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The Modern-Day Witch Hunt: How Witches Are Still Persecuted TodayThe image of witches being burned at the stake may seem like a relic of the past, but the persecution of those who practise witchcraft, or are merely accused of it, is far from over. While society has advanced in countless ways, modern witches—both those who openly identify as practitioners and those falsely labelled—still face discrimination, harassment, and even violence. In some parts of the world, the consequences can be fatal.Historical Echoes in the Present DayThe infamous witch hunts of Europe and North America during the 15th to 18th centuries saw thousands of people executed under accusations of sorcery, often targeting women, the poor, and the marginalised. Though the legal structures that enabled these mass persecutions have largely been dismantled, the fear and stigma surrounding witchcraft persist.In contemporary society, this manifests in various ways—ranging from social ostracisation to imprisonment and murder. While Western nations may not carry out executions in the name of witchcraft, many witches still encounter prejudice, job discrimination, and even threats to their safety. In other parts of the world, accusations of witchcraft can lead to brutal killings, forced exile, or severe punishment under legal systems that still recognise such claims.Witch Persecution in the 21st CenturyThe persecution of witches today takes many forms, depending on the cultural and legal frameworks of different regions.Deadly Accusations in Africa and AsiaIn countries like Nigeria, Ghana, India, and Papua New Guinea, witch hunts remain a grim reality. Women, the elderly, and children are often scapegoated for misfortunes such as crop failures, disease outbreaks, or unexplained deaths. Once accused, they may be subjected to violent attacks, banishment, or even execution.In Tanzania, older women are particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations. Thousands have been lynched over the past few decades, with many burned alive. In India, accusations of witchcraft have been used as an excuse to justify violence against widows or single women, often as a means to seize property.Legal Persecution in the Middle EastSeveral countries in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, still enforce harsh punishments for alleged sorcery. In some instances, individuals accused of witchcraft have been executed under laws criminalising supernatural practices. In Saudi Arabia, so-called "witchcraft-related" arrests are regularly made, with people facing public lashings or even death sentences.Western Society: Discrimination and StigmatisationAlthough physical violence against witches is less common in the West, persecution takes on more insidious forms. Modern witches, particularly those who practise openly as Wiccans, Luciferians, or practitioners of other esoteric traditions, often experience workplace discrimination, custody battles where their beliefs are used against them, or social ostracisation.The rise of online hate campaigns has also led to digital witch hunts, where individuals are doxxed, harassed, and threatened simply for their spiritual beliefs. Some witches fear losing their jobs, friends, or family if their practices become known.The Role of Media and MisinformationMedia portrayals of witchcraft continue to shape public perception, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Films, television shows, and books frequently depict witches as either malevolent figures causing harm or as harmless but eccentric individuals. The reality is far more complex—witchcraft is a diverse spiritual and magical practice with deep historical roots.Misinformation and religious extremism also fuel modern-day persecution. In many places, evangelical movements and conservative religious groups spread fear-mongering narratives that portray witches as dangerous or evil, leading to community hostility and sometimes violent repercussions.What Can Be Done?The fight against witch persecution requires global awareness and action. Human rights organisations are working to decriminalise witchcraft accusations and provide aid to those targeted. Public education is crucial in challenging the stigma and ensuring that modern witches can practise their beliefs freely and safely.For those living in countries where being open about their practice is still dangerous, online communities provide a lifeline, offering support, knowledge, and a sense of belonging. The more society acknowledges and respects alternative spiritual practices, the harder it will be for persecution to thrive in the shadows.Final ThoughtsWitch persecution is not a thing of the past—it has simply evolved. From brutal killings in certain parts of the world to social discrimination in Western nations, those who identify as witches, or are accused of being one, continue to suffer. Challenging these injustices means dismantling old prejudices, questioning harmful narratives, and standing in solidarity with those who face persecution simply for embracing a path that has long been misunderstood.The witch hunts never truly ended; they just changed form. It is up to us to ensure that history does not continue to repeat itself. In recent decades, governments the world over have increasingly taken action to address the dark history of witch-hunting. In western Europe, memorials to victims have been erected at sites in Bamberg (Germany), Vardø (Norway) and Zugarramurdi (Spain). Many states have also taken to issuing national apologies, with some even granting posthumous pardons. The witchcraft exoneration movement isn’t simply about addressing past injustices. Violence directed at suspected witches persists across the world today and, alarmingly, seems to be intensifying. The witchcraft trials memorial at Steilneset in Vardø, Finnmark, Norway. Wikimedia The 2023 Annual Report of the United Nations Human Rights Council asserts that each year, hundreds of thousands of vulnerable people are harmed in locations such as sub-Saharan Africa, India