

Children accused of witchcraft in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)

Between structural and symbolic violence

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ABSTRACT: In this paper I consider the phenomenon of the “child-witches” in Lubumbashi (Katanga, DRC) as the result of the intertwine of two dynamics: the accusation of children within the sphere of the family and the large number of street children in Congolese cities. On the one hand, witchcraft accusations within the family tend to work in two ways: as a mode of children’s subjugation, exerted especially by pastors in neopentecostal churches; and as a “pragmatic of uncertainty” that allow Congolese families to deal with uncertainties of life, such as sickness, suffering, marital problems, failure, and death. On the other hand, children in the streets of Lubumbashi suggest a witchcraft discourse linked to the symbolic violence that should be read in terms of boundaries, margins, and liminality: street children are associated with witches because they have transgressed basic social norms and they live out of the ordinary social networks (kinship, family, school). In this vein, I propose an ethnographic approach which takes into account the multiform feature of the “child-witches” highlighting the importance of the everyday practices and ordinary objects in family ties definition and witchcraft accusations.

KEYWORDS: WITCHCRAFT, CHILDHOOD, STREET CHILDREN, VIOLENCE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO.

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Children accused of witchcraft in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Between structural and symbolic violence

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Introduction

In this paper, I consider the phenomenon of the “child-witches” (*enfants-sorciers*) in Lubumbashi (Katanga, DRC) as a result of the intertwinement of two socio-cultural dynamics: the structural violence of the families’ daily life within which the accusations of children occur, and the symbolic violence exerted upon the street children who are identified as witchlike individuals¹. In this vein, witchcraft accusations are, on the one hand, the consequence of an increasing structural violence characterizing the children’s living conditions within the sphere of their family; on the other hand, the transgression of the social norms by the *sheges*² provokes in the mind of Lubumbashi’s dwellers an identification of street children with witchcraft.

The data presented in this document comes mostly from socio-anthropological fieldwork carried out in Katanga between 2010 and 2017. The most significant sources of information in the research survey were the Salesian centres for street children, the Bakanja Ville and Bakanja Centre, one revivalist church, and the Congolese families I visited on a regular basis.

The child-witches issue rose up strongly first as a humanitarian and mass-media phenomenon in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s. At the turn of the new millennium, local and international press stressed the violence perpetrated on children in the revivalist churches and on violent events involving street children³. Put under the spotlight, children seemed to become new targets of a contemporary Congolese witch craze. Along with the media attention NGOs, and more broadly the humanitarian field, took the issue of the children accused of witchcraft as severe human rights violation (Aguilar Molina 2005; Human Rights Watch 2006; Cimpric 2010; Hanson, Ruggiero 2013).

In the academic literature, the term “child-witches” is not new. Robert Brain (1970) first used it in a paper published in Mary Douglas’s edited volume *Witchcraft, confessions & accusations* (Douglas 1970). Witchcraft accusations against children are also the subject of Peter Geschiere’s “Child Witches Against the Authority of their Elders: Anthropology and History in the Analysis of Witchcraft Beliefs of the Maka (Southeastern Cameroon)”, an article written in the 1970s, that speaks about the rise of a “new form of

1. I wish to thank *Anuac*’s anonymous reviewers for their inspiring comments and constructive criticisms.

2. Local name for street children.

3. See for instance MONUC, “Attaques perpétrées sur les enfants de la rue à Mbuji-Mayi 20-25 Septembre 2004”, Avril 2005, www.refworld.org/docid/46caab050.html, accessed on 01/12/2019.

witchcraft”, called the *mbati* in the Maka language (south-east Cameroon). In the Maka’s villages, which were studied by Geschiere, more and more often adolescents were accused of witchcraft because they rebelled against the authority of their elders (Geschiere 1980).

