Reimagining the Witch Hunt: Gender, Power, and Social Reproduction in Contemporary Africa

Ziyue Shao *

Shandong Experimental High School, Shandong, China

* Corresponding Author Email: Shaoziyue1113@163.com

Abstract. This paper investigates a new phenomenon of witch hunts in post-colonial African societies, focusing primarily on Malawi, Ghana, Tanzania, and other Sub-Saharan states. It assesses the historical trends and present-day accelerants of witchcraft allegations, such as a weak health system, social disintegration, gendered relationships, and class divides. By analyzing the historical sources and recent fieldworks, the paper demonstrates the witch hunt as a form of social and gendered control discussing the misuse of traditions. There is criticism against the Western lack of profound interference due to a misconceived commenting relativism. Based on the study cases, statistical data, and the theoretical framework, this research enriches the understanding of the witch hunt location within the global patterns of marginalization, control, and resistance. Finally, the breed reveals the multifaceted approach, including legal optimization, health infrastructure enhancement, community education, and international partnerships.

Keywords: Witch Hunt, Gender, Power, Social Production, Contemporary Africa.

1. Introduction

Witch hunts, traditionally inherent to early modern European society, currently experience their peaking in various Sub-Saharan contexts. Thus, as witch persecutions seemingly devastated the continent's population during the colonial period, such modern traditional elimination mostly affects women. Indeed, cases of Malawi, Ghana, and Tanzania, where thousands have been accused and exculpated due to the practice, seem to provoke one's reconsideration of the 21st-century priorities.

While this may be, indeed, the case the phenomenon of witch hunts is an age-old issue that has become an increasingly dreadful issue in contemporary times. Witch hunts coalesce with other issues brought on by power dynamics, economic pressure, and a breakdown of social fabric. As conflicting and interconnected examples of a falling apart social order, rural communities challenged by socioeconomic issues refer more frequently to supernatural explanations of the various tragedies. Naming a witch is a way of bringing the disparate reality together by articulating a nebulous force responsible for the community's ills into a single individual. In conclusion, this work connects the dots between territorial economic, socio-racial, tragic, and supernatural factors, citing interdisciplinary scholarship. Witchcraft accusations in our era carry more emotionally stirring implications. The causes of contemporary crisis such as pandemics, environmental disasters, economic collapses, depressions, and civil wars. When societies lack functional health care, formal education, and a judicial system, suasorian etiologies gain traction. Accusing a person of being a witch is an engaging psychodynamic-relational pursuit in time of despair. Simultaneously, it results in heightened violence and destitute marginalization. Witch hunts should not be viewed as irrational outbursts. They are closely related to historicism, a discourse, religious teachings, and our modern-day political economies. Witchcraft victims are not arbitrarily selected, they are predisposed categories comprising elderly women, widows, and outcasts.

Finally, it is crucial to underscore the gendered aspect of this phenomenon. Most of the so-called witches, in Africa as elsewhere, are women. The domination of the weaker sex number indicates not only the presence of permanently active patriarchal matrix but also regular attempts to regulate women's bodies and their reproductive functions. In such categories, the witch is de facto a dangerous creature, not only supernatural but also from the standpoint of normative gender conduct, a root for economic anxiety, and a center of anger and terror. Globalization and associated transformations of

the classical powers often make old fears resurface with new force. Sometimes the accusation of witchcraft is used for political purposes or to resolve private disputes. In other cases, it is sponsor and spread by evangelical preachers, traditional healers, or social media, sustaining fear and punitive mobility. It implies that the witch-hunt is not some relic of the past but a vital sign of unresolved trauma and social malfunction. In sum, to successfully deal with a phenomenon of a witch-hunt, it is necessary to see it in all its complexity and systemic character. It is not only a scientific mistake or bad faith but also a question of historical land, structural inequities, and inadequate contexts. Agenda is required – combining education, reforming laws, improving access to health care and creating community backup networks.

2. Historical Context of Witch Hunts in Afica

Although the belief in witchcraft originated many centuries before the arrival of European colonizers, the practice of local belief systems has been suppressed in favor of distorted and demonized colonizer's view. Even after the decolonization, the image of the "witch" – a miserable old woman who brought disaster upon her neighbors – turned into a social construct, which served as scapegoat. Thus, for instance, between 1960 and 2000, more than 40 thousand people have been killed in witch hunts in Tanzania only. Similar accusations have been recorded in Ghana, where accusers (most of whom are women) are usually exiled to the so-called witches' camps, exiled communities of marginalization.

