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Discourses on inequality
Poverty, public bads and entrenching witchcraft in post-adjustment Tanzania

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Abstract
This article examines the relation between witchcraft suppression institutions in southern Tanzania and the entrenchment of witchcraft. While practices against witches are acclaimed as a public good by grateful residents, such practices actually contribute to the institutionalization of witchcraft in the area. Witchcraft and practices to expose it and suppress it should be considered as part of a single system. Witchcraft as a system has serious social and political consequences, among these being its normativity, the expectation that misfortune and negative social relations are both cause and consequence of witchcraft. The expectation that witchcraft is an accepted fact of daily life in African communities is not confined to communities where witchcraft is an issue but extends to academic and, in particular, to anthropological discourse about Africa. Disciplinary blinds prioritizing culture may contribute to our reluctance to assess the consequences of what we see, and hence to the institutionalization of witchcraft in anthropology.

Key Words
inequality • poverty • public administration • Tanzania • traditional healing • witchcraft

INTRODUCTION
In an article investigating the cultural epidemiology of leprosy in medieval Europe, Mary Douglas strips bare the social processes through which the leper was categorized as outcast and as a person of no moral worth. It was this categorization, rather than an increase in the actual incidence of leprosy, she maintains, that accounts for what is represented in documents of the time as an epidemic of leprosy between 1125 and 1170 (Douglas, 1991: 731–2). The association of leprosy with the moral culpability of sin legitimated the social marginalization of those so classified. At certain times this classification extended to encompass not only those bearing actual signs of the disease, but
other pariah categories – the destitute, the mentally ill and other vulnerable persons. The equation of leprosy and sin as a strategy of exclusion leads Douglas into a consideration of the parallels between the ways in which lepers were treated during the medieval period and the phenomenon of witchcraft more generally. Alert to the diversity of phenomena that can be grouped under this heading, Douglas nevertheless demonstrates how the allegations of filth – physical, moral, and sexual – that accompany imputations of witchcraft are similarly used to justify exclusion strategies across a range of ethnographic and historical examples (1991: 725).

The process of categorization, attributing to another the characteristics of the witch, is an act of separation (Jackson, 1989: 89). Responses to this categorization vary. Those so classified may be expelled, eliminated, rendered harmless through treatment by equivalent powers, or even ignored altogether (Hutton, 2004: 423). Whatever the content of the response to witchcraft, Douglas points out, it is the nature of this response that permits the social process of categorization. ‘The accusation can be completely outrageous; it will be credible essentially if the political system which backs it is accepted. The process of formally accusing, testifying, verifying and remedying plays a crucial part in entrenching the system’ (Douglas, 1991: 726, my emphasis).

Anthropologists who have studied witchcraft have generally played down this process of entrenchment and the wider social consequences of such established systems. Anthropological accounts of witchcraft have largely confined themselves to the field of meaning, focusing on the social construction of witchcraft, its political instrumentality and its symbolism.¹ This emphasis is partly explained by a reluctance to critique the categories of informants in the context of the post-colonial attempt to reassert the intellectual validity of various forms of practice in Africa, and elsewhere, some of which contradict the expectations of modernist rationalities (Rutherford, 1999: 91). Such efforts have yielded numerous accounts which, in making witchcraft sensible, help make sense of witchcraft.

Although anthropologists have long examined the social context and dynamics of witchcraft, they have tended to focus on the immediate relations between social categories leading to accusations. More recent ethnographic accounts of the phenomenon move on from colonial anthropology’s preoccupation with the small-scale holism of the bounded community as the object of study. Peter Geschiere, for example, considers the political role of witchcraft within the contemporary state in Africa, tracking the contours of claim and counter-claim from household to polity, from poor peasant to political elite (1997). Todd Sanders has shown how witchcraft discourses in post-adjustment Tanzania could be read at one level as a commentary on the consequences of neo-liberal economics (2002). But such accounts, my own included (Green, 1994, 1997, 2003), have seemed unwilling to take the analysis further and, sensitive to the shifting meanings of witchcraft within the contexts in which it is embedded, to consider the wider implications of the entrenchment of witchcraft.² What does the entrenchment of witchcraft as a system mean for those communities and societies, countries and regions where it is institutionalized? What are the social impacts of entrenchment? Why and how do such systems retain their entrenched status?

This article explores some aspects of entrenchment and its implications through an account of the dynamic interplay between witchcraft and the practices performed to address it in two neighbouring districts in southern Tanzania. The politics of
entrenchment are considered in relation to new modalities of differentiation, in which witchcraft and attitudes towards what is done to witches come to represent shifting polarities of class and of moral sensibility. New discourses about universal human rights and individual freedom are increasingly invoked by the better off to opt out of participation in public anti-witchcraft practices. The different strategies for dealing with witchcraft accusations adopted by rich and poor are considered in the context of justificatory discourses about the public good invoked by those who condemn witches. The popular evaluation of witchcraft suppression institutions displays interesting parallels to the concept of a public good in economics, that is to a commodity from whose benefits no one can be excluded. The concept of public goods prompts some reflexive questioning as to whether or not witchcraft suppression practices are in fact good for the public. Witchcraft suppression practices play an important part in contributing to the entrenchment of witchcraft and establishing its normativity. It is the normativity of witchcraft, not witchcraft itself, which has negative impacts, deflecting focus from the political causes of misfortune affecting the region.

