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Ritual Murder?

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Ritual murder is a phrase used by many people but what does it actually mean, or imply? To remind you – ritual is a religious performance and embodies authority; its aim is public, the personnel that perform it and, ideally, their actions, are specified and cannot be varied without weakening its efficacy¹. Its aim benefits those for whom it is performed. Ritual concerns the sacred and it is a truism of anthropology that it also invokes the highest cultural legitimacy, activating spiritual powers, whether they be of gods, spirits, or ancestors, in order to achieve a beneficent result.

Murder is, by contrast, immoral and illegal; it is an act carried out in secret that attracts a severe penalty. In all societies killing human beings is subject to some form of regulation that define what is illegitimate killing, that is to say murder.² Murder commonly pollutes the murderer who must be ritually cleansed; the victim's kin incur the duty to seek vengeance or compensation. In Western i.e. Christian doctrine all killing is wrong: thou shalt not kill; in other societies there may be exceptions to a general rule. These exceptions generally designate categories of person who are virtually rendered non-human by their exclusion. Killing them is not murder. In Bugisu, where I first worked, sorcerers and homosexuals were excluded in this way; killing them was not murder and entailed no blood guilt. Murder then is the opposite of a religious act; it is the prototype of illegitimate action. Murder performed as part of a ritual implies the existence of religious acts which are not legitimate and which are, like murder, illicit and morally wrong. Ritual murder is thus an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms and for any anthropologist this requires investigation.

Several forms of killing may also be referred to as ritual murder. There is also a common synonym, human sacrifice, which is used in much the same sense. What the killings seem to have in common is a link to the realm of spiritual power. One of the aims of this paper is to compare these concepts and show that whereas human sacrifice involved real killings, ritual murder is a much more shadowy concept, invoked often enough to describe grisly events or denigrate particular communities, but never pinned down by reliable evidence. In fact, as I shall argue, the idea of ritual murder is just that, an idea that in Britain represents the epitome of evil and which denotes the alien nature of other people outside

¹ Ritual is also used as a technical term in the psychological disciplines to indicate an individual's repetitive behaviour that has meaning but no material effect or purpose. It is usually not public but may be secret without incurring the designation of evil unless it disregards customary rules or breaks the law. Like public ritual it must be invariant and may benefit the performer. I am not concerned with that here.

² See Bohannan, P. (ed.), 1960. *African Homicide and Suicide*, Oxford University Press.

what may be known as “the civilised world” or, worse still, the horror of the evil within. In this respect it resembles witchcraft. I shall come back to this.

While it is sometimes said that academics are too prone to spend their time arguing about definitions and distinctions I would argue that such discussions frequently lead to clarification of ideas and this is my aim here. In my approach though, I follow the French historian Muchembled who wrote of the risk carried by an analysis of ideas without taking into account their social context; this is the risk that “the investigator will describe his own mental processes rather than the subject of his research” (Muchembled 1960:141). That he wrote this in an article about witchcraft makes his remarks even more relevant. To avoid this risk I shall consider try to give at least some of the social context of the relevant ethnography.

The impetus to write this paper was given by the reactions evoked by a film in the television series, *Dispatches*, which some of you may have seen. It concerned a series of murders in Uganda that were referred to both as ritual murder and as human sacrifice, although I would argue that they were neither. This set various anthropologists, myself included, against the film-makers who can be said to represent the general (British) public, although I am aware that journalists are usually believed to be more skeptical than most people.

Professor Pat Caplan wrote an article about this controversy for *Anthropology Today* (26 (2) 4-7) which provides a useful summary of what happened. The cause of this major disagreement between film-makers and anthropologists was the alleged existence of a rapid increase of killings, particularly of children, who were murdered and then mutilated. It was this that was referred to as “child sacrifice” or ritual murder. In support of their view the film-makers relied heavily on a man who confessed to having killed 70 individuals but to have reformed. He claimed to be mounting a campaign against child sacrifice. Most of the anthropologists did not believe him, recognising the type of Christian leader whose conversion gains added lustre from the contrast with the blackness of former sin, and considering what people say as weak evidence without reliable information on what they do or have done. While the film-makers reported that they had been told by reliable witnesses of multiple killings and mutilations, a Ugandan anthropologist from Makerere referred to the situation as “hysteria” and linked it to the popularity of Nigerian (Nollywood) films in which such killings feature. A series of

fairly heated emails were exchanged most of which found their way to Adam Kuper's London Review of Books blog.

