

---

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Women's Activism for Gender Equity in Africa - Joint Special Issue with WAGADU: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*

Article 3

---

October 2008

## Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today

Silvia Federici

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Federici, Silvia (2008). Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(1), 21-35.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss1/3>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

## Witch-Hunting, Globalization, and Feminist Solidarity in Africa Today

By Silvia Federici<sup>1</sup>

*Witch-hunting did not disappear from the repertoire of the bourgeoisie with the abolition of slavery. On the contrary, the global expansion of capitalism through colonization and Christianization ensured that this persecution would be planted in the body of colonized societies, and, in time, would be carried out by the subjugated communities in their own name and against their own members. (Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch, Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation)*

Discussing witch-hunting as a global phenomenon, at the end of *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), and commenting on the witch-hunts that have taken place in Africa and other parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s, I expressed my concern that these persecutions were rarely reported in Europe and the U.S. Today, the literature on the return of witch-hunting on the world scene has grown and so have media reports of witch-killings, coming not only from Africa, but India, Latin America, Papua New Guinea. Yet, with few exceptions,<sup>2</sup> social justice movements and even feminist organizations continue to be silent on this matter, although the victims are predominantly women.

By witch-hunting I refer to the recurrence of punitive expeditions by young male vigilantes or self-appointed witch-finders, often leading to the murder of the accused and the confiscation of their properties. Especially in Africa, this has become a serious problem over the last two decades continuing to this day. Just in Kenya, eleven people, eight women and three men, were murdered in May in the Southwestern province of Kisii, accused of witchcraft (USA Africa Dialogue 5/24/08).

Studied mostly by anthropologists, witchcraft accusations and killings should concern all feminists, North and South. For in addition to inflicting an unspeakable suffering on those accused, and perpetrating a misogynous ideology that degrades all women, they have devastating consequences for the communities affected, especially the younger generations. They are also emblematic examples of the effects of economic globalization on women, further demonstrating that it contributes to the escalation of male violence against them.

In what follows, I discuss the witch-hunts in Africa, examining their motivations and suggesting some initiatives that feminists can take to put an end to these persecutions. My argument is that these witch-hunts must be understood in the context of the deep crisis in the process of social reproduction that the liberalization and globalization of African economies have produced, as they have undermined local

---

<sup>1</sup> Silvia Federici is Professor Emerita and Teaching Fellow of political philosophy and international studies at Hofstra University. She is also a co-founder and coordinator of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa.

<sup>2</sup> One exception is the movie/documentary made by the Indian filmmaker Rakhi Varma, entitled "The Indian Witch-Hunt," that was declared best film at the ShowReal Asia 2 Award held in Singapore on April 20, 2005. According to an article in InfoChange News, Varma chose to film the documentary in Jharkhand state "because of the 500 or more cases of witch hunting reported there in the '90s." InfoChange News & Features, July 2005.

economies, devalued women's social position, and generated intense conflicts between young and old, women and men, over the use of crucial economic resources starting with land. In this sense, I see the present witch-hunts on a continuum with such phenomena as the dowry murders and the return of *sati* in India, and the killings of hundreds of women in the Mexican towns at the border with the U.S., victims of rapists or snuff/porno producers. For, in different ways, they too are an expression of the effects of "integration" into the global economy, and men's readiness to vent on women their economic frustrations and even sacrifice their lives to keep abreast of advancing capitalist relations. These witch-hunts are also on a continuum with the worldwide return of "the supernatural" in political discourse and popular practice (e.g. "satanic cults" in Europe and the U.S.), a phenomenon that can be attributed to the proliferation of fundamentalist religious sects but, significantly, has emerged in conjunction with the globalization of economic life.

My analysis concludes that while mobilizing against these egregious violations of women's rights, feminists should put on trial the agencies that have created the material and social conditions that have made them possible. These include the African governments who do not intervene to prevent the killings or punish them; the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and their international supporters, whose economic policies have destroyed local economies, fueling a war of all against all. Most crucially, feminist should put on trial the United Nations, which pays lip service to women's rights but treats economic liberalization as a Millennium goal, and watches in silence while old women, in many parts of the world, are demonized, expelled from their communities, or cut to pieces or burnt alive.

### **Witch-Hunting and Globalization in Africa from the 1980s to Present**

Although the fear of witchcraft is often described as a deep-seated feature of Africa's belief systems,<sup>3</sup> assaults on 'witches' have intensified across Africa in the 1990s in ways unprecedented in the pre-colonial period. Figures are difficult to come by, since attacks and killings have often gone unpunished and unrecorded. But what is available shows the magnitude of the problem.

