

Coronavirus and the Rise of Child Witchcraft Accusations

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of witchcraft accusations with a focus on Africa and children. After presenting an overview of anthropological understandings of witchcraft in Africa, it focuses on increasing allegations of witchcraft among children. It discusses how this phenomenon may occur in the UK and its implications for social workers and police. Faith based child abuse is becoming more common in the UK and the COVID pandemic is a major risk factor for this.

Keywords: Africa, children, COVID19, witchcraft.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Witchcraft is a complex phenomenon whose precise beliefs and practices differ between societies and become transformed over time (Bussien *et al.*, 2011). This paper focuses upon accusations of witchcraft towards children, with a predominant focus on Africa and the African diaspora in the UK. Attributions of witchcraft at times of misfortune persist today, not only in the developing world but also in modern cultures like the USA and UK. Belief in witchcraft is still prevalent worldwide (Behringer, 2004). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) acknowledges that witchcraft accusations are a reality in numerous countries worldwide.

Redding (2019) underscores the fact that African witchcraft cannot be seen as a unitary phenomenon and in each country they are rooted in local cultures and differ in terms of their historical trajectories. How witchcraft powers are conceptualised and the types of people accused of perpetrating this have been impacted by changing political, economic, and social contexts. He asserts that witchcraft convictions have survived since the 1960s, are highly adaptable, continue to persist in the quotidian, remain part of popular culture in most African countries, and play a significant role in the everyday lives of most Africans.

In Africa, accusations of witchcraft result in violence against alleged witches in countries like Malawi, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, and Burkina Faso. Hundreds of women living in northern who have been accused of witchcraft by kin or other community members have been forced to reside in 'witch camps' after escaping or facing banishment from their communities (ActionAid). Those suffering from illness or misfortune frequently consult traditional healers who frequently invoke witchcraft explanations for this misfortune.

Uncertainty, fear, and suffering are closely tied to accusations of witchcraft and sorcery. At times of uncertainty, resort is often made to magical and witchcraft explanations and healing modalities especially when contemporary medicine cannot offer a cure. While anthropologists have largely focused on the role of witchcraft in interpersonal conflict and reasons for its persistence, here the stress is on the effects of witchcraft accusations on the presumed witch, particularly children, and the role of Covid-19 in this process.

To date, the Covid Pandemic has killed 4.55 million people and there have been approximately 219 million cases worldwide (Mathieu *et al.*, 2020). While there have been increasing numbers of people being vaccinated, to date no cure has been found for the virus. Additionally, the economic costs of the pandemic are huge. It is unsurprising that xenophobia and victim blaming have been commonplace since the start of the pandemic.



This paper builds upon anthropological theorising about witchcraft and its role in the ‘blame culture’ surrounding the Covid 19 pandemic. Before considering an anthropological perspective, I shall look at the role of blame and scapegoating in previous pandemics throughout history. Cohn (2012) provides an excellent overview of the long held assumption that pandemics spark hatred and blame of the other. As Nelkin and Gilman (1988) assert: ‘Blaming has always been a means to make mysterious and devastating diseases comprehensible and therefore possibly controllable.’ Contrary to this view, Cohn (2012) finds that hatred and blame were not necessarily associated with pandemics across history. Pandemics often bring people together rather than divide them as recent flu epidemics have indicated. It appears blame is mainly attributed when the pandemic first arises and the symptoms are novel. As Cohn (2012) notes: ‘Perhaps, as a number of historians have claimed, the newness and ‘mysteriousness’ of a disease is the key that unlocks the extremes of insecurity and fear to ignite scapegoating and mass violence against minorities. Recent epidemics like HIV (Tenkorang *et al.*, 2011; Ashforth, 2005) and Ebola (Buseh *et al.*, 2015) have been linked to witchcraft accusations.

Repeated episodes of a pandemic do not often elicit such intensity of blame. There are some exceptions. Some diseases like cholera were regularly associated with blame. The Black Death 1347-51 unleashed violent pogroms against European Jews. Subsequent waves of this disease in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods in Europe did not elicit such violence towards Jews or other ethnic minorities (Carmichael, 2003).

