

RESPONSES

Conversation Time has Come

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This research by Priest, Ngolo and Stabell (2020) on (alleged) child-witches is very detailed and methodically executed. I am convinced that the report will enforce an “Africa-wide and even global Christian conversation” among scholars from different disciplines. However, the belief-based nature of the concept witchcraft, like many other religious and cultural beliefs, may require scientific patience. Some of the topics for future conversations include the following points raised as responses to the present study.

Children are simply victims. In societies where people believe in witchcraft, children are less often accused of being witches. The case of Kinshasa seems to reveal a strategy to expel undesirable children, or those seen as economic burdens, from families by step-parents. Throughout the narratives in this report, we see step-fathers/mothers pushing pastors to confirm children’s witchcraft. Evidences presented are shallow and weak. Some pastors are receiving ‘gifts’ or bribes for practicing exorcism. It should be clear in the conversation that children are scapegoats for the social evil step-parents go through. These children are probably not be able to understand the social evils (poverty, unemployment, marital conflicts) they are accused of. Are they even able to conceptualize witchcraft? Debates on cases in Kinshasa ought to be treated under ‘child abuse’ rather than ‘witchcraft’. The judiciary can deal with such abusers and the pastors who take such opportunities for getting customers. Other conversations, like the universality of the idea of witchcraft, Satan, demons, witches can be discussed elsewhere than through child accusations in the courts.

The meaning of suffering is another conversation point raised in this report. There is much suffering in the world, despite technological progress. Moral causal ontology is relevant for theologians. The case of Job in the Bible is presented as a suffering not caused by his sins but for the purpose of a test. However, the Israelites’ exile in Babylon is interpreted by the biblical prophets as a judgment of God because the Israelites did not keep the Torah. In some African societies (surely among the Lugbara in Northeastern D. R. Congo), whenever someone (or a community) experiences suffering or repeated accidents, he would ask himself whether he had committed an unlawful act.

Such introspection created room for confession, sacrifice, reparation and healing (in cases of diseases). Socio-cultural anthropologists can look deeper into it.

In such communities, it is not a large step from an astrophysical causal ontology to a moral causal ontology. Often, the first ontology is a necessary step for establishing responsibility in the second. For instance, a person who sends a little child into a bush infested by venomous snakes would be held responsible if the child was killed by a snake. He would have ‘caused’ the death of the child. In the conversation, ‘causality’ will be clearly distinguished from ‘responsibility’, as happens in debates about climate change, and its ‘natural’ calamities. In such conversation, immediate cause will be distinguished from remote cause since some languages may not have separate words for the two.

Interpersonal causal ontology is the one that provokes more ink and saliva to flow. Before conversations move further on suffering and misfortune mystically attributed by other human beings, there is a need to clarify our conceptions and the terms we use to identify those human beings. One preliminary question for defining a ‘witch’ is whether a human being can possess or exercise evil occult power. For instance, can a human being’s soul temporarily leave the physical body and return into it? Is astral projection a reality or a folktale? If yes is the answer, while temporarily out of the body, can this soul incarnate itself into an animal (cat, lion, snake, bees, etc.), then harm other human beings? If the answer to these questions is no, then a witch should be defined as “an *imaginary* human being who can fly, metamorphose itself into an animal to harm people.” The debate about witches would be about a social fiction. Those harming children and adults based on such fiction should simply be arrested by the police. After all, human languages can produce terms referring to non-real beings of objects, such as ‘unicorn’, ‘Father Christmas’, etc. Despite a high occurrence of Father Christmas (like witches) in real communications and their full social implications, Father Christmas is not real. Unfortunately, witchcraft accusation has harmful and sometimes fatal consequences as we see in D. R. Congo.

The challenge would be to start a conversation with the premise that human occult power is not real.

Unfortunately, opposite beliefs are wide-spread, claimed to be based on facts, not only in matters of witchcraft, but also of other modern cultic brotherhoods, such as Satanists, Freemasonry, Rosicrucian, and many other secret societies in Africa. Those who practice astral projection in search of wealth, celebrity and power in D. R. Congo are said to be numerous. They harm other human beings by offering them as sacrifices, it is said. But the practitioners are not ready to open up for scientific research. Until then, conversations about astral projection and human supernatural powers will remain classified as social fiction, or we must say there are powers out there which people *experience*, but on which it is difficult to *experiment* for establishing the truth.

It is good that, with this report, the time has come for deep and systematic conversation about this topic of imaginary witchcraft. Facts-based conversation will help the debate move forward; beliefs-based conversation will degenerate into inter-confessional fundamentalist debates.

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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