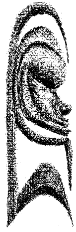

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Witchcraft and Witchcraft Cleansing in Southern Zimbabwe

Per Zachrisson

Abstract. – This article investigates the social mechanism of witchcraft in Hwali ward in Zimbabwe. It argues that the discourse of witchcraft is a local idiom and means to explain and control modern changes. The escalating witchcraft and antiwitchcraft practices can be seen as both explanatory and instrumental. In the former capacity they explain and express discontent with the present economic and political situation in the ward. In its latter capacity witchcraft and witchcraft cleansing is inherently political and become appropriated and reinvigorated by different factions in the community in times of economic and political upheavals which are currently prevailing in Zimbabwe. *[Zimbabwe, witchcraft, community, inequality, development]*

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The Setting

The study is the outcome of walking with villagers from Sotho and interspersed Venda- and Ndebele-speaking communities along many paths in Hwali ward and Patana village in southwestern Zimbabwe.[1] The ward is situated in Dibilishaba Communal Land in Gwanda district in Matabeleland South. Minority groups of Sotho, Venda, and Ndebele try to make a living off the land through cattle, small stock, agriculture, and also over many years through labour migration. During the 1990s the cross-border migration into South Africa increased dramatically (McDonald 2000: 3). Since 2000 food shortages, unemployment, and political violence have accelerated this border jumping of Zimbabweans into South Africa.

After two bloody and disruptive wars during the '70s and '80s, Gwanda as part of Matabeleland became much neglected in the development of the new Zimbabwean State where the lion's share of the resources in the form of development projects, aid personnel, and researchers went into Mashonaland. Today, the population in Gwanda is particularly severely affected by the present economic crisis in Zimbabwe caused by a combination of disastrous national policy choices, economic circumstances, and drought. Added to these developments today is the AIDS-pandemic, taking its toll in the form of sickness, deaths, and a growing number of orphans breaking up families and households.

In Zimbabwe's communal lands a minority of wealthy households produce the main part of the agricultural output (Masst 1994: 24). The number of households in Hwali and Patana that are headed by widowed, divorced, or abandoned women and elderly, often destitute people, is increasing as is the number of young, landless people.

In pace with increasing socioeconomic differentiations between families and neighbours as a

1 "Participant observation" is relevant for this study as a method of data gathering in Gwanda district. Any tape recording or use of structured or semistructured interviews, oral or written, would have been counterproductive considering the sensitive topics under investigation and the unstable political situation in Matabeleland South (Zachrisson 2004).

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result of state and market interventions, people perceive "big men" as taking advantage of them, and accuse them of antisocial behaviour, which often takes the form of witchcraft accusations.

Deteriorating livelihoods from the land have for many undermined their trust in traditional religion and leaders' ability to explain and alleviate difficult life situations in the area. For many villagers in Patana experiencing a worsening situation on the land and in their communities what could then not be closer at hand than to explain this with old explanations, with the threat from within, and to find the cause of the state of affairs within the family, within the community itself; to put the blame on individuals, especially women, and those deviating from the village community by their behaviour: the wealthy and successful and the very poor and isolated.

Such individuals or groups of individuals can be blamed for the increasing imbalance and strife in the community, for the fractured interrelations with the environment, the droughts, and the increasing sickness. The scene is, in other words, set for an old mechanism for coping with and explaining worsening and unbearable life situations: witchcraft. The task at hand becomes now both possible to grasp and feasible for people to rally behind: cleansing the community of witchcraft.

The *tsikamtanda* Witch Finding

Villagers in Hwali and Patana first heard of them when they were divining in the Bulilimamangwe District adjacent to Gwanda. They were called *tsikamtanda* (*tsika* meaning "to step on" and *mtanda*, "a log") or the Tsikamtanda Traditional Healers Group, because, before they divined a person, they let him/her step on two logs symbolising a threshold or lock.[2] It was not clear from where they came. Some said the Tsikas (anglicised form of *tsikamtanda*) were sent from "the big rock Njelele"; others said they were ordinary young men, who had the powers and visions to divine sorcery, witchcraft, bad omens, and the most evil amongst people. A few knew that the group had been started by a man with the *mutupo Moyo* (totem name: heart), who had been told in a dream that he should go around the villages divining all kinds of evil. So he named himself *ukhulu*, grandfather, attracted, and gathered a following of *n'anga*, traditional healers, whom he called *amagosa,* assistants, and set out on his mission. Now, in the aftermath of the cyclone Eline in 2000 they had appeared in Hwali ward and were already busy erecting temporary shacks for their divination camp with the help of some villagers.

The Tsikas, knowing well the importance of using official channels to get permission to divine in the area, had first approached the chief and the headman, then the chairmen of the villages in the ward, who in turn had informed the kraalheads. Kraalheads were told to encourage people to attend. The Tsikas had also told the traditional leaders to be on their alert for people who, as a villager retold,

> used bad means of healing, people who used blood of dead people in their healing rituals; those who witchcrafted and used goblins, *imikhobo,* to haunt their relatives; those who feed on other peoples' homes; those who put bad spirits, *amadlozi amabi*, on their relatives and neighbours and those who acquire wealth through herbs.

Meetings had then been held with the people in the villages to get their consent and to inform them of the divining procedures, the divination fees, and to set dates for the divination proceedings. There were four kinds of fees: a fee for *ukubethela umuzi*, to remove any evil thing from the home, thus protecting oneself from evil doings, is either 7 000 Z$ or a beast; a payment for *ukuchela*, to protect a home from all evil, is 7 goats or 7 000 Z$; a fee for *ukukhipha umnyama*, to cleanse oneself from bad omens in water "medicated" with herbs, is a goat or 1 000 Z$; a charge for ordinary healing is 3 goats or 3 000 Z$.[3]

Notwithstanding such high charges, people seemed appreciative, even enthusiastic, an indication that although on the surface seemingly harmonious in their social lives they had unresolved matters within and between families and kin. Now they looked forward to solving them. However, not everybody was so enthusiastic. The more wealthy and educated in the community, often Christians,

2 Amongst the Ngwato Tswana logs or rods from the hard wood of the gardenia tree (*Gardenia spatulifolia*) were doctored by *n'anga* and placed on roads to a chiefdom as protection against sickness and lack of rain (Schapera 1971: 118).

