

WITCH HUNTS IN MODERN SOUTH AFRICA: AN UNDER-REPRESENTED FACET OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Yaseen Ally
June 2009

BACKGROUND

- Evidence exists that indicates that witch hunts exist in modern South Africa where a witch hunt is taken to refer to a situation whereby a person is accused of witchcraft and perceived as the cause of others' misfortune, illness or death through supernatural means.
- Those accused of witchcraft are often subjected to violence from others which may result in their injury or death [1].
- Accusers are likely to be neighbours, members of the immediate community, and in some cases family members [1].
- Most witch hunts are directed at women, although there have been reports of witch hunts against men.
- Burning, hanging, stoning and beatings are among the types of violence the accused are subjected to.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED BY 'WITCHES'

Having established the existence of beliefs in witchcraft and 'witches', a study was undertaken to understand phenomena and consequences of belief in witchcraft and 'witches'.

The study was based on an analysis of newspaper reports making reference to witchcraft during the period 2000 to 2008.

Preliminary analysis has revealed that damage to property was the most common for violence experienced by those accused of witchcraft. Being forced relocate from one village to another was the next common type of violence experience, followed by being beaten and being burnt (see Figure 1). Other forms of violence included being stoned, hacked, hanged, shot and dismissed from work.

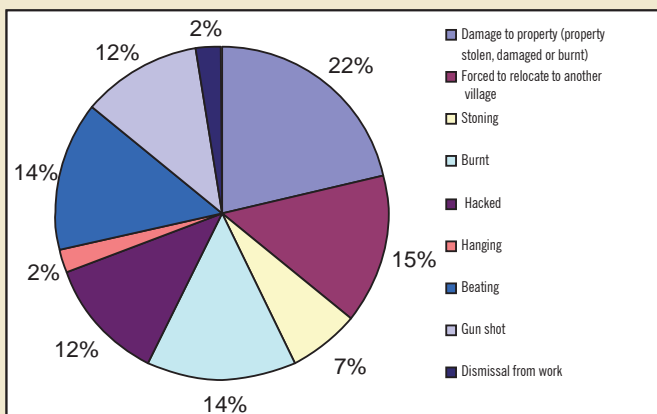


Figure 1: Distribution of types of violence experienced by 'witches' in South Africa



RISK FACTORS RELATED TO WITCH HUNTS

Concentration in certain provinces and rural areas [2]:

- Witch hunts are largely found in rural communities of South Africa.
- In particular, communities in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal provinces reportedly have a prevalence of witch hunts.

Economic elements of witch hunts [3]:

- Competition for scarce resources is connected to witch accusations.
- Apparently, relatively wealthier members of a community are targeted by others as they are believed to have used witchcraft to gain their wealth.
- At the same time relatively poorer members are also accused of causing misfortune to others who lose their economic status in the community or believe they are supposed to be better off than they actually are. Relatively well off persons may accuse poorer members of a community of practicing witchcraft in an attempt to assume ownership of land, property or even livestock.

Socio-psychological dimension of witch hunts [4]:

- 'Witches' are believed to cause misfortune and to bring disease and even death to persons in a community.
- Psychological disturbances, divorce, business misfortune and even HIV/AIDS are believed to be caused by 'witches'.
- Jealousy, rivalry and envy at success or beauty may make individuals vulnerable to an accusation of using bewitchment to attain these attributes.

Age as a factor in witchcraft accusations [1]:

- Most 'witches' are older women. The physical appearance of these women attributable to age seems to be taken as an indicator of the presence of malevolence.



'WITCH' HUNTS AS GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

- Even though some men may have accusations of witch levelled at them, women are more vulnerable to witch accusations and subsequent hunts [5].
- Women who assume power positions, either financially or through a role that provides power, are more vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft from men *and* women.
- Men who level witch accusations against women can be said to be threatened by the socio-economic standing of the accused. Witch hunting is thus essentially about gender-based control in that men assert and reassert their power and control over women's independence, bodies, sexuality and individuality.
- Women who level accusations against other women can be said to function from within a patriarchal ideology, which is used to support the accusers' economic, social, material or psychological needs and motives. Jealousy or envy, as examples, may be the real motive of the accuser but in charging another woman of witchcraft the accuser employs a patriarchal ideology

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

- Non-governmental or cultural activists located within or around the community may have a better understanding of the issues at play, and may not be viewed as a threat to the cultural belief. Approaching them to facilitate engagement by researchers and other professionals with those who accuse others of witchcraft and those so accused about intervention to change violent practices linked to witchcraft beliefs is advised.
- It is important to frame witch hunting as related to place, economic elements, psychosocial motivations and gender power.
- Emphasis should be placed on the violence dimension to witchcraft accusations. Community leaders and government officials in affected areas may need to be sensitised to violence aspects of witchcraft beliefs.
- Increased female involvement in community decision-making needs supporting as it will increase the status of women in these communities, and possibly reduce the stigma attached to women in positions of power.

REFERENCES

1. Briggs, R. (2002). *Witches and neighbours: The social and cultural context of European witchcraft*. USA: Blackwell Publishers.
2. Leff, D., Fontleve, M., Martin, L. (2008). *A pagan witches touchstone*. Cape Town: South African Pagan Alliance.
3. Baten, J., & Woitek, U. (2003). *Economic determinants of witch-hunting*. Retrieved online 20 April 2009 from <http://www.unituebingen.de/uni/www/baten%20woitek%20witic%20final.pdf>
4. Ivey, G & Myers, T. (2008). The psychology of bewitchment (Part I): A phenomenological study of the experience of bewitchment. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 38 (1), 54-74.
5. Roy, P. (1998). Sanctioned Violence: Development and persecution of women as witches in South Bihar. *Development in Practice*, 8 (2), 136-147.



CONTACT DETAILS:

MRC-UNISA Crime, Violence and Injury Lead Programme

P.O. Box 19070, Tygerberg, 7505, South Africa

Tel: +27 21 0534 | Fax: +27 21 938 0381 | E-mail: annelise.krige@mrc.ac.za

Website: <http://www.mrc.ac.za/crime.crime.htm>

Institute for Social & Health Sciences

University of South Africa

P.O. Box 1087, Lenasia, 1820, South Africa

Tel: +27 11 857 1142/3 | Fax: +27 11 857 1770 | E-mail: Lourilo@unisa.ac.za

Website: <http://www.unisa.ac.za/ishs>