



IMPACT OF WITCHCRAFT BRANDING ON CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN THE UK

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This paper looks at the impact of witchcraft branding on child sexual abuse in the UK. It seeks to explore the growing manifestation of accusations of witchcraft and spirit possession and the impact on children in the UK, the linkages between witchcraft branding and child sexual exploitation and abuse and AFRUCA's efforts in tackling this growing problem in the country.

The Concept of Witchcraft Branding among African Children in the UK

In AFRUCA's publication: "What is Witchcraft Abuse", witchcraft is defined as the exercise or invocation of alleged supernatural powers to control people or events, typically involving sorcery or magic. In exploring the impact of witchcraft branding on child sexual abuse, it is important to talk about the interlinking concept of "spirit possession" as well as "deliverance"—also known as Exorcism. "Spirit Possession" is defined in the publication as the takeover of a person's mind and body by an external non-physical force. Both "deliverance" and "exorcism" are the practices of expelling, or attempting to expel, one or more evil spirits from a person or place believed to be possessed or haunted by prayers, adjurations and religious rites.

There is evidence to suggest that stress and lack of social support or other forms of challenges puts children at risk of maltreatment and abuse. Newly arrived immigrant families in the community are often faced with issues like unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low income, lack of housing, uncertainty about immigration status and family depression which often put tremendous stress on poor families. In addition, access to financial support, clashing cultures, language barriers, racism, lack of access to child care and support for children with severe behavioural problems and disabilities all create a stress situation with families seeking answers to their problems in various ways and from various sources including from people masquerading as faith leaders whose sole purpose is material gain. These harsh experiences

faced by the newly arrived in the community can affect the capacity of families to access the right services thereby putting them at risk of child abuse including accusations of witchcraft which can lead to sexual abuse¹.

A study by Trust for London shows how poverty can affect families especially children². In many instances, a family's desperate situation can be used by rogue faith leaders to accuse a child of witchcraft and label them as the genesis of the family's problem. In other instances, a child's behavioural problems including low performance at school can be perceived as an indicator of witchcraft or spirit possession³. At AFRUCA, we do have evidence where children who are believed to be possessed have been taken to churches where they were made to go through long hours of prayers, fasting for days non-stop in order to "get rid of the witchcraft". There are known cases where children branded as witches and their families are told their "witchcraft is too strong" and the alternative is for them to be sent back to their countries of origin, include the Democratic of Congo, to be prayed for to die. All these cases have resulted in negative consequences in the form of emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children⁴. While this is not a UK case, recently in Nigeria an 11 year old child was told by a Pastor she was demonically possessed. Her mother was asked her to leave her in the care of the Pastor who would pray for her to be saved. However the child ended up being repeatedly raped by the same pastor with whom she was left (Channels TV.com).

Witchcraft Abuse Manifestations in the UK

Child abuse linked to the belief in spirit possession first reached the UK national public consciousness in 1999 in the wake of the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, an eight year old Ivorien girl who died as a result of hypothermia, malnutrition and horrific physical abuse after her guardians accused her of witchcraft. A research project into the subject of witchcraft branding conducted by Eleanor Stobbart in 2006 highlighted some high profile cases including that of Victoria Climbie and others who have lost their lives because they were branded as witches. In 2001, the torso of a young boy named 'Boy Adam' was found in the river Thames; he was believed to have been mutilated by ritualists. In 2005, the half dead body of an 8-year old Angolan girl was found in a laundry bag by street wardens in Hackney following accusations of witchcraft against her⁵. She had been put in the bag and left to die. At AFRUCA, between 2011 and 2012, we have worked on at least 20 different cases of children branded as witches either by their families or by rogue pastors for one reason or another. For example, one child was accused of making her step-mother barren, another child with a physical disability was accused of demonic possession. Some have been made to undergo juju and witchcraft oaths by their traffickers before being brought to the UK for

¹ AFRUCA (2012)Witchcraft Branding, Spirit Possession and Safeguarding African Children: A Compilation of Presentations and Recommendations from Afruca's International Conference (p. 35)

² <http://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/media-centre/news/launch-of-safeguarding-childrens-rights-report.html>

³ Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft, Liberty Publishers, Nigeria, 1996, Envag. (Mrs) Helen Ukpabio

⁴ AFRUCA (2012)Witchcraft Branding, Spirit Possession and Safeguarding African Children: A Compilation of Presentations and Recommendations from Afruca's International Conference (p.37-38)

⁵ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmhealth/570/570.pdf>

different forms of exploitation. The screening of a Channel 4 TV documentary in July 2010 - "Britain's Witch Children"⁶ and the very recent murder trial of Kristy Bamu a 14 year old French/Congolese boy tortured to death after being accused of witchcraft have helped to bring to the forefront the very insipid nature of witchcraft branding in the UK and the need to act to protect children⁷.

