

AFRUCA PROPOSAL FOR A NEW LAW AGAINST BRANDING CHILDREN AS WITCHES OR AS POSSESSED BY EVIL SPIRITS AND CARRYING OUT EXORCISM RITES ON CHILDREN.

Background

The horrific images of the scenes of child abuse in the Channel 4 Dispatches Programme "Britain's Witch Children" screened on Monday 26 July 2010 UK are strong reminders that 10 years after the death of Victoria Climbié, 9 years after the torso of "Boy Adam" was found in the River Thames, and 6 years after "Child B" was rescued from her abusive relatives, child abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession has not in any way or form abated.

In her report commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families, (DCSF), **Child Abuse linked to Accusation of "Possession and Witchcraft"** (2006) Eleanor Stobbart recounted disturbing cases where following accusations of witchcraft or of being possessed by demons, children were subjected to horrific forms of abuse. In her conclusions she made it clear that the 38 clear cut cases that came to her attention were an underestimate and she recommended further research in this area.

Our work at AFRUCA confirms the findings by Eleanor Stobbart in her report. Over the past one year alone, we have dealt, in different capacities, with at least 10 cases of children accused of being witches or possessed by evil spirits including the following cases:

- 2 children with "challenging behaviour" were accused by their parents of being possessed by evil spirit and were physically abused and assaulted.
- 1 child was accused by her step mother of making her barren and was tortured so badly by her father she sustained many injuries on her body.
- 2 children were physically assaulted by a parent who claimed that he had a vision that they were possessed by the devil.
- 1 child with disability was accused of being possessed because of her physical condition and was burnt with a flat iron.
- 2 young girls were forced to take oath rituals before being trafficked to a third country, with threats of death if they report their traffickers to the authorities.

Effects of being branded as a witch

Branding a child a witch is not based on any scientific or medical evidence. There is no known method of proving a child is a witch apart from the words of a Pastor or other people who claim to have the "power of discernment". There is no method – scientific or not - of proving that a child branded as a witch is responsible for harming people in any way. These are all beliefs which cannot be proven. However, despite this, the impact of being branded as a witch can be devastating for the child involved:

- The fate of children with disability is worthy of serious concern. The stigma attached to a child with disability being branded as "possessed" can be very distressing and devastating both for the child as well as his or her family.

- Albino children are being specifically targeted although we have not seen cases of this in the UK
- The accusation of witchcraft is a serious violation of the rights of the child in question. Their welfare and well-being is compromised because of the myriad forms of abuse experienced.
- The abuses experienced include physical, psychological and emotional abuse experienced in the form of verbal abuse, curses, and the knowledge that one is hated by everyone else because one is a witch. Isolation and neglect make the child vulnerable to sexual abuse.
- The child's ability to fully experience education is compromised due to missed education or inability to concentrate while at school - leading to low educational achievement and attainment.
- There are long term effects of being branded as a witch. These include ostracization and isolation by others leading to mental health problems, including depression, bed wetting, insomnia, lack of appetite, ongoing fear of abuse, neglect as well as other health problems.
- There are long term effects of a child being made to undergo extreme forms of exorcism rites. These include post traumatic stress disorder, physical harm, being suicidal, disability.
- In some known instances, children have been killed through being branded as witches.
- In many African countries, children branded as witches are ejected from the family home. As street children, they become vulnerable to all forms of abuse harm and exploitation. Many victims become vulnerable to child trafficking for various purposes including, sexual exploitation and forced labour.

Role of Faith Organisations

Even though accusations of witchcraft are borne out of cultural beliefs, most Africans who are Christians believe the church has the best answer to solving the problem of children who are "witches" or are "possessed". Churches themselves see the issue of witchcraft and demonisation as borne out of evil as highlighted in the Bible, and carry out different forms of exorcism rites to rid the child's body of the evil which has possessed it.

In many instances, the accusation of witchcraft is made by a church Pastor who also professes a "cure". This is called deliverance or exorcism by the pastor or other high ranking members of the church.

Islam also recognises the existence of evil spirits called "jinns" that can take control of human beings. Islam recognises that evil spirits are able to affect people's lives by causing physical ailments.

Child Abuse linked to witchcraft can occur in the church and other faith groups in different ways:

- Once a child is branded by the pastor or faith leader, everyone else believes this is the case. There is therefore the risk of all the forms of abuse identified

above occurring, not necessarily perpetrated by the church or the faith group, but sanctioned by it. Branding a child as a witch is an incitement to harm that child because a branded child is seen as an evil child who causes harm to others.

- The church might practice abusive exorcism rites on the child which can cause extreme harm and suffering and even lead to death
- Once a child is branded as a witch, only the pastor can “deliver” that child. The stigma of witchcraft stays until that child is “healed” or “delivered”. However I will argue that the stigma will always be with that child as that child will always be remembered for being a witch
- If the pastor is unable to deliver that child, then the stigma remains forever. In some extreme instances, pastors have been known to prescribe death as the only way out.

Role of Families

Newly arrived families experience many strains and stresses due to a clash of cultures, poverty, poor accommodation, family breakdown and uncertainty about decisions of their immigration status.

In trying to make sense of their place and responsibility in the web of issues they are caught up in, many people resort to identifying “scapegoats” who are seen as malevolent beings responsible for their misfortunes. Often times, healers, diviners and some pastors pin-point a child in the family as being possessed by malevolent beings responsible for the ill-turn experienced and therefore need deliverance/exorcism to get rid of the bad spirits said to have possessed them.

