Conference Report

Witchcraft Accusation and Harmful Practices:

Professional Responses and Operational Learning

HYDRANT PROGRAMME
Supporting child protection and abuse investigation

Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce

Policing - Academic Centre of Excellence | Lancaster University

The Witchcraft Accusation and Harmful Practices: Professional Responses and Operational Learning conference was held at Lancaster University on 22nd and 23rd June 2026. This two-day conference brought together police professionals, academics, policymakers, and other practitioners, to deepen understanding of emerging and established forms of witchcraft-related abuse, harmful practices, and associated safeguarding challenges. The conference was organised by the NPCC Hydrant Programme Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritual Attacks (WSPRA) working group.

Day One

The conference was opened by Richard Fewkes, Director of the NPCC Hydrant Programme and CSE Taskforce, and Professor Kendi Guantai, Lancaster University Dean for Culture and Inclusion.

The first panel on Day One brought together speakers Professor Miranda Forsyth (Australian National University and the International Network Against Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attack, INAWARA) and Dr Kim Bond (National Association for People Abused in Childhood, NAPAC). Their presentations explored the role of data in making visible forms of harm that are often hidden, misunderstood or poorly captured by existing systems. They brought distinct but complementary perspectives, with Professor Forsyth focusing on the global data gap around witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks, and Dr Bond showing how survivor-led data from NAPAC can illuminate patterns of organised and ritualistic abuse that may not be reflected in official records.

Professor Forsyth's presentation challenged the common assumption that harms linked to witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks are rare, archaic or confined to a small number of places. Drawing on the work of the International Network Against Witchcraft Accusations and Ritual Attacks, Professor Forsyth showed how the absence of consistent data creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which the harms remain invisible, appear exceptional, fall between institutional mandates and are therefore not systematically counted. Using Papua New Guinea as a national case study, she highlighted how only a tiny fraction of incidents reach newspapers, police, courts or official records, and that even where cases are recorded, the full range of harms, including torture, burning, displacement, stigma and sexual violence, is often missing. The presentation underlined the need for a mixed-source global database and incident dashboard to make patterns visible, support advocacy and law reform, and give institutions a clearer mandate to respond.

Dr Kim Bond's presentation explored how NAPAC's anonymised, survivor-led data can help reveal forms of organised and ritualistic abuse that are often poorly recognised in official systems. Drawing on nearly a decade of contacts to NAPAC's national support service, Kim showed that organised and ritualised abuse appears as a distinct and recurring strand within the experiences described by adult survivors. Survivors described complex patterns of harm involving multiple perpetrators, family and community networks, clergy and religious figures, concealed identities, coercion, fear, psychological control, spiritual justification, sexual and physical abuse, and profound long-term impacts including panic attacks, flashbacks, sleep disturbance, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. The presentation also highlighted a key tension. Survivors are often disclosing and, in some cases, reporting, but the way in which they describe complex abuse may not translate easily into police or service recording systems. Kim concluded with four practical lessons from survivors: the importance of belief and professional curiosity, accurate note-taking, cultural awareness and the courage to ask, and sustained access to support across multiple disclosures.

The second panel, WSPRA in Context, explored what we understand by the terms 'witchcraft accusation', 'spirit possession', and 'ritual attack', and the drivers of accusations and witchcraft-related harmful practices. Speakers Professor Charlotte Baker (Lancaster University and INAWARA) and Professor Simon Dein (Goldsmiths, University of London) discussed the social, economic, religious and psychological factors that can contribute to harmful practices, who is most vulnerable, and why certain groups are disproportionately at risk.



Professor Charlotte Baker's presentation provided an overview of the contemporary global challenge of witchcraft accusations, spirit possession, and ritual attacks (WSPRA), highlighting their significant human rights and safeguarding implications. Drawing on over two decades of research and advocacy, she demonstrated that these practices are not confined to particular regions, but affect vulnerable groups worldwide—including children, women, older people, persons with disabilities, and persons with albinism—through abuse, exclusion, and violence. The presentation outlined the development and impact of UN Human Rights Council Resolution 47/8, which has helped drive legislative and policy reforms in several countries, while emphasising that legislation alone is insufficient without improved awareness, professional training, and multi-sector collaboration. Professor Baker concluded by stressing the need for culturally informed, evidence-based responses that protect victims, challenge harmful practices linked to faith and belief, and strengthen international cooperation to address this ongoing global issue.



