

Jan-2015

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## Recommended Citation

Machangu, Hamisi Mathias (2015). Vulnerability of Elderly Women to Witchcraft Accusations among the Fipa of Sumbawanga, 1961-2010. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(2), 274-284.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss2/17>

## **Vulnerability of Elderly Women to Witchcraft Accusations among the Fipa of Sumbawanga, 1961-2010**

By Hamisi Mathias Machangu<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Witchcraft accusations have led to the killings of elderly women in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. For many years, the violence has had major effects on people's health. Witchcraft accusations have been the source of people's loss of limbs and deaths among elderly women in Africa. Although these problems have had effects on elderly women, there has been very little reconstruction of their history in Tanzania. Thus, the aim of this article is to rewrite the history of the vulnerability of the elderly women to witchcraft accusations among the Fipa of Sumbawanga district of Tanzania.

This article focuses on the theme of the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in the context of Tanzanian women's history. The article examines conditions that led to the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations among the Fipa. It also investigates the efficacy of the methods employed by the Tanzanian government in the suppression of witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga.

The data for this article were collected from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were accessed at the library of the University of Dar es Salaam, where Tanganyika Provincial Commissioners' Reports were gathered. Other primary sources were accessed at Tanganyika National Archive, where files and letters written by officials were consulted. I also obtained data through the use of interview. I interviewed government officials, missionaries and ordinary people who served in Sumbawanga district. These people had a lot of experience with the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in the area over time.

*Key Words:* Witchcraft, Fipa, Elderly Women, Control of Accusations

### **Introduction**

The belief in witchcraft and its impacts is widespread in Africa. In the socio-economic sphere as well as among the academic and religious professionals in Tanzania, this belief plays a prominent role. Many people in rural areas of Tanzania including Sumbawanga claim to have magical powers which they can use for their own good and which they can also use to help those who are ready to pay for their services (Beidelman 1963).

Witchcraft practices include belief in magical powers such as the ability to change from a human being into an animal, the power to call up the spirit of a dead man, the ability to diagnose and cure illnesses, and the ability to cause and stop road accidents. The term witchcraft has been used to refer to any influence of an individual possessing magical power on another person's

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mind, body or property against his or her will. Some people believe that magic users have the power to cause disease in humans, sickness in animals, bad luck, sudden death, impotence and other such misfortunes (Malowany 2000: 58).

Witchcraft beliefs cause people to suspect others as witches, which leads to the killings that are directed at the suspected ones. In this case, the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Tanzania is the product of witchcraft beliefs (Swantz 1995:112). Therefore, the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusation among the Fipa of Sumbawanga, calls for clarification and awareness.

Witchcraft accusations have been reported in many African nations. In Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe, thousands of elderly women have been killed or driven out of their villages in the recent past because of the suspicion that they are witches (Hayes 2009; BBC 2002).

Witchcraft accusations against elderly women have been recognised by the Tanzanian government as serious problems that cause death and economic decline. Tanzania leads among African nations in killings of elderly women and their sufferings. Tanzania had 3,693 persons killed on suspicion of being witches between 1970 and 1980. There are no reliable data between 1980 and 1990, but between 1990 and 2000 the number rose to 23,000 deaths. 80 percent of those who were accused and killed during these periods were women (Petraitis 2009). Although there is no reliable data on witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga, the area ranks within the five top killers of elderly women in Tanzania. Other areas include Mwanza, Shinyanga, Mara and Kagera (The Independent 2012).

The Fipa are an ethnic and linguistic group based in the Sumbawanga district of Rukwa region in southwestern Tanzania. The name Sumbawanga literally translates as 'throw away your witchcraft'; *Sumba*-threw and *wanga*-witchcraft. It is believed that this came as a warning from local spiritual healers to any bringing in superstitions and practices relating to spiritual healers from other areas (Saiboko 2013).

### **Theoretical Concerns**

This article explains the history of the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Tanzania. It adopts a political economy perspective to explain the relationship between socio-economic activities and witchcraft accusations. This perspective concentrates upon the relations of production and consumption, differentiation and class structures in explaining witchcraft accusations in a society. It asserts that witchcraft accusations are shaped by the political, social, cultural and economic position of the society. Thus, the way society is organised to perform various economic activities can mould witchcraft beliefs (Stewart & Strathern 2004).

