

This article was downloaded by: [leethen bartholomew]
On: 24 April 2015, At: 06:58
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtsr20>

Child abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft

Leethen Bartholomew^a

^a School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QQ, UK

Published online: 02 Apr 2015.



CrossMark

[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Leethen Bartholomew (2015): Child abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft, *Transnational Social Review: A Social Work Journal*, DOI: [10.1080/21931674.2015.1028809](https://doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2015.1028809)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21931674.2015.1028809>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

MAPPING TRANSNATIONALISM: RESEARCH REPORT

Child abuse linked to beliefs in witchcraft

Leethen Bartholomew*

*School of Education and Social Work, University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer,
Brighton BN1 9QQ, UK*

Introduction

This article examines child witchcraft accusations. Specifically, it examines the conditions under which this occurs, why children are accused of witchcraft, and the forms of violence perpetrated towards victims. I will argue that because some of these children come from transnational communities, protecting them requires a response that incorporates government and non-governmental organizations working across international borders.

Beliefs in witchcraft can be found worldwide and in nearly all religious traditions (La Fontaine, 2012). Given the international variation in beliefs and practices relating to witchcraft, there is no universally accepted definition or consensus on what witchcraft is (Stobart, 2006). Nonetheless, witchcraft broadly refers to the belief that an evil force has entered a person and then engages in psychic activities aimed at causing all manner of harm to others.

Witchcraft belief is not a new phenomenon and traditionally women, particularly the elderly, were labeled as witches. This led some scholars to assert that witchcraft accusations against children are a modern invention (De Boeck, 2005; Molina, 2006). However, it is not as modern as we may think, as for example, research by Brain (1970) amongst the Bangwa people of the Cameroon in the 1960s focused on child witches. Brain described how the Bangwa, associating witchcraft with the sky, referred to child witches as “sky” children and believed that their maleficence was responsible for misfortunes.

The abuse of children accused of witchcraft has received extensive international attention over the last decade, particularly in the context of internally displaced children and street children (Hanson & Ruggiero, 2013; Waddington, 2006). In 2009, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston, stated that, “in too many settings, being classified as a witch is tantamount to receiving a death sentence” (Alston, 2009). The UN has thus recognized that accusation of witchcraft is one of the biggest issues affecting children in some developing nations, among them the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Angola, Uganda, Tanzania, the Middle East and parts of Asia (Adinkrah, 2012; Powles & Deakin, 2012; Schnoebelen, 2009).

*Email: l.bartholomew@sussex.ac.uk

Why accuse one child and not another?

There are certain characteristics that increase the risk of some children being targeted for accusations of witchcraft. These include children who are orphans, twins or abnormal births, as well as children with certain conditions such as albinism, physical disabilities, and psychological disorders (Stobart, 2006). Disabled children are also at increased risk, as in some cases their condition is associated with the ascription of sin within the family or evil within the child (Treloar, 2000). Children who display behavioral traits considered unusual, such as insolence or challenging behavior, can also be accused (Cimpric, 2010), as can those suffering from enuresis or other nocturnal habits such as sleepwalking, nightmares, and somnolency. In effect, anything that causes a child to present as “different” increases the risk of their being accused.

Understanding the root of an accusation

Within some African families, the inability to manage the sometimes turbulent transition from traditional ways of life to ones dictated by the demands of an urban setting may result in children being accused of witchcraft (Molina, 2006). Molina (2006) suggests that changes in family ties and an urban lifestyle have shifted views on the image and role of the child within the family. Cimpric (2010) suggests that accusations are symptomatic of societal “multi-crises,” which occur due to poor governance, rising inequalities, and poverty. Family misfortunes such as death, marital breakdown, illness, and unemployment may lead to a fear of witchcraft, particularly if these coincide with troubles with a “different” child, who might then be accused of being a witch.

How does the violence occur?

The power of witchcraft is believed to derive from an evil spirit “possessing” the body of the accused, which results in the spirit of the victim no longer being present. An accusation is usually followed by an attempt to exorcize or deliver the child. These exorcisms are usually a combination of traditional and individually derived practices disguised under the cloak of Christianity or some other faith. Exorcisms may involve a range of behaviors along a continuum from harmless to harmful. Hanson and Ruggiero (2013) found that exorcisms range from praying and attending ceremonies, which are mainly harmless, to beatings and starvation. Death by stoning and burning, acid attacks, poisoning, imprisonment, strangulation, and torture has also been documented in Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the UK (Foxcroft, 2009; Stobart, 2006; Waddington, 2006). Even if the methods engaged to exorcize the accused child are not physically harmful, mere accusation can cause emotional and psychological harm. In cases where mothers have been accused, their children may become victims by association; both mother and child may be banished from their community or killed (Riedel, 2012).

