

Children in African Witch-Hunts

An Introduction for Scientists and Social Workers.

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ABSTRACT

Children are branded as witches on a mass-scale in Congo, Nigeria and Angola. Recent interpretational frameworks about these child witch-hunts employ a simplistic materialism centred on political and economic crises. Meanwhile, historic sources from distinct regions disprove the claim of a purely modern problem. While the concept of child-witchcraft is old and equally well-known from the European context, the recent crisis points indeed at a massive shift in propaganda and victimization strategies. In this text, two showcase film-analyses further question the importance of a crisis for the ideologemes. In the meantime, journalistic evidence and experiences of social workers spearhead the research as ethnographers seem to avoid the issue. Moral demands call for an implementation of advanced theory, psychological competence and social work with children accused of witchcraft.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional and modern witchcraft lore objectifies children. At the same time, children also consume, proliferate, interpret, apply and produce fantasies about witchcraft. In current African witch-hunts children become victims and actors and some will be both.

Neglected by anthropological research so far, the rich subject has been explored mostly by journalists and activists. I first compare and collect existing data and interpretations about child-witches and then apply anthropological discourses on both interconnected fields, drawing from my own ethnographic and practical experience with elderly witch-hunt-victims in Ghana. The discussion of a number of methodological and theoretical desiderata intends to act as an incentive for improved ethnographic fieldwork and improved practice with children and adults accused of witchcraft.

Initially, if we look at the role of children and teenagers within and for African witch-hunting, a whole set of distinct strata comes to sight:

1. **Children are accused** of practising witchcraft or related magical crimes according to the local brands. The results of these accusations range from exorcisms, neglect and abandonment to torture and infanticide.
2. **Children accuse**, denounce, form or take part in lynch-mobs and spearhead stigmatization of outcasts.
3. Children are **creators of witchcraft fantasies**. Witchcraft notions are retrogressive pictures of symbolized experiences in early childhood. Children and young adults are therefore particularly vulnerable for propaganda and indoctrination.
4. Children are **secondary victims**, if the mother or grandmother is accused and they join her in exile or death. Some concepts consider witchcraft as hereditary. In that case, children of accused relatives are condemned to await their own accusation, often until menopause.¹ Children might also be exploited or maltreated by their grandmothers accused of witchcraft, if they are forced to join their frustrated and impoverished grandmothers in exile.
5. Witchcraft beliefs might induce **false diagnosis** of diseases or psychological disorders, some of them exclusive to children.² Children also suffer from scarification, mutilation, hallucinogenic drugging or

¹ I have met such transgenerational accusation-patterns in Kuku, the ghetto for witchhuntvictims near Bimbilla.

² Cp. Stobart 2009: 163.

other **precautionary rituals** perceived to inoculate against acts of witchcraft (i.e. against being harmed by witches) or infections with witch-spirits (i.e. against turning into witches).³

6. Associated with accusations of wizardry and witchcraft are victimisations of children with malformations, disabilities or albinism due to **other magical concepts**.⁴

Mainly the first aspect is of urgent interest today: Why and under which conditions are children branded as witches?

HISTORICAL DATA

To prepare the field, we have to unravel historical data first, a rare routine in existing academic works. In his treatise on philosophical thought among pre-colonial and preliterate societies, Lévy-Bruhl draws on first-contact-reports or at least very early sources from missionaries, travellers, scientists or traders. Not surprisingly, some include associations of witchcraft or related spiritual felony with children. In the area of the Congo, a child with first dentition of the upper incisors was “found guilty of all mishap in the village; it has the evil eye.”⁵ From an adjacent region he gathered reports about conventional modes of stigmatization of children accused of spiritual crimes:

Its' food is prepared in a special way. No one is allowed to accompany its meals. Once grown up, it blends into society, but it will always be scorned and insulted.⁶

Explicit accusations of active wizardry are equally covered in the same area:

“I knew”, said Reverend Weeks, “the case of a chubby scallywag, who was slapped by his uncle one day. The child turned around and said: ‘I will put a spell on you.’ Soon the uncle went ill and despite the treatments and despite the ‘Nganga’ he did not recover. Finally the boy was subjected to a poison-ordeal. He didn’t vomit and was found guilty of bewitching his uncle, who gave the child a good beating. (The poison was too weak to pose a threat to the boy).⁷

³ Cp. Adinkrah 2011: 743.

⁴ Cp. n/a 23.7.2009: „African Albinos killed for Body Organs.“ Al Jazeera via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9F6UpuJIFaY&feature=fvwrel> [21.3.2011]. Also see n/a 28.7.2008: “Africa Uncovered - Murder & Myth Part 2.” Al Jazeera via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IsfWvnE4njs&NR=1> [21.4.2011]. Also see n/a 19.10.2009: “Deadly Hunt: Albinos in Tanzania.” United Nations via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd7RRr5Eubg&feature=related> [21.4.2011].

⁵ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 135. [Transl. FR]

⁶ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 136. [Transl. FR]

⁷ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 220. [Transl. FR]

The same man accused another boy, who stated to have received the power of wizardry from the said nephew.⁸ Lévy-Bruhl hands down another equally explicit source from Togo and Ghana to the reader:

“In Togo, if a child’s upper incisors break through before the lower, it is a Busu, which means, once it grows up, it will do and see all kinds of unsettling things (“to witch”, says father Wolf), therefore children of this kind are either sold or even drowned. [...] Here the association of these children with wizards becomes striking. Their anomaly testifies their future wickedness, which dwells inside of them. [...] Among the Ashantis those children fell under suspicion, who suffered an ailment of their hands.”⁹

The trained philosopher ruled out the possibility of economic reasoning behind systematic infanticide: in no case the suspicious indices posed any handicap, they were just “mystical blemishes”.¹⁰ Another short notice (1933) of an early but explicit witch-hunt against children in the DRC has been found by Puvogel.¹¹

In general, such pre-colonial and colonial sources about similar incidences were ignored so far. Strikingly so, as no one could have possibly overlooked another very prominent account provided by Evans-Pritchard at the very beginning of the most renowned work dealing with witch-craft beliefs:

Nevertheless, rare cases have been known in which, after asking the oracle in vain about all suspected adults, a child’s name has been put before it and he has been declared a witch. But I was told that if this happens an old man will point out that there must be an error. He will say: ‘A witch has taken the child and placed him in front of himself as a screen to protect himself.’¹²

According to Evans-Pritchard, the power of witchcraft is considered as increasing with age. Children are thought of as weak witches¹³ and they had to inherit their power from their parents.¹⁴

These selected historical testimonies provide evidence of spatially widespread, local, traditional cosmologies which fostered accusations of children as witches. Scouring the early anthropological literature for likewise

⁸ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 221.

⁹ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 138f. [Transl. FR]

¹⁰ Lévy-Bruhl (1927) 1966: 138. [Transl. FR]

¹¹ Puvogel 2008: 68.

¹² Evans-Pritchard 1976: 8.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ ibid: 2.

data will unearth further reports, which should then be compared to sources in which children are considered as pure from witchcraft.¹⁵

For the second half of the 20th century, evidence and even anthropological research about child-witch-hunts and witchcraft-fantasies involving children do exist for several regions.

In **Zambia**, Auslander covered 1988 a witch-hunting movement scanning entire village populations - including children. The witch-hunter Dr. Moses claimed to measure the degree of witchcraft. “[...] most children and youths received a low digit, from one to ten, signifying their relative goodness and purity of the heart.” Nonetheless, all had their degree of witchcraft tattooed onto the chest and suffered cuts smeared with an ‘anti-witchcraft substance’.¹⁶ Beidelman analyzes concepts of hereditary witchcraft involving children among the Kaguru in **Tanzania**. The assigned rituals point at an intense obsession with incestuous contents.¹⁷

Goody notes similar notions of hereditary witchcraft among the Gonja in **Ghana**. In this case, children have to give their consent to the intrusion of a witch-spirit.¹⁸ She does not mention any accusation of a child.