In terms of the political economy perspective, the organization of society forces the emergence of witchcraft beliefs because witchcraft accusations are connected with health and healing of people. People's healing knowledge demonstrates the different forms of organization that dominated each historical era. Changes in society over the past centuries are inseparable from the history of change in control over political institutions and change in economic development. This perspective shows that witchcraft accusations are part of politics, kinship relations, religion, trade, farming and life in general. Thus, witchcraft accusations must be understood within the totality of a society's social and cultural history (Machangu 2013:184).

## **Main Causes of the Vulnerability of Elderly Women to Witchcraft Accusation**

The context in which accusations of witchcraft are made against elderly women is complex. This is attributable to a series of political, social and economic changes in Sumbawanga district. These include the weakening of chiefship during the colonial period and after independence. The changes also include the relocation of people and livestock into the area and traditional religious beliefs of the Fipa people of Sumbawanga (Wills 1981).

During the pre-colonial time, the Fipa had already developed into the chiefdoms of Nkasi and Lyangalile. These were centralised states each with the chief or *mwene* as a hereditary ruler who was surrounded by a court of titled officials and appointed officers in charge of ruling different areas of the chiefdom. During the nineteenth century the Fipa chiefs controlled trade, received tribute from their members, controlled the use of fire and land and depended on traditional doctors for medicine (Waters 2009).

Fipa chiefs organised people into production activities. Up to the early nineteenth century, relations of production to a great extent were communal. Division of labour was still largely based on age and sex. Men and boys performed duties that included hunting, fishing, honey gathering, herding, and defence and house construction. Women and girls were responsible for household activities like cooking, firewood collection, fetching water and caring for children. By the end of nineteenth century, agriculture and livestock keeping constituted the main economic activity. The Fipa people cultivated sorghum, millet, maize and cassava. They kept cattle, goats, sheep, chicken and dogs (Tambila 1981).

Although there is no information available, it is important to note that during pre-colonial periods the vulnerability of the elderly women to witchcraft accusations among the Fipa were very low. The area was sparsely populated and there were few interactions between people because of the low level of economic activities. The Fipa tended to live in widely spaced settlements of 20 to 30 round huts, with a total of 100 people in a village. They were self-sustained economically with few items that they exchanged among themselves and with foreigners. The Fipa also believed that witchcraft practices that resulted in misfortune, epidemic and death were mainly due to the quarrels between the villagers. However, when problems were discussed between these villagers under the command of their chiefs, the harmonious situation was maintained. The Fipa believed that their chiefs had magical power to settle disputes among villagers so agricultural crops and animals were plentiful and there were no epidemics that endangered people's existence (Smythe 2006).

Tanzania came under the European authority during the period from 1890 to 1961. The Germans were the first to colonise the area from 1890 to 1919. Then the British succeeded them from 1920 to 1961. It was through these foreign controls over Africans that the area was transformed into centres of colonial capitalist economy (Illife 1979).

When Tanganyika came under the control of the Germans after the Berlin conference, Sumbawanga district experienced the change of the local ruling system. The German colonial governors introduced provincial and district commissioners to supervise the area. These top officials based their administration on the pre-existing rural political system to help them in the supervision of socio-economic activities. The Germans used the system of divide and rule, a tactic that increased the number of chiefdoms and acknowledged not only the pre-existing chiefs but also gave chiefly status to a number of former sub-chiefs and powerful headman (Koponen 1994: 122-124). These Africans were the representatives of the colonial officials from whom they received orders. They administered the laws, collected taxes, supervised agricultural production, and extracted labour and porters from the local population. This transformation made

colonial administrators in Sumbawanga district put more pressure on the people so as to influence their capital goals by introducing a number of social, economic and political changes (Tambila 1981).

After the First World War up to 1961 the British colonial officials succeeded the Germans in supervision of Tanganyika (Illife 1979). In 1926 the British policy of indirect rule was launched throughout the area. The British governors imposed officials to control Sumbawanga district with the help of African officials, some of whom were not indigenous to the area. The indirect rule system made these chiefs into salaried officials to the central government with responsibilities over taxing and maintaining customary laws. These officials supervised economic activities more extensively than was done during the period of the Germans (TPCR 1927).

These increased economic activities and exploitative system during the British period worsened living conditions among many people in Sumbawanga. This was intensified by agricultural concentration in the area in response to the capitalist needs in Europe and the increased population in Sumbawanga. Capitalist needs and population increase forced the use of new lands among the Fipa. Many areas were cleared, the use of manure and ridge cultivation were introduced, and the use of ploughs increased significantly during the British colonial period (Fuggles-Couchman 1964).

