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## When the Vampires Come for You: A True Story of Ordinary Horror

### **INTRODUCTION: SUCKING AFRICAN BLOOD, FOR WHITES, AGAIN . . .**

On the evening of December 23, 2007, a young man in rural southern Malawi, whom we shall call Simon, noted in his journal an alarming story that his wife had just told him.<sup>1</sup> The previous night, bloodsuckers had come to a neighbor's house. Their mission had been to kill the family and pump out their blood. The blood was needed for Satanic rituals. The horror. . . .

Earlier that day at the borehole, that font of rumor, gossip, and water, Simon's wife had "heard that the blood suckers are the whites from abroad, more particularly [the] United States, the ones who were distributing free food to the orphans as well as to diseased people." These whites were using locals to do their evil work in Malawi. Everyone agreed, she told Simon, that these whites from overseas have now "come back through [the] government that they should be sucking people's blood at night as their reward." "*Azungu ochockera kunja*," the women at the borehole had said in Chichewa: Whites from abroad.

Adding to his wife's account, Simon reported in his journal that in some villages where Pentecostal churches have been established, chiefs "have been accusing these members and saying they are one way or another connected" with the bloodsucking. In Malawi, as in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, Pentecostalism, with its obsessions over

demons, is booming. Stories about Satanic churches are shared with a breathless awe. They are usually imagined to be located in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe. There, in the villagers' imagining, Satanists masquerading as Christians park their fancy cars outside enormous churches and parade in their finery to their weekly communion with the devil. One man's prosperity gospel, it seems, is another's Satanic orgy.

Simon and his wife are Christians, belonging to the Presbyterian Church of the Central African Province, whose missionaries followed in the wake of David Livingstone's opening up of this part of Africa at the end of the nineteenth century and the British suppression of the slave trade (McCracken 2008). The Balaka District region is largely Muslim, dating from the days when leaders of the Yao (Simon's "tribe") teamed up with "Arab" slavers from the Swahili coast to capture and sell slaves (Abdallah & Sanderson 1973; Alpers 1967). His wife's mother has been "born again" in the Living Waters church, whose Malawian pastor follows American styles of theology and liturgy emphasizing his power to bring blessings of health and wealth to his followers. Like their neighbors, both Muslim and Christian, Simon and his wife are constantly being invited to join churches where pastors perform "miracles" and often feel tempted to do so.

In their discussion that night, Simon's wife was doubtful that believers in Jesus Christ could be involved in Satanism. Simon, however, had no such doubt. He wrote in his journal that he told his wife he had been hearing that Pentecostals and Satanists were connected "one way or another." Both Pentecostals and Satanists, he told her, were said to speak in strange languages they had never spoken before. He reported that funds were being raised in the villages, and chiefs were organizing patrols to intercept the bloodsuckers and protect people against their assaults. He also mentioned that some people were arguing that since the bloodsuckers use magic methods it was necessary to recruit a "famous and true magician and take herbs there as well and then these bloodsuckers will be caught" (Simon\_071203.anon.rtf). What is a "white from abroad" to make of this gossip at a borehole in deep rural Africa? Some, perhaps, might agree that demonic forces

are indeed running rampant and that people need deliverance from the powers of darkness. Pentecostal pastors, particularly, devote themselves tirelessly to healing AIDS patients by bringing them to the Lord.

Other whites from abroad, such as those of you reading this, might wonder what rumors of bloodsucking really mean. What can they tell us about a newly democratizing postcolonial African state in an era of global neoliberalism? After all, similar stories have been heard before.

In *Speaking With Vampires*, Luise White (2000) documents rumors of bloodsucking that periodically swept through east and south-central Africa, from the teens through the 1950s of the last century. In these stories, blood was said to be collected – by firemen, curiously, and prostitutes, among others – for sale to whites. Whites, as White reports, were said by the locals to be unable to survive in the tropics without consuming African blood to replenish their strength. She uses these vampire stories to examine the ways Africans made sense of colonial power. And there was much to make sense of. Africans made their ways to towns, mines, farms, and plantations, finding much to please and worry them in these strange new worlds where the work must at times have felt like having the life sucked out of you. They met colonial officials in white coats drawing their blood with needles and syringes, treating them for diseases – sometimes in ways that produced future epidemics, such as when the great French public health campaigner Dr. Jamot conducted a massive campaign to eradicate sleeping sickness in southern Cameroon in the 1920s, reusing syringes multiple times in a population where HIV was newly emerging from its chimpanzee hosts, thereby accelerating the spread of the new virus (Pepin 2011). And they found Catholic missionaries quaffing wine in the form of the “blood of Christ” while consuming the Lord’s body in the form of a small white wafer. Small wonder rumors of bloodsuckers found a fertile field for their reception.

Stories of strangers moving around villages pumping blood in service of Whites have been part of the narrative repertoire of Malawians for generations. Today, Whites are still said to be the ultimate

consumers of African blood. These days, however, they (we?) no longer need the stuff for health and survival. Nowadays, we need blood for satanic rituals, the source of the power underpinning our wealth and influence. While the earlier stories of Whites pumping blood can be read as an African commentary on colonial dominance, these new stories seem like nothing so much as a comment on life in a world of neoliberal democracy, free markets, and the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations, not to mention AIDS and the arrival of blood testing for HIV. The obsession with Satanism is inflamed by the surge of Pentecostalist evangelism of recent decades.

Rumors of bloodsuckers on the loose regularly flare up in Malawi, usually intensified by media reports. In 2009, for example, a man nicknamed “*Nachipanti*” since he was found in his underwear, *panti*, was rumored to be a bloodsucker. Also known as the “beast of Ndirande,” after the suburb he purportedly terrorized, he was found half naked and arrested for the rape and murder of a four-year-old girl. He told the police he was pumping blood for a syndicate of businesspeople in Blantyre, being paid 100,000 Malawian kwacha (MK) per victim. The police then arrested four businesspeople, though none were charged (Chikoja 2009). The day after the “beast” appeared in the Blantyre Magistrate’s Court, an enraged mob burned seven homes and destroyed the buses of a suspected syndicate member. The general pattern in bloodsucker panics seems to be that particular events, such as the capturing of *Nachipanti*, crystalize pervasive fears in a community, unleashing a wave of stories about vampires and stimulating collective security efforts. Whether these efforts take the form of a raging mob or disciplined vigilantes depends upon local political conditions—specifically whether or not there are effective local authorities, notably chiefs, who can channel the fears and anger of those who see it as their mission to protect the community, to wit: young men.

