

RESPONSE

A Biblical Scholar's Response to Issues in 'Christian Pastors and (Alleged) Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC'

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Introduction

The research project, 'Christian Pastors and (Alleged) Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC,' authored by Robert Priest, Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell (2020) is a monumental empirical work about children who have been accused as 'witches' and of 'witchcraft' by Christian pastors in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The extensive project engages the subject of child witch allegations from different perspectives which include, anthropological, ethnological, sociological, historical and theological ones. It covers almost every aspect of the issues usually discussed on the subject matter. The role of the EPED team that assisted in the research project and in helping many pastors and deliverance ministers to come to terms with the evil of child witch allegations and persecution is highly commendable. The research is well thought out and takes into consideration all the details that are required of this kind of research.

Issues, Suggestions, and Recommendations

1. My response to whether girls are more frequently accused than boys (7) is that both sexes are accused irrespective of the sex. This is unlike the reference to the word *mekhashshephah* 'a woman who practices magic' in Exodus 22:17 [MT] where the Hebrew word is marked to emphasize that the women folk are more involved in the practice which may be the intention of the author for using the feminine gender. However, in Deuteronomy 18:10 the masculine *mekhasheph* is used by the Deuteronomist which I believe is used generally to refer to the practice and not just to the male practitioner alone.
2. The case of child witch accusations is usually 'status based', 'appearance based' and/or 'character

based'. By this I mean that the majority of children accused are from very poor family backgrounds of which some serve as houseboys or housemaids or servants (status based), some are unkempt, disfigured, physically challenged, weird, have body rashes, body and mouth odours, boils and wounds or sores (appearance based), and some are lazy, violent, shrewd, mischievous, heady, disobedient, sleepwalk, sleep-talk, talk to themselves, bedwet, are arrogant, abusive, disrespectful or cruel (character based). From my personal experience, by observation of children accused as witches and of witchcraft, and of interactions with adults who suspect and accuse children as witches and of witchcraft, the circumstances and description fall basically into these three categories. It is very rare or uncommon to see a child from a rich or wealthy family accused as a witch or of witchcraft, even when they are stubborn, abusive or even belong to a cult. Instead, their behaviour or predicament is usually attributed to a child who may be serving as a maid or servant in the house whose appearance and behaviour cause suspicion.

3. With reference to the age brackets (7) of the children who are mostly accused, it is not surprising that children between the ages of four to seven and eight to fourteen are the ones most frequently accused. Children within these age brackets who come from very poor families and serve as housemaids or servants are the ones most frequently accused. Again, the age brackets are not necessarily the factor determining the accusation, stigmatization and abuse, but their status, appearance and character are the major factors used for the accusation. Expressions like, *afò nyin ifot* ('you this little witch' or 'you this child of a witch'), *idiok ifot* ('bad or wicked witch'), *adia ifot*

(she/he has eaten witchcraft') are used to describe such children.

4. There is need to emphasize that semantically the word 'witchcraft' implies a teachable profession like 'blacksmith', 'handcraft' etc., and is practiced for a living. It is a means of livelihood not just to cause harm to people. It can be passed on from one generation of practitioners to another as a kind of occupation. But how are children taught the craft? There is need to clearly demonstrate the apparent contradiction in the understanding of the word 'witchcraft' and the claim that children become witches by eating 'witch food potion', or 'mystical witchcraft seed', etc.
5. The biblical words used to describe the occult such as מכשפה, כשף, אוב, חבר, ידועני, ענג, נחש, קסם, play a significant role in understanding how the occult operated in biblical times and need to be carefully studied from the Hebrew and Greek source texts. These words need to be given some attention as some Bible versions indiscriminately use the word 'witch' and 'witchcraft' to translate them. The practitioners were part of the royal council and entourage that provided counsel and guidance to administrative policies and adjudication for both national and international politics of their time. They do consultancy services and charge for their services (cf. 1 Sam 28). They were paid from the treasury of the State for their services to the State (Exod 7; Dan 1-4). They were often trained and given professional tutorials and qualify for their employment after being duly examined and found qualified and certified (Dan 1-2).
6. I find it difficult to be convinced of the existence of a so-called "mystical witchcraft seed" that empowers accused "witches" 'towards harm, evil and destruction and that this witchcraft seed can be transmitted into someone by means of contact with a gift of food, drinks, clothes, or toys" (40). As much as this seems to be a general belief particularly in Africa, it still lies within the realm of superstition and speculation. I consider this a propaganda orchestrated to keep the so-called deliverance ministers in business. The deliverance ministers cannot give any evidence to this claim. It sounds strange to me as a biblical scholar to read that "Witchcraft is the means by which Satan accomplishes his goals as articulated in John 10:10—"to steal, to kill, and to destroy"(40). This to me is a misapplication of the Scripture and an overloading of the obvious meaning of the text just to justify the claim to the existence of 'witchcraft' and a 'mystical witchcraft seed'. References to