One thousand women are now exiled in "witches camps" in the North of Ghana, forced to flee their communities under the threat of death (Berg 2005). At least three hundred people were killed, between 1992 and 1994, in the Gusii (Kisii) district of Southwestern Kenya, the attackers being well-organized groups of young men, acting under the directives of relatives of the victims or other interested parties (Ogembo 2006). Intense persecutions have occurred in South Africa's Northern province, after the end of apartheid, with such a heavy toll in human lives that the African National Congress "saw it necessary, among its first gestures in government, to appoint a commission of inquiry" on the matter (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 282). Routine assaults on "witches," often with deadly consequences, have been recorded in Nigeria, Cameroon, Tanzania, Namibia, and Mozambique. According to one account, between 1991 and 2001, at least

---

<sup>3</sup> This thesis is so common that it is hard to select an individual source. See among others: Chabal and Deloz (1999), Ogembo (2006), Bongomba (2007). However, Stephen Ellis points out that "Contemporary African 'witchcraft' is...like many other aspects of life there, neither authentically African nor a pure imposition. It is an unfortunate amalgam created in part by comparing religious ideas and practices from different places" (2007: 35).

23,000 “witches” have been killed in Africa, the figure being considered a conservative one (Petraitis 2003). “Cleansing” campaigns have also been launched, with witch-finders going from village to village, submitting everyone to humiliating and frightening interrogations and exorcisms. This has been the case in Zambia, where, in one of the districts of Central Province, one hundred and seventy-six witch-finders were active in the summer of 1997, and, since then, witch-hunts “have proceeded unabated,” with the accused driven out of their villages, expropriated of their possessions, often tortured and killed (Hinfelaar 2007: 233).

In most instances, witch-hunters have operated with impunity. Police forces often side with them, or refuse to arrest them, not to be accused of protecting witches or because they cannot find people who testify against them. Governments too have watched from the sidelines. Except for the government of South Africa, none has seriously investigated the circumstance of these killings. More surprising, feminists have not spoken up against them. They fear, perhaps, that denouncing these witch-hunts may promote colonial stereotypes of Africans as a population mired in backwardness and irrationality. Such fears are not unfounded but they are misguided. Witch-hunts are not just an African but a global problem. They are part of a worldwide pattern of increasing violence against women that we need to combat. Thus, we need to understand the forces and social dynamics responsible for them.

It is important to stress, in this context, that anti-witchcraft movements only began in Africa in the colonial period, in conjunction with the introduction of cash economies that profoundly changed social relations creating new forms of inequality.<sup>4</sup> Prior to colonization, “witches” were at times punished but rarely killed; in fact, it is even questionable whether we can speak of ‘witchcraft,’ when referring to pre-colonial times, since the term was not used until the coming of the Europeans.

It was in the 1980s and 1990s that--together with the debt crisis, structural adjustment, currency devaluation-- the fear of “witches” became a dominant concern in many African communities, so much so that “even ethnic groups...who had no knowledge of witchcraft before colonial time today believe to have witches in their midst” (Danfulani 2007: 181).

Why this resurgence of a persecution in some ways reminiscent of the European 17<sup>th</sup> century witch-hunts? This is a difficult question to answer, if we wish to go beyond the immediate causes. The situation is complicated by the fact that there are evidently different types of motives behind the charge of witchcraft. A witchcraft accusation can be the result of a land conflict or of economic rivalries and competitions, or it can mask the refusal to support family or community members that are seen as a drain on its resources, or can be a device to justify the enclosures of communal lands.

What is certain, however, is that we will not find an explanation for this phenomenon by appealing to the “African worldview.” Similarly, the view that witchcraft accusations are leveling mechanisms used to defend communal values against the

---

<sup>4</sup> Dovo, among others, notes a rise of witchcraft practices and anti-witchcraft shrines in Ghana after the advent of colonialism, in particular after the development of the cocoa industry that created new class divisions (70). In the 1950s, a witch-finding movement developed, spilling over into Nigeria's Yoruba land, that “persecuted thousands of women,” apparently triggered by the rise in the price of cocoa on the world market. It was sponsored by businessmen who feared the competition of the well-organized female traders, and saw their economic success as a threat to male authority in the household. (Apter 1993: 111, 117, 123).

excessive accumulation of wealth, can hardly account for these persecutions, given their destructive consequences for African communities. More convincing is the view that these witch-hunts are not a legacy of the past, but are a response to the social crisis that globalization and neo-liberal restructuring of Africa's political economies have produced.

A detailed analysis of the ways in which economic globalization has created an environment conducive to witchcraft accusations is provided by Justus Ogembo's "Contemporary Witch-hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya" (2006: 111ff.). Describing a situation that is duplicated in countries across the continent, Ogembo argues that structural adjustment programs and trade liberalization have so destabilized African communities, so undermined their reproductive system and thrown households into such "deprivation and despair" that many people have come to believe that they are the victims of evil conspiracies, carried out by supernatural means (2006: 125). He points out that, after Kenya "adjusted" its economy, unemployment reached unprecedented levels, the currency was devalued, so that basic commodities became unavailable, state-subsidies to basic services, like education, health, public transport, were gutted.

In short, millions of people, in rural and urban areas, found themselves with their backs against the wall, unable to provide for their families and communities and no hopes for the future. Rising mortality rates, especially among children, due to the collapse of the healthcare system, growing malnutrition, and the spread of AIDS, contributed to fuel suspicions of foul play. Ogembo (2006) argues that the persecution of witches was further instigated by the proliferation of fundamentalist sects, re-injecting into religion the fear of the devil, and by the appearance of self-defined "traditional healers," exploiting people's inability to pay hospital fees and hiding their incompetence behind appeals to the supernatural.