More recently, Filip De Boeck has reconsidered children accused of witchcraft in the Congo as a specific research topic (De Boeck 2000, 2005, 2009; De Boeck, Plissart 2013). Within the framework of this text, I would like to briefly recall the three main ideas of De Boeck’s analysis of the child-witch: first of all, Congolese society is experiencing a crisis of “the logic of the gift” and of reciprocity, which has led to the juxtaposition of two terms that in the past would not be associated with one another (i.e. childhood and witchcraft). Secondly, revivalist churches play an important role in spreading the discourse on witchcraft in the public and private spheres and in leveling witchcraft accusations against children. Revivalist churches are social fields where the link between childhood and witchcraft can more easily be made. Thirdly, children are today more likely to be accused of witchcraft than in the past because of the paradoxical position they occupy in the Congolese society. At one and the same time, they represent a burden for their family, and they represent the future of their society. Thus, children and adolescents are at the edges of both social inclusion and social exclusion.

Following the research path opened up by De Boeck, this paper proposes a preliminary attempt to split the phenomenon of the child-witches into two fundamental dynamics: the social stigmatization of the *shege* associated with witchcraft, and children accused of witchcraft at home. The goal is to disaggregate the “child-witch” representation in order to avoid casting it in a generic “African occult” (Ranger 2007).

To distinguish these two case studies, which seem to be a continuum of verbal and physical violence on the ground, is analytically valuable for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, the two figures are, evidently, linked to the idea of the “occult” and of the “esoteric” inherent in witchcraft. Yet they do not refer only to those ideas. Once separated, they show that accusations of child witchcraft have less to do with an imaginary view of witchcraft and much more to do with the social functioning, disintegration and reformulation of family relations and solidarity. The close, causal connection between witchcraft accusations and the crisis of the logic of the gift has been demonstrated also by other ethnographic studies. These latter have shown that one of the causes that provoke an accusation of witchcraft against a child is the breakdown of family ties and, more generally, the weakening of neighborhood solidarity in urban areas. As reported by children’s testimonies in an article by Kahola-Tabu (2014), who interviewed street

children in Lubumbashi, difficulties in recomposing family ties, for example after a divorce or a second marriage, affect more often subjects in a position of dependence, such as children. Children are therefore more easily at the center of dynamics of scission and exclusion from the core of a recomposed family. Secondly, to split analytically the phenomenon of the “child-witches” allows to untangle the hank of intricate dynamics and to observe more closely the relationships of power and abuse that underlie the stigmatization of street children and the accusations leveled at children at home.

Street children and witchcraft’s symbolic violence

From the beginning of my fieldwork in Lubumbashi, witchcraft discourse used by people when they spoke about street children suggested to me a symbolic violence arising from an individual transgression of the social norms. This makes me reconsider classical ideas in the structural anthropology of margins (Douglas 2001) and liminality (Turner 1991). Street children are in fact associated with witches, even though not openly accused, because of their modes of living. To live in the street, or in the Salesians shelters, put children out of the ordinary social networks such as kinship, family, the church and the school. These latter are places where the Christian and urban image of childhood has been (and still is nowadays) performed and recognized. In contrast to this idea of childhood, the link between childhood and witchcraft does not sound that absurd to Lubumbashi’s inhabitants when applied to street children. It should be noted that, in the case of the *shege*, the match between these two semantic fields (childhood and witchcraft) does not happen necessarily in the revivalist churches. Instead, this is rather the consequence of a widespread witchcraft idiom that helps to link social marginality with greedy individuals. Children living alone, out of any kinship network, sleeping on the sidewalks and feeding themselves are then identified as witches.

