

Children Accused of Witchcraft

An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa

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Executive summary

Introduction

This study addresses the issue of children who are victims of violence and mistreatment due to local beliefs, representations and practices, in particular, relating to witchcraft. While the harmful consequences of these beliefs have been publicised internationally, their origins often remain unclear. The objective of the present document, therefore, is to reveal and analyze the diversity and complexity of these phenomena - often falsely associated with "African tradition" - related to beliefs in witchcraft and the "mystical" world. Using examples from sub-Saharan Africa, the study aims to clarify the basis for certain social practices that are wholly or partially misunderstood by western observers. This ignorance of local social norms, creates a gulf of misunderstanding between local social actors and the international framework of norms.

Behaviours commonly associated with accusations of witchcraft include violence, mistreatment, abuse, infanticide and the abandonment of children. From a western perspective, such practices are violations of the rights of children. The objective of this study is to understand both the complexity and the variety of the phenomena described, as well as the causes, which are not only cultural and social, but also economic and political. The study targets child protection agencies and aims to promote better understanding of local representations and beliefs, as well as to provide guidance on effective child protection interventions.

Witchcraft accusations against children

Children accused of witchcraft are subject to psychological and physical violence, first by family members and their circle of friends, then by church pastors or traditional healers. Once accused of witchcraft, children are stigmatized and discriminated for life. Increasingly vulnerable and caught in a cycle of accusation, they risk yet further accusations of witchcraft. Children accused of witchcraft may be killed, although more often they are abandoned by their parents and live on the street. A large number of street children have been accused of witchcraft within the family circle. These children are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and to abuse by the authorities. In order to survive and to escape appalling living conditions, they use drugs and alcohol. Often victims of sexual exploitation, they are at increased risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection.

Belief in witchcraft is widespread across sub-Saharan African countries. It was previously believed that these beliefs and socio-cultural practices would disappear over time, but the current situation indicates the contrary. Far from fading away, these social and cultural representations have been maintained and transformed in order to adapt to contemporary contexts. The notion of "witchcraft"¹ is so flexible and elastic that it is able to integrate into all areas of life, including the most "modern" (Geschiere, 1995). For this reason, contemporary witchcraft can no longer be explained in terms of "African tradition". Without wishing to ignore the history and culture of witchcraft, the current forms of belief are more a product of an "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm, 2006), or perhaps a reinvented tradition. Furthermore, the notion of witchcraft today covers a multitude of clearly distinct "occult" phenomena that should be understood in their specific context.

The notion of witchcraft, despite its suggestion of multiple abilities, can perhaps be defined, in a large majority of African countries, as the ability to harm someone through the use of mystical power. Consequently, the sorcerer or witch embodies this wicked persona, driven to commit evil

¹ The notion of witchcraft is only a translation, often inappropriate, of vernacular expressions.

deeds under the influence of the force of witchcraft. Accusations are still the most visible manifestations of belief in witchcraft. Without denying this belief, the violent nature of accusations deserves greater attention from governments and local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Whereas in the past, elderly people, particularly women, were accused, these days the number of children accused of witchcraft is increasing. The frequent accusations are the direct consequence of a generalized climate of “spiritual insecurity” (Ashforth, 2005) that is created notably through spreading the idea of ever-present danger, closely linked with that of witchcraft as the source of all evil. The accusations form part of a general anti-witch movement found within families, churches, as well as State institutions.

Which children are most vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft?

Vulnerable children accused of an act of witchcraft can be divided into three categories. The first category, which includes thousands of children, refers to the urban phenomenon of “child witches”. These children are typically orphans who have lost one or both natural parents; children with a physical disability (or any physical abnormality, including a large head, swollen belly, red eyes, etc.); those with a physical illness (epilepsy, tuberculosis, etc.) or disability (autism, Down Syndrome, etc., or even those who stutter); or especially gifted children. Children showing any unusual behaviour, for example children who are stubborn, aggressive, thoughtful, withdrawn or lazy, also make up this category.

The second category covers children whose birth is considered abnormal, such as the “bad birth” children from the Bight of Benin region. These children may be premature (in the eighth month), or presentation may be in any variety of breech positions, or in the posterior, face-up position during delivery. Also included are twins, who are sometimes associated with the occult, their birth symbolizing the evil or anger of the gods.

The third and final category concerns children with albinism who are killed because of the magic powers supposedly contained in parts of their bodies, including their organs, hair, skin and limbs.

Why are children accused of witchcraft?

There are multiple causes for the recent and growing accusations of witchcraft against children. Anthropologists and social observers are unanimous in recognizing the complexity of economic, political and social factors that contribute to such accusations. The urban phenomenon of “child witches” and the violence that surround them are the result of a “multi-crisis” (De Boeck, 2000). Life in the city, paid employment, consumerism, financial pressure and an emerging individualism have all led to profound transformations in family structures. The result is a dysfunctional family and a disruption of relations between age groups – in particular the legitimacy of parental authority – and between men and women. The changes that have been introduced through development are therefore a challenge to African solidarity.

The political-military situation – civil wars, coups d'état – has caused considerable loss of life. As a result, there are a large number of orphans that are straining the capacities of their relatives. These children are a particularly vulnerable group. The general impoverishment of populations leads to difficulties with schooling and sometimes even with basic subsistence for children who have to fend for themselves from a very young age. Accusations of witchcraft against children can also be a direct consequence of this inability of families to meet their basic needs. In addition to these economic and political crises, and general impoverishment, there are also institutional crises to consider, such as inadequate health services, weak legal system, and the role of civil society.

The fight against witchcraft

In many countries witchcraft accusations are exploited by revivalist, charismatic or Pentecostal churches. Their pastor-prophets fight against witchcraft in the name of God, identifying witches through visions and dreams, and then offering treatment – divine healing and exorcism – to the supposed witches. This “spiritual” work, often of a violent nature, reinforces beliefs in witchcraft and increases accusations. “The more God’s servants fight against witchcraft, the more they get involved in treating witches, and at the end of the day, the more they extend the resources of witchcraft” (Tonda, 2002) as well as their own income. The persecution of witches has become a lucrative “business” for many pastor-prophets. The actions of the pastor-prophets “complement” those of traditional healers who also fight against the malevolent forces of witchcraft by detecting supposed witches.

In certain sub-Saharan African countries, the fight against witchcraft is officially recognized by the judicial system. In countries where practising witchcraft is considered an offence, those accused may have to appear in court. Those found guilty of witchcraft face imprisonment.

Responses to witchcraft accusations against children

It is impossible to eradicate the acts of violence carried out against children accused of witchcraft without first having studied them in detail. Only a thorough understanding of the systems of representations of specific beliefs, the actions and social mechanisms related to the anti-witch movement (mob justice, churches and traditional healers), and the political, economic and social situation of contemporary African societies will enable the development of effective actions for child protection and awareness-raising with regard to the fundamental rights of the child.

Recommendations

Any response to accusations of witchcraft against children should strengthen national child protection systems that prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation and violence, including improving service provision, legal frameworks and access to justice. Moreover, programming and advocacy interventions should promote social change by raising awareness among families and community leaders, mobilizing and working with legal professionals and regulating churches and traditional healers. The following recommendations highlight strategic priorities for programming.

Strengthen evidence and understanding of witchcraft accusations against children

1. In-depth knowledge of beliefs and practices. Effective programme responses have to be based on and informed by an in-depth understanding of the causes of witchcraft accusations against children. Beliefs in witchcraft, abnormal births, the birth of twins or albinos have to be analyzed and understood within the broader cultural, historical, economic and political contexts.

Promote social change through dialogue on witchcraft accusations

2. Support dialogue with religious leaders and traditional healers in order to identify common ground to combat the abuse of children accused of witchcraft and to mobilize religious leaders and traditional healers.

3. Community mobilization and education. Efforts to educate and raise awareness should be done in partnership and dialogue with communities rather than in a top-down manner. Community dialogue can help to bridge the gap between social norms and international human rights norms. It should promote child well-being and safety in a respectful manner and avoid paternalistic education approaches that have failed in the past.

4. Negotiation and mediation between pastors, families and children accused of witchcraft. Negotiation and mediation consists of a dialogue between pastors, families, children accused of witchcraft and organizations defending children's rights. Pastors are important opinion leaders and have considerable influence over child witchcraft accusations.

Promote access to child and family welfare services for child victims

5. Social protection to strengthen vulnerable families. Provide access to basic services (health, education and social protection) for vulnerable and at-risk children and their families. Reducing poverty and economic stress factors should strengthen the protective role of the family and reduce some of the risk factors associated with witchcraft accusations.

6. Support services, safe spaces and reintegration for children accused of witchcraft. Develop services as part of national child protection systems and avoid creating parallel structures for accused children. Avoid further stigmatization and social isolation of children accused of witchcraft.

7. Develop mechanisms and criteria to determine the best interest of children with regard to temporary placement, family reintegration and permanency planning. Best interest determinations should assess the risks associated with the children's return to their family and community.

8. Develop reintegration strategies that include an anti-stigma component. Work with families and communities to fight stigmatization and ensure that children can return home in safety.

D. Promote the role of health professionals in protecting children accused of witchcraft

9. Access and quality of health services. Improve the capacities of health workers and the availability and quality of health services as a way to reduce the belief in witchcraft as a cause of illness. Provide public health education on the most common diseases, such as malaria, AIDS, cancer and diabetes. Promote deliveries in hospitals or health centres.

Promote access to the legal system for children accused of witchcraft

10. Promote legal reform to decriminalize witchcraft, allow for the prosecution of persons harming children and provide special protection to children in contact with the law. Decriminalizing witchcraft will prevent children from coming in conflict with the law and all the consequences associated with it. Laws governing the prosecution of persons who accuse and harm children will allow for a more robust response by the legal system. This includes religious leaders and traditional healers involved in practices that harm children.

11. Raise awareness and educate legal professionals. In countries where child protection laws against witchcraft accusations have been introduced but are inadequately applied, training should emphasize respecting and applying the existing laws.

12. Regulate traditional healers and the activities of Pentecostal and Revivalist churches. The issuing of licenses to practice as a traditional healer should come under closer scrutiny. Develop specific laws to regulate harmful practices by churches and religious leaders.

13. Strengthen birth registration

Evaluate promising practices

14. Evaluate, review and monitor existing initiatives to ensure that programmes are informed by evidence of effective approaches and avoid repeating mistakes

INTRODUCTION

In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of children who suffer from abuse, exclusion, stigmatization and physical violence (sometimes fatal) as a result of beliefs in witchcraft, the magical power of twins or people with albinism, is increasing each year. This assessment raises questions and often surprises African themselves. The printed press, television, radio, and more recently Internet sites in various regions of Africa regularly report shocking figures on the number of violent acts against children in the context of practices related to these beliefs. Few people, however, consider the deep-rooted causes of these “horrific and terrifying” events that are presented as some kind of “African tradition”.

It is important to clarify, right from the start, that this “African tradition” is not necessarily defined by the past. While it is true that certain ancient practices have been more or less maintained, then adapted to contemporary contexts, other practices that appear to be ancient or claim to be are often of very recent origin. Such is the case of the sale of body parts (especially from people with albinism) or the mainly urban phenomenon of children accused of witchcraft. According to the most recent anthropological studies, witchcraft and the sacrifice of people with albinism cannot be interpreted solely in terms of “African tradition”. It is rather a “new” tradition or an “invented tradition”, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm (2006). In other words, these are “flexible” traditions that have been adapted to the contemporary world.

Irrespective of the type of so-called “traditional” practices, the consequences are often the same: children are stigmatized, discriminated, abandoned, mistreated, tortured or even killed. This study will attempt to categorize, present and analyze certain beliefs and practices that currently affect children in sub-Saharan Africa. These practices stigmatize and promote violence against children, thereby infringing fundamental rights of the child as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1989). This includes, for example, the inherent right to life (Article 6, Paragraph 1); protection against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the beliefs of the child’s parents (Article 2, Paragraph 2); and such protection and care as necessary for his or her well-being (Article 3, Paragraph 2), etc.

Within the vast range of beliefs and thought systems that exist in sub-Saharan Africa with respect to the origins of the world and cosmology, sacrifice and the invisible world, certain practices concern children in particular. This study will present an analysis of these diverse practices, in their specific contexts, in order to promote better understanding of their socio-cultural representations and meaning. The study will also attempt to show the diversity and complexity of phenomena and practices related to contemporary representations that have a particular effect on children in sub-Saharan Africa, notably in Central and West Africa.

The first section of this report presents a review of historical and more recent anthropological studies and highlights the vast field of African witchcraft (in particular witchcraft accusations), which has integrated a considerable number of recent practices involving children.

The second section addresses the urban phenomenon of “child witches”, in particular its geographical distribution, the profile of children who are accused and the causes for increasingly frequent accusations against children. Several explanatory factors are proposed.

The third section is devoted to the presentation and analysis of various practices related to “abnormal” births – unusual delivery and child witches; children with albinism and twins. These practices are related both to cosmological beliefs as well as contemporary representations. The direct consequences of these beliefs – infanticide, abandonment, ritual murder – are also discussed.

All of these practices are generally accompanied by specific social behaviours that are discussed in the fourth section. Although this behaviour is sometimes exploited – in healing rituals in churches or by traditional healers, or even through certain legal proceedings in a number of countries – it is generally characterized by violence. For this reason, it would seem essential to analyze the mechanisms and representations of anti-witch violence, as well as the process of victimization.

The report concludes with a brief analysis of the current state of child protection and aid policy in the context of this “African tradition”. A number of recommendations are proposed, to be used as a basis for planning effective actions to prevent and protect children from witchcraft accusations.

1. Witchcraft beliefs

In the past, it was thought that development, urbanization, modernization, education, or the adoption of Christianity or Islam would lead to the disappearance of beliefs and practices related to witchcraft. However, the current reality in much of sub-Saharan Africa is quite different. Far from fading away, these social and cultural representations have been maintained, transformed and adapted, according to contemporary realities and needs.

Witchcraft is no longer limited to the domain of the secret or unspoken. It is present in every aspect of daily life. The Central African writer Pierre Sammy Mackfof describes it in these terms:

Before, it [witchcraft] was taboo. No one even wanted to hear talk of witches. And then there were all those who had already suffered from witchcraft. So as soon as you talked about witchcraft, there would immediately be a strong reaction. Yet now, it's become almost commonplace. People talk about it all the time.²

The daily routine and constant references to witchcraft are as much part of common sense as “natural behaviour” (de Sardan, 1989: 128). The witchcraft discourse has taken over not only the private sphere but through mass media has also entered the public domain. It receives front page coverage in weekly magazines containing “extraordinary”³ and “shocking”⁴ stories about witches, while radio programmes broadcast confessions and personal experiences of witchcraft.⁵ Witchcraft is present in churches, schools, hospitals, and sometimes even in the courthouse. Today, it is omnipresent in the daily lives of many African populations. According to Adam Ashforth, an anthropologist working in Soweto, “they [Sowetans] live in a world with witches.” (2001: 208)

It is worth pointing out that the issue of whether witchcraft actually exists has long since been abandoned in anthropological research, and it will not be discussed in this report. Witchcraft exists as a social and cultural reality. Its presence and especially the threat it represents are still part of what the French anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan calls “the reality of others” (1989). It is this “reality”, based on the perceptive categories of a particular group that clashes with the common sense of the researcher. As a result, every anthropologist strives to make sense of it. Understanding the “natural behaviour” of social actors with whom development activities are implemented is crucial for every NGO actor operating in a specific context.

Understanding Africa, to quote the title of a book by the Dominican Brother, René Luneau (2002), implies above all understanding Africans, their histories, their evolution – especially the process of rapid modernization – and the socio-cultural representations that distinguish Africa in transition.

² Bangui, 7 February 2007. The interviews carried out in the Central African Republic form part of my field data.

³ “A human heart waiting to be devoured: an incredible case of witchcraft”, *Le Démocrate*, N°1229, 25 April 2006.

⁴ “A little girl accused of witchcraft burned to death”, *Le Citoyen*, N°2532, 26 October 2006.

⁵ In the programme *Triangle*, hosted on the radio station Africa N°1 by Patrick Nguema Ndong, “African mystic affairs” are discussed by various guests. Part of the show is devoted to questions from listeners that regularly refer to problems relating to witchcraft.

Contemporary Africa is a mix, a melting pot or a cobbling together of older representations that refuse to fade away and a craving for modernity that fascinates and frightens in equal measure.

Behind the visible face of Africa, open to all, hides another, that of the “mystic” world. Understanding Africa means not only understanding the visible world, but also and perhaps especially the invisible world. As the African philosopher, Achille Mbembe, says, “the great epistemological rupture – and thereby social – is not between what one sees and what one reads, but between what one sees (the visible) and what one does not see (the invisible)” (1996: 145). Moreover, it is important to emphasize that these two worlds are not in opposition; it would be a mistake to consider the visible world as being of the real world and the invisible world as the unreal. The invisible is not only the other face of the visible; it exists in the visible and vice versa. According to anthropologist Filip De Boeck, not only do the two worlds coexist, but currently, in Kinshasa as elsewhere in Africa, the “second” world is gaining the upper hand (2004: 57). The invisible world is made up of water spirits, or Mami Wata, witches and wizards, zombies, transformers, half-men half-caiman or half-leopard, etc. All these “characters from the invisible or the imaginary”, to borrow Joseph Tonda’s expression (2005), constantly intervene in the visible world, haunting the minds of populations, and representing a real danger for them, that of misfortune, illness or death.

Despite the fear they create, these characters from the invisible, these days grouped under the generic term *witchcraft*, are the subjects of recurrent discussion. In daily conversation, they provide not only explanations for misfortune but also for success and wealth. They are a resource for the poor and the politicians alike, a “mystical weapon” (Ellis, 2000) now available for everyone.

Whatever the context for these conversations, they all concern morality and refer to “the good” and “the bad”. However, once again, it is not such a neat division because “everything seems to depend on the context; what may appear to be bad may suddenly turn out to offer protection and support, while the good might be hiding a mortal danger” (Geschiere, 1995: VII). The dual, ambiguous character of the witchcraft discourse is often masked by a simplistic interpretation, propagated by state institutions and churches before being spread by the general public, that is, witchcraft is a “harmful and wicked force” from which Africa should “deliver” itself.

