

NGOJA AND SIX THEORIES OF WITCHCRAFT ERADICATION

by

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Introduction

In a paper presented at the 1972 Lusaka Conference on Central African Religions, entitled "Mchape and the Study of Witchcraft Eradication," T.O. Ranger undertook to present and assess six theories which can be found in various published and unpublished sources that seek to explain the rise and spread of the Mchape anti-witchcraft movement of the early 1930's. This paper will endeavor to apply these same six interpretations to the activities of Ngoja bin Kimeta who stood at the center of a series of anti-witchcraft movements which took place throughout the 1920's in Central and Southern Tanzania.

Using a variety of documents gleaned from colonial records (kindly supplied by Prof. Ranger), each of the six interpretations will be applied to the Ngoja movements. The paper will then look carefully at the wide range of practices associated with Ngoja and attempt to draw some conclusions about what light Ngoja can throw on the study of witchcraft eradication movements in general. It will seek to sort out some of the weaknesses of the various theories which have been discussed, finally suggesting a seventh approach to the significance of witchcraft eradication which may prove fruitful.

A Brief History of the Activities of Ngoja bin Kimeta

Ngoja bin Kimeta was an old, Ngindo resident of Segerea village which lies near Dar es Salaam near the coast of Tanganyika. He built a remarkable anti-witchcraft career for himself during the latter years of his life, becoming during this period the inspiration for at least two very widespread and popular witchcraft eradication movements.

He practiced actively on the Swahili coast of Tanganyika during the years immediately following World War I and was able to gain a considerable reputation as a *mganga* (witch-doctor) and a witch-cleanser. During 1922 and 1923 Ngoja's influence and practice spread inland from Dar es Salaam into the southern Morogoro area as the natives there sought to import prestigious anti-witchcraft medicine from the coast to deal with recurring epidemics of pneumonia. By 1924 colonial reports indicated that "...his influence was spreading to an astonishing extent."¹ He was, therefore, arrested and tried by the Dar es Salaam authorities on a charge of extortion, but was not convicted. From this time on, however, he was the object of heavy pressure from colonial authorities to discontinue his anti-witchcraft practices.

In 1925 and 1926 Ngoja's anti-witchcraft medicine became popular in Central Tanganika. Ngoja himself was active in Kilosa and Morogoro, but his agents and various imitators spread the drinking of his anti-witchcraft water—which became known as Kimehe or Chimehe—over a much wider area. One chief described the movement thus:

The people like to drink to cleanse themselves so that they cannot be classed as wizards. Because if a person affected by witchcraft drinks Kimehe his witchcraft leaves him and if he takes to witchcraft again he will die. Therefore, people like to drink, because if a man sees all his neighbors drinking, he will do so also, for shame lest people say, 'This man is a wizard and will not drink.'"²

As the Kimehe movement spread, Ngoja was expelled from Morogoro in 1926 and restricted to Dar in the latter part of that same year. Colonial authorities and African chiefs joined forces to suppress the movement with ridicule and with force.

It seems that their efforts were successful. However, Ngoja's activities were not at an end. In 1927, his agents were having success in Ngindo Country. From there the anti-witchcraft movement, now known as "Ngoja," spread over the greater part of Southern Tanganyika in 1928. However, by now Ngoja's medicine had taken a different form.

*On learning that one of the Ngoja cult is in their midst, the people assemble with or without the help of their headmen. All adults present of both sexes are treated by shaving a patch of hair from the scalp and rubbing in the medicine which is a concoction made from the roots of bush called 'Ndokomile' mixed with castor oil. Children are treated also by making them swallow a medicine called 'lipoiya' the juice of the pounded roots of the bush of that name. These medicines are believed to have the power of causing the death of all recipients in the event of their practicing or reverting to witchcraft.*³

In 1929 Ngoja returned to Kilosa in East-Central Tanganyika, attracting large crowds as he moved through the area. He was restricted to Kilosa in 1930 by the Acting District Officer as part of a continuing effort on the part of the colonial authorities to suppress his activities. However, from Kilosa Ngoja continued his practice on a very wide scale both through agents (who had reached the borders of Northern Province) and by receiving clients personally at a secret headquarters at Mkwatani, a village about a mile from Kilosa.

Ngoja died in 1932, while on a visit to Dar es Salaam. However, Ngoja's practice was immediately taken over by his brother, Omari bin Kimeta; and later by his son, Salehe bin Ngoja, who was arrested by colonial authorities in 1946 because of his anti-witchcraft activities.

