

Witch-hunts in modern Africa and early modern Europe (1450–1750): a comparison

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Abstract

Belief in witchcraft is found across the world and in some societies alleged witches are persecuted and killed. This article explores the rise of false accusations of witchcraft and the resultant killings in South Africa in the last three decades; as many as 20 000 may have died between 2004 and 2008. The article considers these lynchings in the light of killings associated with witch-hunts in Europe (1450–1750) focusing on the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In many cases, people's credulity is abused by those who accuse others of practising witchcraft. The accusers often stand to gain in some way and exploit the vulnerability of those they accuse. This article explores witch-hunts as a reaction to disaster as related to gender bias and relational problems. It shows that such persecution is difficult to control with social institutions; it is a self-propagating discourse with potentially tragic results for the victims.

Witchcraft and witch-hunts are as old as humankind

Across the world many people believed, and continue to believe, in witchcraft as a form of human agency which controls the natural and supernatural world. People who claim to be "progressive" may, however, deride such beliefs as "backward" or religiously misguided. In many societies alleged witches are persecuted for a variety of reasons and violent witch-hunts continue to take place. It has been estimated that in the period from 1450 to 1750 around 40 000 to 60 000 individuals were tried as witches and condemned to death in central Europe (Jones 1972:1). It is estimated that in South Africa between 2004 and 2008 about 20 000 people were identified as witches (Chameleon Interactive:2) and some of them were lynched.

In the vast majority of cases, false allegations of witchcraft benefit the accusers and eliminate vulnerable members of society. The lynchings have little or nothing to do with actual witchcraft (which is not debated here), and merely serve to mask other agendas. This article therefore examines the argument that false accusations of witchcraft are found throughout the world in different guises. It is used to cover up social and racial conflict, the tyranny of men over women, vengefulness of rivals, hostility to strangers, oppression of the weak and old, and other agendas. The article explores a number of theories on witch-hunts and their progression. A comparison is made between early modern European witch-hunts and recent witch-hunts in South Africa in an attempt to explore similarities and explain the phenomenon. The study considers the recent South African lynchings in the light of killings associated with witch-hunts in Europe (1450–1750) focusing on the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

As early as 1584, Reginald Scot recognised that discourses surrounding witchcraft are fuelled by religious myth, gossip, slander, rumour, hearsay, suspicion and the like (Scot 1972:4). Such discourses tend to be self-perpetuating, are virtually foolproof for the accusers and aggressively resistant to any opposing point of view (Kgatla, Ter Haar, Van Beek & De Wolf 2003:14). Fear, intolerance, superstition and xenophobia are its vehicles. A rumour about witchcraft is easily started, transmitted and shared at both a private and a public level. The blame is always placed on the victims of such rumours who become the scapegoats for various problems afflicting their society. The common triggers for accusations of witchcraft include religious change and social, economic and political developments and lie at the root of many persecutions (Kors & Peters 1972:127). One may also add personal reasons such as feelings of fear, hatred, guilt, jealousy, pain, grief, confusion, lust or hunger (Levack 1995:1–3).

The Black Death – the bubonic plague that peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1349 killing about 1.5 million people (Snell 1997:1) – led to rumours of devil-worship. Accusations were made against some members of the community of conspiring to invoke Satan to bring about a pestilence that could destroy Christianity and the West (Snell 1997:1).

Levack (1987:125) asserts that to provide a satisfactory explanation for the European witch-hunts, particularly in the sixteenth century, one must consider not only the religious changes and conflicts of the early modern period, but also the broader social environment in which such accusations arose. Acquiring a knowledge of the social setting of a crime and the relationship between the criminals and their victims profits any such type of investigation. Levack further argues that in the case of an imagined crime like witchcraft, a social

investigation can be even more revealing since it can help to explain why the alleged “criminals” were singled out and prosecuted becoming victims of their society’s beliefs. In this way, the social history of the crime becomes more than a study of the victim’s behaviour (Kgatla et al 2003:14). For the purposes of this study, it should be noted that those accused of witchcraft are assumed to be innocent of the alleged crime (which is, as Levack argues, an imagined crime), and are therefore referred to as “victims”. Their accusers are referred to as the perpetrators of the crime of falsely accusing people, sometimes with the tragic result that those accused are in fact killed.