2. METHODS

A literature review was conducted using the following databases: PubMed and Google Scholar using the terms anthropology, witchcraft, COVID 19, children, and accusations. Inclusion criteria were that the papers/books had to be published in English.

3. THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WITCHCRAFT IN AFRICA

Anthropologists have had a longstanding interest in witchcraft both to account for misfortune and to resolve interpersonal conflicts. Anthropological theorising has traditionally focused on three aspects of witchcraft: on the meaning of its ideas and images, explaining the phenomenon, and on the social context around witchcraft accusations. Anthropologists have generally taken witchcraft accusations as the most visible manifestations of witchcraft convictions. Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020) underscores the need to take witchcraft seriously and to take it at face value, not treating it as superstition or as something that requires explanation from outside. He notes the need to take account of the possible physical and psychological harm that those fearing witchcraft can experience. I would also argue that anthropologists should be concerned with the experiences of those accused of being witches.

In many cultures adversity links to questions of how and why (Evans-Pritchard, 1937). The why question is often addressed through accusations of interpersonal animosity. People may receive punishment for their supposed actions. In other cases, such as among the Sudanese Azande, removal of witchcraft occurs through voluntary purgation. It is vulnerable groups like women, children, and the elderly who are often targeted.

Evans-Pritchard in his classical ethnography of a traditional Southern Sudanese society examined how the Azande accounted for the particularities of misfortune through witchcraft. Systems such as witchcraft provided explanations for every misfortune; there was no space left for uncertainty. In his view the witchcraft worldview is coherent and rational, attempting to refute scholars like Levi Bruhl and Fraser who saw it as prelogical and ‘primitive’. Evans Pritchard placed an emphasis on ‘accountability’ in his work on witchcraft. From the 1950–1970s structural functionalist perspectives saw witchcraft accusations as expressing interpersonal conflict in small-scale societies (see Douglas, 1970).

Social and existential uncertainty at times of environmental risk and ontological insecurity may promote witchcraft convictions. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) point out that insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety arising from the opaqueness of the market, its dangerous volatility, and its mysterious accumulation and impoverishment, are frequently articulated through the cultural repertoires of witchcraft, magic, popular religion, and spirit possession. Supernatural discourses provide a way of expressing anxieties about the increased uncertainty occurring in daily life and the insecurities pertaining to neoliberalism and the worldwide economy. There is little doubt that accusations often arise at times of rapid social change (Douglas, 1970).

Moore and Sanders (2001) note how witchcraft accusations have grown in postcolonial African societies on account of disillusionment with neoliberal capitalism and the “failed state”. They may be seen as veiled critiques of modern society. The close connections between magic on the one

hand and the state, development, markets, and media on the other, clearly show the various and unexpected ways in which magic has become both contiguous with and also, constitutive of African modernity. They are highly critical of the evolutionary paradigm of earlier anthropologists with its assumptions of unilinear progress and development. In these ‘Witchcraft after Modernity’ approaches the term modernity is often used in a vague way often referring to a diverse range of phenomena—individualism, a neoliberal market economy, politics in the postcolonial nation-state, and, to a lesser extent, urbanization. But ‘modernity’ is a metanarrative imposed upon the other from outside-by analysts- and does not necessarily reflect the use of our informants.

These authors highlight the continuing power and presence of occult powers, emphasizing the close interconnection between global capitalism and local cosmology. These authors deploy recent ethnographic examples from across the African continent to explore how witchcraft is expressed in particular modern contexts like the State in Cameroon; Pentecostal Christianity in Malawi; the Nigerian university system and the IMF in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. Their text raises the important question as to why, despite the predictions of countless modernists, sources of mystic power have not diminished by the increasing influence of modernity.