**WITCHCRAFT IN SOUTHERN TANZANIA**

Witchcraft (*uchawi*) is pervasive throughout Tanzania where it is a taken-for-granted aspect of daily life for most people in most communities (Abrahams, 1994). What constitutes witchcraft, and the strategies for dealing with it, that is the *institutions of entrenchment*, vary considerably across regions. Imaginations of witchcraft encompass both the involuntary capacity to harm such as that described by Monica Wilson for the Nyakysua in the 1930s (Wilson, 1963) and the deliberate directive malevolence of the manipulators of powerful medicines who select their victims with intent (Harwood, 1970; Green, 1994). Ways of dealing with witches are equally diverse. In the northern and western parts of the country people considered to be witches are violently expelled from their communities and sometimes killed as revenge punishment. Among Sukuma communities in north-western Tanzania the older women most liable to an accusation of witchcraft are at risk of violent attack and even murder (Mesaki, 1993, 1994; Bukurura, 1994; Miguel, 2005). In the south-western parts of the country, notably in the regions of Morogoro and Ruvuma, an established institutional response to witchcraft has evolved centring on the administration of special ritual procedures which suppress the powers of witches through the use of medicines and shaving off all the head and body hair (Larson, 1976b; Green, 1994, 1997, 2003). Consequently, the procedure for the suppression of witchcraft in the south is popularly referred to as ‘shaving witchcraft’ (*kunyoa uchawi*) or ‘being shaved’ (*kunyolewa*).

Shaving witchcraft is currently conducted by several specialists, the majority of whom operate from within the Morogoro districts of Ulanga and Kiolumbero. Deriving from a pragmatic composite of indigenous purification procedures with a mode of delivery inspired by the mass medical and anti-witchcraft campaigns of the mid-20th century, these well-known anti-witchcraft practices were associated with a single dominant practitioner operating from a single place until the late 1990s. This has now changed. Around five specialists, some of whom are related, currently offer identical anti-witchcraft services from multiple locations (Green and Mesaki, 2005). Despite the increased availability of anti-witchcraft services, what continues to characterize the witchcraft suppression process wherever it is undertaken is its essentially benign nature and the
explicit dissociation from any public identification of witches. Those alleged to be witches and their accusers are encouraged to seek shaving together and to travel together to the specialist whose services they seek. These specialists operate at scale, conducting the cleansing rituals, centring on shaving, for up to 30 or more people at a time and providing basic shelter for large numbers of clients, all of whom require at least one overnight stay as part of the ritual process.

POVERTY AND DIFFERENTIATION IN ULANGA AND KILOMBERO

The present day districts of Ulanga and Kilombero are situated in the south-western part of Tanzania, a rural hinterland of fertile river valley and forested highlands between Morogoro and Songea. Previously united in a single district (Mahenge), both districts are economically marginal, a situation accentuated by their continued disconnection from major road networks. Part of Kilombero is transected by the Tanzanian Zambia railway (TAZARA) providing transport links to the capital Dar es Salaam and the expanding western regional centre of Mbeya. Ulanga, to the north, is hemmed in by the border of the Selous game reserve, the largest depopulated wilderness in east Africa, severing connections to the economies and communities of the southern coast. Both districts suffer the penalties of marginality in terms of public investment and human development. Life expectancy at birth is among the lowest in the country; educational attainment (and hence the opportunity to enter secondary school) is poor. Endemic diseases include malaria, tuberculosis and filariasis. The latter is associated with the exceptionally high rates of epilepsy in the region (Jilek-Aal et al., 1979; Matuja et al., 2001).

The bulk of the populations of the two districts are small-scale farmers, cultivating scattered plots of maize, varieties of rice, sweet potatoes, cassava, groundnuts and beans. Wealthier people from highland areas in Ulanga farm plots across the district boundaries, exploiting the productive Kilombero floodplains to grow rice for cash. The poor subsist on a single annual maize crop expected to provide their households with food for between three and six months of the year. For the remainder they depend on hand to mouth casual labour and what they have managed to save. The annual hungry season extends from the moment, early in the year for some families, when their food stocks are finished (Green, 1999). Hunger is associated with lack of assets. The indigenous populations of Ulanga and Kilombero keep few livestock, apart from fowl. This may be because of the history of tsetse infestations in the area, or perhaps as a legacy of inability to restock after the scorched earth response to the maji maji rising (Larson, 1976a). It is likely that community panic and destruction of assets in response to the predations of socialism and villagization during the late 1970s also had a serious impact on livestock numbers. Incoming Sukuma and Tatoga migrants are introducing a thriving cattle economy to the area, although not without conflicts over resource use and grazing. Whatever the attitude to cattle and small stock, chickens are culturally elaborated, featuring in all rituals and exchanges.

Ritual practice is oriented towards achieving a state of embodied blessing articulated through idioms concerning the good state of the body. In districts like Ulanga, where a person’s main asset is their health, the words of the Pogoro blessing ‘let the body be cool’ (shimba izizimiri) are profoundly significant. Ill health is not only an affront to one’s body and productive capacity but, as the body is conceptualized as permeable to outside
forces and to the negative agency of others, it is more often than not direct evidence that the person is under attack (Green, 1996, 2000). Although possession of various kinds is also implicated in illness, witchcraft is vitally important, not only for its ubiquity but its relation with differentiation, a relation that extends to practices to dealing within witchcraft.

Differentiation is not confined to those who make their living primarily from farming. The district centres of Mahenge and Ifakara provide employment for a small salariat of administrators, clerks, hospital staff and government officers, as well as the entrepreneurs who run shops, market stalls, cooked food outlets, cafes, transport services and bars. A smaller number of waged employees is scattered throughout the districts, as teachers and local government officers. Several hundred people are employed by the Roman Catholic diocese contiguous with the boundaries of the old Mahenge district. Formal employment and educational status mark out those with claims to something of an elite status, even though salaries are very low and most will need to support their families from farming. Education and salary are accompanied by what have become outer indices of social and economic status pertaining to styles of dress, housing, furnishing and eating. Common indices of differentiation include brick as opposed to earth houses; comfortable seating in contrast to low wooden chairs, short stools and mats; wearing formal office style dress, including shoes, for men and women; and eating at a table, with cutlery, food served on individual plates, as opposed to eating with one’s hand seated on a mat and sharing with others from a single dish. Many of the larger shopkeepers have origins outside the area, in northern Tanzania. Such individuals, who are also heavily involved in mechanized farming in Kilombero, strive to remain aloof from the social dynamics of witchcraft in the area. Social networks with other migrants and relationships with home make this stance possible, allowing them to remain outside the system. Other incomers can also claim this status. For those members of the small elite from within the area, whose primary relations and obligations are co-located, disengagement is not a viable option, although they can seek to challenge the terms of their engagement.

