
Witchcraft and the Theology of Development in Malawi: A Case Study of Youths' Involvement in Witchcraft Accusations and Violence

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The article examines the involvement of youths in witchcraft accusations and violence and its impact on development. Youths are the largest sector of the population in Malawi, estimated at half of Malawi's population. If strategically harnessed, this demographic dividend could help the nation achieve its ambitious development aspirations (UNICEF-Malawi Youth 2020). The implementation of the vision "Malawi 2063" is largely reliant on energetic young people to achieve the development aspirations of the nation (Resolution Malawi 2063). Unfortunately, there are impediments such as witchcraft related issues that distract youths' focus on development. Young people's involvement in perpetrating witchcraft accusations and violence in the country has affected the development of the country.

This article aims to critically examine youths' involvement in witchcraft related accusations and violence and its effects on development. Witchcraft accusations and violence sabotage the development conscience of the people of God. They also provide a fertile ground for passing on witchcraft beliefs and accusations to the next generations, thereby weakening dependence on the power of God. The article advocates guiding and empowering young people in transformative engagements which would not only provide a conducive environment for economic development in society but also build a society of responsible and accountable citizens. The article is a theological contribution to the debate and discussion of the importance of churches' involvement in eradicating witchcraft related accusations and violence. It will suggest ways of dealing with this vice.

A case study situates the typical behaviour of young people in many societies in Malawi, and generally in Africa, when it comes to witchcraft-related issues. For privacy and security purposes, I call the late chief GVH Chim'bwabwa. The accused is named Chinyama. The two are the key characters in the scene. This is qualitative research based on interviews and observations at the scene. Section one of the article is an introduction to the situation. It presents the

importance of supporting the potential of young people in society. It also expands the problem statement and the research methodology that was used. Section two is about witchcraft and theology. This section draws attention to theological teachings on witchcraft and the importance of youths in society, demonstrating that they can be of value to society. Section three is the presentation and analysis of the events of the case study that happened in Rumphu district. The last section is about the conclusions and the way forward.

1. The Importance of Engaging Youths in Responsible Citizenship And Development

A true church is concerned with the affairs of its members in church and society. Participation in dealing with witchcraft issues affects the growth of the church and the development of the country. The vulnerable, such as youths are the most affected. Yet the majority of the society that are negatively affected by witchcraft issues are the youths, who could be energetic leaders of our communities. They need guidance. Sometimes their curiosity to know and discover things by themselves entangles them in situations that may easily induce them to indulge

themselves in activities that jeopardize their focus. Things like drug abuse, violence, and addictions among youths are influenced by their desire to explore through peer pressure and lack of proper guidance as they grow.

If well focused, youths have the potential to bring about positive change and make a significant contribution to society. The need to give them opportunity to participate in productive decision-making discussions, have their voices heard, and empower them to become active citizens to shape the future of their country cannot be over emphasized (Mandalu 2023). Youth's participation in development in any country is pivotal. To a large extent the Malawi government rests its hope on the youth to implement Malawi Vision 2063. At the workshop organized by the National Planning Commission (NPC) of Malawi at Mponera, Dowa in 2021 this was clearly emphasized under the theme, "How can the youth be involved in the implementation of the Malawi Vision 2063" (UNICEF 2021). At the end of the workshop, strategies of how youths might be engaged in supporting and implementing Malawi Vision 2063 were drafted.

It becomes a great concern when youths are left alone, abused, overlooked, undermined and sometimes indulge in acts that demean their God-given responsibility in society. The gain that would be realized from this largest and strongest sector of the population would be enormous in both church and state. They are a vibrant human capital. If well guided and empowered, they can help the nation achieve its ambitious development aspirations. The United Nations experts state that Africa's young people, who are over seventy percent of the population, have the potential to be key to Africa's sustainable development. Guarding them against peer pressure, drug abuse, vandalism, violence, and some traditional beliefs and customs that distract them to build their conscience and to develop their lives might be necessary.

Youths' involvement in perpetrating witchcraft accusations and violence has recently become strangely rampant in Malawi. Church leaders like Bishop Martin Mtumbuka (Nation Publication 2019, 2023, 2024), have lamented that youths' participation in witchcraft accusations and violence in Karonga

Diocese distracts young people from concentrating on their future development and education. He ascribes this problem to ignorance and illiteracy, and he encourages young people to concentrate on education. If we are to achieve and implement vision "Malawi 2063", youths, who are in the majority, have to be guided into right paths of behaviour (Resolution Malawi 2063). The youths' involvement in perpetrating witchcraft thoughts, accusations and violence is a serious retrogression and stumbling block to Malawi's development. It has been noted with concern that many youths are absent from school when there are incidences of witchcraft accusations. Young people are easily swayed away from their focus if not well guided. They are more interested in participating in witchcraft related matters than their studies. In the case study discussed below, young people spent almost two weeks and some days at the scene. Some would even avoid classes just because they wanted to be part of the talks surrounding the event.