Nonetheless, for limited parts of Northern Ghana Denham et alii just recently explored a traditional practice of associating sick, disabled or already deceased children as *spirit children*. According to them, the number of cases is declining:

We posit that the incidence of the spirit child including natural deaths, post-mortem diagnoses, and infanticide cases will decrease as improvements in these root causes, specifically in maternal and child health [sic] occur. Undeniably, there is evidence that this is already happening. Community members indicate that the prevalence of spirit children today is lower than that of the past, and that these reductions are a result of improved access to care and maternal health programs.

(Denham et al. 2010: 7)

On the other hand the NGO ‘Afrikids’ states to have rescued 50 children from poisoning through toxic potions since 2005. According to Williams, one of the 23 *concoction men* the organisation has convinced to end their profession

¹⁵ Cp. Puvogel 2008: 67.

¹⁶ Auslander 1993: 172f.

¹⁷ Beidelman in Middleton/Winter (Hg.) 1963: 68.

¹⁸ Goody 1970: 209.

confessed to the killing of 34 children within the last 30 years.¹⁹ This statement implies a certain traditionality of the practice.²⁰

Several other sources from modern **Ghana** furnish evidence of brandishing children as witches. The storybook 'Witches Night Club' boasts a fabricated confession:

A school girl who was very inquisitive but didn't have God was given a witchspirit through my five years old daughter. This is how this small girl acquired the witchcraft. Since she was the classmate of my possessed daughter, she ate the food in my daughters' lunch-box with my daughter, but this innocent little girl didn't know that the food contains witch-spirit. She was made to pay a very little amount as her admission fee.²¹

The concept of a contagious witch-spirit implies contamination of vulnerable individuals. A pregnant mother off her guard might infect her unborn child with *witch-spirits*, especially in the bush, in rivers and in forests.²² The idea of child-witchcraft corresponds with traditional lore on witchcraft obsessed with fertility, pregnancy, relatives, inheritance and children.

According to Adinkrah's Evaluation of Ghanaian newspapers, a total of 9 boys and 9 girls from the age of one month up to 17 years were accused in 13 separate witch-hunts between 1994 and 2009, including two cases of infanticide.²³ In every case siblings were among the accusers, in six cases the own mother. Adinkrah sees children at risk, who outrage the age-hierarchy through undue excellence in mental skills.²⁴ Indeed, in 2012 a 17-year old girl was sent to the ghetto for witch-hunt-victims in Gambaga. She was accused of leeching mental capacities from other children in school in order to shine with her own results.²⁵ But most of the cases in Adinkrah's list fit into the general structure of witchcraft-accusations in Ghana and do not apply to a simplistic stereotype of excellence.²⁶

From **Cameroon** an excellent record produced by Robert Brain in 1970 has gained notice. Brain met witchcraft-confessions of children on a rather regular

¹⁹ Williams 2011: 35.

²⁰ In Ghana, witchcraft was referred to me as a continuous threat and not as a growing concern. Even in the still war-torn Northern Region the suggestion the Dagomba/Konkomba war might have increased witchcraft accusations had been ruled out by several interviewees.

²¹ Foster n/a.: 6.

²² Foster n/a.: 9. Cp. Adinkrah 2011: 744.

²³ Adinkrah 2011: 741.

²⁴ Adinkrah 2011: 744.

²⁵ See Ghanaian Times, "Girl dumped in witch camp for being brilliant", 2.4.2012 via: <http://www.citifmonline.com/index.php?id=1.843334> [1.6.2012].

²⁶ See Adinkrah 2011: 747ff.

base and explains them with infantile exhibitionism,²⁷ sexual projections,²⁸ repressed sexuality and aggression resulting in guilt complexes, which equally come to play among relatives of sick persons (i.e. guilt about possibly making sick) and within the sick persons' own mind²⁹ (i.e. guilt about being sick). His most interesting explanation of the confessions is centred on the mild exorcism-ritual which included the consumption of meat. Meat-consumption was connected with status and a rare joy for children. A confession was an appropriate strategy to consume meat without serious risks.³⁰ Brain emphasizes the fact, that children were considered as innocent regardless of confessions or accusations.³¹ Nonetheless, he also mentions expulsions which tended to transfer accused children to the maternal relatives.³² Brain gives another explanation for the rise in accusations of children: Brittle traditional authorities – powers of the earth – failed to meet the shifting challenges, giving way to witchcraft and associated powers of the sky. Brain locates the dominant catalyst for this shift in Christian missions.³³

Geschiere covered another phenomenon in **Cameroon**.³⁴ He describes the advent of an obsession with child-witchcraft among the Maka. Exclusively prepubescent boys were considered capable of this specific type of witchcraft. Geschiere witnessed a public confession of three boys, one of them accusing the others of misleading him. The villagers and the ritual specialist treated the boys soft-gloved, only demanding ritual meat-consumption to induce vomiting of the witchcraft-substance. Two passing policemen interrupted the confession and bashed the boys – to the dismay of the local authorities.³⁵ Geschiere reckons the concern about child-witches to be new, but also points at the dynamic, ever-changing character of witchcraft-concepts among the Maka. The structure of fantasies about child-witchcraft fit into traditional cosmologies. Because of the ambivalent character of omnipresent witchcraft, public counter-actions like trials were rarely meted out on suspects.³⁶ The public trial against the three boys was new,³⁷ but would have stayed peaceful if the policemen had not stepped in.³⁸ According to Geschiere, the chief difference towards conventional witchcraft notions was a new need for a

²⁷ Brain 1970: 161.

²⁸ Ibid: 172; 175.

²⁹ Ibid: 175.

³⁰ Ibid: 173.

³¹ Ibid: 166.

³² Ibid: 169.

³³ Ibid: 178.

³⁴ Geschiere 1980.

³⁵ Ibid: 274ff.

³⁶ Ibid: 273.

³⁷ Ibid: 277ff.

³⁸ Ibid: 282.

visible reaction towards witchcraft. Geschiere then tests a scheme drafted by Douglas: She found small societies tending towards/against witchcraft and centralistic societies towards/against sorcery. He discards this categorization as over-simplistic and unfit for the Maka witch-hunt.³⁹

THE PRESENT CRISIS

Reflecting the low numbers and standards of historical resources, the predominant interpretation of current processes as a modern crisis phenomenon appears of doubtful merit. In the absence of material, projections abound: Ademowo even boasts traditional Africa as free from “witch-killing” and singles out medieval Europe as the “root” of “modern witch-killing”⁴⁰ – a fabrication by all standards. In an essay on colonial witch-hunts in Ghana, Gray has already criticized the eagerness to point at crises and cultural change:

We simply lack historical data either to establish a pre-colonial baseline for the frequency of witchcraft accusations or to chart the number of witchcraft disputes [...] during the colonial period.⁴¹

Her concern about anecdotic or piecemeal evidence is even more valid once witch-hunts against children are concerned. As long as academic field-studies remain rare, journalists fill the gap. They also provide the main-sources for some semi-academic summaries on behalf of humanitarian organisations. Methodological flaws abound, mainly the lack of comparative approaches: Are children accused instead of or among an even larger mass of adult victims? How do the concepts on child-witchcraft contradict or fit into the traditional epistemology of adult witchcraft?

Nonetheless, it is obvious, that the sheer scale and intenseness of the recent witch-hunts targeting children classifies as unprecedented in written history. There are not only western academics and practitioners, but also local protagonists who see a transformation:

Many of the thousands of street children across Angola are probably victims of this trend [...] This is something new to us [...] In African culture it is usually the older people who are accused of practicing witchcraft. Now we’re even seeing cases popping up involving babies.⁴²

³⁹ Ibid: 293.

⁴⁰ Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 21.

⁴¹ Gray 2005: 140.

