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'Child Witches': From Imaginary Cannibalism to Ritual Abuse

Leo Ruickbie

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As Quidditch comes to the Olympic Expo Games in Oxford this year (Martinez 2012), the Seekers, Chasers and Beaters recreating JK Rowling's fantasy game are no doubt unaware that many children in the UK are languishing in an altogether different world of 'witchcraft and wizardry,' a world of *ndoki* and *kindoki*.

For fifteen-year-old Kristy Bamu a trip to London to celebrate Christmas in 2010 turned into a terrifying ordeal, ending only with his death. Accused of witchcraft by the people he was staying with – his elder sister and her boyfriend – Bamu was starved and beaten during an horrific four-day travesty of 'deliverance' to 'remove the *kindoki*.' Finally, forced into a bath to 'wash away the evil spirits,' Kristy drowned, 'too exhausted' to keep his head above water. His other sisters, then aged twenty and eleven, were also abused, but spared further beatings after confessing to being witches (BBC, 6 January 2012 and 5 March 2012; Topping 2012).

In the Langala language spoken in the Congo River region, the witch or *ndoki* (pl. *bandoki*), practises *kindoki*, an 'invisible power to do harm' using spells or psychic means. The *ndoki* is described as one who 'mystically eats his victims' in an act of what Friedman (1996:114) calls 'imaginary cannibalism.' Importantly, the *ndoki* can only attack members of the same family, hence accusations typically come from within the family (Bockie 1993:40-6; Friedman 1996: 114; MacGaffey 2000:56). They are believed to take the form of insects or animals, or to send forth animal familiars to destroy crops and livestock, and to kill people or steal their souls for use as a *nkisi* (fetish) (Morris 2006:157).

The Save the Children report on children accused of witchcraft found that most Congolese and, indeed, Africans in general, believed in an invisible world and that for them 'there was no clear dividing line between the "visible" and "invisible" worlds' (Molina 2006:9). This affected all levels of society and educational attainment, including those who were working with children, although other studies have shown a strong correlation between lack of formal education and belief in witchcraft (Tortora 2010). Within this frame of reference, witchcraft is a daily reality.

Bockie was careful to point out that *kindoki* 'does not necessarily refer to evil' (1993:45) and that *ndoki* should be classified as either (or sometimes both) 'day' (good) or 'night' (evil) *ndoki* (47; 56). Based on field research conducted in the 1970s, Bockie's description appears to have become dated. Molina (2006:9) noted that ideas of witchcraft developing in urban centres, primarily Kinshasa, cast witchcraft as entirely and always negative – a development driven by the Revivalist churches.

That is not the only change apparent in the terms of reference. In current usage among African immigrants to the UK the terms *ndoki* and *kindoki* seem to interchangeably signify 'witchcraft' or spirit possession. In an interview with the BBC (4 June 2005a), Sita Kisanga, one of three people convicted for the torture of an eight-year-old Angolan girl known as 'Child B' in the UK in 2005, described *ndoki* as both an evil spirit and witchcraft. Leo Igwe (2011), a researcher at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, talked of belief in 'a spirit of witchcraft.' Likewise, Anane-Agyei (2009:174) also translated *kindoki* as 'the spirit of witchcraft.' Robert Pull (2009:180), operational commander of the Metropolitan Police's ritual abuse unit, Project

Violet, talked of the accusations against Child B as 'a witch possessed by *kindoki*.'

In Congolese society, it is believed that the *ndoki* is often unconscious of practising *kindoki*, hence *ndoki* could also be seen as a possessing force acting independently of the host (Friedman 1996:213). This would explain why exorcism – 'deliverance' in Pentecostal terminology – is applied to suspected witches. It is also the case that, as traditional ideas of witchcraft were modified by the demands, first of Christian missionaries, then of the Charismatic Revival churches, a greater focus on Christian demonology became inevitable (La Fontaine 2009:119-120). La Fontaine (2012) emphasises that this brand of 'witchcraft' should no longer be thought of as 'traditional.'