The purpose here is to examine youth's involvement in witchcraft related thoughts and accusations, and to learn from the case study and find ways of preventing the kinds of acts that sabotage people's development conscience. Witchcraft related anxieties and accusations are agents of poverty because they hamper the vision of self-development. They doubt the abilities and possibilities of self-development. Above all they undermine the trust and power of God. To bring up our youths in a witchcraft anxiety and accusation-free environment, the church, apart from preaching from the pulpit, has to work hand in hand with other stakeholders including the government law enforcers that protect the vulnerable like the youths. Ruiz (2011) writing from a western point of view, also believes that the church can work with intellectuals to speak against witchcraft accusations in society.

It is possible for African nations to borrow a leaf from the western world. In Europe, witchcraft accusations, trials and punishment stopped as early as the 17th century when the clergy and the intellectuals started to speak against the trials.¹ At that time the region lost a lot of people who were tried and murdered because of having been accused of practicing witchcraft (Ruiz 2011). Europe is a good

¹ Discussions with Prof Paul McKenna from Lancaster University (UK) during dinner in March 2024 when I visited the University for African Research and Innovation Partnership (ARIP). Part of Lancaster campus was a place where witches were murdered.

example not only of how people managed to handle witchcraft issues by sabotaging the stories about witchcraft accusations and punishments but also by unanimously looking at it as an enemy of human rights and mostly caused by poverty and ignorance (Levack 2015). I think that instead of focusing their attention on accusing others, people should start focusing on improving their social economic situation. In Europe, religiously witches, if they existed, were regarded like any other sinner, therefore left for God himself to judge. The church continued preaching against witchcraft like against any other sin without the actual prosecution and killing of the accused.

In the examining the case study before us, we are reflecting on how the involvement of the youths in witchcraft accusations and violence can be eradicated. In the case study in Rumphu district we want to learn that failure to bring up and empower young people in transformative engagements when they are still young breeds bad behaviour. Instead of fearing the Lord they fear witchcraft. Instead of focusing on building their own future they spend time thinking about witchcraft. Instead of developing themselves they spend their time dealing with their fears of witches in their neighborhood. In this case young people are not able to plan and invest in their future because of such fears. As a theological contribution the article persuades young people to stop engaging in witchcraft related stories, accusations and violence. In other words, the case study chosen about the disappearance and the death of a *Fumu ya Muzi* (group village headman) provides one of the typical scenarios of the behavioural dynamics displayed by young people, which if properly studied can help us to determine the causes of such behaviour and find ways of helping them.

A qualitative research method is very suitable. Scholars like William Reid, Anne Fortune, and Robert Muller Jr. describe qualitative research as being able to provide a textured view of social context and systems that may not be possible with quantitative methods. Plus, it may also suggest new lines of inquiry for social work research.² Witchcraft accusations and violence are made against and among humanity. That being the case, the method drives us to investigate the depth of the matter as it affects humanity, along with providing guidelines that are achievable.

The insufficient participation of the church in eradicating witchcraft accusations and violence among the youths has been part of the problem. Interestingly,

this deficiency is also found in other parts of Africa. In Soweto of South Africa where witchcraft accusations are also accompanied by a majority of angry and violent young people taking the lead in accusing the old people in their communities, the Anglican Church and Zionists have also failed to do well. It is reported that the Anglican Church in the area offered little comfort and protection to the accused. The Zionists only insisted on providing a healing ministry over the person who is accused of being a witch without any deliberate effort to help young people not to indulge in violence (Ashforth 2005).

The failure of the church in Soweto was that it mainly demonized the accused. The accuser looked good. Researchers have described such situations where young people indulge themselves in violent acts due to peer pressure, drug abuse and the spirit of violence. It is not uncommon, if youths have nothing to do in their various places, to indulge themselves in bad behaviour. Social events in the community attract the attention of the youths and may provide fertile ground for bad behaviour among some youths. It also happens that where witchcraft accusations have emerged young people get interested in joining the mob and can even participate in beating or harassing the accused. This kind of behaviour informs us that if youths are engaged in meaningful preoccupations and activities such as skills training, jobs, entrepreneurship, or businesses, their lives would be positively different.

2. Witchcraft and Theology

The literature on witchcraft in Africa is massive, with diverse approaches, based on African traditional religions. This article does not have space to adequately cover matters on witchcraft and traditional religions in African. To maintain my focus on the topic, this section is briefly looking at witchcraft and theology so that we are able see what the Bible says about witchcraft and how God expects us to treat witchcraft related matters.