The situation in Sumbawanga shows that in some parts of the district food shortage became familiar during the nineteenth century because of environmental destruction caused by the increase of British colonial economic activities. The changes brought by the policy of indirect rule isolated the chiefs from the people. The authority of chiefs to command their people was reduced. There were no conversation between people and their chiefs and rituals were not performed (Waters 2009). This forced some Fipa people to blame the colonial government for the natural disasters because they expected that regular sacrifices for the chieftom ancestors could have rectified the bad situation. Therefore, the failure of the British colonial administrators to address the effects of change in agricultural systems resulted in insufficient rainfall, frequent famines and bad living conditions. The Fipa believed that their chiefs had the magical power to bring rain and chase epidemics that threatened people. Therefore, ineffective British colonial chiefs that could not perform necessary tribal religious ritual duties led to the increase in vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusation among the Fipa as compared to the previous periods (L. Katabi, Personal Communication, March 19, 2013).

In 1961 Tanganyika got her independence from the British. In 1963, chiefs throughout the country were removed from their offices. The government could not restore local ruling system among the Fipa. Chiefdoms were combined to form new administrative units under officials of the new government or Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) party. Regional commissioners, district commissioners and lower party cadre officials were instructed to control the place. They received orders from the central government to supervise socio-economic activities (Wills 1981).

Since independence, Tanzanian officials failed to implement policies that could have improved agricultural production in Sumbawanga district. There were no participatory programs in which policy makers, extension staff and peasants come together to address various agricultural problems. Agriculture was the Sumbawanga's economic backbone, with about 90 percent of the area's economically active population engaged in it. Agricultural production accounted for about 65 percent of the area's gross domestic product. The major crops grown in Sumbawanga included food crops such as maize, finger millet, beans, rice and cassava; and cash

crops such as tobacco, sunflower, groundnuts, coffee and wheat (URT 1970; URT 1990; URT 2000).

Despite the diversity of crops cultivated in Sumbawanga, most of the area's cash income came from maize, which accounted for 35 percent of the district's total annual food output (URT 1970; URT 1990; URT 2000). However, many peasants experienced problems with increasing maize production, including the inability to use fertilisers, utilise improved seeds, and control pests and diseases, the dependency on the hand hoe since pre-colonial times, and the low price of their products. The continuation of these problems led to widespread of poverty in the area (E. Milunga, Personal Communication, March 15, 2013).

The experience shows that there was a relationship between poverty and the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga. Economic conditions played a crucial role behind the accusations because most killings of elderly women in the district took place in poor rural areas where people largely depended on maize production. The increase of poverty led to the increase of illiterate people among the Fipa. This led many people to believe that some calamities such as droughts, famines, pests and diseases resulted from the effort of poor elderly women, who did not want to see the progress of the energetic ones. The evidence shows that when the drop in income from maize production occurred due to different calamities, the situation led to a large increase in the killings of the elderly women due to witchcraft accusations in the area (J. Shauritanga, Personal Communication, March 13, 2013).

Poverty increased the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga because it was quite possible for the patient in this area to seek medical aid from a traditional doctor first before visiting the hospital. This was partly forced by lack of funds, as it was too expensive for the poor elderly women to afford hospital services. Trust in traditional doctors was also forced by lack of sufficient hospital services, as in many areas people had to walk more than ten kilometres to seek medical services (P. Tende, Personal Communication, March 11, 2013).

The failure of the government to address the question of gender equality in Sumbawanga increased the magnitude of male domination that pressed women into the marginal line in all spheres of life. Since the colonial period many more of the boys from the Fipa communities were allowed to receive secular education as compared to the girls. The continuation of this trend even after independence enabled mature men to control resources mostly through the education they received, which allowed them to earn their income from various economic sectors. For a long period, many Fipa girls could not receive enough education. Some parents believed that spending on girls was futile because marriage made them property of their husbands. Since many girls were not obliged to attend schools they remained ignorant and poor. The experience in Sumbawanga shows that allegations of witchcraft were most likely to occur at the extreme end of some individual adult life cycle (E. Milunga, Personal Communication, March 15, 2013).