1.1. Ambiguous terminology

The French notion of “sorcellerie”, as well as the English equivalents, “witchcraft” and “sorcery”, were introduced to Africa by the first European explorers, colonialists and missionaries. The translation of local terms for local realities by the single term “witchcraft”, which was strongly influenced by European history and thereby pejorative, is often inappropriate and can lead to confusion. The notion of witchcraft covers multiple terms in local languages referring to various phenomena whose interpretation relies heavily on their context. Nevertheless, this ethnocentric terminology has now become integrated into African languages and is used in daily language to refer essentially to “occult or mystical forces”.

A number of writers consider that the notions of “sorcellerie”, as well as those of *witchcraft* and *sorcery* should be abandoned as working concepts in anthropology (Crick, 1979; Geschiere, 2000; Moore and Sanders, 2001). However, for lack of a better alternative, these terms continue to be used by researchers in different fields “in such varied meanings that one sometimes has the impression of attending a debate where the speakers are discussing quite different topics” (Ellis,

2000: 68). Cyprien C. Fisiy and Peter Geschiere have proposed an expression that they consider broader in scope and more neutral: “occult force”⁶ (1993).

Moreover, in English there is a further distinction between “witchcraft” and “sorcery”. This distinction was introduced in the 1930s by the British anthropologist Edward E. Evans-Pritchard who was working with the Zande in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan (1937). According to Evans-Pritchard, the Zande clearly distinguished between “witchcraft” and “sorcery”. For them, *witchcraft* referred to a substance that was inherited and innate, located in the abdomen of people called “witches”; because this substance sometimes acted independently of the *witch*’s control, it could be considered in this case to be an unconscious act. The *witch* operates at night, invisible and transformed, metamorphosed or unfolded from its physical “envelop”, in order to harm victims by devouring their life essence. In contrast, a *sorcerer* is someone who is socially recognized as such, operating during the day and able to harm others by using plant substances and rituals associated with evil-doing. The *sorcerer* always acts consciously, and although his or her knowledge is not innate and may be practised by anyone, it can nevertheless be transferred from one generation to the next.

This distinction became standard practice for many anthropologists working within the “functionalist” approach, and who were interested in African witchcraft in the 1950s and 1960s. However, such a radical distinction quickly led to a number of terminological difficulties, which in turn led John Middleton and Edward H. Winter (1963) to propose the term “*wizardy*”. It included either *witchcraft* or *sorcery*, or a combination of the two, but never caught on in anthropological language. The classification by the Zande has been the subject of extensive criticism, and its relevance in other contexts has, often rightly so, been put in doubt. Furthermore, Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, while carrying out research sixty years later among the Zande in the Central African Republic, noted that they no longer made such a clear distinction between the two terms (1995). Max Marwick (quoted in Douglas, 1973: 73) admits that “the whole troublesome classification was worthless, since sorcery and witchcraft are so far subject to the same sociological generalizations”. In contemporary studies, historians and anthropologists use the notions *witchcraft* and *sorcery* interchangeably (Bernault, 2006; Geschiere, 2000; Bond and Ciekawy, 2001) because this reflects usage in African realities.

1.2. Anthropological studies of witchcraft

1.2.1. Historical overview

At the beginning of the twentieth century, witchcraft had been classified, together with magic, as an integral part of “primitive” or “pre-logical” mentality. It was subsequently defined, according to evolutionary logic, as an irrational religious belief and a precursor to religion (Frazer, 1890 [1983]; Durkheim, 1912 [1968]; Lévy-Bruhl, 1927 [2007]). Contrary to the dominant theories of the time, Evans-Pritchard demonstrates in his classic monograph *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937) that Zande belief in witchcraft is completely logical and coherent when one understands its basis. He also shows that witchcraft is much more than a simple belief or religious experience; it is a way of life. Although the monograph was published in the 1930s, it had little influence on anthropological research of the time. It was only after the Second World War, in the 1950s and 1960s, that African witchcraft became the subject of renewed interest in anthropological studies, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. The social aspect, more than the invisible or mystical aspects of actual witchcraft belief, became one of the major concerns of the Manchester School. The

⁶ It is important to stress that the word “occult” often has a pejorative connotation. As Bruce Kapferer notes, the word is most commonly associated with “that which is mystical and stands outside, or is opposed to, science and the rule of reason” (Kapferer, 2002). Furthermore, magic and witchcraft conceived as practices of the occult were created as alternative rationalisms to that of science. The term proposed by Fisiy and Geschiere never really replaced the notion of witchcraft.

result was an increasing number of anthropological studies analysing the function of witchcraft in African societies. For functionalist writers, witchcraft made sense because it functioned (Mitchell, 1956; Turner, 1957).

What then was the function of witchcraft? Anthropologists tried to demonstrate that witchcraft, and in particular witchcraft accusations, had important effects on the social structure of a particular society. They analyzed the degree of order and social cohesion in the presence or absence of witchcraft accusations. The studies revealed that accusations were more frequent in societies where the social order was unstable, or where social relations have broken down and/or the expectations and responsibilities of members are not satisfied.

Witchcraft is only effective in a limited geographical space. The witch can only operate in the neighbourhood and/or among relatives and as a result accusations generally target individuals with whom one had frequent social relations. Witchcraft studies therefore became inextricably linked to studies of kinship. In this sense, accusations within the family group were restricted to very specific members (Nadel, 1952; Mayer, 1954; Gluckman, 1956; Mitchell, 1956; Turner, 1957). Moreover, accusations were linked to social change and spread as a source of instability and insecurity within a family group.

After the 1960s, studies of African witchcraft became increasingly rare,⁷ probably because of the evolutionist theory that such beliefs would disappear over time.

1.2.2. *Witchcraft in contemporary Africa*

Contrary to a number of hypotheses in the 1960s and 1970s concerning the “third world”, that were quick to predict the decline or disappearance of these so-called *superstitious* beliefs as a result of the rise of economic development, urbanization, education and the large monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam, witchcraft belief has not disappeared. It is apparent as an unquestionable component of private and public life. The current flourishing of witchcraft beliefs and practices is accompanied by a resurgence of witchcraft studies in Africa (Bernault and Tonda, 2000).

In the 1990s, this renewal of interest among anthropologists and political scientists highlights on one hand, the extraordinary vitality and flexibility of the concept of witchcraft, and on the other, the presence of witchcraft discourse in the most varied social contexts – notably, modern – in both urban and rural settings (witchcraft is no longer a village affair). This discourse affects elites as much as ordinary people, and contributes to new social and family conflicts. Furthermore, these new approaches tend to deconstruct functionalist approaches by stressing the complex and multiform nature of contemporary witchcraft (Bernault and Tonda, *ibid.*: 6). Certain writers highlight the “modern” aspect of contemporary witchcraft as being a reaction to capitalism and emerging globalization (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1993; 1999; Geschiere, 1995). Others refer to the importance of the relation between witchcraft and power, in particular the accumulation of power and wealth by often questionable means (Rowlands and Warnier, 1988; Fisiy and Geschiere, 1993; Ellis, 1993).

Witchcraft has not only taken on “new forms”, as in the example of “wealth witchcraft”, analyzed by Peter Geschiere in Cameroon (1995), but has also integrated modern products into its discourse. Globalization and the flood of images in the media have imported imaginary elements that were previously little known or even completely unknown. Consider, for example, the image of the witch flying on a broomstick:⁸ this image of the female witch on her way to a witches’ Sabbath or meeting, to perform satanic rituals (Mary, 1987) still feeds imaginary and fantasy tales (Harry Potter). Yet

⁷ Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the studies carried out in Côte d’Ivoire by French anthropologist, Marc Augé (1974, 1976).

⁸ See also the article by de Blair Rutherford (1999).

these days other “products”, such as aeroplanes or mobile phones, also make up the witchcraft imagination.



A flying witch crashes into a coconut tree and falls onto private land
Front page of the Central African daily newspaper, Le Citoyen N°2400, 14 April 2006

The “modernity of witchcraft” (Geschiere, 1995) therefore constitutes a rejection of evolutionist theories that focused on witchcraft’s own internal processes and the historical nature of its practices. Witchcraft is a discourse that renews itself constantly, adapting to new situations, or as Evans-Pritchard put it, “new situations demand new magic” (1937). But whereas in the past the effects of witchcraft could be positive or negative, these days they have an essentially negative connotation among African populations.⁹

From a scientific perspective, it is apparent that it is impossible to give a general definition of African witchcraft. “African witchcraft” does not exist. On the other hand, “witchcrafts” in various forms and in different socio-historical contexts do exist. Yet in several sub-Saharan countries there is a relatively general concept of witchcraft and witches’ powers. This *mystical* power is known only to those who practise it and is currently most generally defined as the capacity to harm someone (Ashworth, 1998). As Marc Augé notes in the context of Basse Côte d’Ivoire, “the witch is believed to possess a power that allows him to attack someone else” (1976: 129).

A general definition of witchcraft, which can be applied to various contexts, has been proposed by the French anthropologist Marc Augé. For Augé, witchcraft is “a set of beliefs, structured and shared by a given population, that addresses the origin of misfortune, illness and death, and the set of practices for detection, treatment and punishment that corresponds to these beliefs” (1974: 53). We would extend this definition by adding that witchcraft is a theory that explains and justifies a conception of the universe. Thus for Sally F. Moore and Todd Sanders, “it (witchcraft) is a set of discourses on morality, sociality and humanity. Far from being a set of irrational beliefs, they are a form of historical consciousnesses, a sort of social diagnostic” (2001: 20). Extending the definition

⁹ This attitude is undoubtedly reinforced by the evangelical, Pentecostal and revivalist churches who have integrated witchcraft into their own discourse by associating it with the devil.

still further, witchcraft can be understood as a metonymy of complex configurations and intertwined in various fields: philosophical, cultural and social (Bond and Ciekawy, 2001: 4-5).

The notion of witchcraft possesses a multifaceted semiology, referring to a wide variety of representations and practices, which further vary not only within a country but also according to different socio-cultural groups. For example, in the Central African Republic, the notion of witchcraft corresponds to clearly distinct phenomena, such as *ngbin*, *ouroukouzou*, *talimbi*, *ango-brotto*, *likundu*, etc.

Despite these various representations, in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa, witchcraft is perceived as a power that is located within the witch's body. This power is sometimes described as a substance, an organ or an animal that is innate, inherited, transmitted or acquired, voluntarily or not. In Central Africa, it is located in the witch's abdomen. This witch substance,¹⁰ called *mangu* (Evans-Pritchard, 1937), *djambe* (Geschiere, 1995), *evu(s)* (Fernandez, 1961; Mallart-Guimera, 1981; Laburthe-Tolra, 1985), *ikundu* (Tonda, 2000) or *likundu*,¹¹ may be inactive or may act contrary to the will of its host. The representations of *uchawi* witchcraft in southern Tanzania combine both the involuntary capacity for harm (Wilson, 1963) and the voluntary manipulation of powers for harmful ends (Green, 2005). In *muthi* witchcraft in South Africa, it also refers to an animal, but one that is placed by the witch in the abdomen of the victim in order to "devour" him or her from the inside (Ashworth, 2005: 9). In Ghana, *obayi* witchcraft is also represented by a snake (Parish, 2001: 120), just to give some examples.

1.3. The witch

The notion of the witch, like that of witchcraft, covers a multitude of meanings. According to André Mary, the figure of the witch refers to "that disconcerting character, who operates more or less undercover, and who employs occult knowledge and controls certain objects and magic techniques, the female witch on her broom and even to the seers consulted by the local population" (1987: 126). In many African societies, this figure symbolized evil as much as good, who was both feared and respected because he was part of the invisible world and was consequently in contact with genies and spirits. The witch was both someone who could cause harm as well as being someone who possessed special gifts of clairvoyance and healing. As an example, this ambivalent position of good and evil is found among the Evuzok in southern Cameroon. Louis Mallart Guimera, who worked in the region in the 1960s, states that the *evu* – the witch substance – can be predominantly social or anti-social. The holder of *evu* can thereby use it in a positive way as a healer, seer, musician, dancer, orator or hunter, or in a harmful way as a witch (1981). This ambiguity also appears in representations of the behaviour of genies and spirits who are always represented as harmful and helpful. This explains why people with albinism, twins and "badly born" children symbolize the power of the spirits and genies, and why they are both feared and revered, and finally why they are so easily suspected of witchcraft.

Currently, representations of the "good" witch are losing ground to the "evil" witch, who is driven to commit harm by the irresistible force that may be the product of jealousy, envy, maliciousness, ambition, an irrepressible and excessive thirst for power and possession, or increasingly a desire to acquire wealth exclusively for oneself, or to misappropriate socially approved authority for personal gain (Marie, 1997: 64). The general conception is that witches belong to groups that celebrate nocturnal feasts during which members must periodically offer human sacrifices.

¹⁰ It is important to stress that it would be inappropriate to categorize these designations simply as a substance. In general, they possess greater significance, depending on the context. For example, Mallart Guimera (1981) claims that *evu(s)* is more than a simple substance: "*evu* should not be considered as a fixed reality that can be neatly categorized once and for all. It is always capable of changing its character" (1981: 56).

¹¹ Interestingly, *kundu* means stomach (abdomen) in proto-Bantu languages (Bernault, 2006).

In the past, the witch could only operate within his or her own lineage – witches were geographically as well as socially limited – whereas the contemporary witch can operate over longer distances, notably thanks to travelling by his invisible “aeroplane”. Moreover, in African villages witchcraft attacks have widened their social limits, even though the family context remains the most popular zone of operation (Geschiere, 1995). Attacks can now come from a neighbour, friend or colleague. And whereas the witch’s power was formerly innate and inherited from father to son and from mother to daughter, now it can be bought or transferred to anyone. “Witchcraft is for sale”, confirmed a student in Bangui (April, 2006). Witchcraft today is therefore a product on the market, whose power can be increased through human sacrifices. One can only become a witch by sacrificing a member of one’s close family. This witch, who is motivated by personal objectives to the detriment of others (their health, money and power), has for Alain Marie (1997) become symbolic of people who have become “too individualized”.

Few people would dare boast publicly of their witch powers. Only certain African leaders can get away with encouraging this type of discourse. As an example, in Cameroon, rumours circulate about unlawful accumulation of power acquired through mystical means by President Biya. The longevity of his political reign is allegedly due to human sacrifices (Nyamnjoh, 2001). In Gabon, Joseph Tonda relates that, according to popular imagination, President Omar Bongo Ondimba possessed highly developed powers that allowed him to see “naked people” and hear everything. His officials were believed to have been “stamped with a kind of invulnerability” (2005: 159). Their highly placed position, and the power they represent, blocks any accusations aimed at these politicians.

1.4. Witchcraft accusations

Ever since the Manchester School of anthropology, witchcraft accusations have represented the most visible manifestation of witchcraft belief. However, the nature of accusations is considered to have changed significantly.¹² It was rare for a public denunciation to result in a stiff sentence or mob violence. Sometimes the accusation did not name the witch directly, who was thereby required to revive or restore (from illness or misfortune) the suffering victim (Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 39). Furthermore, a person found to be guilty would have to pay a fine or, in the worst case, be expelled from the village.

At the present time, many populations indicate an expansion in witchcraft (Ashworth, 2005; Moore and Sanders, 2001), although this is difficult to measure. In contrast, it is possible to note that there is indeed a feverish exchange of ideas, discourses and debates about witchcraft, which is an undeniable sign of the crises that affect post-colonial Africa. These post-colonial crises, political instability, civil wars and the general impoverishment of the population appear to have reawakened a general fear of the Other. The coming of capitalism and the creation of wealth among a limited group has led to increased jealousy and envy. Such a context encourages the existence and frequency of accusations and, by extension, acts of extreme physical and psychological violence.

In a large majority of African countries,¹³ executions of alleged witches have reached alarming levels. In *Imagining Evil*, anthropologist Gerrie ter Haar collected evidence of executions in at least the following countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Ghana, Namibia, Nigeria and the United Republic of Tanzania (2007: 6). Other authors too note the recent surge in accusations followed by violence. In Limpopo Province in South Africa, according to unofficial estimates, 389 people were allegedly killed between 1985 and 1995 (Niehaus, 2001); and between 1996 and 2001 more than 600 people were

¹² For more information about witchcraft accusations out of the African context, see Jill Schnoebelen’s report (2009).

¹³ Acts of extreme violence, especially against women, have also been observed in India and Nepal. See UN Commission on Human Rights. *Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy, Cultural practices in the family that are violent towards women*, E/CN.4/2002/83, (31 January 2002).

killed by lynching in the same province (Ter Haar, 2007). Thousands of elderly people, especially women, have been accused of witchcraft and then beaten and/or killed in Tanzania.¹⁴ Such acts of violence have also been recorded in Zambia: on 16 May 2007, villagers in Luto village beat two men who were identified by a “witch finder” as sorcerers who had caused the death of two children.¹⁵ In northern Ghana, women accused of witchcraft are banished and forced to live in “witch villages” in dehumanizing conditions (Dovlo, 2007; Adinkrah, 2004). In the western regions of Kenya, people burned to death 15 women accused of witchcraft.¹⁶ In the Central African Republic, since the beginning of 2001, around thirty people suspected of involvement in “suspicious” deaths have been accused of witchcraft and lynched.¹⁷ According to my own research in the west of the country in the region of Lobaye, during the month of January 2009, 22 people were tortured, mutilated and killed as a result of accusations of witchcraft by local traditional healers. In Mozambique, widows living alone are frequently accused of witchcraft merely on the basis of having red eyes.¹⁸ These are just some of a long list of examples.

The existence of such violence requires a number of distinctions to be made. First, it is necessary to remind ourselves that there is a difference between belief in witchcraft and accusations of witchcraft. The fact of believing in witchcraft, that is, in the extraordinary power of certain people, does not pose any particular problem. According to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

While accepting the right of everyone to their own belief, witchcraft accusations that end in extreme violence require a different response. Not only do such acts pose serious problems for civil society and African state institutions, but also for those who defend human rights. As Gerrie ter Haar rightly states, “killing of alleged witches violates the most basic right of every human being in the most obvious manner. It is not the belief that kills them, but the action taken in consequence of belief” (2007: 9).