and Papua New Guinea because of belief in witchcraft. One 2020 UN report states at least 20,000 “witches” were killed across 60 countries between 2009 and 2019. The actual number is likely much higher as incidents are severely under-reported. These sobering statistics indicate a need for urgent government action. The exoneration movement State-issued exoneration for victims of witchcraft persecution isn’t a modern concept. The most notable example was in the aftermath of the Salem witch trials (1692–93), in which at least 25 people (mostly women) were executed, tortured to death, or left to die in jail. In the decades that followed, the citizens of Salem submitted petitions demanding a reversal of convictions for those found “guilty” of witchcraft, and compensation for survivors. In 1711, Massachusetts Governor Joseph Dudley agreed to these demands. More recently, many states have moved to recognise and make amends for their historical involvement in witch-hunting. On International Women’s Day 2022, Scotland’s former first minister Nicola Sturgeon issued a national apology to people accused of witchcraft between the 16th and 18th centuries. In 2023, Connecticut lawmakers passed a motion to exonerate the individuals executed by the state for witchcraft during the 17th century. This motion is the result of grassroots campaigning by descendants and groups such as the Connecticut Witch Trial Exoneration Project. This witchcraft scene (circa 1770-1799), attributed to Spanish painter Luis Paret y Alcázar, shows three nude figures in a darkened interior, with one holding a skeleton by the shoulders. Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA However, as historian Jan Machielsen warns, the exoneration process can also be problematic. For instance, apologies or pardons may ignore the central role of communities in historical witch-hunts. Most witchcraft accusations emerged from neighbourly disputes and involved active participation by both the community and authorities. Even when European states ceased persecution in the 18th century, community-level violence continued. Nonetheless, advocates for witchcraft exoneration projects argue that state pardons are more important than ever, not least because they can help address ongoing witchcraft-related violence. Mifila, a Papua New Guinea woman, was reportedly axed to death after being accused of sorcery in 2015. Anton Lutz/AAP Why is modern witchcraft violence growing? Modern witchcraft persecutions are driven largely by religious fundamentalism and are further exacerbated by factors such as civil conflict, poverty, and resource scarcity. Biblical passages such as Exodus 22:18 are clear on the matter: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”. In particular, the growth of Pentecostalism in developing nations has played a central role in fuelling witch-hunts. Pentecostal evangelising has effectively demonised many cultural traditions – superimposing a strict religious attitude towards magic onto societies that have long accommodated such beliefs. This is evident in the ongoing crusade led by Helen Ukpabio, founder of the notorious Nigerian church Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries. A promotional poster for Liberty Gospel Church with Helen Ukpabio. Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio/Facebook Witchcraft-related violence has also been a growing concern in the United Kingdom, particularly within the African disapora. One of the most shocking cases was the 2010 death of 15-year-old Kristy Bamu in London. Bamu was tortured by his older sister and her partner for days, as they believed he was a witch. On Christmas Day, Bamu was forced into a bath for an exorcism, where he drowned. In response to such horrific cases, London’s Metropolitan Police launched The Amber Project in 2021 to address increasing incidents of child abuse linked to belief in witchcraft and spirit possession. Misogyny has also been a prevalent factor in historical witchcraft prosecutions and remains so today. According to the UN, “women who do not fulfil gender stereotypes, such as widows, childless or unmarried women, are at increased risk of accusations of witchcraft and systemic discrimination”. Witchcraft accusations are often a means to exert control over the bodies of women and girls, while maintaining male-dominated power structures. Accusations also play a role in human trafficking by making it easier to drive victims out of their communities. Read more: Most witches are women, because witch hunts were all about persecuting the powerless Global witchcraft prosecutions Belief in harmful magic and/or witchcraft exists across many societies. India has a long history of witch-hunting and continues to be plagued by this terrible injustice. One victim was Salo Devi, a 58-year-old woman from a small village in the state of Jharkhand. In 2023 she was beaten to death by her neighbours for allegedly bewitching a baby. Papua New Guinea and sub-Saharan Africa are also hotspots for witchcraft-related violence. This wooden fertility doll ‘akwaba’ was made in Ghana prior to 1914. Such dolls were used as fertility charms since infertility raised suspicions of witchcraft. The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA Violence isn’t just used as a punishment against accused witches, but is often part of the remedy. Attempts at counter-witchcraft or exorcisms have been a significant source of harm, particularly for children. Cultural beliefs surrounding disabilities and misunderstood conditions such as albinism have also been used as justification for beatings, banishment, limb amputation, torture and murder. So prevalent is such violence that in 2021 the UN Human Rights Council issued a historic special resolution calling for the “elimination of harmful practices related to accusations of witchcraft and ritual attacks”. This resolution urges member states not only to condemn these practices but also to take action to abolish them. What can be done? The UN and numerous non-government organisations are implementing programs to educate