In late 2002, bloodsucker rumors swept the country, implicating the ruling Democratic Progressive Party in pumping blood for sale to foreigners. Newspapers, in a frenzy of sensationalizing headlines, reported that vigilantes killed at least one man, in Tyolo, and severely

beat three Catholic priests visiting a neighborhood where they were not known. The governor of Blantyre District was also hospitalized after being beaten as a bloodsucker. State President Bakili Muluzi claimed publicly that a “malicious and irresponsible” member of the opposition had started the rumors, and he called for the arrest of anyone promoting them (Tendani 2003). “No government can go about sucking [the] blood of its own people,” the president proclaimed to a skeptical people distrustful of his motives, adding: “That’s thuggery” (Tenthani 2003). Some 40 people were arrested in the early weeks of 2003, including a radio journalist who had broadcast an interview with a self-confessed bloodsucker (Anonymous 2003). (A magistrate subsequently rescinded the arrest on the grounds the police had acted without a warrant and charges were not pursued.) Newspapers around the world featured stories, with varying degrees of condescension and amusement, about the fear of “vampires” in Malawi (See McFerran 2003; Swarns 2003). As the Cambridge historian Megan Vaughan pointed out in an essay in the *London Review of Books* at the time, however, given the dreadful famine that had afflicted Malawi in 2002 and the parsimonious response of the international community, not to mention the earlier admonition by the IMF to the government to sell some of its strategic grain reserves (which was taken as an opportunity by unscrupulous officials to sell it all and embezzle a good part of the proceeds), the image of the government as a bloodsucking vampire working at the behest of Whites from overseas was a fairly appropriate metaphor for the realities of rural life in Malawi (Vaughan 2003).

Stories about bloodsuckers roaming African villages sucking blood for sale to foreign Whites for the benefit of local elites, as we shall see, are not simply metaphors describing the relations between Malawian villagers and global capitalism. They do remind us, however, that sources of wealth in that country are extremely dependent on the largesse of foreigners. It is virtually impossible to become wealthy in Malawi, even in the most modest of manners, except by connection with the government or Whites from overseas, or both. Indeed, the government itself is highly dependent on foreigners, whose aid com-

prises some 40 percent of the national budget (see remarks delivered by the minister of finance, Goodall E. Gondwe [2008, para. 4]). Senior officials, from the president on down, regularly siphon a share of this cash into their own accounts. (This habit peaked in 2013, when officials, in an incident that has come to be known as “cashgate,” were discovered with bales of hard currency in the trunks of their cars and in their homes. An audit subsequently revealed some US\$32 million had been looted from state coffers in six months. At this point, foreign donors suspended aid; see Malawi: Cashgate Arrest 2014.) International NGOs are among the few sources of regular employment for the educated elite. International researchers, too, are thick on the ground. We cannot function without local assistants. As the anthropologist Harri Englund has shown, the prospect of employment in, or grants from, internationally connected NGOs has become a fantasy that animates extraordinary efforts at all levels of Malawian society, from metropolitan elites to villagers bent on securing funding for local good works (Englund, 2006; Swidler & Watkins, 2009). Most Malawians, however, have no chance of rising above the level of bare subsistence eked out of small plots of land hoed by hand in this densely populated country. Eighty percent of the population survives by subsistence agriculture. Few are educated beyond primary school. Most must work ceaselessly merely to survive. If one were looking for a metaphor to encapsulate the essence of the relationship between Malawi and the world, then, it would be hard to find a better one than bloodsucking. But there is more to stories of blood being pumped than that.

Please note: when people gather at a borehole in rural Malawi and talk of bloodsuckers, they are not, unbeknownst to themselves, engaging in a critique of neoliberalism or speaking of vampires as a way of commenting on their marginalization within the global order or reflecting on the ironies of dependence on the largesse of outsiders for survival. They are talking about friends and family and neighbors being killed. They are not talking in metaphors about social structures or global systems. They are sharing the dangers, doubts, and fears that beset their lives and the evils besetting those for whom they care. They

are discussing matters of life and death. In a word, they are talking about security. Part of their sense of insecurity stems from the fact that they see their government as not only incapable of protecting them from life-threatening dangers, but as a force of evil in league with those who would kill them.

They should be taken seriously. For this is a matter of horror; true horror.

### **THE POLITICS OF BLOODSUCKING, 2007–2008**

While the outbreak of bloodsucker rumors in 2002–2003 occurred in the wake of a prolonged famine, the events we are concerned with occurred in a time of relatively plentiful crops, though as with the earlier panic, it was during the “hungry season” at the end of the year when the staple maize crops were still too young to harvest and food was scarce. On December 2, 2007, under the headline “Ending Famine, Simply by Ignoring the Experts,” the *New York Times* ran a story by Celia Dugger (2007) hailing the Malawian government’s fertilizer subsidy program: “[T]his year, a nation that has perennially extend a begging bowl to the world is instead feeding its hungry neighbors.” The article went on to heap praise on President Bingu wa Mutharika for ignoring World Bank orthodoxy and helping to feed his people.<sup>2</sup> While noting that none of the donor funding for the subsidy came from the United States, the *New York Times* neglected to report whether the president of Malawi had employed bloodsuckers to harvest blood for sale to white Satanists.

At about the same time as Celia Dugger was writing her article for the *Times*, a young woman in rural southern Malawi—whom we shall call Alice, also working with the Malawi Journals Project—wrote in her journal an account of a conversation she had had with a neighbor, Mr Kawina, earlier in the day, warning her that “there are some strangers who have come to suck blood from people.” He told her the story of a schoolboy who had fallen victim to the bloodsuckers, and that everyone was being warned to stay awake until 10:00 PM at night to be on guard. Young men armed with sticks, stones, and *pangas* (machetes) were enforcing a curfew between the hours of 7:00 PM and 4:00 AM

Alice asked Mr. Kawina: “Why is this happening to us?”