Nabal in 1 Samuel 25 and Judas are also a misleading interpolation of the biblical texts to justify a speculation or superstition.

7. On the issue of the meaning of suffering and how in some cultures interpersonal causal ontologies are believed to be responsible, when instead of asking the question 'why?', the question 'Who?' occupies the discourse: This, to me, is a clear evidence of backwardness in such cultures. It is obvious that cultures where people are full of envy, jealousy and strife nothing happens without suspecting someone. In cultures where the 'Why?' question is asked, there is always advancement and there are less suspicions of mystical psychic use of power consciously or unconsciously to harm others. This can be attributed to education and enlightenment. The less superstitious a society is, the more realistic and capable it is to find solutions to the problems facing it. To find the meaning of suffering in witchcraft belief is unbiblical and antibiblical. The Scriptures are unequivocally clear that suffering is rooted in sin and human alienation from God. To reject God's gift in the person of Christ Jesus is to remain in darkness and never come to light. It is a known fact that wherever the Gospel of Jesus Christ is clearly and rightly preached superstition, ignorance and darkness, such as belief in witchcraft, do not have any stronghold. Those who use this belief to hold others captive and perpetrate wickedness against those they suspect, accuse and victimize, should be made to face justice and the consequences of their actions.
8. Satan, demons and witches (40): In response to this, studies have shown that the idea of linking Satan and demons to witches has its root in the period when people used magic for manipulating others, which is today called 'black magic'. It was from the time of Augustine of Hippo through the time of Thomas Aquinas that, within the religious circles, magic was associated with demonic and Satanic invocation. Prior to this period, it was merely concerned with the manipulation of nature for various humanitarian purposes, including fortune-telling. Reason shows that, if it is true, as claimed, that one can become a 'witch' by eating witchcraft seed which "can be transmitted into someone by means of contact with a gift of food, drinks, clothes, or toys" or alternatively, "may be transmitted in a dream, through sex, or acquired from one's mother while still in the womb" (40), it is a contradiction to bring in any satanic or demonic idea. In the Efik Bible and among the Ibibios the word 'Satan' is rendered 'Satan' and

'Edisana Spirit' is the translation for the 'Holy Spirit'. The Devil is called *Andidiok* which literally means the 'wicked one'. Since there is no such word as 'witch' *ifot* or 'witchcraft' *ifot* in the Efik Bible, there is absolutely no link between the concept of *ifot* and Satan or the Devil among the Efiks and Ibibios. Such links currently are only the influence of the brand of Christianity which links evil activities with Satan or the Devil and demons.