Six Theories of Witchcraft Eradication

The six interpretations of Mchape which Ranger examines in his Lusaka Conference paper are by no means the only theories of witchcraft eradication which scholars have advanced. However, they are the assessments which have been proposed for the first witchcraft eradication movement to come to scholarly notice and other theories will remain beyond the scope of this paper. The following sections will attempt to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each of these six theories as they apply to Ngoja and his work.

A Revolutionary Conspiracy

Ranger has found that during the spread of Mchape there was widespread fear among administrators that the movement might either actually be an anti-colonial conspiracy or that it would cause such unhealthy excitement among African peoples that revolt would follow. Similar fears were expressed by colonial authorities in Tanganyika as they observed the rise and spread of Ngoja's activities. In fact, the suspicions and fears expressed by Europeans in these two cases are so strikingly similar as to immediately throw suspicion on their validity. Clearly, any large-scale activity among Africans would have given rise to identical misgivings. This phenomenon says a great deal about the effect which Maji Maji had upon European administration throughout the colonial period.

In the case of Ngoja, beyond this general suspicion of all indigenous movements, the fears of the administrators were based on three things: the seeming similarity of the Ngoja movements to the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905-6; the great crowds that Ngoja attracted and the large meetings over which he presided; and, the fear that Ngoja's great prestige would undermine the authority of both colonial and Native officials.

Typical is the report which asserts that Ngoja

*...though purporting to relieve the people from the fear of witchcraft, may quite possibly have hidden political meaning. The origin of the medicine...was quite sufficient to recall to the older natives the sinister days of the Maji Maji Rebellion, which was initiated in that area.*⁴

Another piece of correspondence reads:

*It is, however, obvious that a man who enjoys such renown as does Ngoja may exercise very great influence throughout a wide region and that if he misuses this influence he may become a real danger to the peace of the country....The example of the Maji Maji rebellion will recur..., the more so as that rebellion originated in the Kilwas District and emanated from medicine men of Ngoja's type.*⁵

Though colonial apprehensions were universal, the only real evidence of anti-colonial intentions of the Ngoja movements is based on their similarity to and association with Maji Maji. Both movements at some stage were noted to involve medicine drinking. It was asserted that Ngoja's father had been a "ringleader of the Maji Maji rebellion."⁶ And both movements were observed to have originated from the same general location and spread over the same wide territory.⁷

This is weak evidence at best for any anti-colonial conspiracy especially in the face of a large body of evidence which stands against it. Even the administrators themselves expressed their concern with a conspiracy only as an initial suspicion. Later more considered opinion tended to regard Ngoja as an organized swindle with considerable nuisance value. A 1928 report reflects this later consensus. It admits that Ngoja;

...has spread into the District up the Mbara ngandu from Kilwa along the track followed by the great Maji-Maji rebellion to which movement it bears a superficial resemblance and this has no doubt caused it to be taken more seriously than would otherwise have been the case; at present however I think it is mere charlatanism aimed at parting the ignorant savage from his cash, and has no anti-European or other political bias.⁸

There is no evidence to show that such an anti-government or anti-white bias ever formed a part of Ngoja's activities. On the contrary, persons claiming to be Ngoja's agents are often recorded to have applied to government officials for permits to practice their trade. A 1929 report to the chief Secretary from Lindi Province records one such case:

...at present these practitioners are perfectly open in their ways, have frequently applied to Admin. Officers for permission to practice--which has of course not been accorded--and in one case the human bones (surrendered by confessed witches) were burnt and the purifiers professed willingness to refrain from their ceremonies if required to do so.⁹

In addition, complaints are recorded in several districts that Ngoja's agents actually claimed that official authorization had been granted to them by the authorities or:

...some even, when trade grew slack, asserted in the more distant parts of the areas that their stock in trade had to be purchased by order of the Chief, or even of the Government.¹⁰

Old Ngoja himself was offered a monthly government stipend by officials in 1928 if he would agree to give up his troublesome activities. To this offer he readily assented, but attached conditions which the authorities found unacceptable.

