

# Challenges of Persistence of Witchcraft in East Africa: A Religious and Human Rights Concern

*Peter Mumo<sup>1</sup>*  
*University of Nairobi*  
[peter.mumo@uonbi.ac.ke](mailto:peter.mumo@uonbi.ac.ke)

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Mumo is an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Nairobi

## **Abstract**

In recent history, there have been reported cases of hunting, lynching and killing of suspected witches in East Africa. The situation is so dire that it constitutes insecurity and gross violation of human rights. Loss of innocent lives, maiming of suspects and loss of property has brought fear and despondency among the aged who are the major targets of witch-hunting. Due to the materialistic nature of contemporary Eastern African societies, individuals driven by greed the desire to grab other people's land, family feuds, patriarchy, climate change, drought, poverty and jealousy have all contributed to loss of life and property. Human rights promoters have advocated for severe punishment for the perpetrators. The legal process of proving witchcraft is difficult and complicated since this practice is mired in secrecy where the courts rely on evidence for conviction. In this article I argue that the challenges of dealing with the persistence of witchcraft are enormous since witchcraft is both a religious and human rights concern. Witchcraft being a part of African traditional religious beliefs can only be addressed by understanding its religious foundations and then dealing with its implications in contemporary society. I conclude by holding the view that to eradicate witchcraft and witch hunting requires legal, religious and social interventions.

**Key words:** Human rights, medicine-men, mystical powers, witchcraft, witch hunting.

## **Introduction**

East Africa has undergone tremendous changes some of which have transformed societies while others have negatively affected individuals and sections of the society. Despite the general acceptance of modernity, African culture and some of its institutions have grossly been misinterpreted resulting in untold suffering to Africans. One of the most misunderstood institutions is that of mystical powers (Magesa 1997, 16-17). Though belief in mystical powers was largely beneficial to African societies, misuse of some of its aspects such as witchcraft have brought a lot of suffering to individuals and society in general (Nyabwari & Nkonge 2014, 10).

Belief in mystical power is one of the pillars of African Traditional Religion (Idowu 1973, 190). History has evidence that Africans believed that there are mystical powers in the universe which could be used for good or evil. African religious specialists were empowered to tap these powers to solve not only psychological but also social challenges. For example, these powers were used in healing chronic diseases while at the same time used in protecting individuals and society from evil forces. However, the same powers could also be tapped for evil work as is the case in witchcraft and sorcery. Though witches and other evil forces were a danger to society, the existence of medicine-men neutralized their powers hence creating an equilibrium (Mbiti 1969, 170). 'Witchcraft' is intrinsically neither morally good nor bad, and among others the supernatural activities of 'witches' are, according to their perceived effects, divided into good, or protective, and bad, or destructive, witchcraft.

## **The Entry of Modern Science**

The introduction of modern science came with new religious institutions and foreign to African cultures. The dominant religions were mainly Christianity and Islam. By the time western culture was introduced in East Africa, the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin had already been accepted by majority of professionals in the western world. Anthropologists such as E.B. Tylor among others depicted African culture as less evolved compared to western cultures (Tylor 2012, 417). Consequently, western commentaries and writings on African

institutions were influenced by social Darwinism. African religion and culture were studied with prejudices. Christianity and western culture were depicted in positive light while African religion was presented depressingly awkward, primitive and not worth the name religion. Subsequent western missionaries and the first generation of African Christians followed suit in despising most aspects of African culture and religion. The missionaries tried to paint African society and African religion as evil and did everything possible to ensure that it was ousted. The western missionaries believed that traditional religious beliefs and practices were inferior, and together with the traditional customs, had to be done away with before the acceptance of Christianity. African traditional religion was equated to darkness and evil, some kind of primitive, heathen and 'pagan practice that was supposed submit unquestioningly to some western religious superiority. African Christians on the other hand, instead of contextualizing Christianity within their cultural values and practices went ahead and wholesome adopted Christian and foreign practices. Mystical powers and witchcraft were condemned and their practice outlawed. They were portrayed as evil practices (Bauer 2017, 7).