communities at risk of witchcraft-related violence. Leo Igwe, a Nigerian human rights activist and director of Advocacy for Alleged Witches, has played a central role in increasing public awareness of this violence. More voices like his are needed. At the same time, increased recognition is only the beginning. The UN has issued numerous denouncements and a few states have introduced anti-witchcraft bills. Additional legal protections, multi-agency task forces and national apologies will help bring more attention to this pressing issue. Above all, it’s necessary to address the beliefs and motivations that underpin witchcraft accusations. By doing so, we can reverse the alarming rate of witchcraft-related deaths recorded each year. The Witch Hunt (circa 1882-88) by Henry Ossawa Tanner. Wikimedia Read more: Witchcraft in Ghana: help should come before accusations begin The most famous witch trial in history happened in Salem, Massachusetts, during the winter and spring of 1692-1693. When it was all over, 141 suspects, both men and women, were tried as witches. Nineteen were executed by hanging. One was pressed to death by heavy stones. However, witch trials are not a thing of the past. Indeed, charges of witchcraft and trials of suspected witches are increasing. Witchcraft The word witchcraft has good and bad meanings in different cultures around the world. A general definition of witchcraft is the changing of everyday events using supernatural or magical forces. Witchcraft is usually associated with the power of nature, such as medicinal and poisonous plants, or rains and floods. People accused of witchcraft are said to be able to control natural events such as storms or droughts. So-called “witch doctors” use combinations of plants and animals, as well as spirituality or supernatural ability, to treat medical conditions. These “witch doctors” are not accused of being witches themselves—they heal illnesses and ailments blamed on witchcraft. “Witch doctor” is often a derogatory term for a traditional healer. Traditional healers, who rely on ancient remedies, are not witch doctors. Unlike traditional healers, witch doctors use spells. Spells are words or phrases that are suspected of having magical powers. Casting a spell to be wealthy or lucky in love is an example of witchcraft. Why do some people believe in witchcraft? Using the example of the love spell, some people may believe that the spell is the thing that brought them happiness. However, some people who are unlucky in love may believe that someone is using witchcraft against them. People try to come up with reasons for their own bad luck, or someone else’s good luck. If someone is really lucky, some people believe they must have cast a spell or made a deal with the devil in order to be so fortunate. Belief in Witches Belief in witchcraft is widespread. A 2005 poll of Canadians and people from the United Kingdom found that 13 percent believed in witches. For Americans, that number was even higher: 21 percent. Most people do not believe in magical witches, of course. Sometimes, though, normally logical people blame supernatural powers for their misfortune. Today, witch trials occur all over the world. Organizations like the United Nations and Stepping Stones Nigeria have found that the number of witch trials around the world is increasing. They are almost always violent, and sometimes they are deadly. When people get sick, witchcraft is sometimes seen as the cause. This is especially true in places with poor medical care or few educational opportunities. Although belief in witchcraft is not limited to the developing world, witch trials occur more frequently there. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 25 percent of pregnant women in Zambia are infected with HIV or AIDS. Men, women, and children are accused of spreading HIV/AIDS through witchcraft. Some of the accused are leaders in the scientific community or government advisers. So-called “witch hunters” have been known to kill those accused of witchcraft with a so-called poisonous “tea.” In one town in Zambia, a witch hunter killed 16 people in fewer than four months. Dozens of people have been killed in Papua New Guinea, the eastern half of the tropical island of New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean. In January 2009, a young girl was burned alive, accused of being a witch and infecting men with HIV/AIDS. A month later, a father and son were also burned to death after being accused of witchcraft. Accusations of witchcraft can be associated with good luck as well as bad luck. Nigeria’s oil boom, which began in the 1970s, has made a few of its citizens extremely wealthy. Some Nigerians explain this rapid accumulation of money and power as a sign of witchcraft. As recently as 2007, children accused of witchcraft in Nigeria were burned, poisoned, and abused. In 2008, rumors that a successful soccer player was using witchcraft triggered a riot in Kinshasa, Congo. The riot and stampede killed 13 people. In India, landowning women are sometimes accused of witchcraft. Neighbors of the suspected witch may begin collecting firewood on which the suspect will burn. The women, often older widows, are scared enough to leave their homes. Their neighbors then take their land. People who look different are often the victims of witch trials. In Tanzania, albino people are in danger of being killed for their skin and body parts. Since 2007, more than 50 albinos have been killed for ritual use. Tanzanian witch-doctors believe the arms, legs, skin, and hair of albinos have special magic in them, and that their use will bring their clients good luck in love, life, and business. In the Republic of Benin, the country’s government has used people’s fears of witchcraft to explain why some people do better than others. According to many legends, a baby that is not born head-first and with its face upwards is considered to be a witch. The so-called baby witches have been blamed for poor agricultural seasons or illnesses. Many babies are abandoned or killed. President Yahya Jammeh of The Gambia