Scarre (1987:37–44) cites four explanations of factors that stimulate conditions in which alleged witches are persecuted:

- The persecution of “witches” may be a reaction to disaster.
- Witch-hunts may be a weapon of confessional conflict.
- Functional theories may explain witch-hunts.
- Witch-hunts may be used as a method of social control.

These four explanations deal with witchcraft as a response to social disaster or breakdown of some kind and are discussed in more detail below.

The persecution of witches as a reaction to disaster

In Europe, witch-hunts peaked towards the end of the sixteenth century, a period which saw particularly radical social and economic changes. These conditions in part explain the rise of witch-hunts – a time-bound phenomenon – beginning in the fifteenth century and ending by the mid-eighteenth century. During this period, the European population increased dramatically, and the region was ravaged by wars, epidemics and many years of famine (Levack 1987:127). War and famine are well known to have destabilising effects which encourage people’s desire to cast blame on someone. Under such conditions attempts to blame supernatural forces and human agency, as in accusations of witchcraft, tend to flourish. It is, however, not inevitable that major catastrophes lead to witch-hunts – in some instances the same catastrophes may serve as enabling factors in socially tense situations. Tensions exist everywhere, but not all societies react to tensions associated with disaster by associating them with embodied evil (“witchcraft”) in the same way. Some societies just ignore disaster and carry on as best they can; in societies where relationships are stronger, tensions are attended to differently (Kgatla et al 2003:24).

The persecution of witches as a weapon of confessional conflict

During the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, both Catholics and Protestants found it useful to accuse their opponents of witchcraft to demonstrate their own purported godliness. Being a Protestant in a Catholic region or a Catholic in a Protestant one put a believer at risk of being charged with heresy and witchcraft (Larner 1984:74). Where both the church and the state constantly desire to establish their authority over the populace, it is conceivable that even decency may be viewed as hostility and enmity. Sometimes action against dissidents may take the form of inflicting pain on them to discourage any potential dissidence. The very threat of accusation can thus serve as a regulatory device for keeping certain individuals under control (Russell 2001:1)

Functional theories

Scarre (1987:40) argues that functional explanations of the persecution of witches in Europe are most convincing when they relate persecution to social or psychological needs. Functional theories argue that the benefits that persecutors can derive from witch-hunts serve as a motive for such persecution and are not merely a consequence of the persecution. Many scholars, mainly working from the discipline of Anthropology, have cited a myriad feelings such as fear, hatred, guilt, jealousy, pain, grief, confusion, lust and even hunger as common triggers for accusations of witchcraft, with resultant lynching and killings (Scarre 1987:40).

According to this theory, accusations of witchcraft can be instrumental in releasing dangerous social tensions or in facilitating the ending of a personal relationship which has, for some reason, become insupportable. Accusations of witchcraft can aid in the readjustment of relationships, the release of anxiety or the regulation of social positions. But anti-witchcraft activity is always a dangerous weapon because it is transmitted via stereotypes of “the evil witch” and often calls for torture of the victims – those accused of witchcraft. It is a virtually fool-proof method of attack as it usually does not require an elaborate process to prove that an accused is in fact guilty of witchcraft; in the majority of cases a witch is identified beforehand (Kgatla et al 2003:16) and is simply assumed to be guilty.

Witch-hunts and social control

Some scholars have argued that witch-hunts are largely an instrument of social control – a method employed by the powerful to extend or consolidate their hold over the weak (Scarre 1987:43–44). This is particularly true of situations where there is a scramble for religious or political domination. In a situation characterised by religious or political disagreements which may spill over into outright violence or even war, the preservation of popular obedience and loyalty is a matter of urgent concern to the state and churches alike. In sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Europe in particular, no measures were spared to secure religious or political conformity appearing to many to be an essential bulwark against looming anarchy (Levack 1987:124).

This phenomenon is not unique to communities that believe in witchcraft. In South Africa, the white minority government followed an ideology that brooked no disagreement with its views. The preservation of popular obedience and loyalty to the state was of paramount importance. No measures were spared to secure a political conformity that was seen by white Afrikaners as an essential bulwark against social disintegration. In a country such as South Africa, “Comrades”¹ and witch-hunters may thus be interpreted as examples of groups who employed similar strategies to those used in the sixteenth-century witch-hunts to suppress people whose behaviour appeared to deviate from the supposed prescribed norm.