3 Normally the "Father," a deceased male ancestor, who is symbolised by Y-shaped horns of a bull (*isikhonkwane*) made by the hard, termiteproof wood from the *Umbondo* tree (*Combretum molle*), protects the home. Sometimes an additional protection is needed against witches around the homestead. Leaves and the root of the the same tree are ground into a powder by a *n'anga* who places the powder in holes dug at the four corners and in the middle of the fenced yard.

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the poorest and oldest villagers, as well as *n'anga* authorized by the Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association (ZINATHA) ignored the arrival of the Tsikas. When doing so, they became suspected by many of those attending the divination ceremonies of harbouring witchcraft items.

Voices such as "I feel pity for so and so, he used to kill his brother's children in daylight," and, "Yah, people used to bewitch my child, not knowing that they can be caught," were heard. It was, therefore, not difficult for the diviners to get and choose five people from each village, men and women, who could act as monitors, and to keep order at the coming proceedings in the seven villages of Hwali. They were to be paid 250 Z$ a day plus getting the meat left over from the rituals.

During the night after the team has introduced itself to the village, the people were invited to a preliminary session of dancing and singing to the ancestors where beer and meat were served. The purpose was to find people who had healing powers and could be recruited to work with the diviners. In this way, a woman *n'anga* and a middle-aged man from Patana village were recruited. But equally important was the fact that during the night the diviners could get to know some of the social patterns, the relations, especially strives between and within families in the villages; a knowledge necessary for the later divination proceedings.

The *tsikamtanda* have been allowed by the kraalhead of one of the lines to establish their camp on a cane field close to the bed of Mkhalipe river. At one end of the field, a temporary construction of poles and grass roof with five compartments, the first termed "the surgery" and the other "consulting rooms," *imihlalo*, where the *n'anga* receive "patients," has been erected. It is a cloudy day, but without any rain. It is said that the best day for witchcraft cleansing is a day with rain or drizzle that can "wash away the evil through the rains and fade out the footprints of the witches whose evil will be carried to the rivers and never come again." Rivers are seen as already dirty and, therefore, suitable recipients of pollutive things, while pools are seen as clean and must not be polluted. Two Mopane logs are placed side by side at the short end of the yard and a revolving mirror in a wooden frame is placed in front of them.[4] Ten meters further on, and about eight meters apart, are placed two wooden pails of water, one with antiwitchcraft herbs, the other without.

People from the settlement lines in the village, none of them Christian or wealthy, have rallied under their kraalhead at the end of the yard where the logs are. They look both expectant and apprehensive when they line up in front of the logs, first the kraalhead followed by men according to seniority, then women according to age.

Now, the *tsikamtanda*, the diviner, also called *ukhulu*, grandfather, is standing behind the mirror and two members of the *tsikamtanda* are positioned at each pail. Their function is to direct the person who is divined to any of the pails. One of them starts calling up people according to village line. The kraalhead of each line is the first to step on the logs. By doing this he has agreed to reveal who he is. He raises both his hands in front of the mirror and after looking into it he swivels it around so it faces the *ukhulu*. The Tsika, with a whistle in his mouth, waves his *itshoba*, a whisk made of the tail of a Wildebeest, and scrutinizes the mirror while blowing his whistle.

The whistle is said to bring powers of vision, and it provokes the evil inside a person to come out. Depending on the colour of the reflections of the mirror, the Tsika interprets the problem of the person. If it is green, the person does not have any problem of evil but could nevertheless suffer from some minor ailment. The colour yellow indicates that the person is afflicted with a sickness due to witchcraft and needs healing. If the colour is red, the person is using bad means of healing, for example, human blood to acquire wealth, and he/she can be a witch. The colour black indicates that this is a person with an evil mind, who uses evil spirits on family members, relatives, and neighbours. If the person possesses an evil thing, or has been involved in witchcraft, the diviner changes the tune of his whistling to a high pitched one, and by doing so, everybody can hear that witchcraft and evil things are connected to the person.

Evidently, the kraalhead passes the test and is led by one of the trained Tsika assistants (*amagosa*) to the pail of water where he is asked to cleanse his hands. He then goes to the opposite short end of the yard. The next three persons, a woman and two men, also pass the test and join the kraalhead. But when the fifth person, an elderly woman, stands in front of the mirror, the tune of the diviner's whistling changes into a high pitched one, and he informs that this woman possess some "evil things."

4 For the use of the mirror in divinations see Willis (1970: 130, 134) and Gelfand (1959: 103). For the symbolic deployment of modern devises in witchcraft cleansing rituals see Auslander (1993: 183 f.) and Green (1997: 329 f.).

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She is led by another Tsika assistant to the other pail of water containing herbs where she is told to cleanse her hands. Then she is admonished to go to *umhlahlo*, "consultation room," no. 2, together with her family members and consult the *n'anga*, a woman. Surrounded by her family, the old woman looks on when the *n'anga* throws her *hakata*, divining dices of carved wood with notches, on the reed mat, while swerving her whisk. Depending on how they fall, she will decide the problem.[5] In this case it is divined that she is possessed by an evil spirit and that she harbours evil things at her home.