Ogembo's (2006) analysis is shared by many scholars. But other aspects of economic globalization are noted that provide a context for understanding the new surge of witch-hunting. One view is that witch beliefs are being manipulated to justify expropriating people from their land. In some areas of post-war Mozambique, for instance, women, who after their husbands died, insisted on holding on to the couple's land, have been accused of being witches by the relatives of the deceased (Bonate 2003: 11, 74, 115). Others were accused when refusing to give up the land that they had rented during the war (Gengenback 1998).<sup>5</sup> Land disputes are at the origins also of many accusations in Kenya. In both countries, land scarcity adds to the intensity of the conflicts.

More broadly, witch-craft accusations are often a means of enclosure. As international agencies, with the African governments, press for the privatization and alienation of communal lands, witchcraft accusations become a powerful means to break the resistance of those to be expropriated. As historian Hugo Hinfelaar points out, 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

---

<sup>5</sup> Bina Awargal (1994) finds the same pattern in South Asia: "In communities where women never held land, such rights tend to generate hostility --divorces, accusations of witchcraft, threats, attacks, torture, even murder." Reported in Wanyeki ed. (2003) 74.

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 they have turned into squatters on their own ancestral lands. (Hinfelaar 2007: 238)

Another source of witchcraft accusations is the increasingly mysterious character of economic transactions and people's consequent inability to understand the forces that govern their lives (Ogembo 2006: ix). As local economies are transformed by international policies and the "invisible hand" of the global market, it becomes difficult for people to understand what motivates economic change and why some prosper while others are pauperized. The result is a climate of mutual resentment and suspicion, in which those who benefit from economic liberalization fear being bewitched by those impoverished, and the poor, many of them women, see the wealth from which they are excluded as a product of evil arts. Witches, Parish (2000) writes, are personified in the eyes of Nigerian urban dwellers by the greedy villagers who strip them of their wealth. In turn, the villagers use witchcraft accusations against the urban elite to enforce fading kinship norms concerning standards of mutual support (Parish *ibid.*; Geschiere 1998; Van Binsbergen 2007).

Witch hunting is also attributed to the anxiety caused by the proliferation of "occult economies" resulting from the global deregulation of economic activity and the quest for new forms of business. The traffic in organs and body parts, to be used in transplants or rituals associated with the acquisition of wealth, have spread in Africa as other parts of the world, generating a fear that evil forces are sapping people's life energies and humanity. In this sense, witchcraft accusations --like the vampire stories in colonial Africa that Louise White has studied (White 2000)<sup>6</sup>-- can be seen as a response to the commodification of life and capitalism's attempt not only to reactivate slave labor but to turn human bodies themselves into means of accumulation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 281-85).

While multiple factors have combined to produce a climate in which the fear of witches thrives, there is consensus that at the root of the witch-hunts is a fierce struggle for survival that takes the form of an intergenerational struggle. It is young men, often unemployed, who provide the manpower for the witch-hunts, although often executing plans hatched by other actors who remain in the shadow. They are the ones who go from house to house to collect the money needed to pay a witch-finder or ambush and execute the accused.

---

<sup>6</sup> Louise White reports that in colonial Kenya, Tanganyika, and Northern Rhodesia, in the 1930s, many rumors circulated among the African population about whites sucking the blood of black people or having pits in their homes in which they would keep them before feeding upon them.

With no possibility of going to school, no prospect of making a living off the land or finding other forms of income, unable to fulfill their roles as family providers, many young men, in today's structurally adjusted Africa, despair about their future, and are easily led to war against their communities (Alidou 2007).<sup>7</sup> Often hired and trained as mercenaries by politicians, rebel armies, private companies, or the state, they are ready to organize punitive expeditions, especially against old people whom they blame for their misfortunes and see as a burden as well as an obstacle to their wellbeing. It is in this context, that (in the words of an old Congolese man) "the youth represent a [constant threat] for us oldsters" (African Agenda, 1999: 35).

Thus, older folks returning to their villages with the savings of a lifetime have found themselves charged as witches and expropriated from their houses and earnings, or worse, have been killed -- hanged, buried or burned alive (African Agenda, 1999: 35). In 1996 alone, the Congolese Human Rights Monitoring Commission "recorded about 100 case where elderly people, accused of witchcraft, were hung" (ibid). Pensioners have been a common target also in Zambia, where "village leaders are believed to be conspiring with witch-finders to strip [them] of the assets they have acquired over the years," prompting a newspaper article to comment that "Retiring, going back home has become a risky business!" (Hinfelaar 2007: 236). In rural Limpopo, South Africa, young men have burnt old women alive, accusing them of turning dead people into zombies in order to get slaves, ghost workers and deprive the youth of work (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 285). Meanwhile, in the DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and, more recently, in Eastern Nigeria, children too have been accused of being demonic. The charges have come from Christian exorcists or "traditional witch doctors," who make a living by inflicting on them all kinds of tortures under on the pretext of cleansing their bodies from the evil spirits that possess them. Thousands of children have been tortured in this way, also in Angola, with the complicity of their parents probably eager to free themselves from youngsters they can no longer support. Many children have been thrown into the streets--more than 14,000 just in Kinshasa-or have been killed (Vine 1999, McVeigh 2007, La Franriere 2007).