The dichotomous problem of good and evil has occupied the human mind since time immemorial. All missionary religions of the world have tried to increase their following. Their failure to do so is often blamed on the adversary, Satan. In their struggle for the hearts and minds of the people, anyone who is viewed as having dubious dealings with their religious enemy is viewed with disfavour. The same applies to secular rulers. This theory may thus be employed to explain cases of the persecution of alleged witches in South Africa.

European witch-hunts: the pact with the Devil

The central idea in the concept of witchcraft in Europe was the belief that witches made pacts with the Devil. People believed that witches made explicit, face-to-face contact with the Devil and agreed to make a pact (a contract) with him to serve him in exchange for certain powers. This agreement not only gave the witches the power to perform *maleficia* but also initiated them into the Devil’s service (Levack 1987:27). It was believed that the conclusion of the pact was a formal ceremony which took place after the Devil had appeared to the witches (Jones 1972:673)

A second witch-related belief that many Europeans subscribed to until the late seventeenth century was that witches, having made a pact with the Devil, gathered periodically with other witches to perform a series of blasphemous, obscene and heinous rites (Russel 2001:56). At these meetings, the Devil would appear to them in various forms, together with subordinate demons (Levack 1987:26). The witches would sacrifice animals and children to the Devil and feast on the bodies of these infants and animals. Some witches danced naked and flew on dishes (Kgatla 2000:124). Legends about bizarre witch activities abound.

Russel (2001:56) claims that the idea of a pact began to gain currency as early as the eighth century when Paul the Deacon, one of Charlemagne’s advisers, translated a sixth-century Greek story about a priest named Theophilus who obtained promotion to the episcopate by solemnly promising the Devil to renounce Christ. The motif of the pact in medieval legend culminated in the stories of Doctor Faustus, the fictional high magician of the Renaissance who made a pact with the Devil to obtain both wisdom and sensual delight (Russel 2001:67). Levack (1987:35) argues that the belief that human beings could make a pact with the Devil can be traced to the writings of St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (354–430 AD) who claimed that all “pagan” religions were invented by the Devil to lure humanity away from Christian truth. This is illustrated in Ulrich Molitor’s medieval woodcut *Folk magic: witches brewing a potion* (1493).

Research findings on the emergence of witch-hunts in South Africa²

In 1990, the then South African State President FW de Klerk unbanned previously banned political parties and released a number of prominent political prisoners including Nelson Mandela unconditionally (Minnaar 1994:1). The tension of existing political uncertainty was intensified by the release of political prisoners. African National Congress affiliates such as the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions had already locked horns with the National Party government and the homelands’ political parties (Minnaar 1994:iii). There was serious uncertainty in the country regarding the black majority’s ascent to power under the leadership of Nelson Mandela in a politically polarised society, and there were many secret agents of

¹ A “Comrade” is a person who shares interests and activities with others; a partner; associate. The term is also used as a form of address, as in a Communist party. The title is used to designate a loyal follower of the party’s ideology in ANC-affiliated groupings.

² Some of the findings in this section are those of a research project on accusations of witchcraft in the Limpopo province. The project was sponsored by the South African-Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) and ran from 1998 to 2003. The final report was published in August 2003 by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Utrecht University. (Kgatla et al 2003:2).

the pre-1994 white government in black communities. The crisis conditions resulting from the political rivalry resulted in a fierce political battle. In the struggle to cleanse black communities of the political “defilement” and agenda of white rule, many black people were accused of being *impimpi* (government informers) or witches. Accusations of witchcraft and the persecution of alleged witches proliferated. Many innocent people were made scapegoats and some were killed to eliminate political opposition. In urban areas the violence was overtly related to a political agenda, while in some rural areas it took the guise of religious conflict.³ The situation in a rural area is vividly captured in an article by Wroughton in the *Citizen* of 28 February 1995:

When thunderstorms roll around the normally-parched hills and dusty valleys of the Northern Transvaal, the witch-hunters emerge. The urges to search for those who are skilful enough to manipulate natural forces continue to escalate, despite the formation of police units especially established to combat it.

