

# **Public health and religion: Aids, America, abstinence...**

**Uganda was a beacon of hope in Africa's struggle against HIV, but the Christian right's grip on US policy is undermining this effort with fatal consequences, reports Oliver Duff from Kampala**

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"No No sex! No No Sex!" The chant startles slumbering bats from their trees, repeated until you are left in no doubt that the 3,000 students crammed around this swimming pool really mean what they shout.

"Praise God, I have been saved!" says Isaac Ichila, 24, with a young crowd hanging on every word. "We are fighting the enemy of humanity which is HIV/Aids. It is killing us. I was a drunkard and I slept with 17 women before university. So I took the pledge to abstain from sex and have kept my promise to God. I am physically and psychologically pure."

Isaac is one of those who gather every Saturday night to listen to pro-chastity music and sermons at Uganda's prestigious Makerere University. Abstinence-until-marriage pledge cards fly around for students to sign. Simon Peter Onaba, 24, cautions a friend against flirting with women. "Sex is a progression," he warns. "One minute, you are holding hands with a girl, the next kissing. Don't go in a room with one man and one woman otherwise your pants will go off! Sex is so powerful." Then the clincher: "Remember condoms don't prevent Aids. They have a high failure rate."

Abstinence is working for Isaac and Simon - and for tens of thousands of teens and twentysomethings proudly attending virginity rallies in Uganda. But Aids activists and development officials point to the 130,000 Ugandans infected with HIV last year alone -

up from 70,000 in 2002 - and say the recent obsession with abstinence is handicapping the country's once-successful fight against the virus.

Health workers see the fingerprints of America's Christian right all over the chastity message and believe the Bush administration is using its financial might to bully them into accepting evangelical ideology at the expense of public health.

Aids may have killed one million Ugandans and infected a further million but the latest crisis seems strange when you consider that foreign donors still hold up Uganda as Africa's Aids success story. What's more, under Bush's 2003 Emergency Plan For Aids Relief, where he pledged \$15bn (£8bn) to fighting Aids in the worst-afflicted countries, Uganda receives more US money than ever: doubling in two years to \$169.9m in 2006. But that cash comes with conditions: in a gesture to the Christian right in the US, at least one-third of all prevention money must go to "abstinence-only" projects - \$10m in Uganda in 2005. Critics counting each new infection in field clinics say this has dangerously skewed Uganda's previous "balanced" approach which seemed to be working.

At a tiny clinic in the capital's suburbs, women wait for antenatal advice and Aids testing. "We have worked so hard to get people to understand HIV and that there are three options open to them: A, B or C," says Dr Henry Katamba. "That's Abstain from sex, Be faithful or use a Condom, whichever is the one for you. That's what our government used to say - and everyone understood. The message recognised that it wasn't realistic to ask for abstinence from everyone who's not married." Dr Katamba is health co-ordinator of the Uganda Protestant Medical Bureau, an umbrella of churches providing clinical help in the absence of government hospitals.

Under the previous "balanced" strategy, condom distribution grew from four million a year to 118 million by 2001. Thanks to the abstinence message, teenagers lost their virginity about 18 months later than before. People with several partners realised they needed to stop sleeping around so much. In 1992, one in five Ugandans had Aids. By 2001 that dropped to one in 20.

"Because of the US, our government now says Abstain and Be faithful only," says Dr Katamba. "So people stop trusting our advice. They think we were lying about how condoms can stop Aids. Confusion is deadly."

And so it is proving to be: the number of infections is again rising, after years of decline. Questionable government figures say that 6.4 per cent of Ugandans have HIV/Aids. One in three civil war refugees in camps in the north has Aids, a local NGO says.

Uganda's evangelicals preach that abstinence is the only way to halt the spread of the virus. The trusted and influential first lady, Janet Museveni, is a born-again Christian. She has publicly equated condom use with theft and murder and said that Aids is God's way of punishing immoral behaviour. The first lady also offers scholarships to girls who can prove they are virgins.

Helping her in the recruitment of virgins and "secondary abstainers" (the formerly sexually active) is Pastor Martin Ssempe. The evangelical priest rose to prominence as a breakdancing champion - fame he now uses to get across the message that condoms are a "ticket to death". Both Pastor Ssempe and the first lady enjoy influence among Republican Congressmen. Even the President, Yoweri Museveni, has attacked "those who want to condomise the world" - a far cry from two years ago, when he gratefully embraced condoms as a means of saving his people.

