Elderly Women and Witchcraft Killings Among the Sukuma of Northern Tanzania:
From the 1880s to the Present

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Abstract
Witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women have been a cause of many deaths and socio-economic problems among the people of Tanzania. For many years they have had major effects on peoples’ health, their right to life, their security, their feelings and the social well-being of their dependants. However, although these problems have affected many, there has been no thorough reconstruction of their history in Tanzania. Therefore, the goal of this article is to reconstruct the history of witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women in the country. This article is a modest attempt to address this theme in the context of Tanzanian women’s history.

Résumé
La pratique de la sorcellerie et les meurtres de femmes âgées ont été à l’origine de nombreux décès et problèmes socio-économiques entre les peuples de la Tanzanie. Pendant de nombreuses années, ces problèmes ont eu des effets significatifs sur la santé des populations, leur droit à la vie, leur sécurité, leurs sentiments et le bien-être des personnes à leur charge. Bien que ces problèmes aient affecté nombre de personnes, aucune reconstruction approfondie de leur histoire n’a été faite en Tanzanie. Par conséquent, l’objectif de cet article est de reconstituer l’histoire des pratiques de la sorcellerie et de meurtres de femmes âgées dans le pays. Cet article est une modeste tentative d’aborder ce thème dans le contexte de l’histoire des femmes de la Tanzanie.

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Introduction

Witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women are among the major problems facing sub-Saharan Africa. For many years they have had major effects on peoples’ health, their right to life, their security, their feelings and the social well-being of their dependants. Witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women have been the source of many deaths and socio-economic problems among the people of Tanzania and Africa. However, although these problems have affected human beings, there has been no thorough reconstruction of their history in Tanzania. Therefore, the goal of this article is to reconstruct the history of witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women in the country.

This article is a modest attempt to address this theme in the context of Tanzania’s women history. From a theoretical survey of the theme the article moves to present a case study of the Mwanza and Shinyanga regions of Sukumaland. Sukumaland is the region with the highest percentage of witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women in Tanzania. The article examines witchcraft practices and the beliefs associated with killings of elderly women in Mwanza and Shinyanga. It investigates the relationship between witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women among the Sukuma. The article covers the effectiveness of the methods used by the German and British colonial administrators and later on, by the Tanzanian government in the eradication of witchcraft practices in Sukumaland. It also focuses on efforts taken by the Tanzanian government to stop witchcraft and killings of elderly women in the country.

Stating the Case

Witchcraft is the belief in the practice of magic to make things happen. It has been historically applied to any influence on another person’s mind, body or property against his or her will or sometimes to undermine the social or religious order. Some people believe that magic users have the power to cause disease, sickness in animals, bad luck, sudden death, impotence and other such misfortunes. Witchcraft is a system of cultural and social action, woven into the framework of life. In spite of efforts to deny and eliminate it, it exists and many people in Africa act accordingly. A belief in witchcraft causes other people to be suspected of being witches, which leads to their being killed. In this case the killing of elderly women in Africa is a product of witchcraft beliefs. Therefore, witchcraft and the killing of elderly women, which are a culturally constructed system, affect the lives of many Africans and this calls for explanation and understanding (Hagen 2009).
Witchcraft practices have been reported in many African nations. In Ghana thousands of women have been attacked or driven from their villages in the past decade because of the suspicion that they were witches. Many cases of killing elderly people suspected of being witches have also been reported in Kenya, Mozambique, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Witchcraft accusations also face the youth in Congo, where thousands of young children have been removed from their homes or killed by family members as witches (Hayes 2009; Amnesty International 2000; BBC 2009, 1999, 2001, 2003; Niehaus 1999).

Witchcraft practices and elderly women killings have been recognized by the Tanzanian government as serious problems that cause death and human suffering. Tanzania is leading among African nations in the suffering and killing of elderly women. Tanzania had 3,693 persons killed as witches between 1970 and 1984. Out of these, 2,347 incidences which are approximately 63.5 per cent occurred among the Sukuma of northern Tanzania. There is no reliable data between 1985 and 1990, but between 1991 and 2001 the number increased to 23,000 cases in the country (Petraitis 2009; Othiambo 1999; The Independent 2009; Neville 2009).