Caplan's aim was not to decide either way but to discuss the two main topics she thought had been raised by the controversy: the first concerned "the interpretation of witchcraft and other forms of alleged ritual killings in contemporary Africa ..." while the second, which I shall not consider, had to do with the media and what she calls 'public anthropology'. She argued that anthropologists are inclined to interpret allegations of witchcraft as ideas and moral values in the classical tradition, implying that this leads them to deny the reality of such beliefs. She does not spell out whether she means that they deny that people actually are witches or that what they do works. She points out that, in an alternative view of 'occult phenomena': "some anthropologists working in Africa have accepted that there has indeed been an increase in allegations of witchcraft, but also in its *material manifestations, including killing and the removal of body parts...*" Here killing for body parts is identified with witchcraft; the other material manifestations are not specified. So, not only is there a dispute between anthropologists and the journalists about what is going on in Africa but there are opposed views among anthropologists. I shall try and show that this situation is in part a confusion of terminology.

I turn now to what we know about killings that are linked with beliefs in occult phenomena and I start with human sacrifice.

Human sacrifice

The killing of a living creature as a ritual offering to a god or spirit used to be termed a blood sacrifice, an old-fashioned term that focuses attention on the spilling of blood. The blood may be important, less in itself, than as a manifestation of the dispatch of a victim's life as offering to the spiritual being or beings to whom the ritual is addressed. Usually a return is expected in the form of good fortune, whether generalised or as the granting of a particular prayer. Blood sacrifice might also be used to cleanse sufferers from sin, prevent misfortune or failure and avert evil. In some cases the blood spilled was human.

However, not all sacrifices entail the spilling of blood; victims were killed in other ways and in some societies, and on some occasions, it was actually important *not* to spill the victim's blood. The reference to blood has been dropped now and we consider sacrifice in general. This is a part of rituals in many parts of the world, though usually the offering takes the form of an animal or even a bird. Most anthropologists in the field in Africa have seen at least one of these sacrifices, usually involving a chicken or a goat. The more valued the creature sacrificed, the greater the honour done the recipient of the offering³.

The most valuable of all life is that of a human being and human sacrifice, where it occurred, was the greatest possible ritual gift. Human sacrifice has been recorded in many parts of the world although, as historians have pointed out, executions and other killings of human beings have sometimes been wrongly interpreted as human sacrifice (Wilks cited in Law 1985). The most famous example is perhaps that of the Aztecs, whose human sacrifice allegedly consisted of a heart taken from a living victim.

There is evidence that human sacrifice took place in antiquity in societies, including some in what is now Britain, bordering the Roman and Greek Empires, whose members sacrificed only animals and birds. Rituals including it have been described by outside observers. In Central America the practice of human sacrifice among the Aztecs and Incas was recorded by the invading Spaniards in early modern times and in parts of Africa by the Europeans who came first as traders and then as colonisers. There is most information on human sacrifice in Africa where it has been described in relatively recent times by travellers, missionaries and by officials of the colonising powers, so I will draw largely on that material as summarised in a useful article by the historian Robin Law.⁴ There is no doubt that this killing took place as part of public rituals and was considered legitimate.

In Africa, human sacrifice was a practice largely confined to some kingdoms of West Africa, such as Asante, Benin, Dahomey, Calabar and the riverine Ibo, although disregard of human life was much more widespread.⁵ Human beings were sacrificed as offerings to gods and to the dead, particularly dead

³ Evans-Pritchard recorded that Nuer might offer a wild cucumber if no animal were available but that it was clear that this was merely a stand-in and an undertaking to perform the usual sacrifice when possible.