A further distinction is necessary, between suspicions and accusations. Rumours exist everywhere, and the simple fact of someone behaving differently (that is, not conforming to societal norms and rules for manners and respectability) can give rise to the appearance of rumours. Suspecting someone is not necessarily the same as accusing them. In cases of suspicion, witchcraft accusations are not fully expressed. However, when some misfortune occurs, suspicions become accusations through a process of designating the witch. In the past, this process, called “the ordeal”, was conducted by traditional healers who called on spirits and gods to help identify witches. Currently, these traditional healers typically rely on various highly toxic potions that they administer to the suspect or else drink themselves. It should be noted that designating a witch is more common in churches (revivalist, Pentecostal, etc.).

¹⁴ Duff, Oliver. “Tanzania suffers rise of witchcraft hysteria”, *The Independent*, 28 November 2005. Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/tanzania-suffers-rise-of-witchcraft-hysteria-517157.html>. Accessed 8 September 2009; “Gender and witchcraft killings in Tanzania”, Tomric Agency, 27 March, 2000. Available at <http://www.thelizlibrary.org/site-index/site-index-frame.html#soulhttp://www.thelizlibrary.org/brett/brett009.htm>. Accessed 8 September 2009. See also Schnoebelen, 2009.

¹⁵ *Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Zambia* (2007). Available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100511.htm>. Accessed 8 September 2009.

¹⁶ “Kenya mob burns 15 women to death over witchcraft”. AFP, 21 May 2008. Available at http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=080521153625.1ijzv1&show_article=1. Accessed 24 September 2009.

¹⁷ “Multiplication de lynchages de “sorciers” en Centrafrique”. AFP, Bangui, 13 April 2001.

Available at <http://www.sangonet.com/ActualiteC/Anzeretenetik/Sorciersvoleurslynch.html>. Accessed 8 September 2009.

¹⁸ See HelpAge International, *Stop violence towards older women* (14 June 2007).

Available at <http://www.helpage.org/News/Latestnews/Ly3>. Accessed 25 September 2009.

Misfortune, whether illness, death or other misfortunate events, is rarely considered to have occurred completely naturally. They are the result of interference from the invisible world via spirits, witches, etc. As Evans-Pritchard noted some eighty years ago among the Zande, “all misfortunes are due to witchcraft” (1937: 53). Belief in witchcraft does not, however, exclude empirical understanding of cause and effect. Again according to Evans-Pritchard, explaining a death by natural causes and believing that it was due to witchcraft are not mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other. It is in fact a question of double causality. To illustrate this theory, consider the following example from a modern context: a boy dies as a result of cirrhosis of the liver. No one questions that it was the disease that killed him. The question is: why this boy and not another? Why at this precise moment? Here is where explanations of witchcraft complement the natural explanation. A witch has devoured the boy’s liver. In this sense, witchcraft does not explain how the person died by why.

The process of designating a perpetrator is, of course, a further step in the process of suspicion already underway. It is only when the designation is made public that the belief in witchcraft comes into play and requires some kind of sanction. It is important, however, to point out that important or rich people are never accused in public. Instead, it is always the worst off and most vulnerable, the elderly or women who undergo the ordeals of designation. These days, there are increasing numbers of accusations against children.

2. The urban phenomenon of “child witches”

According to Patrice Yengo, the phenomenon of children suspected or accused of witchcraft is not a new development. In many African societies, notably in the Bight of Benin region, accusations of witchcraft against newborns appear to be an ancient practice and sometimes still occur. They are typically based on the circumstances of the delivery or congenital deformities (2008: 299).

It is therefore important to clarify that the present discussion of “child witches” refers to the recent phenomenon in urban areas, which does not concern newborns but rather older children and those on the verge of adolescence who are already in difficult situations. There should not be any confusion between these “child witches”, typical of Central Africa, in particular in the Congo Basin and Nigeria, with “badly born” children. The representations, social mechanisms and scale of the phenomenon with regard to newborns – sometimes leading to infanticide or abandonment – should be studied in more detail and addressed by the appropriate authorities and international organizations. Nevertheless, the situation is different when compared with new representations of witchcraft that involve children in major African cities. The phenomenon of “child witches” is indeed of recent date and occurs in urban areas, where it has grown constantly in the last thirty years.¹⁹

2.1. Areas documented

According to available sources and our own information, thousands of children accused of witchcraft have been thrown out of their homes and are currently living in the streets of Kinshasa²⁰ and Lubumbashi²¹ in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Many more are living in the streets of

¹⁹ Estimates of the number of children accused of witchcraft are difficult to obtain and are often very approximate. In Kinshasa, for example, estimates are often based on the number of children taken to churches to be “exorcised”.

²⁰ According to the estimates given by Filip de Boeck during his presentation at the University of Toronto in February 2003, 23 000 children accused of sorcery are living in the streets of Kinshasa.

Available at http://www.newsfromafrica.org/newsfromafrica/articles/art_537.html. Accessed 10 September 2009. Given that the phenomenon of child witches is most common in the DRC – some believe it originated there – several studies exist of the Congolese experience, for example, Javier Aguilar Molina (2005) and Mark Waddington (2006). Moreover, witchcraft accusations also appear to be an important factor in the increase in children living in the street.

²¹ According to Aurore d’Haeyer, the phenomenon of accusing children of witchcraft has also increased in Lubumbashi (2004: 7).

Mbanza Kongo, the capital of Zaïre Province, Uíge and Luanda in northern Angola.²² A large number of children accused of witchcraft have also been documented in Akwa Ibom State in south-eastern Nigeria.²³ Cases have also been reported – although in lower numbers – in Douala, Cameroon (Pirrot, 2004), in the Republic of the Congo, between Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire (Yengo, 2008; Makulo, 2005) and in the Central African Republic (CAR).²⁴

With the exception of Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone,²⁵ the urban phenomenon of child witches occurs principally in the Congo Basin, more precisely, in areas of Kongo culture (Yengo, 2008). It is no coincidence that these countries, Angola, the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have also suffered from political instability, endless conflicts and civil wars, and the recruitment of child soldiers. The phenomenon appears to be gaining ground in countries that are geographically close (Cameroon, CAR, Gabon and Nigeria; Liberia and Sierra Leone).

2.2. Predominance of Christianity

Churches, especially those belonging to the Pentecostal and prophetic movement (charismatic, revivalist, etc.), play an important role in the diffusion and legitimization of fears related to witchcraft, and in particular, child witches. The pastor-prophet is an important figure in the process of accusing children of witchcraft, by effectively validating the presence of a “witchcraft spirit”. Pentecostals, for example, present their faith as a form of divine armour against witchcraft, and they participate actively in the fight against Evil that is incarnated through witchcraft.

Despite a lack of precise and detailed information, it would appear that this phenomenon is far less significant in Islamic countries. It is important to understand why reactions to witchcraft in countries of Islamic belief differ from those in Christianized countries. Certain writers believe the difference stems from the ability to translate their religious message. The translation of the Bible into the local language was a priority for early ministers and priests: “The Word of God: open to everyone” (Fancello, 2006:113). For example, in Burkina Faso, the policy of indigenization resulted in missionaries from the Assemblies of God learning the Möré language and investing in translating biblical text (*ibid.*). In contrast with Christian practice, Islam considers Arabic to be a sacred language and has rejected any attempt at translating religious texts into local languages. “Whoever wants to praise God,” comment Christine Henry and Emmanuelle Kadya Tall, “must do it in Arabic, and submit to learning verses at a Koranic school” (2008: 19). In contrast, by putting sacred texts within everyone’s reach, Christianity has facilitated the successful localization of its message and led to the creation of authentic African movements and churches.

Another possible reason is the difference in the perception of Evil in each of the religions. Witchcraft is able to integrate itself so well within Christian discourse because it has been personified and associated with the Devil or Satan. Do witches benefit from the same support from Satan or the Devil in Islamic discourse? While it should be acknowledged that in Islam there is reference to a satanic force, it is not attributed to a single figure who personifies Evil. Instead, Islam discusses “satans”, in the plural. The satans are generally incarnated as *jinn*s and *shayâtîn*. The latter spirits are generally considered to be responsible for illness and madness that is attributed to satanic

²² Local authorities in a town in northern Angola identified 432 children living in the streets as a result of an accusation of witchcraft (LaFraniere, 2007a). See also *The impact of accusations of witchcraft against children in Angola. An analysis from the human rights perspective*. UNICEF.

²³ *The Causes and Prevalence of Accusation of Witchcraft among Children in Akwa Ibom State*. UNICEF, 2008.

²⁴ UNICEF, CAR, Monthly Report, February 2009; Rebecca Bannor-Addae, “Scapegoating the most vulnerable in the Central African Republic”, UNICEF, 12 May 2009. Available at http://www.unicef.org/protection/car_49658.html. Accessed 26 September 2009.

²⁵ UNICEF, Child Protection Situation Analysis in Sierra Leone, March 2006. It is important to note that, although witchcraft accusations are made against children, trafficking in children and the recruitment of children into the army (Cahn, 2005) represent a more significant problem.

possession. However, it is clear that, although there is a difference in the perception of Evil, Islam does present itself as an antidote to witchcraft, by developing talismans or other counter-measures to warn of or thwart witchcraft spells or attacks.

Despite the translation of the Christian message and the perception of witchcraft as the Devil's work, the question remains as to why children are accused more frequently in Christian circles. And why are these accusations less common in Islam? There is not enough detailed data to answer these questions. However, it would appear that the response lies within the doctrines and representations that each religion has with regard to children and their place in the religious system. Generally speaking, the Koran does not address underage children, but rather older children with an understanding of responsibility, or the adults responsible for them. The power of the child thus appears to be reduced. Consequently, a child would not be capable of assuming the role of a witch. In contrast, in Christian belief, there has been a transformation in the perception of children's power: previously children were considered too weak to practice witchcraft, as in current Islamic belief. Now, however, their "power" seems to be gaining in strength.

2.3. What is the profile of a child accused of witchcraft?

According to studies carried out UNICEF in Angola,²⁶ DRC²⁷ and Nigeria,²⁸ from other sources in CAR,²⁹ as well as anthropological studies (De Boeck, 2000; Yengo, 2008; Tonda, 2008), children accused of witchcraft are often pre-adolescent or adolescent, vulnerable and living in socially precarious circumstances.

2.3.1. The right age for accusations?

A number of writers estimate that the most common age for witchcraft accusations is between four and seven years old (Yengo, 2008). Other sources refer to children between 8 and 14 years old (D'Haeyer, 2004). The present study follows the wider age range suggested by Flemish anthropologist, Filip de Boeck³⁰ working in Kinshasa, that of between three and 18 years old.

Witchcraft accusations most often target young children, sometimes up to the onset of adolescence at 13 or 14 years old. The accused children thereby enter adolescence with the label of child witch. It is during adolescence that youth become significant social actors, that they begin to take their place in public space and that their influence in the public sphere becomes more apparent. The central and ambivalent social status of children takes form in the figure of the witch, which is itself the incarnation of a cultural reaction to crisis, according to de Boeck (2000: 34). In situations of a reversal of power between the old and young, notably with regard to financial resources, accusations of witchcraft are triggered by arguments about the redistribution of newly acquired wealth, and can also affect adolescents. Young people who acquire a certain amount of wealth and become figures of success are quickly suspected and accused of witchcraft. These adolescents become associated with imagined witchcraft in order to gain access to the modern world, notably through the symbolism of manducation³¹ previously restricted to adults, and as a means of gaining independence. Furthermore, adolescents sometimes decide to make their mark through an act of revolt or rejection with regard to the attitudes and "traditions" of their parents that they consider to

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Aguilar Molina, 2005; Waddington, 2006. The impact of accusations of witchcraft against children in Angola. an analysis from the human rights perspective. UNICEF, 2008.

²⁸ See footnote 24.

²⁹ UNICEF Bangui has documented several cases of violence against children accused of witchcraft.

³⁰ Chesla, 2003. "DR Congo: Review of "Children, the Occult and the Street in Kinshasa". News from Africa, available at http://www.newsfromafrica.org/newsfromafrica/articles/art_537.html. Accessed 15 October 2009.

³¹ The Christian belief that eating the bread of the Eucharist is eating the actual flesh of Jesus.

be useless and irrational; they distinguish themselves from the family background, as de Boeck notes, “becoming a witch is certainly one way of achieving independence” (2000, 50).

2.3.2. *The profile of children targeted by accusations*

Several studies³² and surveys have identified the profiles of children who are at particular risk of accusations of witchcraft.

- Children having lost both parents, sent to live with another relative. Sometimes the child is sent to a host family according to rules of kinship (matrilineal or patrilineal).
- Children having lost one parent, the other having remarried. Disagreements with the step-father or -mother may be the origin of an accusation.
- Children living with a physical disability (any physical abnormality: large head, swollen belly, red eyes, etc.), those with a physical illness (epilepsy, tuberculosis, etc.) or psychological disorder (autism or Down Syndrome, etc., even those who stutter) or especially gifted children.
- Children showing any unusual behaviour, for example children who are stubborn, aggressive, thoughtful, withdrawn or lazy. In short, all kinds of behaviour that, in a specific context defined by witchcraft discourse, appear as unusual or abnormal.
- “Bad birth” children may also be open to witchcraft accusations, but constitute a separate category.

2.3.3. *Boys or girls?*

A number of studies³³ indicate that witchcraft accusations target boys above all. This is certainly the case in d’Haeyer’s (2004) observations in Kinshasa, and applies to children living in the street in general, according to Emilienne Raoul, Congo Minister of Social Affairs, Solidarity, Humanitarian Action and the Family. Raoul further estimates that girls make up a mere five percent of the homeless population. This may be because of the value attributed to girls doing domestic work or childcare, and their bride wealth potential. Other research rejects these suggestions (De Boeck, 2000; Cahn, 2005) and no accurate statistical analysis has been carried out to confirm the tendency to accuse boys more than girls. Living in the street is one of the common consequences of witchcraft accusations and is also an indicator of the scale of the phenomenon. In this situation, boys probably do have greater visibility. The figures put forward for girls may obscure other phenomena, such as prostitution, which is affecting increasingly younger girls.

2.3.4. *The power of child witches*

The main power attributed to child witches is the ability to inflict harm from the invisible world to the visible. In general, this consists of transmitting an illness to a relative who must be “sacrificed” together with fellow witches. Children are thus accused of causing diarrhoea, malaria, tuberculosis, even HIV/AIDS, and of the fatal consequences that may follow. In addition, they are also suspected of bringing about general misfortune, poverty, unemployment, failure, etc. Mamuya explained how and why he killed his brother in the following terms:

Komazulu is a colonel in the “second world” and he offered to promote me to the rank of captain if I sacrificed someone. That’s why I killed my baby brother. I gave him diarrhoea and he died from it. (De Boeck, 2004: 58)

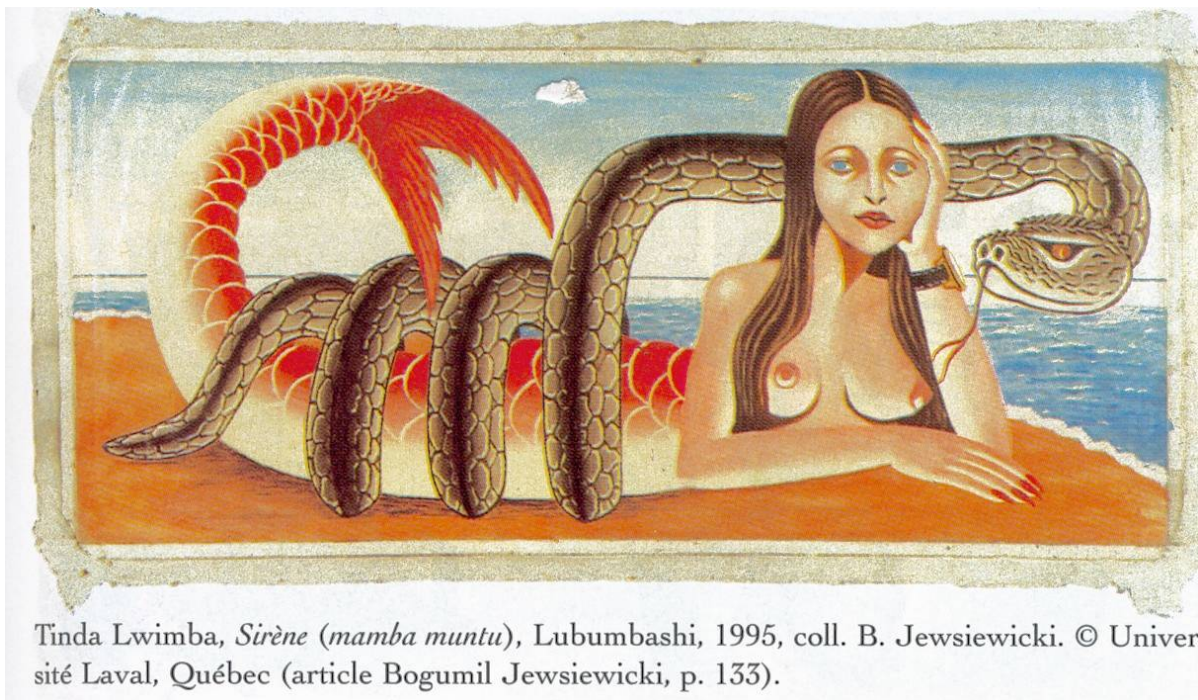
³² Aurore d’Haeyer, 2004; Aguilar Molina, 2005. *The Causes and Prevalence of Accusation of Witchcraft among Children in Akwa Ibom State*. June 2008. *The Impact of accusations of Witchcraft against Children in Angola. An Analysis from The Human Rights Perspective*, UNICEF.

³³ *The Impact of accusations of Witchcraft against Children in Angola. An Analysis From The Human Rights Perspective*. UNICEF, p.21.

Although the act of eating remains a central part of these accounts – the children eat their victims from the inside. Other witch powers are also attributed, for example, the ability to transform oneself into an animal (owl, cockroach, ant, cat, crocodile or snake) in order to get into the victim's house. Stéphane, now aged 12, explains:

At night, I changed into a cockroach to get out through the bars and meet up with my uncle, who had changed into a cat (Bangui, December 2008).