The Sukuma is the largest ethnic group in Tanzania, with an estimated 5.5 million members representing 16 per cent of the country’s total population of 34 million people. Tanzanian government statistics show a rise in witch killings among the Sukuma since the 1960s. The government reported that 3,072 accused witches were killed in Sukumaland from 1970 to 1988, more than two-thirds of the Tanzanian national witch murder total. According to these figures, approximately 80 per cent of victims were women and their median age was between 50 and 60 years (Miguel 2005). Currently, in Sukumaland alone the murder incidences are at a minimum of 600 people a year that is reported to the police (Othiambo 1999; The Independent 2009; Neville 2009).

**Theoretical Overview**

Scholars have different views concerning the approaches used to study witchcraft practices in Tanzania. One scholar, E. Miguel, argues that there are two perspectives, namely, negative income shock and the scapegoat perspective, that have been used to explain causes of witchcraft practices in Tanzania. He links scholars such as P. Fajnzylber, D. Lederman, N. Loayza, E. Berman and E. Oster with the negative income shock perspective. He claims that this perspective shows that economic motivations are the cause of witchcraft beliefs that lead to witch killings in Tanzania. Scholars associated with this perspective believe that large negative income shocks
associated with extreme weather are the driving force behind witchcraft beliefs and witch killings because of poor harvests that lead to economic hardship in the country. This implies that most killings in Tanzania take place in poor rural areas that are largely dependent on rain-fed agriculture, and that most victims are from poor households. The perspective believes that the improvement of the system of formal insurance against extreme rainfall shocks could help to stop witchcraft practices in Tanzania (Miguel 2005).

In the second perspective, E. Miguel joins scholars such as R. Abraham and S. Mesaki with the scapegoat perspective, which links witchcraft practices with socio-cultural beliefs in Tanzania. The perspective claims that witches are killed as scapegoats following household or village calamities, which may include drought, famine, floods, locust, disease epidemics or deaths. The assumption is that some people believe that the outbreak of these natural disasters can be caused by witches. The supporters of this perspective claim that prevention of witchcraft practices should focus on the provision of education, eradication of poverty and insurance against large income shocks.

Negative income shock and scapegoat perspective can be used to explain the history of witchcraft and its implications in Tanzania. However, this study will take a different line on the study of witchcraft and witch killings of elderly women in Tanzania. It will use the political economy perspective as the best alternative that offers a better explanation on the relationship between witchcraft and its impacts. The perspective will concentrate upon the relations of production or reproduction and consumption, differentiation and class structures, and the witchcraft situations in the society. The perspective will be adopted because of the assumption that studies on witchcraft and its impacts are shaped by the political, social, cultural and economic position of the society. Thus, the way society is organized to perform various economic activities can mould witchcraft beliefs.

The political economy perspective assumes that the organization of society forces the emergence of witchcraft beliefs because witchcraft practices are connected with the 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. The perspective will help to show that witchcraft practices are part of politics, kinship relations, religion, trade, farming and life in general. Therefore, witchcraft practices must be understood within the totality of society’s social and cultural history.
Main Causes of Elderly Women Killings Among the Sukuma

Killings of elderly women in Sukumaland are mostly done by young men between the age of 18 and 30. In a few cases elderly men between 50 and 70 years of age are also engaged in killing elderly women. The killers of elderly women break down the door of the victim’s house in most cases at night. They go straight for the old women and kill them either using a sharp knife locally known as a *panga* or sometimes axe, or with the use of stones and clubs. They usually do not harm anybody else in the house or remove anything from the house. The evidence shows those instruments used to kill these elder women are normally left at the scene (Nkya 2009).

Most elderly women are killed in a period of one week to one month following the death of a relative or sometimes a neighbour. The family members in most cases tend to consult diviners to find out the cause of the death. Diviners will usually name witchcraft as the cause of death, something that many people want to hear in Sukumaland. Then the diviner tells the client an amount of money or cattle to be paid to someone secretly after which the execution takes place (Nkya 2009).

