

## RESPONSE

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# Comments on Christian Pastors and Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC

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The authors Priest, Ngolo, and Stabell in their article on “Christian Pastors and Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC” (2020) began by very carefully defining the terms witchcraft, witch, and bewitching from an African perspective. Witchcraft deals with issues of explaining evil, the inexplicable, the malign secret causes of misfortune, illness, and death. Witchcraft beliefs answer the question of why misfortune, illness, evil, or death happens to one person at a specific time and place and it does not happen to another person who was also there at that place and time doing the same things. It explains the intersection of events, time, and people. It provides the ultimate etiology. Those with witchcraft beliefs also recognize the immediate cause of those problems (e.g., an automobile or motorcycle accident, illness, etc.). Yet almost all deaths, other than those of the very elderly who have fulfilled their functions in life or who have died because of God’s punishment for the person’s actions, are attributed to witchcraft. It is the ultimate cause of death that must be dealt with; it is that cause which Western style medicine fails to address.

This belief system is widespread in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, missionaries and Christian church leaders have often either not addressed this issue or done so poorly. Today Christian pastors and other religious church leaders are the most important functionaries in many sub-Saharan African countries, and they need to provide a response from Christianity to help people know how to deal with it. Today this has become a contested area of culture with some Christian pastors making and even affirming witchcraft accusations, some praying for deliverance from witchcraft of those accused, some not knowing how to deal with it, and some caring for those accused. This is a much-needed study from these Christian pastors’ perspective on child witch accusations in DRC, an epicenter for such child witch accusations.

The children accused are often those in areas of social cleavage in society. For example, stepchildren may be accused of witchcraft by their non-biological parent with a biological parent tending to protect their

own children. If children have physical disabilities, other related psychological problems, some unusual behaviors, or are orphans, they may be accused of being witches. In some African cultures, children are not accused of witchcraft; in fact, when I was talking with an African pastor’s wife, she knew of cultures that do accuse children, but she thought that such accusations were not credible.

The results of witchcraft accusations on children include insults, threats, food deprivation, and often eviction from their homes. This results in thousands of children living on the streets, finding food wherever they can, seeking to survive, and where they are further victimized as rejects from society. The EPED organization seeks to care for these children. The authors state that in DRC there is a law that it is illegal to accuse a child of being a witch. As I read through the article, I kept looking for what the police were doing about enforcing this law. I did not find any examples where that was the case. They leave it to the pastors to deal with this important social issue impacting the youngest and most vulnerable in the population.

When I was living in Africa, the longer I was there, the more areas of the local culture I found that were impacted by witchcraft beliefs. While theoretically a witch does not volitionally cause illnesses, misfortunes, and death; those accused of witchcraft are asked to confess to having done so as though they have acted volitionally. If pushed to its logical conclusion, there is a point at which the entire logic of witchcraft beliefs can be questioned; yet many do not do so. For example, it seems incompatible to claim that witchcraft is an unintentional use of spiritual power and to warn witches to desist from using their witchcraft to harm others. Some call the intentional use of witchcraft-substance against another person “voluntary witchcraft.”

Accusation of witchcraft for adults provides a check on anti-social behavior and encourages social conformity. Witchcraft accusations teach the population to relate well to their families and friends, to be respectful, to contribute to the community in helpful ways, and to avoid things that are hurtful to others—e.g., anger,

physical altercations, etc. This situation reminds me of the blind beggar whom Jesus healed as recorded in John 9:1-12. Jesus' disciples asked who had sinned, this man or his parents, that thereby caused his blindness. They too changed the question from why he was born blind to who sinned and caused his blindness, such as we see in DRC. Jesus rejected their assertion by saying that neither this man nor his parents sinned to cause his blindness.

The authors identify as problematic the fact that in many (most?) sub-Saharan African cultures there is not an ultimate evil being in their spirit world, namely, Satan. If there is no ultimate evil being, people still need to explain evil, misfortune, illness and death. In traditional African culture the belief is that people cause evil by their spirits leaving their bodies, often during sleep or inattentiveness, to meet with other spirits in the spiritual realm, resulting in evil, misfortune, illnesses, and death in the physical realm for some other people. Pastors must teach their congregants about the activities of Satan, namely that he is a liar and deceiver. The false accusations against children come from him. In contrast God calls us to love and protect children. Jesus specifically said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:16).

The authors used a questionnaire format for this study. In all they distributed questionnaires to 1000 pastors and received responses from 713 respondents. A question I have is, would oral interviews with pastors rather than having pastors fill out questionnaires have enhanced the responses received? In the case of the DRC respondents, there was no control over the context in which pastors filled out the questionnaires. Another question is, to what extent do the pastors have a functional literacy level or less. Passing out questionnaires discriminates against pastors who are only functionally literate or illiterate. Requiring the skills of reading and writing would have impacted their responses. For example, the low response rate from the pastors in the Kimbanguist churches could have been mitigated by having pastors and others in pastoral positions interviewed rather than requiring written responses. Oral interviewing would likely have taken longer, though with a group of prepared interviewers, it could have been done expeditiously. When I sought responses from an African population to an interview schedule that my research assistant and I had developed, we administered it orally to each respondent. I observed that the use of a written questionnaire resulted in a group coming together to discuss each question in order to arrive at the "correct" response. Even after pretesting the questionnaire and revising a few questions, some questions were still ambiguous.

The authors readily admit that they did not catch all of these. This is a common problem when administering a research instrument. It is hard to anticipate how people will interpret specific questions.

In the results of the questionnaire over two-thirds of the respondents reported that in their sermons they teach that misfortunes may be caused by child witches. Thus, pastors themselves are a major source of these child witch accusations. They are often those who make accusations against specific children, seek confessions from those children, and hold deliverance services.

In reporting basic demographics about the population, I failed to see statistics on the marital status of female pastors, healers, etc. Frequently in traditional African culture, there were specific roles for unmarried or divorced single women, namely they often became diviners and herbalists. If this statistic were provided, it would have answered the question of whether the role of female pastors' positions has continued their religious functionary positions from their traditional culture. A further statistic missing was whether any pastors were found to have no education. For example, what education have the pastors in Kimbanguist churches received?

There is a good discussion on ministry titles of the respondents. I found that African independent churches often have a more extensive list of positions that congregants may fill than is true of more mainline churches. For example, I found in the Cherubim and Seraphim churches in Nigeria, there were positions named senior mother in Israel, mother in Israel, special apostle, most senior apostle or prophet, senior apostle, evangelist, prophetess, leader, etc. These positions enable people to be involved and to receive recognition in these churches.

Where I lived in Africa among the Bajju in Nigeria an individual is conceived of having both a physical body and a seed. The seed is the living part of a person, the part that is the reincarnated soul of an ancestor. I have conceived of the seed as equivalent to the soul or spirit of an individual. In speaking of the "mystical seed of witchcraft" are Priest, et al. speaking about the inherent evil of one's spirit, our original sin nature? How does that relate to the reincarnated seed of an ancestor? A further question that the researchers addressed briefly is the role of demons in the context of witchcraft beliefs. If a child is accused of witchcraft does that mean that a demon is believed to have entered the child? If so, how are demons identified? More focus on this issue would be helpful. Christians often identify demons having entered people who cause trouble for others. Since pastors often hold deliverance sessions for those accused of witchcraft, are they seeking deliverance from demons?

The authors found that church networks appear to be central to the spread of child witch ideologies and

deliverance practices. This is a key takeaway from this research. Pastors and church leaders need to take the lead in combatting these ideologies and teaching about God's love for all, including of children who are accused.

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