**Witch Trials in the 21st Century**

**By Mary Schons**

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The most famous witch trial in history happened in Salem, Massachusetts, during the winter and spring of 1692-1693. When it was all over, 141 suspects, both men and women, were tried as witches. Nineteen were executed by hanging. One was pressed to death by heavy stones.

However, witch trials are not a thing of the past. Indeed, charges of witchcraft and trials of suspected witches are increasing.

**Witchcraft**

The word witchcraft has good and bad meanings in different cultures around the world. A general definition of witchcraft is the changing of everyday events usingsupernatural or magical forces.

Witchcraft is usually associated with the power of nature, such as medicinal and poisonous plants, or rains and floods. People accused of witchcraft are said to be able to control natural events such as storms or droughts.

So-called “witch doctors” use combinations of plants and animals, as well as spirituality or supernatural ability, to treat medical conditions. These “witch doctors” are not accused of being witches themselves—they heal illnesses and ailments blamed on witchcraft. “Witch doctor” is often a derogatory term for a traditional healer.Traditional healers, who rely on ancient remedies, are not witch doctors.

Unlike traditional healers, witch doctors use spells. Spells are words or phrases that are suspected of having magical powers. Casting a spell to be wealthy or lucky in love is an example of witchcraft.

Why do some people believe in witchcraft? Using the example of the love spell, some people may believe that the spell is the thing that brought them happiness. However, some people who are unlucky in love may believe that someone is using witchcraft against them.

People try to come up with reasons for their own bad luck, or someone else’s good luck. If someone is really lucky, some people believe they must have cast a spell or made a deal with the devil in order to be so fortunate.

**Belief in Witches**

Belief in witchcraft is widespread. A 2005 poll of Canadians and people from the United Kingdom found that 13 percent believed in witches. For Americans, that number was even higher: 21 percent.

Most people do not believe in magical witches, of course. Sometimes, though, normally logical people blame supernatural powers for their misfortune.

Today, witch trials occur all over the world. Organizations like the United Nations and Stepping Stones Nigeria have found that the number of witch trials around the world is increasing. They are almost always violent, and sometimes they are deadly.

When people get sick, witchcraft is sometimes seen as the cause. This is especially true in places with poor medical care or few educational opportunities. Although belief in witchcraft is not limited to the developing world, witch trials occur more frequently there.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 25 percent of pregnant women in Zambia are infected with HIV or AIDS. Men, women, and children are accused of spreading HIV/AIDS through witchcraft. Some of the accused are leaders in the scientific community or government advisers. So-called “witch hunters” have been known to kill those accused of witchcraft with a so-called poisonous “tea.” In one town in Zambia, a witch hunter killed 16 people in fewer than four months.

Dozens of people have been killed in Papua New Guinea, the eastern half of the tropical island of New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean. In January 2009, a young girl was burned alive, accused of being a witch and infecting men with HIV/AIDS. A month later, a father and son were also burned to death after being accused of witchcraft.

Accusations of witchcraft can be associated with good luck as well as bad luck. Nigeria’s oil boom, which began in the 1970s, has made a few of its citizens extremelywealthy. Some Nigerians explain this rapid accumulationof money and power as a sign of witchcraft. As recently as 2007, children accused of witchcraft in Nigeria were burned, poisoned, and abused.

In 2008, rumors that a successful soccer player was using witchcraft triggered a riot in Kinshasa, Congo. The riot and stampede killed 13 people.

In India, landowning women are sometimes accused of witchcraft. Neighbors of the suspected witch may begin collecting firewood on which the suspect will burn. The women, often older widows, are scared enough to leave their homes. Their neighbors then take their land.

People who look different are often the victims of witch trials. In Tanzania, albino people are in danger of being killed for their skin and body parts. Since 2007, more than 50 albinos have been killed for ritual use. Tanzanian witch-doctors believe the arms, legs, skin, and hair of albinos have special magic in them, and that their use will bring their clients good luck in love, life, and business.

In the Republic of Benin, the country’s government has used people’s fears of witchcraft to explain why some people do better than others. According to many legends, a baby that is not born head-first and with its face upwards is considered to be a witch. The so-called baby witches have been blamed for poor agricultural seasons or illnesses. Many babies are abandoned or killed.

President Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia believes he is being targeted by witches. According to Amnesty International, as many as 1,000 Gambians accused of witchcraft have been arrested and tortured on orders from the president. At least two people are dead. President Jammeh also claims to be able to cure AIDS on Thursdays and fires doctors who disagree with him.

**Stopping Witch Hunts**

So what can be done to stop witch trials or accusations of witchcraft? Trying to stop a witch hunt by saying witches don’t exist doesn’t work. AIDS and poverty are very real sources of fear.

People project their fears onto unfortunate victims. There has never been a proven case of witchcraft in all of human history. On the other hand, there are thousands of victims of witch hunts. People accused of witchcraft, if they survive their ordeal at all, often end up with ruined lives. In the end, it is the witch hunters who should be feared more than the people whom they accuse of witchcraft.

Quick action by respected authority figures is effective in stopping witch hunts. In 2005, an 8-year-old girl in London, England, was accused of being a witch by a family member. The girl’s family abused her and rubbed chili peppers in her eyes to “beat the devil out of her.” British authorities immediately acted to remove the girl from the home. Three family members were held accountable for treating the girl as a witch.

In 1997, the government of South Africa decided to do something about witchcraft fear in that country. They began an educational campaign in schools and workplaces about science, medicine, and HIV/AIDS. They also sent police to work with traditional healers and village chiefs. The police told them if they accuse a person of witchcraft and that person ends up being killed, the healers and village chiefs will be held responsible.