

A man with a beard, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark pants, stands in a cemetery at dusk. He is holding a small, decorated object in his hands. The background shows tombstones and trees under a twilight sky.

THE TALISMAN

*seeking spiritual protection
to end a deadly practice*

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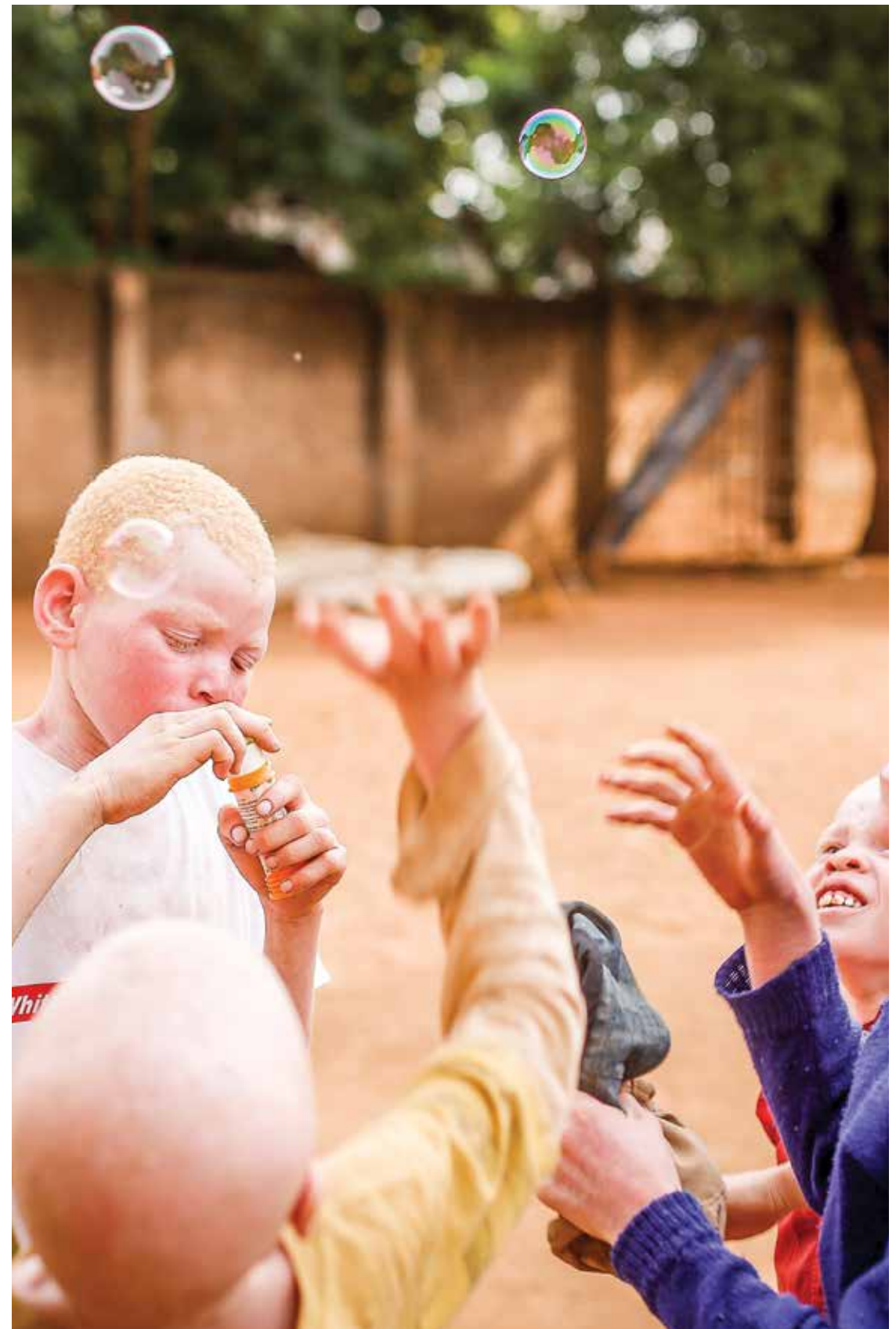
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For explorers and adventure travelers, Tanzania has long been a top destination for those whose bucket lists include a climb up Mount Kilimanjaro or a safari to observe the extraordinary wildlife of the Serengeti. For anthropologists, the country's Olduvai Gorge in the Great Rift Valley has yielded a virtual treasure trove of paleontological remains, which have proven foundational to our understanding of human evolution. Yet few may know that this East African nation tops another list, ranking number one in the killing and mutilation of people with albinism. Their body parts, when rendered in powdered form, are considered among the most potent ingredients in witchcraft.