⁴ See Law, R., 1985. *Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa*, *African Affairs*, 84 (334) 53–87.

⁵ Speke records seeing the King of Buganda shoot the head off a passing slave to demonstrate to his European visitor the effectiveness of the guns he had bought from Arab traders.

kings and other elite forbears. In the West African kingdom of Dahomey, a regular ritual of remembrance offered to dead kings, known as the Annual Customs, required the sacrifice of human victims to strengthen the dead rulers' spiritual powers and by showing the filial piety, engage them on behalf of his successor. It also demonstrated the mundane power of the ruler and the legitimacy of his position (Law 1985), the former function being explicitly recognised by one such ruler, King Kpengla of Dahomey, who explained succinctly the need for human sacrifice to a European enquirer in the 1780s as follows: "You have seen me kill many men at the Customs. This gives a grandeur to my Customs, far beyond the display of fine things which I buy. This makes my enemies fear me and gives me a name in the bush."⁶

In West Africa, as in ancient China and elsewhere, funerals might entail the killing of human beings to accompany the dead. A great ruler might be buried with his wives and/or members of his entourage to provide him with a suitable retinue in the afterlife. The individuals who were killed were not, strictly speaking, sacrificed, since they were not killed as offerings either to the gods or the spirit of the dead king or ruler. Moreover it is alleged in some cases that the close associates of the dead man volunteered to die, much as Indian widows were traditionally expected to commit suicide on the funeral pyre of their dead husband⁷. Nevertheless, the term human sacrifice may be used to refer to these practices, since the additional deaths were an integral part of the funeral ritual. In parts of West Africa, individuals might also be killed as messengers to the dead in addition to the normal human sacrifices. Fear of the approaching colonial powers resulted in many human sacrifices to avert military disaster.

Killings as offerings to the dead may not seem to Westerners to be sacrifices, in that they are not offerings to gods. However in many African religions, ancestors are holy beings, with spiritual powers to reward or punish their descendants. There may be some recognition of a vaguely conceptualised creator god but as a remote deity, uninterested in human affairs; the ancestors are usually the spirits to whom one appeals for help in trouble. Thus in Dahomey when human sacrifices were made "to water the graves of the ancestors" they were as much part of their religion as other religious festivals. Hence we may call these sacrifices and where the victim was human they were human sacrifices.

⁶ Dapper History of Dahomey, cited in Law p74

⁷ Given the pressure of the expectation of the husband's kin and of society in general, it is hard to say that widows who committed 'suttee' as it was called, always died absolutely voluntarily.

Two patterns among the selection of victims can be seen. The victim for sacrifice may be chosen either as a particularly pure or valuable human being: a child, a virgin or a young warrior; alternatively the opposite choice is made; the victim is an outsider: captive, representative of a defeated enemy, or a slave. Slaves might also be bought to be sacrificed, thus avoiding the need to kill a member of the community. However, where the tally of captives and slaves was inadequate, victims might be taken by force from among them.

The Greeks and Romans offered blood sacrifices to their gods but they were never human sacrifices, although both they and the Greeks kept slaves whom they might have sacrificed. In fact the Romans characterised some societies on the margins of their empires as barbarians because they did perform human sacrifices. The failure to draw a distinction between human beings and animals which the existence of human sacrifice implied, was to both Greeks and Romans clear evidence of the lack of civilisation of those people who practised it. Those they conquered, such as the tribes in what is now Britain, were strongly discouraged from the practice. In the early centuries of the Christian Era from which this information comes there were increasing number of Christians within the Roman Empire who believed that the death of Jesus was “a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world”⁸ and it rendered any sacrifice, not merely unnecessary, but a failure of faith. Pagans who offered sacrifices to their gods were barbarians. Thus sacrifice and in particular, what was sacrificed, was a powerful symbol for both communities, dividing them and justifying to each the inferiority of the other.