It is in these two, African traditional religion and cultures, that housed mystical powers. The condemnation of mystical powers and African cultural practices thus created a vacuum on where to anchor mystical practices. Medicine-men and women were also condemned as evil practitioners while witches and sorcerers operated freely and some even openly proclaimed Christianity and remained members of the church. Part of the reason was that the challenges of sicknesses and protective medicine that confronted individuals and society that required the services of medicine-men remained intact. Belief in mystical powers and witchcraft were deeply rooted in African societies as were the effects which were felt and experienced far and wide especially in societies in the rural areas.

Stories of witchcraft as form of practice of mystical powers continue to dominate the sociological scene in which cases of suspected witches in various communities in East Africa are attacked. It is here that mystical powers interfere with enjoyment of human rights. For example, in Kilifi in Kenya old people who are suspected of

witchcraft have been harassed and some even killed,<sup>2</sup> largely on suspicious accusations levelled against them such as causing impotence, causing disease and even death. Among the Abagusii of Kenya, several people and houses have been burnt down for suspicion of them practicing witchcraft.<sup>3</sup> In Tanzania hunting for witches has resulted in innocent people being killed.<sup>4</sup> There are also stories of people who have claimed to have been bewitched, their children prevented from going to school or their farms that have been made unproductive by witches and wizards (Boubakari 2017, 14).

The article argues that when modern change came to East Africa mystical powers and witchcraft were condemned by proponents of science. The checks and balances which guaranteed mystical powers did not negatively affect societies were done away with without their replacement. Mystical powers were classified as evil by western missionaries.. It is argued that the practice of mystical powers in the traditional African societies were generally beneficial because they dealt with the supernatural aspects of human life. The missionaries and the emerging churches condemned the practice of psychological aspects of African religion. African medicine-men were condemned as being evil. The roles they played in dealing with psychological aspects were ignored.

It is important to note that by the time the missionaries were coming to East Africa, western countries had successfully dealt with issues of witchcraft. Most Western societies had successfully abandoned practices such as witchcraft. The missionaries thought that by preaching against witchcraft would bring it to an abrupt end. The belief in mystical powers and witchcraft were deeply entrenched in African societies. Some of Africans who embraced Christianity were practitioners of witchcraft. Since witchcraft is innate hence there are no physical items associated

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<sup>2</sup> [https://web.facebook.com/K24TVNews/posts/witches-of-kilifi-residents-fear-being-bewitched-by-witchdoctors-in-vilagoni-k24/10156289219183141/?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/K24TVNews/posts/witches-of-kilifi-residents-fear-being-bewitched-by-witchdoctors-in-vilagoni-k24/10156289219183141/?_rdc=1&_rdr)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-03-wr-19640-story.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2017/08/01/tanzania-witch-killings-claimed-479-lives-from-January-June-2017-report//>

with it, therefore those who were endowed with it continued practicing it within the church.

In many African rural communities, effects of witchcraft included among others infertility among women, crop and animal failure, children refusing to attend schools and general failure in life (Essien 2010, 535). Those who were affected by witchcraft because the mainline churches did not offer ways of handling it members went out of the church and secretly visited medicine-men who helped them to find the causes of their problems.

Interestingly, the emergence of African instituted churches and Pentecostal churches had spiritual ways of dealing with issues related to witchcraft. They could exorcise evil spirits. They also provided spiritual healing. But these were patronized by the minority of East Africans. The main line churches which had huge following (Barrett 1982, 89) were of the opinion that as many embraced Christianity witchcraft and mystical powers would eventually end naturally.