The old woman is led into "the surgery" for treatment. She has to wash her hands again in a pail of water "medicated" with herbs after which she is covered with a blanket and inhails the smoke from burning prescribed herbs. She is then cut (*ukusikwa*) by a razor blade in the skin on the elbows and knees so that the evil things inside her body can come out. This is called *ukwethulwa*, i.e., to be freed from that which was put into your body by witch doctors.

She is told to go to her homestead, accompanied by two Tsikas and some of the cleansed villagers, and fetch her "evil things," which can be the bones and the skin of a hyena, an *ukhomane* (*liselo* in Ndebele), winnowing basket, "blind" puppies, and cats. If found, such objects must be destroyed. In the case of this lady, some cats "used for bewitching" were found, and also a winnowing basket, on which, it was rumoured, she used to fly during the night to different homesteads. If she refused to go and fetch these objects, it was said that she would either turn mad or die, unless she publicly confessed and denounced her witchcraft. Later, after her "evil things" had been found and destroyed, she was admonished to come to the camp of the *tsikamtanda*. There she was treated by one of the *n'anga* diviners, who made an incision in her back where some powdered herbs were inserted to protect her from witchcraft.

The witchcraft finding and cleansing ritual continues until all the people, who have volunteered to gather from the Patana lines with their kraalheads, have passed the witchcraft test at the logs and the mirror. Ten people, the majority middle aged or elderly women with their own households, had to go through the *ukubethela umuzi*, the same ordeal as the first lady. Many other men and women, younger as well as middle-aged and older, submitted themselves to the *ukukhipha umnyama* ordeal.

5 For a description of how this divining system works see Stayt (1968: 286–290) and Bullock (1950: 67).

In one village line, three quarters of the members volunteered for this cleansing. But there were also people in other settlement lines in Patana who were not interested in attending the ceremony and undergoing the ordeals. There were even members of a whole settlement line who refused to attend the proceedings.

Witchcraft and Socioeconomic Differentiation

The reactions and voices of the Patana villagers to the activities of the *tsikamtanda* throw light, as we shall see, on the life situations of different families in different lines in the village. The activities of the Tsikas may be interpreted as something of a catalyst for the dissatisfaction with socioeconomic changes in the village community and the increased sickness and deaths, hard to comprehend and act upon by many villagers. As one of them said: "If death occurs we say openly *ke nako eateng*, 'It is time for death, it's God's will,' but inwardly we say, 'Maybe someone has bewitched the dead person?' "

To accuse someone of witchcraft has been unlawful in Zimbabwe for almost a century, but to divine and cleanse someone from "evil things" is not against the law.[6] The *n'anga*, the traditional medical practitioners in the area, are, according to the villagers in Hwali ward, increasingly also practising divination and witchfinding in pace with the rising socioeconomic differentiation within and between families in the Hwali community. New, usually younger *n'anga* have emerged, trying to compete with the older ones, especially with those certified under ZINATHA, and wanting to capitalise on a dammed up need for explaining growing inequalities and misfortunes within families and in the community. During periods of prolonged droughts, blaming witches for "closing off the rains" has been a recurrent theme.

However, to explain the increased incidence of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations they must also be seen in a wider sociopolitical context of rising inequalities amongst groups and households in the area (see Green 1997 and Niehaus 2001). A ward and village like Hwali and Patana cannot be seen as self-contained when discussing the role of witchcraft in the community. Wider forces during

6 The local terms for witch and witchcraft are in Sotho and Venda *muloi* and *buloi* and in Ndebele *umthakathi* and *ubuthakathi* respectively. There is no specific term for sorcerer and sorcery. People refer instead to someone practising evil deeds with evil things, as a witch.

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the 20th century of colonial rule, labour migration, land policies, the market, and the new state and its power structures make witchcraft a dynamic part of social and cultural transformations of the societies in Gwanda South. People contextualise such modern transformations to fit their lifeworlds. Witches and witchcraft exist parallel with ancestral religion, Christianity, "traditional" and modern leaders, the state, and the market.

Therefore, as Niehaus (2001: 11 f.) stresses, we need to "place witchcraft simultaneously in the frameworks of social, political and economic structure," and situate it "in terms of local concepts, beliefs and symbols and then understand these in terms of the lived experience of our informants." In this respect, witchcraft becomes associated with inequality and power. In the context of Hwali ward, the escalating witchcraft and anti-witchcraft practices can be seen as both explanatory and instrumental. In the former capacity they explain and express discontent with the present economic and political situation in the ward and with changes that are experienced by many as socially and culturally disrupting. Thus, witchcraft becomes a local way of knowing and naming the world. But using the witchcraft idiom does not mean that it is used as a "traditional" means of responding to the modernising forces of the market and the state.

Far from being a precolonial coping-mechanism it is today part of everyday life, although it draws on old ideas, which reflect points of tension in social order and in the distribution of resources. Instead, this "local knowledge," this local idiom of explanation, is articulated with modern change and it is dynamically adapted to new social structures of inequality, constellations of power, and material benefits as a result of the growing importance of market and state relations. This is seen by its syncretistic practice in antiwitchcraft movements, where indigenous symbolism and procedures and means are articulated with Western objects and procedures. It is in this context that it is used also instrumentally and politically, in the context of the *tsikamtanda* witch-cleansing movement. Such movements seem to recur in times of economic and political upheavals, which the region is undergoing at the moment.[7] As their presence and activities are variously appropriated by political forces and institutions they become part of such upheavals as social and political dramas.

The witchcraft idiom in Hwali is built on the witch from within the community and the family, sucking its strength and vitality, if the witch is not detected in time and cleansed openly.[8] This idiom, where poverty, weakness, and sickness get their explanations, is depicted by a Patana villager as one where

> witches are feeding their goblins, assistants, with milk from human breasts. They direct them to homes where there is a woman with small children, and the goblins feed on her milk. You can always wonder why you see so many small children growing thin and unhealthy; they do not get enough milk because their mother was used by some witches.

