

RESPONSE

Witchcraft Accusations in Comparative Contexts: The Early Modern European Witch-hunts and Alleged Child Witches in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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First, we want to congratulate Robert Priest, Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell (2020) for completing this significant and thought-provoking study on a sensitive and unsettling topic. The length and depth of the work, and the range of participants that the research team involved, is impressive. We trust that the insights gained will provide a foundation for further approaches and increased understanding across constituencies. We therefore consider it a privilege to be asked to respond.

We come at this project as historians of early modern Europe and colonial North America. Therefore, our comments will concern the European and settler colonial witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which an estimated quarter of a million people were unjustly accused and some 50,000 executed. We hope that, through a contextual, comparative approach to current-day child witch accusations in Africa, our comments will be useful. Specifically, we will address the translation of Scripture as a factor in the European witch accusations; the development of demonology and of the concept of the witch in the European imaginary; the social function of witchcraft accusations; the interrelation of witchcraft accusations and children; and the role of clergy and other societal leaders in encouraging or turning back accusations.

The Bible provided a touchstone for defining the reality and nature of witchcraft, and for prescribing punishments of those judged to be guilty of it. In the European context, at least two issues arose that are worth mentioning. First, the act of translation was often inaccurate or value-laden; Hebrew and Greek terms were wrenched into vernacular idioms or preconceptions, and certain terms were interpreted through convenient cultural filters. Second, prosecutors of witches used a hermeneutic of selectivity, focusing only on scripture texts that suited their purposes while losing

the wider view of Christian charity and uplift. What was thought to be the “literal” sense of Scripture was actually misleading and, in the wrong hands, dangerous.

Through the medieval period, the Reformation, and beyond, distinctive conceptions of demons and of witches developed within European cultures. These constructs consisted of a blend of elite and popular beliefs, as well as a synthesis of ancient folk practices and Christian teachings, catalyzing in times of plague, religious wars, and economic hardship. The conception of the witch undergirding the peak of the European witch-hunt in the early modern period originated in the late fifteenth century in and adjacent to the Swiss Cantons. Inquisitors interpreted various magical folk practices in the alpine regions of Switzerland, the Dolomites, and southwestern Germany as demonic, often combining them and associating them with witchcraft. Demonological tracts describing the necessary connection between witchcraft and Satan were well-distributed among theologians and inquisitors in that region by that time and became common theological fare throughout Europe and colonial North America shortly thereafter. In fact, many churchmen attending the Council of Basel (1431-1440) were also authors of early demonological assessments of witchcraft, Johannes Nider most notorious among them. His *Formicarius* (1436-7), which was an essential link in the development of the stereotype of the witch, framed witchcraft as a threat to the authority of the church.

The history of witchcraft in early modern European context also demonstrates the inflammatory and systemic effects of religious conflict, war, and epidemics on fears of witchcraft. Some of the first witch-hunts in all of Europe occurred in northern and western Switzerland in the areas where the Dominican Inquisition targeted the remnants of the Waldensian movement around the turn of the fifteenth century.

Western Switzerland in particular remained a hotbed of witchcraft accusations during the Reformation, as a continuous wave of religious refugees fled France. Many refugees in Switzerland came from Savoy, which was stricken by waves of plague in the sixteenth century. Fears of disease coupled with overcrowding, the friction of growing religious pluralism, and the threat of religious wars made Pays de Vaud, the area around Geneva, and the western rim of Switzerland as a whole one of the busiest zones in the history of European witch-hunts. The same factors—as well as economic hardship and famine—contributed to fears of witchcraft in early modern German states as well.

One way to relieve uncertainties—to which the authors allude in referencing Richard Shweder's "interpersonal' causal ontology"—was by finding scapegoats. That need for relief became most pressing as the boundaries of the body were ruptured in the early modern Euro-American context. By that, we mean that many witchcraft accusations in that context can be described as attempts to explain inexplicable biological malfunctions, including deformed or still-born babies, infertility, the health of plants and animals, and various other bodily traumas. We might expand the list of questions included in Schweder's causal string—the question of "why" was not only converted into "who," but also "how?" The proposed answer was often witchcraft. This study demonstrates ample correlation to the reality that witchcraft becomes most real in Kinshasa, as it did in early modern Europe, when inexplicable trauma arises in everyday lives.

Speaking generally, Europeans viewed Satan and his subservient devils, along with lesser unholy beings, as physical, malevolent forces locked in a cosmic conflict with God and his angels, out to corrupt and destroy the church. To prosecute this conspiracy, they posited that devils sought covenants with witches, and met with them regularly in grotesque gatherings called "sabbats." These anxious theological perspectives were made available to the populous as explanations for natural disasters and afflictions of all kinds. Meanwhile, the stereotype of the witch evolved from including adult men and women, from upper and lower classes, to that of the "hag," an older woman, usually widowed, poor, possibly vagrant or dependent, unsociable, and contentious. Consequently, women, and especially elderly and poor ones, were disproportionately accused, and women were among the great majority of those executed, to the extent that the European witch-hunt has been equated with gynocide, or women-hunting. Accusations and executions in early modern Euro-American context, then, functioned as a way to remove burdensome weight from the community. Such removal acted both as scapegoating and as mitigation of the responsibility in Christian community to care for the poor, the ill, and the handicapped, creating a way to

skirt laws designed to make communities do just that, such as those in Massachusetts Bay Colony during the seventeenth century.