Girls are also suspected of transforming into a seductress, characterized by the urban myth of Mami-Wata, the mermaid who feeds the collective imagination not only in the DRC but also in CAR. Mami-Wata is a white woman with long, straight hair. She seduces her "victim" by promising him wealth. However, once a man has signed the mermaid's contract, he is no longer allowed to associate with other women, because Mami-Wata is very jealous. According to belief, she will eventually drive her victim insane.



Tinda Lwimba, *Sirène (mamba muntu)*, Lubumbashi, 1995, coll. B. Jewsiewicki. © Université Laval, Québec (article Bogumil Jewsiewicki, p. 133).

These astonishing accounts are only rarely questioned. As the police superintendent in Bangui explained, "Children are too pure and too innocent. They never lie" (March 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to clarify the context in which children typically produce these accounts. When the child is young, the tale is the result of fear, of violence or threats by his or her peers. In an emotionally safe and secure environment, the child may recant. The children's accounts, when taken literally, can create fear, and sometimes appear to be used by the children as a way of frightening those who mistreat them. Witchcraft belief can also provide a special social status for children within a group, particularly among those living in the street.

2.4. Why children are accused

The child witch is a paradox. According to Christine Henry and Emmanuelle Kadya Tall (2008: 27), "the theory that the phenomenon is a reaction to globalization and the rise of individualism is inadequate". Consequently, it is difficult to propose a simple answer to the question: *Why do witchcraft accusations in certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa target children so often these days?* Observers of African society, especially anthropologists, are unanimous as regards the complexity of

social, economic and political factors, as well as the changes that have occurred within witchcraft-related representations, that may have caused this phenomenon.

In this section, I will suggest certain factors that would seem to be prevalent in recent accusations against children. First, I will discuss how there has been a change in representations of witchcraft. Then I will analyze social, economic and political factors.

2.4.1. Transformation of representations – from the old witch to the child witch

As discussed above, witchcraft is a power that is passed from one generation to the next.³⁴ Although a child may possess the power of witchcraft, he or she was considered as too weak to use it. “The older a witch the more potent his witchcraft and the more unscrupulous its use”, wrote Evans-Pritchard regarding the Zandé witch (1937: 7). This was why only elderly people were accused.

The “modernization of witchcraft” has made it possible to buy witchcraft powers. However, the act of acquiring this power voluntarily remains a “privilege” reserved for adults. In order for a child to fully develop his witch potential, another transformation must occur. In a fully developed and effective state, the power can henceforth be transmitted to a child by food or drink. Aristote, a boy aged ten, explained how this can occur:

I was a witch. I was bewitched by my grandmother. One night, she came to see me when I was sleeping. She gave me bread and tea. That’s when I began my astral voyages with her. One day she told me to kill papa in return for the bread and tea that she had given me. (D’Haeyer, 2004: 27)

In this story, the elderly person is still an important figure in the witchcraft act, since she is the one who transfers the power to the child. In all the accounts, by accepting the bread, tea or mango, the child “signs a contract” with the witch figure. Witchcraft has thus been transformed into the form of a gift, albeit a poisoned one (De Boeck, 2000: 55). The inability to reciprocate contravenes the principle of reciprocal exchange formulated by Marcel Mauss. In his study of Polynesian culture, Mauss suggested that gift-giving implies a double obligation: to give a gift and to reciprocate (1932 [1968]). According to this theory, all social life is based on this principle of reciprocity, including maintaining kinship bonds. In this sense, the witch appears to demand reciprocation for his or her gift, and since the obligation cannot be met, the child becomes indebted to the witch.

However, according to accounts of children accused of witchcraft, they never act alone. The nocturnal voyages are often initiated by the “guardian witch” and accompanied by other witches, both adult and children. During these trips, they participate in nocturnal feasts during which they eat human flesh and drink blood. They also visit “mystic markets”.

When the child accused of witchcraft makes his confession, he does not hesitate to accuse in turn the person who supposedly transmitted the witchcraft power to him. These public accusations have serious consequences for adults. They often trigger strong reactions within the population, leading to extreme violence not only against the child but also to the older person who has been accused. However, the child does not pick someone at random. They are usually women, or “mothers”.

It is perhaps significant that currently women are increasingly active in society, and that the number of female-headed households is on the rise in both rural and urban areas (Ezémbé, 2009: 104). They have a certain degree of financial independence and they are often the ones who provide food for

³⁴ The transmission of witchcraft generally corresponds to representations of procreation and beliefs in the final judgement. For example, among the Evuzok in southern Cameroon, *evus* (witchcraft) is passed from father to daughter (Mallart-Guimera, 1981: 83). In contrast, Among the Zandé in Sudan, it is passed down gender lines, from father to son and from mother to daughter (Evans-Pritchard, 1976: 3). *The impact of accusations of witchcraft against children in Angola. An analysis from the human rights perspective*, UNICEF.

the family through their small-scale commercial activities. However, in spite of these efforts, increasingly younger mothers, single or widowed, are finding it difficult to raise their children. Unable to meet their children's needs, especially with regard to food, they act inconsistently, starving them instead of feeding them (Brodeur, 2009). The idea of the mother as protector is also thrown into doubt in the case of Magali, recounted by Geneviève N'Koussou (2008): the little girl accuses her mother and half-brother, who have left for France after deciding not to take her. This accusation is triggered by the strong emotions resulting from the girl's abandonment.

In this way, children who have been abandoned or mistreated will accept food from a "witch mother", who will in some way make up for what the first mother could not offer. This "witch mother" may be someone the child knows, or does not know, according to Brodeur (2009), a nameless mother. According to De Boeck, the image of the "witch mother" constitutes a radical departure from "a deeply rooted cultural model where women are considered as creators, mothers, child-raisers, and by extension, as forces of regeneration for the socio-cultural fabric" (2000, 56). For example, the "witch mother" who is initially a provider of food, soon turns into a monstrous, cannibalistic mother during the nocturnal voyages. At the human-flesh-eating feasts, the child is supposed to eat his or her mother (or another family member or neighbour).

The phenomena of witchcraft and "child witches" reflect a profound restructuring of kinship, as well as hidden desires, whether economic or emotional.

2.4.2. "Child witches" as the result of the "multi-crisis"

The last decades of the twentieth century were particularly hard for the majority of sub-Saharan African countries, which have suffered an acute and multiform crisis (social, economic, political and cultural). The post-independence years represented a period full of hope, and the grand speeches at the end of the 1970s inspired millions, especially the young. These promises of wealth for everyone turned out to be false. While a small number of individuals gained wealth rapidly, most people sank into a quagmire of poverty. Many people therefore had the impression that they had missed "the right track to modernization" (Geschiere, 1995). Furthermore, the social changes that followed the rise of capitalism, urbanization and school attendance had a profound effect on the family, kinship relations and inter-generational relations. In these circumstances, it is obvious that there were strong tensions between the elderly and the youth, brothers and sisters (in the widest sense), and also one's cousins.

2.4.2.1. Social factors

One aspect of the multi-crisis³⁵ proves to be particularly significant in witchcraft accusations against children, that of the general dysfunctioning of the family – deparentalization³⁶ – and above all, of “African” solidarity.

In order to better understand the place of the child in the “African” family, it is necessary to analyze briefly the concept of family. There is no single model of “the African family” that can be applied across all regions and to all ethnic groups on the continent. In fact, to talk of “the African family” is difficult, if not impossible. The Togolese psychologist Ferdinand Ezémbé states that “through the interplay of multiple symbolic and biological alliances, no one can say where a family begins or ends” (2009: 97). In his work with the Nube, Nadel shows that “in every family there are a number of relatives that are known to be relatives even though no one can state exactly the degree or nature of the relation” (1947).

Although a child is the offspring of two parents that are recognized socially, its birth may also be the result of divine intervention or through the intervention of ancestors. The most often cited reasons for high birth rate are the desire to preserve the lineage and economic prosperity, both represented by the children. As soon as the child is born, and sometimes even before, the child belongs to the community. In this context, the biological parents do not have exclusive rights over their children. The children are raised by this extended family – their kin – and not only by their biological parents. To understand the concept of family in Africa, one should think large and consider wider relations, focusing on “common characteristics shared by individuals, such as belonging to the same lineage or the same generation” (Ezémbé, 2009: 98).

Moreover, the interdependence between the group and the individual is very strong; the individual only exists as a member of a family, a lineage or a community. Currently, socio-economic changes are promoting an increase of individualism to the detriment of community bonds and family solidarity. Through ever-increasing individualization, to use Alain Marie’s expression (1997), individuals have to be able to assume their responsibilities and their role in society. However, in countries that are undergoing multiple crises and where institutions are showing signs of severe dysfunctioning, the family remains a source of social and medical security. In the system of community self-help, nothing is left to chance. The system is governed by what Alain Marie calls “the principle of community debt”. This principle functions in a similar fashion to that described above, that of *quid pro quo*, or gift and counter-gift. A child is born into a community and owes his birth not only to his biological and social parents, but also to his ancestors and other spirits. He only exists because they gave him life. In these conditions, according to Alain Marie, “far from being individualized and more or less cut off from his village relatives through the process of schooling, the pupil is on the contrary a missionary that has been delegated to the world of modernity and who carries all the hopes of his community” (ibid.). It should be emphasized that school fees represent the main expense among villagers, and that the school pupil symbolizes future economic capital. As investors, relatives submit the children to the principal of reciprocity and to their influence. Once they become adults and parents, the children will in turn become creditors, thereby perpetuating these social relations.

The principle of community debt ensures long-term social security for contributors, and can be considered as a social investment for the future. Far from disappearing over time, this debt often weighs heavily on the children, whether they live in the city or the country, in the situation where

³⁵ The concept of “multi-crisis” has been adopted from anthropologist Filip De Boeck (2000).

³⁶ According to Tonda (2008, 332), deparentalization describes the process of exhausting parental bonds. Its most extreme form is the rejection and criminalization of offspring by their parents.

they are unable to live up to expectations and responsibilities towards their elders. Social relations that are formed around a discourse of the morality of various individuals make frequent allusion to witchcraft, which is itself a discourse on morality.

It is true that witchcraft belief interferes with the value system that governs human behaviour (Evans-Pritchard, 1937: 18). For example, a child that has successfully gone through the school system and found a job, but who gives nothing to his family may be accused of witchcraft by his relatives. The child, who thus refuses to share his wealth – an overly individualized individual – can be accused of witchcraft. In a similar way, failure at school or professionally can also be explained in terms of witchcraft and attributed to jealous relatives. These denunciations are often accompanied by the phrase, “the danger comes from the village”.

The city, paid employment, the economic market, consumerism and financial pressures have provoked changes within the family. The changes affect the legitimacy of parental authority in particular, and that of the elders in the extended family. First of all, children are quickly becoming responsible for their own lives, or their survival, in situations where parents are unable to provide for their needs (feeding or schooling them, for example). This early independence contributes to undermining parental authority (Ballet, Dumbai and Lallau, 2007).

Yet “traditional” hierarchy was essentially based on the criteria of age and the social status of individuals. Currently, this hierarchical relation is being transformed from domination and power of elder over younger, to that of rich over poor. The increase in economic inequality has created a profound change in the system of reciprocity by sometimes inverting the roles of funds and redistribution. For example, Congolese adolescents migrate in huge numbers to the Angolan province of Luanda Norte, in order to work in the diamond mines. Some of the adolescents gain greater financial power than their parents, which accentuates the generation gap (De Boeck, 2000: 46). Those children that possess money become “bosses”, and their age is ignored (ibid.). The poverty, unemployment or the economic incapacity of their elders also plays a part in weakening their authority.

The questioning of authority based on age has become a factor in accusations against children. However, the breakdown of family ties and the loss of parental authority are only two of possible factors in accusations of witchcraft against children. The most often cited factor is that of poverty and the general impoverishment of African populations.

2.4.2.2. Economic and political factors

Poverty and economic factors are significant in witchcraft accusations against children, but they are not the only explanatory factors.³⁷ In his 2005 study, Javier Aguilar Molina rightly states that economic factors cannot provide the sole explanation for this phenomenon because

- witchcraft accusations incur significant expenses, be they from fees for traditional healers, church preachers or the cost of treatment;
- families with sufficient means also accuse children, especially those living abroad;
- although many African countries live in poverty, the phenomenon does not appear everywhere.

In the past (and sometimes still today), the number of children were a guarantee of economic prosperity. These days children may appear as an extra load on the family budget. Faced with difficulties in paying school fees or even feeding all the children, some of them are perceived as a

³⁷ African populations also suggest poverty is the principal cause of witchcraft accusations.

burden. The poorest families are sometimes forced to make selections among their children in order to survive.

The case of Kisangani, DRC, among the Wagenia, highlights the importance of the economic factor in accusations against children. Due to insufficient financial resources, children as young as six or seven are set to work in income-generating activities such as fishing or small-scale trading.³⁸ As a result, they are able to fend for themselves much earlier. In the neighbourhoods where the Wagenia are the majority ethnic group, accusations of witchcraft against children are quite rare.

In certain countries, notably Angola, CAR, DRC and Nigeria, poverty goes together with political-military contexts. These situations have led not only to a climate of general insecurity that, according to Adam Ashforth (2005), promotes witchcraft discourse, but also to the creation of more orphans.³⁹ Furthermore, inadequate health services and the inability to follow appropriate treatment in cases of malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS all contribute to premature death and thus the creation of orphans.

2.4.2.3. Orphans – a consequence of the crisis and targets for witchcraft accusations

The recent upsurge in the number of orphans is a direct result of political crises (civil wars and *coup d'états*), institutional crises (the lack of health services) and economic and social crises. Children who are already living in a vulnerable situation (or because they are vulnerable) are most often accused of witchcraft.⁴⁰ Whether the orphan has lost one or both parents, the child most often finds himself in a reconstituted family, that is, with a relative⁴¹ who already has children. In this “host” family, the child may have a feeling of awkwardness or be treated differently from the couple’s other children.

In cases where the child has lost only one parent, the surviving parent usually begins a new family, with new children. Unlike their half-siblings, the orphans are often unable to attend school, suffer mistreatment on a daily basis, including neglect in the provision of health care, or physical and psychological violence. When some misfortune befalls the family, the orphan is a favourite target for witchcraft accusations. In some cases, the child may be accused of killing his parents.

The testimony of Esther, aged 13, reveals the tensions within a reconstituted family. Esther never knew her mother, was abandoned by her father, and accused of witchcraft by her half-brothers and -sisters:

One day, my step-mother felt ill after a two-day prayer vigil. She had pain in her stomach. Her brothers said that I had bewitched her. I didn't know what they were talking about. I denied it but no one wanted to listen to me. They just kept on accusing me.⁴²

Roger, aged 10, gives a similar, typical account:

Mama left far away when I was little, I don't remember any more. Papa was very weak. His new wife used to beat me and accused me of being a witch. She said I was making my father ill. She drove me away (d'Haeyer, 2004: 75).

³⁸ This practice of course contravenes the rights of the child.

³⁹ Losses resulting from civil wars, mutinies and *coups d'états* are not the only reasons for an increase in orphans. Health issues such as malaria and AIDS also contribute, as well as life expectancy that is typically below 50 years old in sub-Saharan Africa.

⁴⁰ See Aguilar Molina (2005). *The Causes and Prevalence of Accusation of Witchcraft among Children in Akwa Ibom State*. June 2008. UNICEF. Also *What future? Street Children in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Human Rights Watch, 2006.

⁴¹ This obligation is determined by family solidarity.

⁴² Nzapada, 2007. “Esther, child witch of Kinshasa. The innocent victims of evangelical sects”. 1 November 2007. Available at <http://www.afrik.com/article12149.html>. Accessed 25 September 2009.

The testimony of children accused of witchcraft are often similar to these extracts. They reveal the severe strains between the child and members of the “host” family (step-mother, half-brothers and –sisters, for example). These tensions can lead to acts of violence in situations where the families themselves are under severe strain. When the child is already unwanted, unruly, considered as a burden or as one too many bodies to care for, accusing him or her of witchcraft serves as a justification for violence and gives rise to the desire to get rid of them.

Multiple political conflicts have caused significant loss of life among civilian populations. Research carried out in DRC (Waddington, 2006) and Angola⁴³ indicates that children who have been accused of witchcraft have often lost their parents in the conflicts. In addition, these wars and political struggles have given rise to another phenomenon that has radically altered traditional representations of the child: the child soldier.⁴⁴ De Boeck notes that, in 1997 in DRC, “When Kabila seized power and child-soldiers (some aged under ten) entered Kinshasa, it was a totally new phenomenon and shocked many of the capital’s inhabitants.” (2006: 46). A child with a weapon and who intimidates local populations is no longer seen as a fragile being. Through this power, he or she now represents a danger.

The involvement of children in the urban public space goes beyond children in conflict situations. According to de Boeck, children have never been more present in this space. We saw above that in the economic domain, some children acquire greater financial power than their parents. While it is certainly true that children are often victims of the “multi-crisis”, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that they are also “active subjects”, “makers and breakers” of these situations. “Children in these societies often have the capacity, as children, to exert a powerful influence on the world in which they live, in both a positive and negative way [...]. They are fully-fledged social actors, whose role and presence are at the heart of the current social context” (De Boeck, 2000: 45-46).

3. Cultural practices: between tradition and modernity

3.1. Witchcraft fantasies and the other world

In African cities, children and youth have never been more present in the public mind. They are in the media, they are active in musical production, they are found in churches, in the army, etc. There is nothing surprising about this fact, given the social changes of the last few decades that have affected young people in particular. As de Boeck rightly points out, childhood, “as *opus operatum* and *modus operandi* of crisis and renewal, has become a source of reference that manifests clearly the breaking points of an Africa in transition” (ibid.: 32).

Caught between traditional values – even though disappearing – and the influx of goods from the capitalist world, youth often feel frustrated and uneasy, which only pushes them to assert themselves even more. According to Comaroff and Comaroff (1993), youth embody “the growing contradictions in our present world, and in the harshest forms” (ibid.: 95). They are both at the heart of these changes, excluded and included, and on the border between the public and private spheres.