When East African countries attained independence witchcraft was identified as retrogressive practice. For example, the first president of Kenya Jomo Kenyatta identified witchcraft as a threat to progress in Kenya (Kenyatta 1965, 271-272). The colonial and post-independence government of Kenya enacted laws which criminalized witchcraft. It is difficult to prosecute witches because the law did not even define who witches and witchdoctors are.

In modern society as argued above there are still areas where people are still affected by witchcraft especially in the rural areas. This has led to some individuals being accused of witchcraft. It has proven difficult to prosecute witches hence most suspected witches go scot-free. This has led to individuals taking the law in their own hands and hunting for witches. Unfortunately, this has led to some innocent people being wrongly implicated in witchcraft practices and being killed. There are also individuals who have accused others for practicing witchcraft with ulterior motives such as taking their land.

### **Mystical Powers, Medicine-men and Witchcraft in African Religion**

Before the coming of new religions such as Islam and Christianity in East Africa, Africans in sub Saharan Africa had their own religion which African theologians have named African Religion or African Traditional Religion (Magesa 1997, 16-17). The people of this region had religious beliefs which were similar in many ways. They had an elaborate belief system which expounds on their way of life and religious reality. The major beliefs of African Traditional Religion included among others, beliefs in God, divinities, ancestral spirits and rites of passage (Idowu 1973, 140). Although given different names, Africans believed in one God who had different attributes and was believed to be the source of everything (Mugambi 2002, 60).

Apart from the above mentioned beliefs, Africans also believed in the existence of mystical powers which were manifested in form of magic, divination, medicine-men and witchcraft (Mbiti 1969, 197). He (Mbiti 1969, 197) concludes that Africans believed that the universe contain a power or a force which can be tapped for both good and evil purposes. In African societies there are people who are able to tap these powers such as medicine-men, the aged, witches and other religious specialists. For example, the aged could tap the power to bless or curse (Mbiti 1969, 197).

Among Africans the existence of mystical powers was generally beneficial to society. Medicine-men and other religious specialists such as herbalists, rainmakers, diviners, priests and prophets could tap these powers to solve problems in the traditional African society. They could manipulate the natural order using these powers. The powers were also used by medicine-men to give protection in form of charms to individuals and on homes and grazing lands. Those who were given these protective charms were guarded against any harm from malicious forces. Mbiti (1969, 197) argues that African medicine-men were friends of society. In each African village there was a medicine-man or woman who could provide protective medicine and also treat those who were affected by evil forces such as witches and sorcerers. This guaranteed that Africans lived without fear of evil forces.

On the other hand, witchcraft is also used for evil purposes. Witchcraft is a mysterious power which when invoked would harm others. Among the Bantus of Eastern Africa witchcraft is called *uchawi* and one who practices witchcraft is called *mchawi* (Magesa 1997, 180). Among the Kikuyu a witch is a *murogi* (Kenyatta, 288), while among the Kamba she is *muoi* (Magesa 1997, 181). Magesa (1997, 181) argues that witchcraft is understood as part of the mystery of the human person. Witches acquired witchcraft through inheritance and in this way it is transmitted from parent to children. But witchcraft can also be purchased (Magesa, 1997, 182). There are elaborate ceremonies of passing on witchcraft from parent to children. In many African societies witchcraft is associated with women (Magesa 1997, 182). Witches are anti-life and some witches go to the extent of even harming their own kin. According to Magesa (1997, 189) witchcraft is the enemy of life.

In many African traditional societies, witchcraft was greatly feared and those who were considered to perpetuate it were shunned. During initiation rituals young people were warned against marrying from families which were suspected of practicing witchcraft. Among the Akamba, there was a council of elders called *King'ole* which was mandated with the responsibilities of identifying witches and punishing them (Gehman 1989, 85). Among the Lamba of Zambia when one was convicted of witchcraft she was speared to death Magesa (1997, 189). Despite the severe punishments meted on perceived witches the practice persisted.