The demography of European and New World witch accusations from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries was therefore different from that which prevails today in the DRC, with children as accused. This is not to say that there were not cases in the early modern Euro-American witch-hunts in which children were accused: witness Finnmark, in northern Norway, during the early 1660s, in which six girls were accused of witchcraft; or Salem, Massachusetts, in the early 1690s, where four-year-old Dorcas Good was accused of being a witch along with her mother. However, the numbers pale in comparison to those in Kinshasa and surrounding areas.

Even more, children in Euro-America were usually accused of witchcraft in order to compel them to implicate others, especially *adult* members of their own family, who were seen as the real source of bewitchment. This is what happened at Finnmark, at Lancashire, England, in the early 1610s, and at Salem. Two of the primary accusers at Lancashire, Jennet and James Device, aged nine and eleven years old, respectively, helped send their sister, mother, and grandmother to death. Young James was also executed as a witch. And little Dorcas Good was coerced into accusing her mother, reflecting the belief that witchcraft was hereditary, inherited from parents or other older relations. Indeed, in early modern Euro-American accusations, children were not commonly accused but were rather accusers of relatives and neighbors.

The role of the child-accuser was a traumatic one in European and American witch trials. Children who accused their fellow townfolk of witchcraft were subject to the scrutiny of the entire town themselves. At Salem, Justice John Hathorne and other magistrates made it clear that recanting testimony would open the door to murder charges, even for child witnesses. Since the Court of Oyer and Terminer relied heavily upon spectral evidence for convictions, the young female accusers' words carried the weight of life and death for the accused. If any of the child or teenage accusers were to break rank, as Mary Warren briefly did, they risked being prosecuted for witchcraft themselves. This created a dire atmosphere for the rotating cast of girls at the heart of the Salem episode, which was deeply manifest in the aftermath: Ann Putnam, one of the most active of the Salem child accusers, issued a heavy apology to the Salem community some years after the crisis. Dorcas Good, whose mother was executed partially on the basis of her testimony, was deeply disturbed her whole life.

One major finding of this study of alleged child witches is the role of the clergy and other religious leaders. This certainly was a lesson from European

history, in which theologians and pastors, as well as jurists and magistrates, were instrumental in formulating and prosecuting the intellectual and legal foundations of witch theory. As in Kinshasa, clergy and law enforcement officers largely encouraged and legitimated accusations, making theological assertions of Satan's activity available to their communities as recourse for explaining natural disasters, misbehavior, bodily malfunctions and malformations, and afflictions of all kinds. Looking again at the Salem hysteria, the minister of Salem Village, Samuel Parris, deliberately created a climate of fear and conspiracy regarding demonic threats to the local church, prophesying about the threat as a means of extending his personal power. Salem Village was located in Essex County, the ministers of which came together as a very influential voice of authority, but they were ambivalent at best on how the magistracy should prosecute accusations, and their lack of clarity permitted the continuation of trials and executions. But there were other religious and political leaders who, exercising a healthy skepticism and a concern for consistent rule of law, stepped forward and finally succeeded in putting a stop to the proceedings. Although witchcraft accusations by no means ceased in British North America or in the United States, most were dismissed as motivated by interpersonal or psychological issues. A well-informed and impartial clergy was essential to this process.

One difference between the landscape of today's Kinshasa and the early modern Euro-American context is worth exploring further. The aforementioned role of demonology in creating the stereotype of the witch is unquestioned. Moreover, there is a close connection between the judicial authorization of spectral evidence (via particular demonological theologies) and the involvement of children in early modern Euro-American witch-hunts. Without spectral evidence, there was little ground on which to accuse children or to employ them as accusatory witnesses in Euro-American witch-hunts. A different kind of Christian theological and ritual affirmation and propagation of child accusations occurs in current-day Kinshasa, one that appears directly related to the influence of Pentecostalism and the intermixing of Pentecostalism and local magico-religious practices. We might open new hermeneutic territory by comparing Pentecostal theology and spiritual warfare to late medieval and early modern European demonological works espousing the use of spectral evidence.

Another proposition: How does religious competition (see pages 5 and 35) affect witchcraft beliefs and accusations? The "religious marketplace" of Kinshasa certainly does not resemble fragmented, violent European contexts in the late medieval and early modern periods, but a sense of religious sectarianism or at least competition is present in both. It may be that

for churches to articulate and particularize their authority in competitive or unstable religious environments, the issue of otherization in general, and witchcraft in particular, becomes more prevalent. The ability to detect witches is a form of power and authority—potentially redolent both in our context and in Kinshasa. It may also affect the motivation of church leaders seeking to identify witches, sometimes even unprompted.

We have attempted to offer what we hope are some helpful reflections on child witchcraft accusations in Kinshasa, as laid out in this foundational study by Priest and his colleagues, resourcing the historic European witch-hunt. Scripture translation, demonology and the witch concept; the social function of witchcraft accusations through scapegoating, witchcraft accusations and children, and the role of clergy and other leaders are some of the salient comparative issues that can be brought to bear on the Congolese situation. We hope that these historical lessons offer solutions that are culturally sensitive yet that correct injustices.

Suggested Reading

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