While albinism is found across the globe, occurring in an average of 1 in 17,000 to 20,000 births, it is far more

prevalent in Tanzania, where 1 in 1,400 is born with albinism. (It should be noted that the trait is also common among peoples of several other African nations—notably Malawi, Mozambique, and Burundi.) Those who have this relatively rare genetic trait lack pigmentation in their skin, eyes, and hair, which results in increased sensitivity to sunlight and impaired vision. Two percent of those born with albinism live past 40

OPENING SPREAD: DETECTIVE SHUBERT ZUBERI STANDS IN THE MAPANGO YA AMBONI CEMETERY IN DAR ES SALAAM, TANZANIA, A LOCATION HE CLAIMS TO BE FREQUENTED BY WITCHES KNOWN AS *MCHAWI*. FACING PAGE: A FEW OF THE MORE THAN 160 CHILDREN WITH ALBINISM WHO LIVE IN A PROTECTIVE FACILITY IN SHINYANGA, TANZANIA. CHILDREN ARE OFTEN SENT TO THE FACILITY BY FAMILY MEMBERS WHO FEAR FOR THEIR SAFETY.





due to skin cancer caused by exposure to the sun. People with albinism (PWAs) also face a social stigma. They are considered by some traditional societies as cursed or subhuman, viewed as ghostly apparitions from another world, which is why they have become such easy targets for so-called *muti* killings that have claimed the lives of untold numbers of Tanzanians, while leaving those who have survived maimed for life.

In 2008, Prime Minister Mizengo Kayanza Peter Pinda put in place substantial measures to protect PWAs, particularly children, and serve justice on those who prey upon them. On September 23, 2009, three men were convicted in the killing of a 14-year-old boy, Matatizo Dunia, at the High Court in Kahama. This landmark decision was the first conviction for an albino killing in Tanzania's history, yet the majority of *muti* deaths and mutilations still go unreported, with just 176 attacks recorded to date.

Continuation of the practice has garnered the attention of a host of human rights organizations, including the Federation of Associations of Persons with Albinism in West Africa (FAPAO), Under the Same Sun, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, all of which have been instrumental in educating and demanding justice for victims of albinism-biased crimes throughout the African continent.

A BEWITCHING TRADITION

I first learned of the *muti* killings during one of my forays to Tanzania for a documentary I was doing on the country's traditional fermented beverages. As part of that project,

A MCHAWI ADORNED WITH THE THREE COLORS OF THE BELIEF SYSTEM: WHITE FOR HEALING, BLACK FOR INVISIBILITY, AND RED FOR POWER. HE IS HOLDING A STYLE OF *TUNGULI* KNOWN AS *NDELE*, ITS CONTENTS FORMULATED TO ACQUIRE A LOVER.

I began delving deeper into local ethnobotanical practices. It was then that I was introduced to a branch of witchcraft known as *tunguli* and, in time, became aware of the plight of the PWAs.

Tanzanian witches known as *mchawi* practice a form of magic using powders made from rare plants, apex predators, and, as I later learned, sometimes people. *Mchawi* store their powders inside small calabash gourds known as *tunguli*, after which the practice takes its name. The powders are mixed together with a catalyst such as kalonji seed oil, using a small wooden pestle. Once blended, the mixture is placed within another *tunguli*, which is spiritually activated when the vessel is passed over a cauldron of burning frankincense. Smoke from the burning resin serves as an interdimensional missive to the spirit realm, carrying prayers and offerings communicated from within the gourd to ancestral spirits. The hope is that these spirits are willing to provide earthly favors and influence in exchange for such offerings. If they are satisfied with the offering, they will infuse the contents of the *tunguli* with the requested powers. Adherents to the practice will then anoint themselves with the magical mixture to receive the desired good fortune.