The power of the witchcraft discourse in explaining the *shege*’s way of life is grasped fully if compared with the humanitarian category of “street children”. With reference to the humanitarian field, NGOs appeared quite late in this region. Katanga has been marked by a century of social paternalism and political totalitarianism. International and local NGOs involvement in Katanga has been made possible since the 1990s, and came about as a result of the decline of the biggest public companies and Mobutu’s dictatorship opening to a multiparty system (Poncelet *et al.* 2006). Moreover, NGOs operating in the 1990s were responding to a state of

emergency, which led them to draw uncritically from Western categories, such as that of street children (Glauser 1990). Despite the official discourse on the *shege*, which is put in the same street children category it's put in other countries in the world, my hypothesis is that this representation has been appropriated and molded since its reception by Lubumbashi's inhabitants. As matter of fact, the term "street child" puts forward the relation between two semantic spheres, which are "street" and "childhood". In many societies, the category of street children is relevant to conceptualize the marginality of these children (Lucchini 1993, 1996). Conversely, in the Congo, this category does not seem to suggest the same meaning. In the Congo and Katanga, the social exclusion of children is better understood using the image of the "invisible world" rather than the street. The liminal position occupied by the *shege* has crystallized around the image of the witch rather than the homeless, as unlikely as this is in other parts of the world. This is not surprising since, as De Boeck reminds us, in Congolese societies the witch is *par excellence* both the image of the crisis as well as the image of anti-social individual (De Boeck 2000: 56). The symbolic violence borne by the witchcraft idiom is expressed conceptually but also through language. In Lubumbashi, people do not use the word "street child", neither in French nor in Kiswahili. The literal translation in Kiswahili would be *mutoto* (child) *ya barabara* (street). To say *mutoto ya barabara* would be completely meaningless for the Congolese. This is also reported by city dwellers when they say "the street has never had children". In the same vein, the association suggested by the French *enfant de la rue* is unlikely to be translated into vernacular languages. The moral incompatibility of these two semantic spheres does not allow to speak about the *shege* with French words (Rubbers 2007). Witchcraft, instead, is the idiom that allows to link antisocial individuals with amoral worlds.

In the case of the *shege*, witchcraft discourse outlines a world in-between (the *shege*'s world), and we could also say an "anti-structure" (Turner 1991) through which, by contrast, the boundaries of ordinary family and social orders are put forward and reaffirmed. In particular, what people meant when using an association with witchcraft in addressing street children is an idealized image of childhood. Images of a proper childhood are displayed in advertisements visible throughout the city, in TV series and shows, and in the pastors' and priests' sermons in their churches. However, the specific idea of the modern and urban childhood is a colonial legacy. Colonial institutions have been for a long time great constructors of childhood and parenting ethics. Since the 1920s, they have done so through a social policy implemented by the colonial administration, the Catholic Church, and by

public companies such as the *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (UMHK). From this period, “colonial trinity” (colonial administration, church and companies) aimed to stabilize the urban population, encourage Christian marriages and promote the nuclear family model. This was the peculiarity of the Belgian Congo, which was even more evident in Katanga, where wage labor became the main source of men’s legitimacy to become the head of a family and thus exert social control upon family members. In colonial times, as Bogumil Jewsiewicki points out, the ability to exercise a wage labor was linked to a specific legal category, namely the “efficient adult man”. This category did not concern only urban workers. The organization of compulsory crops, especially cotton and coffee, extended a sort of wage labor also in rural zones. The nuclear family model, and the ideal of domesticity connected to it, replaced the role of kinship social structures in the education of children, and education became a task of the parents at home. The nuclear family, school, Catholic Church, and youth movements (Scouts and Kiro for example) were social fields within which this transition occurred, and where a new parental ethic and an unprecedented idea of childhood came about.

