
Thought Short Report

Themes in Spirit Possession in Ugandan Christianity

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Abstract - Spirit possession and the belief in witches and their curses is common in Uganda. This paper discerns a number of common themes that run through many of these experiences. In particular, sex as a motif for deviance and evil is noted as a common feature of many of the possession stories and all contact with spirits is seen as fundamentally dangerous. There is also some commonality in the content of some stories recounted by interviewees. This paper compares the observations and interviews conducted in Uganda and their common themes with Eni's book *Saved from the Powers of Darkness*, with Ugandan cultural traditions and Ugandan experiences of terrorism to probe the origins of their conceptualisations. Through these comparisons it is possible to note Nigerian influence in at least some Ugandan expressions of the experience of spirit possession. However, Ugandan, rather than Nigerian, traditions and experiences are probably more important overall. Besides the traditions that are noted as influences on the way in which spirit possessions are expressed and experienced, the possibility for the breaking of witches' curses being a cohesive of community activity is noted, as is a connection between the casting out of spirits and the resolve (or at least desire) to live a better, morally reformed, life in accordance with what is being preached in a church. This paper notes evidence that supports Horton's suggestion that spirit possession is the theorisation of the world in order to understand and affect it.

Key words: Spirit Possession; Witchcraft; Deliverance; Pentecostalism; Uganda

Introduction

This paper records observations and interviews made in Uganda about spirit possession and witchcraft. It demonstrates some common themes that occur in the possessions and explores possible origins of these themes. It also considers how the experience of possession and the beliefs about witchcraft help the individuals and communities concerned. The fieldwork in Uganda that is recorded in this article was carried out as part of other research completed in 2011. However, the main research went in a different direction, and did not include these observations. The interviews were conducted in Kampala and in two other small village locations in southern Uganda, although some of the participants came from the north of the country. Some interviews took place in what may be described as a 'formal' setting, such as the office of a priest who was interviewed. However, most took place informally and were not set up as interviews, although the participants were fully aware that they were contributing to this project. These interviews took place after church services or ad-hoc as a continuation of an informal conversation started, for example, on a bus. The observations and interviews will be recorded in two sections of observations that record the outline of stories from interviewees and of observations of Christianity that are representative of a wider collection of such observations. The first section is on witchcraft, the second on spirits, healing and deliverance. Then these sections will be compared to Ugandan culture and experience and to a popular account of such experiences in a discussion of the common themes that can be seen in the observations.

Witchcraft

In Uganda and much of Africa, Witchcraft, *eddogo* in Ganda, is more-or-less universally accepted as a fact of life and it is viewed as being fundamentally evil. All over Africa, witches (singular *omulogo*, plural *abalgo*) are blamed for all sorts of misfortune, from losing a job to contracting HIV, often no matter how culpable an individual is for their own circumstances. (Rodlach 2006.) Although when in conversation with individuals I never mentioned witches first, interviewees often talked about them. Often they had had an experience they clearly attributed to witches or suspected that some misfortune had probably been caused by them.

Alan, an undergraduate at Makerere University, Kampala, related how his life had been plagued by a witch. He had moved into student accommodation with several other students whom he had not known before. One of them had said “nothing – not one word” for two weeks when they had moved in and then, without warning had recounted “everything about my family; how many brothers and sisters I had, their names, what they did – everything.” This student had then told Alan that he could also have these powers. Alan replied that he did not want to have Satanic powers and that the other student was clearly practicing witchcraft. Alan’s fellow student said nothing more, but had a “string of girls” who visited his bedroom. One evening, two weeks after the initial conversation, Alan saw the witch floating outside his bedroom window. He prayed to Jesus for strength and the witch went away. Alan went to the university authorities to report this, but was ignored. He managed to find another place to live. Whatever Alan experienced, he was quite sure that he was faithfully recounting it, no matter how odd this story may sound. Alan actually seemed aware of how odd such a story might sound to someone from outside Africa and afterwards added that he thought some churches made up stories of witchcraft and healing to boost numbers. Nevertheless, he was adamant about what he had experienced.