It is important here to again stress the role by the many religious sects (Pentecostal, Zionist) that over the last twenty years have proselytized in urban and rural Africa. Of Pentecostalism Ogembo writes that: "with its emphasis on exorcism...[it] has preyed on the Gusii indigenous beliefs about mystical forces and powers, forcing the two major denominations in Gusiland to reexamine their doctrines on the same." (Ogembo 2006 :109). He adds that through books, open-air sermons in market centers and other public spaces, evangelists have increased people's anxiety about the Devil, preaching a connection between Satan, illness, and death. The media has helped in this process, a sign that the new "witch-craze" is not a purely spontaneous development. Streams of programs are daily broadcast in Ghana describing how witches operate and how they can be identified.

---

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Ousseina Alidou has spoken of the "militarization" of the 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 leading to the harming of their own communities. (Presentation at the Forum on Africa, held by Peace Action at the Judson Church in New York, on September 17, 2007).

### Witch-Hunting as Women Hunting

As we have seen, the recent witch-hunts have spared no one. However, as in the European witch-hunts, those most frequently and violently attacked have been older women. In Ghana, they have been so much at risk that “witches camps” have been created, where those accused live in exile, after being expelled from their villages, at times, moving there “voluntarily” when they are past the child-bearing age, or remain alone, and feel vulnerable to attacks (Dovlo 2007: 77; Berg 2005).<sup>8</sup> Older women were also the majority of the victims in the Gusii witch-hunts of 1992-1995. The men murdered there were guilty of association with suspected witches or were killed in their stead, when the women could not be found or they tried to protect them (Ogembo 2006: 21). Women are the main victims in the Congo, South Africa, Zambia, and Tanzania. Most are farmers, often living alone. But in urban areas, it is traders who are more commonly attacked, as men respond to the loss of economic security and masculine identity, by discrediting women they see or believe to be competing with them. Thus, in Northern Ghana female traders have been accused of gaining their wealth by turning souls into commodities (Dovlo 2007: 83). In Zambia, those at risk are independent women, “who frequently travel as entrepreneurs and smugglers along the national highways” (Auslander 1993: 172).

There are witch-finders who accuse women because they have red eyes, which they claim is a sign of women’s devilish nature, though “it is a common condition in rural Africa, where women spend year toiling in smoky kitchens cooking for their families” (Petraitis 2003: 2).

What is taking place, then, is a broad attack on women, reflecting a dramatic devaluation of their position and identity. “Traditional” patriarchal prejudices certainly play a role in it. Shaped by male-centered religious values, indigenous as well as grafted on them by colonization, African cultures picture women as more jealous, vindictive and secretive than men and more predisposed to evil forms of witchcraft (Dovlo 2007: *ibid*). The fact that women are in charge of the reproduction of their families magnifies men’s fear of their powers. Interviewed by Alison Berg, the male keeper of a witch camp was explicit on this point. Witches - he said - are women because it is women who cook for men! Nevertheless, patriarchal views of femininity do not explain the explosion of misogyny these witch-hunts represent. This becomes evident when we consider the cruelty of the punishments, all the more shocking as they are inflicted on old women and in communities where old age has always commanded great respect. With reference to the witch-hunts in Gusii, Ogembo describes how

[v]illagers rounded up and ‘arrested’ suspects in their houses at night or chased them and caught them like prey by day, bound their hands and feet with sisal ropes, torched them--after dousing them with gasoline purchased earlier or placing them under grass-thatched roofs--and then drew back to watch the victims agonize and perish in the flames. Some of

---

<sup>8</sup> There has been a debate in Ghana over the nature of these ‘camps’, whether or not they should be allowed to stay, and whether they provide women a genuine shelter or represent a violation of human rights. (Dovlo 2007: 79). Female members of parliament insisted first that they should be closed, but they abandoned this project after visiting the camps and meeting the women taking refuge in them.



those murdered in this way left behind a terrified and now orphaned offspring. (Ogembo 2006: 1)

It is reckoned that thousands of women have been burned or buried alive or have been beaten and tortured to death. In Ghana, children have been encouraged to stone the old women accused. Indeed, we could not explain such brutality if we did not have historical precedents, and more recent examples coming from other parts of our "global village" like India or Papua.

The historical comparison that comes to mind is the witch-hunts that took place in Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century that sent hundreds of thousands of women to the stake. This is a precedent that scholars of the African witch-hunts do not like to acknowledge because of the immensely different historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, unlike the European witch-hunts, those in Africa or India today are not the work of magistrates, kings and popes. Nevertheless, they share important elements with the witch-hunts in Europe that cannot be denied and help us "historicize" them (Apter 1993: 97), also throwing light on witch-hunting as a disciplinary tool.