Professor Simon Dein's presentation examined the historical roots of witchcraft accusations in Britain and their continued relevance to contemporary understandings of mental health. He argued that many of the behaviours cited during historical witchcraft trials closely resemble symptoms now recognised as dementia, psychosis, and other mental illnesses, contending that accusations of witchcraft often functioned as a means of 'othering' individuals whose behaviour deviated from social norms. Referring to the Malleus Maleficarum, Professor Dein highlighted how early frameworks for



identifying witches were based on notions of 'spiritual deviance', reinforcing fear and social exclusion. Professor Dein noted that in some contexts today, for example in parts of South Asia, mental illness and dementia continue to be interpreted as evidence of witchcraft or spirit possession. The presentation emphasised that individuals who profit from performing exorcisms or identifying witches have a vested interest in perpetuating these beliefs, with serious consequences for those accused, including social stigma, delayed access to medical treatment, and severe punishment or violence.

In his keynote presentation, Psychoanalytic and Forensic Psychotherapist Stephen Morris UKCP, FPC, IACS highlighted the challenges faced at each stage of the criminal justice process from arrest to post- conviction when working spiritual abuse and those involved in high control groups. Although he was unable to give his presentation in full due to illness, it will be shared as a paper, which will use relevant case material and contemporary research to discuss the unique features that require consideration when belief is a defining feature of a whole range of criminality. These include, identifying strategic use of belief and secrecy, understanding how belief informs the development of problematic identities and exploits vulnerability, and why highly functioning individuals can suspend intelligence and become victims of thought reform. As such, Stephen Morris proposes a revision of what we understand about the personalities involved in belief-based crimes and the complexities of working with dangerous victims, and provides practical guidance to inform investigative interviews, victim redress and ongoing assessment of risk.

Two panels followed in the afternoon. In 'Policing WSPRA: current cases and operational learning', Peter Hornby (NPCC Hydrant) and Lesley-Ann McGee (Police Scotland) combined a brief overview of new national resources with frontline insight, giving delegates a rare opportunity to hear directly about how these cases are presenting, being investigated and responded to in practice.

Lesley-Ann McGee presented Operation Woodwhite, the Police Scotland investigation of systematic serious sexual abuse, rape, and neglect of 4 young children by a paedophile ring consisting of 14 known nominals (males and female accused) based in the Glasgow area spanning a period of several years, the abuse includes element of occult type activity and animal mutilations. The enquiry was long and protracted with the children initially being removed from care of their parents due to severe neglect in 2019. As the children settled and felt safe within their kinship care family, they began to disclose emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. These disclosures were initially slow and sporadic leading to multiple child investigative interviews.

As trust was gained, disclosures of witchcraft, wizardry and spells linked to the controlling nature of the abuse emerged. This presented a major challenged for the SIO and the enquiry team. One challenge was a disbelief of the accounts from the children amongst social work and Police colleagues and from the Crown Office. The teams had to launch a very detailed enquiry spanning a period of over ten years to ensure the children's accounts were corroborated as much as possible to strengthen evidence already obtained from the interviews, child medicals, and house searches. This included crime scene reconstructions and the use of NCA to find experts on child trauma. The investigation spanned over four years and saw the conviction of 8 offenders for serious sexual offending against children and the utilisation of lifetime restriction orders. Following conviction, a two-year learning review took place chaired by Alexis Jay which involved the two eldest children's voices being heard. The review concluded that there had been missed opportunities across all key partners including Police, Social work, Health, and Education to intervene sooner and prevent some of the abuse.

Gabrielle Shaw (NAPAC) rounded off Day One, leading an interactive session which invited delegates to work through realistic scenarios drawn from the themes of the conference using live polling, discussion and facilitated reflection to explore how WSPRA may present in practice. The session aimed to sharpen professional curiosity, test judgement and build confidence in recognising warning signs and responding well across different sectors.

The first day of the conference concluded with an optional guided tour of Lancaster Castle, providing valuable historical context for discussions on witchcraft accusations and their enduring social significance. The tour explored the castle's rich history as a site of justice, imprisonment, and punishment, with particular attention to the 1612 Pendle Witch Trials, one of the best recorded witchcraft trials in English history. Holding the conference in Lancaster, where these events unfolded, underscored the continuing relevance of examining witchcraft accusations from both historical and contemporary perspectives, reinforcing the conference's focus on understanding and preventing harmful practices linked to belief in witchcraft, spirit possession and ritual attacks.