⁴² Paul Salopek 28.3.2004: “Children in Angola tortured as witches”. Chicago Tribune via <http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/newspaper/edition/chi-0403280349mar28,0,7000899.story> [24.4.2011]. Compare: Simon Freeman 11.7.2005:

In Kinshasa, several informants estimate between 10.000 and 50.000 so called 'child-witches'.⁴³ According to the Congolese department for welfare 50.000 children are kept in churches for exorcisms.⁴⁴ For Nigeria, the documentary 'Dispatches: Return to Africa's witch-children' estimates 15.000 children to be affected in the Niger Delta.⁴⁵ According to Chineyemba, the phenomenon became rampant from 2001 onwards.⁴⁶ One study counted 432 street-children abandoned or abused because of witchcraft accusations in a single city in Northern Angola.⁴⁷ Ghana and Benin⁴⁸ are other epicentres of witch-hunting involving children. In Northern Ghana, the aforementioned 'spirit child phenomenon' might mingle or coexist with conventional witchcraft-accusations. And also in Northern Ghana, hundreds of children are secondary victims of witch-hunts against their parents. They live in sanctuaries and ghettos for mostly elderly female witch-hunt-victims where they serve as workers and carers.⁴⁹ And every once in a while newspapers in Southern Ghana scandalize a new case of child-abuse related to witchcraft accusations and perpetrated by clergymen or traditional priests.⁵⁰ In Great Britain, Stobart analyzed 47 cases of related child-abuse, half of them born inland.⁵¹ She states: "The belief is not confined to particular countries, cultures or religions nor is it confined to recent migrants."⁵² Nevertheless, all but one case involved first or second generation immigrants.⁵³ In Germany, I collected several hearsay accounts about children accused of witchcraft and/or subjected to exorcisms in migrant and native evangelical communities, but I could not trace any qualified research.

"Mother of child 'witch' traced in Angola". The Sunday Times via <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article542742.ece> [24.4.2011].

⁴³ See de Boeck 2009: 130; Puvogel 2008: 113; Schnoebelen 2009: 15.

⁴⁴ See Schnoebelen 2009: 16.

⁴⁵ See <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/return-to-africas-witch-children/> [13.10.2011].

⁴⁶ Chineyemba in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 6.

⁴⁷ Sharon LaFraniere 15.11.2007: "African crucible: Cast as witches, then cast out.". New York Times via http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/15/world/africa/15witches.html?_r=2&ref=world&oref=slogin&oref=slogin [24.4.2011].

⁴⁸ N/a: "Benin: Sorcery and infanticide." Al Jazeera via http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LkoGWOIZ4E&feature=player_embedded [21.4.2011].

⁴⁹ At the moment, the NGO „Witchhunt Victims Empowerment Project“ takes care of 30 children in three ghettos with altogether 200 women. For all ghettos Caesar Abagali estimates 1700 children, a figure far too high according to my own experience. See Abagali 2010: N/a: "Child Abuse in Witches Camps of Northern Ghana". Via <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/artikel.php?ID=189045&comment=0#com> [22.1.2012].

⁵⁰ I read several of such newspaper reports during 8,5 months of field-research in Ghana.

⁵¹ Stobart 2009: 156. Cp.: De Boeck 2009: 131. Cp. LaFontaine 2009.

⁵² Stobart 2009: 170.

⁵³ Stobart 2009: 166.

Evaluations from the African sub-regions base on situated experience by distinct persons. Exaggerating the numbers seems irrational – humanitarian aid in this subject is scarce and met by heavy difficulties and resistance anyway. As long as a better empirical database is not at hand to foreign academics, speculations about lower numbers are projective.

Untraceable are aggressive and humiliating ‘deliverance’-rituals which later reintegrate the ‘cleansed’ child into the family. Far worse are cases of extremely sadist maltreatment of children.⁵⁴ Such explicit ritual abuses were systematically recorded at a Nigerian orphanage.⁵⁵ Children were chained with wire (causing festering gashes), dosed with boiling liquids or set ablaze with petrol. One girl was rescued after someone drove a nail into her head.⁵⁶ In Ghana an elderly woman suffered a similar ritual as her accusers hammered a nail into her ankle. Beyond the obvious home-grown aggressive psychosexual symbolism, both might also be an atavism of traditional nail-fetishes, a wooden statue blotched with nails. Each nail was said to ban witchcraft or to seal a contract.⁵⁷

Among the numerous other homeopathic methods of exorcism, which all try to exorcize the child through the same pains and terrors dreaded from the evil dwelling in it,⁵⁸ charismatic churches in Africa swear by fasting, the panacea for all evil, sometimes combined with laxatives and enemas.⁵⁹ Likewise ‘therapies’ pose risks of starvation and permanent damage to undernourished children with parasitological infections. They are also likely to affect the development of the foetus in a pregnant mother.

INTERPRETATIONS

Theoretical reflexions located five different factors fostering the new and mass-scale victimization of children:

1. The increased poverty, and therefore the incapability of feeding children.

⁵⁴ See Stobart 2009: 163f.

⁵⁵ Cp. n/a, BBC: “Saving Africas Witch-Children Part 3” via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1U2xQETKdk> [22.4.2011]. Also compare Oladipo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 14. Cp. Gary Foxcroft and Emile Seeker in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010. Ten showcase interviews with children accused of witchcraft are included in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 89ff.

⁵⁶ Gary Foxcroft and Emile Seeker in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 72.

⁵⁷ See Meyer 1992: 140ff.

⁵⁸ Cp. Stobart 2009:164.

⁵⁹ Cp. BBC: “Saving Africas Witch-Children Part 3” via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1U2xQETKdk> [22.4.2011].

2. A perception of children as threatening subjects due to crises of traditional concepts of age-hierarchies, gender-roles, modes of production or family-models.⁶⁰
3. A general crisis of education and enlightenment.
4. The landslide-triumph of charismatic churches.
5. The new African film-industry.

Almost all authors identify some sort of crisis behind the upsurge in witchcraft accusations against children. How the specific crisis translates into specific witch-hunts is explained mostly by two different theories: either scapegoating and/or the pecking order.

According to De Boeck, children who are at the rear end of family hierarchies (for example stepchildren) bear the brunt of the accusations.⁶¹ Witch-hunts would then serve as an ‘*a posteriori* birth control’ eliminating those of lowest value⁶². The argument of “curbing excessive population explosion” is also employed by Omunukuma.⁶³

Oladipo relates the poverty to sickness and sickness is then misunderstood as witchcraft.⁶⁴ Ademowo sees a lack of explanatory capability due to the “pitiable living condition of many Africans”.⁶⁵

Lawuyi provides an interesting interpretation of witchcraft-fantasies as “inequality ideologies for the justification of exclusion”⁶⁶. Adegoke on the other hand points at the presence of witchcraft beliefs among a vast majority of the Nigerian academic elite.⁶⁷ Ademowo scorns the practice of spending the last resources for exorcisms.⁶⁸ Rather than a total lack of resources induced by crisis it might be the potential to amass wealth which gives witch-hunters the possibility to exploit the pre-existent fears of witchcraft, a phenomenon well-known from colonial witch-hunts in Ghana⁶⁹ and the related Atinga cult in Nigeria⁷⁰.

In any case, the crisis-theories fall short of actually explaining or contextualizing the phenomena. Other regions like Cameroon, Benin and

⁶⁰ De Boeck 2009: 139.

⁶¹ De Boeck 2004: 34.

⁶² De Boeck 2009: 135.

⁶³ Omunukuma in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 32.

⁶⁴ Temidayo David Oladipo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 12.

⁶⁵ Adeyemi Johnson Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 20.

⁶⁶ Lawuyi in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: x.

⁶⁷ Peter Adegoke in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 51.

⁶⁸ Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 55.

⁶⁹ Gray 2005.

⁷⁰ Apter 1993: 120ff.

Ghana all face very different crises and they don't suffer wars like the DRC, Southern Nigeria or Angola. Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Northern Ghana are war-torn without a noticeable rise in the victimizations of children – though there are no less intense anxieties about witchcraft. Also within the epicentres, witchcraft rumours about child-witches don't omit the wealthy and the middle classes – which at least questions Lawuyis thesis of an ideology of exclusion and Ademowo's suspicion of a shifted class conflict⁷¹. Omunukuma shares a similar argument: “[...] in Nigeria, class determines who is a witch. Such is the case that senators' child can never be a witch.”⁷²

On the contrary, all films portray the elites as witches and ritual-murderers and we also have accounts of riots against rich people accused of ritual murder and witchcraft.⁷³ For Ghana it is evident, that literates are less likely to be accused in public, but not less likely to be suspected or to suspect others of witchcraft. While we can agree on a psychological transformation of class-conflicts into witchcraft fears, the ideological content does not necessarily target poor people nor is the ideology created by the rich to irritate the poor. Witchcraft-anxieties rather form a super-ideology consuming all existing ideologies.