After Independence in 1980 with the accompanying new developments we can see how misfortunes in the family or community are increasingly conceived by villagers as being the result of witchcraft. Where it was earlier more common to blame misfortunes on the ancestors' displeasure of peoples' behaviour this is no longer so much the case. According to informants, this is mirrored by the decline of ancestral rites amongst families and in the community in the Hwali and in an increase in witchcraft accusations. Thus, for example, in the seven settlement lines of Patana village, offerings to cognatic ancestors are performed to any extent only amongst families of the Litshani and Siphoma lines.

Such personalisation of misfortune causation goes hand in hand with increased fragmenting of kin groups and families into smaller households because of labour migration, commercialisation, individualisation, and the rise of a small elite in the local economy of Hwali. Perhaps the increasing numbers of witchcraft accusations in this context can be seen as reflecting notions of an imagined and lost good society? Kate Crehan (1997: 36) argues from the standpoint of two village communities in northwestern Zambia that this is the case: "the local discourse on *bulozhi* [witchcraft] can be seen as providing a mirror in which local notions of the good society can be glimpsed in a perverted negative form. When people spoke about *bulozhi* they were in fact drawing on a set of taken-for-granted assumptions about moral behaviour and human relationships, which those who practice *bulozhi* were seen as transgressing."

7 Mark Auslander (1993: 176 f.) notes that during the last 70 years in rural eastern Zambia "antiwitchcraft movements and itinerant prophetic figures have surfaced intermittently."

8 According to informants, in precolonial times villagers in Patana used to "try" witches in a pool. The aim was often to kill witches. Today the intention is to bring witches back into the community through ceremonies of confessions.

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This development is also accompanied by a new attitude of the State to the activities of *n'anga*. Where these had earlier derived their positions and legitimacy in the eyes of the villagers from ancestors and spirits they are now increasingly controlled by the state and by legislation condoning, not suppressing, their practices. The Traditional Medical Practitioners Act of 1981 established a Traditional Medical Practitioners Council giving legal status to ZINATHA, the major traditional healer's association in Zimbabwe. Thus, what we see is a bureaucratisation of the *n'anga*.[9]

The arrival of the *tsikamtanda*, touring the districts of Matabeleland South, seems to have been an opportunity for cleansing the area of competitors, of mushrooming *n'anga* and diviners, after they had been accused and cleansed. The latter could be a major reason why the *tsikamtanda* were tolerated by the authorities in the area, which must have found the many competing *n'anga* weakening and delaying community development efforts. Where there had been more than one *n'anga* in the villages of Hwali ward, now, after the *tsikamtanda* had left, there was usually only one left in each village in Hwali ward.

The *tsikamtanda* capitalised also on the increasing inequalities in the community, especially as a result of the activities of successful entrepreneurs and business tycoons, and this explained their initial popularity. A middle-aged cattle rearer explained this as

> witches use a lot of blood and mainly human blood and they kill people. Some *n'anga* tell their patients to go and bring human blood, especially for the success of a business.

What we see here is how witchcraft is perceived by many as a tool for the enrichment of some in the community. As such it functions also as an idiom and discourse explaining and blaming the rich and successful for literally sucking the blood and strength out of not only individual family members but out of the community itself. Witchcraft as cannibalism (Jacobson-Widding 2000: 301) is a universal phenomenon and gets here its special brand in the context of the specific circumstances of peoples' survival in the midst of drought, AIDS, and increasing inequalities causing social tensions in the community of Hwali ward. The process can also be described from the view of a "Master Farmer" in Patana who here states that

> the witch is not engaged in the business to get rich himself but his aim is to dismantle family progress, family relations. Someone is jealous and always wants to fix those who call themselves better than others. Usually it starts from a family which has progressed more than others, maybe through education and business.

Such voices from the ground add substance to and give circumstances for witchcraft and witchcraft accusations in the area. They also shed some light on the general phenomenon and idiom of witchcraft and how it relates to new inequalities in and between families and communities in Hwali.

The Role of *n'anga* and Diviners

The activities of the *tsikamtanda* in Hwali and Patana obviously filled a long felt need of parts of the population. There is a pattern discernable where *n'anga* and diviners are mainly recruited amongst the Venda and some Ndebele families. Thus, for example, we find the few *n'anga* operating in Patana village living in the Litshani settlement line dominated by Venda. The path to a *n'anga*-ship, often inherited, is retold by *n'anga* along certain patterns.

A person is either called in a dream to become a *n'anga* or he/she is called by the ancestral spirits at a young age after an illness. There are stories in the village of *n'anga* who qualify for in their art by living and being trained by ancestral spirits in rivers and pools. There is a standard version about a dangerous woman, often labeled a mermaid, dragging down people into her pool in the area and those who manage to come back alive are transformed into *n'anga*.[10] Such a pool is situated in Bulobelo village in Hwali and there are many stories about the mermaid, the *injuzi*, a snakelike creature living inside it and devouring people who come too close, especially during the night. The prospective *n'anga* goes through a liminal process in the pool for some months where the *injuzi* teaches him/her the skill of healing and the power of vision and transformation. Coming out of the pool, as from a birth canal, is then seen as a rebirth into the state of *n'anga*-ship.

9 The aim of the Council and the Association is to organise and register Traditional Medical Practitioners and Spirit Mediums so that they can service the community parallel to the Western type of medical treatment in hospitals and clinics.

10 See similar examples of the association of pools and rivers with ancestral spirits in the form of snakes from the Manyika Shona in Jacobson-Widding (2000: 437–439) and from the Zulu Nguni in Berglund (1976: 140–142).