WITCHCRAFT AND SOCIAL CATEGORIES

Witchcraft in Ulanga and Kilombero is conceptualized as a deliberate human act carried out by jealous people empowered through medicines to commit the appalling deeds that witches are famed for. Motivated by an intense greed ultimately expressed as a taste for human flesh, witches take the lives of their victims slowly, draining their strength, then gorge upon their freshly buried bodies. Literally embodying the inversion of normal human attributes of sociality and pity, the physical capabilities of witches are similarly inverted. Witches walk upside down, fly when others walk and prefer night to day (cf. Beidelman, 1963). Despite their inhuman powers, witches themselves are not inhuman. Rather, they embody the worst characteristics of humanity intensified, giving rein to its baser inclinations without restraint (Green, 1997). The prevalence of witchcraft and the high probability of being accused at some point in a person’s life contribute to a somewhat relaxed attitude towards it. Witchcraft is a serious matter, indeed at its most serious amounting to murder, but there is an understanding that witchcraft, like greed, is an inevitable and unsurprising manifestation of human nature. The institutionalization of witchcraft suppression practices, which have widespread credibility in the area,
means that the behaviour of those thought to be witches does not have to be tolerated. Witches, if caught, can be disempowered, taken to specialists and given medicine which is guaranteed to kill them if they ever return to their witchcraft habits.

‘Catching’ in this context does not so much refer to the literal apprehension of those thought to be witches, as to the verbal allegation or outright accusation that precedes the decision to seek cleansing. Although formal talk about catching witches in this way, often in the aftermath of burials, emphasizes the agency of the accusers as they perform their moral duty of protecting society from witches, in actuality many people seek anti-witchcraft treatment well in advance of any possibility of being caught. One of the best ways of doing this is to accompany others who have been caught when they undergo the ritual, ensuring that one has publicly been seen to be treated for witchcraft and yet that one is, in being a captor, self-evidently not in the same category as the caught. Being caught, as Favret Saada put it, ‘in the discourse of witchcraft’ (1980) is not confined to those individuals who are actually accused but, as Douglas (1991) made clear, extends to the social categories which they inhabit. Categorization as very poor or as very rich can increase one’s vulnerability to categorization as a witch. Whether or not this categorization sticks, and hence one’s vulnerability to ‘capture’, depends on one’s social networks, status and power. This process of capture can be directed either upwards at the apparently successful or downwards, at the very marginal. Those in the middle are acutely aware of their vulnerability to the assumed envy of the poorest and the mistrust of the better off and might orient their suspicions in either direction. The marginal lack the power to direct their suspicions too much higher. As in witchcraft settings the world over, the poor suffer the most stigma and are the most likely to be thought of as naturally witches, if not necessarily accused.

This equation of the poor with the propensity to practise witchcraft is justified by their visible failure to thrive, a failure which provokes not compassion but a fear that their abject state must inevitably lead to envy. Such failure to thrive socially, economically and agriculturally cannot be explained though bad luck or inadequacies alone. On the contrary, such people must actively seek out this way of living because they despise success in themselves and in others. This hatred of people bettering themselves, of making improvements, of doing well fuels their desire to ruin the success of others. The poorest are thus the most likely to be suspected of witchcraft and the slightly better off the most likely to suspect them. These are people who have the most to lose in the event of misfortune and whose small-scale projects for improvement can be ruined though an incidence of sickness, crop failure or a death in the family. The good fortune of others beyond what would be normally expected, especially for those without obvious wealth or sources of support, is equally suspicious. People who make good for what others see as no reason also fall under a cloud. An elderly man recalling how he had come under suspicion during the early 1980s when promoted to a senior rank in the village government told how fellow villagers had taken this promotion as a definite sign that he was up to no good. ‘Kila cheo wewe . . . siyo bure’ (you have every title and it’s not for nothing), they said, as they accused him of witchcraft. ‘It’s not for nothing’ recurs frequently in the course of conversations about success and about failure, which are at the same time conversations about witchcraft.

Successful people are also considered to be great witches, but the very successful are not thought likely to bother directing their hostility at those far below them with whom
they have no real connection. What matters for the elite is that ordinary people think they have access to special medicines and powers, some of which may be associated with witchcraft. Allegations of witchcraft against Catholic priests and Muslim religious leaders are not unusual and, while formal allegations are infrequent, suspicion may be widespread. For suspicion to erupt into accusation and a demand that the person be taken to a specialist for cleansing, a broader consensus is necessary, especially if the alleged witch is in a position of relative power. There has to be enough popular support for the accusation to make it difficult for the alleged witch to refuse to go for shaving and to attract popular support to meet the expenses involved in accompanying them. In the event of the more usual accusations amongst the powerless and those with little power, who are more often than not related, backing for the allegation comes from within a smaller circle of kin. In such instances it is in the interest of the accused to seek to allay the hostility suspicion of witchcraft creates and, through consenting to cleansing, to formally indicate their openness to resuming a relationship with those who have suspected them of evil.