The Tanzanian government failed to implement clear strategies to address agriculture that employ many people and create different employment opportunities in Sumbawanga. This led to the increase in poverty which forced many young people to move to towns for different jobs. In the towns they confronted economic difficulties because of the meagre money they earned. In this case, they saved nothing to send back to their elderly mothers. Furthermore, physical absence of the youth increased problems for the elderly women. These elderly women had no one to help them on a regular basis with tasks such as gathering firewood and water or with the cultivation of their farms. Thus, poverty and the absence of the youth to assist with day to day

needs increased the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in the district of Sumbawanga (V. Kikwala, Personal Communication, March 6, 2013).

The government of Tanzania lacked proper policies that addressed the economic needs of elderly women, which pushed them into poverty. In Sumbawanga during the pre-colonial period the elderly people were assured of a comfortable old age by the number of cows they received when they married off their daughters. During the colonial period some social changes started to appear among the Fipa because of economic hardship. After independence, the increasingly impoverished in-laws hesitated to release their cattle for the payment of dowry because they depended on them for survival. Thus, young men had to struggle for little money in order to pay dowry when they wanted to marry. This situation denied the transfer of wealth to elderly people, which increased the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga (C. Kaleleme Personal Communication, March 4, 2013).

The Tanzanian government introduced the Arusha Declaration in 1967. This declaration imposed *Ujamaa*, a socialism and self-reliance policy which led to the resettlement of the rural population. The policy consisted of the compulsory removal of people from scattered settlements into concentrated ones in newly created villages in Sumbawanga. Immediately the policy led to an increase in anti-social behaviour such as adultery, theft and violence, which bred tensions and conflicts. When misfortunes occurred in the background of tensions and conflicts, elderly women were blamed on witchcraft practices, leading to accusations and killings of women in Sumbawanga district (C. Katala, Personal Communication, February 5, 2013).

Population redistribution, which started at the time of villagisation, increased pressure on land located close to the villages. Villagisation together with natural population increase resulted in land shortage in many rural areas of Tanzania. Poor land use management and increased utilization of land for agriculture and livestock activities led to a serious decline in the agricultural and livestock input that many people depended on for livelihood (Miti 1981). In the 1990s and 2000s, land problems forced migration of a large number of Maasai people from Arusha, Gogo from Dodoma, Sukuma from Mwanza and Nyamwezi from Tabora region to Sumbawanga district. These groups of people migrated out of their areas as a strategy for reducing population pressure and acquiring arable and enough grazing lands in Sumbawanga (Madulu 2004). Migration of people to Sumbawanga reduced arable land and the income of many women who largely depended on agriculture. This situation increased poverty, which led to the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in the area (J. Sikanda, Personal Communication, February 9, 2013).

The local government in Sumbawanga failed to check the increase of the livestock population in the area. The area experienced the highest density of livestock per unit of land in the country. The ownership of livestock was very important in the area because it signified wealth and was an essential component of bride price. Since the colonial period, livestock acted as banks to deposit income mainly from maize production, with interest obtained in the form of calves. Livestock were then sold to meet basic needs such as food, treatments and clothes. In the 1990s and 2000s, migration of the Maasai, Gogo, Sukuma and Nyamwezi people into Sumbawanga increased the number of livestock in the area than how it was during the previous period (UTR 1990s; URT 2000s). Livestock densities per unit of land resulted in the degradation of grasslands and feeding problems, which led to quarrels over land among the Fipa. These circumstances increased the vulnerability of unsuccessful elderly women to witchcraft accusations, particularly when misfortunes appeared among the Fipa community members (V. Kikwala, Personal Communication, March 6, 2013).

In the 2000s, the Tanzanian government implemented the Land Act and the Village Land Act of 1999, which reversed discriminatory customary practice over women's rights to land in Sumbawanga (TL 1999). Nevertheless, Local Customary Law of 2002 denied widows the right to inherit at the death of their husbands (TL 2002). This customary law increased quarrels over property and inheritance in the area. Disputes over property and inheritance were the underlying causes of witchcraft allegations and violence against elderly women in Sumbawanga. In some cases, elderly women were alleged to be witches maliciously in order to kill them and grab properties left by their husbands (C. Kalelembe Personal Communication, March 4, 2013).

Corruption was still widespread in Tanzania, in spite of the state struggle through anti-corruption policies and instruments. From 1990s to 2000s corruption increased in the country more than ever before because of inefficient authority. These circumstances undermined the government's poverty strategies and economic development and hindered the growth of democratic ethics and transparency and the accountability in the use of public resources. Its impact was also seen in the economic hardship and unemployment in different places of Sumbawanga. Some people started to use witchcraft beliefs as part and parcel of their survival. The increase in the number of traditional healers in the area was an expression of the commercialization of witch-finding activities. Beliefs in witchcraft and faith in the rhetoric of traditional healers to influence events which occurred among the Fipa without rational explanation, such as death, infertility, drought and crop failure increased the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in the area (K. Magazi, Personal Communication, February 19, 2013).