To assist the youths to avoid indulging themselves in witchcraft accusations and violence, one has to sensitize them to the power of God and to the importance of their own potential according to the Bible. They need to know and understand the vanity of relying on belief in witchcraft powers and the accusations and violence leveled against other people. Youths are very important to God. God takes care of

² <https://onlinesocialwork.vcu.edu>, August 2022, and also see Quality Research Work by Anne E. Fortune.

them as well all members of the society. This section provides a biblical theological study of witchcraft by looking at some verses that have to do with witchcraft in the Bible, and also what young people can learn from it. The main purpose is show that the Bible condemns the practice of witchcraft and to warn people against relying on divination and witch hunting.

The Old Testament is full of practices of divination, sorcery and soothsaying (Schofield 2003). Such practices are strongly discouraged and are regarded as unnecessary for those who believe and trust in the God of Israel. God is the one who will perform wonders for his people and who will reveal to them what they need to know. According to Amos 3:7, the words “Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” is good evidence. God’s purpose of revealing himself is that people may know him and follow him accordingly. According to Schofield, “God can be trusted to watch over his people, to bypass the chosen channels of his grace and guidance by occult means is a sure sign of faithlessness” (Schofield 2003).

If a man equates himself with God, he is wasting time. God does not share his glory with any humanity. God is more powerful than all powers including all spirits, real and imagined, and he delivers people from fear of them. For Paul Hiebert (Hiebert and Meneses 1995, 172), He is God whose power cannot be compared with any human beings’ acts and the church should present the biblical views of the power and the greatness of God to people in order to deal with witchcraft fears. However, the Bible also acknowledges that through the influence of the devil, Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15), there are people who can claim to have powers like those of God. These verses capture the impact of the Fall of Lucifer on humanity in the Garden of Eden on earth. Since then, the kingdom of darkness has had some force with which to stand against the power of God. The Bible recognizes the existence of witchcraft from creation. This cannot be a big surprise to people who know and believe in the devil’s existence. At the same time since the fall of humanity, church people have come to recognize the force that stands against Yahweh and his followers, and this force intends to divert and separate humanity from God.

However, the story of God’s calling of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 is a sigh of relief. It is a new start in which God is preparing to mend the relationship between humanity and himself. Through Abraham, God is creating a covenantal relationship (Vanhoozer

2005, 135). To Noah, in Genesis 9:15, God promised not to destroy his people again through the deluge. But with Abraham God established a covenant. Through Abraham he announced he would save his people and be their God. They would be his people if they followed Abraham. God’s words to Abraham (Gen. 12) are very clear that he will make a great nation and bless them with everything they need. He repeats the same sentiments to Moses (Exod. 6:7), David (2 Sam. 7:13), and to almost all the prophets (Isa. 5:5; Jer. 30:18).

Some missiologists have taken these covenantal verses to be strong missiological statements. God is committed to saving his people from all evils including witchcraft. Those believing and trusting in him are supposed to propagate this commitment of God to his people. This God is willing not only to create a new relationship with people but also provide protection (Psalm 23). This Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the Almighty God. His might can never be conquered. Trusting in the God of Abraham requires a total surrender and submission which demands the follower to lay down all other arms that one may find and trust on earth. There is no other power above him; all other ground is sinking sand. When one relies on God, God provides everything that individual needs.

One of the outstanding sins that witchcraft causes in people is the practice of idolatry. Yet the Old Testament condemns idolatry strongly. Divination and witchcraft hunting are very close to idolatry. The practice of idolatry is condemned because it is likened to the behaviour of harlotry in the life of Jezebel who encouraged the worship of many gods (2Kings 9:22). Instead of people focusing their eyes on God as their source of protection, they turn to people and objects as their source of protection and power to conquer evil. In 1 Samuel 15:23, the prophet Samuel gives us a good story of how people can be tempted to turn their trust to divination instead of turning to God in times of difficulties. The prophet associates this behaviour with rebellion against God and rejection of his will. For Samuel, rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance is like the devil of idolatry. In this respect divination is a serious sin in the sense that it is like idolatry whereby the trust and dependence shift to human beings instead of God. In Isaiah 2:6 judgment is pronounced against the house of Jacob “because they are full of diviners from the east and soothsayers like the Philistines.” On the same subject, Micah warns elsewhere “You shall have no more soothsayers.”