There are echoes of the European witch-hunts in the crimes of which the African witches are accused, that seem borrowed from the European demonologies, likely reflecting the influence of evangelization: night flights, shape shifting, cannibalism, the causing of sterility in women, infant deaths, the destruction of crops. In both cases, moreover, the "witches" are predominantly older women, poor farmers, often living alone or women believed to be competing with men. Most important, like the European witch-hunts, the new witch-hunts in Africa are taking place in societies that are undergoing a process of "primitive accumulation," where many farmers are forced off the land, new property relations and concepts of value-creation are coming into place, and under the impact of economic strain communal solidarity breaks down.

As I have argued in *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), it is not a coincidence that under these circumstances, women, older ones in particular, should suffer a process of social degradation and become the target of a gender war. In part, as we have seen, this war can be traced to young people's reluctance in a time of diminishing resources to support their kin folks and to their eagerness to appropriate their belongings, insignificant as they may be. But most crucial is the fact that when monetary relations become hegemonic, women's reproductive activities, and their contribution to the community are totally "devalued." This is especially true of old women who can no longer provide children or sexual services and therefore are even more resented as a drain on the creation of wealth.

There is a significant parallel here between the attack on old African female rural farmers perpetrated through witchcraft accusations and the ideological campaign the World Bank has been mounting across the continent to promote the commercialization of land, which claims that land is a "dead asset," as long as is used as a means of livelihood and shelter, for land becomes productive only when brought as collateral for credit to the bank (Manji 2007). I would argue that many old women and men in Africa today are hunted as witches because they too are seen as "dead assets," the embodiment of a world of practices and values that is increasingly considered sterile, non-productive.

In making this point, I do not intend to minimize the importance of the complex of grievances, old and new, that in each instance produce witchcraft accusations. Old

rumors, compounded by mysterious deaths especially of children, the desire to appropriate coveted properties (sometimes just a radio or TV), anger against adulterous behavior, above all land disputes or simply the decision to force people off the land, are the daily substance of the African persecutions, as they were in the witch-hunts in Europe. The structure of the polygamous family contribute to foment witchcraft accusations, creating jealousies and competition among co-wives and siblings with regard to the distribution of the family's assets, especially land. Thus, stepmothers and co-wives figure prominently among the women accused. Growing land scarcity intensifies these conflicts, for husbands now find it difficult to provide for all their wives, thus causing intense rivalries among them and their children. In post-war Mozambique, as we have seen, the struggle over land has even brought women to accuse each other of witchcraft (Gengenbach 1998).

Yet, we cannot understand how such conflicts can instigate such cruel attacks on old women unless we place them on a broader canvass. This is the world of the disintegrating communal village economy, in which older women are those who most strenuously defend a non-capitalist use of natural resources -- practicing subsistence farming and refusing e.g. to sell their land or trees, to keep them for their children's security (Bonate 2003: 113)<sup>9</sup> -- and where a generation of youngsters is growing whose minds have become unsettled because of the hardships they are facing, and are now convinced that older people can no longer provide for their future and, worse, are blocking their access to wealth. As Auslander writes, drawing on his experience in Ngoni land (Eastern Zambia), old men too are 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 they lament that their children will poison them to sell their cattle for cash and to buy chemical fertilizer or a truck (1993: 181). But the "battle to make wealth" is "waged [above all] upon the mature female body" (ibid.,170) because old women are believed to pose a special threat to the reproduction of their communities, destroying crops, making young women barren, and hoarding what they have. In other words, the battle is waged on women's bodies because women are seen as the main agents of resistance to the expansion of the cash economy, and as such as useless individuals, selfishly monopolizing resources the youth could use. From this viewpoint, the present witch-hunts, no less than the ideology the World Bank promotes with regard to land, represent a complete perversion in the traditional conception of value creation, symbolized by the contempt the witch-hunters display for the bodies of older women, whom in Zambia they have at times derided as "sterile vaginas."

As we have seen, the elimination of aging female subsistence farmers is not the only motivation behind the attack perpetrated against African "witches." As in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, today as well, many men respond to the threat which the expansion of capitalist relations poses to their economic security and masculine identity, by

---

<sup>9</sup> In the Anchilo area of Mozambique -- a place where women insisting on their land rights have been accused of being witches -- out of 36 women interviewed, only seven responded that they would sell the trees they inherited, while the others said that they would want to keep them for their children, (Bonate 2003: 113). As Mark Auslander himself writes: "Dr. Moses [the witch-finder] and his followers appeared to value greatly the photos I gave them. In 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." (1993: 190).

discrediting the women they see or believe are competing with them. Thus, market women, a major social force in Africa, have been often accused of being witches, also thanks to national politicians who have blamed on them the high inflationary rates the liberalization of the economy has caused (Auslander 1993: 182).