### **Measures against the Vulnerability of Elderly Women to Witchcraft Accusation**

Before colonial rule, witchcraft formed an integral part of the social structure in most African societies (Iliffe 1979:27). This led the Germans to impose severe measures on controlling witchcraft accusations when they took over control of Tanganyika. The Germans used brutal measures such as imprisonment or execution against those who claimed to identify witches in Sumbawanga area. (Semali 1986: 90-97).

During the British colonial period officials enacted laws to control witchcraft accusations in the territory. The Witchcraft Ordinance of 1922 made it illegal for anyone to practice medicine with intent to harm (TNA 1922). In 1928 the British colonial officials amended this ordinance and stipulated that anyone intending to cause harm through sorcery can be jailed for up to seven years (TNA 1928). However, these colonial efforts were not successful because witchcraft belief and accusations persisted in Sumbawanga district.

After independence, the Tanzanian government took some measures to eradicate witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga. In 1965 the government revised colonial Witchcraft Ordinance of 1928 which continued to operate up to this moment. The penalty is imprisonment for a period not exceeding seven years or a fine not exceeding 4,000 Tanzanian Shillings or both (TL 1965). The current 2002 Witchcraft Act only added a fine to 150,000 Tanzanian Shillings (TL 2002). The Tanzanian regulations have necessitated the arrest of more than 200 people in connection to witch accusations and killings of elderly women (The Independent 2012).

Social groups such as Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA) and Pan African Movement (PAM) have always campaigned to deal with the problem of witchcraft accusations among the Fipa. These groups tried to uncover that elderly women in Sumbawanga experience prejudice, social exclusion and human rights violations in their communities. They



condemned the witchcraft accusations and killings and appealed to the government to prevent malpractice against elderly women (Neville 2009).

Tanzania is also assisted in the witchcraft eradication battle by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Comic Relief, the Department for International Development, and a United Kingdom based non-profit organization called Help Age International. These organizations work in many parts of Sumbawanga district. Organizations use traditional drama groups, dances, choirs to create awareness among the entire community that poor and elderly women are not witches. Organizations also work hard to improve their quality of life by improving their houses, medical services and agricultural practices which help them to have modern skills for sustainable use of resources and generation of funds for their development (Akosah-Sarpong 2009).

Religious leaders in various churches and mosques also played their role in liquidation of witchcraft accusations. They condemned witchcraft accusations and killings of poor elderly women in Sumbawanga as ungodly actions. The Catholic Church appeals to the masses to eliminate witchcraft and related killings through the established radio station known as Chemchemi (C. Kaleleme, Personal Communication, March 18, 2013).

The Tanzanian government and various groups have been waging war against witchcraft accusations and killings of elderly women, but the problem remains hard to pin down. Although there is a state intervention in witchcraft practitioners who are normally taken as wrongdoers and face sentences in prison, its obscurity made it difficult to control (V. Kikwala, Personal Communication, March 6, 2013).

It is believed that witchcraft control poses dilemmas because some leaders in Tanzania hesitate to openly condemn such beliefs and practices since they are themselves at times involved in such practices. The meagre budget also contributes to the witchcraft problem. For instance, the police always face shortages of manpower and equipment; therefore, they have had little success in dealing with the witchcraft problem in Sumbawanga (A. Chundu, Personal Communication, March 9, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This study has noted that witchcraft accusations against elderly women are connected with the different forms of organization that dominated each historical era in Sumbawanga. Changes in society over the past centuries are inseparable from the history of changes in control over political institutions and changes in economic development. The paper argued that witchcraft accusations are part of politics, kinship relations, religion, trade, farming and life in general. Witchcraft accusations must be understood within the totality of society's social and cultural history.

The paper has shown that there are various underlying causes of witchcraft accusations against elderly women in Sumbawanga. The paper has discussed the relationship between socio-economic activities and the increase of the vulnerability of elderly women to witchcraft accusations in Sumbawanga despite various colonial efforts for its prevention. The paper also has shown that there are various measures taken by the Tanzanian government to eradicate the problem, although no success has been achieved.

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