It is clear that witchcraft, magic, sorcery, occult, and anything related to these are prohibited in the Bible. In Leviticus 19-20 there are very firm proscriptions, “You shall not practice augury or witchcraft . . . do not turn to mediums or wizards, do not seek them out to be defiled by them³ . . . a man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death, they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them.” God cannot prohibit something that does not exist, so clearly they must exist. He even knows how such things work or happen because he is the “all knowing God” with a total knowledge of all things—past, present, and future, actual and possible—in a single, eternal act, with no need to learn or forget.⁴ Anyone who disobeyed these proscriptions was regarded as an enemy of God. This is evident when Saul visited the witch of Endor and condemned Manasseh the son of Hezekiah who “burned his son as an offering, and practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards (1 Kings 17:6, 18; 21:16). According to Rodney Schofield (2003), divination is not simply a matter of disobedience for the people of Yahweh: it is actually futile whenever and wherever practiced. The other reason why divination is condemned is that soothsayers and diviners treat people as if they are gods. The practice undermines the sovereignty of God. People consulting them shift their allegiance from God as they just look at their present situation and look for the immediate solution forgetting that God is sovereign. Everything that people do is under his control, as he says in Isaiah 44:24-26, “I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth alone—who was with me? I am the one who frustrates the omens of liars and makes fools of diviners and the one who confirms the words of his servants and performs the counsel of his messengers.” Here we can see that soothsayers and diviners are nothing and are futile before God. In the New Testament when Paul lists acts of the flesh he includes idolatry when he says that “those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” In Ephesians they are principalities and powers of the darkness.

Churches that condemn and discourage their church members from indulging themselves in divination and soothsaying are doing well (Nyasulu

2021). They regard divination and soothsaying as some of the ways of promoting witchcraft accusation among church members as well as in society. However, they need to do more. Just focusing much on disciplining their church members without closer engagement with them at a personal or family level is not enough. If they engaged more in discussions with their church members to remove fears of witchcraft it would be good pastoral care given to the members. Also, there is little that is taught to change the life of a person so that after having been helped they find something to change their social and economic life. In charismatic churches church discipline is not rigorous. They and some other Pentecostal churches just emphasize conversion and exorcism and prayers of healing because they teach and believe witchcraft related issues are demonic (Munyenyembe 2012, 211). They have not taught much about social development or on what should be done in life next. The Church should assist in both dealing with witchcraft itself and also changing the socio-economic life of the people it serves.

The power of witchcraft does not supersede that of God, and those who trust God are secured. The youths’ involvement in witchcraft accusations and violence is detrimental to themselves, the church, and society. Parents should stop involving their children in witchcraft accusation matters. In Soweto of South Africa where boys and young men are considered to be inherently aggressive and prone to fighting it has been very difficult to discipline them (Ashforth, 2005). Witchcraft accusations and violence have found a fertile ground in the violence often exacerbated by the volatility of intoxication, coupled with the limited availability of state resources. These have caused harm and destruction in society. Soweto has become a place of danger and fear. Similarly, taking from his research and experience in Bolivia, Robert Priest (2013) noted that witchcraft accusations are mainly ascribed to jealousy, unemployment, unfair distribution of resources, a form of stealing other people’s property, etc. In Malawi, most of these violent acts are ascribed to need and greed, the high unemployment rate, unfair distribution of resources, and also as a form of theft so that they acquire what they want by force.

Still, a person who practices witchcraft is doing evil. He claims to have power over fellow human beings. Also, divination is evil. Such people do cheat

³ Compare Exodus 22:18, a verse invoked in European witch-hunts at Salem, Massachusetts.

⁴ For better understanding read Wayne Grudem’s definitions of God’s omniscience (1994).

people. Their practice too undermines the power and sovereignty of God. Also, the person who goes about to seek help from diviners or soothsayers or witchdoctors is also doing evil because he fears powers of the darkness. The accuser too is doing evil because he employs suspicions and allegations which might be wrong unless proved, or if a person accepts them. Through study of the Bible we see that the power of God is above all powers. It is this power that human beings have to trust in their lives. Spending time thinking about the dangers and fears of witchcraft is detrimental. God himself is in control of everything. Young people have to know this early while they are still young.

3. A Case Study: The Disappearance and Death of a Group Village Headman in Rumphi District

To understand the youth's engagement in witchcraft accusation and violence and find ways of helping them to not indulge themselves in such bad behaviour, one has to be part and parcel of the community. Benjamin Ray confirms this. For him, a person's presence at the scene of long-time sickness, family calamities, and funerals create opportunities where stories of causes or sources of such misfortunes are shared. Generally, such stories about misfortunes and social instability are ascribed to the work of evil men who practice witchcraft (Ray 1976; Onyina 2012).

This section presents a story of a calamity at which I was present. It is a situation in which youths were part and parcel of witch-hunting over the disappearance and the death of a chief in one of the villages in Rumphi. The incident is relevant to what happens in many societies in Malawi and beyond.

Mr. Chim'bwabwa, a Group Village Headman disappeared in the night between the 6th and 7th of March, 2024. The following day, Friday the 9th of March, I joined the village people who were searching for him. When I arrived in the morning, I was informed that Group Village Headman (GHV) Chim'bwabwa had come home drunk at around 8:00 in the evening. In the morning of March 7th, he was nowhere to be seen, the house was empty. In the morning of Friday the 8th one of the young men found his hut hanging on one of the poles of the cattle kraal,

about 100 meters away from the late Chim'bwabwa's house.