### **Modernity, New Religions and Mystical Powers**

Before the coming of modern science and its attendant changes in Eastern Africa, many societies were largely influenced by African cultural beliefs and practices that included religion. The African cultural world view had an elaborate belief system that governed all aspects of life (Mbiti 1969,1). Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century western missionaries started their evangelization of the East African countries Mugambi (2002, 42). Missionaries and colonialists came with their belief system which was different from the African belief system. It is important to note that although the Arabs had been in Eastern Africa for many centuries they were able to accommodate African beliefs within their Islamic religion (Lavtzion & Pouwels 2001, 1). The interaction between Islam and African culture produced what today



is called Swahili culture, a blend between African and Islamic culture. Kiswahili language emerged as the lingua franca to facilitate communication between the two cultures.

Due to the influence of social Darwinism, western missionaries and colonialists came to Eastern Africa with imperialist and a conquering mentality which was based on a false assumption that western culture was superior and that missionary and colonial officers had a divine duty to replace African belief system with Christianity and western culture. These two, missionaries and colonial officers did not even for a moment contemplate a dialogue with African cultures.

Western missionaries, writers and commentators have condemned the African belief in mystical powers as being 'primitive' and satanic. Gehman (1989, 118) hold that 'the Bible teaches that behind genuinely extra ordinary, supernatural of traditional religion is the work of demonic spirits.' This was tantamount to questioning the validity of belief in the power of mystical realities in Africa as this was thought as not being 'real.' Similarly, western missionaries tend to condemn both the witches and medicine-men in the process ignoring not only the benefits that accrue from mystical powers especially with regard to psycho-social aspects of life in African, but also the duality of mystical powers representing both the good and the evil. It is significant to appreciate the fact that African medicine-men were and continue to penetrate the spiritual realm and counter evil forces presented by witchcraft and other malevolent forces. The failure by Western missionaries, writer and commentators threw out the baby with the bath water. They did not bother to understand the dual nature of African mystical powers.

Despite the missionary's condemnation of African mystical powers, many Africans continued practicing the same powers albeit secretly. The innocent Christians who fully abided with the missionary's interpretation of mystical powers suffered because they could still be affected by witches who had accepted Christianity but still practiced it within the church. Some Christians within the church consulted traditional medicine-men secretly to deal with the effects of witchcraft, a contradiction to their professing Christianity.

The colonial governments in East Africa condemned witchcraft and tried through judicial means to eradicate it. Between 1954-1955, the British colonial government in Ukambani in Kenya forced suspected witches to handover their paraphernalia and a total of 1,800 women and 150 men complied (Nottingham 1959, 2-14). It is interesting to note that some of the so called ‘witchcraft paraphernalia’ were part of African aesthetics such as necklaces and beads, a testimony that the mystical power did not subsist in the physical realm.

After independence the East African states drafted laws which outlawed the practice of witchcraft and criminalized witches and witchdoctors. For example, in Kenya Witchcraft Act of 1967 was enacted while in Tanzania Witchcraft Ordinance of 1965 was enacted. Since witchcraft and the exercise of mystical powers had been identified as a retrogressive practice these laws were passed to make the practices illegal.

### **Human Rights, Witchcraft, mystical powers in Contemporary East Africa**

Despite the condemnation of witchcraft by the missionaries, colonists, and other western commentators and analysts, the practice of witchcraft has persisted in the contemporary East African society as in other parts of Africa. Piot (1999, 247-248) reviewing Geschiere’s book (1997) writes “The entanglement of witchcraft, the occult, and the seemingly traditional with the state and modernity, is a widespread phenomenon throughout contemporary postcolonial West Africa.” He observes that Geschiere’s argument throughout his book shows that witchcraft is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Since the traditional methods of dealing with witchcraft were stopped by introduction of Christianity and modernism some individuals have been involved in witch hunting, lynching and killing of suspected witches in several parts of East Africa.