Witches are not always seen though, and the identity of a witch is not always known. In a village about three hours’ drive from Kampala, a farmer had an ill cow. I travelled to the village with a vet who was going that way for an entirely different reason, but who had a look at the cow whilst he was there. He diagnosed a common problem and told the farmer what he should do about it. Then, an interesting dual solution was played out. The farmer complied with what the vet had suggested, but several of the other villagers, including a gentleman named George went to the village church and prayed for the bewitchment to be overcome. The cow recovered in a few days and the villagers were convinced that this was because the witches’ “curse” (*ekikolimo*) had “been broken”, as George put it. The acceptance of the dual solution by the villagers is important in dispelling a corrosive myth of rural African credulity. These African villagers were happy to hold both explanations together, both taking the vet’s advice and also expressing the situation in traditional terms. It is not a question of them ‘believing’ one over and above the other; both were relevant.

It was apparent that the village (at least a good proportion of it) coming together to pray with George for the farmer's cow's recovery was a cohesive, community building event. Quite simply, participation in healing one another's problems brought the community together, serving a purpose no matter what anyone else thought about the efficacy of their prayer. We will return to other dual solutions and effects later in this paper.

Witchcraft is not just something experienced by (possibly vulnerable) young people when they move to unfamiliar surroundings, although this may be a factor in Alan's experience. It is part of the fabric of daily life, providing explanation of everyday misfortunes, such as ill cattle. In several of the observations in the next section, witches were mentioned as a possible root cause for the misfortune primarily attributed to spirit attack.

Spirits, Healing and Deliverance

Spirits are seen as quasi-physical in as much as they can possess physical objects and humans, with malevolent intent. Casting out such spirits is sometimes known as "exorcism" but is usually known as "deliverance" in the large Pentecostal churches in Kampala, where the English word is used rather than a Ganda equivalent. Although not directly the topic of this paper, it is worth noting that this use of the English word is probably indicative of the close connections (at least theologically) between Pentecostal churches in Uganda and those of the developed world. (For use of the term "deliverance" by non-African Pentecostals when talking with Africans, see Heuser 2009 and Gifford 1987: 65.)

Simon, a school teacher, described the story of a 22 year old woman he knew from Gulu. The woman had received the traditional cut marks for her family gods when she was very young. This, Simon said, was the time that evil spirits had first entered her. Then, when she was 16, Satan had appeared to her in a dream. He instructed her to carve 666 into her arm and that if she did so, he would help her in her life. She did as he told her and "the next day she [was given] the job she wanted." Satan gave her a "magic ring that would let her visit him under the water in Lake Victoria." She made a visit to

him and was given an “army of 2000 demons and told to go and kill this preacher.” She “dressed very sexily” to try to get near to him without him becoming suspicious. On way to carry out her mission, she heard a woman praying and “heard the name ‘Jesus,’” at which all the demons fell down and died. She began running back to the lake to get to Satan when a passing man “shouted at her to get saved and then prayed for her.” When she reached the lake, she put on the ring so that she could go under the waters, but it failed to work. She began running around the lake shore when she bumped into the preacher she had been intending to kill. He prayed for her and then “she prayed herself, against Satan, ‘in the name of Jesus, you have no power over me!’” With that, she came to her senses and her “link with Satan was broken.”

Another very similar story was recounted by Constance, about a female friend of hers. Her friend had also had “problems with spirits” from a very early age and she too had met with Satan “on the shore of Lake Victoria” and been ordered to “kill a minister.” Satan had given Constance’s friend an “army of 6000 spirits.” Her friend had also “put on a really short skirt and looked very sexy – all to trap the minister.” However, when the minister saw her friend coming, he was a man of “great spiritual power” and could “see the demons” (“demons” here being used interchangeably with “Spirits”) so he knew what to expect. Before she reached him he “prayed in Jesus’ name” and the spirits “were all killed.” Constance’s friend then ran away and went back to Satan. She told Satan what had happened when the word “Jesus” had been used. At the mention of this name, Satan fell down and this happened another seven times as he tried to stand up. Satan then “tried to kill her for failing to kill the minister and for saying the name ‘Jesus’” but the minister himself had followed her and arrived at that moment. Together they prayed against Satan “in the name of Jesus you have no power over me” and he vanished.

We will return to the similarities in the above stories later, but first we will look at a few other examples. Live on air one afternoon, a radio presenter on a Kampala station recounted his own experience from possession to conversion to Christianity. This particular gentleman used to be a strip club owner, “so I was already a sinner and close to Satan” as he said. One day, Satan appeared to him and offered him “all sorts of powers” in exchange for “having sex with my mother.” He refused to do this and so he was told that he could just kill his mother instead. Once again, he refused to do this and

was given one last chance to acquire “the powers” if he had “sex with a snake.” He did this and as he had sex with the snake “a spirit called Shadow entered me.” He changed his name to Shadow and “slept with eight women a day” until he was “taken ill.” This may be a reference to HIV, but this was not explicitly stated. He almost died of his illness, but as he was lying in bed, he saw a TV evangelist who said “this is your last chance, come to Jesus now, or die.” He “felt convicted” and accepted Christ there and then. He then struggled to a pastor who prayed for him and Shadow came out. He was healed and since that time has been a regular church-goer and has steadily worked his way up to being a presenter on the radio.