Back then, the enormous billboards lining the red dusty road through any Ugandan town advertised condoms. Look now and you see posters of girls urging: "She's keeping herself for marriage ... what about you?" Uganda's first attempt to teach all its schoolchildren about Aids - an initiative bankrolled by the US - was abruptly purged of references to condoms after the abstinence legislation came in. A popular teenage magazine that referred to condoms was burnt. The publisher lost out on a \$30m contract to continue its family planning and Aids work because it "believes that condoms are the answer", the former head of Bush's Aids programme said. The condom promoter Marie Stopes was intimidated into withdrawing advertising.

The gag even extends to the respected Straight Talk Foundation. Radio producer Hassan Sekajoolo describes how US funders demanded he excise condoms from sexual health shows in two languages. "We didn't have a choice," he says. "The American donors came and said, 'Our way is Abstinence and Be faithful, full stop'." Abstinence money was given to the first lady's Uganda Youth Forum, which holds huge virginity rallies in Kampala, and to Samaritan's Purse, an American missionary charity that spreads the Gospel of Jesus in the developing world. US law forbids the use of federal funds for evangelizing.

What has changed in Uganda is that condoms are no longer promoted to the general population. In line with US Aids policy under Mr Bush, condoms should be promoted exclusively to high-risk groups such as truck drivers, soldiers and "discordant" couples (where just one of the partners is HIV-positive). Everyone else should hear the rubber-free virtues of abstinence and fidelity only. Yoweri Museveni's government hungrily devoured the American abstinence policy and the attached cash. It is dependent on foreign donors for half its budget.

People on both sides of the argument agree that Washington is prolonging tens of thousands of Ugandans' lives through treatment - and that abstinence is crucial. "The evangelicals are absolutely right: abstinence is the best way of preventing the spread of HIV/Aids," says Sigurd Illing, the EU ambassador to Uganda. "But some people aren't receptive. We need an end to this bedevilling of condoms by people who take a high moralistic stance and don't care about the impact that this has on reality."

In the stinking back alleys of the capital's Kisenyi slum, abstinence has little currency among the destitute refugees from the Congo, Sudan, Somalia and northern Uganda.

"I try to use condoms but they burst, or our client says no," explains prostitute Jennifer Natalema, 22, propping a brick against the broken door to her brothel. Posturing, unemployed young men loiter outside the entrance, jeering at passing women.

"I don't argue or there's no money when he finishes using me. He will beat me." She has been selling unprotected sex for 4,000 shillings (£2) for seven years. Somehow she has escaped the feeble wasting of Aids. So far.

Asked what she thinks about abstaining, Jennifer's colleague "Pretty", 23, laughs: "We need the money! What else can I do? Abstinence can't work somewhere like Kisenyi." In this part of Kampala, girls tend to lose their virginity aged between 9 and 11. Sex is a marketable commodity in the struggle to survive. Walk through Kisenyi market, and you get an idea of the local economy: fruit sellers, scrap merchants, barbers, thieves, drug dealers and prostitutes. One in seven girls tested in a study last year had HIV.

"Abstinence is not a message that children with no money listen to," says Maurisia Ssebuggwawo, 58, a volunteer midwife who gives advice at a local youth club, gated and patrolled by armed guards to protect the paltry stock of Aids drugs. "They need condoms and don't have any, because they are so expensive." The arbitrary nature of international aid, where money is here one year and gone the next, doesn't help. Since funding from the United Nations ran out in 2001, her club cannot afford to distribute free condoms.

One of those failed is Musa Kabanda, 24. In 2004, he got a girlfriend and had sex for the first time but didn't use protection. He became a weak man fighting Aids. "The club used to come to my market to talk about Aids but they stopped," he says, a rasping cough punctuating the words, sweat rolling down his waxy face as he rearranges the dirty bedsheets. "All I wish is that I had used a condom. Saying 'abstain' is not realistic."