In Lubumbashi, the colonial legacy still informs the idea of the “modern family”. The image of the urban and Christian family is pursued, especially in the wealthier districts of the city centre, while in the *cités* (neighborhoods) it is much more contested, even though it remains the dominant model. Both in the inner city and in the Lubumbashi’s neighborhoods, parents and elders founded their authority on the capacity to meet their children’s basic needs (food, clothes, to have a home, and pay school fees). To define himself as a “responsible” and “reliable” father or elder (*ainé*) means to be able to get access to the food and goods market (“nourrir les enfants à leur faim”), and to the health and education system (“faire grandir à l’école”). In the context of crisis, many difficulties in meeting the children’s needs come from the individualization of the access to these goods and services, which are, moreover, structured according to other social factors, such as gender, social class and generation. Children’s needs are perceived by parents both as social obligations and moral responsibility. They constitute pillars of the social contract between generations. They define the logic of reciprocity between parents and children (Reynolds White *et al.* 2008: 7). Work (*kazi*), school fees (*minerval*), food (*mboka*), and health care are today symbolic media that define social roles as well as social categories such as the “reliable parent” (*un parent responsable*), and, the other way round, the irresponsible parent. From the standpoint of children, they are also supposed to have rights and duties: they should respect the authority of the

father, attend classes, succeed in school, and contribute to the domestic budget. The ethic of childhood, to be a “reliable child”, should be respected so as not to end up a lazy child, a *shege* or a vagrant (*vagabond*).

It is well documented that the crisis in the 1990s has seriously strained a parent’s ability to fulfill their children’s basic needs (Petit 2003; Nkuku & Rémon 2006; Tréfon 2004). In Katanga, former UMHK/Gécamines agents are the most striking example. Men who were the family breadwinner, in the golden age of the UMHK/Gécamines, lost much of their power and control over their children and wife when the company went bankrupt in the 1990s (Dibwe 2001; Rubbers 2013). Accordingly, state and public businesses failures provoked, beyond the economic impoverishment of the majority of the households, also a crisis of social identity.

The designation of *shege* to the “invisible world” (*kipande kingine / kipande kibaya*, literally “the other side [of reality]” / “the evil side [of reality]”), emphasizes the social crisis mentioned above. By the use of the witchcraft idiom, these kids are represented as individuals belonging to a world beyond any social structure. Living in the invisible world, in an in-between place, refers to individuals not subjected to social normativity and freed from any logic of reciprocity. That is the result of the freedom they got in the street released from the social control of elders and parents. The most striking feature attributed to the *shege* is their capacity to perform activities they are not usually supposed to do, such as to feed themselves, work, wander, smoke, or buy clothes. In doing so, they breakdown any logic of reciprocity and refuse to adopt common social roles.

Of course, being out from under social control and the weakening of ties with their relatives has a price for these children that has to be paid. Street children are sanctioned by the symbolic violence of witchcraft and by what has been called “the curse of being nothing” (*la malédiction de n’être rien*) (Jewsiewicki 1998). That means they will become individuals at the margins of society without any recognizable social identity. In social and cultural terms, such a subject can hardly be recognized as a child. Very often the *shege* are not even considered human beings, but rather they are associated with animals (rats, wolves, dogs). As I said above, being at the margins of society is better expressed by the witchcraft idiom that identifies the *shege* with witches. They are said to be, to quote the most frequently cited words of my informants, “hardly approachable”, “dangerous subjects”, “contaminated by impure spirits” and with whom “one must avoid to share food with”. These ideas do not belong only to ordinary Katangese. They are very often expressed also by Salesian and Catholic social workers and seminarists (*frères*) who work with street children. As I was told once by a Salesian *frère*:

All these children who spend the night outside their home are automatically witches. One must not really approach them. We should not eat with them because they have been already contaminated by impure spirits. In our society sleeping outside your home, in the street, means to get impure spirits and children who do that turn into a problem for the other citizens⁴.