The people most affected by such persecution were the poor, the illiterate, women, the elderly and outcasts from society. If there was a thunderstorm, these people lived in fear of being pointed out as responsible for the lightning. If a mysterious death occurred, this group of people hid in their huts in fear of being “sniffed out” by diviners. It was indeed a matter of prestige – and favour – not to be labelled witches by those who pointed out witches, especially if people belonged to the poor, elderly, unemployed, weak and other defenceless groups. As a result of the escalation in witchcraft accusations and killings, violence became a concern in the then Northern province (now the Limpopo province). In the Northern province in 1995, more than 500 people were tried in kangaroo courts and hacked or burnt to death as a result of witch-hunts (Kgatla 1995:1). In the same year, more than 4 500 (Kgatla 1995:54) were left destitute and homeless as their traditional huts were set alight. According to police records of 1998, as many as 694 cases of death related to the pointing out of a person as a witch were reported in the province. The causes of these killings were partly political and partly religious. The killings were political in the sense that the necklace method used against the first political victim Maki Sekhosana in Duduza near Nigel in 1985 was re-employed. Like many victims accused of witchcraft, Maki Sekhosana was suspected of being a police informer after a mysterious death in the township. (*Sowetan*, 22 February 1997). These killings were religious in that the construct of witchcraft is a religious one related to a quest for transformation; these killings serve as direct warnings to those who allegedly “practise magical power” against innocent people. Moreover, “Comrades” were trying to warn the alleged “witches” that street justice would take its course if those who opposed the Comrades did not desist from their “evil practices”. The people knew that the price for practising “witchcraft” was death.

The authors of “Written essays” (2008:1) argue that the escalation in witch-hunts throughout Europe from 1450 to 1700 could be attributed largely to the social changes associated with a spate of natural disasters. These changes only served to complicate matters with the masses looking for a scapegoat or someone to blame. This argument also appears to apply to South African witch-hunts from 1987 to 2004. Opinion formers were advancing the concept that South Africa’s black people would lose the first and subsequent democratic elections because they tolerated government stooges, sell-outs, informers and the people’s enemies – witches. Most of the accused were women.

It is argued below that a witch-hunt is related to gender bias. However, suffice it to say that criminalisation of women and attacks on them using accusations of witchcraft was always a veiled attempt to control dissidence among women. Dissident women threaten a male hegemony. Those who do not conform to the male idea of proper female behaviour are often selected by their reputation and labelled witches for the purpose of controlling them (Larner 1984:2).

Accusations of witchcraft are often gender biased

In both the European and African contexts, accusations of witchcraft are often related to gender bias, relational problems, crises and power struggles, and are thus linked to hegemonic struggles. The accusations take a particular path, starting with social discourse and erupting into violence, even lynching. In a predominantly patriarchal society, women have not only been excluded from most of the historical narratives, but their experiences are deemed inconsequential or are presented in a distorted manner to fit a patriarchal cultural framework. It then comes as no surprise that in Europe’s witch-hunts (and still in African witchcraft discourses) women are stripped of their cultural importance so that they can be demonised as witches (Kors & Peters 1972:142). Although one should be cautious not to conclude that the “crime” of witchcraft is sex-specific and is attributed solely to women, it remains undeniable that accusations of this crime are strongly associated with

³ The majority of South African black people come from a traditional belief that does not regard God as active in human affairs. In this regard Mbiti (1970:23) argues that Africans regard God as remote and disinterested in human affairs. The same belief applies to the adversary of God, Satan. Witchcraft beliefs exist outside the belief in God and Satan. People believe that there are evil people who access the agency of evil spirits and magical forces to hurt others (Kgatla 1995:54).

gendered structures of power. Accusations of witchcraft remain an area pervaded by misogyny in the African context today, just as it was in early modern Europe. Hults (2005:1) argues that the discourse and practice surrounding the accusation of “witches” were linked to men’s efforts to gain power and status, which were informed by ideals of masculinity.

In 1839, Eliza Buckminster Lee (2011:2) observed that most of the accused witches in New England (on the North American East Coast) were female, and that many of their accusers and those who confessed to witchcraft were also female. She concluded that this was due to the fact that women did not exist outside the patriarchal ideology. She herself assimilated the well-established notions of female vulnerability succumbing to evil in all its forms. The frenzy of the witch-hunt is chiefly fuelled by hegemonic and stereotypical speculations targeting, to a greater extent, women: women-as-witches (Written essays 2012:1). The disruption of social order is complicated by a belief in supernatural powers harnessed by evil humans who want to hurt others. Such social mishaps are quickly blamed on a scapegoat or someone who is easy to blame for apparent bad luck (Girard 1982:23). Several scholars (including MacFarlane 1970; Levack 1992; Scarre 1987; Sharpe 1996) have concluded that at the root of the witch-hunt legacy there was often economic and religious conflict that involved men and women in a power tussle.