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Few traditional healers and diviners are found amongst the Sotho since many of them belong to Christian churches and independent church movements. Thus, we see a fracture in the community along religious lines, which also mostly overlaps with a socioeconomic differentiation or fracture along similar lines: between "traditionalists" and poorer members of the community, and Christians and more wealthy and influential members. As an informant said: "The people are now caught in between; they sometimes believe that the traditional way works better than the modern way, and at last they will believe in one."

An interview with a Patanian woman, a *n'anga* turned Christian and recruited by the *tsikamtanda*, can exemplify this. Her story mirrors how individuals not seldom switch from traditional religion to Christianity and back or use meanings from both, finding them useful in coping with their life situations. She retold how

> it was through divining that they told me I was a Christian but they still saw snakes on top of me. They called my family members and told them that my *amadlozi* still want me to work as a traditional doctor. They told me that the reason why my children are not coming home is that I had thrown away my traditional healing tools. So my family members also agreed that they want the spirits back, and the Tsikas asked them if they could work with me and rebuild my power. I don't need to retrain as a *n'anga* but just to be revisited by my last powers. So when I was here in Patana I was an apprentice for the healers. So now I have returned back to the commandments of my ancestors.

It is evident that religious and socioeconomic differences can sometimes reinforce each other and fracture the community between more wealthy Christians and "Traditionalists" and poorer Independent Church adherents. This has been fertile soil for the emergence of new, mostly younger *n'anga* and diviners exploiting such differences commercially. An old man complained, "These people of today who tell you they can perform the ceremonies ... who cheat people for money, they are lying as these things need a same family link ... some are Christians and follow Western culture, how can the ancestors give powers while some of the family members are Christians?" One informant bluntly expressed it as "a problem of culture in our society" where people were starting to blame many of the new *n'anga* and diviners for the increasing sickness and seemingly worsening droughts.

It is this situation in Hwali ward the *tsikamtanda* entered into. How successful were they? According to a woman from one of the poorer homesteads,

> only a *n'anga* can find out the evil spirit, but after the Tsikas, who many of us trusted, we saw that some of the *n'anga* were a nuisance because they lied. Some of the pinpointed witches in our area are the *n'anga* whom people have lost trust in. We believe *ukuloya*, witchcraft, is a family thing and we have some clans pointed out as practicing it. So, the Tsikas have taken the business from the *n'anga* who were possessing herbs for sorcery, bewitching, killing, and bringing conflicts in families.

But there were families in Patana who had mixed feelings about the activities of the *tsikamtanda*. These were the more successful families, some of them Christians, who realized the strong social levelling mechanisms at work at the cleansing ceremonies. For them the witchcraft cleansing was seen as something that could lead to less witchcraft accusations by the poorer envying the more successful in the community. In this respect the activities of the Traditional Healers Group were seen by them as a sort of protection. But it was also a dilemma because, on the other hand, such families could be called in front of the *tsikamtanda* and be accused of greed at the expense of the poorer, who in turn wanted to be protected from the rich. Therefore, most of the richer families did not acknowledge or partake in the cleansing activities.[11] A family head from one of these families thought that

> there are rumours of witchcraft among families which are progressing and have children in school and are working outside the area. Such rumours are about witchcraft that will kill or turn mad those who have succeeded. But after the cleansing of the Tsikas most people feel a sigh of relief from witchcraft because they say, "we are more afraid of this kind of an act of evil than of being exposed."

But not only families with educated members and with members working outside the ward had mixed feelings about the activities of the *tsikamtanda*. Rumours circulated that witchcraft was behind their progress as seen by their bumper harvests and fat cattle. The more successful cattle rearers and farmers felt, therefore, exposed and vulnerable with the arrival of the diviners. In one case the kraalhead of a Patana line, himself a "traditional-

11 Both Christian- and Zionist-type churches have offered alternative moral communities for villagers in Hwali since the 1950s. With their dualistic cosmology, the churches perceive witchcraft as evil. Most of their adherents would be reluctant to attend witchcraft cleansing ceremonies.

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ist" but with the majority of his family and other line members, Christians, and successful small holders refused to have anything to do with the *tsikamtanda*. His opinions are illuminating the social and moral mechanisms behind the popularity of the *tsikamtanda*, a popularity which, however, became short-lived in a situation of continued "blood on the land," drought, sickness, and the increasing socioeconomic differences of households in Hwali ward:

> Many people in Hwali and Patana didn't reap enough maize and sorghum to feed themselves during the drought. This is because of the Tsikas. They are like the *bopase*, the fighters during the liberation struggle who roamed the village and beat up people and took their possessions. People in the village were so busy attending the cleansing ceremonies, also going for them in other villages, that they neglected preparing their fields.

The Aftermath

The kraalhead's opinions about the *tsikamtanda* were to become the opinion of an increasing number of people in Patana after the diviners had left. The reason was that the bad times with sickness and strife in the community, the "blood on the land," continued to pollute the relationships between people, their ancestors and the environment. A Patana woman remembered how during the drought in 1991

> false diviners came out, saying that they could divine thieves and made us pay a lot of goats and cheated us . . . There was also a lot of baby dumping by women. This was believed to be one of the causes of the drought as bones are not supposed to be left bare. So, a ceremony was organised for women between 16 and 40 years old. A fire was made of herbs and other treatments and every woman was made to jump the fire. This was to cleanse the land from the bones of the dumped babies. The smoke cleanses the *engine* as they jump.[12] In Sotho this process is called *uhadulula marapo ni mabika*, the cleansing of bones and stones.

The reason for the welcome of the *tsikamtanda* diviners had been because of the situation where villagers were getting annoyed by the mushrooming of the number of people who claimed to be *n'anga* cashing in on a need for healing and divination. The activities of some of them in pointing out evil spirits and witchcraft amongst family members were fragmenting the community. Some said that these *n'anga* were "home destroyers" because they were pinpointing close relatives as bewitching other family members or revealing that "charms" had been buried by witches "in your fireplace." So, the *tsikamtanda* were looked upon by the people as being useful in cleansing out some of these evil *n'anga*.