believes he is being targeted by witches. According to Amnesty International, as many as 1,000 Gambians accused of witchcraft have been arrested and tortured on orders from the president. At least two people are dead. President Jammeh also claims to be able to cure AIDS on Thursdays and fires doctors who disagree with him. Stopping Witch Hunts So what can be done to stop witch trials or accusations of witchcraft? Trying to stop a witch hunt by saying witches don’t exist doesn’t work. AIDS and poverty are very real sources of fear. People project their fears onto unfortunate victims. There has never been a proven case of witchcraft in all of human history. On the other hand, there are thousands of victims of witch hunts. People accused of witchcraft, if they survive their ordeal at all, often end up with ruined lives. In the end, it is the witch hunters who should be feared more than the people whom they accuse of witchcraft. Quick action by respected authority figures is effective in stopping witch hunts. In 2005, an eight-year-old girl in London, England, was accused of being a witch by a family member. The girl’s family abused her and rubbed chili peppers in her eyes to “beat the devil out of her.” British authorities immediately acted to remove the girl from the home. Three family members were held accountable for treating the girl as a witch. In 1997, the government of South Africa decided to do something about witchcraft fear in that country. They began an educational campaign in schools and workplaces about science, medicine, and HIV/AIDS. They also sent police to work with traditional healers and village chiefs. The police told them if they accuse a person of witchcraft and that person ends up being killed, the healers and village chiefs will be held responsible. The last proceedings of the Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts ended in 1693. But 331 years later, religious witch hunts remain a common — if not well-publicized — occurrence in countries around the world. Women are the predominant targets, as they were in historical witch hunts. But men and even children have also been targeted for allegedly practicing witchcraft. And while the practice is often thought of as a relic of the past, data from many developing countries shows that witch hunts are increasing, not disappearing.Witch hunts remain a "global problem in the 21st century," Deutsche Welle said, and it is such a pervasive issue that Aug. 10 has even been designated "World Day Against Witch Hunts." Thousands of people are accused of practicing witchcraft every year, and many are "persecuted and even killed in organized witch hunts," DW said. These hunts are most prominent in African countries but are also common in parts of Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.What is the 'modern' version of a witch hunt?As was the case in Salem, modern witch hunts involve the trial and persecution of people who have been accused of witchcraft. The hunts can often involve extreme violence, and "media reports suggest a disturbing pattern of mutilation and murder," The New York Times said. This brutality is one of the "ugliest aspects" of witch hunts. Escape your echo chamber. Get the facts behind the news, plus analysis from multiple perspectives. From our morning news briefing to a weekly Good News Newsletter, get the best of The Week delivered directly to your inbox. From our morning news briefing to a weekly Good News Newsletter, get the best of The Week delivered directly to your inbox. "Victims are often burned alive," the Times said, referencing what has been reported in the majority of instances. However, those accused of witchcraft can also be "beaten to death" or they may be "stoned or beheaded, as has been reported in Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa." In many communities, it is "chiefly young men who take on the role of witch hunters, suggesting that they may see it as a way to earn prestige by cleansing undesirables," said the Times — though as previously mentioned, men may also be accused of witchcraft themselves.Why do these witch hunts occur?In many countries in the developing world, witchcraft is "associated with the power of nature, such as medicinal and poisonous plants, or rains and floods," and "people accused of witchcraft are said to be able to control natural events such as storms or droughts," said National Geographic. As a result, "witchcraft is sometimes seen as the cause" of illnesses, particularly in "places with poor medical care or few educational opportunities."One notable example occurs in Zambia, where the World Health Organization estimates nearly 25% of pregnant women are infected with HIV/AIDS. This leads to men, women and children being "accused of spreading HIV/AIDS through witchcraft," National Geographic said. Witch hunters are then hired to "kill those accused of witchcraft with a so-called poisonous 'tea.'" Similar cases of witch hunts against illnesses have been seen in other countries, including Papua New Guinea.Beyond this, some people may become the victims of witch hunts simply for looking different. In Tanzania, "albino people are in danger of being killed for their skin and body parts" because some people "believe the arms, legs, skin, and hair of albinos have special magic in them," National Geographic said.But these causes don't act alone, as "multiple roots entwine to produce a witch hunt," Scientific American said. These roots can include a "belief in sorcery, a patriarchal society, sudden and mysterious deaths resulting from a paucity of health care, inaccessible justice systems that give impunity to attackers, a triggering disaster" and more — all coming together to result in a fear of witchcraft, the outlet added. Ultimately, what witch hunts all have in common "across time, space and culture, is a backdrop of social and economic dislocation."What is being done about witch hunts?Action from the authorities is "effective in stopping witch hunts," National Geographic said. And in South Africa, there has been an "educational campaign in schools