The increase of witchcraft practices and witch killings of elderly women are modern phenomena in Tanzania. As has been noted earlier, this study traced the killings in Sukumaland through the political economy approach. The study relates witch killings to a series of political and socio-economic changes in the area. These include the weakening of chieftainship and its related traditional authority structures under colonialism and after independence. It also includes the patterns of migration and traditional religious beliefs of the Sukuma people (Tanner 1994).

During the pre-colonial times the Sukuma organized themselves under their leaders known as *ntemi* (chiefs). The role of chiefs in Usukuma has gone through many transformations since the sixteenth century when the area began to be organized by hierarchical chiefdoms with the help of village elders. During the nineteenth century in most chiefdoms, chiefs controlled trade, received tribute from their members, controlled the use of fire, land and depended on *bafumu*, traditional doctors, for medicine (Pambe 1978).

The Sukuma believed that chiefs were helpful in organizing people into productive activities. The relations of production which developed among the Sukuma were not static. Up to the early period of the 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 undertook duties that comprised hunting, fishing, honey gathering, herding, defence and house construction. Women and girls were responsible for household activities like cooking, firewood collection, fetching of water and caring for children.
By the end of the nineteenth century, agriculture and livestock keeping dominated as the main economic activity. The Sukuma cultivated sorghum, millet, maize and cassava. They kept cattle, goats, sheep, and chicken. Through this pre-occupation, men started to control land and livestock. Women were slowly pushed out of land and property ownership (interview with Samuel Maganga 2009).

The expansion of economic activities during the nineteenth century meant that some male members of the Sukuma community increased their wealth as compared to the period before. During this time, those who could not manage to gain wealth, especially elderly women, were seen as people that had envy and could cause bad fortunes to the successful ones. This to a greater extent had an impact in the increase in witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women suspected of being witches among the Sukuma (Maganga 2009).

Studies in witchcraft practices in Mwanza and Shinyanga show that among the Sukuma, medicine combined knowledge of herbal medicine and religious beliefs. Traditional healers were usually consulted on ailments, ranging from stomach aches and mental illness to good luck medicines. Sukuma traditional healers combine knowledge of local natural products and their ancestral beliefs with experience in making medicines to provide herbal remedies, amulets and long-term cures. These healing functions sometimes led to witch killings (Corry 1953; Saanane 2004).

Although there is no data available, it is important to note that during pre-colonial times witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women suspected of being witches among the Sukuma were at a minimum. On the one hand, this was because of the fact that the area was sparsely populated and there was little interaction between people because of the low level of economic activities. On the other hand, the Sukuma believed that witchcraft practices that resulted in misfortune, epidemic, lack of rainfall and death were mainly due to the quarrels among the villagers. But when things were discussed among these villagers and their chiefs and rituals were performed appropriately a harmonious situation was maintained. The Sukuma believed that chiefs had the power to manage the use of land, chase away terrible omens and bring rainfall through ritual performances so agricultural crops and animals were plentiful and there were no epidemics that endangered peoples’ lives (interview with Alfred Kikunile 2009).

The Sukumaland region experienced European domination during the period from 1890 to 1961. The Germans were the first to colonize the area immediately after the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, and the British succeeded them after the First World War. It was through these foreign controls over
When Tanganyika came under the control of the Germans after the Berlin Conference, the Mwanza and Shinyanga regions experienced the change of the Sukuma local ruling system. The German colonial governors introduced provincial and district commissioners to supervise the area. These top officials based their administration on the already existing Sukuma political system to help them to supervise socio-economic activities. The Germans used the system of divide and rule by the use of the tactic that increased the number of chieftoms and acknowledged not only the pre-existing chiefs, but also they gave chief status to a number of former sub-chiefs and powerful headmen (Abrahams 1967; 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 local population. This transformation made colonial administrators in Sukumaland put more pressure on the people so as to influence their capital goals by introducing a number of social, economic and political changes (interview with Thomas Biseko 2009).

After the First World War up to 1961 the British colonial officials succeeded the Germans in the supervision of Tanganyika. In 1926 the British policy of indirect rule was launched throughout the area. The British governors imposed officials who controlled Sukumaland with the help of African officials who were not all indigenous to the area. Indirect rule system made the Sukuma chiefs into salaried officials to the central government with responsibilities over taxing and maintaining customary laws. These officials supervised economic activities more extensively than it was during the period of the Germans (Hinkkanen 2009).