The rarer the ingredients in the *tunguli*, the more potent its powder and thus its power. The powdered remains of albino person can command \$100,000. In a country where the median annual salary is less than \$7,000, it is clear that the demand for powders made from PWAs is being fueled by the financial elite, the politicians and rich businessman who are "spiritually benefiting" from them. Perhaps there is something else that would appease these spirits that does not require brutal human sacrifice.

Having spent a lifetime working with rituals and documenting interdimensional commerce, I have found there is always room for

negotiation, even in the spirit world. It is for this reason that I have returned to Tanzania with the hope of stopping the practice at its source. My goal is to infiltrate the *mchawi* covens to uncover when and why this dangerous practice started. If it is to be abolished completely, its underlying ideology must be reprogrammed.

Since the crackdown on albino killings began in 2008, the *mchawi* have rarely operated in plain sight, choosing instead to ply their craft in back alleys, slums, or in shacks just outside the city limits. Gaining access to Tanzania's highest-ranking witches requires being initiated into numerous secret societies and undergoing an extensive suite of rituals of which this would be my first.

A RITE OF PASSAGE

Looking ashore from the ferry, it is easy to forget about Dar es Salaam's dank, flooded streets and frozen traffic jams. I felt as if I was crossing the water to some other realm from which I wouldn't be able to return. I was either floating toward divine providence or willingly descending into hell.

I had befriended one of city's top detectives, Sergeant Shubert Zuberi. He had reluctantly agreed to help me access the world of the *mchawi*. Knowing the danger I would be facing, he agreed to help me only if I were armed with the "proper protection." He was not referring to a gun, knife, or other weapon. He wanted me to undergo a spell of spiritual protection from his personal doctor, a practitioner of the Islamic sorcery known as Al Badr (ba-DEER).

Al Badr is a mystical practice that evolved from a form of ancestor worship, honoring the warriors who were victorious in the Battle of Badr, an important Muslim victory recounted in the *Quran*. On March 13, 624 CE, it is believed that 313 Muslims from Medina defeated 950 Quraysh from Mecca in the Valley of

Badr. Verses mentioning the warriors' names and their attributes appear in small Arabic volumes and are often read as incantations of protection.

While the Tanzanian population is split relatively evenly between Christians and Muslims—each accounting for 30 to 40 percent with those that remain practicing a variety of traditional East African religions—it is not uncommon for Christians to seek out an Al Badr doctor, known as a Shekhe, to protect themselves against witchcraft, without adhering to any other tenets of Islam.

