

RESPONSE

Overview of the Work of the Pastoral Team for Children in Need (EPED¹) in its Struggle Against the Problem of So-Called Child-Witches in the DR Congo

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1. Social Context and Issues raised by the Phenomenon of So-Called Child-Witches

In the Democratic Republic of Congo in general, and throughout the city of Kinshasa in particular, the phenomenon of children accused as witches represents the greatest of dangers to family and social stability. It constitutes an important challenge for political actors and for civil society. This is because so-called child-witches—or more accurately, children baselessly accused of witchcraft—are victims of an unacceptable evil that has been growing in Congolese society (see Priest, Ngolo and Stabell 2020).

There are multiple causes that lie behind accusations of witchcraft involving children. Family instability, inability to stay in school, malnutrition, armed conflict, the rural exodus resulting from different aspects of poverty in Congo, all figure among the predominant social realities that result in children being accused as witches. A number of careful observers have argued that this phenomenon did not make its appearance in the DR Congo until around the 1980 with the advent of a number of new religious sects. It should be noted that these sects have become a fundamental reality of the local context, given their exponential growth from that time to the present—growth that has been spurred on by a diverse set of practices, beliefs and discourses that vary somewhat from one denomination to another.

As a result, the Ministry of Justice has granted legal personality to thousands of new churches, ministries,

and sects. Others exist without legal standing, functioning on the basis of provisional authorization delivered by municipal authorities, and this in defiance of the law. These new religious movements have long engaged in well-developed practices of exorcism, and they sometimes play a significantly negative role in magnifying and lending legitimacy to fears and beliefs that result in children being accused as witches.

Today, accusations of witchcraft are a veritable tsunami, a tidal wave that is sweeping across all of Congolese society. It is important to emphasize that "these accusations are very complex and are part of a panoply of tools that people deploy in the context of an economy in crisis. This economic reality has created so many difficulties that it has become impossible to count them all. Moreover, such difficulties leave in their wake many disoriented, uprooted, insecure and, therefore, vulnerable families. It is in this context that families naturally begin the search for a solution, and often the simplest answer appears to be the best. With this comes the temptation to accept as the only possible and definitive answer: It must be the fault of these children. Children thus become the scapegoats for explaining the family's problems."²

It should also be noted that families affected by such accusations of witchcraft are suffering from a loss of direction, a kind of disorientation, and are thus unable to participate meaningfully in a proper decision-making process or to find real answers to their real questions. Frustrated, uprooted, unprotected, helpless and hopeless, and therefore unmotivated, these families

¹ Équipe Pastorale auprès des Enfants en Détresse.

² Excerpt from a paper read by Reverend Abel Ngolo at the Theological Forum on Child-witchcraft Accusations held in Nairobi, Kenya, from March 1-5, 2016.

experience fear beyond their ability to endure, all because of the different problems that they face in their lives.

Among its various activities, the Pastoral Team for Children in Need (EPED) has at times brought together pastors for the purpose of sharing their experiences with each other. Through such gatherings we have heard several pastors say that it is families that are largely responsible for bringing such accusations against their children. To put it plainly, biological families are the hinge on which accusations of child-witchcraft turn. In light of the testimony offered freely by these pastors, it is clear that accusations directed against child victims are at the root of all kinds of terrible events that happen both in nuclear and extended families. It is always possible to find children who can be labeled and considered as Satan's little minions and/or as dangerous burdens who have been assigned the task of destroying the family.

It is unquestionably the case that the main actors in the validation of child-witch accusations come from the ranks of pastors, shepherds, apostles, prophets, archbishops and other Christian leaders. Through pastoral dialogue or counseling, they use their authority to affirm or deny accusations brought by family members. The case of Cedrick Kalume (11 years old) provides a clear example. He told his story as follows:

After the tragic death of my little sister, my dad took me to a church called Mpeve a Nlongo (Holy Spirit) in the municipality of Masina. My dad told the pastor about our family's bereavement, whereupon the latter subjected me to continuous interrogation and intimidation, forcing me to confess that I had committed the crime. After my confession, he made me fast from food and water for three consecutive days, and poured olive oil on my eyes morning and evening for my deliverance. After all this, when we returned home, my mother and father drove me out of the house. That's why the street has become my home.³

Thus it is that there are thousands and thousands of children who are tortured and at times burned to death, who die of hunger, who driven from their family home and who are then forced to live on the streets. All this happens because, in the name of the church, some of its leaders practice a type of "therapy" that is criminal in nature, wrongly accusing children as witches. Clearly, those who practice this kind of pastoral ministry are

engaged in heresy, though it has yet to be called such. They should never have been allowed to establish this new type of Christian "ministry," nor to usurp the ministry of other established churches. Their actions are self-condemning. Moreover, self-arrogation of pastoral authority is always illegitimate; such practice would never be excused by any ecclesial body worthy of the name.

2. The Social Status of Children Accused of Witchcraft

It is terribly shocking to describe the social status of a child in crisis, and all the more so when it is one who has been accused of being a witch. The term currently used to designate such a child is the Lingala word, "Ntshuor" (in the city of Kinshasa the older term "Ndoki" is gradually disappearing).

In sociological terms, children who have been accused as witches are lost in anonymity, loneliness, marginalization, and alienation. They belong nowhere and to no one. They feel misunderstood, betrayed, oppressed, disappointed, alienated, degraded, without importance to anyone, disconnected, unheard, rejected, not taken seriously, and often driven out of the family home. They are, in short, mistreated in every conceivable way.