Now, after they had left, the Tsikas were seen as the outsiders they were, meddling in the affairs of the villagers. Furthermore, where the local diviners were usually middle-aged or older, the *tsikamtanda* consisted mostly of younger people. They were, according to a villager,

> young men who grew up in the cities, not knowing even a single tree or herb for a single headache, and who were cleansing evil which causes drought amongst the people. But instead of rain it became the opposite and there are right now severe droughts in Patana village and people link the drought to the diviners' footsteps in the area.

These "footsteps," according to the villagers, not only left drought in their wake but also increased conflicts in the community; in fact their activities gave momentum to new witchcraft accusations. The activities of the *tsikamtanda* drained the Hwali ward of more than 300 goats and 100 cattle. With the divination fees they bought two cars. People flocked to their camp and accompanied them when they left for Beitbridge looking for livestock to buy cheaply. Some villagers saw the *tsikamtanda* as imposters looking for money and livestock.

During the following growing season, not a single drop of rain fell in the area between October and February, and the people blamed the diviners for having stopped the rains with their activities. On top of this, people had bad memories of being persecuted for having herbs of witchcraft in their homesteads when in reality these were medical herbs for various ailments. One example, out of many, was the powdered pods of *ugagu,* the Chinese lantern tree (*Dichrostachys cinerea*), used as remedy for depressed fontanelles in babies, which was now confiscated by the *tsikamtanda*. Such harassment, in fresh memory, was now being held against the diviners.[13] One Patanian woman also brought up the fact that they

> lived in a big camp which had been made by some of us villagers, and local girls were asked to cook for them and they impregnated these girls as they looked up to the young men. Some people blame the chief and kraalheads

12 Two similar ceremonies from the Tswana are described by I. Schapera (1971: 107 f.), where a drought was attributed to abortions or miscarriages in the community.

13 Some time after they had left Hwali ward the Tsikamtanda Traditional Healers Group was banned by ZINATHA.

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for giving permission to these Tsikas because what they leave behind after their divination is hatred, conflicts, jealousy amongst families and relatives.

Different Modes of Witchcraft

From the above voices from Hwali and Patana villagers it is possible to discern different modes of witchcraft with different moral overtones (Englund 1996: 271) revealing hotbeds and motives of witchcraft, and also disclosing who uses witchcraft accusations against whom in what contexts amongst Hwali and Patana villagers. One common denominator for all of them are increasing inequalities in the community. Inequalities have, of course, always existed in the small-scale kin communities in the area and conflicts have then largely been solved within the frame of ancestral religion, explaining misfortunes and sickness by the displeasures of the ancestors. In this way, internal conflicts could be solved without blaming and fracturing too many interpersonal relations.

In time with the land squeeze, the resettlement, and fragmentation of the Sotho, Venda, and Ndebele groups in Gwanda South and Hwali in smaller households, there is, according to informants, a decline in corporate ancestral rites, a pattern accelerating after 1980 and the dispowerment of traditional leaders. At the same time there is an increase in labour migration, and the emergence of Christian churches and sects that further weakens cooperation and solidarity built on the earlier kin settlements. This is a development common in the whole labour migration region, and it leads to new forms of inequality and causes new conflicts between kin and neighbours. In such a context witchcraft accusations get renewed impetus.

In many respects the phenomena of witchcraft and gossip (see Gluckman 1963; Paine 1967) have similarities. Both work hand in hand (to many people in Patana gossiping and quarrelling are symptoms of witchcraft) and the increase of gossip and backbiting opens the way for witchcraft accusations and mirrors differentiation and inequalities in the community.[14] Gossip can, as do witchcraft accusations, function as "a culturally controlled game with important social functions," the foremost being to preserve the social unity and morality of social groups by controlling competing and deviating individuals (Gluckman 1963: 312). But, as with witchcraft and witchcraft accusations, gossip can also be seen more instrumental, and as such, apart from "a genre of informal information," foremost as "a device intended to forward and protect individual interests" (Paine 1967: 278).

Thus, there are gossip and rumours of corruption of ward leaders appropriating new resources for themselves and their relatives. This also applies to the more successful cattle rearing and farming families and individuals in the community and their relatives and in-laws, many of whom are working outside the area. Such families are seen by the more disadvantaged as accumulating an inappropriate share of the resources of the area and, when they bring in resources from outside, of not sharing these with poorer families and settlement lines. Thus, it is in such conditions of scarcity and inequality, where gossip and backbiting persist, that we see how witchcraft or sorcery step in. The idiom of witchcraft becomes dynamic and useful in this setting, and should not be seen as too distant from Western idioms of "exploitation," "corruption," and "intrusive government" (MacGaffey 1997: ix), especially in contexts of resources coming from outside, as in development programmes.

Harri Englund (1996: 273) argues with data from Dedza villagers in Malawi that it is not anxieties over "modernity" as such (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993), that mould witchcraft discourses in many rural areas of Africa. We must instead see witchcraft discourses as situated, historically, *within* particular sociohistorical conditions that have evolved out of modernity in the rural areas. In this respect he holds that such discourses "constitute an argument about moral personhood and represent individualism as an inversion of morality." Accordingly, Englund finds that the Dedza villagers' discourses of witchcraft are shaped by how and why accumulation of wealth takes place and by whom. He notes that there are three modes of witchcraft in the area based on envy, greed, and protection, and that they reflect "a morality of accumulation," which shows that individualism is not restricted to specific modes of livelihood (Englund 1996: 274).

