The Psychology of Witchcraft
A study of albino killings in Tanzania

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20/10/2015
Background

• Albinism is a genetic mutation condition resulting in lack of skin, eye, and hair pigmentation
• 1 in 1400 in Tanzania is an albino
• 75 killed since 2000, 29 mutilations and attempted murders, 18 grave robberies (Under the Same Sun, 2002 and 2004)
• Body parts used to fashion amulets that are believed to bring good luck, wealth, and protection from misfortunes
Most killings have been taking place in rural areas of Mwanza, Kagera, Geita, and Shinyanga.
Problem Statement

• The rising number of killed albinos in Tanzania has become a social problem
• These killings are associated with witchcraft
• This research aims to better understand the psychological factors involved in the belief
• It aims to explain the “why” of the issue from a psychological perspective
Objectives

• To review and evaluate pre-existing knowledge on the psychology of witchcraft
• To evaluate the applicability of classical psychological theories to the understanding of the problem
• To generate new ideas on how this social problem can be tackled from a different angle, that which is psychological
Methodology

- Secondary qualitative data research on the topic of witchcraft and primitive magical thinking
- Refereed journal articles from:
  - Google Scholar
  - JStor
  - Online Wiley
- Books
- Newspaper articles
Methodology

• Texts analyzed
  – Evans Pritchard (1944), *Witchcraft*
  – Clyde Kluckhohn (1971), *Navajo Witchcraft*
  – William James (1889), *The Psychology of Belief*
  – Simeon Mesaki (2009), *Witchcraft and the Law in Tanzania*
Findings

• Belief in witchcraft is a utilitarian cognitive blueprint used to explain and cope with the environment
  – Explain events in terms of causation, a source of blame for misfortunes (Pritchard, 1971)
  – Source belief of control for the future
  – Fills the gap of knowledge between “strange” phenomena and scientific explanations (James, 1889)
  – Explains why albinism is associated with curses, ghosts, and other dark themes—leading to stigmatization
Findings

• Is belief in witchcraft strong enough to drive an individual to kill?

• Yes, when coupled with psychoanalytic factors
  – Belief guides, frames, and constructs reality (James, 1889; Kluckhohn 1971; Pritchard, 1944)
  – Associating the victim with negative themes gives leeway for moral bending
  – The promise of benefits from engaging in witchcraft is a form of justification
Findings

• Psychoanalytic factors
  – Anxiety arising from a strenuous environment plagued with poverty and insecurity
  – Disorganized irrational behavior (Marwick, 1948)
    • Displaced blame
    • Irrational fear
    • Mystical promises
Conclusion

• Psychologically, belief in witchcraft as well as primitive magical thinking do have a role in the killings
• Psychological events contribute to the utility of witchcraft by the people
Recommendations

• Community sensitization on albinism as a health condition
• Community education on the harm of the killing practice
• Counseling for both the victims and perpetrators
Recommendations

• Research on the community psychological toll of the events
• Research on the effectiveness of current sanction measures to curb the killings
• Research on the “who” of the matter
Limitations of study

- Not many findings are based on research done in Tanzania
- Psychological focus ignores other significant predisposing factors
Thank you!