Among the Northern Sotho people of the Limpopo province the strategy that actively propagated witchcraft beliefs was not necessarily gender-specific. However, accusations of women always made up the majority of the persecutions. The notion that women are the weaker sex, lack substantial social influence and are therefore prepared to resort to witchcraft to attain their ends is prevalent. Reginald Scot (1972:7) observed in the sixteenth century in Europe that witches are stereotypically often women, “commonly old, lame, full of wrinkles, poor, sullen and superstitious”. This kind of belief is also prevalent under, for example, the Northern Sotho people (Kgatla 2000:246).

Witchcraft is a relational problem

The relational dialectics theory holds that dialectical tensions arise when opposing or conflicting goals exist in a relationship (Baxter & Montgomery 1988:257). Where men regard themselves as superior to women in physique, social status, intellect and personality, for example, they are likely to feel threatened by women’s presence if it is perceived as detrimental and as encroaching on men’s space. To safeguard and protect their territory, men may work hard to enforce their authority. Any perceived threat from the side of women may be counteracted with massive power displays, including the persecution of women as alleged witches. In African communities, male-female relationships that are polygamous and involve the extended family do not have rules of communication that are clearly defined or adhered to. Because of these multi-layered relationships, communication rules are often complicated. The result is that some responses to communication may be regarded as inappropriate and therefore as disrespectful (Duck 2006:20). In such relationships, the threat of accusations of witchcraft may become a control mechanism, especially from the men’s side.

When relationships between people living close together deteriorate, frustration and aggression set in. In such a situation, accusations of witchcraft become a useful guise under which to address the frustration that was caused by the heterogeneity responsible for failed relationships. Accusations of witchcraft and the resultant arbitrary kangaroo trials remain a convenient device to deal with an enemy without having to account to the community for one’s actions. Accusations remain an acceptable excuse to the community for hurting one’s neighbour whom one could not otherwise have hurt (Kgatla 2000:246).

According to Marwick (1965:247) in any relationship, undue and rapid changes may lead to strained relations. This occurs because one of the effects of social change is to bring new values and norms into conflict with existing ones. Others are the creation of new relationships and the fundamental modification of old ones. Any sudden change in a person’s social or economic status often opens up a floodgate of envy, jealousy, rivalry, hatred, misunderstanding, stress and a desire for vengeance. Once the floodgates are opened, a stream of conflict rapidly gathers which may include accusations of witchcraft. Such situations are often preceded by the discourse that saturates people’s minds with belief in witchcraft.

Most of the areas of contestation that lead to accusations of witchcraft among the Northern Sotho of the Limpopo province are found in competition, quarrels and the rivalries that preceded them. Such objects of conflict include issues like a failure to discharge obligations towards kinsmen, adultery, sexual jealousy, political rivalry, and tension and strain caused by cognitive stress. Breakdown in a community or in individuals’ relationships especially caused by the possession of property, a refusal to give alms to the poor or even being regarded as burdensome and as an outcast are viable explanations for accusations of witchcraft.

Witch-hunts are hard to control via social institutions

(False) accusations of witchcraft and persecution, and their spread, are hard to control through social institutions in South Africa. Reginald Scot’s work *The discoverie of witchcraft* (1972:4), suggests that this was also the case

in England where witchcraft was a statutory crime punishable by death (this applied until 1735). According to Scot (1972:4), these years marked a significant increase in the number of witch-hunts and persecutions. He ascribed the endurance of the belief in witchcraft to a populace that was invested in the art of social intercourse, gossip, rumour-mongering and social interaction if witchcraft was suspected (Kgatla et al 2003:5). The prosecutions and the punishment from secular and ecclesiastical courts could not control or contain the belief in witchcraft.