Data from agencies across the UK, including the Metropolitan Police Service as well as AFRUCA's direct experience of this issue based on work with affected children and families shows that children that have fallen victims to this form of abuse include: children with disability including autism, epilepsy, downs syndrome and dyslexia, learning disabilities; 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 "naughty" or have challenging behaviour; children who are geniuses or exceptionally bright; children living in broken families; and children trafficked into the UK for domestic slavery or sexual exploitation.

Effects of Witchcraft Branding on Victims

The branding of children as witches 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. Also, 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. For instance, the fate of children with disability is worthy of serious concern. The abuse involved in diagnosing a disabled child as "possessed" can be very distressing and devastating both for the child as well as his or her family. Such children are also doubly prone to sexual abuse.

The accusation of witchcraft is a serious violation of the rights of the child in question. This is because their welfare and well-being are compromised and their life chances reduced. The child's ability to fully experience education is also compromised leading to low educational achievement and attainment. The long term effects of being branded a witch include: mental health problems, depression, neglect, sexual abuse as well as other health problems. The long term effects of a child experiencing extreme exorcism rites include physical abuse, post traumatic stress disorder, depression, being suicidal. There have been some known instances where children have been killed through being diagnosed as witches (Kristy Bamu, Victoria Climbié). There has also been instances when 'rouge faith pastor's' have sexually abused children all in the name of exorcism⁸. Furthermore, in many African countries, children

⁶ Video Investigation by Channel4 Dispatches: Britain's Witch Children, 2010. Oxford Scientific Films Ltd.

⁷ AFRUCA (2012)Witchcraft Branding, Spirit Possession and Safeguarding African Children: A Compilation of Presentations and Recommendations from Afruca's International Conference (p.45-46)

⁸ Stop Alain Batupa. Video 1 Part 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uk0Ne-UBgM&feature=relmfu>

diagnosed or branded as witches are ejected from the family home. As street children, they become highly vulnerable to all forms of abuse and harm which often leads to many children becoming susceptible to child trafficking for either domestic servitude or sexual exploitation.

There is evidence to suggest that branding children as witches often leads to neglect and isolation thereby putting children at greater risk of sexual abuse. For instance, there is the case of a self-named “prophet”, a UK based pastor who allegedly sexually abused women and girls in the name of exorcising witchcraft^{9, 10, 11}. However, even though he was prosecuted for some of these allegations, he was not convicted in court. There is the case of another Congolese pastor in the UK who was allegedly shown on the Channel 4 documentary, “Britain’s Witch Children” claiming he could cure a man’s illness by sleeping with his under-aged daughter.

Witchcraft Branding and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Exploitation

It is impossible to talk about witchcraft and child sexual abuse in the UK without linking both to child trafficking because these three key components are not always mutually exclusive. AFRUCA has dealt with cases where human traffickers, who are involved in the sexual exploitation of children, often use witchcraft and juju as coercive and control strategies on their victims. As a result, victims of sexual abuse are afraid to disclose their abuse and testify to their ordeal due to the fear that they might have broken an oath and invited death or misfortune upon themselves¹².

In some human trafficking cases, witchcraft becomes a tool used to control victims due to the alleged capacity by witchdoctors to engage with forces that determine people’s fortunes thereby giving perpetrators of trafficking a lot of power to instil fear on their victims. This claim to power is further reinforced by people’s strong beliefs in the supernatural, in witchcraft, its power and its impact. Consequently, the threat and use of witchcraft as a means of control is buttressed by the emphasis on reprisals by higher or evil forces through curses, spells, oaths etc. Hence, many people, including victims of human trafficking, because of their own beliefs, are caught up in this web of control even when they are a thousand miles away from their native country.