All materialist explanations tend to downgrade the witch-hunts to a secondary crisis, an effect of another economical or political crisis. Even references to multiple factors fall short of clarifying how social factors are converted into individual actors' mindsets and actions. What is most important: the crisis-theories can't explain the sadism meted out on children – they rather rationalize it away. Why is it witchcraft accusations that are accepted by the society as a reason to expel a child, but not economical reasoning and why are additional resources used to torture the children with exorcisms? People are allowed to expel or maltreat their children under witchcraft-accusations, but they are not allowed to abandon them in peace with a reasonable explanation. Chineyemba suggests a psychological conflict:

Hiding under the smokescreen of their failures as parents, they mask the reality that these children are just unwanted as they represent unmanageable economic burdens to their family.⁷⁴

Similarly, Omunukuma links scapegoating with corruption dominated by men, while women and children first suffer the consequences and are then held

⁷¹ Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 21.

⁷² Olali Omunukuma in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 29.

⁷³ About the assassination of Eddy Okeke see Harnischfeger 2004: 194. About the Owerri riots see Smith 2007: 140.

⁷⁴ Lydia Isioma Chineyemba in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 5.

responsible for the failure. Strong forces like cultural embarrassment about poverty and shifted guilt complexes are then a strong factor in the production of the variety of notions on child-witchcraft.

But in the end, the circular argument is the less circular: Adults and children are accused of witchcraft because their accusers believe in the existence of witchcraft – although this belief finds different means to produce or reproduce its objects. An economical crisis might produce anxieties about a loss of gained status, it might erode the educational system, but in any case witchcraft-fears thrive and depend on traditional, pre-existing systems.

Accusations of children are rather a radicalization of predominant ideas about witchcraft than a distortion. LaFontaine among many others⁷⁵ asks in total surprise, why children are accused. Puvogel asks „why not“?⁷⁶ Drawing from historical and content analysis, Puvogel comes to the conclusion:

Through the displayed aspects it can be shown, that current witchcraft-phenomena [sic!] are part of a perennial continuity of witchcraft notions. The [...] breach with the past tradition could not be verified.⁷⁷

De Boeck hints into the same direction, but lacks critical distance:

‘Denunciation of the witch is not simply a perversion. It is rather a solution of a crisis, which was common in traditional contexts.’⁷⁸

Witch-hunts are the crisis. Their ramifications on economy and social institutions are yet to be unravelled, but in no way we should think of them as mere by-products of other crises.⁷⁹

It is the independent character the dynamic mindset of witchcraft-beliefs developed against and alongside social conditions which puts the simplistic materialist critique of ideology into troubles.⁸⁰ Comparable ideological phenomena like anti-Semitism and racism prosper unaffected by prosperity or crises. Once created, they reproduce, modify and peak, but they never vanish. They do produce crises by themselves as can be witnessed again and again.⁸¹ Ademowo consequently interprets witchcraft beliefs as the primary cause of failed poverty eradication and not vice versa.⁸² Put simply: Ideologies do not exclusively result from shifts in the modes of production. These shifts happen

⁷⁵ LaFontaine 2009: 120.

⁷⁶ Puvogel 2008: 107.

⁷⁷ Puvogel 110. Translation FR.

⁷⁸ De Boeck 2004: 35.

⁷⁹ As done by Lafontaine 2009: 119.

⁸⁰ Cp. Adornos critique of Durkheim in Durkheim 1996: 39.

⁸¹ For example in Hungary, where today a mysticistic nationalism cripples the economy.

⁸² Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 24.

all the time and there is always some sort of social or economical crisis. Specific retrogressive ideologies are capable of autopoietic parthenogenesis. They then produce the realities which legitimate and reproduce them.⁸³ These perennial and enduring super-ideologies manage to thrive solely on the inevitable universal conflicts of individual psychology, they use, but they don't depend on crises. Their main strategy is to offer relief from self-reflection through 'pathetic projection'.

'Pathetic projection', a term popularized by Adorno/Horkheimer specifies projection without the competence or will to reflect about having projected.⁸⁴ Adorno/Horkheimer define 'pathetic projection' in strictly psychoanalytical terms and mainly separate from economical conditions: it is marked by the projection of repressed sexual contents, foremost homosexual or retrogressive wishes sanctioned by society. Those wishes are then distorted and projected as castrating super-powers against which all formerly repressed and projected aggressions are legitimate. Unlike scapegoating- or crises-theories, the 'pathetic projection'-concept does help to explain the range and intensity of violence which children suffer in addition to their isolation and grinding poverty. It draws from the sum of subconscious conflicts and it connects the individual level with the social situation. Whatever one fears, will be brought over him, as Adorno/Horkheimer say and they continuously point at the lust to persecute those who are already persecuted.⁸⁵ "Fury seeks out those, who are conspicuous of lacking protection."⁸⁶ Grunberger/Dessuant suggest an expansion of this theme: Narcissistic projections come into conflict with the reality, they are ever incomplete. The result is guilt, which is again projected – resulting in a vicious circle producing rage.⁸⁷

This anthropological theme is at the core of the witch-craze. The contents arise from repressed sexual material yet to be interconnected with economical drives and factors and rationalizations. Children share the strong ambivalence of dependency and power, which makes postmenopausal women throughout Africa the most vulnerable group for witch-hunts.⁸⁸ Children insist on their right with all manipulative means, they are narcissists which challenge the narcissism of the adults. Like the Jews in anti-Semitic images, witches are the dreaded superpower, but in the case of Jews, children and elderly people the super-powers are easy to destroy. In short, the witch-image is an offer to solve

⁸³ Cp. Wendl 2004: 17f. Cp. Puvogel 2008: 100.

⁸⁴ Adorno/Horkheimer 1969: 199; 202.

⁸⁵ Adorno/Horkheimer 1969: 192.

⁸⁶ Adorno/Horkheimer 1969: 180. [Transl. FR]

⁸⁷ Grunberger/Dessuant 2000: 406.

⁸⁸ Chineyemba even notes a shift from old age to childhood: Chineyemba in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 5.

all conflicts of dependency and regression by the very easy act of destroying a weak person imagined as tremendously dreadful to basic wishes: Socially forbidden regression turns into exploitation and cannibalism by witches, narcissistic autonomy towards the bondage of curses and covens, repressed homosexuality into hatred against children, who symbolize the heteronormative order. Our main interest should therefore focus on the specific factors, which jazz up ambivalences, without neglecting, that any human being is vulnerable to such a deep-rooted and infamous kind of propaganda. Anti-ideological practice then shifts towards an education about the projective process itself, to enlighten people about their internal mechanisms and their psychology.

FACTORS

Puvogel quotes a common resentment of parents associating the reading and writing skills of their children with witchcraft.⁸⁹ Education and Media bring forward shifts in status and status is the main feature of the authoritarian mindset of which Africa as the rest of the world abounds:

Children and youth are not exclusively underprivileged, but take action in the formation of their environment and modes of livelihood, which partly appears forbidding to elder generations.⁹⁰

Indeed, the former role of children as a projectable and reliable life-insurance altered into a cash trap engendering increased costs of education and nutrition.⁹¹ Meanwhile, global agendas successfully discredited certain initiation rituals, FGM, arranged infant marriage, child-labour and neglect. Thus the status of children as legal persons competes today everywhere with their traditional status: property. While the process should be observable, there is little research done so far to be brought into connection with the recent witch-craze.

De Boeck has an alternative explanation at hand: Child-soldiers have shifted the image of the child in the DRC, which is now associated with aggression.⁹² Considering this tempting argument, we have to admit a lack of evidence, which might consist of repeated ideologemes or quotes connecting child-witchcraft with child-soldiers at least on a subconscious level. In former times youngsters might have been integrated in warfare and mob-action. A recent

⁸⁹ Puvogel 2008: 68.

⁹⁰ Puvogel 2008: 90. Translation FR.

⁹¹ See Puvogel 2008: 99.