In an interview with the BBC (John, 2005), London-based pastor Modeste Muyulu, put these changes into words when he said:

> We know that *ndoki* does exist. Back home and everywhere else too there are people who are used by the Devil to bring a curse or bad luck to other people's lives, even to kill them.

Following the conviction of Bamu's murderers earlier this year, Muyulu appeared on BBC's Newsnight (2012) programme to reiterate his belief in witchcraft and ask the crucial question: 'how do you deal with it?'

The UK registered charity Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (AFRUCA) was established in 2001 to deal with the broader problem of child abuse. In November last year AFRUCA held a conference in London on 'Witchcraft Branding, Spirit Possession and Safeguarding African Children' to explore the growing problem of witchcraft related abuse. More recently, Nigerian born Chuka Umunna, Labour MP for Streatham, organised 'the first ever House of Commons Summit' on witchcraft related child abuse on 18 April this year (Chuka.org.uk 2012). Already familiar in Africa, witchcraft abuse is increasing in the UK among African immigrant populations.

Research commissioned by the government identified 74 cases of witchcraft/possession related abuse during the period 2000-2005 (Stobart 2006). To date, the Metropolitan Police have investigated 83 cases of ritual abuse in the last 10 years (Laville 2012). But even that is only the tip of the iceberg. 'For every case that we hear about,' said Dr Richard Hoskins, an expert on African religions, 'there are at least ten others' (Dangerfield 2012). With the number of African immigrants (excluding Afro-Caribbeans) in the UK exceeding 500,000 and rapidly growing, the situation is likely to become worse (AFRUCA, n.d.).

According to AFRUCA (n.d.), witchcraft accusations against children are a recent development in African communities. They suggest that the social deprivation, health issues, familial disintegration and other stressors facing African immigrants in the UK leads to a blaming of children for these problems. This point was echoed by the government report (Stobart 2006: 25). An alternative explanation of *kindoki* was proposed by Mpolo (1981) who saw it as the 'context in which the individual discovers and actualizes himself,' which may have been more appropriate only to earlier understandings of *kindoki*, but certainly gives a psychological insight into the function of the accusations rather than their origination. La Fontaine (2009:123) saw a different source of strain experienced by immigrant families adjusting to a society that they saw as immoral and unable to discipline (punish) its children and their consequent fears for their own children becoming 'contaminated.' There was wider agreement on the role played by weak familial bonds within immigrant families themselves and the resultant emotional tension articulated in unequal power relationships (AFRUCA, n.d.; La Fontaine 2009:124; Stobart 2006). Max Marwick (1964), of course, famously explained the incidence of witchcraft accusation as a social strain-gauge. The problem here is in determining where that 'strain' lies, or whether in fact it has several foci.

The largest number of identified cases of witchcraft abuse (Stobart 2006) were among immigrants from the war-torn Democratic Re-

public of the Congo (DRC) where witchcraft abuse of minors is an established and persistent problem (Molina 2006; US Department of State 2011). The DRC is in a condition of near anarchy following the First (1996-1997) and Second Congo Wars (1998-2003).

Immigrants from other countries, such as Angola, came from similar backgrounds. Political instability, armed conflict and civil disobedience, and their resultant problems, are widespread in Africa. Health crises, particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic, have been singled out as a decisive contributory factor in the rise of accusations, as well as environmental disaster, food shortages and unemployment (Foxcroft 2009:7-8). Rapid social change driven by Christian missionary activity (Brain 1970:177-179), or the post-colonial decline of traditional authority (Geschiere 1980:283) have also been seen as causing the rise of child witchcraft accusations.

In Africa, too, accusations directed against children are reported by UNICEF to have become prominent only in the last ten to twenty years (BBC 17 July 2010). Foxcroft (2009:5) identified the early to mid 1990s as the key years in this shift.