The Kampala Miracle Centre Cathedral (KMCC) is one place where spirits are regularly cast out. KMCC can, and regularly does, hold 10,000 people. When I visited the church the atmosphere in the church was febrile with excitement and expectation, to the extent that approximately 18 shouts of “Amen” punctuated an announcement that preceded the service to be careful on the slippery floor. The service opened with about half an hour of praise songs. Over this period of time, worshippers appeared to become more and more ecstatic, and by the time about twenty minutes had elapsed, virtually all had both arms spread apart above their heads and appeared in a trance-like state. Then, about twenty-five minutes in, the music changed, beginning to slow and quieten. As it did so, the songs of the worshippers gave way to verbalised praises – sometimes in English, sometimes in Ganda and sometimes using glossolalia. After some minutes, this was brought to a conclusion by the pastor with a prayer of praise to Jesus. Then began an equally long sermon. The pastor made two points, many times. First, the subject matter was focused on carrying out hard work to achieve the worshippers’ goals in this life, for the glory of God. This work might be aimed at getting a job or doing well in studies. This was all solid, socially improving teaching. Second, the pastor was adamant that a “prayerless believer is a powerless believer” and encouraged the congregation to pray for themselves and for one another in overcoming their difficulties in life. The pastor was a charismatic public speaker - towards the end of the sermon, almost everyone in the church was on their feet and beginning to pray out loud. As this happened, the pastor said less and less and let the prayer take place. Small groups began to form around the church and one formed on the dais at the front. Individuals within these groups were prayed for.

Sometimes, the prayer was simply a request for guidance, such as could be found in any Anglican or Roman Catholic church around the world. Sometimes though, it was a much more forceful event. On the dais, this was especially true. Here, two people were kneeling in front of the pastor and a group of other worshippers and with much screaming from one of the two, both had spirits cast out of them. The pastor later told the congregation that they had both had spirits in them that were “not letting them work,” the subject of the socially important part of his sermon. After this prayer time, more music concluded the service in an informal way.

One of the KMCC members described the process of how she was “delivered” from a different type of spirit for me. Mary was 19, but for the previous six years had been suffering from a constant nagging pain in her bowels. At the beginning, it had been a minor problem and, in keeping with her family’s traditions, she had visited a “traditional shrine” to acquire “a charm to take the pain away.” Mary’s family were Anglicans, but still went to traditional shrines for healing. The charm was a small piece of card “with strange writing on it” and it “worked for a while, but the pain came back.” When Mary moved to Kampala at the age of 17, she attended the local Church of Uganda church and made friends with other young people at the church who also went to KMCC. They suggested that she go with them and see if the pastor could deliver her from her pain. She went to a deliverance service and the pastor cast out a “bad spirit that made pain.” After the service, as the pastor had instructed her to do, she burnt the charm and “the power of the devil was broken.” She had been pain-free for two years, and continued attending church twice on a Sunday, once at a Church of Uganda church and once at KMCC.

Spirits are used as the theoretical explanation for many actual and perceived problems in Uganda. One that is particularly worth noting is the class of spirits associated with perceived sexual depravity. Michael, a Church of Uganda clergyman, said that people could be cured of “gayness”. The problem, he said, was that a spirit was lodged in their bodies and that the spirit needed to be cast out. He said that people knew, “deep inside themselves.... being gay is not a good thing to be” and that if they came to the church, his or another, they could ask for the spirit to be cast out. He added that