⁹² De Boeck 2004: 36; Compare Schnoebelen 2009: 15.

shift in status is the participation of children with the diamond trade and other economic sections, making children patrons or at least a competition at the informal labour market.⁹³ But according to all sources, the majority of the accused children are street-children or had a menial status within their families.

Similarly, deviance-theories pose an unfit rationalization: the accused children are not all crippled or crooked or super-intelligent. While witch-hunters often do target abnormal children, the basic theme of witchcraft beliefs is the social camouflage of the witches. Udua points to the fact that most negative characteristics attributed to an accused witch-child will occur in the healthy development of any child.⁹⁴ Rare accusations of babies⁹⁵ disprove the importance of deviance to justify an accusation. As with witch-hunting in general, deviance theories rarely meet the facts in their specifications of vulnerable groups. Often they insinuate witch-hunts would rather discipline than encourage immoral behaviour. Deviance-theories tend to put blame or responsibility for misbehaving on the victim and they are prone to identifications with glamorous underdogs. While all scales of grey exist, I think it is a better exercise to think of witch-hunt victims rather as taken aback by than as expecting their accusation, rather as average than as extremely gifted, rather as adapted than as rebels, rather as denying than as confessing the upbraiding. Comparably, Adorno/Horkheimer point at the techniques of the Nazis to racialize their victims in absence of visible differences: “The real specifics, for which victims are slain, are already wiped out.”⁹⁶

THE RACKET OF THE CHARISMATIC CHURCHES

All sources emphasize the influence of charismatic churches⁹⁷ ranging from international institutions to individual enterprises of autodidacts and lay people. Pentecostal rituals are mingled with individually created or traditional exorcisms. De Boeck tends to paint them slightly too rosy:

The ‘healing’ space of the church allows for the relocation and legitimization of the sometimes extreme physical and emotional violence meted out on the accused children within their kin-group. [...] As part of a therapeutic narrative process, resulting in the most often stereotypical confession of the children, the produced setting diverts the traumatic experience: It assists in getting over the separation and

⁹³ De Boeck 2004: 36f; Puvogel 2008: 98.

⁹⁴ Diana-Abasi Udua in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 44.

⁹⁵ Puvogel 2008: 99; Adinkrah 2011: 741.

⁹⁶ Adorno/Horkheimer 1969: 216. [Transl. FR]

⁹⁷ For example Ogunsanya in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 66.

boosts self-recovery, even if the children are not [...] uncommitted in choosing their way of telling their story.⁹⁸

In 2009 he still stuck to this argument in very much the same words:

[...] the church leaders do not usually produce these accusations themselves, but merely confirm and thereby legitimate them. In doing so the space of the ‚healing‘ church enables to relocate and reformulate the sometimes extreme physical and psychological violence that the accused children have to undergo within their kin-group. As such, the child is removed from the threatening family context in which its place has become highly problematic, and is left in the care of a *pasteur*.⁹⁹

This euphemistic conception of ‚healing‘ absolves churches from their responsibility. Religious rackets propagate and perform accusations. Omunukuma even calls them “religious terrorists”¹⁰⁰. Many accounts throughout the literature allocate the notorious capriciousness, by which clerics destroy basically intact family bonding.¹⁰¹ A documentary cites one ‘Father Frank’ from the DRC:

These children are not very intelligent. Sometimes they are deformed. When the witchcraft is powerful, they appear to be half-asleep and seem to retreat from the company of others. This is how we know the child is possessed by witchcraft.¹⁰²

According to De Boeck churches – as part of the public sphere – are granted access to the family – the private sphere – in the course of the outmoded demands of the extended family. It is the latter the churches would associate with witchcraft.¹⁰³ Competition among churches then makes accusations of children a unique selling proposition for unscrupulous pastors.¹⁰⁴

Some other church-agents might perform exorcisms to the benefit of the children and against their own conviction. They still perpetuate traumatising, if they don’t exonerate the children in private, and they will in any case take part in the circular rumour mills which foster and verify suspicion. Foxcroft/Secker consider the confessions to result from threat:

⁹⁸ De Boeck 2004: 35. [Translation FR.]

⁹⁹ De Boeck 2009: 145.

¹⁰⁰ Omunukuma in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 29.

¹⁰¹ See Puvogel 2008: 120.

¹⁰² Angela Nicoara, Mike Ormsby 2002 (31.10.2006): “Enfants dit sorcier – Children accused of being a Witch”. Internews via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRLVOZaSLbc&feature=related> [22.4.2011].

¹⁰³ De Boeck 2009: 138f.

¹⁰⁴ Cp. Chineyemba in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 4.

[...] when these children have denied involvement in witchcraft, or attempted to speak out in order to exercise their right to be heard, they have generally become more likely to suffer abuse.¹⁰⁵

A third group indeed cares for stigmatized children and sometimes even denies the existence of witchcraft or at least child-witchcraft. These do provide a 'healing space'. One example for these humanitarians is the Angolan Priest Pablo Jose Galvan, who tends to idealize the children:

'What we find with these kind of children is that the very clever, very expert, somehow special, are accused of witchcraft.'¹⁰⁶

In any case, churches provide most of the assistance for witch-hunt victims while other churches target and torture children. The eventuality of severe religious neuroses in accusing pastors as in their followers is not mentioned by any source.

¹⁰⁵ Gary Foxcroft and Emile Secker in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 73.

¹⁰⁶ N/a 13.7.2005: "Angola witchcraft's child victims." BBC-News via <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4677969.stm> [24.4.2011]. Cp. Stobart 2009: 162.

FILMS

Today, the propaganda of the charismatic authoritarian¹⁰⁷ mindset is mainly spread through films aired by church-owned broadcasting agencies¹⁰⁸. Puvogel reminds us of the strong association of the infantile with magic in Western films.¹⁰⁹ Western films are not less haunted by magic and witchcraft than African cinema and they abound with benevolent and malicious child-witches. Nevertheless, there is a specific difference in the reception of films. Adegoke animadverts:

In a country where people do not read and where public libraries are almost non-existent, you have people relapsing to supernatural explanation to national phenomena. People rely more on local films for social counselling and as means of reference. You often hear people, including unfortunately the so-called educated elite making reference to films they watch on witchcraft as reference as if they are citing academic work.¹¹⁰

To classify African films as horror-movies is a widespread western misinterpretation. They are treated as documentaries or educational films by vast parts of the audience, especially if they display witchcraft notions and demons.¹¹¹ Children as a target audience acquire and transcribe fantasies as much as expected behaviour from these films. According to Foxcroft/Secker, “[...] films both reflect and encourage the stigmatization of children [...]”.¹¹² To fathom the situation further, I will introduce two examples which portray children as witches.

ENJOYMENT IN HELL

I purchased the Nigerian film ‘Enjoyment in Hell’ (2007) in 2009 in Cape Coast/Ghana. The rather expensive DVD-format hints at a certain status and vogue in the absence of objective aesthetic qualities. Despite employing two star-actors, the acting is as poor as the screenplay, leaving a catchy music-theme and the content as the remaining factors for the popularity. The storyline introduces a witches’ coven notoriously feeding on ambitious young

¹⁰⁷ We have to pay regard to the complex of authoritarianism, which does not rule out certain liberal and democratic leeways of charismatic churches. Cp. Soothill 2007 about Pentecostalism in Ghana.

¹⁰⁸ See Puvogel 105f.

¹⁰⁹ Puvogel 2008: 98.

¹¹⁰ Adegoke in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 49.

¹¹¹ I conducted a survey with 150 youth in Cape Coast (Ghana). The results are bolstering this argument, while also many dislike the films or find them too horrifying.

