'Gusii' to refer to the area in which the witch-hunts he studied occurred, although the more common term is 'Kisii'.

¹⁴ See, among others: Lizzat Bonate, *Women's Land Rights in Mozambique: Cultural, Legal and Social Contexts*, in: L. Muthoni Wanyeki, *Women and Land in*

the dynamics of witchcraft accusations in a more general sense. As international agencies and foreign companies press for the privatization and alienation of communal lands, witch-hunts serve to break the resistance of the communities to land expropriation; in Marxian terms, they are powerful instruments of enclosure. As historian Hugo Hinfelaar writes with reference to Zambia: "In the current era of uncontrolled 'market forces' as preached by the present government and other supporters of neo-liberalism, confiscating land and other forms of property has taken on a more sinister dimension. It has been noted that witchcraft accusations and cleansing rituals are particularly rife in areas earmarked for game management and game ranching, for tourism, and for occupation by potential big landowners. [...] Some chiefs and headmen profit from selling considerable portions of their domain to international investors, and fomenting social disruption in the village facilitates the transaction. A divided village will not have the power to unite and oppose attempts to having the land they cultivate being taken over by someone else. As a matter of fact, the villagers are at times so engaged in accusing each other of practicing witchcraft that they hardly notice that they are being dispossessed and have turned into squatters on their own ancestral lands."¹⁵

How many witchcraft accusation, witch trials, witch killings fit into this pattern? Unfortunately, the superficial manner in which these persecutions are reported makes it difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion. An investigation worthy of the magnitude of the crime committed would ask what is occurring in the highlands of Papua and Nepal, or in Indian epicenters of witch-hunting such as the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal. Which mining or agribusiness companies are planning operations in these regions and incentivizing the privatization of land? It is important to note

Africa: Culture, Religion and Realizing Women's Rights, London 2003, pp. 96–132; Meena Kandasami, Dangerous Dalit Women and Witch Hunters, Ultra Violet, A Site For Indian Feminists, [<http://ultraviolet.in/2008/04/14/dangerous-dalit-women-and-witch-hunters>] (accessed 15 March 2010).

¹⁵ Hinfelaar, Witch-Hunting (as cited in note 8), p. 238.

that some of the states in India where witch-hunts are most intense (Bihar, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh) are sites that have witnessed a tremendous impoverishment of the peasantry during the past decades, with thousands of farmers committing suicide, mostly as a consequence of the fall in the price of cotton and other agricultural products triggered by the liberalization of imports in the region.¹⁶ They are also sites of conflict between the government troops and the Naxalites, and places where the authorities have tried to create a 'counter-movement' of vigilantes to keep the local population under control, especially the low-caste and poorest groups, who are perceived as being more prone to helping the rebels.¹⁷ Is there any relation between these phenomena and the witch-hunts? As resistance to witch-hunting is growing, answers may soon be found to these questions. For the moment, we can only speculate about the economic interests and deals that may be hiding behind many murders now attributed to 'tribalism'. It is in any case interesting to learn that, in some Indian states, left-wing women running for political positions are now called 'witches' instead of 'communists'.

There are several other ways in which the neoliberal restructuring of the economy that has taken place in the 'Third World' during the 1980s and 1990s is fostering a climate conducive to witch-hunting. As international policies and the 'invisible hand' of the global market transform local economies, it becomes difficult for people to identify the forces governing their lives and comprehend why some prosper while others are pauperized.¹⁸ The result is a climate of mutual suspicion, in which those who benefit from economic liberalization fear being bewitched by those impoverished, while the poor see the wealth from which they are excluded as a product of evil arts. Witches, Jane Parish writes, are personified in the eyes

¹⁶ Sudeep Chakravarti, *Red Sun: Travels in Naxalite Country*, New Delhi 2008, pp. 244–245.

¹⁷ Chakravarti, *Red Sun* (as cited in note 16).

¹⁸ Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunting* (as cited in note 12), p. ix.

of Nigerian urban dwellers by greedy villagers who strip them of their wealth. For their part, villagers use witchcraft accusations against the urban elite to enforce fading kinship norms concerning mutual support.¹⁹ But the difference Parish fails to notice is that those who have some degree of social power never find themselves attacked by a lynching mob. Though witchcraft accusations are, in some contexts, directed at people with different social backgrounds, witch-killings strike at people who have no social standing or are believed to claim a power not pertaining to them. As with the historic European witch-hunts, witch-hunting today is a class phenomenon. There is generally a difference in social power, as well as a difference in gender and age, between accusers and accused. Significantly, in India and Nepal, a large number of those murdered as witches are poor, low-caste Dalit women. Thus, it is not accidental that the police turn their eyes away; fewer than one percent of killings of 'witches' in India lead to conviction.²⁰