From a social point of view, the condition of being out of the social fields (kinship, family, school) where social identities and mutual recognition are performed implies entering an in-between world where social blurriness and vagueness dominate. Children in an in-between world are thought of as a dangerous anomaly and a viral illness spreading out all over the society. In this sense, the symbolic violence of witchcraft exerted upon children can be understood as the consequence of the breaking down of what Alain Marie calls the “community debt” (*dette communautaire*) and the “circle of the endless debt” (*le cercle de la dette infinie*) (Marie 1997). According to this author, the status of the youngsters (*cadets*) is that of “debtors” who are subjugated to their elders (*ainés*), who in turn ensure their growth by providing them with food, a house, and an education. “Debtors” should therefore develop a sense of recognition and subjugation contracted toward their elders in a “endless debt”. Witchcraft discourse sanctions subjects, like the *shege*, who free themselves from this “anthropo-logic of the debt” (Marie 2002).

From a cultural point of view, street children marginality is conceptualized by the witchcraft idiom because it allows to think what Marc Augé calls the “unthinkable of the social” (*l’impensé du social*) (Augé 1982). According to Augé, the unthinkable of the social is pure power. Pure power is at same time out of all social structures and lies at the constitution of social relations. Children who came into contact with the blurred zones of the social reality, with violence and danger, have touched a source of power which is problematic. The inhabitants of Lubumbashi identify the *shege*’s forms of power with their capacity to survive in a hostile environment without any adult mediation. It is also identified with the freedom they got by roaming around the city at night and from the sexuality of street children.

The sharpest problem with the *shege* is the difficulty to control and discipline the violence perpetrated by and exerted upon them. The *shege* are thus perceived as “actors” and “victims” of violence (De Boeck 2009), and also as a source of power and danger (Comaroff, Comaroff 2005). The ideas of pollution (*contagion*), power and danger associated to them have provoked

4. Interview with E., social worker, Lubumbashi 20/05/2010.

violent reactions toward the *shege*. In 2010, when I started my fieldwork in Lubumbashi, the issue of security was a prior theme on the city political agenda (Quaretta 2016). Street children were growing in number and were perceived by the inner-city inhabitants as a serious threat to their security. The feeling of insecurity spread throughout the city partially as a result of harsh incidents street children were seen to be responsible for. However, the feeling of insecurity was also partially suggested by the complete loss of control of the local authority on this issue and by the state of degradation of the zones where the *shege* were living.

The agency deployed by the *shege* in order to survive in a hostile environment, such as the streets of a large city, is often reduced by external observers to the violent behaviors that characterize some groups of street children (Kahola-Tabu 2014). Actually, the children's agency is also observable in less violent manifestations, as, for instance, when they run away from home to break free from violence suffered within their family, or when they lie so as not to be taken back to their family when, for example, a street child is brought to a Pentecostal church or taken into a Salesian educational centre. Other forms of agency are linked to the daily life of the *shege*: the ability of acting the *débrouille* (literally "fend for yourself"), the auto-cuisine (knowing how to prepare food for oneself), the aesthetics of the street wardrobe and the consumption of illegal drugs.

The reason why street children's agency is often reduced to their violent behaviors is probably because it is missed that, as Kahola-Tabu points out (2014: 137), youth violence is actually a counter-violence to the forms of exclusion and indifference of the society and the state towards street children. Under such conditions, the relationship between exclusion and violence has become part of the social structure in so far as it no longer concerns an emergency situation, as it was in the 1990s during the emerging economic crisis. The transition from a state of emergency to a state of structural violence has produced two fundamental consequences with regard to the phenomena of the *shege*. Firstly, it created a "street culture" (Biaya 2000): a youth subculture that is the extreme and violent expression of youth social exclusion and of the generational conflict underlying Congolese societies. Secondly, also for Lubumbashi, we may share the analysis of some scholars (Yengo 2016) who suggest that the emergence of a social and cultural opposition between the "street" and the "family" as being fundamental in the context of the present-day Congo. As said, the street has become not only a physical space where subjects rejected from family are cast, but it has also become a place where an oppositional culture (a "street

culture”) is shaped against that of family and kinship. This opposition has repercussions not only on infant marginalization, but also on ordinary delinquency and even on the level of political and armed violence⁵.