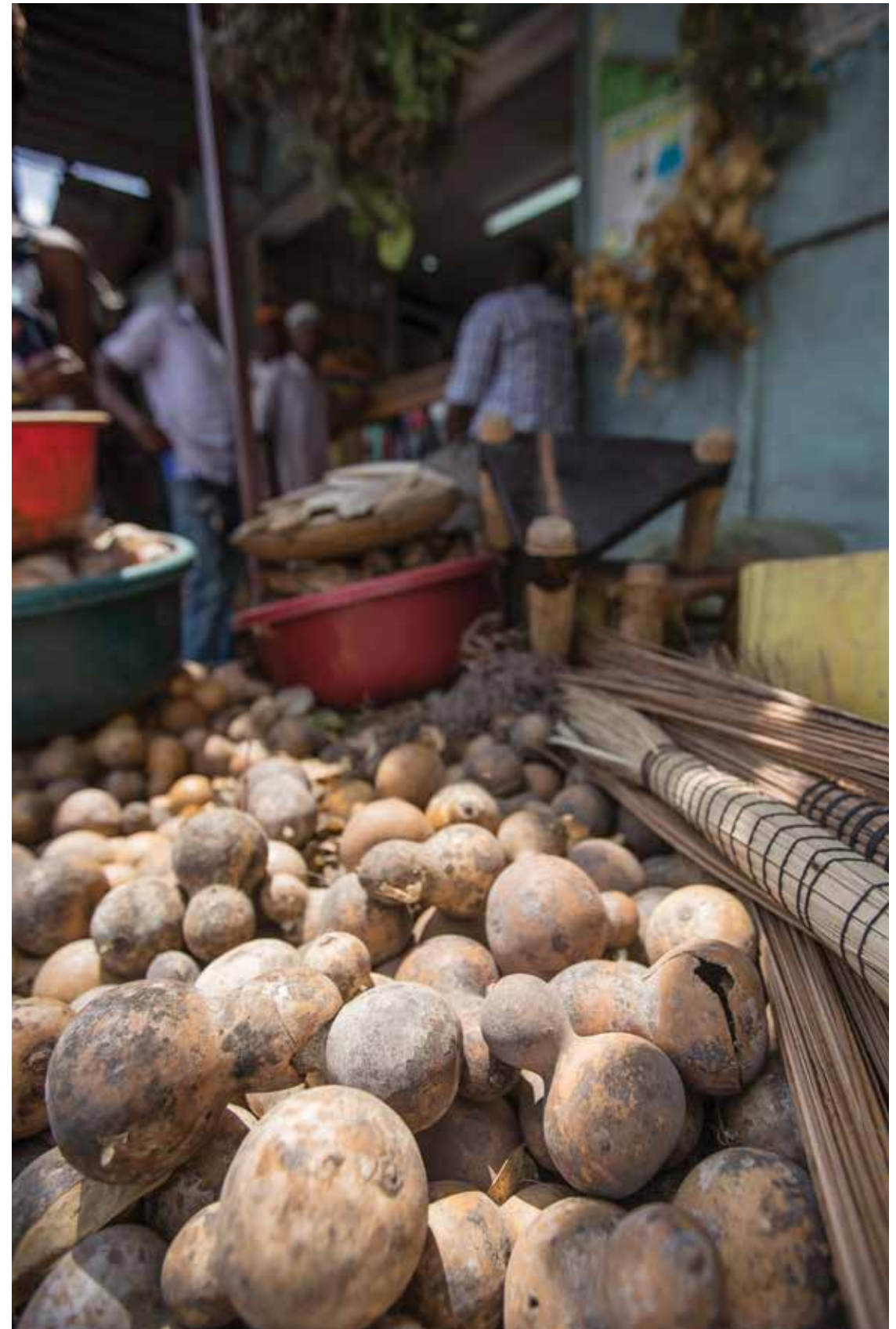
The most common method of protection is the wearing of an amulet known as a *hirizi* (Swahili for charm). A *hirizi* is a small pouch that is worn as a talisman, which provides protection from evil. The *hirizi* also comes with a piece of paper that has prayers drawn out in different shapes and formations. When touched with the hand, this paper works like a battery pack for the *hirizi*. Before Shubert would allow me to meet with the *mchawi*, I was expected to get my own *hirizi*.

My academic mission of the day was to document exactly what was contained in this pouch that gave it its magical powers.

When we get to port at Kigamboni, a short man in a kufi hat and heavily tasseled British racing green pants approaches us on a tuk-tuk. He is carrying a round metal case that looked like it was meant to hold a small film projector. He greets us warmly as we squeeze into the popping tuk-tuk. There are no introductions or explanations as to who he is or where we are going.

We buzz past smoky market stalls and strike out toward the outskirts of the city. Once on the open road, we drive in complete silence, giving me plenty of time to conjure up a number of disastrous scenarios

A STREET STALL IN DAR ES SALAAM SELLING DRIED GOURDS THAT WILL BE FILLED WITH POWDERS AND CONSECRATED AS SACRAMENTAL *TUNGULI*.





in my head. Although my instincts have yet to serve me wrong, I start to wonder how well I actually know Shubert. Where the hell are we going? Is this whole trip just an elaborate extortion setup? Has Shubert exaggerated his contacts just to get me out of the city? Regardless, this is the typical leap of faith an outsider must take to get access to secret societies. As usual, I casually imagine my last words, have a chuckle, and enjoy the scenery.

Finally we turn off the main road into a village. The tuk-tuk driver cruises through a collection of concrete houses, slowing down only to avoid the foot-deep potholes. At the end of the village the road goes down a slope into what appears to be a shallow swamp. Undeterred, our intrepid driver presses on, the tuk-tuk performing like an unlikely watercraft. The water gets deeper and washes over the floorboards. We all lift up our feet as the tuk-tuk rocks back and forth. I wonder in earnest what will happen first: will we topple over into the brown water? Sink in the mud? Or will the motor get waterlogged and die? Miraculously, after motoring through the water for a few minutes, we emerge on the other side. No longer on a definable road, we crawl down a heavily rooted path until finally reaching a concrete square of a dwelling. The man in the green tasseled pants looks at me and smiles, "Welcome."