The spread of global cultures via the media, especially the Internet, have stimulated the desire for self-expression and self-affirmation among youth. “The new age of globalization can be seen as the production of desire on a global scale,” propose Comaroff and Comaroff, “the promise of infinite possibilities collides with the impossibilities created by the increasing disparities in terms of wealth”

⁴³ LaFraniere (2007a) notes that, according to Angolan officials, the 27-year-old conflict that ended in 2002, as well as the proximity to DRC – a country in permanent turmoil –, have contributed to a fresh upsurge in the phenomenon of child witches.

⁴⁴ I am aware of the problems of terminology regarding children associated with armed forces and armed groups and that many of the children have been forced to join armed groups or have been used as sexual slaves. The issue of “child soldiers” is too large and contentious to be addressed adequately here. See Waddington, 2006 and Cahn, 2005.

(ibid.: 98). The images from the capitalist world promised a new age, especially for the young, yet reality has proved the opposite. In particular, the “multi-crisis” has increased the desire for material wealth, which at the same time is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain. Confusion and frustration then arise from a feeling of failure and drives the young to find refuge in a different world. In this way, children and youth are not only the central reference in the contemporary African imagination, they also contribute to its creation.

The invisible or “second world”, to borrow de Boeck’s term (ibid.), would appear to spread more widely in situations of severe crises that create frustrations, breakdowns and disappointments. In this situation, the night world becomes increasingly powerful and threatens to seize power in the visible world. “The second world is the invisible world,” explains a Kinshasa resident, “and those that live there and know everything, they’ve got four eyes, and they can see clearly in the world of day and the world of night. The second world is higher than ours. The second world rules over the first.” (De Boeck, 2004: 58). For this reason, belonging to the second world can symbolize a form of success that can compensate for the failure and despair of the difficult existence in the visible world. It is in this second world that those children and youth that have been abandoned, abused, neglected, or who are ill, can find shelter and attempt to survive.

The testimony of children accused of witchcraft reveals the importance of the second world when they describe their night-time activities, such as those described by Mamuya, aged 16:

My name is Mamuya. I’m 16 years old. I became a witch because of one of my friends, Komazulu. He gave me a mango one day. The next night, he came to my parents’ house and threatened to kill me if I didn’t give him some human flesh in exchange for the mango he had given me. From then on, I became his night-time partner and joined his group of witches. I didn’t tell my mother about it. There are three of us in our group. At night we fly in our “plane”, which we made from the bark of a mango tree, to our victims’ homes. When we fly at night, I change into a cockroach. Komazulu is the pilot. He does the killing. He gives me the flesh and blood and I eat and drink it. Sometimes he gives me an arm, sometimes a leg. Personally, I prefer the buttocks. I keep back a piece of meat to give my grandmother, who is also a witch. [...] Our group has already killed eight people. The victims hadn’t done anything against us. But sometimes we judge them anyway. If they don’t defend themselves very well, we kill them. Sometimes when a man has just been buried in the cemetery, we go there and say a prayer. The prayer wakes the dead man and then we eat him. Now I’ve left the world of shadows thanks to the prayer of the preacher who treated me a church. But the others who are still in the “second world” keep pestering me. Now they want to kill me because they’re afraid I betrayed them. (De Boeck, 2000: 36)

Abandoned children such as Mamuya have a hard time finding their place in the visible world. They therefore take refuge in this second world where they become someone “important”. Another confession makes this desire clear:

I’ve eaten 800 people. I made them have car or plane accidents. I even went to Belgium thanks to a mermaid who took me all the way to the port of Anvers. Sometimes I travel on my broomstick, sometimes by flying on an avocado skin. At night I’m aged 30 and have got 100 children. My father lost his job as an engineer because of me – and then I killed him, with the help of the mermaid. I killed my brother and sister too. I buried them alive. I also killed all the children from my mother.” (Beeckman, 2001: 63-64)

In these accounts, the children do not have the same age, they are able to satisfy their needs (they can eat as much as they want, even though it is human flesh), and they have the power to kill. Their power is used against those who have influence in the visible or real world, whether they are rich people or relatives who they do not get on with. The children also refer to the rich, whom they respect and condemn in equal measure, because they use mystical forces to make themselves rich.

Using a nocturnal broom, a plane made out of avocado skin, the bark of a mango tree or a peanut shell, these children travel to other “better” places. Going to Europe and leaving behind the misery in Africa is a recurrent desire that is often reported in the accounts. The reference above to the city of Anvers in Belgium, the diamond shipping port that is well-known in Central Africa, therefore has a double meaning: it represents both freedom and wealth.

These accounts also refer to feasts that, in their grotesque excess, express the daily reality of the influence of hunger. The empty and clenched stomach is replaced here with the “full belly” (Geschiere, 1995). The expression again has a double meaning in the invisible world. The “full” belly is where one finds the witch substance. This stomach is tormented by hunger (hunger for human flesh and for wealth) that must be assuaged at any price. Of course, the notion of “eating” should be understood here within the framework of imagined witch powers that enable remote eating or cannibalism.⁴⁵ The witches eat the body parts of their victims, especially their heart, in order to kill them. The act of “eating” embodies “the nightly possibility of immediate access to the fruits of modernity” (De Boeck, 2000: 47). As one 12-year-old boy explained:

Everything is useful in the human body. The blood is the fuel, diesel, kerosene and red wine; the water in the body is the motor oil, the brake oil, perfume, drinking water, medicinal syrup and other medicines like ointments to rub on your body. The spine is a radio, a mobile phone, a radio transmitter; the head is a cooking pot, the glass that customers drink from, a swimming pool, a bucket to wash yourself; the eyes are a mirror, a television, a telescope; with the hair you can make a mattress or a couch for the living room. (ibid.)

Witchcraft is dangerous because it makes the impossible and the forbidden possible. It offers the expression of a successful individual venture; it opens the doors to consumerism and the “modern” world, and allows children to express their own wishes. The fact that they do so through such confessions, a risky undertaking in the current climate, reflects the degree of despair of abandoned and abused children.

3.2. “Abnormal” births

We have already discussed how, in certain African cultures, children whose births are considered “abnormal” are labelled as witches, then killed or abandoned by their parents.⁴⁶ While there are large numbers of contemporary anthropological studies relating to witchcraft, those concerning infanticide and the abandonment of children are much less frequent. In some countries, practices and beliefs related to abnormal births have disappeared, either under the influence of missionaries during the colonial period (Bastian, 2001), or through the introduction of alternative practices, for example paying a fine (by dances and ceremonies) in cases of “extraordinary” birth. This fine erases any suspicions (Singleton, 2004). Furthermore, as a result of legislation and the actions of NGOs that defend the rights of the child, the number of cases of infanticide appears to be declining.

In contrast, in other countries, these practices, sometimes in slightly modified forms, have neither disappeared nor lost their social and cultural value. Among the Bariba in northern Benin, the practice of infanticide or the abandonment of children “abnormally” born and who bring misfortune (Yôobinu), endures to this day. For the Bariba, premature births (in the eighth month), presentation

⁴⁵ The concept of cannibal hunger refers to eating, and more generally to consumption. The representations associated with cannibal witchcraft should be compared with those of eating. In fact, the image of eating, especially by cannibals, sums up in a single signification, eating, copulation, killing and causing illness. For more details about eating and cannibalism, see Tonda, 2005: 197-236).

⁴⁶ Most of the data related to this phenomenon – which are certainly insufficient for an in-depth analysis – come mainly from northern Benin, among the Bariba (see Moussa, Koto and DjoDjouhouin, 2001; Sargent, 1988). Nevertheless, it would be useful to carry out comparative and in-depth studies not only in the Bight of Benin but elsewhere, notably in West Africa. According to Baldus, who has worked among the Bariba since the 1960s, this belief is typical of the Bariba and is not found in other parts of West Africa, for example, among the Yoruba (1974: 361).

in any variety of breech positions, or in the posterior, face-up position during delivery, any physical defect, born with teeth, or who caused the death of a parent are called *gnando* or wizard (Yengo, 2008). They should be killed or abandoned as soon as they are born.

The “unlucky child” is not actually accused of witchcraft. He is a potential source of misfortune for his relatives. For example, a *Gnango* or child-witch is considered a potential danger and his immediate death represents a beneficial act for the community. Infanticide must therefore be understood as a response to notions of good and evil, of the acceptable and unacceptable, of normal and abnormal as conceived in Bariba social order.

Attempts to justify infanticide rely on the fact that the child is first and foremost a witch and that his parents have not yet named him. As long as he has no name, the child is not considered to be a fully-fledged person. He does not gain this status until the age of two, even though the naming ceremony only takes place after he has got his first teeth. Late teething is another sign of the presence of a witch (Sargent, 1988). According to Delaunay, the ceremony marks the transition to full personhood and occurs shortly after birth (2009: 35). In the cases of *gnando*, “he isn’t given a name, it’s not a child, it’s a witch who has hidden inside him”, explains Mr Gnonlonfoum, former Justice Minister in Benin.⁴⁷ Although it is socially recognized, infanticide is still carried out in secret because it is usually outlawed by the State. Choosing to eliminate a child is not automatic,⁴⁸ and the decision to do so seems to belong to the father of the family. If he decides the child should be killed, the family calls on an “executioner”, also known as the village “fixer”. The name is telling, since it refers to a social order that has been disturbed by a bad birth. In order to re-establish social order, the birth needs to be “fixed”.

Those children who escape the “fixer’s” clutches are systematically rejected, abandoned and driven out of the village. It would appear that infanticides and the abandonment of children “born badly” have come to the attention of Benin’s authorities and of NGOs, who have launched a campaign against these practices (Yengo, 2008). For example, Father Patrick Sabi Sika founded an NGO called Hope Fights against Infanticide in Benin (ELIB), which campaigns to abolish the killing of children labelled as “witches” and looks after abandoned babies. In 2005, ELIB was caring for about thirty children who had been abandoned by their parents and arranged for many more to be adopted.⁴⁹

In spite of similarities in the consequences of belief (the violence, abandonment, etc.), this phenomenon should not be confused with that of “child witches” described previously. The social representations and mechanisms that lead to a child being labelled a witch are profoundly different.

3.3. Albino children on the market⁵⁰

Several news articles published recently on the Internet reveal the extreme discrimination and violence against people with albinism, especially in Burundi and the United Republic of Tanzania, but also in Côte d’Ivoire, DRC, Kenya, Senegal and Zimbabwe. In the United Republic of Tanzania, violence against albinos⁵¹ has reached alarming proportions. Several dozen were killed in 2008,⁵²

⁴⁷ See the documentary film “Gnando, child witch”, directed by Marino Mercuriali, Pois Chiche Films. <http://www.vodeo.tv/4-32-4884-gnando-enfant-sorcier.html>.

⁴⁸ Infanticide appears to be less common than other forms of discrimination, such as abandonment, social neglect or abuse

⁴⁹ “BENIN: Fears of witchcraft lead to widespread infanticide in remote north”. United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 18 July 2005. Available at <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=55489>. Accessed 9 October 2009.

⁵⁰ The phenomenon of albinos – the cosmogony as well as current representations – being killed for the sale of their body parts in sub-Saharan Africa is too complex and varied to be discussed in detail in the current report. We will restrict our analysis to a brief overview, in order to highlight the importance of anthropological studies in understanding the phenomenon.

⁵¹ The commonly used term, “albinos”, refers to people living with albinism, a congenital disorder characterized by the complete or partial absence of pigment in the skin, hair and eyes, due to the absence or defect of an enzyme involved in the production of melanin. Albinism is also associated with a number of vision defects and the lack of pigmentation makes the organism more susceptible to sunburn and skin cancers.

especially in the Lake Victoria regions of Mwanza, Shinyanga and Mara. In the neighbouring country of Burundi, three albino children and two adults were killed, and 35 albinos have reported being threatened or attacked in 2008.⁵³ Although the number of acts of violence against albinos in other countries does not approach the figures from Tanzania, they are still alarming. An albino woman was killed in Kenya in May 2008. The head of an albino child was discovered in the suitcase of a man crossing the Congo border (Schnoebelen, 2009: 19). An 18-year-old albino fled Benin for fear of being killed in a ritual murder.⁵⁴ In Zimbabwe,⁵⁵ albino women are victims of rape, because according to local belief, HIV can be cured by having sex with an albino woman. In other countries, such as Cameroon, Mali and Senegal,⁵⁶ albinos are heavily discriminated and stigmatized.

In Cameroon, Jean-Jacques Ndoudoumou, President of the World Association for the Defence and Solidarity of Albinos (Asmodisa), explains: "People think we are magical creatures, that we've come back from the dead as a punishment by God for something we did in our previous life."⁵⁷

In contrast with the "child witches", albino children are attacked and killed in order to make people more powerful, rich and prosperous. Certain body parts, such as the skin, tongue, hands, ears, skull, heart and genital organs are believed to have magical powers and are used to make potions and charms. These body parts are sometimes called "spare parts" (Tonda, 2005) and are commercially traded.

In order to understand the special character of the ritual murder of albinos and the "magical" trading in their bodies, it is essential to analyze two types of representations. The first type is linked to the idea that albinos possess "magical" power. This belief exists in West Africa, across Central Africa, down to southern Africa. The second type refers to much wider representations related to magic powers. The idea that albinos possess "magical" or "supernatural" characteristics, as well as ritual sacrifice, is not a recent representation. The birth of an albino baby has always stirred up a strong reaction – positive or negative – in African societies.

In the Dogon cosmology studied by Germaine Dieterlen (1957), albinos are thought to be the cursed offspring of an incestuous relationship between the gods. Consequently, an albino possesses great power and can act as a mediator between the heavenly and earthly worlds. On the other hand, since his birth is the result of a transgression (incest), an albino also represents danger. But as a holy child, his extraordinary magical power makes him the ultimate sacrifice for the hogon, the religious leader among the Dogon. In order to strengthen the power of the king, a human sacrifice with an albino was required three years after coronation, followed by a cannibalistic feast (De Heusch, 1986: 240). Among the Bambara, "an albino was also sacrificed during the coronation of King Segou. The victim's blood was poured on the king's shaven head (ibid. 241). Albinos were also sacrificed to Faro (the spirit of earthly waters) when the kingdom was in danger (ibid. 253).

In Benin, albinos are treated with the utmost veneration. People consider themselves honoured if albinos enter their home and take some food or any other thing. Similarly, Louis Jacolliot recounts in

⁵² According to some figures, 25 people with albinism were killed between March and August 2008 (Battaglia, 2008); another source puts the figure at 30 (Obulutsa, 2008).

⁵³ UNICEF. *UNICEF Burundi update of the situation of Albinos*. See also "UNICEF calls for better protection for albino children in Burundi". 19 November 2008. Available at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-11/19/content_10380475.htm. Accessed 21 September 2009; "Les albinos en danger d'extermination au Burundi". 17 November 2008. Available at <http://www.afrik.com/article15698.html>. Accessed 21 September 2009.

⁵⁴ "La chasse aux albinos est toujours ouverte". 13 April 2009. *Les observateurs*.

Available at <http://observers.france24.com/fr/content/20090413-chasse-albinos-ouverte-afrique-sorcellerie-tanzanie-cameroun>. Accessed 24 September 2009.

⁵⁵ Machipisa, 2003. According to some, sex with an albino woman can also cure AIDS.

⁵⁶ "Senegal: Albinos face perilous social rejection". 21 November 2008. United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN). Available at <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=81588>. Accessed 24 September 2009.

⁵⁷ Elouné and Kengne, 1998.

Mysterious Africa that in Kongo, “albinos are considered as special people. They are respected by everyone, so much so that they are allowed to visit the market and homes, and take whatever they need in terms of food or other things” (1877: 79-80).

The king of Loango, Gobbi, in Kongo, was surrounded by albino royal servants who possessed witch power and had learned magic (ibid.: 79). The link between witchcraft and albinos was also noted by Henri Labouret, working in western Sudan, where albinos were suspected of taking part in “strange and dangerous practices” related to witchcraft (1935: 464).

In western Kongo, Luc de Heusch reports that albinos are considered as “water spirits” (2000). Such representations are still alive in CAR, where the birth of an albino is the result of a woman having sexual intercourse with a water spirit, also known as Mami-Wata (Ogrizek, 1981; Grootaers, 1995), who is always represented as a white-skinned figure. As children of Mami-Wata, albinos should be revered in order to ensure a good catch – the fish are also considered to be the “children” of water spirits. The divine child, “sacred monster”, to adopt de Heusch’s term (2000), or witch, is thus both feared and revered.

Considering their “mystical” value, it is not surprising that albinos are especially prized on the occult market. Trade in their body parts form part of the representations related to the occult market and economy. Multiple anthropological studies have reported this trade in Ghana (Parish, 2000), Nigeria (Bastian, 2000), South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999), the United Republic of Tanzania (Sanders, 2001) and Zambia (Colson, 2000), to mention only a few countries. Most authors believe the phenomenon is directly related to globalization, the arrival of capitalism and the market, production, consumerism, as well as development policies.⁵⁸ It integrates the mysteries of economic growth, the accumulation of wealth and of the general impoverishment of populations. Increasingly striking social inequalities are more often explained in terms of the “occult economy”. This expression, adopted from Jean and John Comareff (1999), implies generally the deployment of magic means for purely materialistic ends. More widely, this “occult economy offers the means to produce wealth by using mystical techniques whose operating principles are neither transparent nor explicable in any conventional way” (ibid.). Moreover, these techniques involve the destruction of the human race, notably by albinos, which only contributes to the perception of their immoral nature.

In the context of globalization and the highly visible presence of material wealth (luxury cars, villas and haute couture clothes are now part of life among African city dwellers), stories abound of ill-gotten gains. To most people, those in power are becoming more powerful, and the rich are getting even richer. Thus dawns an “obsession with modernity” (Mbembe, 1992), or an “obsession with objects related to the new wealth” (Geschiere, 1995), the “spell of modernity”, which leads to an “all-out hunt for wealth” (Geschiere, 1995). “In the minds of those who lead their lives in the most trying and precarious situations, it is clear that money, merchandise, basic consumer, subsistence and status goods are taken as essential (Florence Bernault and Joseph Tonda, 2000: 10). Patrice, a student from Yakoma studying in Bangui, explains the situation in the following terms:

Witchcraft is more powerful than ever. In the past, people just wanted little things. Now they want a mobile phone, a TV, a car, a big house. Everyone wants to get ahead. People are becoming more jealous. If his neighbour has a radio or telephone, and he doesn’t, then he might use sorcery ... (Bangui, March 2006).