In both the UK and Africa, researchers have repeatedly drawn attention to the disintegration of social structures as a key factor in child witchcraft accusations. Hence we could see the shift in accusations in the DRC as linked to the destruction of public and familial networks and the change in the country's demographics: over half of the DRC's population are children (Waddington 2006:10) and almost half of all those dying in the wake of the Second Congo War were under five years old (Polgreen 2008).

However, even as early as 1970 'child witches' were being reported as a new phenomenon in Africa, particularly Cameroon (Brain 1970:178). Brain (1970:178) observed that, even then, 'witchcraft accusations and exorcisms were ten a penny.'

Whether new or not, witchcraft accusations against children are currently endemic in subsaharan Africa. Cases have been reported from Nigeria, Ghana, Botswana, Angola, Liberia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Tanzania, Sierre Leone, southern Chad, Malawi and South Africa, as well as the DRC (Foxcroft 2009:5, 7, 8, 9). There are a few, though slight, variations in the discourse surrounding these accusations. In Botswana, for example, the issues are couched in terms of 'Satanism.' High profile figures such as Isaac Kgosi, head of the Directorate of Intelligence Services, and Phenyo Segokgo, the newly elected president of the Botswana Movement for Democracy Youth League, have publicly declared their belief in a large-scale Satanic conspiracy responsible for their country's woes (Keoreng 2012; Piet 2012). As elsewhere, this is believed to involve children. In all seriousness it was reported that 'schools in Botswana are infested with Devil worshippers' (Ngakane, 2011). None of this should be too surprising. In 2009 Gallup asked 18,000 people aged fifteen or older in eighteen sub-Saharan African countries whether or not they believed in witchcraft. Ivory Coast returned the highest belief rate at 95 per cent, Uganda the lowest with 15 per cent. In the DRC's capital, Kinshasa, 76 per cent believed in witchcraft. Overall, the average was 55 per cent (Tortora 2010).

The tradition of anti-witchcraft cults or movements in Central and West Africa, such as the Aberewa, Bamucapi and Munkukusa movements, is well documented (Chanaiwa 1990:218; Bockie 1993:59; Richards 1935; Waite 1992:229). These typically blended traditional and Christian beliefs (Friedman 1996:209) and have been linked to the more recent Charismatic Revival (or Renewal), described as itself an anti-witchcraft movement (Fabian 2004:372). De Boeck forcibly argued that 'beyond any doubt the Pentecostal churches play a "crucial" role in the production of the figure of the witch' (de Boeck and Plissart 2004:173).

The role of religion is also apparent in the UK. Researchers and charities involved with African immigrant communities talk of 'rogue churches' (Dangerfield 2012) and 'breakaway churches' (BBC 4 June 2005b) among the 3,900 African Pentecostal churches now operating in the UK, a number that is expected to rise to 4,600 by 2015 (Topping 2012b). Debbie Ariyo, founder and director of AFRUCA, said that 'one

of the key beliefs of these churches is in witches and exorcising them' (Dangerfield 2012). An unnamed London social worker involved with African communities in the UK was quoted as saying that witchcraft abuse was 'spreading like bushfire' (Topping 2012b).

In both Africa and the UK financial gain is in part driving the witchcraft panic (Molina 2006:6). It has been frequently observed that pastors involved in exorcising witches/the possessed are running a lucrative business (Dugan 2008; Cimpric 2010; Oppenheimer 2010; Dangerfield 2012). In Nigeria, one evangelical preacher was arrested after charging over $250 per exorcism (BBC 17 July 2010). Speaking of the situation in the UK, Ariyo was quoted as saying that: 'The idea is to extort money from parents because if your child is branded a witch you will need to exorcise that child' (Dangerfield 2012). The same social worker mentioned above also attributed the dramatic rise of witchcraft/possession in African churches to financial gain: 'If you can charge £500 for an oil that is going to "cure" a child of evil spirits, you are going to make money' (Topping 2012b).