We enter through the back door into a bare, dark room, the concrete floor of which is covered with woven plastic mats. Droplets of sizzling tree resin release their fragrant blue smoke as they melt over red coals in a small brass urn. Patches of sunlight filter through the window revealing buckets stacked along the walls, and plastic jugs stuffed with what appeared to be paper packets. We are

invited to sit down. Shubert reclines against a wall and makes introductions.

"This is my doctor Shekhe Hassan. What would you like from him?"

"You suggested I should get a *hirizi* made."

"Ok, do you want the regular *hirizi* or one like mine?" he asks, pulling a fat black leather pouch out of his back pocket that is overflowing with folded papers. "The regular one will take 45 minutes and is 55,000 shilling (\$24). One like mine will take three hours and is 170,000 shilling (\$74)."

Hoping to still have time to look for witches before the markets closed, I opt for the quickly produced floor model, thinking I could always upgrade later.

Shekhe Hassan calls down the hallway and a slender Yemeni man appears in a floor-length white gown. They speak for several minutes in Swahili. The man sits down next to us, opens a few of the plastic jugs, and starts pulling out handfuls of packets. The Shekhe summons me to him and stands up over me as I kneel on the concrete floor. He removes one of a dozen small books from his metal case and places his hand on my forehead. He begins reading from the book as he chants in a flowing rhythmic cadence. As his hot, dry hand presses hard against my forehead, I imagine ancient energies flowing like electricity directly into the fibers of my being. The chanting carries on for 45 minutes, my knees screaming since the first five.

Straining my peripheral vision, I can see the cleric's assistant ripping and sewing together shreds of black fabric. He appears to be making a small change purse-size bag and begins filling it with bits of material that had been stored in the mysterious paper packets.

I want desperately to stop the process to see what the ingredients are, but I don't dare interrupt the Shekhe mid-ritual. It is impossible to send a subtle signal to Shubert who is zoned out, texting on his phone.

A STYLE OF *TUNGULI* KNOWN AS *JIN MAKATA*, WHICH IS EMPLOYED FOR THE DEATH OR DESTRUCTION OF AN ENEMY.

The elaborate fanfare is nothing he hasn't seen before. When the chanting stops the Shekhe's assistant lifts my sleeve and ties the packet around my bicep. Shekhe Hassan hands me a piece of paper covered in prayers and gestures for me to put it in my pocket. I look over at Shubert who seems pleased with the exchange.

The Shekhe ceremoniously claps his hands and then opens them to the sky. I take this to mean, "You are protected, have a nice day, bye-bye."

"This is a great honor, Shubert, but please let the Shekhe know it is important that I know what is inside of my *hirizi*."

Shubert speaks with the two men, who have already put all of the individual packets back in the plastic tub along with my money. They smile and start removing the contents once again, patiently unfolding the first of the packets. I feel a sense of researcher's relief as Shubert takes on his professorial tone.

"This is called *kazimba* powder. Usually Al Badr uses plant materials, but to be protected from a *mchawi*, you must use the same ingredients that they will use against you."

For a moment I feel my stomach drop. Was I unknowingly wearing pulverized albino powder on my arm?

"Does this *hirizi* contain human parts?"

Shubert laughs at my horror.

"No, no, of course not, that is what we are trying to stop."

As each packet containing a few grams of material is opened for my inspection, the Shekhe describes its contents to Shubert who then relays the information to me.

"This is the leg of a crazy bird, a bird that walks around aimlessly. They will send curses to create confusion in your mind.

"These are burnt lion bones from a long time ago. This is to defeat the beasts they will send against you.

"These are the bones of a giant snake. This snake will eat the diseases they send to infect you."

Shubert went through a few more spirit animals before being passed a rather pedestrian piece of thin rope. It was the same cheap plastic cord one might find at a dollar store that could be used for a clothesline. He looked at me and paused for a moment.