Despite scientific knowledge and education, beliefs in magic and witchcraft still remain central in African life. The assumption that diverse processes like development, urbanization, modernization, education, or the adoption of Christianity or Islam would result in the eventual eradication of witchcraft beliefs and practices has not been born out. Witchcraft continues to thrive there, providing strategies for dealing with changes in the modern world. Capitalism and the creation of wealth among an elite group have resulted in an intensification of envy and play a central role in the contemporary persistence of witchcraft accusations.

Every misfortune is held to have a cause and in many African cultures that cause is witchcraft. In Africa the invisible mystical world—the ‘second world’—is as real as the visible world- and as anthropologist Philip De Boeck (2004, p. 57) notes in Africa, the “second” world is gaining the upper hand. La Fontaine (2009) points out how, in many African countries, those who are held to be possessed by Satan or other evil spirits are seen as witches. Possession can empower those who are possessed to harm other people. Discourses on witchcraft provide explanations for misfortune and inequality but now these phenomena are impacted by wider cultural forces. Victims of witchcraft can be found not only in the villages but today, on a wider global scale.

As Johanneke Kroesbergen-Kamps (2020, p. 862) notes: ‘In the modern economic and social climate, Africans feel exploited and jealous of those few that are somehow able to acquire wealth, and the narratives about witchcraft and related phenomena are ways to express and deal with this.’ Finally, witch-finding movements derive from a general sense of social unease, the public perception of an escalation of misfortune, indicating that witches are increasing in number and that their actions are affecting everyone (Willis, 1970, p. 131). Fisiy (1998, p. 158) argues that health, economic, cultural, or political crises can result in ‘the collapse of community-based safety nets . . . During these critical periods of indeterminacy, when old and new forms of social organizations are in a state of flux, the anxieties generated by such moments are most likely to be translated into societal fears and suspicions.’ (Fisiy, 1998, p. 158).

Recent studies indicate that witchcraft is more than an expression of modernity, magic and metaphysics are actually constitutive of that modernity. As Geschiere (1997) asserts, the forces of witchcraft are ambivalent, they can be reinvented in novel situations: ‘It is precisely through this ambivalence that discourses on the occult incorporate modern changes so easily’. Witchcraft convictions are flexible and elastic and can be transformed to adapt to contemporary contexts. In a similar way, Geschiere argues that the preoccupation with witchcraft in many parts of contemporary Africa cannot be understood simply as some traditional residue. It is in fact more pronounced in the more modern spheres of society. His ideas directly contradict evolutionary accounts of witchcraft.

These views accord with Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) who argue that contemporary occult practices including witchcraft cannot be seen as a return to traditional practices nor are they signs of backwardness. Rather they reflect uncertainties, moral disquiet, unequal rewards, and aspirations in the present. From a comparative, global perspective, this linking of modernity and witchcraft is not unique to Africa: In other parts of the globalized world, modern developments can be found alongside what the Comaroffs call ‘the economies of the occult’.

Haram and Yamba (2009) discuss how life in contemporary Africa has become increasingly insecure and uncertain. They underscore the fact that witchcraft accounts for failures and malaise, while at the same time, witch hunting becomes a lucrative profession. Parish (2010) notes how, in relation to Ghana, ‘It is in this diasporic context, marked by a pervasive sense of uncertainty, unpredictability and contestability, that anti-witchcraft shrines are popular’. For her contemporary fears witchcraft concerns are driven by moral uncertainties around identity, sociability, and materialism.

La Fontaine (2009) in her examination of child witchcraft allegations examines how recent outbreaks of witch-hunting have to date been accounted for by rather general factors like colonialism, globalisation, religious change, and the breakdown of traditional institutions. She cites Pentecostalism and the entrepreneurial activities of pastors belonging to African independent churches as especially important. However, these factors in themselves fail to explain the growing phenomenon of child witches (as opposed to adult witches) as will be described below.