Extant historical records have shown that both colonial and post-colonial regimes have exploited the narrative of witchcraft to enhance their power. For instance, during the British rule, most Europeans in Africa reinforced local chiefs to report and punish witches, which they have used further to colonizers. However, even more importantly, both colonial and postcolonial governments have created a legal paradox regarding witchcraft. While colonial codes defined witchcraft as superstition, it is a criminal offense to accuse someone of witchcraft. Thus, the existing paths of negotiation and mediation through are at jeopard. Post-independent states inherited these contradictions without seeking to solve, and many communities have thus adopted a hybrid system in-between their customary laws and colonial legacy.

Secondly, the figure of a witch has changed throughout colonial and postcolonial eras and has transcended from being a dispute between siblings or a spiritual revenge into a toxic cancer that inhibits progress. Thus, as James W. Getz enquires, "the witch is an object that in modernity becomes a threat to orderly advancement. And where this shift happens, the tendency is for the "fault" – a witch – must then be rooted out". Thirdly, and most significantly, the anthropological research has focused on exploring oral archives and religious artifacts, and the most colonial ethnographers who simply represented African practices through the prism of Western morality. That is why the current stigma interviewers and leaders are using to persecute witches is evident in Ewick and Silbey's theory of stigma as moral maneuvering [1-4].

3. Witch Hunts in Malawi: a Case Study

Malawi is one of the most severe and worrying cases of contemporary witch hunting. For the last two decades, the country has been experiencing a dangerous spike in accusations and violence. The reason for the witch hunts in Malawi is the terrible state of the country's healthcare system – it contains only one doctor per 88,300 people – and heavy reliance on traditional healers, also known as shi-nganga [5]. Traditional healers are commonly forced by the community to identify the culprit behind any sickness or misfortune, leading to drawing divinitions over whom they then persecute by naming and blaming witches [6]. The same practices were documented in northern Zambia. A researcher suggests that up to 60% of traditional healers confirm being led to identify the witches when pressured by their communities [6]. This issue blurs the line between healer and accuser and makes witch hunts a practice of both medical and spiritual life. In Malawi, the integration of

traditional medicine and community skepticism enforces the vicious cycle of fear since unexplained deaths and sickness always end up attributed to malevolent rather than medical forces. There is also a total lack of political will to fight against the practice. Most publicly employed individuals and police forces avoid interfering in witchcraft cases for fear of public backlash. Sometimes, even the law is not clear on the subject. The government has often tasked the chiefs to help without any success, as the chiefs, despite being influential, rely more on community opinion than the legal framework [6].

Detailed reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch present numerous individual cases when the accused suffered from insupportable tortures, were sentenced to prison without a fair trial, or even killed. The phenomenon is due to the shortage of resources and pressure upon courts, which are unable to resist agonizing evidence, and the system fails to provide justice for the prosecuted witches. As a result, many magistrates and police officers either neglect the problem or support community actions because they believe in witchcraft themselves. The lack of evidence presents another challenge, which can hardly be solved because of the very nature of the charges. Field studies conducted in Mzimba, Dedza, Nsanje, and other rural-using districts reveal the following specific trends. Women, especially widows, old women, and those who have to life alone are the most affected. Women targeted for witchcraft are preferred and killed if weak and lonely. Many actions are triggered by envy and land propagation, as it is reported that even the murders had been committed on pure economic reasons. Sometimes, charges can be proved by traditions, and women are taken to the witch camp. Only in 2017, accounting soul-safe space among suspected witches were accused of killing more than a hundred people. The Malawian media also influences public opinion. Some of the public media present the information critically, and the outlets are used to organize public outrage. However, there are reports that many media services and clerics have been paid to criticize. Although some studies exist, the mainstream is not ready to initialise the public. Religious facilities are making tremendous pressure, as some of the evangelical churches have accepted the witchcraft policy. In their sermons, they claim that demons advocate the actions and special battles of witches are required. Despite this, some Malawian and foreign non-governmental organizations have started pilot programs, providing the local health ministry, and the charity Irish government in the coming two years. Despite the progress, a more coherent approach is challenged. Malawi is the perfect example of the close connection between belief systems, social disruption, and the collapse of the institution, which continually revives the constant violence. Malawi is further unfavorable, and the answer is condemnation. However, the more general solution should also look at the core of anxiety, exclusive practices, and weakness of the system.