"This rope was used in a suicide. A person hung themselves with this rope. The *mchawi* will send a suicide curse after you. The curse will make you very depressed and you will want to take your own life. If you have some of this rope with you, it will not work."

I try not to move as I feel a chill shoot through my body.

He shook his head. "I told you Justin, this is very real."

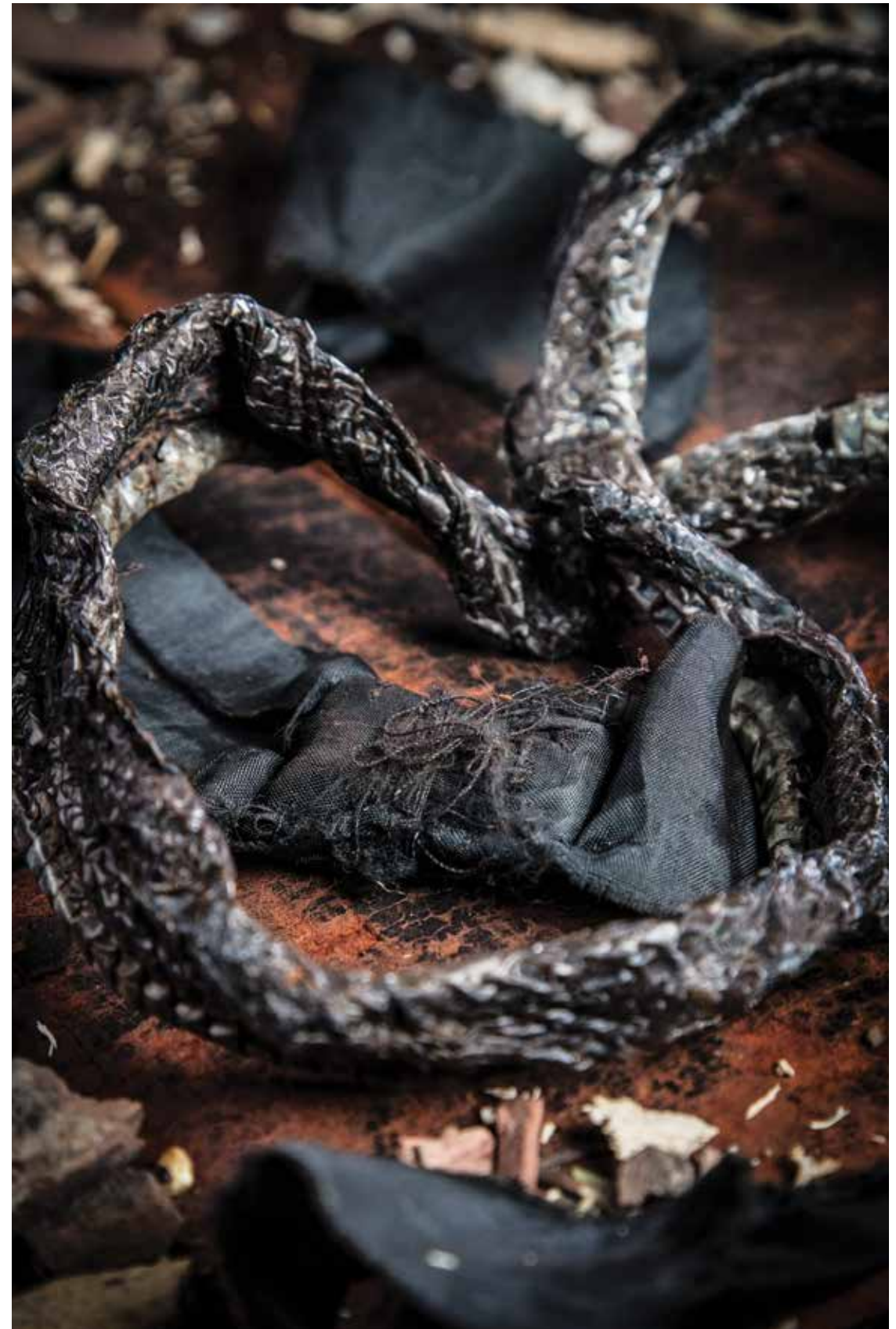
The final ingredient he displays is a piece of broken gourd. "This is a piece of *tunguli*. This is the most important tool for the *mchawi*. They use these gourds as their cauldrons. This belonged to a very powerful witch who was killed. This piece of *tunguli* is the glue that binds everything together."