Human sacrifice is no longer practised, even in those societies where it used to be part of the traditional religious rites. Apart from the disapproval of the Romans, the spread of Christianity in territories taken as colonies by European powers, starting with Spain and Portugal in southern America in early modern times, have rendered it immoral and illegal in many areas where it used to be practised. Islam, spreading southwards from North Africa into Africa south of the Sahara, put an end to the practice in the north of many West African states and further colonisation by the European powers in the nineteenth century has forcibly ended the practice in the southern areas⁹. There may be talk of its revival in independent West African states where it has only been a century or so since the practice was

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer* – service of Communion.

⁹ Historians have pointed out that the fact of human sacrifice was used by some apologists for the slave trade to justify selling slaves because otherwise they might be taken for sacrifice (Law op.cit.)

stopped, but the stories are, so far, only unconfirmed rumours. There has been no public revival of the practice. But people persist in associating Africa with human sacrifice. Since the practice is abhorred in Britain it is also seen as ritual murder.

There are also practices that are sometimes confused with human sacrifice or considered to be necessarily linked to it. Cannibalism is not an inevitable consequence of human sacrifice nor are the victims dismembered for use in some other way, although the Aztecs were reputed to eat the hearts of human sacrifices. Some peoples, in many different parts of the world – the Ijo of West Africa are an example – ate parts of their dead enemies as a means of magically taking over their strength. Marshall Sahlins describes with some gusto similar practices in Fiji (*Anthropology Today* 19 (3) 3-5). Such practices have been referred to as ritual cannibalism, since they have magical and spiritual connotations to the participants. However, in Africa, although animal sacrifices were normally eaten at the end of a ritual, in a feast whose participants were carefully selected for their relation to the spirit (usually an ancestor) in whose honour the sacrifice had been offered, human sacrifices were not eaten. Speaking generally, cannibalism, even as a ritual, was always much less frequent than human sacrifice.

The rationale for eating human sacrificial victims or enemies who had been killed in battle, was that power was thought to be inherent in parts of the human body, even after death. The same belief lies behind the use of body parts in ‘medicines’¹⁰ records of which in Africa go back as far as the 17th century. These ‘medicines’ are magical concoctions but their purposes are purely secular; they are put together by specialists, who charge for their services and they purport to ensure success, wealth and the confounding of enemies. The magicians often referred to as witchdoctors may employ killers to obtain what they need or may kill themselves. The use of human body parts is said to give the ‘muti’ very great power. This is a form of magic or sorcery, concocted in secrecy for the benefit of the sorcerer’s client and of course to increase the renown and wealth of the magician. Universally stigmatised as ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ the practice has nevertheless been reported widely in Africa.

The early records of this ‘medicine’ came from West Africa but it probably occurred elsewhere as well. In modern times, from the end of the twentieth century to the present, murders for the purpose of making medicine (the South African term *muti* may be used) have been reported in large numbers from

¹⁰ The term denotes a concoction, made by specialists for their clients, which is magically rather than materially effective. It is thus not medicine in a modern Western sense, which is why I use the word in inverted commas.

South Africa and from much of East Africa. The murders of albino Tanzanians for 'muti' were widely publicised in the international press. The acquisition of body parts does not always require killing. Some unfortunate victims have been left alive after limbs have been severed.

The "child sacrifices" in Uganda were killings for such magical purposes. The police reported that some corpses lacked limbs or organs. (Killing was not always necessary; in Kenya recently two men have been arrested for dealing in body parts obtained from a crematorium). But murders for body parts are not offerings to any god or spirit but killings for gain: both the client who orders and the magician/sorcerer who prepares the 'medicine' profit by the death. While the belief in the power of human body parts may be called magical thinking, as can the idea that albino body parts have greater power than normal African ones, the killing is not part of any ritual. Children and young people may be chosen as victims more often because of their purity and the potential for growth in their bodies, but their selection may be simply the more mundane one of greater ease of capture. We do not know, as everything about these 'medicine' killings is secret until the mutilated body is found. Whereas human sacrifice was performed openly and as part of rituals that were believed to benefit the community, these murders are furtive and hidden, fuelled by individual ambitions and the lust for wealth and power. They are manifestations of continuing belief in the power of magic (or sorcery if you prefer) but not of witchcraft which has never rested on material proof except the misfortunes that are, with hindsight, attributed to it. Killings for 'muti' are openly condemned by members of the communities where they take place but they are not human sacrifices or even ritual murders.