Children at risk of being branded as a witch

In the past, we have come across the following groups of children who have been accused of witchcraft or of being possessed by the devil:

- Children with disability including autism, epilepsy, down’s syndrome, dyslexia etc
- Albinos
- Children living away from home in private fostering situations as well as in domestic servitude situations
- Children living with a step parent, with one of the natural parents absent or dead
- Children whose parents have been branded as witches
- Children who are seen as “naughty” or have challenging behaviour
- Precocious children and left handed children.
- Children who are living within a polygamy setting

AFRUCA's Position

AFRUCA believes there is no justification for branding children as witches. The scape-goating of children and the abusive exorcism rites that are performed on them as such is a violation of their rights and is therefore unacceptable in any society. Our position on this is therefore as follows:

- Culture and religion should never be a reason for child abuse. The rights of the child are paramount
- The branding of a child as a witch and the performance of exorcism rites on that child lead to physical, emotional and mental abuse which cannot be justified in any way or form.
- It is inconceivable that a child's life can be totally ruined based on them being branded as a witch by one person – their pastor.
- We are very concerned about the category of children who are at risk of being scape-goated as witches or as possessed. These are children living in environments where they are already very vulnerable to abuse or children who are already in abusive situations and where love and affection is lacking.
- It is crucial that efforts are made by government to protect vulnerable children from further abuse through accusations of witchcraft.
- A law to stop children being branded as possessed or as witches is essential to safeguard vulnerable children from long term abuse, harm and even death.

What is AFRUCA is doing?

AFRUCA is running three main projects across England which, among others, addresses the issues linked to accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession. The Safeguarding African Children in London Project delivers specialist training courses for practitioners on African cultural and religious values and practices to enable them gain the skills necessary to identify and intervene in cases of abuse linked to accusation of witchcraft and spirit possession. It also supports practitioners through the provision of expert advice on cases involving witchcraft accusations.

Our Child Protection Training and Awareness Raising for African Parents in England Programme is currently running in 4 London local authorities as well as in Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle. It aims to help educate African parents on UK laws and regulations on the safeguarding and protection of children and provide them with new skills so they can identify what constitutes harm to children and how to prevent abuse.

AFRUCA has recently been funded to establish a project "Working with Faith Groups to Safeguard African Children in Yorkshire". This will enable us to work with a range of faith organisations in the cities of Leeds, Bradford and Sheffield to strengthen their child protection policies and practices as well as work with faith workers and members of their congregation to improve their knowledge of child protection and child abuse prevention.

We have produced the “Safeguarding African Children in the UK” series of publications to help raise awareness about different forms of abuse in the African community and what needs to be done to safeguard children. In particular, our publication: “What is Witchcraft Abuse?” aims to educate about witchcraft branding. This publication is available in English and French and can be downloaded from our website.

We are aware of work being done in the community by other groups including the UK Congolese Safeguarding Action Group to support families at risk. However, in order to provide a stronger layer of protection for children, deter offenders and empower communities to act against those who are indeed powerful members of our communities and indeed other communities, we strongly believe that a new law to criminalise the branding of children as witches is necessary.

Our Proposal for a new Law Against Branding Children as Witches or as Possessed.

In order to provide better protection for children at risk and empower government agencies and communities themselves to become more involved in efforts to tackle this growing problem, AFRUCA proposes a New Law Against the Branding of Children as Witches or as Possessed by demons. We are proposing that the elements below form part of the new law:

- Make it an offence for anyone to call a child a witch or describe a child as possessed by the devil. This is because branding a child a witch is an incitement to harm the child
- Make it an offence for anyone to carry out any form of ritual or exorcism rite on a child because they are a witch. This is because such rituals lead to physical and other forms of abuse and harm on the child
- Make it an offence to force a child to fast because they are a witch. This is child neglect which also causes harm to a child
- Make it an offence to send a child outside the UK (including other European countries) to be exorcised because they are a witch. This is to prevent a possible by-passing of UK law which (will) forbids the carrying out of such practices here
- Make it an offence to send a child abroad to be prayed for to die or be killed because they are a witch. This is to protect children who might not be subjected to a similar level of protection if they are taken abroad.

In parallel with the 2003 Female Genital Mutilation Act where similar provisions exist for better protection of vulnerable children, we propose the following additional provisions to the law:

- Find someone guilty if he/she aids, abets, or counsels a person to take a child for exorcism following accusations that he/she is a witch or if he/she procures a person who is not a UK national or permanent UK resident to perform exorcism on a child branded as a witch.
- Make it an offence for someone to assist a non-UK person to exorcise a UK child overseas.

- Make it an offence for a UK national or permanent UK resident to aid in or carry out carry out exorcism on a child overseas.

Is this law enforceable?

AFRUCA believes this law can be effectively monitored and is enforceable:

- Nation-wide information dissemination to faith groups and other community organisations will help to raise awareness of the law and empower people to act to protect children.
- There are many people who are against the branding of children as witches or as possessed but who do not feel able to act against powerful members of the community because of the ambiguities in current laws. Such individuals will be better empowered since they will now have the support of the law to denounce the practice and report perpetrators.
- Children will be made aware at school and other places that it is a criminal offence to brand them as possessed by demons or evil spirits. This means that children will understand that they need to report if they are branded as witches and/or if exorcism rites will be or have been performed on them.
- Faith groups will have the new law written into their child protection policies and practices and will have to comply.

Next Steps

AFRUCA will be holding a series of consultative meetings in the following months to discuss our proposal. We want to seek views of different groups and agencies to let us know what they think about our proposal. We will also be engaging with various faith groups to gather their viewpoints on this issue. Event details will be publicised on our website.

Further information

For further information about this proposal and ongoing activities to promote it, please contact Justin Bahunga, Policy and Networking Officer at AFRUCA. Email justin@afruca.org, or call 0844 6608607. For further information about our work on child abuse prevention in the UK African community, please visit our website at www.afruca.org.

**AFRUCA – Africans Unite Against Child Abuse
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