

RESPONSE

Comment on the Article “Christian Pastors and Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC,” by Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo and Timothy Stabell

Edwin Zehner

A Tragic Issue—Overview of the Problem

One of the great tragedies in late 20th and early 21st century African Christianity is the abusive treatment of orphans, young children, elderly widows, and other relatively defenseless people in the name of “protection against witchcraft” (e.g., Ashforth 2005 plus the present article). This treatment is often meted out by the very church pastors and lay leaders whom the Bible urges to devote themselves to improving their church members’ social, physical, and material welfare.¹

In the present article, “Christian Pastors and Child Witches in Kinshasa, DRC,” Christian scholars Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell (2020), focus specifically on “witchcraft” accusations lodged by Christian church leaders and lay people against young children in their own Christian communities and families. In doing so they also highlight creative approaches being developed by the Congolese EPED (*Équipe Pastorale Auprès des Enfants en Détresse*, a name whose approximate English equivalent is “Pastoral Team With [or for] Children in Need”) to “protect” these children, to reinsert them into their families and communities, and to reshape the general patterns of behavior surrounding witchcraft accusations, especially the “divination of witchcraft bearers” carried

out by so many Christian leaders in the Kinshasa, DRC, area.

The first half of the article describes background issues and then provides detailed quantitative data and analysis on the prevalence of certain practices and beliefs in the Kinshasa, DRC, churches’ approaches to and understandings/perceptions of children perceived to be “witches” (a term whose *practical* meaning is “people who are perceived to project supernatural threats to those around them simply because of who they are”).²

The second half of the article focuses again on solutions, and then again on larger implications. For me, the most interesting parts of this section are the first two sections of chapter four, which use some creative qualitative ethnographic techniques to highlight and analyze the measures used by EPED and perhaps some other Christian faith-based organizations to redress the problem. Using a combination of interviews, first person oral accounts, and careful analyses conducted in discussion with EPED personnel, this section teases out from the authors’ observations a set of measures keenly calibrated to the local situation in such ways that they might be able to spark continent-wide “protective care” measures, even while side-stepping (deliberately) the question as to whether witches actually exist.

This side-stepping is essential, because, as the paper demonstrates, attempts to deny that child witches exist

¹ Examples of these instructions include Leviticus 18: 21—“Do not pass your children through the fire . . .”; Mt. 18:12-14 & Lk 15:3-7—The Parable of the Lost Sheep; Mt. 19: 14—“Suffer the Little Children to Come Unto Me”; Mt. 20:26 & Mk. 10:48—“He who wishes to be great among you must be as one who serves”; Acts 6—the early church ensuring ethnically equal treatment of widows in the distribution of food; 2 Corinthians 11: 7-9—Paul preaching to the Corinthians free of charge; 2 Corinthians 12:14-15—Paul’s personal example to the Corinthians; Galatians 6:10—Paul: “Let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers”; Ephesians 5:18-20—Do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns and songs . . . ; Philippians 2: 1-11—Be humble before each other; and more.

² Note the parallels to the 1937 findings of noted British Christian anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard, who wrote that the Azande, among whom he did extensive fieldwork, “believe that witchcraft is a *substance in the body* of witches” (1937, 21, emphasis mine). Thus, in his case, as in the case of the DRC churches, there was no magic performed, merely a suspicion that the churches and their communities were in constant danger from supernatural forces channeled in and through these children.

could threaten the ministry's local and continent-wide effectiveness. Therefore, instead of trying to start from a "supposed central world view" and work "out to practice," as some analysts might do, the EPED goes straight to the individual practices and to the specific personal mindsets that sustain them. The accusations posed against specific child witches are almost random and highly idiosyncratic in their approach, and often "circular" in their diagnostic reasoning. Consequently, by encouraging practitioners to back away from the "certainty" of particular diagnoses, EPED practitioners are sometimes able to make substantial progress against the entire child accusation syndrome, reinserting ostracized children ("suspected witches") into their families, churches, and communities, and sometimes also "shifting" the overall "default approach" of key ministers and family members in the course of what Americans might call "the recovery and reconciliation process."³

These activities are tremendously important in pointing ways to better futures for these children and their families. Therefore I was pleased that the quantitative portion of the article included a measure (Table 3.3.c) attempting to assess how widespread these and other "child protective" activities were in DRC churches. The reported incidences were fairly low, and indeed, I am not sure if these are the most useful categories to use (I suspect the survey's creators are equally uncertain), but the fact that there is any faith-based child protective activity at all in this area provides hope for the future.

If there were opportunities for a new round of research, I would personally like to see someone take the results of the 2017 qualitative follow-up study and use those details to construct new study categories, thereby resulting in a more finely-tuned follow-up survey than the original one was. I strongly suspect that if the researchers (or other readers) were to take the more detailed understandings developed in 2017 and apply them to the development of a new "child ministry" survey instrument, I suspect the information gained would be more finely detailed, and the instrument itself could be "instructional" and perhaps mildly influential even among those congregations that fail to return the entire survey.

The reasons why I think this is so is because many of the approaches used by EPED are probably "new" to most Christian practitioners in Africa (locals and

foreigners alike), and an "indirect instructional approach" like theirs, supplemented in the form of a gently worded and often "indirectly worded" survey could achieve long-term results of a type that formal seminars struggle to achieve, because when engaging with surveys, people's defenses are down, they are less influenced by "concerns about how their face and eyes" look in front of others, and, ideally, the survey taker would also have time for individual introspection and study (Note: These suggestions come primarily from my interactions with Southeast Asians; however my recent encounters with the growing communities of African Christians in Thailand suggest that some of these interactional and cognitive issues may be similar in the two regions).