Nor is saying "Be faithful" at present, given the widespread and accepted male infidelity in Uganda that results in one infected person spreading the virus quickly. "I was faithful to my husband but he told me a man has to have up to 10 women and not less than two," says Sarah Ndagire, 41, infected by her adulterous partner in 1997. Constance Namuyiga, a 28-year-old mother of three young children, found out she was HIV-positive two years ago. "Men think they own us here," she says. "My husband had other women. He laughed when I asked him to use condoms with them." She adds: "I told him to go for a test when

I found out I am HIV, but he left me. I hope to see my children grow. I don't tell my parents in case they worry I die before them."

It is 30- to 35-year-old women and 35- to 45-year-old men in marriages, not sexually active teens and twentysomethings who are most likely to be infected.

Another hurdle Aids workers have to jump is the US condition that they sign a pledge opposing prostitution. Ask Mrs Ssebuggwawo, the midwife, why her club does not apply for Bush's Aids funding and her good nature crumbles in an instant. "How can we help the girls if we condemn them?" she demands.

Even senior members of the Ugandan government admit that the first lady and her US backers are dangerously moralising the situation. "There are some prominent people in government, and some outside, who with the help of conservative agents in the US are stigmatising Aids, saying that only sinners use a condom," says Dr Jotham Musinguzi, director of the Population Secretariat at the Ministry of Finance. "That is the message we are struggling with." Ugandans are becoming more reluctant to ask for free condoms, advice and testing - particularly vulnerable groups such as prostitutes and homosexuals.

Not everyone is sad about the escalating epidemic. In a roadside timber yard near Kampala's Mulago Hospital, coffin makers report that business has never been better. "Three years ago, I sell 15 coffins a week. Now it is 20 adult coffins and seven children's coffins," says Lawrence Kiwanuka, the jovial boss of an expanding workforce of 25 carpenters. "I think the Aids deaths are really more than the government says." So is he happy more people are dying from Aids? He laughs: "That is a very difficult question."

## **Bereaved mother offers hope in war on gun crime**

**By Oliver Duff**

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A bloody circle was completed in the early hours of Saturday morning in New Cross, south London.

Andrew Wanogho, 26, the man accused of murdering Damian Cope outside a West End nightclub in 2002, bled to death in the gutter - shot through the back and heart in a killing that will be seen as street justice to those familiar with gang culture.

Detectives have not ruled out the possibility that Mr Wanogho's murder was a revenge attack for Mr Cope's death, but he had many enemies. Known as "The Assassin" in the boxing ring and "Sparks" outside of it, Mr Wanogho was considered a hothead who had a history of firearms-related crime. When any cases against him came to court, witnesses would back out, as happened in his trial at the Old Bailey over the Cope murder. He was acquitted.

He survived an assassination attempt last summer and had taken to wearing a bulletproof vest.

The feeling among those who knew him is that Mr Wanogho's past caught up with him. But thoughts of a death avenged have not crossed the mind of Lucy Cope, Damian's mother. In an astonishing act of grace, she wants to launch a joint public appeal with Mr Wanogho's mother, Deborah, to help catch his killer.

"Andrew Wanogho is not a perpetrator now - he is a victim," she said yesterday. "My initial reaction was truly and deeply for his mother. I shed tears for her. This is not justice. It makes no difference it's Andrew Wanogho here. His mother doesn't deserve this."

After Damian's murder four years ago, Ms Cope set up the charity Mothers Against Guns, campaigning against the flood of firearms ending up in the hands of Britain's gangs. She estimates that she has had contact with 700 grieving relatives around the UK who have lost loved ones to gun violence. "You go to the mortuary and you see your

dead son lying there six inches behind the glass," said Ms Cope. "Your initial reaction is to beat that glass - and it echoes.

"You know when they died it wasn't an accident, it wasn't an illness. At that specific moment when the bullet enters their body their life must flash before their eyes and as a mother you're not there for them. The scream comes from the pit of your despair," she said.

It is unclear if Andrew Wanogho ever saw his killer. He was on the poorly lit Pendrell Road in New Cross at 1.30am on Saturday when he was shot once in the back. The bullet pierced his heart and he staggered up the street. He was driven to the flat of Paul Wanogho, his brother, but by the time he arrived he was dead.

The murder is being investigated by officers from Operation Trident, the Metropolitan Police's black-on-black gun crime unit. Detectives say they are keeping an open mind, but are investigating the possibility that it was an ambush. "We can't rule out a connection with the Damian Cope murder at all, but we can't rule it in either," said one. "There are going to be very few witnesses, if any."