“I don’t know,” Mr. Kawina told Alice, “but I just heard that we are dying because of the cheap fertilizer that we are buying. Our president went somewhere outside the country to ask for the credit.” The president told his creditors, Mr. Kawina went on,

whatever you need to be given in Malawi, you are most welcome. The owner [of the money] told him that we need blood. There is no other thing that we can need in your country other than blood. Therefore they agreed to come here to suck people’s blood for three months. These people will be here for three months from now. Our president borrowed money from the satanic people.

At least in this part of Malawi, President Mutharika was not getting much credit for relieving hunger. Southern Malawi was a stronghold of the former President Bakili Muluzi, a bitter rival of Mutharika. Simple partisanship, however, does not account for the attribution of Satanic practices to the president or account for the transformation of a creditworthy effort to alleviate hunger into blame for murderous occult practices. From Mr. Kawina’s perspective, Mutharika literally sold the nation’s essence, its blood, to the devil.

According to Simon, this particular round of bloodsucking rumors began in his district early in the month of December 2007. At that time stories about bloodsucking became a common topic of conversation in the villages and trading centers. Other journal writers in the region working for the Malawi Journals Project reported similar conversations at the time. The political motives of the bloodsuckers were debated vigorously in public and private conversations. On January 4, 2008, for example, a group of friends, young men, gathered for a chat under a big Ntondo tree in a small trading center on the main road to Mangochi. One of the friends opened the conversation by noting that “the bloodsuckers which are currently sucking blood here in Malwai is due to . . . jealousy [between] . . . former and current presidents.”



Another disagreed, arguing that it was the previous government sowing “confusion” by killing people and extracting their blood. The third insisted “it’s the current government, DPP [Democratic People’s Party], that has received the contract of sucking people’s blood and be selling to satanic people who drinks the blood and use the blood magically and continue to be richer and richer.” Distrust of government runs deep. Wealth and power is suspect (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, 1999; Geschiere 1997). Satan is everywhere.

Rhetoric about “Satan” is not uncommon in political discourse in Malawi – at the highest levels of the state as well as in everyday gossip under the Ntondo trees. On August 12, 2007, President Bingu wa Mutharika addressed a political rally at Lilongwe prior to the opening of Parliament and launched a blistering attack on the opposition, naming Satan as the source of their obstructionism. For several months, government had been stalled by gridlock in Parliament over passing a budget, a constitutional crisis relating to the change of party allegiance when the president broke with his former party, the Malawi Congress Party. A rancorous personal rivalry between the president and his predecessor, Bakili Muluzi, dominated Malawian politics until Mutharika’s death in 2012. At the August rally, according to the *Nyasa Times*, President Mutharika

told the gathering that Tembo and Muluzi [opposition leaders] are being driven by “Satan” for refusing to pass the budget; further alleging that the duo while in Malawi Congress Party killed people and stole money from government. “Tembo and Muluzi were both in the MCP and they were both killing people and stealing together,” Mutharika accused without elaborating (*Nyasa Times*, August 12, 2007).

A couple of months earlier, an editorial in the *Nation* newspaper had criticized the president for trying to drive a wedge between Christians and Muslims by accusing certain politicians of being “confusionists and agents of Satan” (*Malawi Nation*, May 30, 2007). Mutharika may, or may

not, have considered his references to Satan a mere figure of political speech. For his audience, however, Satan was a central player in the game of politics. The only question was: On whose side? And satanic bloodsuckers were a real, present, and extremely serious threat.

The young men chatting under the Ntondo tree at the Trading Center on the road to Mangochi in early January debated whether the real culprit in the current wave of bloodsucking was the past or present president. They disagreed over which political party was to blame. Some insisted both were involved. But they all agreed that the government was doing nothing to stop the problem, leaving vulnerable communities to address the problem on their own. Some local chiefs and village headmen were organizing groups of men to patrol villages at night, imposing a levy of MK20 to MK50 per household (about 20 to 50 US cents at the time) in order to provide tea and food for the patrolmen. Other chiefs and headmen were reputed to be in the pay of the bloodsuckers, accepting payments of MK10,000 to let them work freely.

### **MORTAL MEN FACING MAGICAL QUARRY**

The friends chatting under the tree considered the patrols at once foolish, dangerous, and necessary. No bloodsucker had ever been caught, one of the young men noted, because “these people [the bloodsuckers] fly and they use magic and it’s very difficult or impossible to catch them.” Ordinary mortals patrolling with sticks and *pangas* are not going to catch them, he told his friends: “It’s better the people patrolling . . . use magic as well.” The patrols themselves, the friends agreed, posed dangers. It is not always easy to distinguish friend from foe in the darkness of a Malawian village, especially during the growing seasons when the corn is high. One friend reported that in some areas patrollers had devised a system of signaling a code to each other with torches. They all laughed when another of the friends suggested that the system of patrols would allow guys opportunities to visit girlfriends under the pretext of community defense, thereby promoting the spread of HIV/AIDS. All understood, however, that securing the community was essential, and

that the responsibility for the task lay with youth like them. But security for the community in the face of magic-wielding bloodsuckers would require access to supernatural power as well as vigilant action by young men. Moreover, since bloodsuckers operate using magical techniques, when cornered they would be unlikely to be in possession of compromising apparatuses like needles and pumps and bottles – though they might be. Witnesses and evidence of the ordinary sorts, then, might not be found while urgent action would need to be taken. This would prove to be problematic.

While the conversations about bloodsuckers and self-defense patrols were amusing to this group of friends, none doubted the very real dangers of the situation – dangers posed by bloodsuckers, of course, but also the dangers of the patrols to themselves and innocent civilians. People were dying. “Bloodsuckers [are] threatening everyone and in Mangochi two have died [from having their] blood sucked,” one of the friends said. Operating under the protection of darkness – and the night in a Malawian village can be darker than many of us in light-polluted parts of the planet can imagine – bloodsuckers are ordinarily indistinguishable from innocent neighbors or strangers passing on the road. During the rainy season, when the maize is high and the grass dense, paths winding through the fields from village to village seem sinister at night. And people are hungry. Their seeds sown, crops yet to ripen, most subsist with little food but plenty of time to nurture fears. Danger seems everywhere. The vigilantes were frightened, too, but committed to action.

