Witchcraft and Witch-Killings in Tanzania Paradox and Dilemma

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Abstract
This dissertation is about the origins, historical development and current manifestations of witchcraft belief and practice in Africa, especially Tanzania. Witchcraft is examined as a socially constructed system of meaning and action which confront ruling elites with paradox and dilemma. These contradictions are rooted in colonialism. Colonial rulers regarded witchcraft as evidence of backwardness. They strove to suppress it through law and acculturation but with little success. Instead, Africans joined popular anti-witchcraft movements to cleanse their communities. Although the rulers condemned these movements and other traditional means of combating witchcraft, they recognized their necessity in maintaining social order. Thus they adopted a policy of "watchful tolerance" towards witchcraft cleansing. Post-colonial elites are caught in similar but more exquisite dilemma. If they admit that witchcraft exists and seek ways to control it, they contradict modernity. Denying witchcraft deprives the state of official instruments of control. If they acknowledge traditional witch-cleansers they reinforce witchcraft beliefs and assail modernization. Outlawing witch-cleansing, drives it into a form of popular movements which contravenes state authority. Tanzania provides an especially poignant case of such dilemmas. Tanzanians have built a secular and socialist state, progressing in the delivery of essential services. But they remain beset with witchcraft practices and beliefs which contradict socialist ideals of living, working and advancing together. Their programs of economic development and "villagization" counter some material and social causes of witchcraft but promote yet others. The dissertation deals with these conditions of dilemma among Tanzanians generally and then among one ethnic group, the Sukuma, specifically. Witchcraft is manifested dramatically in the apparent murder of Sukuma witches. This phenomenon is investigated and its distinguishing characteristics delineated. It is explained as a function of the cosmology of the residents, failure of the state to grapple with witchcraft, and the progressive commercialization of detection and execution of alleged witches. The future of witchcraft in Tanzania is projected. Witchcraft will likely continue as a culturally constructed meaning system because the contributing factors to it prevail and state authorities remain unable to change the system or escape its dilemmas.