As someone who is interested in witchcraft research, I decided to have this story written. Many research scholars agree that in social epistemology⁵ a researcher can employ questions to probe into issues in depth (Fuller 1959; Goldman 2024). Those people going for missionary work are encouraged to employ both questions and observations so that they get a better understanding of the culture of the people they evangelize (Warren 2006; Priest 2008). That is why I decided to get more information for better analysis by probing into the issues at hand.

I wanted to find out what happened before the day the dead person disappeared. I asked the closest family members about what happened before the actual disappearance of Mr. Chim'bwabwa. It was shared that on Sunday afternoon after coming back from church, Chim'bwabwa was seen drinking at one of the beer shops near his house. On the morning of Monday, he went to the maize mill on his bicycle. On the same Monday afternoon, he went and talked to his cousin Chinyama in his garden.⁶ Chim'bwabwa told Chinyama that 2024 was his last year to cultivate that piece of land because it belonged to Chim'bwabwa's sister who was staying in Rumphi boma (headquarters). This news did not please Chinyama. Later that day Chinyama went to his friends at the drinking place and told them that he was not happy with what GVH Chim'bwabwa told him at the garden. To abort what Chim'bwabwa planned to do against him, Chinyama said he was going to deal with him because he did not want to leave the garden. On Tuesday, the following day as usual, Chim'bwabwa went to spend his day drinking with friends. He continued talking to his peers about his intention to grab the land from Chinyama to give it to his sister who was staying in Rumphi. The tension between the two grew because of the landownership dispute, and many people in the village knew about it. Culturally, the words of Chinyama were dangerous because the words, "I will deal with him," have the connotation of the intention to kill. As such these words were believed by many to mean that Chinyama wanted to inflict harm on Chim'bwabwa. Indeed, Chinyama was later accused of having been the one to have caused the death of Chim'bwabwa.

⁵ Social epistemology refers to a broad set of approaches that can be taken to construe human knowledge as a collective achievement. This includes the evaluation of the social dimensions/scopes of knowledge or information.

⁶ Chinyama and Chim'bwabwa were brought up together in the same house, although Chim'bwabwa was older than Chinyama.

Witchcraft accusations can emanate from jealousy and fighting over chieftainship. I remembered this when it was shared that Chim'bwabwa was also a chief, a group village headman (GVH). As a chief he was not in good relationship with his relatives and his fellow chiefs. It was said that his relatives, who also wanted the same position, started to be jealous and to hate him. At one point the senior chief, who crowned Chim'bwabwa to be a chief, told the relatives that he did not like the way Chim'bwabwa was behaving. It was said that there were times when Chim'bwabwa was not respectful to his relatives and to him, the senior chief. Most of the time he came to meetings late and drunk. So, the senior chief requested that the village give him another name from their clan to replace Chim'bwabwa. In January 2024, three relatives went to meet with the senior chief and submitted the name of the new chief to replace Chim'bwabwa. The fight over chieftainships brought in suspicions that those who wanted to be chiefs played a role in getting rid of Chim'bwabwa.

Upon hearing that, Chim'bwabwa went to the District Commissioner (DC), to seek advice. The District Commissioner advised Chim'bwabwa that he was still the chief of the village until death unless otherwise. Chim'bwabwa took the DC's message to his relatives and made a public statement at the funeral ceremony that nobody was going to take the chieftaincy from him. Apparently, it was alleged that the message did not go over well with those who went to see the senior chief and submitted the new name. So two things dominate the story about the death of Chim'bwabwa: a land dispute and the chieftaincy.

I asked who saw Chim'bwabwa last before he disappeared? We were informed that the tenant was the last to see Chim'bwabwa in the evening when he was collecting his phone which he had left on the solar powered charge on 7th March. On this day Chim'bwabwa was alone. His wife had gone to her home after a quarrel. Another young man added that on the 6th, when he was coming from the maize meal and stopped at the bar, Chim'bwabwa had a swollen face. The young man suspected that he might have had a fight with someone and had been beaten at the beer place (although he did not disclose it).

I enquired further if the matter had been reported to the police. We were informed that they had not reported the matter to the police. I proposed that we

go to the police. So, we went to report to the police in Rumphu. After informing the police of what happened we were advised to go back and continue searching. Each evening after searching, when we were away, family members were consulting *asing'anga* (witchdoctors) to seek help to know what happened to Chim'bwabwa. The *asing'anga's* (diviners) role was to help them to trace where Chim'bwabwa was. The *asing'anga* were telling people that Chim'bwabwa was still alive in the bush alleging that someone had put him there through magic. Those that had hidden him were planning to kill him or make him disappear mysteriously to use him for their business. The *Asing'anga* also said that the missing man had been bewitched so he was not able to know what was happening to him. He left the house by himself through *kusonthola*⁷. Interestingly, it was the elders who were sending youths to pick the *asing'anga* to assist the village to do witch-hunting.