people had a choice of whether or not to come and seek healing. Whilst talking to Michael in his office, it was interesting to notice the eclectic nature of the books he owned. He had some books on biblical interpretation, including some published by Cambridge University Press and Sheffield Academic Press. Alongside these he had books about the dangers of Spirits – *The Occult Explosion*, *African Traditional Religions in Biblical Perspective* and the like. This seemed to show a constant pattern of belief, that spirits are evil and represent a danger to the ordered will of God in the world. When asked about the book on traditional religion, he became very animated and said “tribal teachings are abominable” and that “initiation orgies” in such belief systems were the point at which spirits often entered people. Such religious practices were “satanic and should be broken.” For Michael, spirits are a real and active part of the world, are controlled by Satan and need to be removed from anyone they infest. One of the interesting things about Michael is that he is a clergyman, and although his Sunday services are not Pentecostalised, he does carry out “deliverance... with three or four [other people] who know Jesus... at [the possessed person’s] house or privately here, in church.” This was also confirmed by another priest – he also carried out deliverance for individuals, but was unwilling to discuss this further. Nevertheless, deliverance is available *via* the Church of Uganda, albeit in generally somewhat more private settings than that in KMCC and other Pentecostal churches.

Discussion: Common Themes from the Observations

There are a number of common themes from the observations outlined above. First, we will look at similarities between some of the accounts and a book written in the late 1980s. Second, we will examine the recurrence of sexual motifs. Third, we will examine a connection with the Lord’s Resistance Army and lastly use Robin Horton’s theoretical ideas to note a driving factor within every single story of spirit possession and witchcraft.

In 1987, Emmanuel Eni published a book called *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness*; it is his own spiritual autobiography. I was in a bookshop in Kampala when a student from Makerere came in and bought five copies for the Christian study group that she ran at the university. Such a book was clearly worth buying – it was still being used by students twenty years after it was first written. There were, at the time, twenty-

four copies of the book in the shop and the proprietor confidently assured me that he would need to order more “within a few weeks.” What is interesting about the book is that it describes the story of the possession of one person living in Lagos, Nigeria, by Satan and other spirits in a remarkably similar way to how several experiences that are recounted in this paper were described by the interviewees. Eni recounts how he was told to kill various members of his family (Eni 1987: 20) and that later he was appointed to a position of responsibility by Lucifer with a mission of corrupting ministers and if this did not work, killing them (Eni 1987: 30). At one of the climactic moments of the book, Christians attempt to cast the “demon” out of Eni, but fail. He describes how, on hearing the name “Jesus,” he “heard a big bang inside me and fell to the floor.” (Eni 1987: 35) He also describes running around the room, running because of another “power” that was present – Jesus. (Eni 1987: 35) In addition to the descriptions of his purpose on Earth whilst possessed and experiences of deliverance ministry, he also describes how he met Satan in person (Eni 1987: 21f.) and went under the sea to meet with another evil character, the Queen of the Coast with the aid of a “belt,” (Eni 1987: 16f) analogous to the ring in Simon’s story, above.

Sexual motifs also appear in Eni’s book and in our observations. One of the ways Eni tries to entrap pastors is by transforming himself into a woman and trying to have sex with them. (Eni 1987: 30) He also has sex with spirits on several occasions, thereby entering into a covenant with the spirit world. (Eni 1987, Chapter 2.) Sex is an important motif in our observations. For Alan, having a “string of girls” was clearly an indication of the malevolence of the person he thought was a witch. For the radio presenter, sex was the way in which an evil spirit entered his body. For Simon and for Constance, attractiveness and seduction are seen as essentially evil. All of this, from both male and female contributors was assumed with no critique. It is simply that the overriding assumption seems to be that sex, except in strictly delimited situations, is evil. *Ipsa facto*, it is used by the evil spirit world.

Besides likely connections between the way in which Eni tells his story and the Ugandan stories we have described above, connections can also be made with Ugandan traditional religion. One class of powerful spiritual beings lived under the waters of Lake Victoria. (Kasozi 1981: 126f and Ward 1991: 81.) It seems obvious that the focus on the lake has echoes of this earlier spirituality, but whereas the spirits of the lake were once venerated as well as feared, now they are fought and feared.

Other local issues also have an impact on the Ugandan expression of spirit possession, maybe more ubiquitously than Eni's book. The terrorist group the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that aims to overthrow the Ugandan government and exercises extremely brutal terror attacks on civilians believes that armies of spirits assist it in its murderous mission (Behrend 1995 and Ward 2001). It seems no coincidence that two of the stories spoke about armies of spirits – in addition to which, Gulu, where one of the stories originated, is a town that has been in the middle of LRA violence. Moreover, the beliefs of the LRA are well known all over Uganda; it is impossible not to meet someone begging on the city streets who is a refugee from the conflict. A short conversation with any of them is enough to catch as much of a glimpse of what they have experienced as anyone would want but also, usually, it is obvious that they have some basic understanding of what the LRA believe. This is not to say that the LRA's beliefs about armies of spirits are necessarily causative of accounts of spiritual experiences that include such armies. Nevertheless, armies of spirits are known about across Uganda; they are just part of the fabric of belief, part of the background. It is not surprising that they surface in stories that give expression to people's spiritual experiences.