De Boeck and Plissart (2004) note how the Pentecostal churches play a central role in maintaining beliefs in the power of witchcraft. As will be discussed below, African independent churches, particularly Pentecostal, continue to be involved in the diagnosis and treatment of child witches in the African diaspora. Given their emphasis on success, wealth, and possessions, indicating divine favour, these churches often attribute lack of success as being caused by witchcraft. And pastors of these churches may themselves encourage witchcraft accusations among their congregations. Successful exorcisms may bolster their prestige and be very lucrative.

Thus the above studies argue convincingly for a close link between uncertainty, especially economic and existential, and witchcraft accusations. Redding (2019) notes how witchcraft rhetoric is deployed to understand how the few prosper while their compatriots suffer, the power of political elites and their enrichment, and the rapid spread and social dislocation of diseases like HIV/AIDS. The COVID-19 pandemic with its economic and existential insecurities has provided fertile soil for the growth of such accusations. I shall now focus on the interrelationships between COVID 19 and witchcraft and, more specifically, children as victims of witchcraft accusations.

4. WHO IS A WITCH?

Harm resulting from witchcraft accusations and ritual attacks has significant implications for human rights. Katelan (2017) notes:

‘An accusation of witchcraft is not levelled at random. When someone suffers affliction (loss of a job, of a child, illness), the cause is often attributed to the malevolent activity of a person they know, a familiar, ill-intentioned ‘other.’ The accusation is always preceded by suspicions within a limited circle: the family, the neighbourhood, the village. It can be a child, a woman, an elderly member of the community—often someone in a position of weakness. And that person is accused.’

It is often those of marginal status who are recipients of witchcraft allegations. One particularly tragic example pertains to the killing of albinos in Africa in witchcraft related violence. This group suffers from extreme prejudice and stigma. The Office of United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reports how albinos are viewed as ‘supernatural’. Their body parts are held to transmit magic powers when deployed in potions.

Since 2007 more than 50 albinos have been murdered so that their body parts could be deployed for ritual purposes. In Zimbabwe, albinos are referred to as “*sope*,” indicating that they are possessed by evil spirits; in Tanzania albinos are referred to as “*nguruwe*,” meaning pig; “*zeru*,” meaning ghost; or “*mzungu*,” denoting a white person. It is commonly held that their body parts are lucky and increase wealth, are used in witchcraft rituals and sold in witchcraft markets (Taylor *et al.*, 2019). The majority of these were children. There is evidence supporting an increase in witchcraft accusations among this group (United Nations News, 2021). As another example in Benin babies who are not born head first are considered ‘baby witches’ and are blamed for poor agricultural outcomes or illness. Many have been abandoned or killed.

5. COVID 19 AND WITCHCRAFT

Recent previous pandemics like HIV/AIDS (Haley, 2009) and Ebola (Muzembo *et al.*, 2022) resulted in harm resulting from accusations of witchcraft. de Vries *et al.* (2016) in an ethnography of Ebola in Luwero District, Uganda indicated a high prevalence of witchcraft causal explanations. The WHO reports that twenty five percent of pregnant women suffer from HIV/AIDS in Zambia and men, women and children are frequently accused of spreading AIDS through witchcraft.

Killings have increased during the COVID 19 pandemic and its resultant poverty. At the beginning of the lockdown in South Africa, the government’s Gender-based Violence and Femicide Command Centre reported over 120,000 victims, predominantly females. It is unclear how many of these episodes were provoked by witchcraft fears. The pandemic may be accounted for by other factors apart from COVID. While witchcraft and COVID have been closely tied together in the popular media, a study of knowledge and attitudes towards COVID in Ghana suggested that those interviewed saw this disease predominantly as a punishment from God rather than resulting from witchcraft (Saba *et al.*, 2020).

In relation to COVID 19 specifically, several factors have been instrumental in escalating witchcraft accusations. A high prevalence of illness present significant strains for overstretched health services,

intensifying accusations. New narratives arise combining existing prejudices with novel ones pertaining to COVID. Already vulnerable groups are rendered more vulnerable. Due to the extreme secrecy of these practices it is difficult to get an accurate understanding of the degree of harm posed by them. While witch trials occur predominantly in the developing world, they are not limited to there.