Despite all the cases that have come to the fore, it has proved difficult prosecuting cases of witchcraft linked to child trafficking in the UK. There has only been one known prosecution and a successful conviction of a trafficker (Anthony Harrison) who trafficked girls out of the UK. The case also has strong elements of witchcraft involved because the victims were made to undergo juju rites before being trafficked. The difficulty encountered in convicting

⁹ 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8uk0Ne-UBgM&feature=relmfu>

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCathS1qsBg&feature=relmfu>

¹¹ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdz5YF_8WIY

¹² ¹² AFRUCA (2010) Breaking the Cycle of Fear: Witchcraft, Juju and Safeguarding Victims of Human Trafficking

perpetuators of child trafficking for sexual exploitation is heightened by the victims' belief in witchcraft and juju. Hence, there is usually not enough evidence to obtain conviction as witnesses are usually unable to disclose their abuse and testify to their ordeal due to the fear that they might have broken an oath and invited death and misfortune upon themselves. It is evident from child sexual abuse and exploitation cases in the UK that the police, on its own, cannot achieve the results necessary towards fighting human trafficking linked to witchcraft. There is therefore a strong need to engage with faith and community organisations who have strong understanding of the issue in order to effect positive changes¹³.

AFRUCA'S Position and Interventions

AFRUCA is convinced that there is no justification for branding children as witches. The scape-goating of children and the abusive exorcism rites that is performed on them as such is a gross violation of their rights. Child branding is a harmful practice and our position is therefore as follows:

- Culture and religion should never be a reason for child abuse.
- The diagnosis 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. Sometimes children are sexually abused as a result of witchcraft branding.
- It is inconceivable that a child's life can be totally ruined based on the diagnosis of witchcraft by one person.
- We are very concerned about the category of children who are at risk of being scape-goated as witches. 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 at the macro level to protect vulnerable children from further abuse through accusations of witchcraft.

AFRUCA has developed a holistic approach to effectively deal with the issue of witchcraft branding and child sexual abuse/child sexual exploitation in the UK. We work in 5 key areas focusing on policy and advocacy; victim support; work with faith-based organisations, local communities and parents as well as practitioners in the UK.

¹³ AFRUCA (2010) Breaking the Cycle of Fear: Witchcraft, Juju and Safeguarding Victims of Human Trafficking (p.8)

Policy and Advocacy: Through our ‘Faith Based Child Abuse in London Project’, AFRUCA has been at the forefront of efforts to influence change at the policy and regulatory levels in the UK in order to address the terrible phenomenon of the branding of children as witches or as possessed by evil spirits¹⁴. Our efforts have directly influenced the establishment of a National Working Group by the Children's Minister Tim Loughton MP to help identify strategies to deal with the problem. AFRUCA has also mainstreamed this issue via campaigning for a change in legislation to make it illegal to brand children as witches. We continue to work with legal experts to strengthen our proposals which we hope to present to the government soon. On the 18th of April 2012, we hosted a summit at the UK House of Commons which brought together parliamentarians, policy-makers, members of the African community and others to explore many of the issues¹⁵. This event was a follow-up to the murder trial of Kristy Bamu in London in March 2012¹⁶. We have also hosted a 2-day International Conference on Witchcraft branding in November 2011 to bring practitioners and policy-makers together to share knowledge and exchange ideas about this issue.

Victim Support: We provide support to children and young adults through different projects and initiatives.

The Survivors’ Forum is a participatory approach to supporting young people who have experienced exploitation and abuse and the activities are user-led. The Forum aims to create a platform for young people to provide each other with mutual support and assistance while establishing new friendships and networks. The forum is used to disseminate information and educate young people on issues relating to sexual health, personal safety, and personal development and create general awareness of social issues that may be of concern to them. In addition to the peer support group, the forum informs AFRUCA’s child abuse programmes and activities¹⁷.

The Theatre for Development project complements AFRUCA’s services in supporting children and young people who have been sexually abused following accusations of witchcraft and children who may have been trafficked into the UK. The project is run in partnership with leading theatre practitioners. The project uses drama, dance and music as a creative and culturally appropriate alternative to available psychological and therapeutically services. This project seeks to address some of the psychological and emotional needs of the young people using our services while helping them to gain new skills like assertiveness,

¹⁴ Faith Based Child Abuse in London Project. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/17--faith-based-child-abuse-in-london-project.html>

¹⁵ AFRUCA Summit calls for joint efforts to fight branding of children as witches. Available at: <http://www.theafronews.eu/community/afruca-summit-calls-for-joint-efforts-to-fight-branding-of-children-as-witches>

¹⁶ The Kristy Bamu Murder Case: Afruca Reiterates Call for Changes in the Law to Criminalise the Branding of Children as Witches. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/component/content/article/90-the-kristy-bamu->

¹⁷ Trafficking of African Children and Young People in London and the South East. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/16-trafficking-of-african-children-and-young-people-in-london-and-the-south-east.html>

communication, problem solving, focussing, team working, voice projection, and confidence building¹⁸.