Finally, it is clear from the evidence available that the periods of greatest spread and popularity of Ngoja's medicine were achieved with the assistance of many imitators and imposters and were periods when Ngoja himself was plainly not in control of all of the practices which bore his name. A report of the 1926 Kimehe outbreak observes:

The original vendors of the nostrum netted a rich harvest, for Kimehe became the fashion and everyone seized the opportunity of gaining a clean sheet at the cost of two cents. Imitators soon appeared and vendors of Kimehe were heard of in all directions;...Ruaha water, originally an essential ingredient, became too distant, and fluid from the nearest puddle had to suffice.¹¹

In 1927 "agents" with whom Ngoja disclaimed all connection were prosecuted in Rufiji District, on the coast, for selling thousands of anti-witchcraft charms in the name of the government. And in 1931, in the midst of an unsuccessful raid on Ngoja was heard to warn his Gogo clients:

I hear that there are many Ngojas in your country, they are deceivers. I am the only Ngoja and your father...¹²

A Response to Colonial Stress

The first scholarly interpretation of a witchcraft eradication movement is that which Audrey Richards applied to Mchape in 1935. She did not believe that the movement which she treated was an anti-colonial phenomenon, but saw it as an African response to the dislocations in African society caused by European contact. Richards maintained that changes in Native beliefs regarding witchcraft and African sorcery must inevitably follow changes in social structure. She felt that by 1934 the economic and social changes caused by colonial rule had so shattered traditional institutions and moral codes that a great increase in the fear of witchcraft and the use of protective medicines had resulted. Such changes, and especially the abandonment of traditional religious practices, had caused the majority of Africans, according to Richards, to suffer from "a perpetual sense of guilt" which is expressed as a search for protection against witches. Since traditional protective medicines had been suppressed or discredited by colonial interference, witchcraft eradication movements were born. Their success was due to a blend of old and new forms which took advantage of new heightened fear and claimed special ability to eradicate witchcraft.¹³

As Ranger has noted in his paper on Mchape, it is rather difficult to bring the details of evidence to bear on so generalized a theory.¹⁴ However, certain basic assumptions of this approach can be made more explicit. Richards' interpretation of Mchape rests on the assertion that witchcraft eradication is essentially a new development in African religion which is peculiar to the period of transition from a traditional to a modern social order. Anti-Witchcraft movements

are seen as an Afro-European syncretism whose primary purpose is to relieve the tensions caused by social change.

There is a good deal of evidence in colonial records which indicates that one result of Ngoja's activities was the alleviation of social tension, but it is difficult to say how this could support Richards' interpretation. For instance, one typical report states:

*This man however has great influence and power and his movements and activities have been unremittingly watched in accordance with instructions issued by the Governor. His influence has not been harmful, in fact it might be said to be useful in that after his efforts in an area there is a feeling of security amongst the people that their enemies cannot harm them by wizardry.*¹⁵

On the other hand, there is a large body of evidence which would mitigate against Richards' view. First of all, it seems clear that Ngoja stands in the midst of a long series of witchcraft eradication movements which occurred before it and continued after it. Gwassa's research indicates that witchcraft eradication movements existed "long before" the Maji Maji Rebellion of 1905-6 in the area of Southern Tanzania.¹⁶ And such movements have continued to spring up even after independence. They are certainly not linked to any particular period of African history.

Second, Ngoja and his agents did not present their patrons with a modern Europeanized syncretism. On the contrary, one colonial official expressed his concern with Ngoja in these terms:

*Himself an ignorant old man, he was able to persuade quite a number of comparatively educated and intelligent people that he was able to detect and cure witchcraft in others...*¹⁷

Though they sometimes claimed European approval of their activities, it would appear that Ngoja's men drew upon the prestige of the Swahili coastal culture, rather than upon the symbols of European civilization to aid their efforts. This question will be discussed in more detail below.

A Response to Economic Depression

Ranger has found that some administrators in the 1930's argued that Mchape was primarily the result of severely depressed economic conditions. Mchape vendors were held to be young, educated and urbanized men who were thought to "be victims of the slump."¹⁸ The movement itself was presented as one means by which these men, forced to return to their villages or unable to leave them, sought to acquire money and position.

However, colonial authorities in Tanganyika advanced to similar claim for Ngoja. Two are recorded to have experienced difficulty in collecting taxes in areas where Ngoja was found to be operating, but this evidence must be taken with more than one grain of salt before it is applied to the Depression Theory.

There are considerable difficulties in applying this interpretation to Ngoja for a number of reasons. First, it is probably true that the 1920's in Tanzania, and especially the latter years of the decade, were not a period of depression, but rather one of progressive recovery from the dislocations caused by World War I and the change of colonial administration from German to British. Of course, the economic history of this area has not been fully studied and any conclusions must remain tentative.