That ‘shaving’ permits the resumption of relations on both sides of the breach is much remarked on as a positive outcome of the witchcraft suppression procedures, a social impact which has led to their enthusiastic acceptance not only by ordinary people, but by many of the government officials charged with administration and public order in the districts. This tolerance is contested. District officials in Ulanga are becoming more critical of the role played by witchcraft suppression institutions in the district and are actively supporting the rights of individuals accused of witchcraft not to engage with such procedures. Although only a minority of people accused of witchcraft actively seek state support in their bid not to engage, legal redress, justified through a discourse of human rights, is becoming more important as a response to witchcraft and, despite the egalitarian claims of the new discourse, as an indicator of inequality.

WITCHCRAFT SUPPRESSION PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS
Witchcraft suppression practices in Ulanga and Kilombero are a social institution, deriving much of their meaning and effect from their intimate association with indigenous ritual and purification procedures. They have also been the object of successive institutional innovation over the past 70 years or so, a process which has been highly successful in entrenching witchcraft suppression practices and, arguably, the social institution of witchcraft. Witchcraft suppression practices attained mass legitimacy through the so called witchcraft eradication movements in the 1930s and 1940s, in which popular participation was promoted through a combination of administrative controls on local populations and on itinerant practitioners of traditional medicine and divination. Peripatetic anti-witchcraft specialists were permitted to shave entire communities if district officials consented, a strategy adopted by the colonial and socialist administrations in southern Tanzania (Green, 1997). Witchcraft suppression practices were performed by other specialists from their own homes and were not necessarily part of what some analysts have termed witchcraft eradication movements. In Ulanga and Kilombero, such practices became the de facto monopoly of a single specialist called Bibi Kalembwana at the height of the socialist period in the early 1980s. Restrictions of the movement of people and the effective promotion of Kalembwana’s practice as an option for dispute resolution resulted in what became a public, and ultimately national,
institution for dealing with witches, an institution which attracted clients from many parts of Tanzania (Green, 1994, 1997, 2003).

Kalembwana’s death in 1997, at the apex of post-socialist liberalization and the introduction of multi-partyism in Tanzania, altered the institutional landscape of witchcraft suppression services in the south. Shaibu Magungu, Kalembwana’s maternal grandson, who claims to have inherited her powers, has established three branches offering cleansing services across Kilombero, Ulanga and Songea rural districts (Green and Mesaki, 2005). Meanwhile, Magungu’s brother and sister provide an alternative source of the same treatment from Kalembwana’s home village of Ihowanja, a service also provided by Nangonyani, one of Kalembwana’s kinswomen and closest colleagues. In addition to these practitioners offering to shave witchcraft under the authority of the very same spirits who empowered Kalembwana, several independent healers claim to be able to suppress the powers of witches through ‘shaving’.

At present the various specialists involved in these practices are engaged in a series of disputes over the legitimacy of their respective rights and claims to be empowered to ‘shave’. The main fault lines are between Magungu and his siblings, and between Magungu and other specialists claiming the power to ‘shave’. While these disputes are important, not least for those involved, the virtual uniformity of delivery and procedure provided by all those claiming the ability (uwezo) to shave is striking. All make use of a combination of medicine and the shaving of head and body hair to effect the bodily cleansing of witches and their accusers through a ritual involving groups of accusers and accused. All offer a ritual process lasting at least 24 hours, during which time clients stay at a special section of the specialist homestead, subject to various prohibitions, notably on the transmission of fire. All insist that if at all possible alleged witches and their accusers should arrive and be treated together, and that those in either category receive exactly the same treatment before eating a meal, cooked with a dose of the special anti-witchcraft medicine, together. Finally, everyone who has undergone the procedure known colloquially as being ‘shaved’ (kunyolewa) or, increasingly, ‘being cleansed’ (kujisafi) receives a numbered and dated certificate with their name on it. The certificate matters, not only because bureaucratic practice adds authority to the institution, but because such is the power of ‘shaving’, in particular the ancestral sanction surrounding the ritual and the special medicines administered during it, that it only needs to be performed once in the lifetime of a person. Both practitioners and clients are adamant that anybody who returns to their witchcraft medicines will die, even many years after being shaved.

EQUALITY AND THE RIGHTS OF CITIZENS

Witchcraft suppression practices in Ulanga and Kilombero are interesting for their symbolic complexity and ritual structure, issues which I have explored in some detail elsewhere (Green, 1994, 1997, 2003; Green and Mesaki, 2005). They also make an interesting statement about the limitations of categorization and the potentiality of equality. Anti-witchcraft practices in Ulanga and Kilombero do not differentiate between accuser and accused, between those who consider themselves to be victims of witchcraft and those whom they consider witches. Indeed, the procedure is carefully administered in an identical way to all those seeking it, whichever category they fall into. At no point does the ritual differentiate between them, or seek to identify witches. The identities of suspected witches are, however, confirmed in other ritual contexts,
generally through divination. Although all the anti-witchcraft specialists offer divination, they strive to keep it separate from their witchcraft suppression activities. Those seeking divination at Magungu’s place, for example, must be ‘shaved’ first, to reduce the likelihood of conflict. Further, because naming a witch is against the law, which anti-witchcraft specialists are keen to work within, and because divination in all cultural settings seems to work by responding to clients’ verbalized feelings (cf. Favret Saada, 1980; Boyer, 1990), confirmation of clients’ suspicions is more likely than identification and naming.7

The fact that witches and accusers all receive the same treatment is central to the procedures’ social success, and to its continued institutionalization after disestablishment from the party and village government dispute-resolution mechanisms that gave Kalembwana her monopoly. Accusing somebody of witchcraft is to situate them in a pariah category associated with crimes of such seriousness that they amount to crimes against humanity. The shocking and horrific nature of these crimes verges on the incredible. Cannibalism, the murder of one’s own children and depraved night adventures into the bodies of others are commonplace. The outrageousness of the crime is matched by the outrageousness of the accusation. Even small children, once thought unlikely to succumb to the temptations of witchcraft, are routinely implicated and subject to involvement in witchcraft suppression procedures.