Day Two

The second day of the conference began with a panel focusing on international perspectives on WSPRA from Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and Papua New Guinea. The speakers examined the social, cultural, economic and political dynamics that can drive accusations and witchcraft-related violence in different contexts internationally. Professor Miranda Forsyth discussed what she termed the 'flammable landscape' of Papua New Guinea (PNG) that includes a combination of worldviews, inequalities, low social cohesion and the normalisation of violence. Professor Forsyth highlighted the belief that agency is assigned to humans through supernatural powers in prevalent in PNG, and that these powers are not attached to any one particular class, but can determine characteristics across men, women or children, depending on the area looked at. Her research finds that in 82% of cases, there was a pre-existing conflict which leads to an accusation, as sorcery is used as an explanation for what has gone on. Glasmen are diviners and often work with pastors or those in authority to search for truth, encouraging those who are accused to confess or implicate others. This, in turn, can lead to torture, violence, sexual violence, or displacement. Importantly, Professor Forsyth remarked that in the cases she documented over four years, in 80% of cases, accusations were prevented from turning into violence. A community curriculum is currently





being rolled out across PNG to bring people together and to discuss underlying beliefs and other drivers of accusations.

Dr Jobair Alam's presentation then turned to examine WSPRA in Bangladesh, arguing that these phenomena should be understood within their broader cultural, religious, social, and economic contexts rather than dismissed as irrational beliefs. Dr Alam highlighted how Islamic traditions, local folk practices, poverty, gender inequality, limited access to healthcare, climate-related insecurity, and media narratives shape beliefs and responses to WSPRA. The presentation also discussed the role of traditional healers, the disproportionate impact on women and other vulnerable groups, and the limitations of existing legal and policy frameworks. It concluded by advocating culturally sensitive safeguarding approaches and interdisciplinary research that protect vulnerable individuals while respecting local beliefs.

Dr Keith Silika's presentation then addressed the social, cultural, and political dynamics of WSPRA in Southern Africa, with a particular focus on Zimbabwe, while introducing a novel technological and forensic framework for investigations. He explained that accusations in Zimbabwe frequently arise during periods of uncertainty or hardship, including illness, death, crop failure, and economic instability. These accusations are often driven by poverty, property disputes, family conflicts, and gender inequalities. Dr Silika highlighted that cultural narratives surrounding witchcraft frequently justify violence, creating significant challenges for investigators. Police investigations are further complicated by the fact that officers may share the same cultural beliefs as the communities they serve, witnesses often fear retaliation, and symbolic objects found at crime scenes can be interpreted differently by investigators and community members. To address these challenges, Dr Silika proposed Ritual-Ecological Forensics (REF), an interdisciplinary investigative framework that integrates empirical data collection and forensic standards, ethnographic insights into lived experiences and community meaning-making, socio-cultural analysis of belief systems and power inequalities, and technocratic solutions such as artificial intelligence and immersive simulations to strengthen data intelligence. The REF approach fuses Routine Activity Theory, which focuses on motivated offenders and suitable targets, with Cultural Criminology to better understand performative harm and the communal fears associated with ritual violence. A central element of this methodology is the SPIRIT App, a decision-support forensic platform designed to overcome psychological barriers in ritual harm investigations. The app incorporates a standardized 25-item enhanced checklist and a 'Red Flag' indicator system to classify cases as Standard, Medium, or High risk. It also provides rational-forensic reframing tools that help investigators shift from belief-based assumptions to evidence-based practice, offering a 'cognitive shield' against fears of retaliation or community ostracization. In addition, the platform supports structured professional judgement by guiding investigators on appropriate actions, including safety planning and referrals to Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC). Dr Silika concluded that bridging the gap between belief and evidence through these interdisciplinary frameworks is essential for protecting vulnerable groups and strengthening access to justice in line with UN Human Rights Council Resolution 47/8.

Having heard about international perspectives, the focus returned to the UK with a presentation of The Amber Project, a national safeguarding initiative that is designed to assist professionals to understand, identify, report and respond effectively where abuse linked to faith and belief, and particularly WSPRA, are suspected. Speakers Inspector Allen Davis (Met Police), Rohma Ullah (Barnardos), Leethen Bartholomew (WSPRA and INAWARA) and Kate Bridger (WSPRA) explained that the project was developed to provide evidence-based training for frontline professionals, increase awareness, improve referrals, and strengthen safeguarding practice while emphasising that the focus is on preventing abuse—not challenging or judging religious or cultural beliefs. Drawing on research, case reviews and Children in Need data, the speakers highlighted the prevalence, warning signs and severe consequences of WSPRA, including physical, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and violence. They outlined common risk factors, indicators and professional responsibilities,

introducing the framework of Recognise, Respond, Record and Refer (RRRR), alongside guidance on making effective safeguarding referrals and working with professional curiosity. Case studies and interactive scenarios reinforced how beliefs can escalate into serious harm when children are labelled as 'evil' or 'possessed', underscoring the need for prompt, evidence-based, multi-agency intervention to protect vulnerable children.