But the attack on trading women also involves a clash between opposite systems of values. As reported by Parish (2000), in Ghana, witchcraft accusations develop in the clash between the values of the predominantly female village traders, who insist on returning the money they earn to the local economy and keeping it where they can see it, and those of the male businessmen involved in export/import trade who look at the world market as their economic horizon (Parish 2000). Sexual elements enter this scenario, as the same businessmen fear that witches can appropriate their bodies (beside their wallets) through their sexual arts (ibid). But the charge most often moved against "witches" is that they are sterile and produce sterility, both sexual and economic, in the people they bewitch (Auslander 1993: 179). "Open the Wombs" "Open the Wombs," women were commanded in a rural community of Eastern Zambia during a witch-finding campaign in 1989, while accused of making people barren (ibid: 167). Meanwhile, their bodies were cut up with dozens of razor incisions in which a "cleansing" medicine was placed (ibid: 174).

### **Witch-hunting and Feminist Activism: Reconstructing the Commons**

Considering the danger the African witch-hunts represent for women, the suffering they inflict, their violation of women's bodies and rights, we can only speculate why feminists have not spoken up and mobilized against them. Possibly, some may think that focussing on this issue may divert attention from broader political concerns like war, global debt, and environmental crises. As I mentioned, there may be also a reluctance to tackle this topic for fear of promoting a colonial image of Africans as a backward population. But the result is that it is mostly journalists and academics who have analyzed this persecution, and as a consequence it has been depoliticized. Most accounts are written in a detached mode, showing little outrage for the horrific destiny that so many of the accused have met. With the exception of the articles contained in *Imagining Evil* (2007), none of the reports I have read is written in an advocacy mode or to protest the indifference of national and international institutions to this butchery. Most anthropological analyses are concerned with demonstrating that the new witch-hunts are not a return to tradition, but Africans' way of negotiating the challenges of "modernity." Few have words of sympathy for the women, men and children who have been murdered. One anthropologist even collaborated with the persecutors. Over a period of months, he followed a witch-finder who was traveling from village to village in Zambia to exorcise those he identified as witches. He tape-record the entire exercise, though it was often so violent that he compared it to a RENAMO incursion, with people being insulted, terrified and cut up presumably to force the evil spirits out of their bodies. Then, to the witch-finder's satisfaction, the anthropologist turned over to him the photos he took, knowing that the witch-finder would use them to publicize his work (9).

Feminists' first contribution, then, should be to initiate a different type of scholarship, concerned with better understanding what social conditions produce witch-hunts, and with building a constituency (of human rights activists, social justice groups) committed to documenting, publicizing and ending the persecutions. Examples for this

type of scholarship and activism are not lacking. For years feminists in India have mobilized public opinion against dowry murders, turning it into a global issue while retaining control over its definition. The same development must take place in the case of Africa's witch-hunts. They too have to be brought to the foreground of political activism both because they constitute outstanding human rights violations and because crucial issues are at stake in these persecutions, that go to the core of Africa's political economy and social life in much of the planet.

At stake, are women lives, the values transmitted to the new generations, the possibility of cooperation between women and men. At stake is also is the destiny of the communal systems that have shaped life in Africa and in many parts of the world until the advent of colonialism. More than anywhere else, communalism has defined social life and culture in Africa, surviving into the 1980s and beyond, largely because in many countries land was never alienated even in the colonial period, though much was diverted to the production of cash crops. Indeed, Africa has long been viewed as a scandal by capitalist policy planners, who have welcomed the World Bank's structural adjustment programs as an opportunity for the development of African land markets. However, as the present witch-hunts indicate, African communalism is undergoing a historic crisis, and this is where the political challenge for social movements lies.

It is important that this crisis should not be misread as an indictment of communal relations, for what is in crisis in Africa, is not communalism *per se*, but a model of communal relations that for more than a century has been under attack, and, even at its best, was not based on fully egalitarian relations. Women, in the past, may have not been burnt as witches by their husbands' kin, when they tried to hold on to the land left to them, as it is happening today in Mozambique. But customary laws have often discriminated against them, both with respect to land inheritance and even land use. It is in response to this discrimination that over the last decade, as Wanyeki (2003) has documented, a women's movement has grown in Africa to demand a land reform and land rights for women. But this movement will not succeed in a context where the women making land claims or insisting on holding on to the land they have acquired, are treated as witches. Worse yet, this movement can be used to justify the kind of land reform that the World Bank is promoting, which replaces land redistribution with land titling and legalization. Some feminists may believe that titling gives women more security or can prevent the land disputes that have often being the source of witch-hunting and other forms of warfare in rural Africa.

This belief, however, is an illusion, since the land law reform which the World Bank and other developers (e.g. USAID, the British Government) have promoted will only benefit foreign investors, while leading to more rural debt, more land alienation and more conflicts among the dispossessed (Manji 2006). What is needed, instead, are new forms of communalism guaranteeing an egalitarian access to land and other communal resources, one in which women are not penalized if they do not have children, if the children they have are not male, if they are old and can no longer procreate, or are widowed and without male children coming to their defense. In other words, feminist movements, in and out of Africa, should not let the demise and/failure of a patriarchal form of communalism to be used to legitimize the privatization of communal resources. They should, instead, engage in the construction of fully egalitarian commons, learning from the example of the organizations that have taken this path - Via Campesina, the

Landless Movement in Brazil, the Zapatistas - all of which have seen the building of women's power and solidarity as a fundamental condition of success.