In any case, as mentioned above, witchcraft eradication movements are a long-standing phenomenon in the areas of Ngoja's out-break. Such movements have occurred both before and after Ngoja in prosperous times as well as in depressed ones. Again, any attempt to link witchcraft eradication with any one period of African history can be satisfactorily refuted and dismissed.

Another problem with this approach to Ngoja is the absence of any evidence that would indicate that its practitioners were young, urbanized and modern men. This conspicuous lack of information will become important again later in this paper. Finally, is the fact that Ngoja's medicine and services were expensive. It is doubtful that they could have had such widespread success during a time of depression. In 1931 his standard fees were known to be "sh 10 if a man is declared a witch, and sh 6 if he is not declared a witch."¹⁹ One client confessed paying sh 20 to Ngoja for medicine to ensure his safe journey home.

A Neo-Christian Movement

Central African witchcraft eradication campaigns have often been analyzed as Christian-African syncretisms and there is no doubt that many of them drew heavily upon Christian symbols and Christian theology. Ngoja stands out in distinct contrast to this widespread characteristic as it shows no signs at all of Christian influence. It does, on the other hand, betray a distinctly Muslim flavor, though it may be going a bit too far to regard it as an Islamic-African syncretism.

Ngoja bin Kimeta was himself a Muslim. His career began on, and he repeatedly returned to, the Islamic coast of Tanganyika. There he enjoyed the support of some educated Muslims, as well as high Muslim officials. Ranger has demonstrated that the spread of Ngoja's influence into the interior from its coastal base conforms to a long-established pattern of the diffusion of Islamic influences in Tanzania. Moreover, he notes that Ngoja's campaigns penetrated into Central Tanganyika at much the same time as the last great expansion of Islam and may be regarded, in a broad sense, as one expression of the expansion of Swahili society.

The scant evidence which is available on Ngoja's legitimate lieutenants shows them to have Muslim names and indicates that they must have been Muslims. There is evidence which suggests that the water-drinking ceremonies characteristic of Kimehe may also have been of Muslim origin.

A Means of Role Redefinition

David Parkin has dismissed the notion, implicit in all of the previously described theories, that anti-witchcraft movements are essentially a thing peculiar to the colonial period. He argues that such movements are long-standing cultural features which invariably signal a redefinition of internal roles within the societies where they occur. Thus, Parkin asserts that the significance of witchcraft eradication is primarily political. Such movements are means by which potentially new and younger elites can attack the symbols of established authority and announce that they have assumed key roles, or are about to do so. The movements do not in themselves bring about role changes, but they advertise new trends in society which have made new sources of (especially economic) opportunity and influence available. They open the door to intense internal political bargaining from which a new configuration of prestige and power may emerge.²⁰

There is an abundance of evidence which may be used to support this argument in the case of the various Ngoja movements, for it is quite often recorded that the famed doctor's great influence met with fear and hostility, not only from colonial officials, but also from African authorities. As the Kimehe campaign spread in Central Tanganyika in 1926, the chiefs in the Uhehe, Upawaga and Ubene areas joined with the government to suppress the movement with no small measure of brutality--Sapi beat the vendors, Kisagua had them dosed with castor oil.²¹ In Mahenge Province in the South in 1928 and 1929, Ngoja's practices also met with stiff resistance. After the movement had gained considerable momentum, the Wapogoro Council of Chiefs took successful steps to check it. Colonial reports record that:

A sporadic attempt at revival of this anti-witchcraft treatment was made recently but came to an untimely end through the agency of the Wapogoro Council of Chiefs. While no alarmist, I am convinced in my own mind that there is an element of danger in the spread of this 'cult'. Although hard to prove, I am satisfied that it leads to the smelling out of wizards, and I am informed that deaths by suggestion have been common, and that innocent natives have suffered. Politically such a movement is highly undesirable from the hold which these unscrupulous natives obtain over the popular imagination to the detriment of the influence of chiefs and headmen whose prestige it is essential should be fostered in the early days of Native Administration. This latter was the real reason that the Superior Native Authorities became so alarmed.²²

In this same province Native authorities prevailed upon one D.O. to draft a law outlawing Ngoja and set about to enforce it with vigor.

Though the chiefs of Mahenge may have been alarmed by an attack by Ngoja on their authority, it also seems clear that their anti-Ngoja views were heavily influenced by British opinion which was brought home to them in a very direct manner. For instance, one report reads:

While avoiding the impression that the Government attached too much importance to this movement, it was thought wise to discuss this matter with the chiefs and Headmen who were unanimous in thinking that their people were being swindled out of money which they could ill afford. From that time the Chiefs took vigorous steps to stop these practices with success.²³

The records show that a number of chiefs and headmen were actually dismissed by colonial officials for collaboration with Ngoja and it seems likely that others were aware of this action and got the message.