As we prepare to leave, Shekhe Hassan explains to me that should I find myself in trouble I am to touch the prayer sheet to give the *hirizi* full power.

On the boat ride back to Dar es Salaam, I experience a very different side of Shubert. For the first time he begins to share with me some of the stories that had gained him his reputation. It seems my initiation had made me a member of the club.

"One time I used my *hirizi* to stop a bank robber. I had him cornered in an abandoned building. He had a gun. I put my hand on my *hirizi* and walked into the room where he was hiding. He could not shoot me. He could not move. I just walked up to him and pulled the gun out of his hand."

AN *HIRIZI* (TALISMAN) CREATED USING A FORM OF ISLAMIC-INFLUENCED SORCERY KNOWN AS AL BADR. IT CONTAINS A COLLECTION OF PULVERIZED ITEMS BELIEVED TO COUNTERACT THE SPELLS USED BY THE *MCHAWI* IN *TUNGULI* MAGIC.





"Another time my partner and I cornered a *mchawi* in a cemetery named Mapango Ya Amboni. The witch was dressed all in white. He went behind one of the tombstones and then there were three of him. The middle one grew giant in size."

"What the hell did you do?"

"We emptied our guns at the large one. The bullets did nothing, so we ran out of the cemetery. Sometimes the witches are too powerful."

"I look forward to seeing that."

For the first time I saw Shubert laugh. "Hahaha, you just might."

Clearly excited, Shubert lays out the plan for the rest of the mission.

"The next place we must go is the Port of Tanga. This is one of the only cities in Tanzania where the *mchawi* are still very powerful. Here I will introduce you to a coven I work with. They will initiate you into the group. You will be put in a coffin and buried alive in the cemetery. After that your soul will be invisible. Then it will be very hard to kill you."

I take a brave pull on a plastic envelope of Konyagi gin. "Now we're talking. Have you done that initiation?"

"Of course," Shubert nods while waving away an offered pull of my Konyagi.

"Then we will go to Pemba Island, the northernmost island in the Zanzibar archipelago. That is where the top *mchawi* all come from. That is where the decisions are made. That is where we can try discussing ending the albino hunts."

"Do you think we can reason with the *mchawi*?"

Shubert pauses for a long time and strokes his beard. "These witches are just taking orders from their spirits. They make

a pact with a demon to get its power. Once they make that contract they have to bring whatever the spirit asks for. If they do not meet its demands they will die. If you want answers, we are going to have to speak with the demons directly."

"I would love to speak to a demon. So these *mchawi* are just filling requests for their demons? When did this start? Was it always the albino powder?"

"No. The albino is more recent. Long ago, it was made from people whose heads were flat on top. For a long time the spirits wanted the powder made from their heads. So those people were disappearing. Now for a while spirits want the albino."

As outrageous as some of Shubert's statements sound, I feel we are really getting closer to the source of the problem. Rather than play the skeptic and question the scientific validity of each story, it is time to simply listen and keep climbing down the rabbit hole. The goal of my mission is to meet with the top *mchawi* council and build a case for a powerhouse botanical to replace albino body parts for use in talismanic items. At the very least I wanted to be able to identify the *mchawi* shot callers who are peddling this harmful superstition to the people of Tanzania.

When we reach the docks it is dark and raining. One of Shubert's men meets us among the taxis, hands him a green poncho, and ushers me into a minivan.

I look back. "Shubert, are you rolling with us?"


Shubert was already climbing on what appeared to be a random motorbike.

"No, I will take a motorcycle."

He starts the bike and weaves off through the stopped traffic.

As the rain pounds the windshield, I look over at the driver. "Was that his motorcycle?"

"Ha, ha, ha, he is Shubert."

His answer is as good as any. 

A CHILD WITH ALBINISM PLAYING IN THE LAST MOMENTS OF DAYLIGHT BEFORE THE SHINYANGA FACILITY UNDERGOES ITS EVENING LOCKDOWN.