Indeed, viewed from the viewpoint of the African village and the women who have been the victims of witch-hunting, we can say that the feminist movement too is at a crossroad and must decide "which side is it on." Feminists have devoted much effort during the last two decades to carving a space for women in the institutions, from national governments to the United Nations. They have not always, however, made an equal effort to "empower" the women who, on the ground, have borne the brunt of economic globalization, especially rural women. Thus, while many feminist organizations have celebrated the United Nations' decade for women, they have not heard the cries of the women who, in the same years, were burnt as witches in Africa, nor have asked if 'women's power' is not an empty word when old women, with impunity, can be tortured, humiliated, ridiculed and killed by the youth of their communities.

The forces that are instigating the African witch-hunts are powerful and will not be easily defeated. Indeed, violence against women will end only with the construction of a different world where people's lives are not "eaten up" for the sake of the accumulation of wealth. However, starting from the present, we can tap into the experience that women internationally have gained to see how an effective response can be mounted. Confronted with the constant escalation in the number of women killed by fire in "dowry murders," by husbands eager to remarry to acquire money and commodities they could not otherwise afford, Indian women in the 1990s launched a broad educational campaign with street plays, demonstrations, sit-ins in front of the houses of the murderers, or in front of the police stations to convince the police to arrest the killers (Kumar 1997: 120-1). They also made songs and slogans, naming and shaming the killers, formed neighborhood groups, arranged public meetings where men pledged never to ask for a dowry again. (ibid: 122) Teachers went to the streets to demonstrate against dowry murders.

These direct action tactics can be applied also to confront the African witch-hunters, who can continue to torture and kill only as long as they believe they have a license to do so. African women are particularly well equipped for mounting this type of mobilization, as in the confrontation with colonial power they forged forms of struggles and tactics that to this day ensure that their voice can be heard. What should be organized, for instance, is a movement of women who "sit" on witch hunters, disrobe in front of them, and perform shaming acts of staged "incivility" - as African grassroot women's movements have been known to do (Diduk 2004) - at their doorsteps, in Africa, as well as in the world's capitals where the policies are made that are driving the witch-hunts.

Clearly, "sitting on the man" can only be a beginning. But it is important that we recognize that there is much that women and feminists can do to oppose these new witch-hunts, and that such intervention is much needed. For in a social context in which communal relations are falling apart, few people will have the courage to come to women's and old men's rescue when they are surrounded by a gang of youth with ropes and gasoline in their hands. This means that if women do not organize against these witch-hunts, no one else will, and the terror campaign against them will continue under the form of witch-hunting or in new forms.

One lesson we can draw from the return of witch-hunting is that this form of persecution is no longer bound to a specific historic time. It has taken a life of its own, so

that the same mechanisms can be applied to different societies whenever there are people in them that have to be ostracized and dehumanized. Witch-craft accusations, in fact, are the ultimate mechanism of alienation and estrangement as they turn the accused - still primarily women - into monstrous beings, dedicated to the destruction of their communities therefore making them undeserving of any compassion and solidarity.

## References

- African Agenda (1999). "Saving the Elderly from Prejudice and Attacks," 2 (2) 35.
- Agarwal, Bin (1994). *A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Apter, Andrew (1993). Atinga Revisited: Yoruba Witchcraft and the Cocoa economy, 1950-1951. In Comaroff and Comaroff eds. (1993) 111-128.
- Ashford, Adam (1998). Reflections on Spiritual Insecurity in Soweto, South Africa, *African Studies Review*, 41(3) 39-67.
- Ashford, Adam (2005). *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Astill, James. (2003). "Congo casts out its 'child witches.'" *The Guardian* (UK) May 11, 2003.
- Auslander, Mark (1993). "Open the Wombs": The Symbolic Politics of Modern Ngoni Witch-finding. In Comaroff and Comaroff eds. (1993) 167-192.
- Austen, Ralph A. (1993). The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History. In Comaroff and Comaroff eds. (1993) 89-110.
- Bastian, Misty L. (1993). " 'Bloodhounds Have No Friends': Witchcraft and Locality in the Nigerian Popular Press." Comaroff and Comaroff eds. (1993) 129-166.
- Berg, Alison (2005). "Witches in Exile." VHS. *California Newsreel*. [www.newsreel.org](http://www.newsreel.org)
- Bonate, Liazzat. (2003). "Women's Land Rights in Mozambique: Cultural, Legal and Social Contexts. Wanyeki ed. (2003) 96-132.
- Bongmba, Elias K. (2007). "Witchcraft and the Christian Church: Ethical Implications" In Haar ed. (2007) 113-142.
- Bond, George Clement & Ciekawi, Diane M. (2001). *Witchcraft Dialogues. Anthropology and Philosophical Exchanges*. Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies. Africa Series N. 76, 2001.
- Chabal, Patrick & Daloz, Jean-Pascal (1999). *Africa Works. Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John eds. (1993). *Modernity and its Malcontents. Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John (1999). "Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: Notes from the South African postcolony." *American Ethnologist* 26 (2): 279-303.
- Comaroff, Jean & Comaroff, John eds. (2006). *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago and London; University of Chicago Press.
- Ciekawy, Diane and Geschiere, Peter. (1998). "Containing Witchcraft: Conflicting Scenarios in Postcolonial Africa, *African Studies Review*, 41 (3) December 19, 1-14.
- Diduk, Susan. (2004). "The Civility of Incivility: Grassroot Political Activism, Female Farmers and the Cameroon State. *African Studies Review*. 47(2) September 2004, 27-54.