⁵⁸ Some authors seem more reticent, arguing that the discourse concerning the trade in body parts, without ignoring its importance in capitalist ideas, cannot be understood without reference to representations that date back to the colonial period, of which they are the result (Bernault, 2006).

The spread of democracy, capitalism and the free market have also democratized the occult (Sanders, 2000). Today everything is for sale: charms, talismans, magic powders and potions, some apparently made from body parts. The services of traditional healers to combat the world of magic are also available on the market. Moreover, this occult market transcends ethnic and national frontiers, and everyone can reach them. In some countries, such as Burundi, Uganda and Tanzania, albino body parts appear to be particularly highly prized, because they can be used to make potions and magic charms – lucky charms – that enhance wealth.

In Tanzania, albino body parts are alleged to have been used to make charms that give luck to those looking for diamonds. Their hair has been allegedly used by fishers in order to attract fish in Lake Victoria. This last belief recalls the links between albinos and the water spirits in Central Africa. It would also appear that different body parts symbolize various powers; therefore the reason given for the use of one or other organ depends undoubtedly on the context and the person addressed. However, despite the fact that the use varies and adapts itself continuously, it is nevertheless not the crux of the matter.

The ambivalent nature of albinos in current representations in sub-Saharan Africa inspires both fear and suspicion. Their white skin seems to make a reference to Europeans – and consequently, “modern” material goods—and the world of spirits and witchcraft. It is therefore unsurprising that access to the capitalist world is sought through the “mystic” powers of albinos. A number of questions, which unfortunately cannot be answered due to a lack of accurate data, remain open: given the all-out hunt for wealth, the explanation of social inequalities through the occult market, belief in witchcraft and the mystic powers of albinos, are not particular to Tanzania, why then do these practices exist so strongly in Tanzania and its neighbours (Burundi and Uganda)? Can we expect that, through images and representations, the phenomenon of ritual murders of albinos will gradually spread to other countries?

3.4. Twins – Sacred monsters

In many African societies, the birth of twins, as with all births considered “abnormal” (“badly born” child witches or albinos), is generally surrounded by a complex system of representations and rituals. Because “twins are creatures belonging to the supernatural,” writes Luc de Heusch, “in the same way as albinos and all kinds of other abnormal children” (2000: 145), their birth is always marked in some way. It becomes sacralized because of its abnormality and thus concerns the whole community. Twins are often thought to be mediators between the visible and invisible worlds. The interpretations surrounding the “abnormal” birth of twins vary from one society to the next, and sometimes even within the same group. In order to understand these diverse interpretations, it is first necessary to understand how these societies perceive the world, their cosmology, mythologies, social order, the past and the present.

On the subject of the birth and status of twins, anthropological studies⁵⁹ reveal a wide variety of socio-cultural representations and social behaviours. The birth of twins can be interpreted in a positive way – although this is rather rare – or can lead to rejection, abandonment or infanticide immediately after birth. It appears that the birth of twins is considered a joyful event among populations in West and Central Africa, where twins are revered as gods, whereas in the south and east, the social response is clearly less welcoming.

⁵⁹ It is worth pointing out that anthropological studies relating to twin births, the beliefs that surround them and the social consequences, refer to relatively old field observations. They first attracted attention in the 1920s, later in the 1960s and 1970s (Renne and Bastian, 2001: 2). The phenomenon interested anthropologists because of the variety of responses in different societies, as well as its “mystic” and “irrational” aspects (Ball and Hill, 1996). Studies regarding the contemporary practices of infanticide of twins are almost nonexistent (Delaunay, 2009).

In West Africa, among the Dogon, Bambara and Malinké, twins are the incarnation of a mythical ideal. According to their cosmologies, the first living creatures were couples of twins of opposite sex,⁶⁰ which have since been assimilated in the idea of “harmonious and inseparable unity” (Cartry, quoted in De Heusch, 2000). When twins are born, “there is a public outburst of unreserved joy” (ibid.), because the loss of twinning had been the price paid by mankind for the transgression committed by one of their ancestors. The birth of twins is a reminder of their former happy condition and is celebrated everywhere with great joy (Dieterlen, 1971).

The idea of spiritual unity is also present in Nuer representations, according to Evans-Pritchard’s studies. For the Nuer, the unique personality of twins belongs to the realm of the sacred, and their duality to the secular world. They are categorized as heavenly creatures or children of god (Turner, 1969: 52).

Among the Ga in Ghana, the birth of twins is also seen as a welcome anomaly, because it symbolizes the reproductive power of their parents (Kilson, 1973). In these populations, twins represent the mystical world, and they are associated with genies and the spirit world.

The Kedjom in Cameroon also admire and revere twins, whom they consider to be a special connection with the spirit world (Diduk, 1993). The story is similar among the Mende in Sierra Leone, who attribute special powers to twins and pay them great respect in order to gain their goodwill.

In other societies, twins are associated with dangerous/witch powers. Among Bantu populations in southern Africa, twins are often associated with animals, because they are believed to have the ability to transform themselves (Kuper, 1987). Among the Yaka in Congo, twins are “marked with an animal characteristic” (Devisch, 1976: 457). In CAR, the Yakoma call twins *ngbô*, which means “the snake”. They are mediators between the animal world and the divine. In Turner’s view, they are simultaneously superhuman and sub-human (1967: 52). A Yakoma journalist, who is himself a twin, explains in the following terms:

In Mobaye (situated 600km from the capital, Bangui), when we were born, we were revered. Twins are revered in Mobaye as little gods. We were seen as witches, and people were afraid of us. When people went fishing, in order to get a good catch, they first came to see us. I was very young, just one or two years old. People came to my parents’ house and prostrated themselves and asked for our blessing so that fishing would be good. And as soon as they had finished fishing, they always brought us the largest piece. (Bangui, March 2006)

The frequent association of twins with harmful influences causes a fear of twin births that may affect both parents and children. On one hand, the birth may lead to the adoration of the twin children. On the other, it may be associated with a special ritual to cleanse both twins and parents from their contagious condition.⁶¹ The rituals may concern the parents, as is the case among the Lele in DRC, where parents have to perform the appropriate rituals and payments; otherwise the village will be in danger (Douglas, 1963: 212). But they may also affect the twins, who have to undergo a period of segregation from public life. For example, among the Suku in Congo, twins are only allowed back into the community after a long period of segregation (Van Gennep, 1909). The rituals may involve both parents and children, as is the case among the Nyakyusa, described by Monica Wilson in the following terms: “twin birth is a fearful event to the Nyakyusa. The parents of twins and the twins themselves are *abipasya*, the fearful ones, felt to be very dangerous to their relatives and immediate neighbours” (quoted in Turner, 1969: 53).

⁶⁰ In Africa, only twins of opposite sex are considered as “real” twins.

⁶¹ See Turner, 1969, especially pages 49-94.

Anthropological studies also recount the existence of more radical violence: the infanticide of twins. While practices relating to the birth of twins among the Uduk in Sudan have varied in the past, according to Wendy James, reactions took a more negative turn in the twentieth century. One young man explained the birth of twins to the anthropologist in these terms: "It is cursed by Uduk. Uduk say it is very bad" (1988: 111). He continues: "they kill them dead if two are born. They kill one and keep one" (ibid.: 112). Until recently, they killed one of the twins, less often both of them, and sometimes also the mother (ibid.: 110). Saving children from the villages became a priority for missionaries, and it appears that their work has been successful in eradicating the practice.

Another example is found among the Thonga in southern Africa, who considered twins as a threat of drought. One of the children was then sentenced to death and buried (De Heusch, 2000: 149). Cases of infanticide are also reported among the M'wali in Angola, where the birth of twins represented a disaster for the whole country, and the children were therefore killed (Erny, 1988). In southeast Nigeria, among the Igbo, for example, twins were systematically eliminated because they were considered to be an abomination against the god of the earth (Achebe, 1958). Among the Antambahoaka in Madagascar, twins were killed by a witch, in order to protect their parents (Van Gennepe, 1909). Infanticide of twins was also practiced in the north of Tanzania, among the Chaga (Singleton, 2004).

Considering all these representations that indicate the harmful nature of twins towards their family circle, it is not surprising that they have been associated with witchcraft. The ability to "play" with the fate of members of their society – as well as with natural events – and the ability to transform into animals leads to associations of twins with witches. Moreover, twins represent an image of a double spirit, which is also characteristic of witches. In Nigeria, for example, twins are special beings that can fly, use their power for antisocial aims, and cause illness and misfortune (Masquelier, 2001). In addition, it appears that certain changes have occurred in the representations of the power of twins. As with albinos, the presence of twins is more often explained in terms of misfortune, and consequently they must be punished.⁶² Again in Nigeria, in 2007, twins were called witches by villagers who expressed their anger and fear by saying, "Take them away from us, they are witches. Take them away before they kill us all. Witches."⁶³

Infanticide of twins has often been explained as being the direct consequence of beliefs in their status in society. In an article in 1966, Helen Ball and Catherine Hill question the validity of considering the phenomenon from a purely cultural position. Twins are eliminated, according to them, because they belong to a social category related to "difficult" births. Furthermore, in the socio-cultural contexts where infanticide occurs, the act is not considered as murder. Infanticide is justified by the need to restore social order and to eliminate a danger. In a similar way to the infanticide of child witches in the Bight of Benin region, infanticide of twins addresses the norms of good and evil. Although these practices seem to be increasingly rare, replaced by others, such as abandonment, further research is necessary in order to improve general understanding of such social behaviour.

4. Fighting evil – fighting witchcraft

Different social and legal mechanisms, some legitimate and others not, have been established to fight against evil. Practices such as abandonment, rejection or infanticide are often based, at least in the popular imagination, on a danger incarnate in the child. The practices are therefore considered

⁶² Due to a lack of contemporary literature and data, current changes in representations of twins cannot be analyzed in detail. Nevertheless, it is useful to analyze further the representations relating to the birth of twins and the social consequences (infanticide, abandonment or any other kind of behaviour) in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies.

⁶³ MacVeigh, 2007. "Children are targets of Nigerian witch hunt". *The Observer*, 9 December 2007. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/dec/09/tracymcveigh.theobserver> . Accessed 25 September 2009.

as legitimate means of eliminating the danger. In cases of “abnormal” births, killing the child would appear to be the most effective solution. In the current and urban context of children accused of witchcraft, other possibilities are available. While killing the child is one way of “fixing the problem”, parents can opt for other solutions: once labelled a witch, the child can be taken to church or to traditional healers in order to be “healed”. In countries where witchcraft is legally recognized in law and applied, the child can also be tried in court.

4.1. The deliverance of child witches

4.1.1. Revivalist churches

Since the end of the 1980s, there has been a rise of various religious movements in sub-Saharan Africa. The most visible groups originate in the large “universal religions”: protestant movements (evangelical, apostolic, Pentecostal, Baptist or Methodist) and the charismatic renewal in Catholicism. In sub-Saharan cities, the public space is filled with these churches. It is of course necessary to distinguish, state André Mary and André Corten, the “historical” Pentecostal churches (Assemblies of God or Pentecostal Churches), some of whom have been present for over a hundred years, and those churches belonging to the “Pentecostal movement”, such as revivalist, spiritualist or African prophetic churches (2000: 12).

Pentecostalism is a religious movement in which followers claim personal experience of a supernatural force, the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, Pentecostals believe that everyone can be saved by faith in Jesus. The force of the Holy Spirit within those who have been truly saved is the most obvious characteristic that distinguishes Pentecostalism from other forms of evangelical Christianity. During services, the Holy Spirit is called upon to descend on the faithful and is a necessary presence in ceremonies.

Followers attend services several times a week that can last many hours and take place in a highly charged atmosphere of singing, prayers, trances, sermons, revelations – testifying and confessions – healing rituals through laying on of hands, miracles and offerings. The “high” points are undoubtedly the public or private deliverance sessions, divine healing and testifying typically related to the forces of evil. Followers’ whole lives centre on their church, which integrates them in a new kind of community, the Pentecostal family. They call each other brothers and sisters. The main message of these churches focuses on their ability to use the presence of the Holy Spirit to fight against the satanic world that is incarnated by witches, evil spirits and ancestral spirits. Pentecostalism takes all these imaginary African characters seriously and gives them a new status through assimilation with Satan. These are of course highly syncretistic churches that have successfully integrated African beliefs into their discourse, as well as certain behaviour, such as trances and possession. According to André Mary and André Corten, Pentecostal discourse gains “its strength and ability to mobilize the two imaginary worlds of public space and invisible forces by intertwining them and inventing a new syntax” (ibid.: 17). By manipulating the forces of good to combat the forces of evil, Pentecostalism operates essentially in the universe of demonization.

4.1.2. Deliverance and the “spiritual war”

Most Pentecostal churches (revivalist and charismatic) are centred around a pastor or prophet who claims to have been chosen by God through divine revelation. In their main objective to fight an omnipresent evil (witchcraft is an evil force that is still omnipresent), the pastor-prophets offer their followers not only a better life – financial prosperity – but above all divine healing and deliverance (from where the commonly named, “healing churches”).

Maman Joséphine L. was born in 1954 and began working in 1974 in response to a miraculous divine calling. In 1997, she began to help children overcome bad spirits through deliverance. In her

opinion, it is God who has given her this gift. The bewitching of children is shown to her by a spirit and through prayer. (Aguilar Molina, 2005: 27)

The phenomenon of deliverance is, according to Sandra Fanello, “at the heart of the explosion of Pentecostalism in Africa since the beginning of the 1990s” (2006: 147). The practice of deliverance is at essence based on a dualistic vision of the world between the forces of evil and divine power. It is closely linked with divine healing through the fight against genies and evil spirits that haunt African populations by inflicting physical and psychological harm. The personalization of the image of the demon, notably in the figure of the witch, enables churches to declare a “war against Satan” (Meyer, 1995).

Through increased reliance on therapeutic aspects – the miraculous healing – these churches’ discourse focuses on the healing and salvation of the soul, through “exorcisms” that are often accompanied by singing or performance that reduce anxiety. Many confessions by members involve visions or being possessed by evil spirits. While exorcism and promises of divine or miraculous healing apply to the individual – within the family – “deliverance” often contains a collective dimension, that of spiritual war and liberation from evil forces.

This healing by the Holy Spirit is interpreted as being miraculous, and forms part of the validation or certification procedure of the prophet, who is supposed to be capable of healing all kinds of illnesses. These include diabolic, satanic illnesses that modern medicine (that is, “the white man’s”) cannot cure, such as AIDS, cancer and diabetes. Accounts by people who have been “cured” of AIDS can be heard every day on the radio or television. They give hope to all those who have not yet received this deliverance from God. According to Fanello, “miraculous healing is at the centre of conversion strategies of Pentecostal churches” (2006: 148), but is equally valid for other revivalist churches.

4.1.3. The role of pastor-prophets and “spiritual” treatment

The role of pastor-prophets in these churches seems to be of major importance in the “anti-witch hunt”, not only through the possibility of bringing deliverance to people possessed, but also through their ability to identify witches. In several African cities, these pastor-prophets play an essential role in witchcraft accusations against children. Although they are not always at the origin of the accusation – the person is already suspected by the family or members of the community – they confirm and legitimize the accusation. Numerous articles in the press, videos on the Internet⁶⁴ and anthropological studies indicate that in Angola,⁶⁵ CAR, DRC⁶⁶ and Nigeria,⁶⁷ as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, these pastors detect witches through visions and dreams.

Maman Putu, from the Eben Ezer centre in Kinshasa, calls herself a prophet and explains her gifts in the following terms:

When a child first comes here, I first check the condition of his soul. I’m not only a prophet but also a clairvoyant. I start by praying with the child and then I ask him some questions about his dreams and his food situation. I use references and I can very quickly tell if a child is bewitched or not. (D’Haeyer, 2004: 37)

The “spiritual” treatment can only begin once the child has confessed. The confession is often obtained under duress or violence, as one accused of witchcraft, Bruno, explains:

⁶⁴ See list at the end of this report.

⁶⁵ See LaFraniere, 2007a, b; UNICEF, 2008a.

⁶⁶ See Aguilar Molina, 2005; Waddington, 2006; Devey, 2007.

⁶⁷ UNICEF, 2008b.

For three days we were not allowed to eat or drink. On the fourth day, the prophet put our hands above a candle to make us confess. So I admitted the accusations and the harsh treatment stopped. Those who didn't confess were threatened with whipping. (Interview by Human Rights Watch with Bruno, Kinshasa, 30 September 2005)

In exchange for money, the pastors then propose the "soul cure", which consists of divine healing and the deliverance of the child. In the language of the Pentecostal churches, a child that is possessed by the evil spirits of "witchcraft" must be delivered "from the forces of darkness". Deliverance ceremonies can last several days, and generally begin with the laying on of hands and prayers; they regularly transform into extremely violent "exorcisms". According to de Boeck, "the space of the healing church enables the relocation and reformulation of the physical and psychological violence, sometimes extreme, that the accused child undergoes within the family group. In fact, the child is extracted from the threatening family situation in which his place has become very problematic, to be entrusted to a pastor. There, the treatment is often equally severe, beginning with a period of reclusion or quarantine, which may be individual or collective with other child witches." (2000: 41)

The "spiritual" treatments described in studies carried out in Angola⁶⁸ and DRC⁶⁹ also exhibit a violent nature. The "healing" of children accused of witchcraft varies from one church to the next, and from one region to the next. Children are sometimes isolated in the churches for a period ranging from a few days to several months. During this time, they are forced to fast, deprived of food and water for such long periods that some children die.