The bloodsucking enterprise was organized. Of that, no one doubted. The way people imagined its structure it was as if the ordinary processes of foreign aid and development assistance were mirrored through a glass darkly. The standard narrative ran thus: the president, or the former president, had made deals with rich whites from overseas to supply human blood, African blood, for Satanic purposes. Below the president, on his order (or his rival’s, depending on the political disposition of the narrator), middlemen fanned out across the country to organize collection activities. These middlemen connected

with networks of village-level operatives possessing the local knowledge needed for harvesting the blood. At this lowest level—the place, incidentally, where donors and their agents imagine beneficiaries of their largesse to dwell—villagers employed in the cause of bloodsucking were said to be combining Satanism and witchcraft in their evil work. Among other things, witches aiding in the bloodsucking enterprise were said to be using their powers to fly at night and magically vanish when disturbed in their activities. This was most frustrating for the village patrollers. Virtually every time they got a bloodsucker in their sights he would disappear. Each night, as dawn approached, weary patrollers would gather, empty-handed, for tea in the chief’s compound. Were they to catch one red-handed, they reasoned, it would be necessary to beat him thoroughly before he vanished.

### **FALSE ALARMS AND TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES**

Some of the beatings were fatal. During those months of alarm in late 2007, suspected bloodsuckers were being killed. No one knows how many people died. In late December, for example, not far from the town of Mangochi, the southernmost settlement on Lake Malawi (about 50 miles from the village of the men under the Ntondo tree), a group of men on patrol for bloodsuckers stopped a minibus at eleven o’clock at night. The man telling the story to his friends under the Ntondo tree heard it from a friend who was one of the vigilantes. When challenged on why he was driving at such an hour the driver claimed to have been delayed by a breakdown. The patrollers did not believe him. Suspecting him of bloodsucking, they hacked him to death with *pangas*. The four passengers in the van escaped to a nearby house. The residents of that house, confronted by the patrollers, took the other four passengers, the suspected bloodsuckers, to the house of the chief. The chief granted the suspects refuge. He called the police. The patrollers, accompanied by a crowd of villagers, descended on the chief’s house, accusing him of collaborating with the bloodsuckers. He was assaulted, grabbed by the neck and throttled, until in the words of the storyteller “the eyes of the chief protruded, each eye like a fist.” Hilarious. The friends under

the Ntondo tree burst into laughter at the image of the pop-eyed chief, their mirth hardly subsiding with the news that he had been “admitted at the hospital and it took some weeks for him to . . . be able to drink water or eat *nsima* [maize meal porridge] properly due to the grabbing of the neck.” The police arrived, apparently, while the throttling was in process. They intervened, rescuing the chief along with the suspected bloodsuckers. They then proceeded to arrest the vigilantes who had killed the minivan driver. Overruling the protests of the mob, they justified the arrests by claiming they had “no witness that indeed people are bloodsucking.” The young men sharing stories under the Ntondo tree that day were not persuaded. The police, they all agreed, were never concerned with evidence. Their job was merely to extract bribes. Of course they were acting in league with the bloodsuckers.

A week or so after these events on the road to Mangochi, according to the national press, a DPP constituency governor in a nearby village was beaten and stoned as a bloodsucker for being out past the nine o’clock curfew (Muwamba 2008). In May 2008, another of our Malawian journal writers, while working with a team of researchers conducting interviews for an (unrelated) American research project seeking to devise policies for encouraging girls to stay in school, narrowly escaped being killed by villagers suspecting the team of being bloodsuckers working on behalf of Whites from overseas. The researchers were traveling in a minivan, the favored conveyance of bloodsuckers, so rumor has it—along with just about everyone else in Malawi. When they arrived at the school, the children panicked. They ran to their homes, alerting parents and other nearby residents who marched on the school armed with *pangas* and whips. The research team, fortunately, had visited the school a year earlier and knew the area, so were able to contact the village headman and establish their credentials before the mob reached them. The headman was able to vouch for them to the parents, staving off a fate that might have been similar to that of three passengers who had been burned to death in a minivan in the same village a few months earlier. (The police were not informed of this incident, the headman told the researchers. The bodies were

buried in a pit.) In parting, the headman warned the young researchers to inform him first in future before entering the village. If not, the journal writer reported him telling them, “it will be difficult for him to stop his people doing anything bad to you. He will know that his people are not wrong because they have met with strangers. They are fighting for their freedom” (Alice\_080510.anon.rtf).

Judging from Simon’s January journal, two things were clear to the friends chatting under the tree: bloodsuckers are a serious threat to the community, and the authorities are no help. People are dying. The consensus was that something must be done. But who can be trusted to work faithfully on behalf of the community to protect people from this danger? The problem of who to trust is compounded by the fact that the people whom villagers suspect to be engaged in bloodsucking are the very same people who might ordinarily be expected to lead and protect the community. As they swap stories of bloodsuckers under the Ntondo tree, the young men express a fundamental distrust of elites, political and economic, and authorities connected with the state. At the same time, their talk serves to further undermine trust in such persons and the institutions they represent. Police are particularly suspect because their love of money means they are predisposed to protect the wealthy bloodsuckers – after all, they are part of the government, too. Their love of money, moreover, also predisposes police officers to practice the noxious art of bloodsucking themselves. Chiefs, who occupy a sort of hybrid place in the local political structure as both agents of the state and representatives of the community, are in an awkward position (see Englund 2006; Kaspin 1996; Peters, Kam-bewa, & Walker, 2008). Some, such as those sponsoring the patrols, are evidently working with the people against bloodsuckers. Chiefs who decided not to promote patrols in their areas, as one chief told me, were suspected of being in league with the Satanists. Some, such as the unfortunate chief near Mangochi who was nearly choked to death for protecting suspected bloodsuckers, were deemed to be actively supporting the bloodsuckers. In circumstances such as these, neutrality is not an option. Given the volatility of the situation, a chief’s authority

can easily be challenged; support for him can turn quickly to disdain, indeed outright rebellion, if people lose trust in his commitment to their safety. When Chief M'denga moved to protect one of his villagers against a mob determined to chase him from the village, perhaps to kill him, the chief faced accusations that Satanists had bribed him to protect the bloodsucker and his family.