Ritual murder

If ritual murder is not human sacrifice or killing to obtain ingredients for powerful magic, what is it? The term implies a killing to obtain spiritual powers that are not recognised as morally right, but are evil and dangerous. So far from being the same as human sacrifice it is its antithesis.

It is in Western Europe that one finds this idea of ritual murder and it has a long history. In the second century AD, Christians may have despised the religion of their pagan neighbours for the blood spilt in their rituals, but much worse allegations were made against these small dissident groups within the Roman body (Rives 1995). Christians were said to worship their god in secret, performing rites in

which there were sexual orgies, often incestuous and cannibal feasts. The central act of the ritual was the killing and eating of a child or baby, perhaps stolen for the purpose. Since the early Christians were forced to conceal their gatherings, meeting in secret, the conviction that they were engaged in shameful acts seemed plausible. In AD 177 in Lyons, a number of Christians were publicly tortured and killed by the Roman authorities and these allegations played a large part in their condemnation. Some of those who died cried out denials of the accusations, proof of the role they had had in these horrible deaths.

When Christianity became the dominant religion in Europe, the idea of secret groups practising ritual murder did not disappear; Christian authorities took over the myth that had earlier been used to justify their own persecution. Like their Roman predecessors they used the accusation of ritual murder to denigrate and persecute opponents. In this case it was those divergent religious communities such as the Waldensians or the Cathars who were designated heretics and accused of it. Centuries later, in a more elaborate development of the story, ritual murder was believed to be carried out by covens of witches, gathering to worship the devil and feast on the flesh of human sacrifice.

They represented the opposite of all that was considered good and their pleasure was to do evil and ultimately to destroy society. The rituals they performed were the opposite of Christian services: they took place at night, not in the daytime and in secret locations, not in public buildings that were known and open to all; most sinister of all, the rites included practices that represented all that was believed to be against human nature: cannibalistic feasts, incest and other perversions. It was these ideas that triggered the infamous witchhunts of early modern Europe.

The picture that I have drawn was built up gradually during the centuries. The people who were accused of ritual murder, or suspected if they were not accused, were people seen as non-believers, outsiders, whose very existence threatened the fabric of society. Belief in hidden conspiracies, secret societies whose members aimed to rule the world, were rife from the eighteenth century onwards. Subsequently Jews, Freemasons, and, in twentieth century America, conspiracies of communists, were seen in a similar light, as people of evil intent, whose aim was to destroy society as it then existed. It is important to recognise the historical depth of our beliefs in a secret and conspiratorial group, the epitome of evil characterised by the ritual killing they are believed to indulge in. The depraved actions of these hidden beings are very similar to those of witches the world over: they commit incest, kill and

eat human beings and commit the most lurid crimes. This is part of a cultural definition of evil, just as beliefs in witchcraft as a manifestation of evil, are part of the world view of most Africans (see Pocock, Parkin et al *The Anthropology of Evil*.¹¹

The colonisation of Africa may have suppressed human sacrifice but it allowed for the development in Europe of the myth of ritual murder in another direction. The former existence of human sacrifice in West Africa encouraged the most sinister beliefs about African culture. Events in Africa seemed to confirm these as realistic portrayals. From the end of the nineteenth century onwards there were outcrops of serial killings in different parts of Africa that local people claimed were the work of human beings who had transformed themselves into animals, usually leopards or lions. Given the belief that occurs in many parts of Africa that witches can transform themselves into wild animals for the purpose of killing and 'eating' other human beings, an anthropologist would expect that both the killing and the eating were spiritual rather than actual. However the deaths were real and the death blows appeared to have been dealt by an animal, showing wounds apparently inflicted by teeth and claws, although sceptics claimed that these mutilations might be inflicted by special weapons designed to conceal the fact that the killer was another human being. Given the existence in Sierra Leone, where the first such cases emerged, of secret societies of witches associated with leopards it was thought that these societies might be to blame and that the killings were offerings to their secret shrines. Some witnesses claimed to have seen leopards attacking the victims, others claimed that the murderers were human beings disguised as leopards. The European colonial servants who were responsible for the areas in which these murders occurred and who shared to a greater or lesser extent existing fantasies about Africa were unable to decide whether the killings were ritual murder or not. But reports of the deaths contributed to a whole genre of literature that embedded the notion of ritual murder ever more deeply into the European imagination.¹²