When witchcraft comes home

International migration has seen migrants taking their cultural and religious practices to different nations. McEwan (2004) suggests that migrants’ cultural identity should not be seen as being formed by their homeland or host country, but should be seen through the lens of transnationalism. International migration and travel have had the effect of transforming people’s beliefs in witchcraft to adapt to their new environment. In multicultural and multi-faith British society, such beliefs proliferate partly due to the arrival

of people from countries where witchcraft beliefs exist. Witchcraft accusation against children in the UK is a relatively new phenomenon. Focus has been placed on children of African background from Nigeria, Angola, the DRC, and Ivory Coast (Secker & Rehman, 2013), despite the fact that children from South Asian, Caribbean, and white British communities are also being accused (Stobart, 2006).

Knowledge of the phenomenon in the UK received national attention in 2000, following the death of an Ivorian eight-year-old girl named Victoria Climbié, who was accused of witchcraft by her caregivers. The enquiry into her death sparked national outrage due to the harm she suffered and the failure of statutory services to protect her (Laming, 2003). Different professionals' observations were based on harmful assumptions. For example, Victoria's social worker (mis)interpreted her "standing to attention" as a reflection of the demands placed on African children to be respectful; the pastor (mis)attributed her concerning behavior to being newly arrived in the UK although she had been resident for over a year, and medical practitioners failed to conduct a full assessment of marks on her body because of the assumption that African children would have more marks on their bodies compared to European children (Laming, 2003). Victoria's experience presents a poignant example of the difficulties professionals may encounter when trying to protect children with different religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

More recently, fifteen-year-old Kristy Bamu, whose family originated from the Democratic Republic of Congo, died at the hands of his sister and her partner while on a Christmas visit from Paris to their London home in 2010. An incident of bedwetting triggered their accusation that Kristy and two of his four visiting siblings were witches. Kristy suffered a sustained attack over several days, resulting in 130 external and internal injuries, and his death occurred in full sight of his siblings (Pull, 2013).

Protecting children accused of witchcraft

The diversity of issues to consider in dealing with witchcraft beliefs and accusations demands that child protection professionals possess the necessary skills, competencies, and knowledge of the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of children. In the UK, the Government Department for Education and Skills "Every Child Matters" initiative (Department for Education & Skills, 2003) was developed to promote children's welfare. However, the DfEs failed to include the significance of religion and spirituality in the lives of some children when considering their welfare (Gilligan & Furness, 2010). In a subsequent attempt to understand the scale, nature, and geographical reach of the child witchcraft accusations, the same government department commissioned a report, which revealed that between 2000–2006, there were 38 reported cases involving 47 children (Stobart, 2006). Eighteen of these children were placed into public care, as were 23 of their siblings. This highlights the need to consider not only the harm done to the accused, but the impact of accusations on siblings. The small number of known cases of witchcraft allegations against children is often used to claim that the extent of the problem is minor in comparison to other types of abuse that children may experience. However, the recognized barriers to reporting abuse are accentuated in the case of witchcraft accusations, since witchcraft itself is a taboo topic and the measures taken against it are not seen as abusive in some communities. Thus, there are significant barriers to quantifying the scale of the problem and this should not be seen as a precondition to attempting to find appropriate solutions.

In 2007, the UK Government issued non-statutory guidance aimed at helping professionals understand witchcraft accusations and outlining appropriate courses of action to protect the child (HMSO, 2007). This was followed by a government-established National Working Group, which developed a National Action Plan to tackle abuse linked to faith and belief (Department for Education, 2012). The plan focused on a four-pronged approach to tackling this issue, namely: engaging communities, supporting victims and witnesses, empowering practitioners, and communicating key messages. While the National Action Plan is a step in the right direction, failing to consider the impact of globalization is a key missing component.

Since the experience and identities of some migrants, and by extension their children, are not bound to a single location, any attempt to tackle witchcraft accusations must include working with nations where witchcraft accusations lead to human rights abuses. This is the approach taken by the UK Government to tackle other child protection concerns, such as female genital mutilation and forced marriage. Working across nations is immensely important, given the international dimension to witchcraft accusations. A child accused in the UK may be sent overseas to family members, whose duty will be to organize an exorcism (Bahunga, 2013). Faith leaders are known to use the media to display their skill at diagnosing and delivering the accused, and in some countries there is a proliferation of such television programs (Pype, 2010). Consequently, parents do not have to leave the UK to seek the intervention of faith leaders, who may recommend rituals and practices harmful to children. The advent and availability of satellite television and the Internet help maintain transnational connections, and these ties cannot be ignored if we are to protect children from this type of abuse. Additionally, religious leaders known to have physically harmed children during exorcisms and who have broadcasted this through YouTube have entered the UK, possibly to perform similar practices (Foxcroft, 2014).