¹¹² Gary Foxcroft and Emile Secker in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 73.

people. To destroy a rather prosperous middle-class family they concoct an insidious plan: 'We should use one of the kids to initiate.' The scheme is doomed to fail for one reason: 'I am so confused. Because the children are equally covered under the spiritual umbrella of their parents.' The witches finally succeed with infesting the daughter through a contaminated biscuit. In Nigeria as in Ghana it is taboo for a child to accept food from strangers or even secondary relatives as food is perceived as vulnerable to poisoning, drugging and bewitching.¹¹³ Violation of the taboo is punished at once: The daughter turns into an agent of the witches and develops a narcoleptic syndrome. She oversleeps and no one can wake her up as long as she remains in the witches' realm. Finally, her brother confesses his sister has accepted a biscuit from a stranger, leaving the parents horrified while still in dark about a detailed aetiology. Meanwhile two of the witches insinuate to the girl in front of the house: 'Your father beats you everyday. He doesn't like you.'



the father is portrayed as choleric, but not brutal. She receives a spiritual knife to stab the father anytime he beats her. At midnight, she does ascent from her bed to throw magic fireballs at her sleeping family members.

But her spell backfires. The next day she is found unconscious in her bed. Albeit the mother pleads the father to call an ambulance, the father calls a priest: 'Pastor? There is a situation in my house!' The pastor comes running, prays in tongues, the daughter comes back to life and confesses: She was at the 'witchcraft kingdom' because she has taken a biscuit, which she should not have eaten. The witches had battled the family but failed, because the family was too faithful. Then she denounces a relative of being a member of the witches' coven. Another cleric then tracks the witches down to their domicile. Hammered through inevitable war-prayers the chief-witch squirms with pains in spiritual flames while her two accomplices are converted to Christianity, both burned all over by spiritual fire.

The second story narrated in between spins around a prosperous couple. The wife ends up in four days labour pains, giving birth to a giant red yam in the end. The nurse explains to the appalled husband: 'Your wife has delivered for

¹¹³ Videostill: 'Enjoyment in Hell': 00:37:08.

days because she is a witch.’ A medical doctor verifies the diagnosis. The husband yanks out his wailing wife, which ends the story.

Strikingly, all of the protagonists are by no means impoverished in African terms. Crises are neither mentioned nor hinted at. The scenario takes place in an intact, prosperous petit-bourgeois flow of continuity, where the horror of witchcraft assaults by surprise.

END OF THE WICKED

“End of the Wicked” (Nigeria: 1999) is the best known film about child-witchcraft. Ogunsanya stresses the fact, that it is just one among many films Ukpabio produced with the intent “[...] to spread the view that children can become possessed by evil.”¹¹⁴

The initial scene depicts a witches’ coven ruled by a demon whitened with kaolin. The first scene displays a variety of malformations with all actors: strabismus, disabilities, excrescences, encrusted skin. In a dark, rattling voice, the chief-demon orders a refill of the ‘blood-bank’ of the organisation. He informs his chief-witch: ‘Lady Destroyer: Your son has been bought. He is no longer your son but ours!’

At night, the chief-witch ascends from her bed as a witch-spirit. Her sleeping grandchildren wake up and scream in terror. After that scene, they are introduced to the coven and instructed by the teenage general of the witches:

We operate by picking things from our parents! [...] We bring them here and we use it to torment them. [...] I invoke upon you: The spirit of stubbornness, stealing, lack of interest in school, waywardness, unsteadiness, bad company and the power of destruction!

The infantine agents of evil are invited to destroy electronic devices, to spread diseases and erode any happiness. In the next scene they are portrayed as eating from the spiritual body of a man, symbolized in a rice-platter with meat.

The next day, the man suffers from dorsal pains medically confirmed as ‘spinal complications’.

A second father is conjured into the spiritual realm and shivers in front of the child-witches. He kneels subdued and under the by guffaw of the gathered children his eyeballs drop into a calabash. He wakes up as a blind man, staggering around. A number of witchcraft-induced catastrophes follow. The

¹¹⁴ Ogunsanya in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 65.

main victim of these acts is the daughter of the chief-witch 'lady destroyer'. Her mother and her own child are witches by that time. She complains about the child:

She lied. She creates a lot of confusion. [...] My pastor says these are signs of witchcraft. But I don't believe it. How can a child that age be a witch? How?

The friend advises her to pray. Her husband dies and she herself is accused of witchcraft at the coffin. A sympathizing female pastor impedes the potion-ordeal the congregation is about to force on her. Nonetheless, 'Lady Destroyer' plans further evil. The initiated granddaughter asks her: 'Why don't you kill her?' The girl is complemented on this excellent wickedness. Because the daughter is devotedly praying, the last spell of the chief-witch backfires: 'Lady Destroyer' is struck by deafness and staggers to the street, where she is lynched by an angry mob. Mortally wounded she confesses: 'I am a witch. I even state: All the children is a witchcraft!'¹¹⁵

The credits cite the notorious quotation from Deuteronomy 18:10-12A:

There shall not be among you anyone that maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire or that useth divination or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer, for all that do these are an abomination to the lord.

Again, it is not a poor clientele, but prospering petit-bourgeois who are attacked by child-witchcraft. No crises are mentioned at all. Of importance is the imagination of dreams as the source to an anamnesis of spiritual problems. Dreamt affliction transforms into somatic affliction. This pattern of permeable body hulls granting access to the spiritual intrusions is a dominant feature of countless African films.¹¹⁶ The special importance of dreams for children might boost this cultural phenomenon.

Both movies don't introduce children as especially wicked but as an especially wicked method to infiltrate families. Children are the weak spot even of faithful families. In 'End of the Wicked' some children grow and display their own wickedness up to the lust to kill. But even here children are witches among others and ever under the rule of adult spiritual authorities. Child-witches are not the converse but the extension of familiar spiritual anxieties. Even the discipline pressed on children is rather an outcome of a serious concern about spiritual contamination.

¹¹⁵ 'To be a witchcraft' is a widespread idiomatic expression.

¹¹⁶ I discussed some psychosomatic concepts of African films in Riedel 2010.

Absence of dogma causes the need for permanent updates on looming and changing spiritual menaces. One reason for the consumption of Nigerian films by the Diaspora is the necessity to stay informed about the new techniques of witchcraft to anticipate them at home-visits. The child-witch image is another, rather consequent and expectable expansion of the palpable threats of backstabbing family witchcraft meted out by seemingly loving and caring mothers and fathers. Thrill gained by the maliciousness of the most familiar is put to use and escalated by charismatic churches as by their film-industry. Child-witches are then an expectable by-product of the African culture industry.

A self-evident attempt to reverse this trend was the production of the film “The Fake Prophet” (2010), initiated by the organisation ‘Stepping Stones Nigeria’ and directed by the same Teco Benson who once directed “End of the Wicked”.¹¹⁷ While the advertisement of the film boasts resounding success, the effects are yet to be verified. Many charismatic films already employ scorn of decadent fake-pastors against which the true prophets can shine brighter. ‘The Fake prophet’ also stages the lynching of the fake pastor as the climax and moral of the film and therefore it still endorses mob violence.

In essence, observing films to sense the current propaganda and victimization is of extreme importance, if we really want to foretell and impede upcoming witch-hunts. Throughout history, witch-crazes as anti-Semitic pogroms were fanned by mass-media’s fabrications. If certain victim-groups (homosexuals, albinos, epileptics, hunchbacks...) are increasingly targeted in films and other media, it should be of utmost concern to warn and back these groups in time and to counter propaganda before it becomes urban legend.

¹¹⁷ A review of the film was written by Chinelo Onwualu O.A.: „’Child-Witches’ controversy gets the big screen treatment“. NextCommunity via <http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5585642-146/story.csp> [30.4.2011]. The film is distributed by the NGO “Prevent Abuse of Children Today“ (PACT): http://www.makeapact.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=90&Itemid=142 [31.10.2011]

CHILDREN AS STAKEHOLDERS

The obvious victimization of children should not blind out an essential dimension of witch-hunting. In Germany, the best known actors of a witch-hunt are two children, Hänsel and Gretel.