During divination, a number of names were mentioned. The person that Chim'bwabwa talked with at the garden and the names of his friends with whom he shared the story at the beer shop about his garden also came out. His wife too was mentioned. Those who went to show to the senior chief who should replace Chim'bwabwa were also mentioned. The *asing'angas* further alleged that the young man Chim'bwabwa talked with at the garden was not just an ordinary man, he was a businessman who made his wealth through witchcraft and magic.

On Tuesday 13 February, Chim'bwabwa was found dead along the riverbank, with some body tissue removed. It was reported to the police. The police and hospital people conducted an investigation and the postmortem. The report showed that the dead body might have stayed in the river for a long time and that some body parts might have been eaten by animals. The police report was that there was no evidence that Chim'bwabwa was taken by person from his house. He might have left the house unknowingly under the influence of alcohol. The police advised that the dead body of GVH Chim'bwabwa should be buried immediately.

The majority of young people were furious and alleged that someone had deliberately killed the person and removed the body parts. They were also angry at the police and the hospital's people because (1) some of the suspects had run away soon after the

⁷ *Kusonthola* is the Tumbuka word that is used to mean that, through magic, a person can leave the house and follow the magician unknowingly. Some say either by calling or using a cloth, you blow it at his face

police arrived. Chinyama with his wife had run to the police for safety fearing that they might be killed by the mob. (2) They questioned why the police had to protect Chinyama, the witch businessman and the murderer although they lacked evidence. But the people around did not mention that diviners had come and told them this. (3) They did not trust the report from the police and the hospital people. On Wednesday the 14th of February, before the burial, we went to the police with some of the angry people. We were told that the report compiled by the police and the hospital had to be adhered to. The police warned that no person should cause havoc in the village. There was nothing to do with witchcraft involved in the disappearance and death of GVH Chim'bwabwa. He was drunk so he might have left the house and gone out under the influence of alcohol. But the community, including the youths, could not believe this. For them some magic had been involved especially from his cousin Chinyama who quarreled him in the garden.

While we were at the police station, young people went about destroying the crop fields of all suspects. Chinyama was the key suspect. As we conducted the burial service at the village, rumours and gossiping continued. At the burial, strong and angry speeches from chiefs, clergy and youths were made, praising the goodness of Chim'bwabwa and condemning the practice of hiding and killing people in the area. After the burial, the youths continued destroying the property of the suspects as vengeance. The preacher preached against false accusations levelled against each other, urged the community to encourage their children to go to school, and urged the community to focus on self-development in life. However, we left the graveyard without a clear answer on whether Chim'bwabwa disappeared by himself, or it was *kusonthola* (magic). People left the place wondering whether some of the body parts of the late Chim'bwabwa had been eaten by the animals, as per the hospital report, or indeed removed by the suspects. This remained a mystery.

While at home, gossip continued circulating. One of the *asing'anga* said that there was a certain businessman from Burundi who had given money worth fifty-six million (K56,000,000) allegedly to the oldest man of the six people to kill Chim'bwabwa to use parts for his business. This infuriated the young men more. They went again to all the suspects and destroyed their property, gardens and houses.

After the burial, family members went to the police to give a full account of what really happened as per the police requirement. Some of the questions the police were asking the family members included whether they were able to mention the person who saw Mr. Chim'bwabwa leaving his house at night when he disappeared. The police also demanded evidence from them whether body parts were actually cut, since they denied the hospital report. The police said Chim'bwabwa could do anything under the influence of alcohol, including leaving the house and walking to the river. The police condemned the violent actions of destroying houses and maize fields. Chinyama was later released from custody as a free person.

In sum, people believed that the tension between Chim'bwabwa and Chinyama, his cousin, contributed to the demise of Chim'bwabwa. Also, the tension between those relatives who went to the senior chief with the name of another person to replace Chim'bwabwa and Chim'bwabwa himself who wanted to keep his chief position, also contributed to the death of Chim'bwabwa. Those who were suspected, and some who ran away, and some who had their crops destroyed, were close relatives of Chim'bwabwa. Even after the burial people continued not to accept the credibility of the report of the police. To them Chim'bwabwa was killed by his relatives who saw him as a stumbling block to many, i.e. regarding the garden and the chieftainship issues.