In a village outside the trading center of Ulongwe, where another of our journalists lives, not far from Simon's place, the response to the threat was more haphazard. People were sleeping out of their homes, gathering together in one central place for mutual protection. Young men organized patrols, but they failed in their quest to raise 20 kwacha per household. They had no organized structure. The chief did not take command. They patrolled for about three weeks, until a couple of them beat and robbed a man walking home late after a drinking session. Their victim complained to the police. The two renegades were apprehended and forced to pay back the money. After that people lost faith in the patrollers. They were soon disbanded.

The young men reported in Simon's account of a conversation in an African marketplace seem to be yearning for someone in whom to place their trust, someone capable of meeting this occult assault head on. When otherwise ordinary humans are wielding invisible forces, intending to cause harm, acting in concert with demonic spirits – spirits, moreover, linked to Satan – inequality breeds distrust. Unequal wealth and status are taken as a sign that a person has been using occult power to further his own ends at the expense of others. Zero-sum. People who would foster “development” under such circumstances, therefore, would be well advised to take heed that the inequality that development inevitably fosters may produce unforeseen results. Remember how the fertilizer subsidy scheme, touted worldwide as a break with neoliberalism that saved lives, was seen by some as a sign that the president had mortgaged Malawian blood to foreign Satanists? Nobody should presume that community life, no matter how bucolic and peaceful it may seem, is underpinned by an enduring sense of collective trust.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, the danger created by the putative forces being deployed against the community produces an imperative of trust. In the absence of effective authority, only by creating trust networks capable of acting collectively against threats such as bloodsuckers can a community defend itself (Tilly 2005). This is no easy matter. The young men out patrolling for Satanics, as was the case in Ulongwe, might be in the robbery business for themselves. They might, indeed, be Satanics involved in the bloodsucking business. And, as we shall see, when people become the target of community suspicion in such matters, protecting oneself and one's family from harm becomes a complex matter. No one is guaranteed safety.

Amid this community distrust, state authorities were at work trying to preserve order in the face of bloodsucker rumors. The police were on the case. On January 3, 2008, the day before the conversation under the Ntondo tree reported in Simon's journal, the police instructed the local chiefs to summon a public meeting at the primary school near the trading center. Four police officers – two from District Headquarters and two from a nearby market town – accompanied the supervisor of health surveillance assistants from the local clinic to the meeting.<sup>4</sup> The authority of law and science, it seems, were to be arrayed against the rumors of bloodsucking. Opening the meeting, according to Simon's reporting of an eyewitness's account, the police announced that they wanted to “find a solution, both the police and we the people, to the bloodsuckers.” The police reported that a number of persons suspected of being *anthu wopopa magazi* (people who pump blood) had sought police protection. (The person who was recounting the events of the meeting added: “this is because they have good houses, and no proper recognized kind of job but [were] still running their families well.” Given how scarce proper jobs are in the close-knit communities of rural Malawi, such people are noticed.)

The police met with a skeptical crowd. According to the one who was there, “the police ordered those people patrolling at night here” to stop. They threatened that anyone found patrolling would be arrested, along with the local chief. Agents of the state everywhere



long for a monopoly on the use of violence. The authority of the state, moreover, should trump that of the “traditional” leader. The order to stop patrolling provoked a fury against the police: *wapolisi alile mbiya kutyochera ku boma kusaka kuti tugambeje kuwa mpera nguku* (the policemen have received money from the government wanting that we should be dying like chickens; Simon’s translation, in his journal). The police in reply threatened the chiefs with arrest if they continued to allow patrols at night “killing innocent people.” The authority of the state, however, is limited. They asked the people gathered at the primary school if “anyone has the evidence that his or her house had been invaded by bloodsuckers and really one’s blood sucked?” No one replied. The policeman then asked the chiefs whether they had evidence. Again, no one came forward. Instead of persuading the people that their fears were groundless, as they no doubt intended, this line of questioning caused a general “murmuring”: “people were furious.” Denying the reality of the dangers people feared was tantamount to being on the side of the bloodsuckers.

The meeting began to break up. People were saying: “we are not [being] helped.” Then the police unleashed the authority of medical science. The supervisor of the health surveillance attendants was asked by the police to address those who remained. According to Simon’s informant, the supervisor was “told to tell the people . . . how blood can be taken out of the person.” Drawing blood, the assembly was informed, is skilled work and a laborious process. The supervisor assessed the rumors of bloodsucking thus: “He said that him as a health worker he doesn’t believe that there are people who sucks blood using instruments at night and by stealing, because setting the condition to suck blood is not so easy. This belongs to the Ministry of Health only and other well-trained organizations.” The supervisor perhaps undercut his case, however, by comparing the slow laborious drawing of blood by trained officials of the Ministry of Health with the “fast” process he had heard described that the Satanists used. His long description of the transfusion process, according to the witness, merely left people “murmuring” again. He had succeeded only in prov-

ing that the bloodsuckers must be using magical means. The supervisor departed the place, along with the public. The police retreated to a classroom for a private meeting with the chiefs.

Simon does not mention in his journals that the reason the police called this meeting to address rumors of bloodsucking was because of him. He takes his work as a journalist seriously. The journals, in his view, are supposed to be for recording conversations in the community. They are not a place to describe his own troubles. When I visited Simon in 2009 and asked what had happened, however, he told me the reason for the meeting. He had gone to the police in fear for his life after hearing rumors that he was suspected of being a bloodsucker. Let him tell his own story:

### **A SUSPECT'S STORY**

The following is an edited transcript of a conversation I recorded with Simon in June, 2009, 18 months after he was targeted and nearly killed as a suspected vampire:

Okay, yeah, this happened, like, two years ago. It was 2007. I was sent by the project to do HTC training in Blantyre. HIV Testing and Counseling. So it was I went to Blantyre. It was on the eleventh of November. I went for three weeks. So when I went there I did my course. I passed my exam and I came back. When I came back everything was quiet.

In Malawi, we usually sow our maize in late November or early December. So by mid-December the maize was high. It's dark then and people are scared. Even when going to school one should be accompanied or be in a group. So it was during that time whereby this rumor started, because people were afraid. You know in the village there is hunger as well. People are scared. And they are thinking that people who are eating food in their homes are involved in this thing because they have money. So whoever was looking like he is doing something, who was maybe working or

having a little bit of money, was being regarded as maybe he was in this system.