Keynote speaker Muluka-Anne Miti-Drummond examined the situation of persons with albinism in the context of the UN Resolution on the Elimination of Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks. She outlined the social and physical challenges associated with albinism, explaining how myths and superstitions surrounding their appearance contribute to stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, mutilation, and killings. While noting that persons with albinism are not as commonly accused of witchcraft, she emphasised that they are frequently targeted in ritual attacks based on the false belief that their body parts possess supernatural powers capable of bringing wealth or good fortune. She explained that the UN Resolution deliberately adopts the term ritual attacks rather than ritual abuse to capture these forms of violence and concluded by stressing that responding to spiritually motivated abuse and attacks does not require belief in the supernatural, as the resulting harms are real and demand legal and policy responses regardless of the underlying beliefs.

Keynote speaker Professor Michael Salter (Director of the Childlight East Asia and Pacific Hub at the University of New South Wales) then examined ritual child sexual abuse as a form of organised abuse in which ideology, ceremony and terror are used to control victims. Drawing on survivor testimony and trauma theory, it explains how offenders manipulate dissociation, attachment, fear and compliance, and how these dynamics are often misread by professionals as consent, fabrication or lack of harm. The presentation argued that systems fail when they lack a shared vocabulary for extreme abuse, overlook adult vulnerability, and treat fragmented disclosure or continued contact with perpetrators as evidence against victimisation. It concluded by calling for clearer recognition of ritual abuse, specialist multidisciplinary pathways, better interpretation of trauma responses, intelligence-led disruption of organised networks, and expert case review mechanisms.

The conference concluded with a Round Table discussion, chaired by Richard Fewkes. The participants were Peter Hornby, Professor Michael Salter, Professor Charlotte Baker, Dr Leethen Bartholomew and Gabrielle Shaw. The panel discussion focused on a number of shared priorities. There was clear consensus on the need to raise awareness of Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritual Abuse (WSPRA) so that it is better recognised by professionals and responded to consistently. Linked to this, participants highlighted the importance of developing a clearer public narrative to broaden understanding and support earlier identification. Speakers emphasised the importance of data and the need to fill the gap that currently exists to help understand the threat and the many different contexts in which WSPRA presents itself. Partnership working and education were consistently identified as critical to prevention, with a need to strengthen collaboration across policing, safeguarding, health and community sectors. Finally, there was discussion around the potential role of legislative approaches as part of a wider preventative framework.

Suggested resources for further reading and research:

Evans-Pritchard, E. E. *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Clarendon Press, 1937.

Gazi, M. I., H. B. Hamid, M. Y. Arafat, et al. 'Unraveling Traditional Healing Practices for Jaundice among Adults in Bangladesh: A Multicenter Qualitative and Ethnographic Study.' *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, vol. 10, no. 5, 2026. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-026-00153-1.

Gershman, Boris. 'Witchcraft Beliefs around the World: An Exploratory Analysis.' *PLoS ONE,* vol. 17, no. 11, 2022, e0276872. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276872.

International Network Against Witchcraft Accusations and Ritual Attacks. https://www.theinternationalnetwork.org/.

Mullick, M. S. I., N. Khalifa, J. S. Nahar, and D. M. Walker. 'Beliefs about Jinn, Black Magic and Evil Eye in Bangladesh: The Effects of Gender and Level of Education.' *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, vol. 16, no. 7, 2013, pp. 719–729.

NAPAC Research Hub. https://napac.org.uk/research-hub/.

NPCC Hydrant Resources on Witchcraft, Spirit Possession and Ritualistic Abuse https://www.hydrantprogramme.co.uk/our-work/ritualistic-abuse.

Salter, Michael. *Organised Sexual Abuse*. GlassHouse/Routledge, 2013.

Salter, Michael. 'Malignant Trauma and the Invisibility of Ritual Abuse.' *Attachment: New Directions in Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2019, pp. 15–30.