Applying Englund's argument on the witchcraft discourses on Hwali ward and Patana village, we can discern how similar images of the moral person and accumulation inform these discourses and mirror a local society over a number of years participating in the process of commoditization. Thus it is possible to discern three broad modes of witchcraft in the context of unequal access to resources and employment in Hwali ward as they are represented by the voices of the villagers.

14 As Michael Taussig (1993: 85), Adam Ashforth (1996: 1194), and Peter Geschiere (1997: 204) note, both witchcraft and gossip can be characterized as "public secrets."

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First, many of the richer believe that there is a real threat from a witchcraft linked to envy directed against them by families and family members, and sometimes neighbours, who are poor and disadvantaged, and they accordingly avoid showing off their wealth. Emotions of envy and resentment dressed up as in witchcraft accusations are conceived as being deadly by some of the more wealthy. One informant described how

community members who are successful through agriculture, livestock, or education are the ones most pinpointed for causing misfortunes. A family member can invite the relative for a social talk, and serves him or her poisoned food. But he can also go to a *n'anga* and ask to have the person bewitched.

There is also the use of witchcraft in family disputes about wealth and influence, especially in connection with who is going to have a certain community position and also in connection with succession to the posts of chief, headman, and kraalhead. A villager said:

Suppose that so and so who is the present headman gets very sick and there is no hope for recovery, then family members of the other house may bewitch the person next to take the throne, especially if it's in polygamous families where the other house wants the throne. For development projects people may bewitch those locals running the project in jealousy of their positions. So, you may find that some community members are now afraid of holding such positions in fear of being bewitched.

Secondly, this mode of witchcraft of envy gets momentum from its opposite, perceived by the poor as a witchcraft of greed, caused by the gluttony of the better-offs making the poorer even poorer, perceived by them as undermining the solidarity in the community. A poor villager describes that

people believe witches can butcher other humans for the purpose of getting *umuthi*, medicines, to use.[15] Human flesh is seen as wealth. If an individual succeeds in business, they say *akula* business *engalagazi lomuntu phakathi,* meaning there is no business without human blood in it. The witch is believed to dig up new graves at night and take human flesh and then refill the graves. This is the reason why relatives put thorn bushes on top of graves and insert sticks at the corners of the grave so they can see if someone has tempered with it.

Both the above modes of witchcraft result in a vicious circle of witchcraft accusations and counteraccusations. They can be seen as striking a fragile balance between the levelling tendencies of the poor and weak, something of a weapon of the poor against the accumulating tendencies of the small local elite. Both modes lead to a need for a third, more defensive but also more morally acceptable mode of witchcraft, a witchcraft of protection. Applied by some members in the community in a delicate balance of levelling and accumulative tendencies, new forms of wealth can be legitimised. Peter Geschiere (1997: 12, 16) argues that this ambivalence, and such balancing, is a key to understand the modern transformations witchcraft has undergone lately. He notes that "It is precisely through this ambivalence that discourses on the occult incorporate modern changes so easily" (1997: 13). Demanded foremost by the successful members of the community protecting them from the witchcraft of envy, it is also in demand by the poorer members of the community protecting them from the witchcraft of greed. One informant describes how

rich families, business people and even learned persons working in the community go to *n'anga* and ask them to get their homes protected from intruders. This is called *ukubethela isikhonkwane* in Ndebele.[16] The *n'anga* gives you medicines and tells you to dig two holes at the gate to your home and place the medicines there. To protect one's home specifically from witches and evil spirits is called *ukubethela umuzi* and any witches passing the gate will be caught.

Combined, the three modes lead to an escalation of witchcraft accusations into which many families and family members are drawn. A middle-aged cattle owner from Patana, describing a case of witchcraft, reveals how an elderly single woman (it is most often women who are accused of witchcraft), and mother-in-law, can be seen as a threat to the patrilineal order in the community:

I know of a family in Patana who went secretly to the Tsika, because of the death of one of their members, a young wife. They suspected her mother-in-law of having bewitched her. When the Tsikas had divined they said it is the husband's mother. There was a time when the niece of this mother-in-law was made pregnant by

15 According to informants in Hwali when "witchcraft" is "used politically" some politicians campaigning for local posts "smear herbs and lion fat on their foreheads to lure voters to them." A wide variety of material substances, animal parts, plants, stones, minerals are believed to contain certain powers. Known collectively as *imithi*, they can be translated with the term medicines that can be used for both good or evil purposes to further the interests of men.

16 The expression is derived from *ukubethela*, to nail or peg a sharp object to mark a boundary/margin and *isikhonkwane*, in an invisible way.

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one of the boys in the village. The boy refused to say that he had made the girl pregnant and this mother-in-law replied that if you made my niece pregnant, you are going to have your penis returning into your stomach. These words were widely heard, and many people started to say that she is a witch.

Witchcraft and the Patrilineal Order

In the patrilineal order of the Sotho, Venda, and Ndebele communities in Hwali you do not utter words undermining male fertility unpunished, especially not if you are a woman and a mother-in-law. In the above case, the punishment was witchcraft accusations against the woman. Women, especially if they are single, elderly, and deviate from the moral order in any way, are the ones most liable to be accused of being witches in this patrilineal and patrifocal society. Even those women who are seen as being successful migrant labourers, vendors, and/or participate in local politics run the risk of being seen as threats to the prescribed order.[17] Part of the initial success of the Tsikamtanda Traditional Healers Group was that they understood and could capitalise on gender and generational tensions in this context. Thus the majority of the witches pinpointed by them were elderly women.