If the allegation of witchcraft situates persons in a pariah category, establishing a clear boundary between the witch and those accusing them of witchcraft, the egalitarian treatment meted out to witches and accusers effectively collapses this boundary, allowing the re-establishment of social relations to take place. For this to occur it matters that both sides participate in the treatment, a dimension accorded ritual dramatization through the meal shared between accusers and accused that is the culmination of the witchcraft suppression procedure. This act of commensality is fundamental. In this area, as in much of Africa, eating together as the core motif of sociality and cooperation is the central act of all life-crisis events. Sharing food is symbolically elaborated as a virtue to the extent that witches are said to be unable to eat with people. Eating from separate plates as those who fancy themselves to like ‘maendeleo’ (development/progress) do is condemned by self-defined traditionalists as expressing western notions of selfish individualism. The re-establishment of relations acknowledges the mobility of categories which are ‘not specific sets of people or unmistakeable attributes, but standardized, moveable social relations’ (Tilly, 1999: 66). It is this mobility, the applicability of categorical nets across diverse social relations, that allows witchcraft to be imputed to a range of social categories, even though those most likely to be thought of as witches are already social pariahs.

Given that the dissolution of the boundary depends on participation across it, the implications of not participating are significant. Until very recently those who refused to participate in witchcraft suppression procedures were usually employees of the Catholic Church, who risked losing their livelihoods if they were known to have consented to take part in such activities (Green, 1994). As Tanzania embarks on its post-liberalization path towards democratization and a new respect for human rights, new responses to witchcraft allegations are emerging. District administrations, partly in response to directives from central government but also reflecting the attitudes of reform-minded members of staff, are committed to upholding citizens’ rights not to participate against their will in witchcraft suppression practices. This is a substantial change since the 1980s when it was not unusual for local government authorities to
condone the sending of alleged witches to Kalembwana for shaving, and when the 'catching' of alleged witches and taking them without their consent for 'shaving' did not lead to anything more than an insistence from the police that any transport costs incurred by the victim were paid (Green, 1997).

While the authorities in Kilombero District respect the rights of those suspected of witchcraft not to participate in witchcraft suppression procedures, they generally leave matters to customary law as the remit of village government. If a person seeks advice from district staff they may be counselled that accepting treatment is in their best interests as it will allow them to live in peace with their neighbours. The District of Ulanga has adopted a more assertive stance. Complainants who allege that they have been accused of witchcraft (and hence threatened with being taken for cleansing) are accorded police support and a case against their accusers under the witchcraft ordinance is brought before the magistrate. Some five such cases were brought in 2001, and 13 in 2002. A further three cases were brought up to July 2003. The numbers involved are very low compared with the numbers of those going for shaving. During a single week in August 2003, for example, in excess of 60 people were 'shaved' at Magungu’s headquarters in Mkas, Kilombero district, while a further 25 were dealt with at the branch operated by his son Sadat in remote Mwaya. The numbers of complainants are small but they are highly significant, demonstrating that opting out of the process is now a possibility for those who can access the support of the law and who can afford to turn their backs on the expectations of kin and neighbours that they will go for shaving.

Opting out by using the power of the law to challenge accusers may reduce the immediate pressure to accept with good grace the invitation to seek cleansing. It does not re-establish trust. Indeed, it may erode it further by involving the police and district officials in disputes between kin and neighbours. Neither does opting out lead to sanctions against those allegedly making the accusations of witchcraft. The majority of cases brought under the act are unsuccessful in the higher courts to which they must be referred. Moreover, seeking legal redress does not defuse suspicions of witchcraft. It may delay an accusation, but refusal to go for cleansing and involving the law are taken as signs that the person accused is really a witch, and hence must protect the threatened loss of their powers at all costs. Seeking the support of the law only happens in a small number of cases. To do so is to adopt a confrontational position that refuses to acknowledge the claims made by kin and neighbours or to accept the appropriateness of an established community response. Only a minority of people, those who are not dependent on the goodwill and collaboration of kin and neighbours, can take the risks that pursuit of such a strategy entails, even where they strongly believe their rights have been infringed through an accusation of witchcraft. Apart from outsiders, those whose assets and important social networks are elsewhere, it is the better off who can take such risks, people who can seek social support from state agents to support their refusal to comply with community sanctions and to uphold their rights, the very same people who in previous years would have been, even at substantial financial cost to the community, at risk of being physically taken for shaving.

PUBLIC GOODS AND THEIR LIMITATIONS
Just as ‘catching’ a witch and accompanying them for shaving is to make a statement about a collective community responsibility for dealing with witchcraft, opting out is to
deny one’s responsibility towards that community, even where that community holds you responsible for a death within it. It is not necessarily to deny the reality of witchcraft. The small numbers of people who refuse to comply with witchcraft suppression expectations do not seek to disestablish the system, only to challenge those who claim that they should take their place within it. They are demanding that their rights as individuals not to participate in shaving take precedence over the rights of the community to deal with witchcraft. In so doing, they are not only rejecting the egalitarian premise of witchcraft suppression procedures, which seek to dissolve the categorical inequality between witch and accuser. They are also demanding differential treatment, as rights-bearing individuals whose primary obligations are to what they perceive to be their own moral integrity rather than the security of the community (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004: 189–92). Freeing the social universe of witchcraft is less important than ensuring that one’s accusers are themselves accused.