3. Witch-Hunting, Children and Pentecostalism

While multiple factors have combined to produce a climate in which the fear of witchcraft thrives, there is a consensus that at the root of the witch-hunts there lies a struggle for survival. In Africa, this struggle takes the form of intergenerational conflict. It is young men, often unemployed, who provide the manpower for witch-hunts, though they may execute plans hatched by others remaining in the shadow. With no possibility of going to school, no prospect of making a living off the land or finding other sources of income,

¹⁹ Jane Parish, *From the Body To The Wallet: Conceptualizing Akan Witchcraft At Home And Abroad*, in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute*, 6 (2000), 3, pp. 487–501; Peter Geschiere / Francis Nyamnjoh, *Witchcraft in the 'Politics of Belonging'*, in: *African Studies Review*, 41 (1998), 3, pp. 69–91; Wim van Binsbergen, *Witchcraft in Modern Africa as Virtualized Boundary Condition of the Kinship Order*, in: George Clement Bond / Diane M. Ciekawy (eds), *Witchcraft Dialogues: Anthropology and Philosophical Exchanges*, Athens (Ohio) 2007, pp. 212–262.

²⁰ InfoChange India News, [<http://infochangeindia.org>] (accessed 21 March 2007).

many young men in today's structurally adjusted Africa despair over their future and can be hired to conduct punitive expeditions,²¹ especially against elderly people, whom they blame for their misfortunes and perceive as a burden and an obstacle to their wellbeing. Thus, older men returning to their villages with the savings of a lifetime have also been charged with witchcraft; they too have had their houses and earnings confiscated or, worse, been killed.²²

At the same time, children have been accused of being demons in many African regions such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eastern Nigeria and Angola.²³ The charges have come from Christian exorcists who have made a living from identifying witches and allegedly expelling from their bodies the evil spirits that possess them. Thousands of children have been tortured in this way.²⁴ That parents have consented to these acts of torture and have in several cases participated in them or even killed their children is a dramatic indication of the wounds economic restructuring has opened in the social body. In Africa, children have often been the object of a quasi-religious reverence, and women without chil-

²¹ Ousseina Alidou has spoken of the "militarization" of African youth, referring to the radical dispossession young people have suffered as a result of structural adjustment and their consequent readiness to be recruited as mercenaries for military activities that harm their own communities. Ousseina Alidou, paper presented at the Forum on Africa organized by Peace Action at the Judson Church in New York, 17 September 2007.

²² Saving the Elderly from Prejudice and Attacks, in: *African Agenda*, 2 (1999), 2, p. 35.

²³ Jeremy Vine, Congo Witch-Hunt's Child Victims, BBC Online, [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/575178.stm>] (accessed 15 March 2010); Tracy McVeigh, Children are Targets in Nigerian Witch-Hunt, in: *The Observer*, 9 December 2007; Sharon La Franiere, African Crucible: Cast as Witches, Then Cast Out, in: *New York Times*, 15 November 2007. According to the website [freethinker.co.uk], 60 cases of child abuse related to witchcraft have taken place in England between 2006 and 2008 (accessed 15 March 2010).

²⁴ The story of the children accused of being witches in Nigeria's Niger Delta is told in the documentary "Return to Africa's Witch Children" (2008), which caused international outrage. In its wake, a few pastors were arrested for the first time. See [<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/episode-guide/series-43/episode-1>] (accessed 15 March 2010).

dren have traditionally lacked social standing, sometimes even being considered a threat to the community's prosperity and wealth. In such a context, infanticide becomes comparable to suicide; it is certainly a dramatic reflection of the brutality of the economic policies inspired by the 'Washington Consensus'.

But the demonization of children also highlights the crucial role played in the persecution of 'witches' by the Christian Pentecostal sects that have proliferated in urban and rural Africa during the last twenty years. While a full analysis of Pentecostalism – taking into account its role in the globalization process and its evolution in the course of the 1980s and 1990s – remains to be written, the connection between Pentecostalism and the persecution of witches is well documented, possibly providing a clue to the rapid expansion of witch-hunting in so many different parts of the planet. Ogembo discusses the role of Pentecostalists in the spree of witch killings that occurred in Kenya's Gusii province during the early 1990s, noting that with their emphasis on the devil and exorcism, Pentecostalists latched onto Gusii indigenous beliefs about mystical forces and powers. Through books and open-air sermons in market centers and other public spaces, evangelists increased people's anxiety about their social environment, preached a connection between Satan, illness and death and incited a spiritual warfare of sorts.²⁵ Similar accounts have come also from other parts of Africa, like Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, all places in which Pentecostalist sects represent a significant social force. The media have contributed to this process, and this also suggests that the new 'witch-craze' is not a purely spontaneous development. Streams of programs describing how witches operate and how they can be identified are broadcast in Ghana every day. In Nigeria, films detailing the evildoings of witches are commonly sold in the markets.