and workplaces about science, medicine and HIV/AIDS" to try and deter witch hunts.Beyond this, governments "have moved to recognize and make amends for their historical involvement in witch-hunting," Brendan C. Walsh, an academic at Australia's University of Queensland, said at The Conversation. Advocates for "witchcraft exoneration projects argue that state pardons are more important than ever, not least because they can help address ongoing witchcraft-related violence" by educating people about the practice. Despite this, an uphill battle remains, and "every year more than 1,000 people around the world" are killed due to accusations of witchcraft, said Scientific American. By: Lindsay Baker / BBC Translation: Telegrafi.com When King James was returning by sea to Scotland with his new wife, Anne of Denmark, the voyage was marred by bad weather—not unusual for the stormy North Sea. But the king was convinced that the devil and his agents—witches—were causing the storm. It was this belief that prompted the Scottish Witchcraft Act of 1563, and the subsequent witch hunts. From the 1560s to the 1700s, witch hunts swept across Scotland, with at least four thousand accused and thousands executed. The process involved unspeakable torture; brutal and cruel methods included devices such as toe screws, foot-crushing “boots,” and the “witch bridle.” King James VI of Scotland and James I of England were directly involved in the brutal witch trials (Source: Alamy) In Norway and the US – where witch hunts and trials took place on a similar scale during the same period – the executed victims have been commemorated. Now, in Scotland, an official tartan – to be used on kilts and other clothing – is being introduced to honour the victims of the Witchcraft Act. Meanwhile, for several years now, everything related to the "witch" aesthetic has been becoming increasingly popular around the world and among different generations - WitchTok [on social media] TikTok] continues to grow in followers and distribution; the Uçkor view [WitchCore] continues to appeal to people; while witch-themed romance is a growing branch of the romance genre. In cinema and television, Practical Magic 2 is in production for release next year, while the television drama about witches, Domino Day, has been a hit. All of this reflects the fact that neopagans and modern witches are on the rise. A modern witch may include nature worship, tarot, magic, and rituals with plants and crystals in her spiritual practice. Participation ranges from self-care and personal empowerment, to involvement in religious groups such as Wicca [Wicca]. According to the Scottish Tartan Register, the Witches of Scotland tartan pattern is a “living memorial” full of symbolism – “the black and grey symbolise the dark times of this period and the ashes of those who were burned, the red represents the blood of the victims, and the pink symbolises the legal ribbons that bound documents, both then and now.” The official Witches of Scotland tartan commemorates those who were tortured and executed (source: Clare Campbell) This is the result of a five-year campaign by activists and podcast founders. The Witches of Scotland [Witches of Scotland], Zoe Venditozzi and Claire Mitchell, who wrote the book How to Kill a Witch: A Guide to the Patriarchy [How to Kill a Witch: A Guide for the Patriarchy] – an account of the witch trials in Scotland – is published this week in the UK and in the US in the autumn. The book explains how, as Venditozzi tells the BBC, “the belief system and social anxiety of the time created a perfect storm for finding false accusers and dealing with them harshly.” In 2022, the two authors achieved one of their goals when the then First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, issued a formal apology to Scottish women prosecuted under the witchcraft law, calling it a “colossal injustice.” Several female ministers of the Church of Scotland have also apologized. The theme of witch trials is also inspiring many literary authors. Witch [Hex] by Jenni Fagan recounts “one of the most turbulent moments in Scottish history: the North Berwick Witch Trials.” The novel I burn brightly. [Bright I Burn] by Molly Aitken, is a story about the first woman in Ireland accused of witchcraft. And, the latest historical thriller, The wicked of the Earth [The Wicked of the Earth] by AD Bergin is based on the witch trials in Newcastle, England. in How to kill a witch, the authors show that King James’s voyage by ship was the starting point for the whole story. “James VI of Scotland and I of England had a huge influence on the witch trials,” explains co-author Mitchell, who is also a criminal and human rights lawyer. The “evidence” for witches included accounts of women “moving on the sea with sieves” and “dancing in the church of North Berwick.” "A few years later, James wrote the book Demonology [Daemonology] – a guide ‘how to find and deal with witches and other spirits’". This book was widely circulated – and its message spread rapidly. The Witchcraft Act was intended to establish “sanctity” in the new Protestant Scotland, with the law punishing anyone who appeared to be “collaborating with the devil”. Engraving from 1591 depicting King James interrogating North Berwick women accused of witchcraft (Source: Getty Images) “People are still haunted by what happened,” says historian Judith Langlands-Scott, who has noted a surge in interest in witch trials in recent years. “King James was obsessed with the Bible and believed he was God’s representative – and he was obsessed with the idea that witches were multiplying. Historians broadly agree that after the death of his mother [Mary, Queen of Scots], he was raised to believe that women were weak and manipulable because of their carnal desires.” “In Forfar [in Angus, Northern Scotland], where I come from, we learned that the people who were accused – mostly women – were usually elderly, disabled or blind, or people with alcohol addictions. They were people who were a cost to society, who lived on the margins, who were poor and did