The treatment can also consist of swallowing potions, administering perfume, spiced sauces, as well as injecting petrol in the eyes or ears. They are also often beaten.⁷⁰ The surveys carried out by Ballet, Dumbi and Lallou in Kinshasa offer further evidence of the extreme violence inflicted on certain children. Glodie Mbete, aged eleven, recounts her "deliverance":

The healing ceremonies took place in the revivalist churches. One pastor burned my body with candles. A prophet *mama* covered my body with a red cloth. In yet another church, they poured the sap from a tree into my eyes. It stung terribly. The healer said that the witchcraft had gone. My eyes hurt so badly. (Ballet, Dumbi and Lallou, 2007: 15)

In this way, the children are not only stigmatized because they are accused of witchcraft, they are also abused and tortured within the churches. The churches claim to eliminate the evil definitively from the child's body. However, if the child survives this "spiritual" treatment, he will be stigmatized as being a witch and rejected by his family. The phenomenon of the child witches illustrates, as Facello rightly notes, "the paradox of churches that are themselves caught in the trap of witchcraft accusations while claiming to fight against witches. Between witch and counter-witch, there is a constant switching of places (2008: 78). Another result is that parents sometimes doubt that their child has been healed after deliverance ceremonies in churches. It is not uncommon that after being initially convinced, after experiencing a single new misfortune, the child is once again accused.

4.1.4. *Miracle Merchants*⁷¹

All the "spiritual" treatments offered by pastors and prophets belonging to Pentecostal, revivalist and other churches require some form of payment. To my knowledge, no church offers these

⁶⁸ UNICEF, 2008a.

⁶⁹ See also Aguilar Molina, 2005 and Waddington, 2006.

⁷⁰ UNICEF, 2008b.

⁷¹ The *Miracle Merchants* (*les marchands de miracles*) is the title of a documentary film by Gilles Remiche, and made in 2006 in Kinshasa. Available at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xoylg_marchands-de-miracles_news. Accessed 15 October 2009. The film shows clearly the financial nature of the revivalist churches.

services for free. While the fee may vary from one church to the next, it is generally higher than most people can afford. For example, one Congolese family, for whom the pastor had detected five cases of witchcraft, had to pay the equivalent of €24 plus a piece of sheet metal for each child. Another family had to pay the equivalent of €27 per child, and so on. (Aguilar Molina, 2005: 29). One young believer explained it thus:

The hard-earned money of the women selling vegetables in the market goes towards building the pastor's villas or the upkeep of one or other of his mistresses. (D'Haeyer, 2004: 45)

The earnings from a deliverance ceremony, and also during a regular service when the collection plate goes around, are not insignificant. Consequently, a number of pastor-prophets, including women, have found their calling in the anti-witch hunt, as is the case with Prophet Helen Ukpabio in Nigeria. She founded the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries, whose primary goal has become the detection and deliverance of child witches. For these pastor-prophets, "detecting" child witches brings not only money, but also a certain social status and popularity that draws new members and "clients", and leads to yet more income. Accusations against children therefore form part of this vicious circle of the prophets' "business" and their status.

According to Marshal-Fratani (2001), these days, pastor-prophets are the new models of social success and power. They are associated with wealth, social status, connections with transnational networks and contacts among the political elite. Their conspicuous wealth – clothes, luxury cars, mobile phones and computers, villas, jewellery, etc. – escapes no one. They own television channels and radio stations, and they do not hesitate to advertise themselves, as the following billboard shows:⁷²



All this promotion is part of the goal to increase the number of members, who represent their "wealth in numbers". Without ignoring their social function, while fighting evil, revivalist churches keep their members afraid of their neighbours and promote fatalism rather than action. Furthermore, although pastor-prophets represent the fighters in the struggle against the forces of

⁷² This image is available at http://cedric.uing.net/files/post_file_21031.jpg. Accessed 15 October 2009.

evil, they cannot escape from the suspicion that they are in fact collaborating with these forces. “Through healing gestures and other “miracles” that are supposed to replace the “charlatan witch”, these pastors appear to be endowed with the same extraordinary magical powers, and are therefore witches.” (Marshal Fratani, 2001: 43). This brings them, symbolically at least, closer to their direct “competition”, traditional healers.

4.2. Treatment by traditional healers

A number of traditional healers,⁷³ or traditional doctors, called *nganga* in Central Africa, or *inyanga* or *sangoma* in South Africa,⁷⁴ also claim to be able to combat the occult forces of the invisible world. In the same way as the pastors and prophets, traditional healers take advantage of the ever-present witchcraft discourse. In addition to healing “natural” illnesses with medicinal plants (hence the title, *médecin traditionnel*), they also offer to heal “witchcraft-related” illnesses. Moreover, they also have the gift of clairvoyance, which enables them to detect witches. Both urban and rural traditional healers are increasingly visible, advertising their “hospitals” with large signs that promote their expertise in combating the “modern” forms of witchcraft.



Sign for a traditional healer in Mbaïki (CAR) © 2009/Aleksandra Cimpric

When children are suspected of witchcraft, they are taken to traditional healers to get confirmation. The healers use potions made from poisonous plants, which they forcefully administer in the eyes or ears. This “therapeutic” treatment causes vomiting or defecation, which is interpreted as proof of either the presence of witchcraft or the effectiveness of the treatment.

⁷³ The concept of traditional healer, or its equivalent, “traditional doctor” (*médecin traditionnel*), raises a number of terminological issues.

⁷⁴ According to Adam Ashforth, there is a difference between *inyanga*, the traditional doctor who uses medicinal plants, and *sangoma*, who deal with spirits in order to diagnose an illness (2005: 53).

Children accused of witchcraft



Administration of plants in a child's ear (Bangui, CAR). © 2009/Aleksandra Cimpric

In the Central African Republic, I witnessed treatment that required an operation. Since witchcraft is defined as a substance in the child's abdomen, the *nganga* makes an incision in the child's belly, using an unsterilized knife, and cuts out a small piece of intestine, which symbolizes the witchcraft. As a result, the children are "cleaned".



Children showing the witchcraft substance allegedly removed from their abdomens. (Bangui, CAR) © 2009/Aleksandra Cimpric

Traditional healers in CAR belong to the National Federation of Central African Traditional Healers, which was officially recognized by the State in 1995,⁷⁵ and now counts 4,884 members. Official

⁷⁵ Act n°85/025 dated 16/08/1995.

recognition has not, however, diminished the highly ambiguous nature of traditional healers. Putting one's trust in the *nganga's* knowledge could turn out to be risky, because the only reason the *nganga* can fight witchcraft is because he is also part of the same invisible, occult world. As Peter Geschiere and Eric de Rosny (1981) have shown, the *nganga* himself is suspected of being a witch. So in the end, one still has the same atmosphere of mistrust that fed the initial accusations of witchcraft. Moreover, the *nganga's* secret knowledge can be used against him, which is why traditional healers insist in repeating that their role is to fight witchcraft and not to harm people. Nevertheless, the *nganga's* assessment is still important in witchcraft accusations against children, even though their services provide a source of income.

4.3. The judicial system

In a number of sub-Saharan African countries,⁷⁶ practicing witchcraft is against the law, although it is not always applied. To my knowledge, the law is in force in Cameroon, CAR, Chad and Gabon. Apart from the Central African examples, I am unable to provide information about the sentences given during witchcraft cases, due to a lack of precise information.

Cases of witchcraft in CAR represent a large number of cases brought before the family courts (*tribunaux de Grande Instance*). Prior to appearing before the judge, children accused of witchcraft have already undergone a long procedure of "healing", whether by traditional healers or churches. They have often suffered acts of violence from their family and community. The children are sometimes seized from the hands of an angry mob determined to make them confess. Once at the police station, the children are forced to confess their witch activities and to inform on the person who supposedly transmitted the witchcraft to them, who is then also brought before the court. During the initial enquiries, which may last several months or even years, the children are generally kept in prison in order to protect them from mob violence. Due to a lack of infrastructure and juvenile detention facilities, they have to share cells with adult prisoners.

Sophie,⁷⁷ aged 13, had lost her father and her mother had left for Congo, leaving her daughter with the paternal family. Sophie was accused of witchcraft by someone in the community. After being beaten and abused by her family and community, she was taken before the family court, where she admitted to having inherited the power of witchcraft from her mother, but that she did not know how to use it. She was sentenced to several years in prison. Following a decision by the public prosecutor, she was transferred to the house of one of the prison wardens. Soon after, she was suspected of witchcraft and transferred once again, this time to the Catholic Mission. Two years after she had been sentenced, she was again accused, this time of eating the heart of one of the novices at the mission. In the end, she was sent to prison.

Without any other legal evidence, children are accused on the basis of the judge's personal conviction and testimony – sometimes from traditional healers –, circumstantial evidence and the confession. Confession is still considered to be the most significant evidence in cases of witchcraft.

Cases of children accused in court are still quite rare. This may be explained by a general mistrust of the judicial system, and on the other hand, by the choice to submit the child to other kinds of punishments or treatments. Nevertheless, cases of witchcraft account for approximately 25 percent of all cases brought to court in Bangui, and 80-90 percent of cases in rural courts. As an example of

⁷⁶ The legal injunction against practicing witchcraft exists in the former-French colonies of Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, Mali and Mauritania. The Witchcraft Suppression Act is the corresponding text in former-British colonies, such as Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Zimbabwe, etc. However, there are significant differences in how the texts are formulated. In French-speaking countries, the law only punishes those who practice witchcraft, whereas the Witchcraft Suppression Act also those who make false accusations of witchcraft against someone, as well as all persons who claim to be a witch.

⁷⁷ Name changed in order to protect anonymity.

the results of this phenomenon, 70 percent of prisoners in Bangui central prison are there on the basis of witchcraft accusations.⁷⁸

5. Consequences of social and cultural practices: violations of children's rights

5.1. Anti-witch violence

Girl accused of witchcraft burned alive

She was admitted to hospital last Monday. Having lost her father, the nine-year-old girl had been accused of witchcraft by her mother's younger sister. The case had dragged on at the serious crimes division since 2005. After having been doused in petrol, she was set on fire by persons unknown. When the police arrived from SICA II, everyone had already fled the scene.⁷⁹

One of the most serious consequences of witchcraft accusations against children is violence. Whether it is psychological (humiliation, contempt, disdain, insolence, etc.) or physical, violence against children violates children's fundamental rights as defined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19 paragraph 1: "States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child."

In order to understand this recurrent violence, it is necessary to understand the social mechanisms that culminate in such behaviour, and necessary to consider it in a wider context, that of the anti-witch movement that is generally considered to be justified in the minds of most African populations.

It is essential to clarify that although violence is universal, the definition of an act of violence can vary in time and space. According to Françoise Héritier, violence is the "application" of force that an individual, group, social category or society defines as "violence" (2005: 21). For this reason, acts of violence may be defined differently not only from one society to the next, but also within a single society. What passes for violence is subjective.

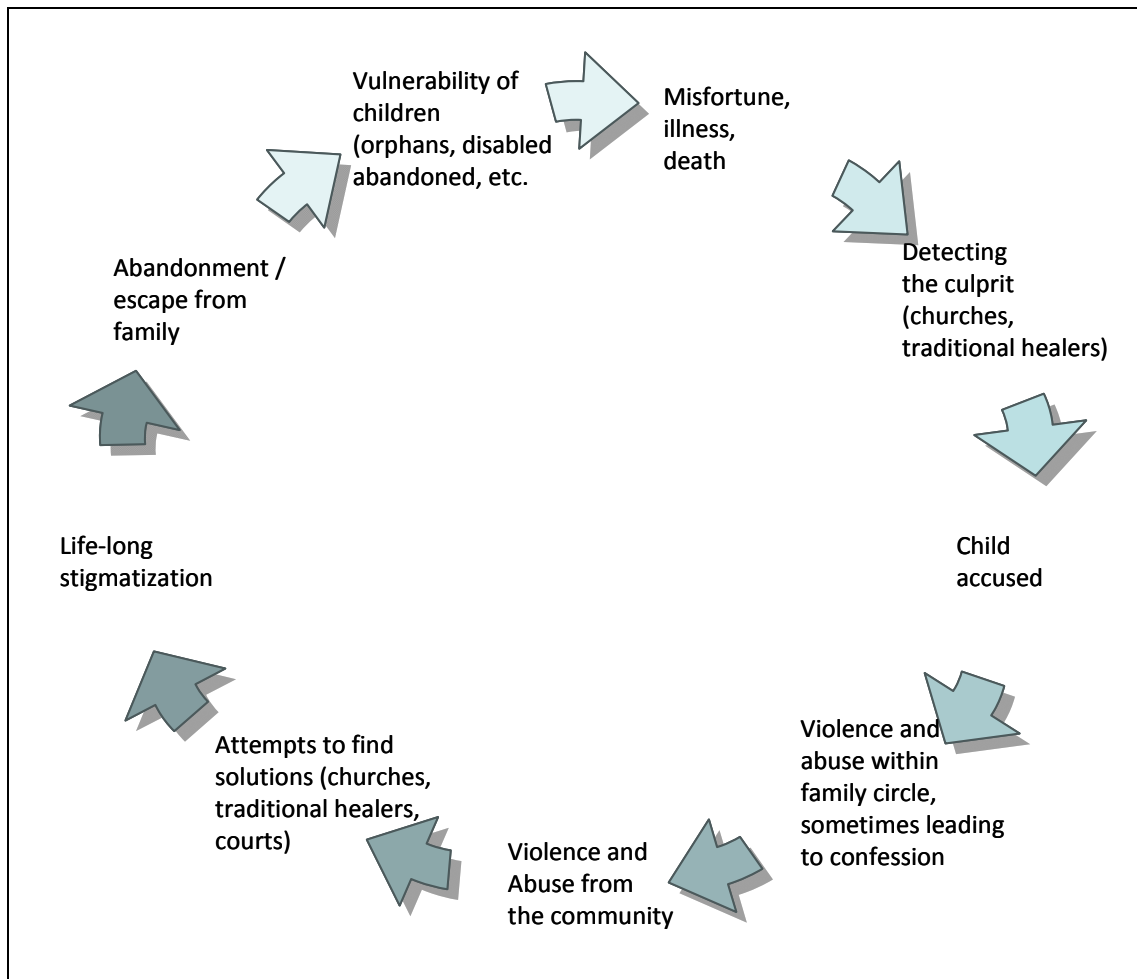
5.1.1. The victimization process – the double victimization of children

The process of victimization that culminates in an accusation of witchcraft and acts of extreme violence is actually dynamic and complex. It begins with the child's vulnerable situation (orphan, disabled, ill, etc.). As Bouju and de Bruijn rightly note, when troubles strike certain social categories, they become more vulnerable to violence than other categories (2007), they become the quintessential scapegoats. A single, serious misfortune – death – or a series of misfortunes trigger suspicions and accusations that lead almost systematically to violence that in turn can lead to infanticide or rejection of the child. The child is initially a victim of his situation, thereafter a victim of a witchcraft accusation. Once accused of being a witch, the child is stigmatized forever.

⁷⁸ See Dankwa, 2000. Data also comes from surveys in Central African prisons between 2005 and 2009.

⁷⁹ *Le Citoyen*, n°2532, dated 26 October 2006.

Children accused of witchcraft



While the child is considered as a “victim” of witchcraft accusation from the point of view of the Western conception of human and child rights, it is not a view shared by local populations who have designated the child as guilty. According to local beliefs, the real victim is the person who suffered the consequences of an act of witchcraft. As soon as the child has been accused of witchcraft, it is no longer a child, but a witch. Bobo Makoka, pastor of the Evangelic Mission of the Breach, presented by his followers as “the Lord’s warrior”, explains that the children change form at night and turn into animals.⁸⁰ A follower of Ebale Mbonge makes it clear:

Child witches act without thinking and without pity. When they are asked to give (*kill*) their parents, they don’t hesitate.⁸¹

The act of violence against witches represents a kind of reassertion of norms of the social order. “We wanted to destroy the witch to show the others, to make the others afraid,” explained Paul. “It’s not our fault. It’s him (the child accused of witchcraft) who committed the fault.” (Mbaïki, CAR, January 2009). The act is interpreted as socially acceptable not only by the family and neighbourhood, but also to the police forces. In addition, the fight against people considered as evil-doers who upset the social order and incarnate evil not only on a personal level but also in society at large, can be exploited by others, for example by churches (Fancello, 2008) or in the judicial systems, where witchcraft discourse is made official in principle and in practice.

⁸⁰ Nzapada, 2007.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

This endemic violence is not only justified at the community level, but also at the level of the State, which only rarely gets involved during a collective act of violence, and hardly ever applies legal sanctions against the perpetrators. The authorities are sometimes themselves implicated in the violation of the law. Confronted with violence characterized by popular uprisings and highly charged emotions, the State often feels ill-equipped to act. As a result, in a society marked by spiritual insecurity and a context of anomie – as Bouju and de Bruijn explain succinctly – anti-witch violence in its widest sense appears to be characteristic of a situation where the international system of norms has lost all or part of its legitimacy, its rigour and effectiveness (2008: 2).

Anti-witch violence, despite being unlawful, finds legitimacy in the general fight against witchcraft that is exploited in churches and in law.

5.2. Infanticide

Infanticide is a legal term that refers both to the murder of a child, especially a newborn, and the perpetrator of such an act. The present report has shown how practices relating to “badly born” children and the birth of twins are particularly susceptible to infanticide. The practice was banned and outlawed by colonialists and missionaries, and, while it still exists in certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa, infanticide seems to be losing ground to other practices. For example, among the Yoruba, rituals related to twins or the use of charms have replaced infanticide (Renne and Bastian, 2001). Infanticide is more often seen as murder. According to a recent UNICEF study, among the Bariba, infanticide has either disappeared progressively as a result of creating maternity centres and judicial measures, or been replaced by another practice: abandonment.

5.3. Abandonment and street children

The phenomenon of street children currently affects almost all urban centres in Africa, and sometimes even smaller towns; yet only 20 to 30 years ago, it only concerned a few of the largest cities on the continent and even there in much smaller proportions (Canard, 2001: 21). Whether he was badly born, is a twin or an albino, or simply accused of witchcraft, a child risks being abandoned by his family and having to migrate to the streets of African cities. Together with violence, abandonment is one of the most common practices in witchcraft accusations. The practice infringes the principles relating to children as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations proclaimed that “childhood is entitled to special care and assistance, convinced that the family, as the fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members, and particularly children, should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community, recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.”

Abandonment also violates Article 18 paragraph 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that “States Parties shall use their best efforts to ensure recognition of the principle that both parents have common responsibilities for the upbringing and development of the child. Parents or, as the case may be, legal guardians, have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern.”