These increased economic activities and the exploitation system during the British period increased bad living conditions among many people in Sukumaland. This was intensified by agricultural concentration in the area in response to the increased population (Von Rotenhan 1968:51-86). Population increase forced the use of new lands. Many areas were cleared and the introduction of the use of manure, ridge cultivation and water harvesting became crucial in agriculture. Transformation in the agricultural systems were also seen in the use of ploughs that started around the 1930s and increased significantly after the Second World War when cotton became an important cash crop in Sukumaland (Fuggles-Couchman 1964).

Sukuma tradition suggests that famine became more common towards the end of the nineteenth century because of the destruction of the environment due to the increase of British colonial economic activities. The
changes brought by the policy of indirect rule made the chiefs more distant from the people. The power of chiefs to control their subjects was reduced. There were no discussions between villagers and their chiefs, and rituals were not properly performed (Hinkkanen 2009). This forced the conservative Sukuma people to blame religious innovation for the natural disasters and they expected that regular sacrifices for the household or chiefdom ancestors would rectify the situation (Abrahams 1967). Therefore, inefficiency of the British colonial administrators to address the effects of transformation in the agricultural systems resulted in a lack of enough rainfall and in frequent famines and bad living conditions. The Sukuma believed that their chiefs had the power to bring rain and chase epidemics that threatened people. Ineffective chiefs that could not perform the necessary tribal religious ritual duties led to the increase in witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women suspected of being witches among the Sukuma as compared to the previous period (interview with Kabula Masele 2009).

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 the Sukuma local ruling system in the area. Some Sukuma 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. These received orders from the central government to supervise economic and social activities (Tanner 1970; Pambe 1978; Maganga 2009).

The established Tanzanian government that had to supervise Sukumaland increased economic activities in the Mwanza and Shinyanga region as compared to the pre-colonial and colonial period. In 1960/61 Sukumaland produced 90,000 tons of cotton, in 1965/66 it increased to 231,000 tons and jumped to 260,000 tons in 1989/90 (Mwanza 1990; Shinyanga 1990). Although in 2002/03 the tonnage declined to about 151,000, the increase was noticed in the past eight years (URT 2004). Economic liberation and the lifting of barriers to trade and commerce from the 1980s onwards increased demands in growing of cotton. The increase in cultivation of cotton cash crop resulted into a more remarkable down-turn in subsistence agriculture in Sukumaland than in other cash-crop producing areas such as Bukoba, Kilimajaro and Mbeya. But the price of cotton was always low to such an extent that the earnings could not suffice for food and other requirements like health and school costs for the peasants’ children. This intensified exploitation of the indigenous Sukuma people and led to widespread poverty in the area (Wijsen and Tanner 2002).
The experience so far suggests that there was a relationship between poverty and witchcraft practices among the Sukuma. Economic conditions were a key driving force behind witchcraft and killings of elderly women suspected of being witches because most witch killings in the region took place in poor rural areas where people largely depended on rain-fed agriculture. The evidence shows that there were some periods that had extreme rainfall that resulted in drought or floods which was exogenous and were associated with poor harvests and famine conditions in the region. When these circumstances happened they resulted in a drop in income and always led to a large increase in witch killings of elderly women as suspected witches among the Sukuma (Miguel 2005:1153-1172; Moore and Sanders 2001).

Poverty led to an increase in witchcraft practices in the area because it was quite possible for the patient in Sukumaland to seek medical aid from a traditional doctor and also turn to the hospital the next day and vice versa (Swantz 1968). This was also forced by lack of enough hospital services in Sukumaland. For instance, currently the area of Shinyanga alone with its population of more than 2.4 million people has 261 dispensaries and 21 health centres which are unable to offer the necessary health services to the people. Also, in rural areas, people have to walk from 8 to 15 kilometres to seek hospital services (Nkya 2009). Most mission hospitals and dispensaries in many Sukuma places are more trusted because of better services as compared to those of the government and private ones. But mission hospitals are too expensive for the poor Sukuma to afford (Hinkkanen 2009).