To get back to the symbolic violence of the witchcraft labeling, that is moreover problematic because street children are in the hands of institutions such as Salesian’s shelters, NGO’s centres and by specialists such as social workers, educators, and catholic aid workers. These actors do not seem to have appropriate tools for considering all the social, cultural and symbolic implications that the street children phenomenon have in Lubumbashi. That is why the strategies implemented by these institutions for family reintegration and social inclusion of the *shege* often fail. Following Mary Douglas, the path from the social margins toward reintegration would entail the use of ritual. With no rite of aggregation, to which a whole community should participate and share common symbolic values, social integration is more likely to fail. Without a new position in society, children remain in the margins “credited with unreliability, unteachability, and all the wrong social attitudes” (Douglas 2001:98). Douglas’ interpretation of being in the margins is particularly cogent for the Congolese common assumptions about street children. These latter are considered, first and foremost, as subjects “who are unable to change”. I was very often told about the impossibility of changing a *shege*’s habits and behaviors. They are thought to be deeply corrupted with money (“they love to get money”, “*ils aiment l’argent*”), with sexual promiscuity (*banakupatana*), and with filth. For Lubumbashi inhabitants it is hardly possible to bring about changes in their way of life regardless of the methods used. A social worker told me about this impossibility for a *shege* to change:

A child who has lived for many years on the street, even if you provide him with a good education or whatever good for his life, he will never change. A vagrant is always a vagrant. Even us we are careful with them. A child without father and mother, without love, well, one has to beware of these children⁶.

The work and strategies of the Salesian centres and NGOs programs (social surveys, protection of the children’s rights, family reintegration, follow-ups of children reintegrated, and food programs) may sometimes succeed but are not effective in solving the street children issue. The main reasons for this situation can be identified in the social and economic conditions in which many households are still living today. Given the poor conditions at their homes, children run away and choose to live in the street.

5. I am particularly thankful to the anonymous reviewer for this important suggestion.

6. Interview with Ph., social worker, Lubumbashi 5/05/2011.

Nevertheless, the problem also stems partly from the way public and private institutions approach street children. I argue that these institutions work more like Western institutions such as the prison or the asylum. Once individuals are formally classified as “abnormal”, their behaviors became unacceptable. After a long period in prison or in asylum, individuals are hardly capable to reintegrate their own society. In the same way, institutions working with the *shege* participate to render the “street child” a symbol of marginality and of the abnormality of being out of any social network. From a cultural and local point of view this abnormality is thought and sanctioned through the witchcraft idiom.

Children accused of witchcraft and the structural violence

Accusations of witchcraft leveled at children at home are less a discourse about social margins than an explanatory idiom to challenge social conflicts and to interpret misfortune. In order to approach the accusations of witchcraft at home, I begin this section by posing two preliminary considerations. First of all, most of my interviews have been characterized by stories whose focus was on the ordinary violence people experience in their lives. By “ordinary violence” I mean at the same time the structural violence (Farmer 2001) which is embedded in social structure and in people’s everyday life (Scheper-Huges 1993) for which they encounter severe hardships in most of Lubumbashi’s neighborhoods (*cités*) in meeting basic needs (health care, water, electricity, education, public transportation, and food). Secondly, the experience of material deprivation and uncertainty so often expressed by my informants (and indeed visible to me) show how social dependency, vulnerability and violence are deeply interconnected. This means that in challenging conditions of “distress” (Naepels 2019) we should pay attention to economic as well as to the “ecological conditions” people live in (*ivi*). Indeed, living conditions shape and push people toward specific cultural interpretations, such as a belief in witchcraft, when illness and misfortune come about. This is fairly evident in Lubumbashi’s *cités*. Witchcraft idioms and symbolism as well as the anti-witch practices partly compensate the poor quality of biomedical care. This does not concern only witchcraft accusations leveled at children. The “new mystical” illnesses, for instance, are also examples in which structural violence, the lack of health care and medical services, shape people’s responses to suffering. *Nteta* and *Kapopo* are considered as two mystical illnesses that have been massively spreading in the city for the past ten years. *Nteta* and *Kapopo* are biological diseases easily identifiable by biomedical symptomatology. *Nteta* is diabetes and *Kapopo* is dental decay. Serious injuries caused by *Nteta* and *Kapopo*