Abandonment can be a consequence of witchcraft accusations, but can also be the cause. We have already noted how abandoned children are often targeted for witchcraft accusations. According to Véronique Delaunay, abandonment can take on various forms, which could lead to the death of the child (infanticide), or to an increase in the numbers of street children and child servants (exploitation). Children accused of witchcraft are abandoned by their families or forced to flee, following violence and abuse in the family home. They can also suffer violent acts within churches,

as described above. As a result, millions of abandoned children end up on the streets of Africa's large cities. The number of street children,⁸² although difficult to estimate, is increasing each year. These children have an extremely difficult existence,⁸³ characterized by violence, drugs and exploitation.

- **Physical and sexual violence**

The children have often experienced physical violence before they arrive on the street, and once there, even if they find some kind of shelter, they continue to be beaten and abused either by other, older street children or by the general public or by security forces. The youngest children are often kicked, hit with a stick, or burned in order to make them hand over the money they made during the day or to enforce their loyalty or obedience. They can also suffer violence as part of a "test". One night in Bangui, street adolescents forced younger children to crawl on their hands and knees on broken glass, supposedly to pass their "initiation rite". Street children appear to be organized not only by age group, as Filip de Boeck (2000) shows, but also according to neighbourhood or the pace where they sleep. Each group is controlled by a "chief", which is usually the eldest child. Both girls and boys are subjected to sexual violence. Many of them, sometimes aged just 8 years old, have been victims of rape, often repeated, carried out by civilians or security forces. The children thus live in suffering, shame and the incapacity to describe the sexual violence. Moreover, the sexual abuses are committed without protection, which increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

- **Violence committed by the authorities**

Children living in the street have often made reference to numerous cases of abuse, theft, threats and violence carried out by state authorities (police or *gendarmerie*); the children live in fear of the same security forces that are supposed to protect them. The Human Rights Watch report, *Quel Avenir?*, also describes how street children are recruited by these same police officers to steal and loot. Emmanuel, aged 14, recounts acts of violence committed by soldiers:

Life is tough here in the street. We get harassed by the soldiers all the time. They come at night, any time after 22:00. They hit or kick us. They regularly demand money or stuff they can sell, like mobile phones. Only those who manage to run away and not get caught are out of danger. Even if we've been working all day for 100 francs (\$US0.20), they might still take it off us. (Interview by Human Rights Watch with Emmanuel, street children centre, Goma. 14 September 2005)

- **Drugs**

Drugs play an important role in the daily lives of street children; cannabis, valium or glue, and to a lesser extent heroin and cocaine, are all frequently used. Alcohol is also used. Drugs such as cannabis, heroin and cocaine can easily be found in the markets of African capitals. As an example, in Kinshasa at least 300 places have been identified where cannabis can be bought. The drug gives the children a sense of force and power: "When you smoke cannabis, you get really angry and you turn into a war machine" (De Boeck, 2004: 166). It also represents a way to escape from misery, in the sense that it helps one sleep at night, wipes out problems, eliminates shame and sometimes reduces feelings of hunger.

- **Badly paid or illegal work, prostitution and begging**

Street children typically congregate around economic centres, markets, restaurants, bus stations and taxi ranks. Here they can hope to get money to buy food. Some children offer their services to carry merchandise, others clean the streets in front of restaurants and shops, help load and unload buses

⁸² It is perhaps necessary to clarify that there are at least two categories of children: street children and children in the street (De Boeck, 2004). The first category, the one referred to in the present report, are children for whom the street is their only home. The second category comprises children who have a home, who spend their days in the streets but return to the family residence at night.

⁸³ The difficult situation of street children in DRC has been described in detail in Human Rights Watch, 2006.

and taxis, and give directions to travellers. The children are easily exploited, for example, carrying enormous loads for a pittance. Some children take advantage of the large numbers of people in these places in order to beg. Still others get involved in illegal and dangerous activities, such as dealing drugs and alcohol. Near the mines in DRC, children are often exploited and work illegally, for the smaller the person, the more easily they can move around underground, attached to a rope. Sometimes children die in work-related accidents or in fights over diamonds. When they find diamonds worth thousands of dollars, they are not allowed to keep them.⁸⁴

Girls begin prostituting themselves as young as 6 or 7 years old. Prostitution, according to de Boeck, has almost become an obligation (2004: 167). Despite being consensual – with several “customers” per day – safe sex is at best optional. The amount paid depends on the use of condoms. The girls are paid more for sex without a condom. They earn between 500 and 1 500 CFA per customer (€0.75 to €2.30). Sometimes the customers do not pay at all, as Amélie recounts:

Sometimes men come and force themselves on me, and after, they go without leaving any money. That often happens. I started doing this work when I was ten years old. It’s not a pretty life. I’d like to go somewhere else and study. (Interview with Human Rights Watch, Lubumbashi, 18 September 2005)

At nightfall, if they are not working in prostitution, the children can be seen lying in front of buildings that offer them some kind of shelter, covered, if they are fortunate, with a piece of cardboard. Living conditions are so unbearable that the children rarely reach adulthood.

5.4. Schooling

Children accused of witchcraft typically have had little or no schooling, if for no other reason than parents unable to pay school fees. The children therefore stay at home, or go out and beg or look for work. For all of them, their situation does not improve over time. Those that may have attended school initially have to drop out in order to earn money to feed themselves.

5.5. Stigmatization and discrimination

Stigmatization and discrimination affect children accused of witchcraft as much as those “born badly”, twins and albinos. Several accounts by albinos indicate that their social stigmatization is probably due to the fear they inspire within society. For example, they are accepted with difficulty at school, and are often abused by their classmates. Twins whose birth is considered undesirable have to put up with stigmatization and discrimination within their own family.

A child who has been accused of witchcraft will be stigmatized for life, and even if he has undergone various treatments, his witchcraft past will continue to haunt him. The child is stigmatized within his family, neighbourhood, village or community. The possibility that he will be accused again remains high.⁸⁵ As with “badly born” children, witchcraft stigmatization also leads to discrimination. The family, community and State that tries to exclude a child accused of witchcraft violates Article 2, paragraph 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which clearly states that “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members.” Stigmatization and discrimination lead to traumas, psychological and emotional suffering. They also make more difficult any attempt to reintegrate the children in family and social life.

⁸⁴ CRIN, 2006.

⁸⁵ See the vicious circle diagram above.

6. Results of protection policies for children accused of witchcraft

One result of the increasing violence against people accused of witchcraft is that State authorities and NGOs appear to be becoming more involved. All the examples of violent behaviour mentioned in this report – abuse, abandonment, rejection, spiritual and traditional treatments, infanticide and mob justice – violate fundamental human rights and the rights of children. Concerns about the resurgence of violence in cases of witchcraft have been expressed recently by United Nations representatives. In his report for the High Commissioner for Refugees, Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, highlighted the extent of the problem.⁸⁶ Several reports by UNICEF, notably in Angola,⁸⁷ Benin⁸⁸ and Nigeria,⁸⁹ and the UNHCR 2009 Report all confirm the problem of violence associated with witchcraft accusations and the close link with human rights violations.

All these reports have shown, in the same way as the present study, both the difficulty and the weakness of governmental organizations and social services in providing protection and assistance to victims of witchcraft accusations. In response to the increasing number of accusations, international donors and NGOs have acted to limit the marginalization of children, and have accused in turn church leaders, pastors and certain traditional healers of abuse. As an example, in DRC, although the government has prepared a legislative framework for juvenile justice and contemplated taking action to limit the “spiritual” power of certain pastors, the plans often remain at the level of theory (Waddington, 2006). Moreover, according to de Boeck, some international organizations approach “the problem of child witches in Kinshasa as a humanitarian issue of street children and choose to ignore totally the cultural implications of the issue of witchcraft” (2000: 41). Acts of extreme violence against children appear to be gaining more media attention, yet due to a lack of in-depth knowledge, governments and international and local NGOs seem to be at a loss as to how to tackle this problem. One reason is that there is generally a division between in-depth knowledge of local beliefs and practices and human rights. Another reason is the lack of financing necessary to set up sustainable initiatives and programmes, although a number of existing programmes appear to present positive results.

Save the Children

This NGO, in partnership with local NGOs grouped under the Network of Educators of Street Children and Youth (REEJER), attempts to advocate on behalf of abused children and to return them to their families. In Kinshasa and Mbuji-Mayi, around 8 000 children have been reintegrated with their families over the last four years.⁹⁰ Through their efforts, the NGO aims to change attitudes towards children and witchcraft, as does War Child, another NGO. They especially try to prevent accusations of witchcraft from occurring.

International Catholic Child Bureau (BICE), DRC

As part of a larger project entitled, “Capacity-building and creating synergies between civil society actors, state services, the media, communities and children to contribute to establishing a culture of children’s rights and a State of law in DRC”, BICE is engaged in local activities to help children accused of witchcraft. Their objectives include setting up a programme to facilitate the identification, the physical, psychological and social rehabilitation, support, social and community reintegration, legal aid, and education of children accused of being witches. Other goals include

⁸⁶ OHCHR, 2009.

⁸⁷ UNICEF, 2008a.

⁸⁸ Moussa, Koto and Djodjouhouin, 2001.

⁸⁹ UNICEF, 2008b.

⁹⁰ Nzapada, 2007.

awareness-raising initiatives among the local populations, determining areas that might facilitate the social integration of those children identified, as well as working with pastors.

Child Protection Committee in Zaïre Province, Angola

In the province of Zaïre in Angola, the work of the child protection committee appears to be producing good results. By engaging institutions and NGOs, notably Save the Children, the committee has successfully identified several methods to improve the protection of children victims of violence, stigmatization and abandonment. The committee strives above all to detect accusations against children, to raise awareness among families regarding reintegration of children, and ensuring the rights of the child are not violated. At the same time, eleven churches have been shut down, following abuses by pastors. If a child does not have a birth certificate, the committee tries to obtain one. Awareness-raising sessions have also been organized, bringing together communities and local authorities, traditional healers and church leaders. The meetings emphasize the importance of the social development of the child and the child's rights. A number of people have been selected to "train" and raise awareness within village communities; the objective being to identify cases of witchcraft accusation quickly and to find solutions for reconciliation. The success rate, if not perfect is nevertheless impressive: 380 out of the 423 brought to the centre have been reintegrated into their families.

The committee's actions of raising awareness among families and communities concern both witchcraft accusations and violations of children's rights. They bring together local authorities, traditional healers and church leaders. By shutting down churches, they also contribute to establishing operating principles that could serve as an example for other regions.

Stepping Stones Nigeria

The Director of the NGO Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN), Gary Foxcroft, has repeatedly raised the issue of the alarming situation of children accused of witchcraft⁹¹ in Akwa Ibom State in Nigeria. SSN⁹² has been working for several months with the local NGO CRARN (Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network) to provide support for victims stigmatized by witchcraft accusations. Their work has been supported by the government of Akwa Ibom State, the local government of Eket and aid from the United Kingdom. They have managed to

- Set up a centre for abandoned children, especially after witchcraft accusations. The children suffer from severe rights violations experienced in the street – where they live most generally – as well as within their family and church;
- Hire teachers for the centre, to provide an education for children who have rarely attended school previously;
- Set up medical services. Children are tested for HIV-AIDS. Treatment for illnesses such as tuberculosis, malnutrition, malaria, typhoid fever, etc. is proceeding successfully.
- Feed children by offering one meal a day;
- Offer opportunities for apprenticeships in traditional trades such as bricklaying and construction, agriculture, dressmaking, soap production and carpentry that will offer children better reintegration;
- Reunite 32 children with their families.

In November 2006, SSN and CRARN, in partnership with the government of Akwa Ibom State, launched the Prevent Abandonment of Children Today (PACT) campaign. The objectives of the campaign are to:

⁹¹ Foxcroft, 2009.

⁹² The information in this section was provided directly by Gary Foxcroft, as well as in his paper, *Supporting Victims of Witchcraft Abuse and Street Children in Nigeria*.

- Address the problem of ignorance and witchcraft belief affecting children through the use of media (television and radio), drama, posters and children's books;
- Highlight cases of abuse (torture) and murder of children stigmatized as being witches and abandoned;
- Lobby for children's rights and for the adoption of a Child Rights Act by the Akwa Ibom State Government;
- Encourage all stakeholders to support orphans and vulnerable children;
- Carry out in-depth research in order to explore the relation between the abandonment of children and child trafficking in Akwa Ibom State.

SSN and CRARN's projects have a two-pronged approach: to improve understanding of witchcraft through awareness-raising, and to protect, support and reintegrate children accused of witchcraft. Despite failing to bring down the number of accusations against children – a long-term effort – prevention efforts within families and communities, and setting up education facilities will no doubt help to reduce accusations. Aware of the harmful influence of certain churches, they also lobby to regulate the activities of certain pastors.

Other examples exist, however, to my knowledge there is currently no structured and specific programme in the countries most affected by the phenomenon that has sufficient financial resources. As Waddington notes, there is almost a total lack of political leadership regarding street children. A number of politicians interviewed by an All-Party Parliamentary Group admitted that they wanted to avoid alienating pastors by addressing the issue of vulnerable children (2006). Civil society organizations that could provide care for accused children have very limited resources. Certain local NGOs are attempting to establish protection and aid programmes for children accused of witchcraft, albinos and twins, but they too lack resources, as well as effective plans of actions. It has proved difficult to implement the plans because of the deeply held belief in child witches and problems understanding local representations.

7. Recommendations

Strengthening child protection systems and promoting social change. Any response to accusations of witchcraft against children should strengthen national child protection systems that prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation and violence, including improving service provision, legal frameworks and access to justice. Moreover, programming and advocacy interventions should promote social change by raising awareness among families and community leaders, mobilizing and working with legal professionals and regulating churches and traditional healers. The following recommendations highlight strategic priorities for future programming.

A. Strengthen evidence and understanding of witchcraft accusations against children

1. In-depth knowledge of beliefs and practices. Effective programme responses have to be based on and informed by an in-depth understanding of the causes of witchcraft accusations against children. Beliefs in witchcraft, abnormal births, the birth of twins or albinos have to be analyzed and understood within the broader cultural, historical, economic and political contexts.

B. Promote social change through dialogue on witchcraft accusations

2. Support dialogue with religious leaders and traditional healers in order to identify common ground to combat the abuse of children accused of witchcraft and to mobilize religious leaders and traditional healers.

3. Community mobilization and education. Efforts to educate and raise awareness should be done in partnership and dialogue with communities rather than in a top-down manner. Community dialogue can help in bridging the gaps between local social and moral norms on the one hand and national and international human rights norms on the other. Awareness raising should be an on-going process that allows an exchange of ideas and beliefs. Communication campaigns should develop effective ways to discuss child well-being and safety in a respectful manner and avoid paternalistic education approaches that have failed in the past (see Wessells, “What are we learning about protecting children in the community”).

4. Negotiation and mediation between pastors, families and children accused of witchcraft. Negotiation and mediation consists of a dialogue between pastors, families, children accused of witchcraft and organizations defending children’s rights. Pastors are important opinion leaders and have considerable influence over child witchcraft accusations. In situations where legal and rights arguments are largely ignored, religious arguments could prove to be more effective.

C. Promote access to child and family welfare services for child victims – taking on a systems approach

5. Social protection to strengthen vulnerable families. Provide access to basic services (health, education and social protection) for vulnerable and at-risk children and their families. Reducing poverty and economic stress factors should strengthen the protective role of the family and reduce the risk of witchcraft accusations.

6. Support services, safe spaces and reintegration for marginalized children, including children accused of witchcraft. Develop services as part of national child protection systems and avoid creating parallel and isolated structures for accused children. Integrate services into existing structures to avoid further stigmatization and social isolation of children accused of witchcraft.

7. Develop mechanisms, procedures and criteria for determining the best interest of all children with regard to temporary placement, family reintegration and permanency planning. Best interest determinations for children accused of witchcraft should be done with service providers and government departments and should include assessing the risks associated with the children’s return to their family and community.

8. Develop reintegration strategies that include an anti-stigma component. Work with families and communities to fight stigmatization of children returning to their community. This may include education campaigns at national and community levels, as well as traditional methods (healing, prayer) to ensure that children can return home in complete safety.

D. Promote the role of health professionals in protecting children accused of witchcraft

9. Access and quality of health services. Improve the capacities of health workers and the availability and quality of health services as a way to reduce the belief in witchcraft as a cause of illness. Provide public health education on the most common diseases, such as malaria, AIDS, cancer and diabetes. Promote delivery in health facilities.

E. Promote access to the legal system for children accused of witchcraft

The legal protection of children accused of witchcraft should be considered in relation to other justice for children issues and overall legal reform. Specific actions to be considered to improve access to justice for children accused of witchcraft include:

10. Promote legal reform to decriminalize witchcraft, allow for the prosecution of persons harming children and provide special protection to children in contact with the law. Although real change requires more than legal reform, bringing national laws in compliance with international standards is an important first step. Effectively legal reform requires broad consultation with a variety of stakeholders, as well as clear advocacy strategies targeting communities, religious leaders, government officials, and parliamentarians. Child advocates should work with rule of law advocates to lobby for change. Decriminalizing witchcraft will prevent children from coming in conflict with the law and all the consequences associated with it. Laws governing the prosecution of persons who accuse and harm children will allow for a more robust response by the legal system. This includes religious leaders and traditional healers involved in practices that harm children. Along with specific campaigns to change the law governing witchcraft, reform efforts should also promote child friendly justice systems that are in line with international standards.

11. Raise awareness and educate legal professionals. In countries, such as DRC, where child protection laws against witchcraft accusations have been introduced but are inadequately applied, training should emphasize respecting and applying the existing laws.

12. Regulate traditional healers and the activities of Pentecostal and Revivalist churches. The regulation of traditional healers should include an official ban on using poisonous plants, “magic” powders or potions, as well as any activity related to the detection of witches. Any infraction should be punished through official legal proceedings. In countries where formal organizations of traditional healers already exist, review existing legislation by applying the rules mentioned above. The issuing of licenses to practice as a traditional healer should come under closer scrutiny. Specific laws and regulations should be developed to regulate harmful practices by churches and religious leaders.

13. Strengthen birth registration

F. Evaluate promising practices

14. Evaluate and monitor existing initiatives to ensure that programmes are founded on evidence of effective and tested approaches. Review and learn from previous activities to avoid repeating mistakes.

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