not contribute. The community – led by the Presbyterian parish – wanted to get rid of them.” The “witch-hunter” or “witch-snitch” – who had financial gain – was a self-proclaimed expert in identifying witches, she says. The most famous of these, in the mid-17th century, was John Kincaid, who was known as the alleged discoverer of “witch marks” and was involved in the torture and execution of hundreds of accused women. “The accused were completely stripped and searched in front of an all-male congregation [to find the ‘marks’ made by the devil], and were often shaved all over.” According to Langlands-Scott, this humiliating ritual was “psychosexual, and in the Scottish Presbyterian society of the time, sex was an obsession.” There were witchcraft trials in England as well, but Langlands-Scott points out that “Ireland and Wales had only one trial each, as they believed in fairies, while in Scotland [the belief] was in the devil and anyone who did his work”—that is, witches. New book explores this dark era of history – and its relevance today (Source: Octopus Books) Despite the shocking details in How to kill a witch, there are also moments of dark humor. “We have always treated the facts and horror of the witch trials seriously, but of course we use a dark humor to deal with the more disturbing or irritating aspects of that time,” says Venditozzi. “This book was always intended as a reflection of our personalities, not as a historical work. Surviving as a woman sometimes means being able to see the humor even in terrible situations.” The pomp of the witch hunters – with their strange methods and sick imagination – is clearly revealed. The whole system, after all, was absurd. As Venditozzi says: “It was a clever trick, wasn’t it? Society blamed women – because they were considered so weak that the devil managed to possess them and get into their underwear, and their stories about it were often extremely detailed. All this to justify what they were doing to them. It’s crazy”! The authors aren’t the only ones who see the humorous side – the comic series The Witchfinder exploits the absurdity of witch hunts, using dark humor. The book also debunks some misconceptions about the era, including the practice of “burning at the stake,” says Venditozzi. “It’s a caricature. They were really burned, but they were usually first drowned and then thrown into the fire to destroy the body, so that the devil could not resurrect it and so that they could not go to Heaven.” This was an additional layer of cruelty, says Langlands-Scott: “To burn the body so that it could not be resurrected on the day of judgment, any hope of escaping suffering would be completely extinguished – since the accused knew they were going to die.” The authors acknowledge that there has been a surge in interest in the witch trials – their podcast attracts millions of listeners from around the world. How has modern-day witches reacted to their campaign? “We have had a lot of support and interest from modern-day witches,” says Venditozzi. “The key point is that we support anyone who wants to practice their beliefs, but people need to understand that the ‘witches’ of that period were not under the control of the devil and were, in fact, just ordinary people caught up in an extraordinary time. Modern-day witches have empathy for the plight of the accused, as they themselves sometimes experience isolation and discrimination. However, modern-day witches are not the same as those who were accused during the Scottish witch trials.” In recent years there has been a steady increase in interest in paganism and witchcraft (Source: Alamy) As Witchcraft becomes more and more popular, are we in danger of romanticizing the brutal torture and suffering of innocent people in history? “No,” says Mitchell. “Modern witchcraft or WitchTok "It is very different from the crime of witchcraft hundreds of years ago. People who identify as witches today do not claim to be 'agents of the devil' who do evil in society. The modern idea of a witch is very different from the historical definition." Langlands-Scott puts it differently: “People are perfectly free to do as they please, and modern witches do not try to appropriate as part of themselves the people who were executed hundreds of years ago. The accused were Christians – though they were considered pagans and heretics; most of them at the Forfar trials of 1662 [where 42 local people were imprisoned and tortured] were Catholics. The Presbyterian Church wanted a pure and godly society after [Oliver] Cromwell left Scotland in 1651. They were ordinary people, some of whom may have practiced some folk magic, but had committed no crimes.” Author Margaret Atwood has said that the Salem witch trials are events that repeat themselves over and over again throughout history – when cultures face stress. Does Venditozzi agree? “Absolutely – when Atwood wrote the work The Handmaid's Tale [The Handmaid's Tale], she said that all the things she describes in it have really happened in Western culture, and she said this in the 80s [of the XNUMXth century]. It was very prescient. The wheel turns, but it doesn't change much.” In How to kill a witch mentions a contemporary pastor in the US who warns of the presence of witches in his congregation. Also included is a section on the organization Advocacy for Alleged Witches that “seeks and promotes compassion, reason, and science to save the lives of those affected by superstition.” The Scottish Witches Tartan is designed to raise awareness and understanding, says Mitchell. “It’s so important to remember our history and learn from it: Scotland stands out very badly compared to other countries that have commemorated those who were accused of being witches.” Margaret Atwood portrays a theocracy where executions are frequent (Source: Disney/Steve Wilkie) So what lessons can we learn from the history of witch trials today? “Let’s not use the condemnation of vulnerable or isolated members of the community as a way to strengthen public trust and safety,” says Venditozzi. “Although witch trials took place