Ritual murder is still murder and hence a crime. If we treat it as such, we have to consider what the evidence for it is. Over the course of history, many people have been accused of ritual murder and many have been executed for it, but the evidence for their guilt has been unsatisfactory from a modern point of view. Two kinds of evidence have been accepted as 'proof' of participation in ritual murder:

¹¹ See Parkin, D. (ed.), 1991. *The Anthropology of Evil*, Blackwell.

¹² I think it no coincidence that Lawrence Pazder, author with Michelle Smith, first his patient and later his wife, of *Michelle Remembers*, a book which had a considerable influence in generating belief about Satanic Abuse in the USA in the 1980s, had once been a missionary in Nigeria

first accusations by people who claimed to have suffered the evil attacks and/or to have seen the secret meetings or secondly confessions from the accused, in former times often extracted by torture. Checks as to whether personal malice or pre-existing quarrels were the cause of accusations seem not to have been made although the accused have often claimed that the allegations were the result of malice. Independent evidence or material evidence such as would be demanded in a prosecution today has never existed. Yet the idea persists because it represents in a dramatic form what is the ultimate in inhuman evil and by contrast emphasises what it is to be human.

At the end of the twentieth century people across the world asserted their belief in rituals that included the sacrifice of children as offerings to the devil. In the United States, Britain, Europe, Australia and New Zealand accusations were made. The rituals were said to include a modern sin, that of the sexual abuse of children, but in other respects they resembled the accusations made across early modern Europe and included allegations of human sacrifice and cannibalism. But when investigated, the evidence for the conviction that ritual murder was being perpetrated was very like that of early modern Europe: allegations, often from children, and the ‘confessions’ of adults who claimed to have been participants. There was no forensic evidence. As one journalist put it, despite modern sophisticated techniques of investigation, police found: “no bodies, no bones, no blood, nothing”.

Yet seven years after the ritual abuse panic died down, when a little boy’s mutilated body was found floating in the Thames, some of the same people who had publicised their belief in Satanism claimed it as justifying their beliefs. The Catholic Herald proclaimed: “Boy’s torso prompts new ‘Satanic abuse’ fears (March 2002). Was this the proof of ritual murder that had not been available before? It was presented as such in the media. Amazing detective work by the Metropolitan Police traced the child, referred to as Adam, first by the police and later from its use in the media, by everyone in general. Medical science showed the mutilations had been performed after death. The origin of the only garment he was wearing, shorts, were traced by their label. Forensic science indicated from the contents of his stomach where he had originally come from, Nigeria, from a village in the south-east of the country. This is all material evidence on which conclusions may be based and it can only be challenged by similar but contrary evidence.

Yet, despite the good work of the police, they could not show *why* Adam was killed and then mutilated

or who did it. Nevertheless his death continues to be cited as evidence for the existence of ritual murder. It was the fact that ‘Adam’ was found to be African turned attention to the possibility of ritual murder. According to one BBC report, (BBC News July 9th 2002 accessed April 13 2010) police were investigating whether Adam’s death “was a West African voodoo killing involving human sacrifice.” The use of the term voodoo is an example of how ignorance about a non-Christian religion can support this myth of ritual murder. Vodun is a religion that developed in the Caribbean among West African slaves, from a mixture of Catholic Christianity and the traditional beliefs preserved in memories of their homeland. Its rituals do not include human sacrifice, but the whites in the Caribbean, for reasons that were partly political, claimed it was devil worship and that evil reputation has clung to it ever since. Voodoo became a term denoting evil magic and ritual practices, even in Africa¹³