Doch, wie die Hexe zum Ofen schaut hinein, ward sie gestoßen von Hans und Gretelein. Die Hexe mußte braten, die Kinder gehen nach Haus: Nun ist das Märchen von Hänsel und Gretel aus.¹¹⁸

A children's book from 1953 recommends a performance to this popular folk-song:

A large circle holding hands together is the gingerbread house; in the middle couches the witch. At her side is the oven, a small circle closed up, arms folded on the neck. Hans and Gretel arrive from outside of the circle and the story is performed according to the text. Finally, everybody dances around the oven with the witch inside.¹¹⁹

Even without this training, especially small children are capable to turn noticeable aggression up to the lust to kill into action or to force through existing normative orders far more radical than adults. Often they manipulate norms to suit their wishes. Schauber mentions participation of children or youth in witch-hunting in Northern Ghana:

Children were defined as a target group [for educational campaigns, FR] because they play a role in the lynching of women alleged to be "witches". [...] They often throw stones at the women. The youth, especially the males, were selected because they are the most violent section of the population, when it comes to mob violence. (Schauber 2007: 140)

In several cases the youth organized the lynching process.¹²⁰ Nonetheless, likewise evidence is scarce and we should not overestimate the role of younger children in actual lynch-mobs. But if children watch or take part in lynch-mobs, it is likely, that unbound oedipal aggressions condense at socially legitimated objects which can then remain intact throughout maturing, allowing for regressions into sadist aggression and lustful projections. Accordingly, young and adult Ghanaians I spoke with retreat into an infantile

¹¹⁸ 'But as the witch inspects her oven in bad faith, Hansel and Gretel have pushed her inside. The witch was burned alive and the children went back home. This fairy tale has now come to an end.' (Translation: FR)

¹¹⁹ Preetorius 1953: 43.

¹²⁰ Schauber 2007: 126; 124.

position, once they discussed witchcraft scenarios. They depict themselves as helpless, meek, defenceless victims of dastard attacks by powerful witches-covens, which so often resemble grown-ups laughing about toddlers. Or they imagine children to be the main victims of witches. Where barrenness and homosexuality is extremely tabooed, children also symbolize the hetero-normative compulsion towards reproduction. The projected vulnerability of the infant or the adult in an infantile position allows for extreme punishment masked as self-defence.

Children will easily sense the power of the witchcraft idiom as the elderly also use the idiom to rule.¹²¹ De Boeck specifies one case of a grandfather accused by children.¹²² From my own research, at least 60 % of the 150 witch-hunt victims I interviewed in Northern Ghana were accused because of dreams, and in at least a dozen of cases the dreams of children. In other cases children revoked the dream insinuated by adults, therefore protecting the accused person. According to Stewart/Strathern children act on both sides of ambivalence towards parents: They can protect and turn in their parents.¹²³ Such pondering has to take into account situations, where the naming of a relative might also be a call for help or an aggression about being left alone by the former protective instances of the close family in an awkward situation of inquisitive questioning or in a painful health-condition.

We also have accounts from socially accepted exploitive relationships towards children stripped off the emotions so often rated as natural. In Ghana and other African societies abrupt neglect in early childhood, passing children on to relatives for all kind of chores or even selling them into slavery occurs on a certain scale. Guilt repression and repression of wishes for affection can easily transform into revenge-fantasies and revenge-anxiety. Where street-children accept the stigma, it is just normal that they switch their status into fantastic projections of being super-witches. They can then reorganize their violated narcissism and even gain real power.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Cp. Bohannan 1954: 93;103.

¹²² De Boeck 2009: 143; vgl. De Boeck 2004: 38.

¹²³ Stewart/Strathern 2004: 155.

¹²⁴ See Puvogel 2008: 102ff, 108; De Boeck 2004: 32.

IN PRACTICE

Several practical approaches exist and some were already mentioned above. Most renowned is the orphanage formerly run by the ‘Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network’ (CRARN), housing about 100 children. The documentaries ‘Saving Africa’s Witch-Children’¹²⁵ (2008) and ‘Dispatches: Return to Africa’s Witch Children’¹²⁶ (2009) drew international attention. Donations were organized by the NGO ‘Stepping Stones Nigeria’.¹²⁷ Even a Nigerian bikers association visited the children to deliver footballs, toys and other donations.¹²⁸ A journalist from London dressed as Santa Claus and handed out presents to the children who were obviously terrified by the weird outfit.¹²⁹

Powerful institutions felt disturbed by the initiatives. The popular pastor Helen Ukpabio, producer and author of the storybook of ‘End of the Wicked’ was branded responsible for the new witch-hunts against children – with good reason. According to several sources she writes in her book ‘Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft’:

“[...] if a child under the age of 2 screams in the night, cries and is always feverish with deteriorating health, he or she is a servant of Satan.”¹³⁰

In one interview she accuses her critics of racism and denies any responsibility.¹³¹ At the same time she sued and – with the help of her congregation and fans – mobbed the Organisation CRARN.¹³² In the Nigerian

¹²⁵ N/a: “Saving Africa’s Witch Children”. Channel4 via <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/episode-guide/series-8/episode-1> [30.4.2011].

¹²⁶ N/a 23.10.2009: „Dispatches: Return to Africa’s Witch Children“. AtheistMediaDotCom Via http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbGzFN_NaII&feature=iv&annotation_id=annotation_129230 [30.4.2011].

¹²⁷ The organization later withdrew from the orphanage after internal conflicts.

¹²⁸ Members of the Hard Motorbikers Association of Nigeria 22.12.2008: “The witch children of Eket” via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpZiOwhLals&feature=related> [22.4.2011]

¹²⁹ “New Update 2009 The African Witch Children” 8.4.2009: globalmediaeuropeint via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y2U3S9h4Lg&NR=1> [22.4.2011].

¹³⁰ A good summary was delivered by the Youtube-Member xxxthepeachxxx: „Child Witch Hunter“ 5.3.2012: via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5klKretrsw&feature=youtu.be> [8.4.2012]. Compare Mark Oppenheimer : „The witch-hunter explains herself.“ New York Times News Channel via http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/Home/5571826-146/the_er_explains_herself__csp [30.4.2011]. The same sentence is cited by Yomi Ogunsanyas analysis of Ukpabio’s mindset in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 65.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² See 29.7.2009: “Helen Ukpabio Militia invade Childrens rights conference in Calabar, Nigeria”. Saharatv via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWktZEj6OZ8&playnext=1&list=PL7421CB2969D31DD8> [30.4.2011].

magazine “Newswatch” the director of the NGO ‘Stepping Stones’, Gary Foxcroft, was slandered to have plotted a 20-Million-Dollar-scam.¹³³

The NGO had organized a protest march of the orphans and succeeded with an edict of the governor outlawing witchcraft-accusations against children.¹³⁴ Billboards announced this edict.¹³⁵ But soon, the same governor denounced the NGO as fraudsters, downplayed the numbers of victims and boasted his edict to be a total success: “And that brought that situation immediately under control.”¹³⁶ The philosopher and activist Leo Igwe points at the erratic and ambiguous stance of the government towards the problem. He was arrested and charged with child-trafficking after he imparted a street-orphan to the public authorities.¹³⁷

In a radio broadcast last year, [...] Akwa state governor Godswill Akpabio vowed to clamp down on NGOs working against witch hunts in the state. Local newspapers have reported that Igwe’s arrest is part of that campaign by Governor Akpabio.¹³⁸

As in the case of Ghana’s ghettos and sanctuaries for witch-hunt-victims, witch-hunts are intermingled with public, religious and private interests and tackling them appears to overcharge fragile or inexistent governmental structures. Such idiosyncratic reactions are likely, wherever dysfunctional institutions are held responsible for something, which they are inexpedient or incompetent to resolve or push through. In Nigeria it was mostly individuals and middle-sized institutions which managed to raise awareness and help children.

In Angola cooperation with local authorities proved successful:

The Angolan city of Mbanza Congo, just 50 miles from the border with Congo, has blazed a trail. After a child accused of witchcraft was stabbed to death in 2000,

¹³³ Emmanuel Uffot, 5.12.2011: “The Big Rip-Off”. Newswatch via http://www.newswatchngr.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3740&Itemid=26.

¹³⁴ Channel 4: “Saving Africas witch-children Part 6” via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltYqx6v2d7k&NR=1> [22.4.2011]

¹³⁵ See „Part 1 Update: Saving Africa’s Witch-children (falsely accused)”: via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxKf0EH1NsI&feature=related> [21.4.2011]. Cp.

Ademowo in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 56.

¹³⁶ “Nigerian governor says abuse of child “witches” to be exaggerated – CNN.Com.mp4” (30.8.2010): CNN via http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pkc70_RzbkE [22.4.2011].