In South Africa individuals and institutions involved in the control of witchcraft accusations are traditional healers, police, religious leaders and courts of law. They all find it difficult to control the incidence and flaring up of false accusations. The traditional healers are themselves linked to witchcraft accusations, either as people who are asked to “sniff out” witches, or as people who must protect their clients against witches’ “spells” (Kgatla et al 2003:14). In a sense, they are thus part of the problem. They depend on the discourse for some of their status and income. The police, legal institutions and political establishment partly share the discourse surrounding witchcraft, and partly deny it; an ambivalence that renders effective measures impossible (Kgatla et al 2003:15). The secular courts are supposed to curb false accusations of witchcraft by enforcing the colonial law still in force in South Africa, the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957. According to Quackdown (2011:1), the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1957 was based on the Witchcraft Suppression Act of 1895 applicable to the British colony of the Cape of Good Hope, which in turn was based on the Witchcraft Act of 1735 in Great Britain (the 1735 Act was only repealed in Britain in 1951). The act is ambivalent in that it does not acknowledge the existence of, or criminalise, actual witchcraft, only the pretence of witchcraft (Quackdown 2011:1). It simultaneously outlaws the practice, denies its existence and prescribes punishment for offenders.⁴

Recently the government of Zimbabwe,⁵ formerly the British colony Rhodesia, tried to abolish the Witchcraft Suppression Act and put a new act in its place. The new act is as bizarre as the one it is intended to replace. The act outlaws the practice of witchcraft and stipulates that anyone who practises it will be criminally prosecuted. However, it also makes it illegal to call anyone a witch, meaning that no cases of witchcraft can be reported. The new law aims to make it a criminal offence to hire a witch or assist in the commission of witchcraft, but also provides protection for people “groundlessly” accused of practising witchcraft. In the same breath, the police argue that it is empirically impossible for them to verify witchcraft (Nkatazo 2009:1). At the same time, the chairperson of the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association,⁶ prof Gordon Chavunduka, claims that witchcraft is making a comeback because of worsening economic conditions.

Accusations of witchcraft constitute a discourse

Witchcraft flourishes on the art of social intercourse, gossip and suspicion (Scot 1972:4). Beliefs shape people’s worldview and provide a lens for them through which they see their world. People talk about what they believe and it easily becomes a yardstick by which people judge others (Kgatla et al 2003:11). It is a discourse that forces conformity and maintains hegemony. It can be used to contain dissidents and control those who wish to break the ranks. Witchcraft discourses are also hidden discourses that flourish on gossip and hearsay (Kgatla et al 2003:11). Such discourses can swell unnoticed through gossip so that by the time a rumour enters the public domain it has already mobilised enough support through community outcry to achieve social backing for action against an alleged “witch”.

Witchcraft is also a self-supporting and self-perpetuating discourse. The slightest mishap may lead to a chain of beliefs and false explanations. In its self-propagation, the discourse is also resistant to logic. It cannot be disproven because it brooks no dissidence (Kgatla et al 2003:12). Any contrary evidence regarding an incident can be reconstrued by claiming that it can be ascribed to supernatural agency. The discourse is convincing because it uses familiar language and symbols. It requires no reflection and reasoning, only blind faith.

The witchcraft persecution ladder

In the recent SANPAD research (Kgatla et al 2003:16), a witchcraft persecution ladder was identified. In every instance in which a “witchcraft” attack was orchestrated there were preliminary stages before the grand plan was executed. These included the formation stage, which includes a real cause of tension among the victim’s kin or community, gossip, the naming of the victim, organising public support, the annihilation of opposition, the

⁴ The South African authorities are not sure what to do with the law. Although they are under pressure from the South African Law Reform Commission and the South African Pagan Rights Alliance to repeal the act as unconstitutional, they are afraid that such a move will open the floodgate to new persecutions and killings (see Kgatla 2000:247).

⁵ Most British colonies in Africa had a witchcraft suppression act as statutory law to contain the carnage. According to a Zimbabwean news site, the country’s National Traditional Healers Association has 50 000 members and is headed by a retired professor of Anthropology and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe (Nkatazo 2009:1).

⁶ It is reported, ironically, on the same Zimbabwean news site that the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association originally helped amend the old law (Nkatazo 2009:1)

“conviction” of the victim and the execution. These preparatory stages are crucial for preparing both the ground and the community for action. An organised attack on the victim is preceded by thorough preparation.

The tension stage

Firstly, there must be a real problem in the community that causes tension. It may be illness, mysterious death, starvation or anything that causes discomfort. In the preparatory stage a person who is claimed to be causing the supposed evil in the community or institution is identified and labelled. This victim of labelling is normally blamed for all the tension among people and the social crisis that the family or community is passing through, and in that way is made a scapegoat.