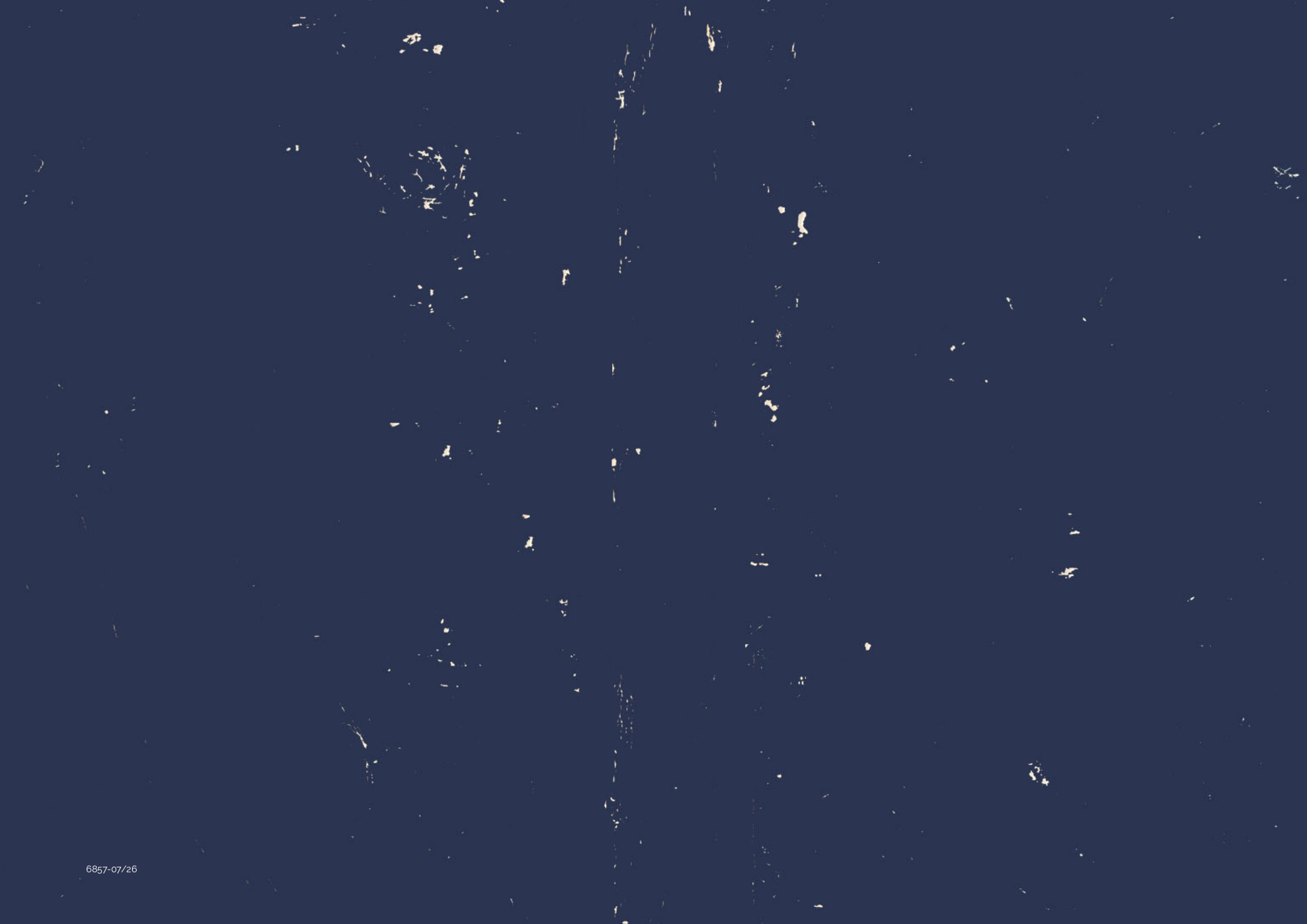
Study on the Situation of the Violations and Abuses of Human Rights Rooted in Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks. United Nations, https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/52/47.

United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 47/8: Elimination of Harmful Practices Related to Accusations of Witchcraft and Ritual Attacks. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3936009?v=pdf

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 'Reports of the UN Independent Expert on Albinism.' https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-albinism/reports.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. 'Access to Justice for Persons with Albinism.' YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oq6icuk4Yyc.

Penny Woolcock (dir)., *Kindoki Witch Boy* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLLf8WYWB34



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