Throughout East Africa various cases of harassment and other forms of human rights violations have been witnessed. Reports exist of inhuman treatment, harassment, cruelty violence and even killing of not only suspected witches but even their accomplices or even relatives. For example, in 1993, 44 men and women were

burnt to death in Kisii and Nyamira. On 17<sup>th</sup>. October 2021, four old women were lynched in a village in Kisii as reported in media<sup>5</sup> In Kilifi in Kenya the media also reported hunting of old men and women who are suspected of practicing witchcraft and this has caused untold suffering, uncertainty and panic among the aged.<sup>6</sup> These actions are not only contrary to the Constitution of Kenya, 2010<sup>7</sup> and especially the bill of rights in chapter 4 but a violation of international human rights instruments treaties and convention that have been assented to and ratified by Kenya. There are also other laws which protect rights of individuals such as Prevention of torture Act, Victim protection Act, legal aid Act. In Africa we have the protocol to the African charter on Human rights and Rights of the older person.

In Tanzania, a total of 479 suspected witches were killed between January and June 2017.<sup>8</sup> This is besides the thousands of elderly Tanzanians and albinos whose human rights have been violated through cruel and inhuman treatment between 2000 and 2017.<sup>9</sup> These actions have been condemned by human rights groups who have expressed concern on the rising wave of witch hunting and killings with very few investigations leading to few prosecutions.<sup>10</sup> In Uganda and DRC children have been killed in witchcraft related rituals.<sup>11</sup>

Beliefs in mystical powers, and witchcraft is a universal phenomenon. Western missionaries and anthropologists commenting on witchcraft in Africa depict it as a unique African phenomenon. However, the truth is that belief in mystical powers, and witchcraft has been manifest in the history of all human societies from primordial. Gehman (1989, 102), writes ‘witchcraft, and sorcery are found in every corner of the globe.’ This is supported by Parrinder (1958, 138) who opines, “there is an astonishing resemblance between these modern African beliefs and those of the European centuries ago.” During the middle ages, European countries fought

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-03-wr-19640-story.html>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://web.facebook.com/K24TVNews/posts/witches-of-kilifi-residents-fear-being-bewitched-by-witchdoctors-in-vilagoni-k24/10156289219183141/?\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/K24TVNews/posts/witches-of-kilifi-residents-fear-being-bewitched-by-witchdoctors-in-vilagoni-k24/10156289219183141/?_rdc=1&_rdr)

<sup>7</sup> See Government of Kenya, 2010. Constitution of Kenya, Arts 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 44, 47, 48, 50 & 57 among others.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.africanews.com/2017/08/01/tanzania-witch-killings-claimed-479-lives-from-January-June-2017-report/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-07-02/witchcraft-child-sacrifice-uganda-victims/11248026>

against witchcraft and it is documented that the Roman Catholic Church fought witchcraft and supported witch hunting (Federic 2004, 68).

A cursory look at the doctrines of different religions reveal that witchcraft is frequently mentioned in the negative with a view of eliminating the practice. For example, in the Quran (113:3; 2:10; 2:102) witchcraft and sorcery are condemned. The Quran (13:2-4; 133:5) provides further evidence on how to ward off witchcraft as a social evil. This is bolstered by Maquelier (2008, 132) who holds that Islam forbids the practice of witchcraft. In both the Old and New Testaments, the Christian faith considers witchcraft as a social vice. In Exodus (22:18), it is commanded that “do not allow a sorcerer to live,” while Leviticus (20:27) commands that “a man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; your blood will be on their own heads.” Deuteronomy (18:10) directs “... no one *should* be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practice divination or sorcery, interprets omens, and engages in witchcraft” (emphasis mine). Finally, Galatians (5:20) lists witchcraft as an act of sinful nature. In all these instances, doctrines from different religions converge on supporting persons associate with witchcraft and sorcery in any way to be subjected to cruel and inhuman treatment engendering gross violation of human rights. Christianity and Islam being the dominant religions in East Africa find the use religion as ready armament to use in witch hunting and other forms and practices of mystical power. To the larger population, religion, one of the moral foundation in society is seen to support forms of human rights violations which in the eyes of human rights advocates and defenders is obnoxious.