The question we need to be deeply considered about is, why would people with a majority of youths in the community, be obsessed with witchcraft stories in the village? Some informants told us that this was not the first incident. A number of deaths happened in a very similar manner. Looking at the theological discussion and the case study above, we can say that it is worthwhile to study youths participating in witchcraft accusations and violence in our societies. From observation and enquiry, this community was rich with young people, most of them between their teens and forties. There were many primary and secondary school children, especially boys. The accused person who ran to the police for rescue was in his 30s. Those who went to submit the name of a new chief were in their 30s and 40s and those cutting crops of the accused were age mates of the accused, some even younger. Most youths during this week did not go to school. It being a rainy season, the whole village did not go to the gardens to do farming activities. It was evident that most of the youths in this area indulged in the habit of beer drinking, smoking, and all sorts of

drug abuse. While at the scene, some youths were seen drunk, carrying and drinking alcohol, which might have caused their violent behaviour.

But God would like these youths to be useful, and He wants to elevate them to a significant noble task and responsibility as Paul writes:

Don't let anyone look down on you, because you are young, but set an example for believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:11-15)

Paul saw leadership qualities in the young Timothy. He encouraged him not to despise himself, but to lead by example. The text teaches how a young person ought to behave. Youths are not supposed to despise themselves. They are not supposed to be looked down upon. Instead, they should set good examples to people. They should do the work of God. Paul was teaching that people should appreciate the leadership of young people. Paul also urged Timothy to mind the noble task of his calling. Youths should understand and appreciate their importance and be willing to take up leadership positions.

To know who young people are is important. Although the word 'young man' in the Bible has a wide semantic range, in the text 1 Timothy 4:11-15, Timothy was actually a young man. We should be aware that in the Greco-Roman world's culture someone could be a youth (*neotes*) until they were up to forty years old. According to Irenaeus, many people of his time thought that the youth ranged from 30 to 40 years. He said, "Thirty is the first stage of a young man's age, and extends to forty, as all admit." Josephus calls a 40-year-old man a youth (*Antiquities* 18). People like Earle comment that young age ends at 40 years old. He writes, "The word youth is *neotes*, . . . [a] grown up military age, extending to the 40th year." Timothy was called when he was in his late twenties or early thirties. He can properly be compared to many young people in many countries, institutions and communities of today. In most Presbyterian churches in Malawi members of Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF) are between 12 and 35 years old.⁸ In Malawi the National Youth Policy defines youth as people between the ages of 10 and 35 years regardless of their sex, education, culture, religion, economic, marital and physical statuses (Manyozo, 2020). Some people in

Malawi who are members of parliament are between 30 and 40 years old. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals III (MDGS III) considers youth to be a cross-cutting issue with no specific youth indicators, an approach that has been criticized by some because it provides room for youth issues to be buried in this crosscutting adventure (Manyozo 2020).

However, MDGS III makes specific mentions of empowerment of youths in the areas of education, skills training, agriculture, health and population. Youth empowerment also includes improved quality, access and equality in education at all levels through the provision of targeted scholarships for needy students in both secondary and tertiary education, linking up training institutions to companies for hands on training and establishment of cooperatives; ownership and control of productive resources; agricultural education and technical training and promotion of access to affordable credit facilities for youth as a way of developing a skilled and empowered youth population. Most importantly, MDGS III stated that between 2017 and 2022 the government and various stakeholders would focus on increasing youth representation in decision making structures and politics. This would include the increase in youth participation in the economy through development initiatives at all levels (Manyozo 2018).

If this is indeed the case, we can learn from the above text that young people are not only important before God and humanity, but also they should be given important tasks to serve the community and the country where they live. The country's policy is not in contradiction with our heavenly God's policy unless clearly otherwise. They both recognize that the future of any society is in the young people. In Psalm 127 the psalmist teaches about the relationship that exists between parents and children. While children are precious gifts in the family, parents have the responsibility of teaching them good manners so that they are not put to shame by their behaviour. Paul's household code is full of such instructions. Children are supposed to obey their parents in the Lord for this is right, and parents are supposed to teach and treat their children well by bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:2; Colossians 5:2).

The question we may ask our communities from this case study is what do parents teach their children? It is likely that the youths in the village of our case study based their accusations on gossip they encountered in

⁸ Read Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF) Constitution for CCAP Synod of Livingstonia.

the village from their parents. As many people said that there had been similar incidences before, one is tempted to assume that the area is not only obsessed with witchcraft accusations, but also that witchcraft stories are passed on from generation to generation. In fact, the diviners that were called to help to find where Chim'bwabwa was, did not come from very far. After all it was members of the family that went to pick up the diviners from their homes. It is possible that these young people were influenced by the prevalence of gossip and asing'anga in the village.

4. Conclusion and the Way Forward

It has been established that young people are important to the development of the country, socially, economically, and morally. This resonates well with the Youths' Commitment Statement in Malawi's Vision 2063 where they recognize the great role that has been bestowed upon them to be champions and be at the forefront of the implementation and realization of the vision (Malawi 2063). There is a great need to support such initiatives to promote youths' activeness in society. The church can work hand in hand with the state and other stakeholders to promote youth power.