9. As a biblical theologian, I have not come across any biblical text that teaches the 'witch' or 'witchcraft' idea where some people, through evil occult power, are secretly the cause of other people's misfortunes. I agree with Priest, Ngolo and Stabell when they say, "But we wish to illustrate the possibility that Christians have fundamentally misread their Bibles, and thus that a larger conversation is needed that involves the biblical text, later translations, anthropological categories, and theological reflections" (43). This is never more true than now and there is a great need to help most Christians in this direction.
10. It is unfortunate that many Bible translations done in Africa are done by recruits who do not have a good theological background or expertise in the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek or are knowledgeable in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics or even linguistics skills. This has drastically affected the indigenous translations, especially those ones that used the King James Version as their source text. Exodus 22:18 has been the key Bible text, particularly in the King James Version, that has been translated into most African indigenous languages that relate to 'witches' and 'witchcraft' practices. This is why Exodus 22:18 has been used to justify 'witch-hunt' of every form, including child witch victimization. Few indigenous translations, like the Korean and the Efik, do not use a word that carries the idea of one who has the power to harm others. From my experience also, it is true that "few contemporary pastors are utilizing this passage to call for the death of supposed witches" (43), however, many pastors are still ignorant about what the text of Exodus 22:18 really means and how it should be interpreted in the context of the text and in the contemporary society. Many ordinary Christians believe that the text should be understood literally as supporting capital punishment for those supposed to be witches, even though they would not follow through with the killing themselves.
11. The Hebrew and Greek source texts of Exodus 22:18 and cognate references to the Hebrew root

word *kashaph* and Greek word *pharmakous* when studied in their respective contexts are insightful as to how to understand this text. From my personal studies, there is no single instance where there was the practice of "witchcraft" in which people were believed to have the psychic power to do harm to others or be responsible for infertility, impotency, loss of property, loss of job, sickness, etc., of others by occult powers. This is well captured in pages 44 and 45 of the research project. More particularly, as it relates to the research concern on alleged child witches in Kinshasa, DRC (and indeed anywhere in the world), there is no evidence of children possessing "witchcraft" powers to cause harm to people in the biblical text.

12. To be able to tackle the menace of misinterpreting and misapplying biblical passages often cited to justify 'witch' and 'witchcraft' beliefs, Eugene Nida's observation as cited in the research should be taken serious: "Eugene Nida, the 'world's most influential Bible Translator,' complained in a *Christianity Today* interview that many Bible translators fixate on, and worship, words, but fail to understand that 'words only have meanings in terms of the culture of which they are a part'" (p. 44). There is need to harness the fruits of anthropology, sociology, theology (biblical/systematics/hermeneutics and exegesis/applied theology), linguistics, history and philosophy, to engage the biblical text as well as contemporary indigenous cultures to deal with the challenges of witchcraft beliefs, accusations, stigmatization and abuses, in every form and especially against poor vulnerable children.
13. I strongly agree with the conclusion of the authors that: "If the above summary is correct, then the issues playing out in Kinshasa churches have contributing translational roots that go back all the way to the Latin Vulgate translation—a translation that influenced the whole history of Western Christendom. The fact that witch hunts thrived under Latin influenced Christian territories and not under Greek influenced Christian territories, raises interesting questions on the extent to which differing Bible translations affected this—with Western Europe influenced by the *maleficos* translation" (45). This obviously applies to every other context in which people use their Bible translations to justify the victimization of supposed 'witches'.
14. There is need for pastors to be given proper theological education on the challenges of the society and how they can be solved without

compounding the problem due to misinterpretation and misapplication of the Scriptures.

15. There is need to have a broad-based curriculum that will combine different related disciplines to tackle the menace of witchcraft related incidents in the society.
16. There is need for a clear proactive action plan to deal with the issues of witch and witchcraft accusations, stigmatization and abuses. EPED is doing an excellent job and the membership should be extended to scholars who are recognized to be engaged in witchcraft related situations.
17. I strongly suggest that the research project carried out in Kinshasa, DRC, should be repeated in other parts of Africa and Asia and scholars from diverse disciplines be engaged to come up with more qualitative results that will change the course of history as it did in Europe.

Reference

- Priest, Robert J., Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell. 2020. Christian Pastors and Alleged Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC. *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 4(1):1-51.



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