So it suddenly happened that one day someone around our area, a woman, a Health Surveillance Assistant, married to a teacher, saw the Satanics. She had been sleeping and was disturbed. What happened was at night. She said she saw something as if she was dreaming. She said that some people, whom she said were Satanics, came with a big pipe and penetrated the roof of her house and sprayed some chemicals which made her very weak, which made her maybe to die. But fortunately enough, the Satanic people did not succeed to do what they wanted to do because she shouted. And some people around, neighbors, came and rescued her. I believe it was around ten o'clock, to eleven.

So she was taken to the hospital. Then that rumor went around. People said some certain girl was taken. They said the Satanics had come. So the rumor was around. Around our area, the neighbors came to believe that this was happening. Why? Because they could see some torches around the graveyard at night and they believed that the Satanic people were having their place in the graveyard and were waiting to hide there until it was really dark. So whenever there was night, some torches were seen at the graveyard.

So what the chiefs around here did was they mobilized the youth. Each and every man around the village was called to the chief and was registered to be in police patrols at night. They were told to be guarding at the graveyards. There are about three graveyards around here. Those people were demarcated so that people were going around the different graveyards. So they were going from eight PM till around four AM. They were going around the village. They were having *panga* knives. Some were taking beers so that they would be energized to go around at night. And every household was contributing 20 kwacha, 20 kwacha per

week. At four o'clock they come to the chief to report and are given tea. The money was to buy tea to energize them. With 20 kwacha for every house, they were having a lot of money. So this was sort of a business. They've got a job. And there was a chairman, elected, a secretary, a treasurer who was keeping the money.

One night there was a certain neighbor near us who cried out: "Ay, ay, ay . . . Come here!" So the people who were guarding at night ran toward that house. They found there's nothing. But they said it was smelling. They said the smell was from a certain chemical the Satanics use. Because it was a neighbor, in the morning we rushed to see again. Me, my mother, and my wife, we all went. But we found that it was nothing, only a scratch at the door like somebody was trying to get in. Some people were saying it was Satanics, but others were saying maybe they were robbers. They said that maybe the robbers were finding a loophole, to take advantage because the satanic system is here. So the other robbers were just coming. So we just found a scratch on the door, but because people were afraid whoever passes by they could say "ay, ay, ay. . . ." Things like that.

While these people were guarding at night, a certain kid was killed. A certain woman was at home with her two little young sons. The kids were saying, "Mum, could I go out to pass urine." So they go out to pass urine. At that moment someone was passing by in the dark. The mother became afraid and started shouting "ohhh. . . ." So she became afraid, the mother. Because she was afraid, she ran back inside the house and closed the door. One son followed her. The other one, who was about five years old, was left outside. Because he was afraid he just sneaked and he hid [sic] on the corner of the wall, waiting to see what was happening. Those people who were patrolling they had some whistles to alert everybody. They blew the whistles and

said: “Oh, that house is being attacked.” They found this one, the young child, hiding against the wall. It was near some grasses. So they said: “Oh, this is the witch. The witch has come.” They began beating the young child with *pangas* and these big sticks until he died.

When the mother came out she said: “Where is my little one.” She found that her son was dead.

After that the chiefs said to the people who were patrolling at night that whoever they find they should go to the chief first rather than do on their own. The chiefs were saying: “Don’t just beat whoever you meet. You first find him, and just catch him and bring him here.” Everyone was saying that that mother should not have left her kid outside. At the funeral she was just sat with her head in her hands in shame.

One day, when I was passing by a certain village, I heard people saying, “This is the year.” It was like they were saying they would be beating me, and when I die, maybe they will go on the sand, make a hole, and bury me there in the sand. So then I said to myself: “Eh, this is the thing.” Then my chief told me “some people are suspecting you.” Yes, he told me. Because sometimes we do chat. We meet while drinking beers. We have been together in the village. He said to me: “People are saying this and this, and the other chiefs were saying this and that. But I’ve tried to say, I’ve tried to convince them and told them ‘I’ve known Simon; he’s been growing from here despite he came from Blantyre. I know whatever he does. And most of the time, he works with these white people. They come even to visit him here at home. He can’t do that. He can’t do that. One cannot do anything strange in my village. I’m the responsible person and I can know that.’” Other people understood. But not my age mates, because of jealousy and things like that.

My age mates were the ones who were trying to make people against me. Because of jealousy they could say: “No, he is one. Because the Satanics who are coming here are taking the blood and no one who is not experienced can be involved in the exercise. So maybe, where he was doing that course (because they knew I had been in Blantyre for the HTC training) he was involved in that exercise.” So some of them were suspecting that. So they went to the chief and said: “Ah, we are being troubled here.” Because now the rumor was going outside and people were not sleeping at night. And my age mates, I’ve known them all my life. We were schooling together. I thought we were friends. It was paining for me.

This went on for about a month. Though I knew I was suspected, I didn’t change my attitude. Each and every day I would go to the trading center. Each and everyone could murmur, but I did not change. One night the people who were guarding were planning to attack my house. They were going to burn it and even kill me. They were gathered, about 40 people. But the chief told them they must not do that. The chief said: “You don’t have any witness. One. And, two, I know him; he can’t do that. Three, I know that he started working many years ago and he is the one who is supporting around that area. And we have been seeing some whites sometimes, maybe his bosses. They are the ones assisting him. So if you are going to do that, maybe you are just jealous. I don’t want you, anybody here, to touch him.” And he told them that if they attack me he would get in trouble with the police, because he is the one who is responsible.

Anyone who was walking at night, around 9 or 10 PM, could be attacked like he was a Satanic. One day a certain Mr. Mbewe wanted to go for a certain lady. He was coming from beer, with his bike, at around 10. He was going to

knock at the house of a certain girl. But I think they didn't promise each other. He was just going to see if "ah, I can go there." But because the woman didn't know that this man will come, she thought he was a Satanic and started to shout: "Ahhh. . . ." The people gathered around and he was started to be beaten. He was beaten almost to the death. Then a neighbor recognized him and said: "Ah, I know him. He's Mr. Mbewe." So that neighbor took him into his house. When people saw that someone has hidden him in his house they started breaking the house. The house collapsed. The man, Mr. Mbewe, was brought out and was beaten again. Fortunately, because of the grace of God, he collapsed and he was taken to the hospital and it was at the hospital where he survived.