The youth's involvement in witchcraft accusations and violence is very detrimental to themselves and to society. There is nothing that is achieved from such acts. With the conducive environment of having youths in their worship services, the churches are well positioned to assist young people in guiding them in proper ways of using their time. Youths can be engaged in discussions, encouraged to join clubs, and even provided with platforms from which they can display and showcase their leadership skills.

Therefore, besides preaching from the pulpit against witchcraft, schools need to be flooded with Christian literature that has to do with witchcraft eradication. Churches should be concerned with how young people use their time and energy. The following might be important matters to consider when working with young people:

1. God is More Powerful than all the Powers in the World.

The lack of a well-developed biblical approach to reaching those Malawians who practice and believe in witchcraft and magic has crippled the development of most Malawian societies. This article has unearthed

some of the reasons why people indulge themselves in witchcraft accusations and violence, including fear, jealousy, poverty, and also having nothing to do. Young people should know the word of God because God has power over the universe. With the power of God, people should be able to deal with their fears of witchcraft attacks.

Christian leaders today should take a different approach than that of the missionaries who just condemned the beliefs without careful study. The fact that God ruthlessly condemns the belief and practice of magic as noted above, does not mean that we can let it go without properly teaching village people. We need to go beyond the mere condemning of the belief. As a matter of emphasis, the church should make literature available showing that God is more powerful than all spirits, real and imagined, and that he delivers his people from fear of them. The church should be encouraged to pray for those who are sick, possessed, fearful, and insecure and help them find refuge in the God of the Bible.

2. Educate the Young People about Their Life Development Starting from their Homes

The church should advocate for good education among its people in all places. The incident in the case study chosen took place in the rural place of Rumphu district. Nyasulu's research in 2010 noted that belief in witchcraft and witch accusations is more common in rural areas among the less educated people than in urban areas among the more educated people. The argument that education is essential to most social, economic, and psychological development in life is very correct. Although all along the Presbyterian Livingstonia Mission has believed education to be the key to all the good things to which one might aspire in life, in this area it has demonstrated the opposite. Unfortunately, there seems to be little emphasis in theological seminaries on witchcraft, the Church and the society. The Church should encourage the teachers in theological seminaries to have this subject in their schools. The church should also teach people responsibility, stewardship, and hard work in life. People tend to avoid talking about issues like poverty, laziness, ignorance, diseases, failure to take care of the environment, etc. Instead, they should find ways of dealing with these problems. There should be a deliberate arrangement by the church and theological schools to address these things openly rather than trying to hide them.

3. Render Support and Service to Both the Accuser and the Accused.

True religion that God accepts is that one takes care of the vulnerable, orphans, widows and the marginalized (James 1:27). As salt of the earth, the church has to embrace people and serve them. Both the accuser and the accused need help from the church. The accuser needs to know that witchcraft accusations do not provide answers to the problems society faces. In the case study above, there wasn't any proof that the chief was bewitched. The *asing'anga* who claimed to have the knowledge of what happened to the missing chief just brought havoc to the village. People of this kind need serious instruction, and perhaps counseling, that will make them understand the vanity of their speculations. As such they should be told categorically that whether witchcraft exists or not, what is important is to know that the power of God is supreme and above all powers. The powers of darkness have been conquered by the power of Jesus. A practical holistic action to include service rendered to those caught up in the webs of fear, suspicion, and accusations associated with belief in witches must be taken. The accused people need to be cared for. They should not only be received but also supported. The accused may be living in fear for their lives. The church must have a listening and examining ear before they believe anyone who accuses another of witchcraft.

4. Sowing Seeds of Peace, Unity and Love in Young People

Nearly 500 years ago, St. Ignatius of Loyola emphasized inner tranquility through God's will, serving others, and finding calm amidst life's struggles. To him what was paramount was to be at peace with oneself, with the world and understanding that true peace comes from serving God's greater glory even amidst suffering. He taught that desolation (sadness, anxiety) is not from God but a trial to grow in faith, urging perseverance and not losing heart.⁹

Witchcraft accusations and violence destabilize peace and harmony in society and families. Violence emanates from the spirit of anger, hate, and bad relationships. These are what people are to guard against if they want to live in harmony with other people. The church is well placed to handle immoral practices because of its divine mandate. Fortunately, it

has a majority of young people. The word of God teaches us that if we train children when they are still young, they will grow in a manner that is pleasing before God (Proverbs 22:6). According to Bishop Mtumbuka (Nation Publication, 2023; Malawi Nyasa Times, 2024) if the world is to do well, the church has to teach its members peace, unity and love. He said, "The church is determined to continue sowing seeds of peace, unity and love among its faithfuls as a way of fulfilling the biblical scriptures." He believes this can influence good behaviour in people, especially the youths.

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⁹ <https://www.googlereads.com>

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