The joint work with the London Borough of Newham is a unique partnership to ensure children, who have been traumatised as a result of abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession, and their families, have access to a holistic service package which addresses mental health, faith and social needs. The project is unique because it combines the use of ‘Community Mediators’ – a team of key members of different communities to support affected young people and families who also have access to counselling and therapeutic support by practitioners.

Faith based organisations: AFRUCA has been working in partnership with African Faith organisations in the three cities of Leeds, Sheffield, Bradford as well as in Greater Manchester to promote better child safeguarding practices. AFRUCA’s work with faith organisations involves helping to enhance the skills of people who have contact with children, develop the right policies and ensure their environments are safe for children.¹⁹.

Local Community and Parents: AFRUCA also works with African parents across the UK to raise awareness about safeguarding children and protecting them from witchcraft abuse that could lead to sexual abuse and other forms of exploitations. We have produced a range of Safeguarding African Children in the UK series of publications which looks at different issues including one on “What is Witchcraft Abuse?” in both English and French to educate and inform community and others about this issue.²⁰.

Practitioners: AFRUCA also offers specialist training courses on African cultural and religious practices and provides expert advice on cases. In 2007, we launched a National Training and Advice Programme for practitioners who work closely with black African children and their families. The programme was established to help consolidate our work with agencies and their staff in the area of skills development in addition to acting as a tool for informing and influencing policy at a higher level, since the practitioners extend what they have learnt to the authorities of their organisations. Since the inception of this programme, AFRUCA has trained over 1400 practitioners who attend AFRUCA-run training courses as well as other training activities organised by other agencies but delivered by AFRUCA. We equally work with agencies nation-wide to input into ongoing casework by providing expert advice to help inform child protection case assessments, reviews and legal proceedings involving African children and families²¹.

¹⁸ Child Trafficking and Theatre for Development Project. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/62-theatre-for-development-project.html>

¹⁹ Working with Faith Organisations to Safeguard African Children in Yorkshire & Greater Manchester. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/63-working-with-faith-organisations-to-safeguard-african-children-in-yorkshire.html>

²⁰ Child Protection Training for African Parents in England Project. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/15-child-protection-training-for-african-parents-in-england-project.html>

²¹ National Training and Advice Programme for Practitioners. Available at: <http://www.afruca.org/our-work/our-work-in-the-uk/18-national-training-programme-for-practitioners.html>

Learning's from the UK and Key Recommendations

The impact of witchcraft branding on child sexual exploitation and abuse is a very sensitive issue requiring a very firm but delicate approach. It is important to note that witchcraft branding is a human rights issue because it infringes upon children's rights. It is also a global issue with people suffering abuses as a result of witchcraft accusations across the world. AFRUCA has been very vocal in highlighting the issue of witchcraft branding and spirit possession as a human rights issue and not an attack on culture or religion. While people might have freedom of belief and religion, this should not infringe on the rights and safety of another person. NGOs working on this issue must first acknowledge that the branding of children as witches is a gross violation of the rights of children and be prepared to act on that basis.

The need for changes in policy and the law is crucial in countries where there are human rights violations as a result of witchcraft branding. Offenders will know they are committing a definite crime while members of the community, including children will have another layer of protection against rogue faith leaders and others who harm children in the name of religion.

Countries need to consider the need to establish protocols for faith groups and ensure places of worship have child protection policies that are regularly reviewed and monitored. This will help to guide their work with children, and ensure they can put processes in place to ensure their safety. The need for research on the scale and extent of child sexual abuse linked to the belief in witchcraft and spirit possession is important to help build knowledge and understanding of the extent of the problem. Currently, there is very little empiric research available, even though of course we do know the problem does exist. Local practitioners, especially school teachers, social workers and the police need to be trained to understand how and why the branding of children as witches is wrong, the damage it causes in the lives of children and communities and their own roles in helping to protect those at risk of harm.

There needs to be joint working and collaboration between NGOs and the government to tackle the issue of the branding of children as witches. Work by NGOs must be complemented by intervention at the macro level – policy and systems changes, regulation and the law. This raises the need for continuous engagement to raise the concerns of the community and influence policy and practices.

With the growing problem of child branding as witches occurring in many countries across the world, the need to act to protect children has never been so crucial. Governments must take up the gauntlet to enhance protection for children and communities need to be empowered to enable them play their roles as protectors of children.

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