That this course of action is now an option in rural Tanzania is an indication of how far rights discourses have become institutionalized within district administrations and among the educated elite, despite their long-standing place in the constitution. Rights guaranteed by the constitution and accessed through state and legal mechanisms are represented as a public good that operates for the benefit of all citizens. The economist Ravi Kanbur defines a pure public good as ‘a commodity which satisfies twin requirements of non rivalry and non excludability’, that is something, a good or service, even a condition – peace for example – from which consumption by one does not reduce the amount available for another and from which people cannot be excluded (Kanbur and Riles, 2004: 9). In actuality, other institutional constraints, including community expectations, mean that the majority of people accused of witchcraft cannot practicably use the rights option as a get-out clause. Going to be shaved is an obligation, just as it is an obligation on the catchers of witches. The public good here, as with other elite-benefiting public goods elsewhere, operates for the benefit of those few individuals able to take advantage of it (Illich, 2002: 58–9).10

At first sight this situation seems to contrast markedly with the public good characteristics of witchcraft suppression institutions. These, as we have seen, are united against what is by common consensus the ‘public bad’ of witchcraft. Witchcraft suppression institutions are accessible, egalitarian and inclusive. In enabling the re-establishment of ruptured social relations, often between kin, they restore trust and deal non-violently with conflict. In the words of a local government officer from Kilombero, ‘They help people make up (patana). They help a lot. Without [them] we would have no peace’. Examples of how the region would be if it were not for its witchcraft suppression institutions are reiterated by government workers and the public alike. ‘It would be like Mwanza’, or ‘People would kill each other’. ‘It would be like it is with the Sukuma’, a group associated with witch killing and violent revenge attacks on witches. These desperate futures are cited by public officials as a further reason why witchcraft suppression institutions should be tacitly supported, as long as they comply with the requirements of public health and public order.

**THE ENTRACEMENT OF WITCHCRAFT**

Unlike human rights’ discourses, which in practice deny the benefits of their protection to the poor, witchcraft suppression practices and institutions in Ulanga and Kilombero
can be viewed as a genuine public good, at least in the sense theorized by economists. Even though not everybody participates in witchcraft suppression practices, everybody is thought to benefit from their apparent effects: social order and a decrease in the numbers of active witches. But are witchcraft suppression institutions good for the public? To what extent do they contribute to the institutionalization of witchcraft, to the process of entrenchment? And what are the consequences of entrenchment, both for the people of places like Ulanga and Kilombero and, more broadly, for anthropology?

Witchcraft suppression institutions in Ulanga and Kilombero have evolved into what is widely acknowledged to be a legitimate public service in the area capable of dealing with the conflicts around witchcraft and to an extent with suspicions about those persons thought to practise it. They do not seem to have suppressed the incidence of witchcraft conflicts or the scale of suspicion about it. In 1991, for example, at the height of Kalembwana’s popularity and absolute monopoly across both districts, some 200 people a week were making the long journey to Lhomanya to seek shaving during the heightened accessibility of the dry season. Twelve years later, also during the dry season, although shavers were more dispersed and clients could in effect choose where to go for treatment, the total number going for shaving was probably similar, if not slightly increased due to the relocation of Magungu’s headquarters to a site convenient for TAZARA and hence for the people of all stations between Dar es Salaam and Songea. Indeed, while certain events may provoke mass accusations and hence peaks in demand from time to time, general demand for shaving appears relatively steady, with seasonal increases after the harvest when people have money for the journey and when transport, by vehicle or on foot, is easier. A consequence of this seems to have been a shift in the age categories likely to be accused of witchcraft. Because almost all the older adults in many – perhaps a majority – of villages have now been ‘shaved’, either by Kalembwana or her descendants, young people and even children become suitable candidates for accusations of witchcraft.

Notions about the capacities of personhood have shifted to accommodate the possibility that even five-year-old children can practise witchcraft, something unthinkable in the early 1990s when small children in particular were thought of as harbouring an innocence and harmlessness that precluded propensity for witchcraft. As witchcraft is not an inherent attribute of the person, nor transmitted through descent, inheritance of the witch’s craft is said to amount to the literal passing on of medicines and instruction from witch to child, when the witch awaiting their turn for shaving knows that they have no choice but to give up or die. Children now comprise a small but growing proportion of those being brought for shaving. While it is not possible to determine with any certainty a causal relationship between witchcraft suppression institutions and the perpetuation of notions of witchcraft in the area, which are deeply cosmologically embedded, the above example strongly suggests an ongoing and mutually constitutive relation between anti-witchcraft institutions and ideas about witchcraft.

PUBLIC BADS AND THE SIDE EFFECTS OF WITCHCRAFT

The existence of practices to suppress the powers of witches alongside divination specialists able to diagnose with clarity the source of attack, and the fact that such practices are comparatively benign and widely trusted, contributes to the entrenchment of witchcraft as a social institution in Ulanga and Kilombero. It is an institution which can be deadly.
serious but which can also be invoked on chance, as it were, because the penalties for caught and catcher are not inevitably harsh. However, a narrow focus on accuser and accused, on the individuals involved in witchcraft disputes, distorts the extent to which witchcraft as an institution can be seen to have additional social penalties deriving from the wider implications of entrenchment – what we might think of, after Ferguson (1990: 254), as the ‘side effects’ of witchcraft in Ulanga and Kilombero. The most significant of these is what I refer to as the normativity of witchcraft, the expectation that witchcraft is a routine feature of daily life and is a causal factor in all kinds of misfortune.

The self-evidence of witchcraft is not only manifested in the effects of witches’ actions, but in the visible presence of those thought of as witches and in the widespread institutional response to persons so categorized. Although the witchcraft suppression process does not identify witches, and although the knowledge about who is actually a witch is said to remain in the diviner’s heart, witchcraft suppression institutions, in making public the socially antagonistic categories of accuser (victim) and accused (witch), reveal the witch as a social agent. Negative social relations feed allegations of witchcraft where there is evidence of the effects of witches’ actions. Evidence is plentiful, because virtually all deaths, unless of the extremely old, are considered to be ultimately precipitated by witchcraft. Funerals, especially the gatherings of kin after the burial, become fora where discussion of liability for a death is commonplace, and where kin are more often than not implicated. This is because they are most likely to have failed to meet expectations in some way towards the dead person or their family. ‘Kinship is very difficult (undugu ni ngumu),’ explained a provider of shaving.