A 27-year-old woman and a 22-year-old man were arrested on Sunday and bailed until June.

Gun crime is rising and becoming more prevalent among teenagers, according to the head of Trident, Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles. Mr Wanogho's death is "basically the same old vicious circle that's been going on for 10 years," he said. "But we have more and more young British black kids carrying guns all the time. Last year we charged someone who was 14 with murder for the first time – others were 15,16,17 and 19. Before that we'd never had someone under 21 charged with murder," he said.

Gun crime rose slightly in the United Kingdom last year, to 11,110 incidents. There were 3,865 firearms offences in London, up 7 per cent, with Lambeth, Hackney and Haringey seeing 25 per cent rises. One tenth of all firearms offences in the UK are shootings:



Trident dealt with 241 non-fatal shootings in the year to March - up by one third - with 15 fatal shootings.

But the problem is by no means confined to black communities: Operation Trafalgar, which deals with non-black shootings, saw a 44 per cent increase from 59 to 86 shootings.

"One boy said to me, 'In your day, you had knives. Now we have guns,'" said the Rev Nims Obunge, who heads anti-crime community programmes in London. "Guns are available, so they will be used as offensive weapons. Some young people say they feel 'untouchable' when they carry a gun' others won't give them up because of safety fears. We must find them an exit strategy to get out of these environments."

Police and community anti-gun programmes focus on children as young as six.

Yesterday in Pendrell Road, the blood and the police tape had been cleared, and a resident's car with a bullet hole in it had been taken away for repair. All that marked the spot where Mr Wanogho fell were eight bunches of flowers and a rainsodden pair of boxing gloves - a tribute to his days as a successful amateur middleweight.

"One of the realist nig-gas," read one message. "RIP Sparks, Love D x" said another. A girl who pulled up in a car said through her tears: "I met him at Bristol at the carnival and he was fun. He was 26, the same as me. He always had a joke to make me smile when I was down. I don't think he never murdered Damian." She drove away and two different girls pulled up. One laughed: "Don't be fooled, he was murdering scum! I've come to see which mugs have put flowers down. He was bad work, everyone knows he killed Damian. I'm pleased he's dead."

Ms Cope thinks differently. "My message to those who carry guns is this," she said. "You think you are protected because you have one but you aren't. One day the bullet will have your name on it."

# Peckham, five years after Damilola. Has anything changed?

By Oliver Duff

Published in *The Independent*, 26 November 2005

The stairwell on Blakes Road where Damilola Taylor lay dying on 27 November 2000, bleeding from a stab wound to the thigh with a broken bottle, is gone now.

Five years after the murder of the 10-year-old Nigerian, so too are the filthy, rundown, high-rise flats that were attached to it. It is all gone - the whole North Peckham Estate symbolically razed. In its place have appeared 2,500 new homes.

But locals say little has changed. The plague of burglaries, intimidation, muggings and stabbings continues, despite Southwark Council tackling the shoddy housing that saw this corner of south-east London become the eighth most-crowded place in the UK.

"My kids sum it up well: nice new houses but the same old shit happening inside them," said Camilla Batmanghelidj, a leading child psychologist who works with emotionally abused and violent youngsters in the area through her Kids Company charity. Many still lived with "extreme, exhausting stress" caused by worrying about their parents, she said. "They live with a high level of violence and a shortage of money."

Damilola's death "really woke people up to lone children on the streets fendng for themselves", she added. Despite this, education, social services and mental health services remained under-resourced.

Teenagers recognised her concerns. Lloyd Stephens, 16, said poverty had forced people he knew into crime. "There's a lot of stealing," he said. "If you get mugged and don't give over your stuff you get your face bashed in." Asked what he thought of new sports facilities in Peckham, he said: "I dunno. We just jam, you know, in the street."

Even some of those residents given new homes remain unconvinced. Back on Blakes Road, Mary Borg dismissed the regeneration as lacking substance. "You can change the houses, but you can't change the people," she said. "This is a rough area - what happened to Damilola down the road didn't surprise us. You don't go out at night otherwise gangs trouble you. You worry they'll pull a knife or a gun."

A neighbour, Sylvia Mitchell, said she was mugged two weeks ago on one of the new roads. "I lived on North Peckham Estate before they knocked it down and I'd rather go

back to that," she said. "There was a community and, if something bad happened, people came to help."