Cultural Relativism and Western NGO Inaction Combatting witch hunts is further complicated by the reluctance of Western organizations to directly challenge the practice. Many NGOs avoid the subject, concerned about being accused of cultural imperialism or essentializing African cultures as uniquely prone to the evils of witchcraft and the persecution thereof. But the contrary opinion, which romanticizes such violence as an aspect of a “culture” rather than the pattern itself, leads to complicit harm under the auspices of congratulating diversity. While it is often stated that witchcraft and accusations thereof are a fundamental feature of life in indigenous African societies, witch hunting is less an “African norm” than a symptom of structural violence that has been exacerbated by modern development challenges. One such tendency is to treat these forms of violence as a problem that Africa must solve for itself. In fact, however, the aid is oriented towards problems according to international agendas and is determined by what is measurable. In this way, issues that matter for the women “back-homes” are trivialized off the official agenda, as human rights have been given partial treatment for development. Cultural and relativism are not only complicit end excuses: they silence that which needs emergency advocacy work from the inside, and giving possible excuses to those who say that to actually act against such horrifying structural violence is imperialist interference. This moral reluctance, which has a basis in postcolonial guilt and liberal multiculturalism, has the result of policy inaction. In concrete terms, international organizations and donors, for fear of being labeled anew as neo-colonial, often take neutral or non-interventionist stances in clear cases of human rights violations. This is extremely harmful when local voices, around a 50% of whom are organizing

women and who are demanding help, defense, and reform, are saying that violence against them must stop. The argument of respect for cultural tradition sustains that tradition, elevating it over women's lives. Moreover, the discourse of development too often de-politicizes witch hunts, treating the issue as one of illiteracy or the aftereffects of colonization that can be solved through education or modernizing development. By doing so, they do not address the power relationships or even the naked power imbalances that the practice reflects and legitimates. The same development programming that often de-politicizes and inaccurately uses culture as an excuse is overly directed at microfinance and small business creation by entrepreneurs, and under-inclusive of actual policy reforms that often determine violence occurrence. Therefore, while ignoring gigantically unequal land rights or funeral belonging allowed under cultural practices at a community level, agencies often come four years to the tragic conclusion that politicians have created awful situations. Academic theorists have warned that human organizations cannot be watered down. This means supporting and amplifying local activists' actions, gendered survivor testimony organized by people who their neighbors who are experiencing or who have experienced witch-hunting violence back home, as it may be a method to show how traditional authorities abusing women's bodies should not be seen as examples to follow and organization to court associate with, so the ally should help in the fundraisers you see. Ultimately, the refusal of many Western organizations to fully engage with witch-hunting reflects the fundamental Internal contradiction of global human rights: the friction between universalist ideals and relativist concerns. Resolving this contradiction requires the courage to stop complicit violence under any pretext [7-9].

4. Class Conflict and the Political Economy of Witchcraft

One researcher demonstrates in her aforementioned Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women that witch hunts serve historically to coerce capitalist labor discipline. The context of Africa, many accusations occur in poor, rural communities, where class tensions generate the environment of suspicion. Due to the poor's embroiled, animistic, and unpredictable worldview, which frequently comes into opposition with the hegemonic rationality and deterministic order of the state [9], poor communities involved in the poorest class seem to see their own situation as impossible. Magic poses a political threat—at once a refusal of rational capitalist discipline and a social critique of rational capitalist wage labor. In such a political economy, witch hunts cannot be analytically understood as a cultural or religious phenomenon. When accusations are not evenly dispersed, witch hunts are class histories rather than cultural patterns; the same accusations follow the trails of wealth, property, and inheritance in any society. The accusations focus on the most vulnerable class from the fringes and the periphery of the social body: the class with the least institutional economic dependency, the sick, widows, the poor and destitute, the landless, the homeless, old women and children, and those without kinship protections. These dynamics are more apparent under conditions of Structural Adjustment Programs and neoliberal reformation in Africa decimating public services. In communities where there is a debt of state assistance, the same poor, distress, oppressed, castrated, and powerless communities accuse the estranged poor communities of being witches. They gossip about witchcraft in a manner that reconfigures discontent at social relation of production into resentments at the individuals. Hence, witch hunts reinforce exploitative economic relations.