Constance, Mary and Simon had all heard of Eni's book and had all either read it or been present at discussions of its contents, so it is maybe unsurprising that their stories include echoes both of traditional religion and of Eni. The suggestion that follows from the observations about the similarities between the description of some Ugandan experiences and Eni's book is that this 1980s Nigerian expression of the spirit possession tradition has had an impact on the expression given to the experience of spirit possession in at least part of modern Uganda. However, although Eni's book may be causative in terms of some of the detail described in our Ugandan stories, it is likely that sexual *mores* and attitudes to sex are merely supported by Eni's work. It is unlikely to be causative of this attitude as such. It is likely that both stories from this book and other stories that are passed on in discussions (such as the memory of spirits living Lake Victoria or tales of armies of spirits) shape the expression of individual experiences so that similar themes recur.

There is one thing that all of our observations have in common. Contact with spirits, whether through one's own volition or whether through the malevolence of a witch, is fundamentally dangerous. It is physically and spiritually dangerous and also (if through one's own volition) evil. This came into sharp relief at the KMCC service. For example, a good way of living was presented in the sermon at KMCC, juxtaposed with the attempt of the worshippers to rid themselves of the spirits that stopped them living in this way. There is an argument to say that whatever the 'average westerner' thinks of the idea of casting out spirits, the service still served a good purpose. It encouraged people to set their lives on a good course and if the activity of casting out spirits enables this, maybe by making the message concrete, so much the better. Horton makes the point that talk of spirits in African religion is usually about adding a theoretical level of experience to a concrete experience in the physical world in order to process and address the physical-world experience in the physical world. (Horton 1993: 197-221.) Certainly in all the instances we have seen here, the morally repugnant (at least as viewed by the interviewees or those observed in the church service) is abstracted into the realm of the Spirits. This is sometimes very clear, in the case of perceived sexual deviancy for example. It is arguably the case even with joblessness. Although unemployment is not immoral *per se*, the point that could have been taken from the Pastor's sermon at KMCC was that it is morally unacceptable not to at least try as hard as you can to find employment. It is not that the lady who had bowel pains from which she was delivered was doing anything immoral, but here too it seems likely that the spiritual theorising of her problems put her in the right frame of mind to overcome her problem. This is another point made by Horton in this context – medicine works best if mental health is good and sometimes good mental health, including being given respect and being taken seriously, is all that is required. (Horton 1993: 200-7.) The same is true of the farmer, his cow and the reaction of some of the other villagers. In addressing the matter spiritually, the villagers were all showing their solidarity with the farmer, providing some sort of solution, even if the cow died. The theorisation of the situation at the level of the spiritual provides a societal solution. It is no wonder that such Pentecostal Christianity is blossoming in Africa for, in Horton's phrase, the "explanation, prediction and control" of the universe offered by traditional religion *via* the spirits is to be found here too. (Horton 1993, 5f.)

Conclusion

Spirit possessions in Uganda have a number of key themes that run through them. They will often be concerned with or reference sex and sexual deviance, at least sexual deviance as conceptualised by the one experiencing or recounting the possession. They will often also have other moral or social problems (such as joblessness) associated with them, or as the main concern of the possession.

Stories of spirit possessions also reflect the cultural *milieu* of Uganda, with echoes of the horrors of the LRA, of traditional religion and of the popular work *Saved from the Powers of Darkness* being present in some of these stories. It could be that all of these echoes are in truth more firmly related to traditional religion than to the book or the LRA, although Eni's work is so similar to some stories that it must have had an impact on at least the way the stories are told. More research is needed in order to establish precisely the origin of these particular conceptualisations. In the case of a witches' curse, we observed villagers holding dual explanations, dual world-views, together, using both to produce an answer to their particular situation. Overall, these stories of witches' curses and of the spirits provide a rich theoretical framework within which Ugandan Christians can theorise their world, abstracting issues in order to address them as best they can with often limited resources. Whether it is 'factually correct' or 'scientifically correct' to state that a curse has been broken or a spirit cast out is not the point. The point is that these things are (usually) useful to those who practice them, either from a personal point of view or from a societal-moral point of view.

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