- Dovlo, Elom (2007). "Witchcraft in Contemporary Ghana." Haar ed. (2007) 67-112.
- Danfulani, Umar Habila Dadem. (2007). "Anger as a metaphor of witchcraft: the relation between magic, witchcraft, and divination among the Mupun of Nigeria. Haar ed. (2007) 143-184.
- Ellis, Stephen (2007). "Witching Times: A theme in the Histories." Haar ed. (2007) 31-52.
- Federici, Silvia (2004). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia.
- Fisiy, Cyprian F. (1998). "Containing Occult Practices: Witchcraft Trials in Cameroon." *African Studies Review*, 41(3) 143-163.
- Gengenbach, Heidi. (1998). "' 'I'll Bury You In The Border!': Land Struggles in Post-War Facazisse (Magude District), Mozambique." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, March 1998, Vol. 24, Issue1, p.7.
- Geschiere, Peter & Nyamnjoh, Francis. (1998). "Witchcraft in the 'Politics of Belonging.'" *African Studies Review*, 41(3) 69-91.
- Haar, Gerrie ter ed. (2007). *Imagining Evil: Witchcraft Beliefs and Accusations in Contemporary Africa*. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Hinfelaar, Hugo F. (2007). "Witch-Hunting in Zambia and International Illegal Trade." In Haar ed. (2007) 229-246.
- Kumar, Radha. (1997). *The history of doing: An illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India, 1800-1990*. Revised edition. London: Verso Press.
- LaFraniere, Sharon. (2007). "African Crucible: Cast as Witches then Cast Out." *New York Times*, November 15, 2007.
- McVeigh, Tracy. (2007). "Children are targets in Nigerian witch-hunt." *The Observer*, December 9, 2007.
- Manji, Ambreena. (2006). *The Politics of Land Reform in Africa*. From Communal Land to Free Markets. London: Zed Books.
- Meyer, Birgit. (1998). The Power of Money: Politics, Occult Forces, and Pentecostalism in Ghana. *African Studies Review*, 41(3) 15-37.
- Miguel, Edward. (2005). "Poverty and Witch Killing." *The Review of Economic Studies*, N.72, 1153-1172.
- Mutungi, Onesmus K. (1977) *The Legal Aspects of Witchcraft in East Africa. With particular reference to Kenya*. Nairobi: The East Africa Literature Bureau, Kenya.
- Niehaus, Isak A. (1998). The ANC 's Dilemma: Three Witch-Hunts in the South African Lowveld. *African Studies Review*, 41 (3) December 1998, 15-37.
- Niehaus, Isak A. with Eliazaar Mohala and Kelly Shokane. (2001). *Witchcraft, Power, and Politics. Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld*. London: Pluto Press.
- Offiong, Daniel A. (1988). *Witchcraft, sorcery, magic & the social order among the Ibibio of Nigeria*. Calabar (Nigeria): Forth Dimension Publishing.
- Ogembo, Justus M. (2006). *Contemporary witch-hunting in Gusii, Southwestern Kenya*. Lewinston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006.

- Okamba, Louis. (1999). "Saving the elderly from prejudice and attacks." *African Agenda*, Vol. 2, N.2, 1999,35. Accra-North (Ghana), Published by the Third World Network.
- Oyewùmi, Oyèrónké (2003). *African women and feminism: Reflecting on the politics of sisterhood*. Trenton (NJ): Africa World Press.
- Parish, Jane. (2000). "From the body To The Wallet: Conceptualizing Akan Witchcraft At Home And Abroad." *Journal of the Royal Anthropology Institute*, 6(3) 487-501.
- Parish, Jane. (2003). "Anti-witchcraft Shrines Among The Akan: Possession And The Gathering Of Knowledge." *African Studies Review*, 46 (3) 17-34.
- Pels, Peter. (1998). "Reflections on a Western Commonplace." *African Studies Review*, 41(3) 193-209.
- Petratis, Richard. (2003). "The Witch Killers of Africa." Modern Library: Documents. [www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_petratis/witch\\_killers.shtml](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_petratis/witch_killers.shtml)
- USA Africa Dialogue, " 'Witches' burnt to death." 5/21/08.
- Van Binsbergen, Wim. (2007). "Witchcraft in Modern Africa as Virtualized Boundary Condition of the Kinship Order." Bond and Ciekawy eds. (2001) 212-262.
- Vine, Jeremy. (1999). "Congo witch-hunts' child victims." *BBC Online*, December 22.
- Wanyeki, L. Muthoni ed. (2003). *Women and Land in Africa: Culture, Religion and Realizing Women's Rights*. London: Zed Books, 2003.
- White, Louise. (2000). *Speaking with Vampires: Rumors and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California.