The normativity of witchcraft informs expectations about post-funeral behaviour and responses to persistent sickness, legitimating visits to diviners and the transformation of bad feelings into accusations of witchcraft. It also contributes to a culture of suspicion and mistrust of kin and neighbours, in which those seeking to establish businesses or succeed in their agricultural activities feel perpetually under threat from those whom they know to be jealous and whom they believe wish them to fail. Failure is interpreted in such terms. Protection (kinga) from witchcraft is sought from traditional medicine specialists, diviners and shehes, who are also able to supply different kinds of medicine for success. Those in salaried posts may seek medicine for promotion; farmers seek medicine for their farms; shopkeepers seek medicine for business that can attract customers. Substantial sums are invested in success medicines as well as kinga. I was informed by the assistant of a renowned healer that protection with his kinga for a family of four would cost around 35,000 Tanzania shillings, a sum of money equivalent to a quarter of a year’s food supply for a household, or over 30 days’ backbreaking casual agricultural labour. These costs were justified by the medicine’s exceptional strength and the fact that its effects could be expected to last for the life of the individual. With these kinds of prices access to medicines also delineates differentiation in the community, with ‘big shots’ and business people reputed to be better protected and to have ensured that they have the medicine for success.

Witchcraft has another more serious side effect. Its normativity, the expectation that bad outcomes can be attributed to it and to those who practise witchcraft, deflects attention away from consideration of real causes of misfortune, ill health and economic crisis in the area. This deflection from a consideration of causes is not due solely to witchcraft as an institution. Indeed, reorientation away from what contributes to poor rural living
conditions is a characteristic of the Tanzanian political system, which has tended to natu-
ralize poverty as an inevitable fact of life in rural communities which can only be
addressed through an allocation of resources rather than the content of policies directed
at rural areas. This political thinking, the product of a de facto single party system in
which personal attributes rather than policy is the basis on which candidates for national
and local assemblies are selected, and which takes as given rural social conditions that
are therefore not the basis for campaigns for change, complements the negative side
effects of witchcraft as an institution: the side effects which turn people’s gaze inwards
to their own community rather than outwards to the content of policy processes which
produce poverty and vulnerability in the region, and in others like it.

Poverty and endemic disease are not natural hazards in rural Tanzania but the conse-
quence of successive policy decisions on health, agriculture and the economy. Others
have demonstrated the process of impoverishment of southern Tanzania that accom-
panied colonization (Kjekshus, 1996; Seppala and Koda, 1998), the legacies of maji maji
(Culwick and Culwick, 1938a, 1938b) and, more recently, the massive costs borne by
rural producers for four decades of ineffective agricultural policies (Cooksey, 2003).
Similarly, the high morbidity and mortality across the districts is mostly attributable to
failures in the health system after structural adjustment, inappropriate policies regard-
ing anti-malarial regimes and the inability of large numbers of households to access
adequate treatment (Green, 1999; Schellenberg et al., 2003). If witchcraft as an insti-
tution complements a politics which denies responsibility for social outcomes in the
south and which deflects blame for misfortune back onto the local communities who
suffer, witchcraft suppression institutions must be re-evaluated in terms of their contri-
bution to the entrenchment of witchcraft. The side effects of witchcraft as an institution,
embracing the systems for dealing with alleged witches, are far from positive. Indeed,
while the entrenchment of witchcraft does constitute a form of local political action, in
the micro-politics of blame and accusation, shame and betrayal, and indeed a politics of
alignment, which can be scaled up to play out in wider conflicts of interests (Green,
1997), in prioritizing the micro for the attribution of blame, it deflects attention from
the wider social relations that have contributed to the environments of misfortune in
poor rural communities, attributing responsibility for social ills to the very people who
are most subject to them. Witchcraft suppression institutions pay a crucial part in
entrenching witchcraft in the region, and contribute to the normativity of witchcraft.

WITCHCRAFT, ANTHROPOLOGY AND ENTRENCHMENT
The expectation that witchcraft will be part and parcel of the social fabric is not confined
to communities where witchcraft is entrenched as a system. Anthropological responses
to witchcraft, my own included, have probably contributed to the institutionalization
of witchcraft as normative if not in Africa, then certainly in academic discourse on it
(see also Rutherford, 1999: 92). Efforts to interpret witchcraft and to emphasize its
rationality and meaning have underplayed consideration of its wider impacts. This has
been partly because of a tendency within anthropology to valorize diverse cultural
systems and partly because of a genuine concern to restate marginal social practice
within a global mainstream of modern political engagement. Such efforts, in focusing
on the local dimensions of the cultural, may have missed the significance of the bigger
picture where other tiers of politics are played out. Further, they expose the double
standard of a cultural relativism in which it is legitimate, expected even, to critique the
assumed negative effects of imported practice and institutions – development being a
case in point – but unacceptable to subject what are taken to be indigenous institutions
to the same critical scrutiny (see Green and Mesaki, 2005).

An evenhanded approach to the institutions extant in Africa would access them in
the same terms sociologically, accepting that neither development nor witchcraft can be
viewed as either wholly alien or wholly indigenous. Both are an amalgamation of diverse
origins transformed through history as the action of active subjectivities (see also Ortner,
1995). The institutionalization of witchcraft suppression practices in Ulanga is the result
of the interrelationship between local administrations’ control over local communities
dispute settlement through colonial, postcolonial and socialist modes of governance,
culminating in the current marketized arrangements whereby rural residents seek solu-
tions to the problem of the witch among them. Similarly, the reluctance to name witches
is not necessarily derived from the requirements of traditional divination but is equally
a product of colonial and postcolonial legal systems (Waite, 1992: 229). Witchcraft as
an institution is not simply a mode of political action or a domain of meaning. Like all
social institutions it has tangible impacts. Some of these are negative. Witchcraft as an
institution in naturalizing misfortune, albeit through social agency, is as much an anti-
politics machine as ‘development’. Arguably the two work together to smother political
accountability and set the limits of political transition in democratic but single party
Tanzania.