The suspicion stage

Repulsive things are usually said about witchcraft to convince the community that those person who practise this “dark art” deserve inhumane treatment because of their supposed outrageously anti-social behaviour. Rumours, slanderous messages, gossip and alleged examples of actions associated with witchcraft are not necessarily directed at a particular individual but are spread in the community. Once the persecutors are convinced that the community is in full agreement that the practice should be put to a stop, the next stage of gossip comes in.

The gossip and naming stage

As soon as a problem is identified and a way is found to apportion the blame to human beings, the naming stage begins. A rumour is spread through all the community’s gossip channels to make people aware of the supposed public problem. All sorts of ills and evil deeds, past and present, are blamed on alleged “witches” in terms of the conspiracy plan the accusers have in mind. The intentions of the rumour-mongers are usually well orchestrated and designed to injure their victims. The victim has to be demonised and labelled as “witch” – public enemy number one – to elicit public outcry.

Annihilation of opposition

Once the tension is blamed on a victim, a rumour is started to enlist community support. Slanderous messages are spread about the victim. The sole purpose of this stage is to destroy any form of trust, sympathy and regard the community may have for the victim. Amassing enough community support is crucial to the propagators of the claim of witchcraft, because failure of the project may have serious consequences for those who started it, if it fails.

The public support stage

Once the persecutors are convinced that the community has internalised their message and that the community is in agreement with them, they name their victim. Normally, a meeting is convened where actions against the victim are planned. At such a meeting, a delegation to consult an authority on the suspected witch is chosen. The “sniff” expert may be a renowned diviner who is consulted to legitimise the naming of the “witch”. Because the accusers have already made up their minds about who the “witch” is, the authoritative person is guided to sniff out the witch they have in mind. This is the second proof acquired to convince anyone who may still have any doubt after the preparatory stage. The consultant must be a renowned diviner in the community. Sometimes the consultant is chosen from a distant village to give the process some credibility. However, diviners will try their best to confirm the suspect the accusers have in mind.

As soon as the authentication of the alleged witch is received, a parade is arranged where the name of the witch is announced so that the person can be burnt or banished from the community. In the attack stage – if the victim has any property – the property is looted before the hut is set alight. The report-back from the person who authenticated the suspicion of witchcraft is a mere formality, because the action is decided upon in advance. Thus the motive for the looting of the property of the victim is disguised. After the looting, the person’s dwelling is burnt to disguise the intention of looting. Victims are either killed or banished from the community to justify the outrage the community feels towards them.

Conclusion

This article argues that a belief in the practice of witchcraft is found among human groups around the world and go back to the very beginnings of human culture. A comparative framework was developed to argue that claims

of the human agency of evil are found in many societies, but that the methods used to respond to this alleged agency may vary. The aim of the comparison is to indicate that people react in a stereotypical way when they are faced with phenomena such as disaster and insecurity. Social theories of religious conflict, functional explanations of behaviour, social control and fear of the unknown are used to explain human reactions to what is perceived as a threat. Cases of witch-hunts in early modern Europe and South Africa are contrasted. The article argues that persecutions exploiting accusations of witchcraft in both early modern Europe and present-day Africa frequently have and still do relate to gender bias. Certain assumptions are made about women who have been blamed for many ills in communities and reduced to scapegoats to relieve cognitive stress. Differences can be a basis for persecution. Differences in roles can also lead to hegemonic conflict and thus to a desire to eliminate differences and ensure compliance with a particular norm. Karl Marx's social conflict theory (cited by Kgatla 2000:134) postulates that mere difference constitutes a power difference. A powerful group will always want to remain in power and is thus prone to use methods that can ensure it remains in power.

Belief in witchcraft and the stereotypical accusations of practising witchcraft that people make to eliminate others are hard to control and curb. The relational dialectics theory is alluded to in this article to explain dialectical tensions that give rise to a striving for equilibrium in social relationships. It is argued that intimate relationships often need centrifugal force to create space between close-knit groups and individuals. This has become even clearer under the ladder of witchcraft persecution.

It is also argued that witchcraft discourses follow the stereotypical ladder of persecution. The escalation ladder is described in a recent research report emanating from a research project undertaken in the Limpopo province in South Africa. The ladder starts with tensions in society that gradually lead to public outcry that may lead to the public violence of a witch-hunt. Sadly, measures to curb the violence associated with false accusations of witchcraft could not be covered within the confines of the article.

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