That there is a base for men's fear of being manipulated and, come the worst, being dominated by women, is seen by the increasing number of women-headed households and the increasing number of women working outside Hwali. Men are also not sure of their wives' powers over them within the marriage. That they have reasons for this insecurity can be exemplified by two women voices from Patana. Both mirror the extent in which women can manipulate and neutralise the dominance of their husbands. Their voices reveal also how intertwined the work of *n'anga* and the fear of witchcraft on part of the men can be in gender relations. A younger woman, married to a war veteran, explained that

> married women can use herbs which they put in their husbands' food so as to make them soft, as most men like abusing their wives, taking them like workers. So, if he is given this mixture, *ukudliswa*, the man can do any chore in the home. He will be soft when speaking, and he can even cook for the family. Most women, if they are troubled by their husbands, consult a *n'anga* for this herb. Sometimes they consult for the medicine that makes the man to become erect and wanting sex only with his wife. They call it to lock the man's penis and you only unlock it when he is at home; when he goes away you lock it so that he will not have any entry desire for other women.

The reversal of gender roles is prominent here and mirrors the official rigidness of such roles in the Hwali society. A second voice gives an interesting twist on a similar theme and throws light on why a man cannot be sure of the food cooked by his own wife; a situation that lessens his power over her and adds to witchcraft accusations between the sexes besides explaining some of the polluting power of female fluids on a male. An older widow from Patana was quite open about how

> a woman cooks a chicken, and during the cooking she removes her pants and opens her legs over the pot with the meat so that the steam goes into her *nuo*, vagina, and drops back into the pot. Then, when the man comes home after a hard day's work, he finds *sadza* served with chicken, which is a rare meal. He says that the meat tastes so delicious and he eats a lot and the meal will weaken his powers over his wife. Often the meat will be sprinkled with some herbs given by a *n'anga* to add to the effect. Another method is when the wife boils her pants and uses the water to cook *sadza*, which she serves her husband. So it seems the trick is within the vaginal area. You can hear people saying, *Lo, ah! Udlisiwe*, "This one, ah! He has been given the medicine," when they see weakness in a man in solving family issues, or when they see him doing woman chores, carrying water, and washing when the wife is still there.

In a community where the old patrilineal order is increasingly fragmented by the double onslaught of drought (the withholding of fertilizing rain by the male ancestors) and sickness and death (the anger of the ancestors about "the blood on the land" caused by a perceived antisocial and promiscuous behaviour of men and women), witchcraft accusations and gossip get new nourishment. The increasing socioeconomic differences between families and households lend more fuel to such social mechanisms.

Deviating from the social norms and challenging the moral order, a member of the community is prone to be accused and labeled as a witch, especially if it is a woman. It seems as if every village in the ward has got one or more such village witches, fulfilling needs of having scape goats and gossiping in times of stress and change. When a woman comes from outside the village

17 The circumstances "why little old ladies are identified as potential sources of dreadful evil" (Ashforth 1996: 1209) may be connected with the increasing number of women-headed households in the communities in Hwali ward, a development that goes against the grain of a patrilineal and patrifocal society.

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she may become a scapegoat for the fractures and misfortunes in the family and the community. She may particularly be seen as a potential threat to the male order. A Patana man lamented:

> The problem of culture in our society is caused by many men marrying "born *lokhitshi*," that is, women who are bred in the town location. Such wives are hated by the mothers-in-law, who say that they don't work, especially not in the fields; that they don't show respect to elderly people by standing, sometimes even sitting on the stool of the father-in-law, because they just don't know these traditions.

The case of the "born *lokhitshi*" points to socioeconomic and cultural fracture points found between generations, rural and urban people, and between men and women in a ward like Hwali. Such fracture points, magnified by socioeconomic changes, make gossip and witchcraft accusations spread and grow.

Concluding Remarks

The idioms of kinship and witchcraft are applied both to explain and to control fracturing socioeconomic transformations in the community. In its latter capacity witchcraft is inherently political and, especially in the context of witchfinding movements, becomes appropriated by different factions in the community as younger against elderly, by men against women or vice-versa, by traditional leaders, kraalheads, headmen, and chiefs against modern political leaders.

As Mawere and Wilson (1995) point out, such movements or cults try to address sociopolitical and socioeconomic strains in the community brought about by the wider political economy by mobilising communities to cleanse evil within themselves. However, socioreligious and witchfinding movements like the *tsikamtanda*'s are usually short-lived as social movements. An important reason for this is that they interpret the communities as more consensual than they are, run up against their socioeconomic, gendered, and political divisions and fail to organise accordingly.

Witchcraft accusations and witchfinding movements may be seen as part of the strategies of people of the Hwali ward to grasp and control their economic and social marginalisation in the wider regional labour economy. In this respect it has been argued (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxviii f.) that "witchcraft is a finely calibrated gauge of the impact of global cultural and economic forces on local relations."

However, what it boils down to in the end in the context of Hwali ward is, as Niehaus (2001: 193) underlines, that "For villagers witchcraft has less to do with civilisation and African identity than with their experiences of misery, marginalisation, illness, poverty and insecurity." Accordingly, the burden of blame for the state of affairs in the community is increasingly shifted to personalised forces disruptive of interpersonal relations of exchange and production in the community: the amoral, greedy witch, the antithesis of reciprocity, and social reproduction.

The witchcraft discourses are still the underside of kinship in Hwali ward, but, far from being a precolonial coping mechanism, they are equally put to use by members of the community, both men and women, to explain and control new inequalities, threats, and their consequences. According to informants much gossip is centered on access to resources that the state and NGOs, including development programmes such as the CAMPFIRE (Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources) (see Zachrisson 2004) bring into the ward. The idiom of witchcraft is reinvigorated under these circumstances and becomes a dynamic response by disadvantaged villagers' perceptions of distributions of such resources.

The *tsikamtanda* witchcraft-cleansing practices and the local villagers' articulation with these show how local concepts (local knowledge) and practices adapt to new distributions of power and goods brought about by the state and development programmes. In the wider picture witchcraft and witchcraft cleansing in Gwanda are means by which communal land inhabitants try to explain and control modern changes and socioeconomic transformations in Zimbabwe since Independence.

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