The anthropological emphasis on culture, while important, may have led us to
downplay the harmful social consequences of some of the practices and perspectives
which we are so keen to interpret. Paul Farmer has criticized anthropology for its stance
on HIV and AIDS, seeking to explain and justify cultural practices as sacrosanct on the
one hand and on the other turning a blind eye to the economic conditions which render
people, women especially, unable to protect themselves from risky relationships which
may hold out promise of a better life or even food in the short term (Farmer, 1999:
148–9, 258–9). He calls for a broader take on ‘meaning’, one that can accommodate the
significance of cultural practices, particularly around healing, not so much as implied
commentaries on global processes but in relation to global repertoires of effective
interventions. Recounting the case of a young girl whose father believed that her treat-
able illness was due to sorcery, Farmer brings the meaning of culture into play with
inequality:

but where I then saw cultures in conflict . . . I now see the symptoms of unequal
access to effective remedies. It’s not that ‘culture’ doesn’t matter. Far from it: the
father’s conviction that his daughter was the victim of sorcery . . . led to his decision
to remove her from the clinic, a decision that the priest correctly identified as poten-
tially fatal. The question is, what does Marie’s close call mean at the end of the twen-
tieth century? Do these events speak to the power and integrity of Haitian cultural
traditions? Or do they point instead to inequalities of access which mean that, in
rural Haiti, understandings of acute infectious disease even now evolve largely in the
absence of effective interventions that are available to non-poor Haitians? Is Marie’s
story a story about rural ‘beliefs’ or rather a story about poverty and its effects on
health outcomes among people who share her circumstances? (Farmer, 1999: 154)
Orin Starn has described how anthropologists writing during the height of the guerrilla uprising in Peru emphasized cultural practices, ritual and symbolism in their accounts at the expense of the political transitions sweeping though the countryside, thereby ‘missing the revolution’ (1991: 64). Keith Hart, writing about the massive changes taking place in Asia and Africa during the 1960s, comments that ‘it is worth stressing how little of what transpired in the Third World after decolonization was picked up by intellectuals while it was happening . . . even after it had long become obvious to the inhabitants’ (1992: 220). Hart puts this situation down to a division of labour in which anthropologists as those on the ground lacked a bigger picture, while those with a bigger picture were confined to bureaucracies or ivory tower disciplines which did not engage first hand with local realities (1992: 220). Understanding witchcraft and its effects is not simply a matter for anthropology or a single discipline. The bigger picture is a composite of interdisciplinary perspectives which are issue focused. Just as witchcraft as an institution intersects self-consciously with healing, divination, local and national politics and inequality, approaches to understanding it must take these multiple perspectives into account. Such approaches, in escaping disciplinary traps, allow us to critically engage with a wider set of issues and complexities, and contribute to disestablishing the assumptions our discipline has promoted.

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Notes
1 See for example Moore and Sanders (2002); Bond and Ciekawy (2001).
2 See also Englund (1996); Comaroff and Comaroff (1993).
3 For accounts of witchcraft suppression campaigns in southern and east Africa historically see Richards (1935), Willis (1968) and Marwick (1950). See Fisher and Arce (2000) for details on the linked symbolism of mass anti-witchcraft practices and vaccination campaigns.
4 For a recent statistical analysis of socioeconomic conditions in Ulanga and Kilombero.
see Schellenberg et al. (2003). In 1997 the median value of monthly household consumption expenditure was under $100, of which about 75 per cent was for food (Schellenberg et al., 2003: 562). Only 11 per cent of households in this study had livestock in addition to fowl, and only 23 per cent of households had more than two mosquito nets: a mere 20 per cent had a single net between all members of the household (2003: 563).

5 Everybody who has been treated for witchcraft receives a numbered certificate, irrespective of whether they were accuser or accused. Not only is shaving said to prevent witches returning to their witchcraft in future, the certificates provide evidence that a person has been shaved by a specialist, and hence is no longer empowered to practice witchcraft. For further details of certification practices around 'shaving' see Green (1997) and Green and Mesaki (2005).

6 The permits issued to traditional healers in Ulanga contain an explicit warning about this: 'Warning: you are not permitted to expose witches through divination'. 'KIBALI CHA KITA CHA JADI: ONYO: HURUHUSIWI KUTAMBULIA WACHAWI KWA DHANA YA KUPIGA RAMLI'.

7 Actually naming a witch is illegal anyway, which contributes to the reluctance to name. But in any case, divination seems to provide a context for voicing suspicions or for having these teased out through general assertions of the diviner, so that spontaneous naming would be highly unlikely.

8 This is described in some detail in Green (1997).

9 The witchcraft ordinance was amended under the 1988 Act 12, which did not alter the substance of the law but merely increased the penalty, a fine. The ordinance states it is illegal to accuse another of witchcraft, as well as to practice it. Since colonial times most cases under the ordinance have been against those accusing others of witchcraft because proof is virtually impossible to obtain in regard to practising witchcraft (Green, 1997). This has certainly been the case in Ulanga where all the recent cases brought before the primary court since 2001 have related to accusations of witchcraft (interview with District Magistrate, Ulanga).

10 To be precise, Illich talks of public utilities, including services such as education. He refers to those which benefit the few as ‘false public utilities’ (2002: 59).

11 This dimension of witchcraft suppression institutions is addressed in Green and Mesaki (2005).

References


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