Witchcraft practices are the result of increased economic activities that led to the decline of the moral economy and the widening gap between the rich and poor. Failure of the government to address the question of gender equality in Sukumaland increased the magnitude of male domination that pressed women into the margin in all spheres of life. Businessmen and politicians who have become wealthy in the urban centres are suspected to have pursued their careers with the help of ritual murders and other obscure methods. The impoverished relatives or neighbours especially women who have stayed in the rural areas are also accused of practicing witchcraft. Since they have not succeeded in life, one assumes that they watch the success of their rich relatives with an evil eye. Unsuccessful people who are normally driven by envy and resentment try to destroy the rich ones. These situations have led to killings of poor elderly women suspected of being witches among the Sukuma (Geschiere 1997).

Major structural and economic factors underline the dominant accusation patterns of the killings of elderly women suspected of being witches. The economic wealth and control in some Sukuma societies were in the hands of mature men who had achieved their inheritance and were not yet obliged
to reallocate their wealth to their descendants. Allegations of witchcraft were aimed not at such people but at the unfortunate or impoverished who lacked sufficient resources to maintain themselves independently. The experience shows that this outlook increased witch killings which were most likely to occur at the extreme end of some individual’s adult life cycle (Middleton and Winter 1963:123-142; Moore 1975; Tunner 1957; Marwick 1965; Gray 1963). Similarly, it was noted that structural conflicts between older and younger generations had been exacerbated by the emergence of new developments. This forced the young to seek economic and religious independence from their elders. The situation always led the young to question the wisdom and authority of their seniors, who in turn tried harder to assert that authority through warnings of mystical punishment. The elders’ warnings were often taken as witchcraft threats to the young which led to murders (Mombeshora 1994).

Corruption is still widespread in Tanzania, in spite of the state struggle through anti-corruption policies and instruments. This circumstance undermines the government’s poverty strategies and economic development and hinders the growth of democratic ethics and transparency and accountability in the use of public resources (Hinkkanen 2009). Its impact can also be seen in the economic hardship and unemployment in Sukumaland. Some people use witchcraft practices as part and parcel of their survival. The increase in the number of dubious traditional healers in Sukumaland is an expression of the commercialization of witch-finding activities that have led to the killings of elderly women as witches by hired killers (interview with Kabula Masele 2009).

The recent expansion of cotton growing and production activities that was not clearly supervised by the Tanzanian government led to the massive cutting down of trees and deterioration of forest vegetation in Sukumaland (Birley 1982). Research conducted in Mwanza and Shinyanga reveals that poor women with red eyes were victims of indoor pollution. In some villages every female cooked daily on wood sticks and inhaled amounts of benzopyren (a poisonous gas) equivalent to 20 cigarettes a day. In other villages, because of a scarcity of fuel wood, cow dung was used as an alternative to firewood. Use of low quality biomass fuels like cow dung created indoor pollution which was a hazard that resulted in eyes turning red. Eyes of poor elderly women mostly turn red because of the long stay in small and unventilated houses. This situation caused them to be suspected as witches, a situation that perpetuated witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women among the Sukuma (Nkya 2009).
Lack of monitoring of government livestock policies led to a very big increase of livestock population in Sukumaland. The area now has the highest livestock per unit of land in the country. The ownership of livestock is very important in the area because it is an indicator of wealth and an essential component of bride price. Since the 1940s livestock has acted as a bank to deposit income mainly from cotton production, with interest obtained in the form of calves. Livestock are then sold to meet basic necessities such as food, medical treatment and clothes. Livestock densities per unit land resulted in the degradation of grasslands and feeding problems. This resulted in quarrels over land that always increased witchcraft feelings and witch killings particularly when a misfortune appears among community members. In most cases the alleged ones are the unsuccessful old women (Hinkkanen 2009).

The Tanzanian government introduced the Arusha Declaration in 1967. This declaration imposed Ujamaa, socialism and self-reliance policy which led to the resettlement of the Sukuma rural population. The policy consisted of the compulsory removal of people from scattered settlements into concentrated ones in newly created villages. 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 were blamed on witchcraft practices, this led to accusations and witch killings of elderly women among the Sukuma (Hinkkanen 2009).