hundreds of years ago, we still often see a wave of condemnation of marginalized groups in times of social uncertainty. Claire and I are optimistic.” Langlands-Scott is also optimistic. “The fact that there is a strong wave of interest in getting the truth out – and that there have been apologies – that is a reason for optimism. It is mainly women who are apologizing and I think this is a way of restoring the fact that it was mainly women who were tortured and tried. It is almost like giving them a voice; us women giving them a voice that has been missing, and also a warning to the present about what can happen.” /Telegraph/ Akua Denteh was beaten to death in Ghana's East Gonja District last month — after being accused of being a witch. The murder of the 90-year-old has once more highlighted the deep-seated prejudices against women accused of practicing witchcraft in Ghana, many of whom are elderly. An arrest was made in early August, but the issue continues to draw attention after authorities were accused of dragging their heels in the case. Human rights and gender activists now demand to see change in culture in a country where supernatural beliefs play a big role. But the case of Akua Denteh is far from an isolated instance in Ghana, or indeed the world at large. In many countries of the world, women are still accused of practicing witchcraft each year. They are persecuted and even killed in organized witch hunts — especially in Africa but also in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Read more: Ghana: witchcraft accusations put lives at risk Many women in Ghana are pushed to live in so-called witch camps because they are rejected by societyImage: picture-alliance/Pacific Press/L. WateridgeWitch hunts: a contemporary issue Those accused of witchcraft have now found a perhaps unlikely charity ally in their fight for justice: the Catholic missionary society missio, which is part of the global Pontifical Mission Societies under the jurisdiction of the Pope, has declared August 10 as World Day against Witch Hunts, saying that in at least 36 nations around the world, people continue to be persecuted as witches. While the Catholic Church encouraged witch hunts in Europe from the 15th to the 18th century, it is now trying to shed light into this dark practice. Part of this might be a sense of historical obligation — but the real driving force is the number of victims that witch hunts still cost today. Historian Wolfgang Behringer, who works as a professor specializing in the early modern age at Saarland University, firmly believes in putting the numbers in perspective. He told DW that during these three centuries, between 50,000 and 60,000 people are assumed to have been killed for so-called crimes of witchcraft — a tally that is close to being twice the population of some major German cities at the time. But he says that in the 20th century alone, more people accused of witchcraft were brutally murdered than during the three centuries when witch hunts were practiced in Europe: "Between 1960 and 2000, about 40,000 people alleged of practicing witchcraft were murdered in Tanzania alone. While there are no laws against witchcraft as such in Tanzanian law, village tribunals often decide that certain individuals should be killed," Behringer told DW. The historian insists that due to the collective decision-making behind these tribunals, such murders are far from being arbitrary and isolated cases: "I've therefore concluded that witch hunts are not a historic problem but a burning issue that still exists in the present.” A picture of so-called witch doctors in Sierra Leone taken roughly around the year 1900Image: Getty Images/Hulton ArchiveA pan-African problem? In Tanzania, the victims of these witch hunts are often people with albinism; some people believe that the body parts of these individuals can be used to extract potions against all sorts of ailments. Similar practices are known to take place in Zambia and elsewhere on the continent. Meanwhile in Ghana, where nonagenarian Akua Denteh was bludgeoned to death last month, certain communities blamed the birth of children with disabilities on practices of witchcraft. To view this video please enable JavaScript, and consider upgrading to a web browser that supports HTML5 videoIn the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is usually the younger generations who are associated witchcraft. So-called "children of witchcraft" are usually rejected by their families and left to fend for themselves. However, their so-called crimes often have little to do with sorcery at all: "We have learned of numerous cases of children suffering rape and then no longer being accepted by their families. Or they are born as illegitimate children out of wedlock, and are forced to live with a parent who no longer accepts them," says Thérèse Mema Mapenzi, who works as a mission project partner in the eastern DRC city of Bukayu. 'Children of witchcraft' in the DRC Mapenzi's facility was initially intended to be a women's shelter to harbor women who suffered rape at the hands of the militia in the eastern parts of the country, where rape is used as a weapon of war as part of the civil conflict there. But over the years, more and more children started seeking her help after they were rejected as "children of witchcraft." With assistance from the Catholic missionary society missio, Mapenzi is now also supporting these underage individuals in coping with their many traumas while trying to find orphanages and schools for them. "When these children come here, they have often been beaten to a pulp, have been branded as witches or have suffered other injuries. It is painful to just even look at them. We are always shocked to see these children devoid of any protection. How can this be?" Mapenzi wonders. Thérèse Mema Mapenzi is trying to help women and girls accused of being "children of witchcraft"Image: missioSeeking dialogue to end witch hunts But there is a whole social infrastructure fueling this hatred against these young people in the DRC: Many charismatic churches