In Malawi, Ghana, and Nigeria, the most accusations are proclaimed during slumps, crop failures, or heads of unemployment. The witch serves as a container for collective outrage in such periods. Instead of aiming at the institutions or the political elites that create economic misery, these institutions make it instead easier to disassemble scapegoated targets by turning against ones considered weaker and have no benefactor influence. Not merely abusing easier goals, but the witch offers a phony form of fairness which distracts from the well-resourced agents of poverty and repression and is blindfolded by the violence and tragedy of vast numbers of magnificent mutinies of observance. Nor does the witch merely solve that fiasco by its group action; fewer support checks whose lives remain faceless to its most significant citizens, the witch reflects a glance at the suffering

conclusion elite which fails the "many" and exposes it; the witch may be a trigger of decontrol which connections the dies and rhyme outside of psychic inequality – the wild, firm totalitarian return domination. Langer was witch-hunting as "a part of the severe grammalogic delineation of what it signifies to be people" Witch quests mark where individuals are sucked everywhere the edges thanks to supernatural affordances. Women who talk or challenge old ways. Witches still possess that sexual, economic, or spiritual power that they are guilty of accepting, suspend, despicable dead.

5. Gender and Reproduction:the Mechanics of Woman-Hate Accusations

The issue of gender is inextricably linked with the mechanisms of witchcraft accusations. Women are the primary target, as gender ideology is built around the image of the woman as irrational, sexually powerful, and dangerous [10]. This manifested notably in the witchcraft accusations in Europe from 1550 to 1650, where contraception and the right to control reproduction became a crime, enshrined in law in the assimilation of the female body as an over-sexualized and controlled object through which the population was reared [11]. These mechanics became imported and reshaped into other national, historical contexts, and in modern Africa, older women in poor communities, particularly widows, are most vulnerable.

Based on the mechanics described above, which to a large extent remain in force to this day, the hunting of witches became a regulator of male power and female autonomy from witchcraft in modern Africa – the victim is the same woman from many serious accusations, but in modern Africa, the process began during times of economic crisis and demographic collapse. Witch hunts are a regulator of social reproduction: through an accusation, male authority is restored, female autonomy is regulated. In modern African communities, where economic factors and demographic pressures destabilize traditional gender norms, the victim is a woman who refuses to live in such conditions who is most vulnerable when patriarchy finds it hard to restore order. The most obvious case is for matrilineal societies where the transition to patrilineal legislation and disputes over land and inheritance stimulate many victims and accusations. Another structural element of the woman's accusation is the anxiety about modernity brought about by the changing nature of labor. Work gives women independence and independence, which makes them vulnerable to accusations undermining their autonomy.

In some cases, the woman is accused of witchcraft to be made submissive, examples of disputes over land, child care, and responsibility for agriculture and pastoral labor, showing the economic level of accusations. The other dimension is symbolic and structural violence because the witch becomes not just a woman deviant, that woman, who changes the border with her body, given power to harm people without sources. The symbol of masculinity comes in specifying the boundaries and excludes. This can mainly be used in the ritual purification – women during witch-hunts are undressing, beating, rape used to clean their impure and irrational essence. These can be shown in the below Table 1, Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Table 1. Victims of Witch hunts and Access to Healthcare in Selected Countries.

Country	Estimated Victims (1960–2000)	Health Worker Density (per 100,000)
Tanzania	40,000	4.5
Ghana	1,500	10.3
Malawi	1,000	1.1
Nigeria	2,000	4.6
Zambia	800	3.2
Kenya	600	5.8
South Africa	700	9.7

Figure 1. Estimated Victims (1960-2000)