¹³⁷ Sahara reporters 12.1.2011: “Clampdown on Child Rights Activists in Akwa Ibom State: Leo Igwe arrested by Police on the orders of Gov. Akpabio” via <http://www.saharareporters.com/news-page/clampdown-child-rights-activists-akwa-ibom-state-leo-igwe-arrested-police-orders-gov-akpab> [22.4.2011]. Verified through a personal interview with Leo Igwe.

¹³⁸ International Humanist and Ethical Union 18.1.2011: “IHEU representative Leo Igwe jailed and beaten for human rights work” via <http://www.iheu.org/iheu-representative-leo-igwe-jailed-and-beaten-human-rights-work> [22.4.2011]

provincial officials and Save the Children rounded up 432 street children and reunited 380 of them with relatives, the witchcraft report stated. [...]

Eleven fundamentalist churches were shut down because of reports of child exploitation and abuse. Eight Congolese pastors were deported. Villages formed committees to monitor children's rights. The authorities say the number of children who are abused or living on the streets dropped drastically.¹³⁹

Where such collective acts fail, orphanages remain the best strategy. Orphanages for children accused of witchcraft exist not only in Nigeria, but also in Kinshasa¹⁴⁰ and Angola:

An orphanage in Luanda, run by Argentine Catholic priests, houses more than 100 children, up to 40% of whom were abused, beaten, cast out from their homes as they were believed to be witches.¹⁴¹

All interviewed operators of NGOs cite the regulation of churches as the priority objective:

AFRUCA is calling for the establishment of a registration and monitoring system to regulate the faith sector and ensure anyone who wants to set up any place of worship is vetted to ensure they are fit to do so. We believe such a system should help to weed out unscrupulous persons and ensure they are fit to be spiritual leaders with responsibilities for vulnerable families and their children most of whom rely exclusively on their faith networks for support, help and assistance in settling into their lives in the country.¹⁴²

While regulations are prone to illiberal sanctions on the freedom of worship, the charismatic churches are in an undisputed position anyhow. Wilbanks makes the obvious conclusion to cooperate with churches and convince them to speak out against child-witch-hunting.¹⁴³

It has to be noted, that many social workers counselling witch-hunt-victims are by no means free from witchcraft-beliefs. This does not necessarily pose a

¹³⁹ Sharon LaFraniere 15.11.2007: "African crucible: Cast as witches, then cast out.". New York Times via http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/15/world/africa/15witches.html?_r=2&ref=world&oref=slogin&oref=slogin [24.4.2011].

¹⁴⁰ Dan Balluff 15.7.2008: "Children of Congo: From War to Witches" via <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ew4rd1YyD7A&feature=related> [22.4.2011].

¹⁴¹ N/a 13.7.2005: "Angola witchcraft's child victims." BBC-News via <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4677969.stm> [24.4.2011].

¹⁴² AFRUCA 30.6.2006: "UK: Africans Unite Against Child Abuse responds to Report on Child Abuse and Witchcraft." Child Rights Information Network via <http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=9005&flag=news> [24.4.2011]. Cp. Jessica Wilbanks in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 83.

¹⁴³ Wilbanks in Ademowo, Foxcroft, Oladipo 2010: 82f.

risk to the children under their custody, as this sceptical witchcraft belief is able to reflect upon the projective character of the accusations. More problematic is the missionary practice among orphans and their exploitation for other, most often religious, interests.

The myth of the 'special-gifted' child is additionally prone to exploitation through western puritan ideology. The results are attempts to put the talents of witch-hunt victims 'to good use'. The first concern of westerners seeing the elderly witch-hunt victims in Ghana seems to become managers of the concentrated, but wasted workforce: "Can't you let them make traditional crafts, pottery and the like?" Safety and food are the basic needs of the traumatized victims, not work.

RESEARCH

Puvogel makes an upbeat forecast:

[We should] hope for and even expect, that these societies will develop or already have developed sound and independent approaches for the 'problem' of the child-witches.¹⁴⁴

As long as struggles go on within these societies, ignorance means supporting one faction. Witch-hunt victims call for help and they are aware of the power of the international society. It is most important to train, employ and support expedient workforce who treats the violated individuals with respect and patience. They need caring, nutrition, housing, education in the first place. Negotiating ever risky resettlements or family reunions with local authorities requires diplomatic sensitiveness and daedal cultural brokering. According to Simon Ngota, director of the Ghanaian 'Witch-hunt Victims Empowerment Project'¹⁴⁵, working with witch-hunt victims is ever at risk to be associated with witchcraft oneself.¹⁴⁶ Under the visible umbrella of international organisations, such work is safer and better equipped.

Academic research faces the problem of theory and practice. Vast parts of anthropology oppose or avoid any intervention. It seems impossible to meet the objectivity standards of positivism while ranking enlightenment as superior to traditional ontologies and highly moralized epistemologies. Ter

¹⁴⁴ Puvogel 2008: 114. [Translation FR.]

¹⁴⁵ [Http://gushiegus.wordpress.com](http://gushiegus.wordpress.com) [12.12.2011].

¹⁴⁶ Also cp. Puvogel 2008: 106.

Haar scandalizes the lapse of humanitarianism among research about witch-hunts:

For Western academics the subject of witchcraft is more likely to be regarded as an absorbing field of study than as the matter-of-life-and-death reality it is for many Africans. International human rights organisations such as Amnesty International have so far not pronounced witchcraft accusations to be a specific category of offence against human rights, probably because they have never thought about the matter in those terms in first place. Neither have human rights lawyers or others with a professional interest in human rights. The matter of witchcraft accusations seems simply to escape their attention, and recent witchcraft studies have done little to remedy this oversight, as they normally fail to include a human rights perspective.¹⁴⁷

Hazard-free phenomenology, categorizing from the distance and more or less felicitous philosophical approaches dominate the subject today.¹⁴⁸ For example, Geschiere's reserved description of the witchcraft trial fails to reflect on the position of the ethnographer, his options to intervene in front of outright maltreatment of accused children (through policemen) or just the sheer effects his presence as a white person might have had on all actions. He just rates his eye-witness account as a rare "luxury" for the ethnographer.¹⁴⁹ To me, it is rather a burden and I met other ethnographers, who were completely overcharged with witch-hunts, some were even traumatized by watching lynch-mobs, others became targets of accusations.

The obvious necessity of a practice-oriented research in alliance with witch-hunt victims and with the organisations assisting them conflicts with other standards of ethnography. To intervene means to take certain risks, not intervening brings forward the 'luxury' of 'objective' data. But just watching these organizations work is cynical disaster tourism. Taking part with appropriate assistance and a certain financial contribution easily transcends the actual means of ethnographers who today are under tremendous pressure to wrap up their research in a minimum amount of time. Moral codices befitting field-work have never really existed. Field-research with witch-hunt victims requires knowledge about the psychology of trauma, sensitivity in dealing with victims and social workers, reflexivity on the own status as a representative of a powerful and rich international community. A very good amount of money, networking and time come in handy, too. No one with matured morals will just do some research and go. Working with witch-hunt

¹⁴⁷ Ter Haar 2007: 19; cp. 3.

¹⁴⁸ One example is delivered by Bond/Ciekawy 2001: 10.

¹⁴⁹ Geschiere 1980: 292.

victims easily becomes and should become a contract and dedication for lifetime.

SUMMARY

Imaginations of witching children are rather an expansion than a distortion of traditional concepts about witchcraft. They are affected by other crises just in secondary effects and should be regarded as a crisis in its' own. Prerequisite for research is therefore a profound critique of ideologies. The most important protagonists are charismatic churches and associated films. How to face these institutions without recurring on eroded governments and justice is up in the air.

In the meantime those locations are of utmost interest, where witch-hunt victims gather, organize and communicate. Practice against witch-hunting poses challenges and requires sensitive action to avoid backfiring and to provide proper protection for affected children (and other victims).

Research is required to advocate witch-hunt victims but through this provokes parts of the social environment on which a holistic expertise depends. In general a better and more intense cooperation between historical, anthropological, ethnographic and humanitarian institutions is desirable.

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