In any case, indigenous opposition to Ngoja was by no means consistent. On the coast the African authorities were found to welcome and support the movement. Ngoja was openly backed by the senior administrative official of Dar es Salaam. In Ngoja's home Ngindo territory, chiefs offered no resistance to his activities and some were heavily committed to it.²⁴

Another problem with the theory of role redefinition lies in the absence of evidence regarding the identity of Ngoja's agents. Parkin's argument is heavily committed to the idea of generational cleavage, but the Ngoja material betrays no hint of its existence. On the contrary, Ngoja himself was an old man and was observed to move with other elders in communities where he practiced. After his death his brother became his successor and even later his son fell heir to his father's practice, suggesting the primacy of age and generational harmony, rather than tensions caused by youthful revolt.

Since it has been established that Ngoja's men were not Europeanized examples of the modern new African, but most probably Swahili Muslims, one might ask what new social trends were being signaled by their activities. If the advance of Swahili culture is the answer, the immense popularity of Ngoja on the Tanganyika coast, as well as in the interior, must be explained.

A Traditional Religious Form

The last theories which Ranger treats in his paper on Mchape are those which regard modern anti-witchcraft movements as late developments of an ancient religious tradition in Central and East Africa. Matthew Schoffeleers and Jan Vansina, both in

unpublished papers, have argued in this vein.²⁵ And Mary Douglas, in print, has suggested a similar interpretation.²⁶ This approach rejects the idea that witchcraft eradication can be thought to be a new thing in African societies or that its existence can be attributed to the impact of Western contact on African cultures. Though it is generally conceded that the colonial period may have witnessed an important expansion of such movements in both number and scope, these theories insist that similar movements had existed long before colonial rule began. Witchcraft eradication stands along side of protective medicine and the Mwavi poison ordeal as a traditional means of witchcraft control.

Such an interpretation can easily be applied to the Ngoja movements. It has been emphasized that Ngoja can be shown to stand in a series of anti-witchcraft campaigns that existed long before and continued long after the 1920's. It is clear, even from colonial records, that Ngoja bin Kimeta was not regarded as a new or unique phenomenon during his time:

These rites are generally known as 'Ngoja' but a similar cult bearing the various names of 'Pemba', 'Malinda', 'Lipanga' & etc. all professing the same beneficial object of exorcising any inherent power of sorcery and of protecting individuals from the wizardry of others, reappears from time to time.²⁷

Just how ancient the tradition of witchcraft eradication is in Southern Tanzania has yet to be established, and further research is certainly needed in this area. However, research must go beyond merely establishing the antiquity of these traditions and attempt to discover the role which they played in society and the various forms which they took through time. Only then could Ngoja be meaningfully studied as one development in the dynamic African religious culture of its area. Otherwise statements about long-standing sequences of anti-witchcraft movements will conceal as much as they reveal.

Such a treatment of Ngoja is beyond the scope of the evidence available for this paper, but the above insight provides the opportunity to look more carefully at the activities associated with Ngoja bin Kimeta and ask some basic questions about the nature of witchcraft eradication movements in general.

Ngoja and Witchcraft Eradication

T.O. Ranger, in an unpublished paper, has defined witchcraft eradication in terms of two essential elements. The first is its basic opposition to the customary means of witchcraft control, "born out of a profound sense of disillusion with them." Witchcraft eradication, says Ranger, must involve a "sweeping away" of common protective devices and perhaps an attack on all other medicines. The second essential is universal treatment, requiring by definition complete community involvement for a total eradication

of witchcraft—protecting all innocents from future attack and rendering all witches harmless.²⁸

The application of this definition of witchcraft eradication to the varied activities of Ngoja bin Kimeta presents a number of difficulties. For a period of more than a decade Ngoja presided over a wide-ranging practice and offered many different services to his clients. The evidence clearly indicates that often one or the other (and even both) of Ranger's conditions were missing from his anti-witchcraft trade. Moreover, it seems that Ngoja himself did not regard either intolerance of other medicines or universality as essential to his powers or practices. Finally, in the eyes of others Ngoja's reputation does not seem to have rested upon these conditions either.