Academic Value and General Analysis

Moving to the article's academic value, I find it very informative and well researched. There is much to learn, even for those of us who had thought we knew the relevant literatures (see Zehner 2013a and 2013b for some of my own explorations). For example, only in the present article did it become clear to me that contemporary accusations of so-called "child witches" are in many ways "entirely new" (my phrase), even if they are built on "cultural building blocks" that suggest a "hybrid origin."⁴ Though there may have been prior local systems of belief in "supernatural forms of danger," the precise belief and practice patterns encountered in this article draw *both* on prior African belief systems (though often with important changes from the past) *and* on recent North American and African "deliverance ministries," "prosperity gospel ministries," and possibly also "faith healing ministries."

Now, on the face of it, in line with both biblical and logical principles, these accused African child witches *should* almost automatically be ruled "innocent" by the churches, and, in practice, it is the pastors and other self-appointed diviners who should be banned from holding power in the churches. Almost all of the divination techniques described in the article are explicitly "banned" in the Bible. They also lack verification from mature third parties as required in scripture (see Deut. 19:15, 1 Cor. 14:29, and 2 Cor. 13:1). Others simply have no Biblical precedent to build on, being built instead on "vernacular every day practices" whose precise sources we do not know.⁵

³ I cannot tell if EPED has a term for this, so I am making one up that I hope will help North American readers relate positively to EPED's processes.

⁴ I thank Robert Priest for drawing my attention to the article's "hybridity" and "cultural building blocks" themes.

⁵ The term "vernacular practice" is derived from Knauft's seminal work (2002; vii-viii) on "vernacular modernities" and related terms and concepts; these are more commonly known as "alternative modernities," but the value of Knauft's phrase is that it emphasizes

According to the present article, in Kinshasa, DRC, and apparently also in other parts of Africa, the present-day practice of accusations, suspicions, divinations, and “punishments” of orphans, stepchildren, biological children, and other families’ children, is a set of institutionalized (yet highly variable) practices in which the assumption of a prior training in witchcraft or sorcery techniques has almost entirely dropped out of the equation (if indeed it had ever existed for the case of potential child witches). This “lack of an appeal to magical technologies” makes the current system of accusations even more pernicious, because instead of an appeal to independently discoverable (and perhaps verifiable) magical techniques and objects, and instead of using the collective prophetic evaluation techniques required in 1 Corinthians 14, everything seems left to a single diviner or two.

Consequently, the “divinatory discovery” of specific child witches involves an almost “circular” and “random” series of free-floating interpretations of the diviners’ (i.e., pastors’, self-appointed prophets’, etc.) own impressions and/or dreams, “signs” visible to some but not to others, and “impressions” that the accuser receives but to which others are impervious (see relevant sections of the present article). These are then used to construct a series of accusations and (usually abusive) “proof-tests” that prove equally circular in their logic but apparently “convincing” in their social and rhetorical impact.

While noting that the above practices are problematic, I believe we must also take into account the sheer terror that must drive the thoughts and hearts of many of the Congolese who become involved in these activities—both for the pastors and for the parents and for the neighbors. One rarely sees this psychological angst fully discussed in the relevant literatures (and the present paper also does not discuss it, though I am not complaining), but an intriguing and important additional aspect of this story could well be just how *scared* people are when they perform exorcisms or divinations or even think of driving out a witch. This is a set of issues that might be explored further by drawing on the examples of the psychological anthropological works of Tanya Luhmann and Julia Cassaniti as they explore such things as American Pentecostal prayer, Thai Buddhist spirit beliefs, and (most recently) perceptions of spirits and mediums.

If I am right in suspecting that there may be serious personal fear and tension in the prosecution of witchcraft accusations, then the opening to receive back a “reinserted child” must truly be an act of faith—either faith in God’s almighty power, or else faith in the

methods and recognitions encouraged by the EPED workers. Possibly both. As I reflected on this, I found myself wondering what the father in chapter four was thinking and feeling when he was on the verge of accepting his son back? What was going through his mind and nervous system as he was on the verge of re-decision? And what reconsiderations led him to be such an adamant and fearless opponent of the next accusation he heard. These may *look* like “a series of small victories,” but I suspect that collectively the stories retold in this article show evidence of much deeper—and much more genuine—reserves of faith in God than Congolese and Liberians and Ghanaians are often given credit for by outsiders. And I suspect that it is because of these reserves of faith that EPED practitioners are able to gain access to their clients at all. I wish them continued success.

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that these processes of recent change have been “low to the ground” and rooted in the same sorts of interactions that might be involved in an “informal set of conversations” (my phrase).



Dr. Edwin Zehner (Ph.D. Anthropology, Cornell University, USA) has been a Thailand specialist since his first visit in 1980. His first reference to 19th century “witch” accusations in northern Thailand came in an article published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies (JSEAS)* in 1996. He has been working comparatively on the issue (Thailand, Java, south and Central Africa, Papua New Guinea, etc.) since at least the early 2010s. He has teaching experience (graduate and undergraduate levels) in both Thai and North American universities. His scholarly writing has appeared in *JSEAS*, *Social Compass*, *Anthropological Quarterly*, *Culture and Religion*, *International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, and more.

Author email: ezehner1@gmail.com