blame diseases such as HIV/AIDS or female infertility on witchcraft, with illegitimate children serving as scapegoats for problems that cannot be easily solved in one of the poorest countries on earth. Other reasons cited include sudden deaths, crop failures, greed, jealousy and more. Thérèse Mema Mapenzi says that trying to help those on the receiving end of this ire is a difficult task, especially in the absence of legal protection: "In Congolese law, witchcraft is not recognized as a violation of the law because there is no evidence you can produce. Unfortunately, the people have therefore developed their own legal practices to seek retribution and punish those whom call them witches." In addition to helping those escaping persecution, Mapenzi also seeks dialogue with communities to stop prejudice against those accused of witchcraft and sorcery. She wants to bring estranged families torn apart by witch hunts back together. Acting as a mediator, she talks to people, and from time to time succeeds in reuniting relatives with women and children who had been ostracized and shamed. Mapenzi says that such efforts — when they succeed — take an average of two to three years from beginning to finish. But even with a residual risk of the victims being suspected of witchcraft again, she says her endeavors are worth the risk. She says that the fact that August 10 has been recognized as the World Day against Witch Hunts sends a signal that her work is important — and needed. Hunting the hunters — a dangerous undertaking For Thérèse Mema Mapenzi, the World Day against Witch Hunts marks another milestone in her uphill battle in the DRC. Jörg Nowak, spokesman for missio, agrees and hopes that there will now be growing awareness about this issue around the globe. As part of his work, Nowak has visited several missio project partners fighting to help bring an end to witch hunts in recent years. But he wasn't aware about the magnitude of the problem himself until 2017. The first case he dealt with was the killing of women accused of being witches in Papua New Guinea in the 2010s — which eventually resulted in his publishing a paper on the crisis situation in the country and becoming missio's dedicated expert on witch hunts. But much of Nowak's extensive research in Papua New Guinea remains largely under wraps for the time being, at least in the country itself: the evidence he accrued against some of the perpetrators there could risk the lives of missio partners working for him. Not much has changed for centuries, apart from the localities involved when it comes to the occult belief in witchcraft, says Nowak while stressing: "There is no such thing as witchcraft. But there are accusations and stigmatization designed to demonize people; indeed designed to discredit them in order for others to gain selfish advantages." Maxwell Suuk and Isaac Kaledzi contributed to this article. Alamy(Credit: Alamy)A new book How to Kill a Witch brings a dark period of history back to grisly life – and an official tartan is being released to memorialise some of those who were tortured and killed.When King James was returning by sea to Scotland with his new wife Anne of Denmark, the voyage was plagued by bad weather – not unusual, for the famously choppy North Sea. But the king was convinced that the devil and his agents – the witches – had a hand in the storm. The events surrounding his voyage home to Scotland in 1589 and the subsequent North Berwick Witch Trials led to further witch hunts.This article contains violent details some readers may find upsetting.From the 1560s to the 1700s, witch-hunts ripped through Scotland, with at least 4,000 accused, and the executions of thousands of people. Along the way there was unspeakable torture, involving "pilliwinks" (thumbscrews), leg-crushing boots and the "witches' bridle", among other vicious and brutal methods.AlamyKing James VI of Scotland and I of England was involved in the brutal witch trials (Credit: Alamy)In Norway and the US – where witch hunts and trials of a similar nature took place during the same period – those who were executed have been memorialised. Now, in Scotland a new official tartan – which will be incorporated into kilts and other garments – has been released to honour the victims of the Witchcraft Act.Meanwhile, all things aesthetically "witchy" have been gaining popularity around the world and across generations for several years – WitchTok gains increasing followers and hashtags; the WitchCore look is still attracting fans; witch romance fiction is a growing branch of the romantasy genre. In film and TV Practical Magic 2 is in production for release next year, and TV witch drama Domino Day has been a hit. All of which reflects the fact that neopagans and modern witches are actually on the rise. A modern witch may incorporate nature worship, tarot, magic and rituals with herbs and crystals into their spiritual practise. Involvement ranges from self-care and empowerment to participation in religious groups like Wicca.The belief system and social anxiety of the time created a perfect storm to find scapegoats and deal with them harshly – Zoe VenditozziThe pattern of the Witches of Scotland tartan is a "living memorial" full of symbolism, according to the Scottish Register of Tartans – "the black and grey represent the dark times of this period and the ashes of those burned, the red represents the victims' blood, and the pink symbolises the legal tapes used to bind papers both during that time and now".The Witches of Scotland/ Clare CampbellThe Witches of Scotland official tartan memorialises those who were tortured and executed (Credit: The Witches of Scotland/ Clare Campbell)It's the result of a five-year-long campaign by activists and founders of the Witches of Scotland podcast Zoe Venditozzi and Claire Mitchell, who have now authored a book How to Kill a Witch: A Guide for the Patriarchy, an account of the Scottish witch trials – out this week in the UK, and in the autumn in the US. The book outlines how, as Venditozzi tells the BBC, "the belief system and social anx