As can be seen from earlier quotations cited in this paper, mention of any demand for the surrender or destruction of customary anti-witch charms, which has been a prominent part of other anti-witchcraft campaigns, such as Mchape, is notably absent from Ngoja's rites of community cleansing. Nor are Ngoja's agents ever recorded to have carried quantities of such charms with them or displayed them in large piles as proof of their power as Mchape vendors are known to have done. The evidence here is admittedly incomplete. However, it is clear that exclusivity was never a necessary part of Ngoja's practice.

Moreover, Ngoja is shown to have regularly treated individuals as well as communities, and to have trafficked in ordinary *uganga* (benevolent medicine). The following confessions of his clients obtained by police authorities illustrate this point:

I was at the time much distressed since I knew that Asha another of Karinga's wives, thought that I was a witch and responsible for all the trouble in his house, so I wanted to go to Kilosa so that this diviner could see me and if I really was a witch, so that he could take away the badness from me.... Ngoja first took my hand and after looking at my palm he told my husband that I was not a witch.... We were given some medicine by Ngoja which he said was a permanent preventative against all kinds of harm.²⁹

And, again:

For some time my house has been unfortunate. My wives die and my children die and surviving wives do not bear children. A man who lives at Kisese named Yusuf Korombo told me during this year that there was a diviner in that district who was very efficient and able to point out the thing... which was responsible for the deaths.... We found (Ngoja) at Kilosa township. I told him that I wished him to divine for me. He agreed and informed me that there was a bad person in my house who was jealous of my riches and was responsible

*for all my calamities....He told me that his fee was 2s. This I paid him and we all left the house and returned to this district. Ngoja gave me some medicine which I have tied in a bracelet to my wrist, to ensure my safe return home. I paid him sh 20 for this and for this same money he also gave my wife some similar medicine.*³⁰

There are only a few hints to be gleaned from colonial records that give us an idea of Ngoja's image of himself. Yet they indicate that he regarded himself as a great *Mganga* (doctor)--a master of medicines, rather than their enemy--and that he was content to confine his practice to receiving individual clients if it seemed profitable. During the ill-fated police raid previously mentioned, Ngoja was heard to declare to his suppliants: "I am the only Ngoja and your father, as I am the father to all Africans, and I know medicines."³¹ When offered a considerable monthly stipend by the government if he would abandon his widespread activities, Ngoja agreed, asking only that he be allowed to practice privately from his home in Dar es Salaam.

Finally, it must be argued that Ngoja's popular appeal was based on his reputed ability to cleanse witches of their evil and the efficacy of his protective medicines, rather than on the universality or exclusivity of his rites. One Provincial Commissioner explained to the Chief Secretary in 1930:

The evidence tends to show that Ngoja rather meets a demand already in existence amongst the natives for some recognized authority who will grant them absolution from the crime of witchcraft. The Courts do not fulfill that need. It is doubtless realised that witchcraft is involuntary as well as voluntary or malicious. In some ways it corresponds to a legacy of 'original sin' which other religious cults drive out by means of a cleansing ceremony.

There is no evidence to the effect that Ngoja has decided that any of his clients are witches. He receives a fee for telling them that they are not witches--the very answer they would receive from the ordinary D.O. In some cases he avoids giving judgment as to the commission of witchcraft in the past but binds them to good behavior in the future by an allegorical ceremony....

*Natives commit the illegal act of accusing others of witchcraft... Ngoja alone can give both the accusers and accused the satisfaction and peace of mind which they desire. Absolution is required and not criminal action by the Govt. against the slanderers.*³²

And another official sometime later concurred:

...every African believes that there may be lurking in him the seeds of 'uchawi' (witchcraft). It is on this belief that the cults like Mchape and Ngoja trade and make their money. They claim that they can protect the individual in life against all 'uchawi'... Furthermore they claim that they can discover and remove all the unknown but lurking seeds of 'uchawi' in any man.³³

All this may just possibly suggest that the emphasis which scholars have placed upon the attack which some witchcraft eradication movements have made on all medicines and upon their universal scope may be misplaced. Witchcraft eradication itself may be only a special form of witch-cleansing which erupts with such force and popularity on occasion as to attempt a final solution to the problem of witchcraft within a particular society.

An Alternative Approach

The previous sections of this paper have sought to assess the strengths and weaknesses of six interpretations of Mchape as general explanations of witchcraft eradication by applying them to evidence available for the Ngoja campaigns. Now I will attempt to sketch out, in the final sections, an alternate approach to the significance of these movements which I feel is suggested by the material.