Implications

Tackling the issue of witchcraft accusation requires that we recognize that many accused children come from transnational communities or backgrounds. National and local governments and child protection agencies need to think and respond in ways that connect their own policies, practices, and understandings with those of other nations; they also need to work hand in hand with international as well as national and local religious organizations and civil society groups. Tackling this also demands that professionals receive training that includes awareness of the wider dimensions and complexities of witchcraft accusations, and how what happens or originates overseas can reverberate in the UK and in other national contexts. Most importantly, future policy initiatives within and across national borders must not make the mistake of failing to recognize the significance of religion and spirituality in the lives and welfare of some children.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

- Adinkrah, M. (2012). Child witch hunts in contemporary Ghana. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 35, 741–752.

- Alston, P. (2009, May 27). *Protection and promotion of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural right, including the right to development*. Report of the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions to the UN General Assembly, A/HCR/11/2, New York, NY.
- Bahunga, J. (2013). Tackling child abuse linked to faith or belief. *Every Child Journal*, 3, 14–19.
- Brain, R. (1970). Child witches. In M. Douglas (Ed.), *Witchcraft confessions and accusations* (pp. 161–182). London: Tavistock.
- Cimpric, A. (2010). *Children accused of witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa*. UNICEF. Retrieved from http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/wcaro_children-accused-of-witchcraft-in-Africa.pdf
- De Boeck, F. (2005). The divine seed: Children, gift & witchcraft in the democratic Republic of Congo. In A. Honwana & F. De Boeck (Eds.), *Makers & breakers: Children & Youth in post-colonial Africa* (pp. 188–214). Oxford: James Currey.
- Department for Education. (2012). National action plan to tackle child abuse linked to faith or belief. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175437/Action_Plan_-_Abuse_linked_to_Faith_or_Belief.pdf
- Department of Education and Skills. (2003). *Every child matters*. London: Stationery Office.
- Foxcroft, G. (2009). *Witchcraft allegations: A protection concern for UNHCR and the wider humanitarian community?* United Kingdom: Stepping Stones Nigeria. Retrieved from http://www.crin.org/docs/Stepping_stones_witchcraft.pdf
- Foxcroft, G. (2014). Hunting witches. *World Policy Journal*, 31, 90–98.
- Gilligan, P., & Furness, S. (2010). *Religion, belief and social work: Making a difference*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hanson, K., & Ruggiero, R. (2013). *Child witchcraft allegations & human rights*. Belgium: European Union. Retrieved from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/433714/EXPO-DROI_NT\(2013\)433714_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/note/join/2013/433714/EXPO-DROI_NT(2013)433714_EN.pdf)
- HMSO. (2007). Safeguarding children from abuse linked to belief in spirit possession. Retrieved from <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFES-00465-2007.pdf>
- La Fontaine, J. (2012). *Accusations of witchcraft made against children*. Unpublished research report.
- Laming, L. (2003). *The Victoria Climbié inquiry: Report of an inquiry*. London: HMSO.
- Mcewan, C. (2004). Transnationalism. In J. S. Duncan, N. C. Johnson, & R. H. Schein (Eds.), *A companion to cultural geography* (pp. 499–512). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Molina, J. (2006). *The invention of child witches in the democratic Republic of Congo*. London: Save the children. Retrieved from https://www.crin.org/docs/The_Invention_of_Child_Witches.pdf
- Powles, J., & Deakin, R. (2012). *Seeking meaning: An anthropological and community-based approach to witchcraft accusations and their prevention in refugee situations* (Research Paper No. 235). Retrieved from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fc49bed2.html>
- Pull, B. (2013). *Child witches and witchcraft*. Kent: CCPAS.
- Pype, K. (2010). Of fools and false pastors: Tricksters in Kinshasa's television fiction. *Visual Anthropology*, 23, 115–135.
- Riedel, F. (2012). Children in African witch-hunts: Introduction for scientists and social workers. Retrieved from http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/childreninafricanwitch_huntsfinalversion-1-Felix-Riedel-2.pdf
- Schnoebelen, J. (2009). *Witchcraft allegations, refugee protection and human rights: A review of the evidence* (Research Paper No. 169). UNHCR. Geneva: Policy Department and Evaluation Service.
- Secker, E., & Rehman, Y. (2013). Possession or oppression: Witchcraft and spirit possession as a form of ritual abuse if children and woman. In Y. Rehman, L. Kelly, & H. Siddiqui (Eds.), *Moving in the shadows: Violence in the lives of minority women and children* (pp. 141–154). Surrey: Ashgate.
- Stobart, E. (2006). *Child abuse linked to accusations of "Possession" and "Witchcraft"*. (Research Report No. 750). London: DfES.
- Treloar, L. (2000). Spiritual beliefs, response to disability and the church- part 2. *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health*, 4, 5–31.

Waddington, M. (2006). *"Child Witches", child soldiers, child poverty and violence: Street children in crisis in Democratic Republic of Congo*. Report by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Street Children on its mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo and recommendations for addressing the escalating street child crisis. Kinshasa: War Child and The Jubilee Campaign.