Another group that has been inciting witch-hunts is that of traditional healers, or witch doctors. While their profession may have seemed destined to disappear under the impact of 'development'

²⁵ Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunts* (as cited in note 12), p. 109.

and ‘modernization’ during the 1960s and 1970s, traditional healers have seen their social status boosted by the collapse of public health care and the rising number of AIDS-related deaths. Their authority reconstituted, many have made it a lucrative business to posture as witch-finders. From Mozambique and Zimbabwe to Nepal, they lend their expertise to those eager to dispose of a relative or neighbor, attributing to the designated victim the responsibility for recent mishaps or deaths. Witch-doctors play a key part in the fueling of fears and abuses, but they can do so only because they enjoy total impunity. This also holds true for Christian pastors operating in Africa, who are rarely held accountable for the inflammatory rhetoric with which they instigate witch-hunts. So confident have the followers of Christian sects become that when the Nigerian town of Calabar hosted a conference on witchcraft and child rights in July 2009, an angry mob of members of the Liberty Gospel – a witch-hunting church – stormed the meeting and proceeded to beat the secretary of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and other participants.²⁶

4. Witch-Hunting: A War on Women

As we have seen, witch-hunting has spared neither men, nor women, nor children. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that those most frequently attacked have been women, and in particular lower-class and elderly women. In Africa most are farmers, usually single, and living alone, but in the urban areas traders have also been targeted, accused by men who clearly perceive them as competitors and a threat to their power. Lower class women are also the primary victims in India and Nepal. There can be little doubt that the abuses inflicted on ‘witches’ serve to discipline all women, thereby preventing them from asserting their rights.

²⁶ See Joint statement by IHEU and the Association for World Education, UN Human Rights Council 12th session, 22 September 2009, [<http://www.iheu.org/witchcraft-united-nations>] (accessed 15 March 2010).

The intent to terrorize women becomes evident when we consider the punishments inflicted. Thousands of women have been burned, buried alive, hacked to pieces, tortured to death. Shaming rituals are common in Nepal and India. Before being killed, the accused are paraded through the streets naked, forced to eat excrements and beaten.

Patriarchal bias alone cannot explain such brutality. We can only understand it by taking into account the context of societies in which communal solidarity has disintegrated and new economic relations are being introduced that radically destabilize social reproduction and devalue the social position of women. As land is privatized and monetary relations become hegemonic, women's subsistence activities are no longer perceived as a contribution to the wellbeing of the community. This is especially true of elderly women who can no longer bear children or provide sexual services, and who are thus especially resented, sometimes even by members of their own families, as a drain on available resources. Many elderly women today are persecuted because they are perceived as a dead weight, the embodiment of a world of practices and values increasingly considered sterile and non-productive.

In making this point, I do not mean to downplay the importance of the immediate grievances that produce witchcraft accusations. Long-standing rumors compounded by mysterious deaths, land disputes, the desire to appropriate coveted property, anger prompted by adulterous behavior or the refusal of sexual services – these are the daily substance of the persecutions. In Africa the structure of the polygamous family foments accusations, creating jealousies and competition among co-wives and siblings with regard to the distribution of the family's assets, especially land. Growing land scarcity intensifies these conflicts, for husbands now find it difficult to provide for all their wives and their children.

Yet we cannot understand how these conflicts instigate such cruel attacks on women unless we place them on a broader canvas. This is the world of the disintegrating communal village economy,

in which women, elderly ones in particular, with their subsistence farming and their attachment to the land, are seen as obstacles to ‘development’. It is also a world in which a generation of men has come of age whose minds have become unsettled because they cannot earn a living and are convinced the elderly are blocking their access to wealth. As Mark Auslander writes, drawing on his experience in Eastern Zambia, elderly men are also caught in this conflict between the values of the older, subsistence-oriented communal world and those of the advancing monetary economy. In popular songs and plays, elderly men lament that their children will poison them to sell their cattle for cash and buy chemical fertilizer or a truck.²⁷ Still, the “battle to make wealth” is “waged [above all] upon the mature female body”,²⁸ because old women are perceived as useless individuals who do not contribute to the production of wealth and yet, by virtue of their age and sex, are assumed to possess great power, especially over the process of daily reproduction.

5. Feminist Solidarity and Resistance to Witch-Hunting

Considering the danger the present witch-hunts represent for women and the suffering they inflict on them, their children and their communities, we can only speculate why more feminists have not chosen to speak up and mobilize. Some may think that focusing on this issue will divert attention from broader political concerns like war, global debt and environmental crises. As we have seen, there may also be a reluctance to tackle this subject for fear of promoting colonial stereotypes. Consequently it is mostly journalists and academics who have analyzed witch-hunting; as a result, the issue has

²⁷ Mark Auslander, “Open the Wombs”: The Symbolic Politics of Modern Ngoni Witch-finding, in: Jean Comaroff / John Comaroff (eds), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, Chicago / London 1993, pp. 167–192; p. 181.