So when I saw this man was nearly beaten to the death, then I was very afraid. I thought if I just stay here without doing any action, something could happen to me. That's when I went to the police at Ulongwe. So I went there, I presented my issue. I said: "People are suspecting me of this and this and this." They said: "How do you know?" I said: "People are moving around. And even my wife, she is being told maybe at the borehole, they say this, and my wife's young sister could go maybe where she stays and they say 'ah, we've heard that he's amongst you.'" There were other people at the trading center who were also suspected. The other one had a minibus. The other one had a big shop. People who were looking like they do have some money were just suspected to do that. They were suspecting me not because I had money but because of the school where I went for HTC training.

So I thought I shouldn't stay quiet. I went to the police, whereby they said: "Yeah, this rumor is everywhere. It's like in Tyolo, and there, and there. And most of the VCT counselors, they are beaten at their centers. This is not new." I

had come with my papers, my certificate, and said: "This is what I was doing. HIV Testing and Counseling. These people are just suspecting me." And the police said: "We need not to stay quiet. We need to sensitize people now. This rumor is dangerous. We heard about Mbewe who was beaten and we didn't do anything. I think we have to sensitize people. Maybe people are doing this ignorantly. They don't know that with the Satanics, one can't see a Satanic person."

So, the following week, it was on Tuesday, whereby the Ulongwe police and the other one from Balaka came out to Nkhonde primary school. And most of the chiefs were told by the letters to bring their people around. At night people would shout and shout "We have to meet at the school tomorrow." There were many people there because of this, many thousands of people. I didn't go because of the rumors, but my wife, my mother went there.

So the police tried to sensitize the people and said: "No, these are just rumors." But the people said: "No, the police know something." They said the police were trying to hide these Satanic people. They were on the same side. Maybe they'd given the police some money. And the other man, the Health Surveillance Assistant, tried to explain. He said: "No, pumping blood cannot be done anyhow. You need to have some arteries where you stick your instruments. Only an experienced person can pump the blood. What happens when we at the hospital want to suck blood, to give transfusion of blood, we do like this and this and this. It's contrary to what you are thinking." But the other people were saying: "No, maybe he's the one keeping the same bottles of blood. He's been given money."

There was a lot of confusion at that time; from December to January. It was around mid-January to the end of January, but not much after the end of January, whereby this rumor ceased. People found that there was no one be-



ing pumped blood. If you went to Ulongwe, you would hear people who say: “People are dying, the other one is being pumped blood.” But here, no one ever saw that this person has been pumped blood.

So it was just a rumor. And the rumor continued until the people just recognized the truth. By then it was in January, when the people who have planted in November are about to eat their own corns. That was the time when this rumor ceased down until it just ended in February.

Of course, there was satanism, but not in this area. It was in other areas. So, that was the issue. That was the rumor. Fortunately enough we all survived.

A year and a half after these events, Simon tells his story with laconic good humor. After a few beers in the local Balaka bars, however, I begin to get a sense of what it might mean to have “age mates,” people you have known all your life, lived with as friends in a tightly knit community, want to kill you and destroy your home; what it means to know that even though you survived that round, you live with them still, they resent you still. And it is a sobering thought to think it could happen again at any time.

Simon is quite clear that he fell under suspicion because of the training course he took in Blantyre in HIV Testing and Counseling. In a small irony of “development,” the training course had been a gift of the director of the research projects that previously employed Simon. With the projects coming to an end, the director had agreed to fund Simon’s HTC training in order that he might be able to seek work as a VCT counselor at a time when the provision of antiretroviral drugs was beginning to increase. The act of kindness nearly proved fatal.

## **SPEAKING OF BLOOD, AND SATAN**

Rumors of bloodsuckers have been heard before (see White 2000; Vaughan 2003; Peters et al. 2008). One of the friends gathered with Simon under the Ntondo tree, whose conversation Simon reported in his

journal, said his grandmother told him that a similar wave of bloodsucking swept the country in 1948 and 1949. Nineteen forty-nine was the year of the worst famine in recent times. The rains failed completely. People were starving. At that time, according to the grandmother, the bloodsuckers were moving about in cars and vans at night – which must have been quite remarkable, given the rarity of vehicles and scarcity of roads at the time. The onslaught only ceased after cars were burnt and a curfew imposed by the village chiefs.

Talk of blood in this part of the world resonates with traditions of healing and health maintenance, offering rich resources for speculating on the powers inherent in the vital fluid and imagining the dangers they pose. Lessons regarding the dangers of contact with blood, particularly through sex, along with the importance of managing hot and cool bodily states, have long been taught in the formal contexts of initiation schools and are reinforced in the medium of everyday talk (for a discussion of the women responsible for teaching girls about blood, sex, and health during their initiation period, see Kaspin 1996). In recent years, the advent of AIDS and information about HIV as an infectious agent present in blood – often expressed colloquially as “*kachiroambo*,” a small creature inhabiting the infected person’s blood – have raised new possibilities for speculation about blood. HIV/AIDS is a new disease; “virus” names a new kind of agency of misfortune, resident in blood. Who can say exactly what the agency inherent in a virus is? Who can say what other kinds of agency can interact with the virus? Who can say for sure which agencies *cannot* so interact? The term *kachiroambo*, incidentally, expresses an unintentional irony. When health authorities sought a local equivalent for translating the word “virus,” they chose the Chichewa term for a small animal that is also used in witchcraft.<sup>5</sup>

Blood is both the home of the virus and the source of resistance. In the everyday epidemiology of AIDS, which we see emerging in conversations documented by participants in the Malawi Journals Project, variance in time between the putative date of infection and the onset of symptoms is frequently explained by reference to the concept of

“strong blood.” This is mainly relevant in cases where both partners in a marriage are infected, or when one falls ill while the other does not. (Strong blood also explains why some people can hold their liquor better than others.) Injections, blood transfusions, and now HIV tests (which became widely available around 2006) provide a clinical frame of reference for speculating on the inherent powers of blood. An old woman once told Simon, for example, that the contraceptive injections women receive at the clinics strengthens their blood, enabling them to remain fat, attractive, and dangerous while infected with HIV (Simon\_050121.anon.rtf). Antiretroviral drugs are said to work in the same way. Diagnoses of low blood pressure are sometimes communicated to patients as “not enough blood.” People caring for AIDS patients are routinely instructed to avoid blood and other bodily fluids and wear gloves—or, if they cannot afford gloves, plastic bags which should be washed and hung in the sun to dry after use. No doubt the talk of preachers invoking the “blood of Jesus” as a cleanser of sin contributes to the aura surrounding the stuff, too. The Satanic thirst for human blood also connects with the legendary appetites of certain kinds of witches for the eating of human flesh, from which they derived extraordinary powers. The meaning of blood, to put it mildly, is overdetermined.