An immigrant resident, who asked not to be named, said she saw children as young as seven breaking windows in the disused factory late at night. "By the time they are teenagers that will not be enough for them," she said. "They will be mugging us. I've lived here 20 years and have seen it happen." She conceded that crime on her street had fallen since the rebuilding.

Others were less pessimistic. At Damilola's school, Oliver Goldsmith Primary, there will be a memorial assembly for their former pupil on Monday. The headteacher, Mark Parksons, said the biggest change in the past five years was pupils' willingness to talk to teachers about problems outside school. "That was the problem with Damilola," he said. "He didn't tell us."

Mr Parsons said that the presence of police and pedestrian wardens to help children travel safely to school - heavy after Damilola's murder - had tailed off. Parents had become more supportive though, and there were fewer challenging refugee children from countries such as Sierra Leone, Somalia and Bosnia.

"The biggest problem is that this is a very mobile area with a high turnover of residents who come and go, making it difficult for kids to settle," said Mr Parsons. "Remember: this is Peckham and Camberwell, not Kensington." The Peckham Academy, which offers specialisms in business or performing arts, was raising education standards in Southwark, he added.

Those who knew Peckham before the £275m investment began in 1994 - the death of Damilola was the catalyst for faster change, rather than the origin - agree that, over a tiny area, the transformation is impressive. There are several community treasures, foremost among them an award-winning library designed by Will Alsop, which is packed throughout the day. There is a new leisure centre and a youth centre, the Damilola Taylor Centre, funded to provide sports activities.

Peckham has also been reborn as something of a creative hub, attracting artists such as Antony Gormley, who has designed some of its street art.

Low rents and its proximity to Goldsmith College and Camberwell College of Arts recently saw it named by a panel of experts as a "hot spot" of British culture.

There is criticism of the project once you go to East Peckham, outside the regeneration zone. Gordon Fox, a retired postman, said his part of town had seen none of the benefits. "I go home at 4pm and don't come out until the next morning, it's not safe," he said. "But credit to the council, the library is beautiful. I do my crossword there."

Despite cynicism about the regeneration's chances of success, the council insists it would be churlish to scoff at its efforts. It promises to attract new businesses and homeowners to

breathe energy into an area which has suffocated with little of either for 50 years, and says that crime is slightly down. But the real challenge is yet to come.

In two years' time, government funding runs out and the council has to absorb the substantial costs of sustaining regeneration into its existing budget. "We have a series of problems, not the least being the ability of the council to find money from an already stretched council tax pot," said Russell Proffitt, head of regeneration at Southwark. The danger will be that if the funding does dry up, the project will fall far short of its aims.

Three teenagers are due to face trial for Damilola's murder in January next year at the Old Bailey. Hassan Jihad, 19, from Peckham, and two youths aged 16 and 17, also from south London, who cannot be named for legal reasons, were charged with murder in January this year

## **‘They treat you like you’re the Krays’**

**By Oliver Duff**

**Case study published in *The Independent*, 1 June 2006**

"They treat you like you're the Krays," says Hassan quietly, always avoiding eye contact.

"A gang means something. You matter if you got a gang, you're important. You look after each other."

Gang life provided Hassan (not his real name) with the drama and status his existence otherwise lacked. He was the ringleader of a locally notorious group that ran amok through the mazes of shabby estates in south London. They progressed from vandalism, bullying and petty theft to muggings and knife attacks in the space of four years. They smoked a lot of dope and he got a teenage girl pregnant. Gang life came to an end for Hassan five years ago, however, when he was placed in a young offenders' institution and tried for murder. He was acquitted. Now 21 and jobless, he lives in his mother's high-rise council flat.

Looking back, does he wish he had never joined the gang? "You don't get it," he says, angrily pacing around her kitchen. "There was nothing else. It was fun. You know, you do some bad stuff, like. But it doesn't mean you're evil."

## **Tanzania suffers rise of witchcraft hysteria**

**Thousands of elderly people, mostly women, are being accused of witchcraft and then murdered or maimed by vigilante groups in Tanzania. But the police and government do little to prevent the deaths, reports Oliver Duff from Mwanza**

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They came for Lemi Ndaki in the night. "I was sleeping when I heard a noise," explains the 70-year-old Tanzanian grandmother. "There was no security in my hut and the door was easy to open. I got up to see about the noise and someone grabbed me and chopped off my arm with a machete. I think he came to chop my neck but I raised my hand and he only took my arm."