Witchery in many world cultures has a serious impact on human rights violation. First, in many communities around the world, witchcraft related beliefs and practices have resulted in serious violations of human rights including, beatings, banishment, cutting of body parts, and amputation of limbs, torture and murder. Secondly, the victims of witchcraft suffer severe consequences. For women, witchcraft can cause barrenness, while farms and livestock are caused to become unproductive. At individual level, personal health can be adversely affected with some individuals rendered mad, while children involuntarily refuse to attend schooling sessions (Mbiti 1969, 203). This leads to poor, unfulfilling and life of

indignity. On the other hand, wanton hunting of witches on many occasions has led to violation of human rights with suspects being hounded out of their homes. Many a time, those suspected of being witches end up being innocent, as evidence where the aged and poor are targeted. For example, in 22 October 2021 HelpAge International reported that four older women accused of being “witches” were lynched and murdered by members of their community in Kenya. It went on to report that allegations of witchcraft were on the increase in certain parts of Kenya, and such accusations, mainly targeting innocent old men and women often led to barbaric acts of violence. These allegations are often from members of their own family seeking to profit from their death.<sup>12</sup>

### **Managing Human Rights Challenges**

Chapter four of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010<sup>13</sup> provides a robust, progressive and expansive Bill of Rights which recognizes human rights as inherent to every human being and not granted by the State. This acts as check for human rights violations. In traditional African societies, there were checks and balances which guaranteed innocent people were protected from witchcraft, and witch hunting. Among the Akamba of Eastern Kenya, there was a council called *King'ole* which was composed of elders of high standing in society, and some young well behaved men (Gehman 1989, 85). The mandate of the *King'ole* was to dispense justice both to the suspected witches and victims of witchcraft. When individuals reported that they were bewitched, the council carried out thorough investigations to verify the veracity of their claims. This involved consulting several respected medicine-men. They consulted between three and five medicine men and when there was a consensus, the suspected witches would be summoned to a meeting of the council together with their close relatives. The charges and report of the council's findings would be tabled. If the suspects agreed with the findings of the *King'ole*, several measures were taken as interventions that mitigated human rights. One option would be to request to undo the effects of their work by spitting on the victim by uttering some words after which they would be reprimanded in the presence of their

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.helpage.org/news/older-people-must-be-protected-from-witchcraft-accusations/>

<sup>13</sup> See Republic of Kenya, 2010. Constitution of Kenya. <http://kenyalaw.org/lex/actview.xql?actid=Const2010>

relatives to desist from practicing witchcraft. The second option would involve the witch consuming a concoction prepared by a medicine-man which would neutralize the efficacy of their witchcraft. The third would see the witch expelled from the community. The final would be invoked if and when the witch persisted with their practice. This would be invoked on the orders of the *King'ole* who would order the witch to be killed by use of arrows. To show approval of the verdict of the *King'ole*, it was the husband of the suspected witch who threw the first arrow and then soldiers of the *King'ole* would accomplish the remaining task. It is important to note that, those who brought false accusations of witchcraft, would be investigated and if it turned to be false, they too would be severely punished (Gehman 1989, 85). This was seen as a mitigation on any possible human rights violations. This would be in form of offering forced apologize and would be forced to compensate the suspected accused. The *King'ole* institution in traditional Akamba society thus ensured justice, and, promotion and protection of human rights.