It would be unwise to be too sanguine about the possibility of establishing an authoritative reading of what the symbolizing of blood in discourse about the operations of Malawian bloodsuckers is really about, to read talk of bloodsuckers as discourse about something else. While there is no shortage of experts on tradition, healing, religion, and the perfidies of witchcraft, to name but a few issues relevant to the subject, a fundamental uncertainty pervades talk of these matters. Questions emerge in the course of everyday lives for which there are many possible answers.

Consider the following debate among a group of women, reported by Simon in October 2005, about the risks for Satanists in consuming HIV-infected blood:

Asked Ethel: So it means that the blood which the satanists gather from these accidents, they put it all together? If they mix the blood when baptizing the new members joining the Satanic church by giving them blood to drink as their baptizing, won't they get AIDS from that since nowadays AIDS is everywhere and the virus is probably found in the blood that they drink?

They don't care about AIDS, answered MaAngela. Wealth is what they are after, becoming rich.

Ethel asked: Rich? Rich? For how long will they be rich before dying?

Since it's the system which goes with that of witchcrafts, said MaAngela, there is no spreading of AIDS. The *kachiroombo* is killed. When the new members joining the Satanic church are given the blood to drink, as baptizing them, they don't get AIDS.

No, said Ethel. AIDS doesn't choose. It's the disease that doesn't see what kind of person it is. No matter whether you're a Satanist, or practicing witchcraft, or a Born Again you still can have the virus. If the blood that these Satanic people drink has the virus causing AIDS, those who drink can get the virus (*kachilombo*) if they had no virus. And if they had the virus already, it can add the virus into their blood (Simon\_051023.anon.rtf).

Whatever else one might want to say about the ideas expressed in this debate, the exchange seems to me to illustrate a degree of uncertainty in people's relation to this essential substance, blood, and the invisible agencies that can operate in, through, and on it.

While there are many authorities that can, and do, pontificate on the particular properties, material and mystical, of human blood, there is no one who could resolve the question debated above without fear of contradiction. It is this uncertainty, uncertainty regarding such fundamental issues as the sources and nature of life-threatening dan-

gers, rather than any fixed notions, theories, or beliefs that contributes most to the imagining of danger in stories about bloodsuckers. Multiple authorities, moreover, claim the capacity to speak the truth: police officers, public health officials, chiefs, healers, and pastors, to name but a few. This plurality of competing interpretive authorities can produce a condition of epistemic anxiety, of knowing that there must be answers to the questions emerging in everyday life but not knowing how to find them; knowing that there are invisible forces acting on life, but not knowing how to manage them.

Consider this note from the journal writer Alice, who lives about 10 kilometers from Simon, appended to her entry of December 4, 2007 during the time of the bloodsuckers:

Until now, nobody knows the truth about the Satanics. Like myself, I know nothing about these people, and nobody is able to mention where these Satanics come from. Most of them are just saying they are foreigners. They don't know which country they come from. But people here are still sleeping outside their houses and they are sleeping in groups. . . . They are stranded and they don't know what is happening, therefore everyone is in great fear (Alice\_071204.anon.rtf).

*They are stranded and they don't know what is happening, therefore everyone is in great fear.* This epistemological dimension of spiritual insecurity, ultimately, is the reason the condition must be considered a distinct feature of human social life and not merely a product of other forms of insecurity. It is what you will be wondering when the vampires come for you.

## NOTES

1. "Simon" keeps a journal on behalf of the Malawi Journals Project, formerly part of the Diffusion and Ideational Change Project of the University of Pennsylvania, now based at the University of Michigan. He has been keeping journals since around 2000. His brief is to record

in a notebook accounts of conversations witnessed pertaining to HIV/AIDS, sex, family planning, illness, death, or related issues. Examples of his journals, along with a description of the project, can be found at [http://investinknowledge.org/projects/research/malawian\\_journals\\_project](http://investinknowledge.org/projects/research/malawian_journals_project). Other quotations in this article from the project can also be found here.

2. For a less enthusiastic assessment of the subsidy program, see *The Economist* (2008). A 2008 study from Michigan State University added complexity to the case for ignoring conventional wisdom on subsidies by questioning the governments figures on maize production (Jayne, Chapoto, Minde, and Donovan 2008).
3. “Collective efficacy,” for example, Felton Earls’s notion adopted by Helen Epstein to explain the response of Ugandan communities in combating AIDS, is not a given (see Epstein 2007 160).
4. Health Surveillance Assistants are public health officials who have received 10 weeks of training. They provide a number of primary care services such as immunization, dispensing of essential drugs, and HIV testing and counseling.
5. See Probst (1999):

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in Malawi the Ministry of Health and Population had translated the English word “virus” by *kachiroambo* (lit., “little animal”). Soon after, however, it was found that people understood the concept in a way which had not been intended. The idea of only one “little animal” being responsible for the infection led people to think that they could lose the single virus by passing it on to others via sexual intercourse, thus freeing themselves from the zoomorphically conceptualized cause of the disease. As a result, the authorities pluralized the word, talking instead of *tizirombo*, “little animals.” Yet the term remained – and still remains – problematic, for it resonates with a basic figure of thought in Malawian culture. In contrast to *nyama*, which means all mammals that are

eaten as food, the term *chirombo*, the stem of *kachirombo*, means all animals that are useless, noxious or dangerous to humans. . . . These very animals, however, are also the ones which are thought to be deeply connected with witchcraft. Hyenas, for instance, as the most prominent beasts in this context, do not only count as popular familiars of witches. Their brain is also known to be an important activating agent (*chizimba*) in the preparation of *mankhwala*, medicines, necessary to satisfy the cannibalistic lust of witches (118).

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