A neighbour heard her cries and took her to the hospital in Mwanza, the nearest city, a three-hour drive away on the shore of Lake Victoria. "They couldn't put my arm back on and the scar still hurts, especially when I'm cold." That is not surprising: the open bone still pokes out from the skin below her elbow, 19 years later.

Other elderly women in her village, Mwamagigisi, haven't been so lucky. Ng'wana Budodi was shot in the head with an arrow. Kabula Lubambe and Helena Mabula were knifed to death. Ng'wana Ng'ombe was also murdered with a machete, and when her mud hut was set alight, her husband, Sami, was burnt alive.

This is the fate awaiting thousands of old people, mostly women, who are accused of witchcraft in this rural and isolated corner of east Africa. The killings are escalating in many areas, perhaps numbering more than 1,000 a year, but the Tanzanian government and police do nothing to stop them.

Although belief in witchcraft is common across much of sub-Saharan Africa, relatively few people persecute suspected sorcerers. What exists in the regions of Mwanza, Shinyanga and Tabora - predominantly Sukuma by tribe - is a localised hysteria reminiscent of the witch burnings and trials-by-ordeal of Salem or medieval Europe.

A combination of poverty, ignorance and personal jealousies leaves fearful and frustrated peasants quick to blame any adverse act of fate - a dead child, a failed crop, an inheritance settlement where a sibling receives all the land - on witchcraft. Throw into the pot malicious gossip and an often fatal bout of finger-pointing at old women, and the result is vigilante groups of professional killers moving from village to village, accepting payments to remove the "problem" by hacking, beating or burning. Four cows or \$100 is said to be the going rate.

Sometimes local outrage is such that mob rule breaks out and the "witch" is openly lynched. One of the most surprising aspects is the attacks often originate from the victim's family.

"We are talking big numbers as not all cases are reported," said Simeon Mesaki, a sociologist at the University of Dar es Salaam who specialises in witch killings. "They appear to be increasing in some areas. In Shinyanga region you are talking a minimum 300 a year that we know about. Mwanza is probably the same. About 80 per cent of reported attacks are against elderly women."

In 2003 the Tanzanian government said more than 3,072 witch killings had occurred since 1970 - but a government commission said in 1989 that 3,693 had been reported to police between 1970 and 1984 alone. A regional police chief admitted they were a daily occurrence, and a leaked survey by the ministry of home affairs said 5,000 people had been lynched between 1994 and 1998. The problem is so prevalent that villages have been set up populated exclusively by accused witches forced to flee their communities. "The government figures are very low, not accurate," said one official who asked not to be named. "I know a much higher number, and even that is not the full situation."

The root cause of the killings is that village life is so hard, prompting neighbours and relatives into competition over resources that can spill into violence behind the smokescreen of witch hunts.

These are the most deprived parts of a country whose people have an annual income of \$330 and a life expectancy of 46 years. There is no electricity or running water; home is a mud hut with a straw roof. Few roads are passable during the wet seasons and 60 per cent of villagers lack adequate sanitation facilities. Rainfall is low and unreliable so crops struggle. Lions and leopards from the nearby Serengeti attack cattle or people.

These conditions result in poor employment, literacy and general health, and susceptibility to superstition. The incidence of HIV/Aids - a mystery to some locals - is thought to be much higher than the countrywide average of one in 10 adults and is

decimating the working 18-49 generation. Malaria, typhoid, polio and dysentery kill many more under-fives than the national mortality rate of 165 deaths per 1,000 children.

But life has always been hard here and witch killings were sporadic until the late 1960s. What prompted the explosion in murders was the breakdown of the traditional tribal system of governance. The collectivisation policies of Tanzania's popular first President, Julius Nyerere, tried to bring together 120 tribes through a common language, Swahili. The dialect policy proved successful: despite Tanzania's diversity, it is one of Africa's most harmonious societies.