One major problem which I find with the theories discussed above, which seek to interpret witchcraft eradication in terms of social, economic, or political pressures, is that they fail to give proper credit to the fact that most African peoples actually do believe in witchcraft. In many cases fear of witchcraft is universal within a society and virtually every sickness and untimely death is attributed to this cause. Given such a real belief in, and fear of witchcraft, there must then exist within these societies some means of witchcraft control, regardless of what other social, political or economic conditions exist.

Therefore, I maintain that it is a mistake to regard witchcraft eradication as primarily a response to political or economic trends and pressures. It is rather primarily a *means of witchcraft control* and to regard it as otherwise can only result in a distortion of its true meaning. Once this has been established, however, it must immediately be admitted that means of witchcraft control may be influenced and affected by social pressures without these pressures becoming their central concern. Such means of control certainly have had social implications which go beyond witchcraft itself and have been manipulated for political or economic advantage. The forms that this manipulation may take and the results it may have in any one society are endless and depend only upon the strength and ingenuity of the manipulators.

However, the subject does not end here. From this point and using this approach a number of other historical questions may yet be asked. The one which I will attempt to answer here is why witchcraft eradication movements have seemingly become so numerous, widespread and millenarian during the colonial period.

A Legal Means of Witchcraft Control

It would appear from the evidence that traditional societies in Central and east Africa have had available to them for centuries three alternate means of witchcraft control, all of which were in continual or periodic use. The first of these, and by far the most common, was the use of protective medicines. These were always available from a variety of *waganga* and seem to have been virtually ubiquitous. Every person in society made use of this medicine at one time or another. Second was the Mwavi poison ordeal, which was used only occasionally and was often in the hands of the political authority. This ordeal (by which, after drinking poison, the innocent were believed to live and the guilty witches to die) was a conclusive means of resolving suspicions and open accusations of witchcraft. Occasionally, mass ordeals were conducted, involving every adult member of the community.

Thirdly, it is clear that witch-cleansing (whereby a convicted witch is absolved of his crime) was also a traditional phenomenon. More research is needed here to establish what forms this cleansing took and to work out what relationship it had to the other means of witchcraft control. Now it seems that it was the most unusual of the three. It may have been dependent upon the arrival of external practitioners, or perhaps the rise of a particularly powerful and effective *mganga*. Douglas suggests that it may simply have stood as an alternative to the Mwavi ordeal, which may have seemed at times to be too drastic a means of dealing with an offense as usual as the common cold.

With the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of colonial rule, the first two of these three means of witchcraft control came under attack. The Mwavi ordeal was outlawed and those who dared to continue to participate in it were often fined, imprisoned and even hanged. This was true in Tanganyika. An Annual Report from the Southern Districts for 1920 notes that the manufacture of poison for the ordeal is still worthy of note, "but this industry, it is pleasing to record, is fast dying out."³⁴

The source of protective medicines, the *waganga*, misunderstood by colonial officials and faced with hostile missionaries, also found themselves on the defensive. One sympathetic report made in Tanganyika complained:

No distinction is made in the Ordinance (the anti-witchcraft law) between these two aspects of the case, in facts, as the D.O. Lindi points out that it is almost impossible to prosecute

the 'mchawi' (witch) successfully whereas it is quite easy to prosecute the 'mganga' who in reality should be prosecuted....

*"The 'mganga', although the only medical practitioner available in most communities and who is the benefactor of the community, is regarded by Missionaries as a hindrance to their work, hence there is a tendency on the part of the Missions to take all possible steps to discredit these men and they are only too pleased to see them prosecuted. This combined with an inability to distinguish between 'uchawi' and 'uganga' on the part of some officials, has often led to criminal action being taken against the 'mganga'."*³⁵

These conditions may have combined to make the third means of witchcraft control, that is witch-cleansing, much more important and attractive in African societies during colonial rule and after. This is especially true since the authorities were much more willing to tolerate (and occasionally even to encourage) witch-cleansing, even when it erupted into witchcraft eradication, than the other means of dealing with witches. In Tanganyika, even when the government sought to suppress Ngoja, it had a great deal of difficulty finding a law under which he could be successfully prosecuted—since the act of declaring that someone is not a witch was not a crime.

This legal factor is very important because it provided Africans with an acceptable means of dealing with witchcraft fears, suspicions and accusations when other means were under attack. One British official observed:

It has been my opinion for some time past that the practice has evolved from the old 'smelling out' ordeals when Mwavi was used to detect the suspected wizard but which is too dangerous to use in these times under a closer Administration.