Idowu (1973, 175) holds that 'to Africans of every category witchcraft is an urgent reality.' This existential and spiritual reality is what the missionaries termed false belief. Given this misunderstanding of witchcraft, western writers and analysts did not quite come to terms with the institution of mystical operation in Africa and this may be the reason the practice of witchcraft continued even within some membership of the church. The immediate effect of this ambivalence was that, medicine men were outlawed but the practice of witchcraft continued albeit underground. The act of outlawing medicine men was taken oblivious of the fact of medicine men's role in the mystical power equation. They could tap mystical powers to protect individuals from the effects of witchcraft as well as provide remedy for those who had been bewitched. The condemnation of the medicine-men meant that the community became exposed and vulnerable to the use and abuse by practitioners of mystical powers. The condemnation of medicine-men did not only expose the community to vulnerability but also led to the emergence of impostors who began advertising their trade in the Eastern African region. Gakuya (2020, 4) observes that 'there are ... a lot [many] quacks who ... entered traditional medicine either as practitioners or traders.' The consequence of this was to cause confusion for those who sought the services of medicinemen who had now gone underground.

This meant the art of practicing medicine had been pushed into secrecy but significantly was that membership now included African Christians who feared being exposed by the church as purveyors of evil.

Since many missionaries came from societies which had already dealt with witchcraft, they remained ignorant of the social and psychological challenges Africans were going through and did not understand the weight of the challenges Africans faced. African beliefs were brushed aside and termed primitive. The missionaries failed to understand that belief in mystical powers was so real to Africans and that in fact some were already victims of the practice of witchcraft. The argument brought forward was that mystical powers would fade away with the entry of hristianity and passage of time. But for Africans there were real challenges impacting on their physical as well psychological wellbeing that required attention. To date, the mainstream Christian churches in Africa have been casual in the manner they have handled the challenge posed by the presence of mystical powers. This, in turn has impacts human rights in a significant way, either for the victims or practitioners of the mystical powers.

### **The Entry of New Religious Movements**

With the coming of the revival movement in East Africa, a new mode of expressing Christianity emerged.<sup>14</sup> The revival began in Gahini in Rwanda, then spread to Kenya and Tanzania (Kinoti 1989, 60). This new Christian expression was widely embraced by students in schools, colleges and universities (Kinoti 1989, 60). The revival movement stressed the use of the Holy Spirit in dealing with physical as well as psychosocial challenges. The revivalists preached about spiritual healing as well as exorcism of evil spirits. They preached that through the use of the Holy Spirit, challenges such as witchcraft and generational curses could be overcome. The mainstream churches initially opposed the revival movement but later some of its members embraced it. The revival movement together with Pentecostalism

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<sup>14</sup>In Christianity, revivalism means the general renewed religious fervor, some form of spiritual awakening. However this primarily is a movement in some Protestant churches to revitalize the spiritual zeal of their members and to win new adherents, with a view to making christianity more popular and more influential.

presented a new and effective way of dealing with mystical powers.<sup>15</sup> In Eastern Africa, there emerged a category of pastors who through prayers and the use of Holy Spirit dealt with all sorts of challenges in African societies but previously frowned upon by earlier Christian missionaries. Currently many people and especially Christians do approach these pastors to solve their problems. However, some of these pastors have been accused of misuse of religion for financial gain and syncretism (Gehman 1989, 271).

Although the revival movement as well as the African independent churches are able to deal with some African cultural issues confronting contemporary society the challenge is that only a small percentage of African population patronize them. The majority of Africans have remained in the mainstream churches.

### **Mystical Powers and the law in East Africa**

Due to the menace posed by witchcraft and mystical powers governments in East Africa chose the legal ways and laws have been enacted to deal with this. The colonial governments just like the missionaries were largely influenced by western cultural prejudices and eccentric positions. Due to their poor understanding of the nature and role of mystical powers, most of the laws were ambiguous and difficult to execute. For example, in Kenya, the Witchcraft Act, Cap 67 of the Laws of Kenya states that;

Any person who holds himself out as a witchdoctor able to cause fear, annoyance or injury to another in mind, person or property, or who pretends to exercise any kind of supernatural power, witchcraft, sorcery or enchantment calculated to cause such fear, annoyance or injury, shall be guilty of an offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years<sup>16</sup>