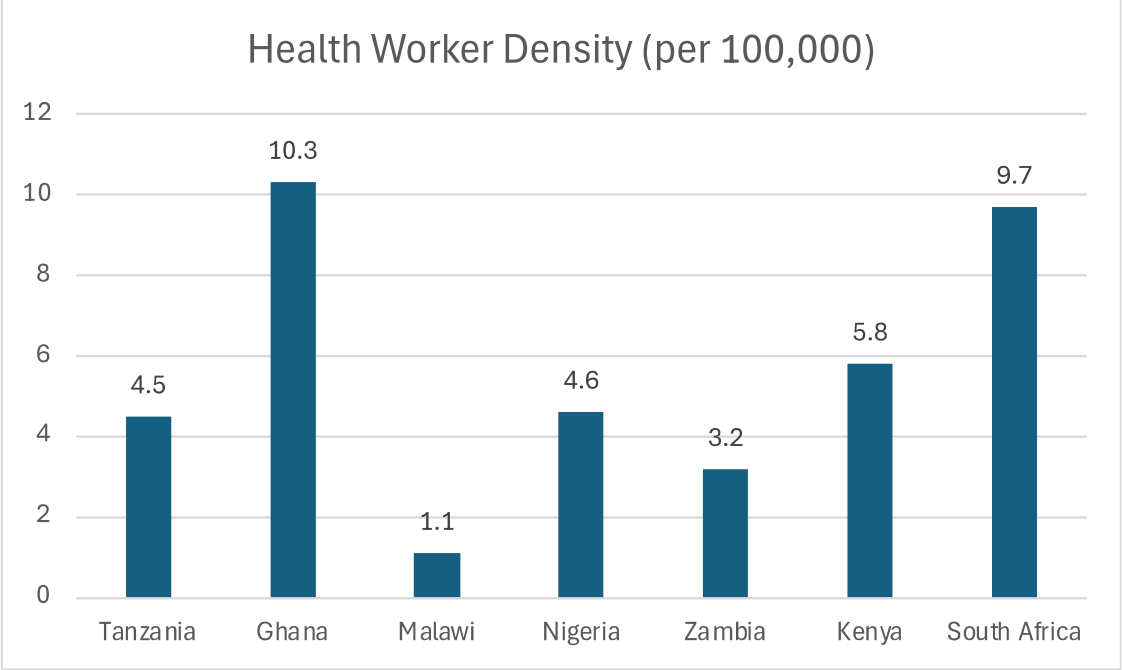

Figure 2. Health Worker Density (per 100,000)

In contrast, accused male sorcerers are usually younger and are more likely to be labeled as charlatans or frauds than as supernatural entities. Such a gender divide is a manifestation of more profound power dynamics, as women are considered statistically more probable to be suspects who can be disciplined. Thus, witch hunts are just one form of gender-based violence, including domestic and spousal abuse or community segregation. To combat the issue at its roots, policymakers and activists insist on an intersectionality-centered approach. Formal legislation is not enough, as it must be supplemented with educational efforts, open dialogue, and economic empowerment for women. Policy measures should be grounded in the local contexts, but they must always comply with the international standards. Merely fighting the consequences of gendered insecurity won't result in long-term solutions unless the root causes are eradicated.

6. Global Resurgence of Witch Hunts

Although this paper centers on Africa, witch hunts are not restricted to any particular geographical area. Several recent instances in India, Papua New Guinea, and parts of Southeast Asia show that witchcraft accusations are actually widespread across the globe. Spiritual and supernatural rationales continue to lead to accusations in places like South Korea and rural China. The phenomenon occasionally grows around moments of social unrest or family strife. This cross-border current suggests that witch hunts will continue to manifest in areas where few legal or social institutions can be trusted, and where suspecting bands of residents can easily choose powerless outsiders. The causes of global witch hunts frequently mirror the events in Africa: poverty, lack of education, poor health care access, and patriarchal control. Indian Dalit women are a frequent focus of witchcraft accusations as an endeavor to conserve caste and gender norms. In Papua New Guinea, violence related to witchcraft is prevalent in regions where civil legal systems scarcely reach. Such global events demonstrate that witch hunts can not be ascribed to cultural otherness, but actualize universal tendencies of disenfranchisement. Latin America is another case where witch hunts have historically served to disregard native women. In the process of the religious conversion and colonial savagery, Andean towns have accused their female members of sorcery and spiritual control. Influence of such beliefs has also been reported in Bolivia and Peru, where it was connected to resistance to political organizations, inheritances, and interpersonally nosiness. The instances prove that witchcraft creations become repositories of nervousness over social improvement, which dominant sects exert as a way of life and violence.