In the people's mind the necessity for discovering wizards still remains and use of the 'Ngoja' and other methods, avoids the retribution of our law on those who might participate in poison ordeals.

*I am also under the impression that the areas Songea, Livale, etc. through which the present practice prevails are those which in earlier times were particularly addicted to the use of the Mwavi ordeal, but I am open to correction on the point.*³⁶

This legal aspect can account for the widespread appeal of witch-cleansing movements in recent years and may even go far towards explaining why they often erupted into eradication movements. However, I feel that the millenarian tendencies associated with many such eradication movements call for a wider interpretation. Here I agree with Ranger that these tendencies, where they exist, reflect a profound reaction against the customary means of dealing with witchcraft and against the whole witchcraft belief system. The fear of witches in African societies, deprived of its normal cultural controls by colonial interference, became a disruptive and dangerously anti-social

force. It appears that during this period many communities recognized this fact and sought to do away with the whole system of witches, ordeals and medicines through an enthusiastic and universal application of witchcraft eradication. Where millenarian beliefs occur, they represent a kind of pledge not to believe in witches any more and to banish the influence of such fear from society--a pledge which, most unfortunately, could not be kept.

FOOTNOTES

1. Annual Report: Dar es Salaam 1924, Secretariat 1733/26
2. Annual Report: Iringa 1926, Secretariat 1733/4/50
3. Annual Report: Mahenge 1928, Secretariat 11680
4. *Ibid.*
5. Interdepartmental Minutes, Cameron & Dundas 6/1/28, Secretariat 12333
6. Chief Sec. to Gov., 10/14/30, Secretariat 12333
7. For a fuller assessment of this final point refer to T.O. Ranger, "Witchcraft Eradication Movements in Central and Southern Tanzania and their Connection with the Maji Maji Rising", Unpublished paper. University College, Dar es Salaam, 1966.
8. Mahenge Province Tour Report, 7/25/29, Songea, Secretariat V16-M12553
9. Acting P.C. Lindi to Chief Sec., 11/7/29, Secretariat 12333
10. Annual Report: Iringa 1926, Secretariat 1733/4/50
11. *Ibid.*
12. Evidence of Mahamudu bin Selimani, 8/31, Secretariat 12333
13. Audrey Richards, "A Modern Movement of Witch-Finders", *Africa*, Vol. 8, 1935, pp. 448-61.
14. T.O. Ranger, "Mchape and the Study of Witchcraft Eradication", Unpublished, p. 14.
15. Annual Report: Eastern Province 1926, Secretariat 1733/3:47
16. Obtained from Ranger's notes on a conversation with G.C.K. Gwassa

17. Annual Report: Dar es Salaam 1924, Secretariat 1733:26
18. T.O. Ranger, "Mchape...", p. 16.
19. Evidence of Sehuli bin Magubika, 6/31, Secretariat 12333
20. David J. Parkin, "Medicine and Men of Influence", *MAN*, Vol. 3, 1968, pp. 424-39.
21. Annual Report: Iringa 1926, Secretariat 1733/4/50.
22. Annual Report: Mahenge 1928, Secretariat 11680
23. *Ibid.*
24. For a fuller treatment of this subject refer to Ranger, "Witchcraft..."
25. J. Matthew-Schoffeleers, "M'Bona. The Guardian Spirit of the Man Manganja" B. Litt. Thesis, Oxford, 1966 & Jan Vansina, "Lukoshi-Lupambula: A Group of Anti-W. Cults in So. Central Zaire, 1920-1970" Unpublished seminar paper. n.d.
26. Mary Douglas, "Techniques of Sorcery Control in Central Africa" in *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, Middleton and Winters, eds.
27. Annual Report: Lindi 1932, Secretariat V16-All679.
28. Ranger, "Witchcraft...", p. 1.
29. Evidence of Mwanageni bt Nkoma, 6/30/31, Secretariat 12333
30. Evidence of Karinga Mariri, 6/30/31, Secretariat 12333
31. Evidence of Mahamudu bin Selimani, loc. cit.
32. Acting P.C. Dar es Salaam to Chief Sec., 9/19/30, Secretariat 12333
33. A.N.L. to P.C. Lindi, 7/7/37, Secretariat 16/5/7
34. Annual Report: Songea 1919-20, Secretariat 1733/1
35. A.N.L. to P.C., loc. cit.
36. P.C. Lindi to Chief Sec., 9/25/33, Secretariat 12333

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Igbo Folk-tale: *LAMENT OF THE DOVES*