

Real witchcraft: Potent solutions

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

Just when it seemed that the interminable presidential campaign had plumbed every depth of the absurd, witchcraft entered the picture. To the hilarity of Sarah Palin's liberal critics, a video surfaced in which Kenyan Pentecostal bishop Thomas Muthee had invoked blessings on Palin, asking among other things that God "keep her safe from every form of witchcraft." To many people this request discredited Palin's faith, along with churches so apparently out of touch with modernity as to accept the reality of demons and witchcraft.

Yet understanding the modern experience of witchcraft is critically important for any attempt to appreciate the appeal of Christianity worldwide. Across much of the global South, and above all in Africa, belief in witchcraft—the idea that malevolent individuals can inflict harm at a distance, using occult means—is an unavoidable reality. Such beliefs have actually grown as rural people have flooded into great cities, where merciless witch hunts claim hundreds of lives. For Christians, dealing with beliefs about witchcraft is a central aspect of church life and one of the most urgent pastoral problems.

Overwhelmingly, Christians who confront witchcraft are not preaching or advocating a belief in supernatural evil, but rather recognizing that such an idea exists, and offering means to combat and eradicate it. This distinction is pivotal. Only someone who has lived in a society saturated with tales of curses and sorcerers can understand those tales' destructive consequences. Reports that one has been targeted by sinister rivals can destroy an individual, inflicting ruinous psychological damage and wrecking one's reputation. In that sense, witchcraft really can kill.

What can Christians do in such a demon-haunted society, where a simple denial of the reality of the problem proves utterly unconvincing? Some of the most imaginative solutions come from Roman Catholic and Anglican groups who struggle against malicious allegations and paranoia but who still treat the underlying belief system with respect. In 2004, for instance, the Inculturation Task Force of Zambia's Catholic Church produced a [manual](#) for Christian communities struggling with issues

of traditional supernatural healing and witchcraft.

Once the obviously false cases have been weeded out, churches must deal with instances of real witchcraft and cursing. Most churches unashamedly resort to spiritual warfare, deploying different weapons from the church's historic arsenal of prayer, exorcism and anointing. However hard it may be for Northern churches to accept, such campaigns are overwhelmingly positive. By offering distinctively Christian solutions, churches disarm the bloody practices of antiwitchcraft rituals and discredit the cultish mass movements that arise from them. If ordinary people come to accept that their prayers can destroy the wiles of witches, there is no reason to pursue or torment those individuals. Society can begin the gradual process of turning the stereotypical witch into a crazy person—unpleasant possibly, but harmless, and even comical.

Effective solutions to witchcraft have still more far-reaching results. In a relatively short time, the Christian emphasis on prayer and Bible reading defuses the fatalism inherent in a traditional system based on notions of pervasive supernatural evil. When Christians are taught to rely on faith, they can understand that the individual is no longer a slave to destiny or fate—an astonishing historical innovation that amounts to a psychic and cultural declaration of independence. By taking older notions of spiritual evil seriously, by dealing with witchcraft as a real problem for which the churches have their own potent solutions, Christians are leading an epochal cultural revolution, of the kind that Europeans lived through in the 16th and 17th centuries.

If tempted to mock African ideas of witchcraft, Euro-Americans should remember that we are not so far removed from our own modern-day witch hunts. In the decade after 1984, after all, virtually every U.S. media outlet gave widespread coverage to ludicrous and wholly false claims about the activities of Satanist gangs and murder rings on American soil, including the mass ritual abuse of small children. Just how did the notorious McMartin preschool case differ from a classic witch hunt, except in the vast role played by the mass media? Perhaps such night terrors are deeply embedded in the human psyche, and societies exorcize them according to their own cultural traditions. The West turns to secular therapy, Africa to spiritual forms of search and rescue. Each method can claim its successes and failures.