It is worth pointing out that it has been argued that a connection exists between witchcraft accusation and unproductive family members in times of economic hardship (Miguel 2005:1153, with regard to the elderly in Tanzania). Minors, like the elderly, also fall into the unproductive (or less productive) category. The recent Gallup survey found that poverty was associated with a higher belief in witchcraft (Tortora 2010). Children are often driven out of their homes following an accusation – as many as 20,000 street children in Kinshasa are believed to have been accused of witchcraft (Dangerfield 2012).

Traditional African beliefs were often situated in a 'moral economy' where success was a zero-sum game – 'one person's gain is always offset by another's loss (Harms 1999:21) – and witchcraft, specifically, was 'the dangerous appropriation of limited reproductive resources by selfish individuals' (Austen 2010:272). However, incapable of physically appropriating resources, the child witch is seen as preventing such appropriation by others, an easy scapegoat for misfortune, especially that which is otherwise hard to explain.

Several characteristics can lead to a child being accused of witchcraft or possession in the UK, such as disability, mental health problems, retardation, or conversely high intelligence, delinquency, left-handedness, as well as social factors including fostering, living with a step parent or having parents who had been accused of witchcraft (AFRUCA n.d.:8-9). Bed-wetting, as in the case of Kristy Bamu, and even nail-biting can also be interpreted as signs of witchcraft/possession. Stobart (2006:16) found that disability (most frequently mental) was a prevalent factor, but also significant were nightmares. During the dream the children often described 'taking the shape of an animal and flying to other parts of the world to kill and eat people' (Stobart 2006: 22). Kisanga told the BBC (4 June 2005) that it was believed that 'the girl [Child B] goes to Africa in the night-time to do bad things'.

The importance of dreams also came to light during the trial of Kristy Bamu's murderer, Erik Bikubi. Bikubi described having 'visions of his brother entering his room and trying to strangle him at night.' As a result, Bikubi frequently moved house. Bikubi also believed that he had a special gift for detecting witches which made him 'the chosen one' (Topping 2012b).

These 'signs' have direct parallels in witchcraft accusation cases in Africa and particularly the DRC. Religious and community leaders in the DRC agree upon a similar range of physical signs of strangeness, disability and disease, and behavioural deviance (Molina 2006:12-13). This would suggest a continuity of belief stemming from the region of origin, which helps us to understand how such accusations could arise in the UK. Transmission routes for these beliefs are multiple and diverse. For example, Bikubi had conducted internet research on *kindoki* and visited Nigerian pastors based on the Holloway Road, London, but had also come close to being accused of witchcraft himself when still a child living in the DRC. He described being ostracised after having 'abnormal visions' and his family feared that he would be labelled a witch (Topping, 2012a).

Similarly, child witches in Africa were described as engaging in comparable activities. Night flying, attending witch conventions and cannibalism were all common themes.

Earlier this year, a group of school-girls from Francistown, Botswana, exorcised at Jehovah's Potters' House Assembly, apparently confessed to how they could 'summon a slice of bread, a needle, a blanket or mealie meal bag and instruct it to take them to the depths of the ocean where they hold meetings with their leaders and receive instructions' (Muyakwabo 2012). Molina (2006:11) noted that whilst previously witches in the DRC had been said to travel 'in peanut shells, on *fufu* spoons, in the bristles of brooms or on banana leaves' they now more frequently travel by aeroplane.

In Botswana, witch meetings involved 'eating human flesh and drinking blood,' with new recruits forced to eat human excrement (Muyakwabo 2012). Molina (2006:11) observed that 'the need to eat human flesh, that is, to draw on the energy and power of others, is related to the hierarchy of the second [invisible] world.' Here the amount of human flesh consumed is related to the prestige and power of the witch.