The Act does not categorically state who a witchdoctor is or what witchcraft is. This being the case, the concept witchdoctor remains tacked in its acquired negative connotation associated with mystical powers having no social benefit at all. This is

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<sup>15</sup> Pentecostalism is a Protestant Charismatic Christian movement that emphasizes direct personal experience of God through baptism. Pentecostals put a lot of emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit, for example to make people who are sick healthy again, and that everything in the Bible is true. Pentecostals are distinguished by their unique belief that an individual can serve as a conduit for supernatural gifts endowed by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>16</sup> Republic of Kenya 2012, The Witchcraft Act, Chapter 67 Laws of Kenya, Sec. 2.



in stark contrast to the people's perception. This law is thus largely ineffective and does not help in identifying a witchdoctor or a witch. Mutungi (1971, 5) argues that 'there are no universally agreed criteria [anywhere or] even in East Africa on what constitutes witchdoctor. He reiterates 'that, despite the ambiguity presented by the Witchcraft Act, - Witchcraft fears and all that go with them exists and haunt a large proportion of native Africans, both educated and uneducated. The laws are not even clear on those who are falsely accused of witchcraft. The Kenya constitution in the preamble recognizes that, "[e]very person has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion.<sup>17</sup> This an important statement about the protection and promotion of human rights of everyone and suspicion of being a witch is not good reason to violates one's rights. In Tanzania just like in other countries in East Africa, the government has not come up with adequate legislation covering witchcraft and mystical powers (Masaki (2009, 138). However, the government recognizes witchcraft as a stumbling block to national development. Mesaki (2009, 138) observes that a vague law is useless in precisely dealing with the challenges posed by witchcraft as much as handling the challenges posed by a metaphysical phenomena, mystical powers. Various bodies in Tanzania have categorically stated that the witchcraft Act is outdated and should be reviewed.<sup>18</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Witchcraft and witch hunting are moral issues. Those who use witchcraft to harm others do so for evil reasons. In all religions, there is the dichotomy of the good and the evil. Religions world over have devised ways of explaining the presence of good and evil by creating two opposing realities. In Christianity, there is a God who is supposed to be good. Evil is associated with the devil. In African Traditional Religions, God is thought as good and evil is associated with evil spirits. Witchcraft is associated with anti-life forces. Africans believe that God gifted some individuals with supernatural powers to neutralize the powers of those who cause evil in society. There were specific social institutions which dealt with issues that threatened life.

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<sup>17</sup> Republic of Kenya, 2010. Constitution of Kenya Art 32(1)).

<sup>18</sup><https://www.africanews.com/2017/08/01/tanzania-witch-killings-claimed-479-lives-from-january-june-2017-report/>

The Akamba had *king'ole* which discouraged practice of witchcraft. There was belief in the wholeness of life. The society socialized individual to always protect life. Life among Africans was sacred and all that needed to be done was done to ensure its sanctity. All these present avenues and institution that promoted and protected human rights in traditional Africa. The entry of prented new challenges that could not clearly be defined and handled by traditional societies.

The author holds the view that, the main stream Christian religions and Islam in East Africa should be contextualized so that the useful aspects of Africa culture are preserved while weeding out the destructive aspects. Witchcraft is one such issues which should be condemned by all the religious traditions prevailing in East Africa. The use of mystical powers as happens through the practice of witchcraft becomes an obstacle to the actualization of one's wholeness of life. Religions in East Africa should socialize its membership on how to respond to witchcraft in all its forms while sparing and equating it wholesomely to the institution of mystical powers. Governments and religious leaders should sensitize citizens to respect rights of others. There should be a mechanism and institutions that protect the human rights of those vulnerable, suspected and accused of witchcraft including those suspected purely on account of advanced age.

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