Population redistribution that happened at the time of people being moved into villages increased pressure on land (Miti 1981). This movement, together with a natural population increase, resulted in a land shortage in Sukumaland. Poor land use management and increased utilization of land for mining activities caused serious problems, resulting in the decline of agricultural input that over 90 per cent of the population depended on for their livelihood. This forced the migration of a large Sukuma population to Kagera, Mara, Tabora and Mbeya region over the past twenty years. The Sukuma migrated out of the area as a strategy for reducing population pressure and acquiring arable and grazing land from distant places (Madulu 2004). The patterns of migration led to conservative older people being left behind in central zones, when the young and less traditionally minded moved out of Sukumaland to peripheral areas. Witch murders took place in central areas, largely being instigated by young elements (Tanner 1994).

Witch killings have also been tied to the resurgence of a pre-colonial village political institution, called Sungu-sungu, the male elders council. The Sungu-sungu first appeared in Sukumaland in response to a wave of cattle theft that exploded during the severe national economic crisis of the early 1980s, and is popularly credited with having put an end to rural disorder by
organizing village patrols to punish suspected thieves and recover stolen
property (Abrahams and Bukurura 1992). In some villages, the Sungu-sungu
also organizes mutual insurance and emergency credit schemes, and is entrusted
with collecting funds for local development projects (Miguel 2005).

In addition to these activities, the Sungu-sungu embarked upon combating
witches as central to their mission of promoting village security (Abrahams
1967). Witchcraft is a tangible reality for many Tanzanians and witches are
considered criminals just as dangerous as ordinary thieves and murderers.
In the Sukuma community, if you kill a witch it is not really considered a
crime. It is as if you are doing a service to the community. According to this
view witch killers are pursuing justice, a view that runs against both
Tanzanian law and international human rights norms (BBC 2002).

People in Sukumaland believe that witchcraft is a mysterious power,
present in all things, distinct from ordinary natural powers. It can be used
for good purposes by witch doctors or for bad purposes by sorcerers and
witches (Haule 1969). The study observed that the belief in witchcraft is
paradoxically perpetuated by the opposition of state, party and the church.
Currently witchcraft activities are treated as civil disputes by the state and
the ruling party. Administrators refer those involved back to the Sukuma
village authorities, where villagers are likely to agree on witch doctors’
activities for the treatment of the affected people, a situation that perpetuates
witchcraft practices. On the other hand the current Catholic Church policy
is to temporarily excommunicate those suspected, but the exclusions are
not regarded by many as an integral part of the witchcraft cleansing procedure
(Green 1994).

A study among the Sukuma of Geita and Kahama shows that some gold
diggers have been made by traditional doctors to believe that in order to find
a mine rich in ore, one must get luck medicine by offering sacrifices using
organs of human beings. Even some Sukuma fishermen along Lake Victoria
have also been made to believe that their successes depend on possession of
human organs in their work operations. Many people in Sukumaland do
believe that to win in the coveted dance competitions, a leader of the dance
group requires magical power which has to be made from human body
parts. This situation leads to frequent visits that wealthy Sukuma business
people and others usually make to their trusted traditional healers for
divination or for good luck medicines (Ngubane 1986:189-204).

Therefore, the study on witchcraft practices in Sukumaland revealed
that many people believe that most illness, death, miscarriages, sterility,
difficult childbirths, poor crops, sick livestock and poultry, loss of articles,
bad luck in hunting and lack of rain are caused by witches. Witches are an
active and prevalent segment of the population (Beidelman 1963; Mwaipaja 2000). Sukuma traditional doctors are present in almost every aspect of life in their communities. The presence of these traditional doctors gives assurance to the people because of filling great needs in their communities (Feierman and Janzen 1985). The Sukuma believe that their traditional doctors possess the knowledge that made them prepare and administer herbal medicines and detect witches. The people of Mwanza and Shinyanga believe that their traditional doctor acts as a priest in religious matters; they act as lawyers in legal issues and as policemen in the detection and prevention of crimes. They also believe that their doctors possess magical power which can be used to increase crop harvests and instil special skills and talents into their clients. Some of these practices go hand-in-hand with witch killings of several members of the community (Gelfand 1964). This situation shows that it is too difficult to abolish witchcraft because of peoples’ psychological belief that there is effectiveness in the functions of their African traditional doctors.

