In 1950s Northern Rhodesia, present-day Zambia, rumours abounded amongst the African population that intimated that the white settlers and administration were extensively involved in witchcraft, cannibalism and blood-sucking. In turn, members of the white administration and settler community believed very much the same with regard to the African population of the territory. The development of nationalist politics and the increasing unionization of African workers in colonial Zambia led to agitation that was matched with increasing disquiet and fears on the part of white settlers. The emergence of ‘Mau Mau’ in Kenya and the envisaged use of African troops from Northern Rhodesia in that country served to underscore European fears in Northern Rhodesia.¹ Based on research in the National Archives of Zambia and the United Kingdom, this paper explores the manner in which public rumour played out in late-colonial Northern Rhodesia.

In 2000 Luise White published a wide-ranging and path-breaking book that was the culmination of a series of articles that dealt with African articulations of the metaphysical in east and central African history.\(^2\) Graced with a detailed and dense introduction, *Speaking with Vampires* sought to take ‘these stories’ of the metaphysical ‘at face value, as everyday descriptions of extraordinary occurrences.’\(^3\) White argued that the inaccuracies in these stories make them ‘exceptionally reliable historical sources’ as they allow historians ‘a way to see the world the way the story teller did’.\(^4\) These stories provide historians with ‘a vision of colonial worlds replete with all the messy categories and meandering epistemologies’ that Africans used to describe every day life.\(^5\) White was explicitly not concerned with the origins of these stories, choosing instead to focus on their power, ‘their ability to describe and articulate African concerns over a wide cultural and geographic area.’\(^6\) White positioned herself in opposition to analyses that ‘seek to explain belief and the imaginary to an observer; they explain why someone might believe what is to most authors make believe.’\(^7\) White, in contrast, ‘[tried] to do something different, looking not so much for the reasons behind make believe as for what such beliefs articulate in a given time and place.’\(^8\) The paper presented here is interested in the origins of these stories and with the reasons for this belief in the make believe. At the same time this paper seeks not to separate out African beliefs in the metaphysical from European beliefs in the make believe, choosing instead to see both as two sides of the same coin, where one group’s fears were another’s aspirations.

**Changed Imperial Policy**

The landslide election victory of the British Labour Party in 1945 brought about radical change in Britain, and initiated long-term and irreversible changes in

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\(^2\) L. White, *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000)

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 5.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 18.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 44.

\(^8\) Ibid.