There are no simple explanations or easy solutions to these dynamics. Moreover, globalization and media have only made the landscape more complex [6-7]. For example, in Nigeria and DR Congo, Pentecostal and charismatic preachers tend to disseminate massive messages about the demonic possession and spiritual war on the radios, TVs, and social media. These ideologies become imported into the praying communities in Europe and America, and witch hunts also start becoming popular there, especially in the immigrants' communities. This underlines that global flows of ideology and media can reproduce the local cycles of violence. However, global human rights networks and norms have introduced new forms of resistance. For instance, the international campaigns of UNICEF or Amnesty International have displayed the human rights dimensions of witch hunts. In tandem, the cross-national feminist networks have mobilized against the patriarchal violence, including the neo-colonial and patriarchal constructions of witchcraft, supporting the survivors of hunting and community-based interventions. This analysis should recognize the global re-emergence of witch hunts as a reconstruction of a crisis and not as the resurrection of tradition. The witch is the distinct figure among us who personifies the invisible threats: disease, deficiencies, disloyalties, disloyalties of the collective. Therefore, only when we develop an appropriate analytical frame and determine that witch hunts are the expressions of social and political turbulence and desires, interventions can address the material and symbolic conditions behind the phenomena, integrating the local cultural knowledge and global supports.

7. Conclusion

The modern witch hunts rife in Africa are multifaceted social problems deeply embedded in the region's history, economics, and gendered injustices. They grow due to the failure of formal institutions, which create a gap filled with traditional beliefs. Western silence through the excuse of cultural sensitivity only compounds the situation. Holistic responses to this challenge should focus on more than humanitarianism. Instead, they should address the systems that support poverty, gender inequity, and epistemic injustice. These responses should operate at different levels. Laws should protect, legal frameworks should compatible with customary law, and administrators should highly enforce the law. One of the most significant causes of witchcraft accusations is misunderstood health issues, which could be reduced by further intensified medical infrastructure. Developments in rural clinics would reduce illnesses that may motivate the belief, while psychological services would fill

the gap currently filled by spiritual treatment approaches. Schools, especially in areas with a strong attachment to the traditional belief systems, should teach critical thinking and human rights education. Community-based initiatives can help in embedding critical thinking where they leverage the influence of traditional leaders and faith-based organizations. Internationally, there is a need to change development aid to include gender equality and anti-violence. International NGOs should join local advocates in endemic areas. Witchcraft-related killings are not just human rights violations; they are struggle-related problems. To end witchcraft-related killings requires deeper work touching all aspects of life and its intersection. Therefore, the aim must go beyond ending killings to include the development of systems that promote dignity, justice, and the dignity of life in all forms.

References

[1] Daskalaki, M. (2021). The subversive potential of witchcraft: A reflection on Federici's Self-reproducing movements. *Gender, Work & Organization, 28* (4), 1643-1660.

[2] Murrey, A. (2017). Decolonising the imagined geographies of 'witchcraft'. *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal*, *2*(2-3), 157-179.

[3] Federici, S. (2009). Witch-hunting, globalization, and feminist solidarity in Africa today. *Wagadu*, *6*, 49-64.

[4] Koffey, M. (2021). *The Witch's Craft: A Critical Feminist Analysis of the Witch in Historical and Contemporary Visual Discourse* (Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University).

[5] Scheurich, S. N. (2022). *Hex the Kyriarchy: The Resignification of the Witch in Feminist Discourse from the Suffrage Era to the Present Day* (Doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University).

[6] Collard, R. C., & Dempsey, J. (2018). Accumulation by difference-making: an anthropocene story, starring witches. *Gender, Place & Culture*, *25* (9), 1349-1364.

[7] Tomlin, J. (2022). Hidden in Plain Sight: reconsidering the value of social reproduction, work and nature. *The Kenarchy Journal*, *3* (2), 10-28.

[8] Dawson, E. (2018). Reimagining publics and (non) participation: Exploring exclusion from science communication through the experiences of low-income, minority ethnic groups. *Public understanding of science*, *27* (7), 772-786.

[9] Mourad, L. (2025). 'Stretching'Social Reproduction:(Re) Conceptualizing Informal and Gendered Labor in Egypt under Global Capitalism. *Middle East Critique*, 1-18.

[10] Mkhwanazi, N. (2023). Re-imagining Reproduction: Citation and Chosen Kin. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, *37* (3), 204-210.

[11] Rosenman, E., Loomis, J., Cohen, D., & Baker, T. (2024). Bringing life's work to market: Frontiers, framings, and frictions in marketised social reproduction. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *56* (1), 190-198.