Witchcraft accusations are still prevalent across Africa. A 2010 Gallup Poll of 18 countries indicated that witchcraft beliefs were pervasive in sub Saharan Africa: 95 percent in Ivory Coast, 80 percent in Senegal, 77 percent in Ghana and Mali (Tortora, 2010). While there have not been any empirical studies of witchcraft accusations in Africa pre and post COVID, anecdotal reports suggest that their prevalence is increasing. Igwe (2020) notes how pandemics result in fear and uncertainty resulting in a proliferation of irrational beliefs. He underscores the fact that some African countries report escalating witchcraft accusations in the wake of coronavirus pandemic and deploying exorcisms that can result in injury or death.

The increased mortality and morbidity from COVID-19 can create assumptions that a witch or wizard is deploying witchcraft to bring about illness. These accusations are exacerbated by lockdowns, shortages of food and economic crises and driven by fear and uncertainty. There is an increase in witchcraft discourse generally which can lead to violations of human rights. Some examples: On 27th May a Haitian girl was fatally poisoned after imbibing blood from a turtle 'prescribed' by a traditional healer in an attempt to cure coronavirus. 4 • On 30 May 2020 in India a man was beheaded by a Hindu priest at a temple in the hope of ending the coronavirus pandemic in India. 5 • On 11th June, residents in Kwale County, Kenya, publicly claimed that witchcraft was "killing their business".

6. CHILDHOOD ACCUSATIONS

There have been sporadic accounts of child witchcraft accusations in Africa going back to the 1930s (Riedel, 2012). However, the identification of child witches is relatively new in anthropological writings. Child witches were first described in the anthropological literature by Brain (1970) among the Bangwa of Cameroon. This was followed by Geschiere's (1997) recording of a new type of child witchcraft—*mbati*—among the South-East Cameroonian Maka Reports of accusations of witchcraft towards children originate from politically stable and post conflict countries (Reis, 2013).

The growing numbers of childhood accusations are based upon complex interplays of economic, political, religious and social factors including urbanisation, transformations in family structures and emerging individualism (Cimpric, 2010). These can result in dysfunctional family structures and challenge the legitimacy of parental authority and pose a threat to older generations. In many societies these accusations are deployed by Pentecostal, revivalist or charismatic churches who present faith as divine 'armour' against witchcraft. Much of their discourse concentrates upon fighting evil incarnated through witchcraft. Redding (2019) notes how many Christian Africans link wealth with immorality, accusing the wealthy of trafficking in evil and possibly engaging in devil-worship. However there still remain many unanswered questions as to why the phenomenon of witchcraft accusations toward children is increasing in Africa (Riedel, 2012).

For La Fontaine (2009), areas characterised by social upheavals and of population decimation from civil wars and coup d'état have transformed understandings of what children are. In a similar vein De Boeck (2004) notes how the whole concept of childhood was modified by violent upheavals in central Africa, large numbers of deaths and displacement, especially the growth of child soldiers, diamond hunters and those who survived without adults. They are given new roles which are unprecedented in traditional thought and have increased military and economic power. Those accused often suffer from below average intelligence, physical disability, unusual behaviour or other distinctive physical features (Cahn, 2006).

As one illustrative example, Effiong (2016) discusses child witches among the Ibibio of South eastern Nigeria. He notes that the stigmatisation of children as witches is a relative recent phenomenon which has become popular since the mid 1990s and has resulted in thousands of children being tortured or killed. For him the religious discourse of the new Christian Pentecostal movement has been influential in enhancing belief in witchcraft, more specifically their attribution of failure and misfortune to the devil. Pastor-prophets who engage in deliverance sessions can receive huge financial benefits. This is on the background of poverty which is often attributed to metaphysical causes and children are easy targets to blame. To date some Pentecostal churches have begun to fight against child abuse and have attempted to raise awareness of the 'issue' of child witchcraft and mobilise people through their sermons. The portrayal of children in popular media like Nollywood—the Nigerian movie industry—further disseminates and reinforces the image of children as witches.