The witches' feast is an inversion of the conventions of eating and the social norms that they imply. Non-food, such as excrement, and taboo food, such as human flesh – the body or the things of the body – are the staples of the witches' table. Indeed, the symbolism of witchcraft specifically works through inversion (Ruickbie:2009), a point also made by Molina (2006:11).

The child as a relatively powerless agent in the physical world, is inverted in the invisible world and promoted to a position of power and influence. The child can become a leader, marry and accumulate wealth, for example (Molina 2006:11). As status decreases the potential for inversion increases. The further removed the child becomes from direct familial bonds sees a decrease in status and hence an increasing likelihood of accusation. The socio-psychological dynamic is the same as that which posits the elderly as supernaturally powerful agents. One of the children in the Botswana case, for example, was described as being able to transform into an elderly woman (Muyakwabo 2012).

In the accusational scenario witchcraft becomes an enacted internecine nightmare of social reversal. The family attacks the family. The parents attack the child. The child attacks the parents. Sibling attacks sibling. The abundance of children in a society of low life expectancy provides the perfect replacement for the disappearing 'old crone' because the principle of symbolic reversal and the underlying economic determinants remain the same.

In the DRC the transmission of witchcraft generally follows one of three routes: inheritance; initiation by a family member; or through a bewitched substance, usually food (Molina 2006:13). Recently in Botswana it has emerged that 'the Satanism spirit' can be passed on by a simple glance, with terms such as 'infected' being used to describe the process (Muyakwabo 2012).

Here we see that without any outward signs of abnormality, any child could be involved in invisible crimes that only religious specialists can diagnose and treat, and the only proof of the alleged crimes is the child's own confession. It has also been observed that many of the so-called 'signs' of witchcraft identified in the UK cases, such as bed-wetting and behavioural issues, are within the range of normal childhood development (Molina 2006:5). Again, the consequence is that any child may be thought to have become a witch.

Branding as a witch typically leads to a spiral of abuse and neglect. The idea that witches are 'used by the Devil,' in pastor Muyulu's words (John 2005), disassociates individual agency and facilitates the intervention of the exorcist, and by concomitantly depersonalising the victim as 'possessed' also allows abuse. Stobart (2006:21) found that perpetrators talked of 'beating the Devil out of the child' or trying to 'squeeze the life out of the evil' through smothering and strangulation. In another case the victim's hair was cut 'to release the witchcraft' (BBC 26 January 2012). Such treatment is inevi-

tably traumatic and, in more than one instance, fatal.

Social strain may lead people to make more accusations, but it is the underlying belief system (however fluid and informal) that creates and sustains the possibility of making an accusation in the first place.

Stobart (2006) was right when she said that witchcraft accusations are 'not confined to particular countries, cultures or religions nor is it confined to recent migrants,' but this viewpoint is at odds with the current pattern of the witchcraft abuse of children in the UK. To be sure, witchcraft beliefs are far from 'confined,' but they are more prevalent in certain geographical and social areas than others (Tortora 2010). Stobart's own research shows that cases are concentrated in a particular demographic.

By downplaying cultural background, or even denying it as an influence, and marginalising witchcraft focused churches as deviant, organisations in the UK attempting to deal with the problem have created severe obstacles in their own path. Witchcraft accusations and related abuse are spreading rapidly in the growing African immigrant population in the UK, on a par with developments in the migrants' home countries. Overplaying immigration stressors as opposed to its many benefits, focuses on potentially the wrong sources of strain giving rise to accusation.

Some may have swapped their 'jolly hockey sticks' for broomsticks, but the supposed supernatural experience labelled 'witchcraft' in African immigrant communities in the UK is far removed from both Western media's portrayal of 'witchcraft and wizardry' à la Harry Potter and modern religious expressions of 'witchcraft' such as Wicca. Here we are again dealing with ideas of witchcraft as a form of magic directed against the well-being of the family/community where misfortune is given a supernatural explanation and scapegoats are sought among the socially deprived with terrible consequences. Despite all the good intentions it is a scenario likely to become more familiar.

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