**Measures Against Elderly Women Killings**

When the Germans took over the control of Tanganyika and the Sukumaland regions of Mwanza and Shinyanga, they imposed measures on controlling witchcraft activities. The Germans were ruthless against those who claimed to identify witches and in some cases they hanged the culprits (Illife 1979; Semali 1986:90-97).

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

The Tanzanian government took some measures to eradicate witchcraft and the killing of elderly women suspected of being witches in the country and among the Sukuma. In 1965 the government revised the colonial Witchcraft Ordinance of 1928 which has continued to operate up to today. The penalty is imprisonment for a period not exceeding seven years or a fine not exceeding 4,000 Tanzanian Shillings or both (Witchcraft Ordinance 1965). Tanzanian media have recently reported the arrest of more than 190 people in connection to witch killings, including a considerable number of
traditional doctors, organized gangs hired by traditional doctors and their clients (The Independent 2009; Neville 2009).

Civil society groups have launched campaigns to address the problem among the Sukuma. The Tanzania Media Women’s Association (TAMWA), Pan African Movement (PAM), and Albino Association of Tanzania (AAT) have expressed concern that elderly women and albinos experience prejudice, social exclusion and human rights violations in their communities. They condemned the killings and appealed to the government to protect elderly women and persons with albinism (COMRIC 2009).

Tanzania is also assisted in the witchcraft eradication battle by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) like Comic Relief and the Department for International Development and a United Kingdom-based non-profit organization called Help Age International. These organizations work in many villages of Sukumaland. Organizations use traditional drama groups, dances, choirs to create awareness in the entire community that older people and women are not witches. Organizations also work hard to improve the quality of life by improving their houses, medical services and agricultural practices which help them to have modern skills of sustainable use of resources and generation of funds for their development (Akosah-Sarpong 2002).

Religious leaders in various churches and mosques also play their role. They condemn witchcraft practices and killings of elderly women among the Sukuma as ungodly actions. The Catholic Church appeals to the masses to eliminate witchcraft and its related killings through the established radio programmes in Sukumaland.

Therefore, the Tanzanian government and various groups have been waging war against witchcraft practices, elderly women killings and superstitious albino killings but victory remains an elusive goal. This is to say that Tanzanian government efforts to stop the killings have been limited and unsuccessful. For instance, in one notable episode during the 1970s the Shinyanga regional government did arrest 897 individuals suspected of carrying out witch killings, yet the campaign was quickly called off once 12 suspects died in police custody, and the remaining suspects were later released. The situation also forced the resignation of the regional commissioner, Ali Hassan Mwinyi (Mesaki 1994). This is due to the fact that although there is state intervention in witchcraft whereby practitioners are normally taken as wrongdoers and face sentences in prisons, witchcraft’s obscurity has made it difficult to control.

It is believed that the witchcraft problem and attempts at its control pose dilemmas because some leaders in Tanzania hesitate to explicitly condemn or countenance such beliefs and practices since they are themselves at times
involved in such practices. The situation also reveals that the police, faced with shortage of manpower and equipment, have had little success in dealing with the witchcraft problem, and even the prosecution of cases in the courts has rarely been successful (Mesaki 1994).

**Conclusion**

This study has noted that witchcraft practices are connected with the health and healing of people in the regions of Mwanza and Shinyanga. 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. It is argued that witchcraft practices are a part of politics, kinship relations, religion, trade, farming and life in general. Witchcraft practices must be understood within the totality of society’s social and cultural history.

The article has shown that there are various underlying causes of witchcraft killings of elderly women in Sukumaland. The article has discussed the relationship between socio-economic activities and the increase of elderly women killings among the Sukuma despite various colonial efforts to prevent it. The paper has also shown that there are various measures taken by the Tanzanian government to eradicate the problem although the efforts have not been very successful.

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