When it was discovered that the child Adam was probably brought to London from Africa, which has for centuries been subject to myths about ‘The Dark Continent’, certain people hastened to claim that it ‘proved’ the truth of satanic ritual abuse and of human sacrifice continuing to occur among the ‘uncivilised’. The general attitude has been described very nicely by David Pratten who wrote: “... Africa represented a blank space in Europe’s collective imagination and could therefore be populated by all manner of invented creatures, sometimes noble, sometimes monstrous, that were the visual and visceral products of European fears and desires” (Pratten 2007:9) Over simplistic ideas about ‘leopard societies’ and secret organisations that kill for pleasure, have influenced Christian missionaries in Nigeria and kept the idea of ritual murder alive.

While Sanders (2001) has done a good job of pointing out how the continued emphasis on the African provenance of ‘ritual murder’ has deepened existing prejudices about Africa and Africans, he stuffs all the evidence of British cultural concepts into that vast portmanteau labelled The Other. Unfortunately this neither illuminates nor analyses the ethnographic material that is thus bundled together. What I have tried to do here is to show how British concepts of evil – particularly the ideas of ritual murder and human sacrifice – emerge in the way they think about the African killings. ‘Ritual murder’ is a European representation of great evil; its historical origin has been demonstrated by historians who have demonstrated its role in generating the Christian pursuit of witches in early modern Europe. It is hardly surprising then that the present rash of accusations of witchcraft against children (which I have

¹³ Bettina Schmidt explains vodun as it is properly called. See La Fontaine, J. (ed.), 2009. *The Devil’s Children*, Ashgate.

no had time to deal with) owes as much to Christian fundamentalist missions as to 'traditional' African ideas of witchcraft. In today's Africa the Pentecostal belief in Satan's demonic servants as the source of the power of witchcraft links the two concepts firmly together into a single contemporary image of the grossest evil.

Beliefs in ritual murder and in witchcraft are similar cultural traditions and both are worthy of anthropological study and of comparison, since if it is to be anything anthropology must be comparative. While I have not attempted this yet, a brief indication of the differences and similarities between the concepts might be a fitting end to this article.

Both the idea of ritual murder and the concept of witchcraft concern activities and persons who do not, as far as we know, exist. While real people may be accused, the evidence supporting the accusations is not rationally founded or supported by hard evidence. So we are talking about ideas, not behaviour, but ideas that motivate strong reactions. The actions and the people who perform them represent evil in its most extreme forms. The actions of witches and in ritual murder include the same acts of evil: incest, sexual perversion, infanticide and cannibalism; the cannibalism fills a lust for human flesh, rather than any ritual or symbolic requirement which may surround cannibalism in societies that do undertake it. This may be what makes it so evil. In effect, these persons are inhuman and their lack of humanity may be further emphasised by attributing to them nonsensical reversals of behaviour. By opposition then, both concepts define not merely inhuman but human nature, not merely evil but the bounds of what is permissible in human society.

Both concepts also are linked to the distribution of unfortunate events although the power raised by ritual murder is not directed by individuals against their personal enemies. But neither allows for the random event, drawing everything into a framework of human (or near human) causative power. Moreover both concepts embody the possibility of social destruction whether of social life or of interpersonal relations and relate this to the power of evil, whether generated by organised groups or seen in individual malice. Evil can and may destroy the world.

Of course there are differences. In Western society evil is characterised by a group whose individual members act in concert to worship the fount of all evil, their demonic master. Witchcraft is essentially a

matter of individuals, although Western witches undertook a collective worship of Satan. While African witches may attend communal feasts, the emphasis usually lies on the debts created by the provision of the flesh, the substance of the feast that create indebtedness between provider and receiver. Hence perhaps the elaboration of differences in behaviour and appearance of witches, the unnatural human beings, that does not appear to characterise participants in ritual murder. Indeed ritual murder does not depend on the people who enact the killing being inhuman, merely evil. Ritual murder, then, brings destructive evil within the range of human possibilities.

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