Witchcraft accusations are highly traumatic for those accused resulting in both physical and psychological trauma, neglect, and long term emotional damage following abusive exorcism. They are associated with psychological and physical violence first from relatives and the wider community and

then from religious professionals and traditional healers. Dearden (2020) reports that in the previous financial year nearly 2000 children in the UK were involved in incidents of abuse relating to faith and belief and there have been several deaths. Previous tragic examples include Victoria Climbe who died at the hands of a distant relative she lived with in 2000 and Child B in 2005, an eight year old who was grossly abused by two women and a man from Angola who were subsequently convicted of childhood cruelty. Both children were accused of being witches. The pandemic has put extra pressure on families fuelling allegations of witchcraft. This is on the background of escalating reports of children being involved in ritual abuse in the UK. Death rates from Covid among African people in Britain are 3.5 times the rates for White British (Merrick, 2020). Such inequalities may call for urgent explanations as to why this is the case.

A need exists for increasing community awareness and education pertaining to how witchcraft stigmatisation is a form of child abuse and the risks involved with this. It is necessary to educate faith groups about the dangers of witchcraft stigmatisation and deliverance rituals, both of which pose significant risks of harm to infants and children.

7. IMPLICATIONS

We argue that any prevention programme for witchcraft abuse must be based upon in depth understandings of the causes of this phenomenon and dialogue between health and social services, religious professionals and traditional healers. This should occur in collaboration with communities. There is a need for social protection to strengthen vulnerable families and training for legal, health and social service professionals to recognise, protect and work with these families. Finally legislative reform in the UK and in Africa could help to deter incidents of abuse in the future.

There have been concerns in the UK that COVID could increase accusations of witchcraft and possession among children who may be blamed for illness or misfortune. The UK police speculate that COVID 19 will be understood ‘spiritually’ through those maintaining beliefs in witchcraft. The risk is heightened during lockdowns when children do not attend school and teachers and youth workers are unable to assess children’s welfare and to pick up early signs of abuse.

Furthermore, there are concerns that symptoms of COVID are treated by spiritual means with increasing prevalence of exorcisms or deliverance. Finally COVID 19 has had a negative impact on the psychological health of children living in the UK (Ariyo, 2020). Mental health problems in BME children are often viewed through as supernatural lens and is held to require treatment through non-orthodox medical means including traditional or spiritual treatments.

Ariyo (2020) notes that one national charity-AFRUCA–dealing with issues pertaining to safeguarding and child protection in Black and other minority communities in the UK has received increased referrals into their early intervention service since the onset of COVID 19. These have not been specifically faith related. The organisation’s ‘Faith Based Child Abuse in London Project’, aims to influence change at the policy and regulatory levels in the UK relating to the labelling of children as witches or as possessed by evil spirits. While no cases of COVID related childhood witchcraft beliefs and accusations have been published in the UK media there are escalating numbers of articles on the web recommending that social workers, schools and the police should be able to recognise them. Signs may include: marks on the body; changes in demeanour; starvation over several days and weight loss and the child themselves may indicate that they have been labelled as a witch or called ‘evil’ (Ariyo, 2020).

One BBC website titled ‘Met Police to get training in spotting child abuse linked to witchcraft’ discusses how police in the UK require more training in recognising this form of abuse (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-59384546>). The National Police Chief’s Lead Commander stated “We need communities and family members to be vigilant about the wellbeing of children and young people, now more than ever, and report any concerns to the police and other appropriate agencies.” (<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/increase-witchcraft-and-spirit-possession-suspected-during-coronavirus-lockdown>).

Notes

In many African societies this power is held to reside inside the witch’s body. It may be seen as a substance, an organ or an animal that is variously innate, inherited, transmitted or acquired, voluntarily or non-voluntarily (Cimpric, 2010).

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