The second policy, Ujamaa, proved disastrous. It demanded socialist farming collectives, bringing together distant peasants for work and access to basic facilities (many are still waiting for these). Ujamaa's idealism was suffocated by the lack of individual incentive and sowed a more murderous seed by disbanding the system of village chiefs, outlawed in 1963 and replaced by faraway officials.

The chiefs had been responsible for resolving local conflicts - not always amicably, but firmly. Into the authority vacuum stepped the unsung culprits of the witch killings that would tear apart rural harmony: traditional healers, or, as we would crudely recognise them, witch doctors.

This motley crew of diviners (fortune tellers), rain makers, herbalists, bone sitters and traditional birth attendants accumulated great power over their clients. Many enjoyed good reputations for patient care even if their scientific knowledge was poor. But a new generation of hoaxers has set up shop in villages and by highways to prey on passing motorists and pedestrians worried about their fate. These "briefcase specialists", as some locals laughingly call them, attribute undiagnosed illnesses to witchcraft, and - for a price - direct their vengeful clients to the accused sorcerer. Hence the rise in witch killings.

It is the elderly, particularly those whose families have died and so have no protection, who bare the brunt of people's frustrations and anger. Diviners spread money-spinning stories that an individual keeps hyenas and tames snakes, digs up corpses and eats the flesh, and stays up all night bewitching people - hence her bad temper, grey hair and the bags under her bloodshot eyes (actually the result of years toiling over cow dung cooking fires).

A law was passed two years ago obliging the ministry of health to set up a traditional healers' union with a code of conduct for members, but the effect has yet to be noticed.

In Mwamagigisi, the nfumu (diviner), Gamawishi Shija, said people needed to know if they had been bewitched by a neighbour so they could "stop the problem". The 44-year-old Maasai said: "When you have a disease which is unknown you can see it is witchcraft. Ancestors tell me who the witch is when I sleep. Then I tell the patient. When the person dies, [relatives] want to kill the witch. It is for security."

She breaks away from her explanation to tend to a client. The ceremonial importance of handing over money is immediately apparent. Once a coin is tossed in her basket, the diviner sets off on a 10-minute, eyes-closed medley of bell-ringing, whistling and shaking a maraca - to contact the ancestors. Her chants grow louder to drown out the sound of a patient's cough in a hut behind her. Once finished, she returns to her client: "Maybe you are suffering with your backbone, your legs?" With no easy access to dispensaries and medical advice, this is a common experience for rural Tanzanians.

The witch killings are not a problem eroded by the dribble of modernity - radios, mobile phones and cars - into villages. If anything, peasants' growing awareness of their poverty compared to the rest of the country only exacerbates tensions.

The day we passed through Magu town, Mwanza, on the way to the countryside, a old woman was murdered in nearby Busami village after relatives accused her of bewitching her terminally ill husband to an early grave.

Many murders go unreported because villagers cover up the killings to avoid police attention. If the police do receive a report, they arrive a day or two after the attack, once a 4x4 vehicle can be found to negotiate the country trails. By then the killers have fled and there is no evidence.

The best officers can do is round up the victim's neighbours and question them until they buy their way out of jail. Regardless of corruption, law enforcement officials lack the resources to solve the crime and prosecute the perpetrators.

"The government is condoning the killing," said Scolastica Jullu, the executive director of the Women's Legal Aid Centre in Dar es Salaam. "Except for cases of rape of older women, I don't find anyone taken to court. If it was a man or young woman who was killed, the police would investigate, but because it is old women they don't worry."

The government says with so few resources it can do little more than encourage NGOs interested in the problem. "This is an evil, repugnant practice", the district commissioner for Magu, Elias Maaragu, said. "But if old people have no children to protect them, it is not like it is in the UK where you house them together and give them an allowance."

Stepping into this void is a handful of NGOs targeting trouble spots with educational programmes. One charity, Maperece, is recognised as having had particular success in Magu. It gets £20,000 a year from British donors through Help the Aged's Adopt a Grandparent scheme, allowing its 12 volunteers to support elderly people in 58 villages. But such charities are the only agents likely to intervene. Until the Tanzanian government can be embarrassed into action, and until it controls less pitifully empty coffers, that will remain the case.

*\* Readers wishing to sponsor a grandparent, which costs £12 a month, can contact Help the Aged on 020 7239 1983 or at [www.helptheaged.org.uk](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk). Sponsors receive a photo of their grandparent and newsletters.*