²⁸ Auslander, “Open the Wombs” (as cited in note 27), p. 170.

been depoliticized. Most accounts are written in a detached mode, exhibiting little outrage over the horrific destiny that so many of the accused have met. Few scholars have words of sympathy for the women, men and children who have been murdered. One US anthropologist has even collaborated with a witch-hunter. For months he followed him from village to village in Zambia, tape-recording his interrogations and publicly performed exorcisms, eventually giving him the photographs he had taken, well aware the witch-hunter would use them to publicize his work.²⁹ Another American scholar, an economist in this case, has used witch-hunting as an example to illustrate the logic of people's behavior; in a class video, he describes how droughts and economic downturns make it "necessary" for people in impoverished communities "to hack grandma to death."³⁰

Feminist interventions, then, are crucial to the creation of a different type of scholarship, one dedicated to better understanding the conditions that produce witch-hunts and to building a constituency of human rights activists and social justice groups committed to ending the persecutions. Models for such scholarship and activism are not lacking. For years, Indian feminists have mobilized public opinion against dowry murders, making it a global issue while at the same time retaining control over its definition. Confronted with the growing number of women killed by fire, starting in the late 1970s, they have launched a broad educational campaign showing that dowries have become for the Indian middle class a means of capital accumulation; the murders were committed by "entrepreneurial families who killed so that their sons could re-

²⁹ As Mark Auslander himself writes: "Dr. Moses [the witch-finder, S. F.] and his followers appeared to value greatly the photos I gave them. On several occasions the Doctor indicated his hope to use these materials in a television series." But Auslander admits that "on some occasions I unquestionably increased the anguish of the participant." Auslander, "Open the Wombs" (as cited in note 27), p. 190.

³⁰ [<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/episode-guide/series-43/episode-1>] (accessed 15 March 2010).

marry and amass more wealth.”³¹ The campaign involved street theater, demonstrations and sit-ins in front of both the houses of the murderers and the police stations to pressure the police to arrest the killers. The campaigners also came up with songs and slogans, naming and shaming the killers. They formed neighborhood groups and arranged public meetings where men pledged never to ask for a dowry again. Teachers took to the street to protest against dowry murders. In this way feminists “reversed decades of indifference” and even induced the government to introduce a bill making cruel treatment of one’s wife a punishable offence.³²

The same direct action tactics are now being applied to confront the witch-hunters who can continue to torture and kill only as long as they believe they have a license to do so. In India and Nepal some legal support organizations are joining the fight and so are women’s groups. In Kathmandu, a shelter for women charged with witchcraft has been set up. In Africa, women and community groups are also coming forward against the attacks on witches, especially those affecting children.

These forms of mobilization are crucial; they are the first line of resistance to witch-hunting. But for witch-hunts to become a key issue in the international feminist and social justice movements a broad research project is needed providing a “more systematic, more specific” analysis of the connection between “global economic restructuring and the outbreak of witch-hunts and murders.”³³ Again echoing Ogembo, we can say that the recent anthropological studies have shed light on the various ways in which globalization has intensified the fear of the occult especially in African societies. But the body of scholarship devoted to this issue is still very limited, and the interpretative framework it provides fails to address many crucial questions.

³¹ See Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of the Movement for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990*, London 1997, p. 118.

³² Kumar, *History* (as cited in note 31), p. 119.

³³ Ogembo, *Contemporary Witch-Hunting* (as cited in note 12), p. 4.

For instance, what kind of class struggle is taking place in the rural areas of Africa and Asia that is driving many villagers to become expropriators themselves, often of their own kin? Who is manipulating and arming the youth that carries on the attacks against the so-called witches? Who benefits directly and indirectly from the killings? We also need to better understand the history of the Christian, evangelical sects that operate in Africa and have spread to almost every part of the world during the 1990s. What political forces are behind them? What is the significance of the timing of their worldwide crusade, coinciding with the onset of structural adjustment and neo-liberalism? How to explain their obsession with witchcraft and the devil, coupled in most cases with an open endorsement of wealth acquisition and self-enrichment?

In the body of literature analyzing the contemporary witch-hunts, these questions are not asked. Part of the problem is that the motivation driving the contemporary anthropological research on witch-hunting is essentially a cultural one. Tracing the return of magic and the fear of the occult on the contemporary scene serves to challenge the assumption that modernity is equivalent to progress rather than uncovering the social dynamics and forces responsible for the murders of 'witches'. What is needed is a research effort committed to the termination of this persecution. An important aspect of such an effort consists in identifying the social, political and economic forces that create witch-hunters.