To paraphrase the words of Marie-France Le Heuzey,⁴ children accused of witchcraft feel that they have lost control over their lives. They constantly replay past scenarios of abuse through repetitive games involving all or part of the trauma they have experienced, or through recurring nightmares full of terrifying content. Sometimes traumatic memories reappear in the form of hallucinations. Children who have experienced rejection of this kind sometimes succumb to sleep disorders. They may have trouble falling asleep, or find that they wake up during the night for no reason. This can lead to irritability, anger, difficulty in concentrating, a decline in academic performance, and other behavioral struggles.

3. Actions Taken by the Pastoral Team for Children in Distress (EPED) in the Face of These Problems

All of this represents an attack on the ideal image that we have of children, but also of their families and of society in general. Thus, in an effort to address this

³ Interview with Cedrick Kalume, conducted on January 6, 2014, after EPED social workers succeeded in reinserting him in his family with his paternal uncle in the Lemba Commune of Kinshasa.

⁴ Marie-France le Heuzey, « L'enfant maltraité, le regard du pédopsychiatre, *Revue Cairn Info*, posted on January 1, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.3917/lae.081.0026>

distressing situation, EPED has formulated a three-fold pastoral praxis, namely: (i) personalized pastoral care for children in crisis, (ii) pastoral care for families through collective action, and (iii) pastoral care for the community.

First, with regard to the personalized psychological and pastoral care for children and adolescents in crisis, EPED has since 2011 developed a new therapeutic methodology called "The Sidewalk Project" supported by material provided in "The Green Bag" which is designed to give children visual tools as an aid to reflection on their situation.⁵

This new approach is designed for use with children in need and/or those accused of witchcraft. It focuses their attention on various pictures contained in "The Green Bag." Each of these pictures provides an opportunity for children to regain a more balanced view of themselves and of their individual lives. The images are eye-catching and are chosen with a view to providing children with a chance to take stock of their own self-understanding. This approach promotes healing of emotional trauma in the children's individual lives, encouraging restoration through interactive biblically-based materials that emphasize God's love for children. Thus whatever degree of exclusion a given child has experienced, this material contributes to the rebuilding of self-esteem, the development of individual capabilities, and the opportunity to participate in the life of the church and of the wider society.

To illustrate how this form of therapy works, take the example of the lives of two different children, Simon (15 years old) and André (14 years old). Both of these boys were accused as witches and driven out of their home by their own birth-parents. One of the EPED pastors, Josué Mabele, took them in and cared for them. Four years later, Simon has been accepted into the Medical School of the University of Kinshasa, after having graduated from high school with good grades.⁶ André, meanwhile, has been welcomed back into his extended family by one of his uncles. He too has graduated from high school. Thus it is possible that working together we can transform adversity into opportunity, and share with the world the glory of serving Christ through the compassion that we show to vulnerable children. EPED is very grateful to Pastor Josué Mabele Oye Ngamiku for the way that he has proven himself to be a champion for children by

demonstrating the dramatic difference between the criminal "therapy" that is witch-accusation over against an approach based on compassion and on God's love for children.

With regard the second element of EPED's praxis—"pastoral care for families through collective action"—EPED aims to support families through various activities that allow them to meet together, strengthen ties among themselves, build relationships of trust, and pursue collective socio-educational goals. For this purpose, EPED instituted a network called REAAP⁷ whose goal it is to help those parents who have come to the EPED's attention to find answers to questions they have about the education of their children. This network seeks to make a variety of programs available to all families—programs that aim to support parents in their role and to develop their parenting skills. REAAP thus engages in the following activities, among others:

- leading discussion groups among parents
- organizing parents into groups for the purposes of reflection, research, and/or training, and thus engaging them in the construction of knowledge regarding positive parenting
- providing economic support for vulnerable families through a microcredit program
- pastoral dialogue and home visits

The third component of EPED's praxis we refer to as "pastoral care for the community." Here the purpose is not to mobilize the community at large, but rather to equip the Church so that it is able to engage with the needs of the wider community. Seen this way, this element of our praxis is definitely "social" in the sense that the church is encouraged to address the felt needs of the community in which it is located. Among the basic elements of a process of church mobilization we would include: (i) the transmission of a vision for this type of ministry to pastors, (ii) the transmission of this same vision to the congregation, (iii) the establishment of a well-defined group tasked with the management of this initiative, (iv) recruiting volunteers, (v) training volunteers, (vi) supporting volunteers.

It is important that we communicate a vision to both pastors and to lay members of the church so that they will engage in the kind of action that will ensure the protection, well-being, and safety of children.

⁵ The Sidewalk Project was initiated by SGM Lifeworlds, based in London, UK. This is a unique approach to providing psychological and pastoral care designed for use with street children, using interactive biblical material highlighting God's love for children.

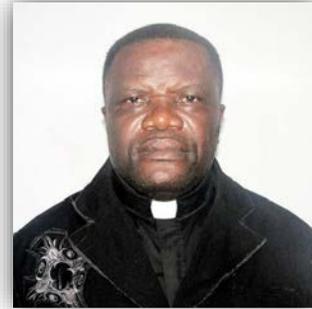
⁶ Reverend Ngolo provides the actual grade (62%) that Simon achieved. That seems low by American-Canadian standards, but in the Congolese system, this is a reasonably good mark.

⁷ REAAP : Réseau d'Ecoute d'Appui et d'Accompagnement des Parents (Parent's Network for Mutual Listening and Support).

If the church is to engage with the wider community around it, the church itself must first be stirred to action. Only then will it be able to mobilize the community so as to encourage the community to take responsibility for its own needs. This approach is different from others that have gone under the label of “Church mobilization” in that once the church itself has been challenged to take action, it becomes an enabler rather than a provider. In other words, rather than itself providing answers for the community’s needs, the local church seeks to transmit a vision to members of the wider community, and to give that community the capacity to identify and address its own needs. Thus the local church works *with* the community rather than *for* the community.

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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