take over when people do not have the means to be properly treated. Very often the lack of treatment and money lead to death. These dramatic outcomes could be avoidable with simple procedures, for instance by the removing of the infected tooth, which costs around 40\$. In these cases, people turn to revivalist pastors and “traditional healers” (*bafumu*), who treat illness as a “spiritual problem”.

My hypothesis is that structural violence pushes people to turn their attention exclusively toward the social etiology of the illness, disregarding biological symptoms. The reason for this is basically to alleviate suffering and to shape its experience. The vacuum left open by the absence of a medical system has been occupied by “specialists/experts” in treating sickness and misfortune, as I just said, such as pastors and *bafumu*. Revivalist churches are among the most important religious actors. These latter provide believers with economic and spiritual support. Nevertheless, in revivalist churches the attention is more likely directed to “spirituality” and Christian morality. In doing so pastors, and the other revivalist religious figures, stress the social dimension of illness and propose social etiologies. In other words, in revivalist churches the focus on illness is removed from the body of the sufferer and cast into the spiritual field. Either an external agent or misbehaviors are supposed to lay at the emergence of the symptoms. It might be a witchcraft attack provoked by jealousy; it may be the consequence of the believer’s sins or misbehaviors; it can be the result of the believer’s misdeeds. A major consequence of this interpretation is to rule out physical symptoms in favor of social and moral causes.

Nteta and Kapopo are just two examples that show how everyday structural violence profoundly shapes the cultural experience of illness and misfortune and pushes people toward a specific cultural interpretation (Reynolds White 1998). In most of my case studies, children accusations of witchcraft stem from the interpretation of illness, death and misfortune. The social dimension of this interpretation is often mobilized through the accusation. In contrast with the common assumption that sees witchcraft accusations as an excuse to cast the children out of the home, I propose to see it as an interpretative idiom of what Marc Augé called “the elementary forms of the event” (*forme élémentaire de l'événement*) (Augé 1984). According to Augé, elementary forms of the event are illness, death and misfortune. These are defined by the author as the most “social” of the individual life events (*ivi*). In this vein, the accusation of witchcraft works as a “pragmatic of uncertainty” (Reynolds Whyte 1998) that deploys a twofold logic of interpretation: the identification (diagnosis) of the individual symptoms and the questioning of the social order, on the one hand through

the symptomatic idiom Congolese families deal with substances, objects, biomedical and local medicines by which people try to treat the immediate injuries and harms, and on the other, by the etiologic idiom always taking into the interpretation the social environment within which the individual diseases manifest. Because of their precarious structural position within the family, children become the articulation point of the witchcraft etiologic idiom.

Practically speaking, when a witchcraft accusation breaks out at home, it opens up a crisis, a “social drama” to say it as Victor Turner does (1967). Social dramas call for a ritual resolution. To my view this is the most important difference between witchcraft accusations at home and the “witchcraft” labeling of the *sheges*. Witchcraft accusations at home attempt to open a liminal space and time in order to retake control of situations, spaces, and subjects where practical forms of control became difficult (Douglas 2001:103). Witchcraft accusations uttered at the revivalist church open a liminal space within which the usual activities of a family are either suspended or set aside in favor of ritual practices. These latter are often prescribed by a *mutumishi*, the Katangese-Swahili term for “God’s servant” (“*homme de Dieu*”), who charges ritual practices with a strong symbolic value. Ritual actions may consist in going to church at specific moments, praying several times a day for hours, going through several “soul healings” (“*cure d’âme*”), practicing fasting, and in abstaining from eating specific foods.

Theoretically, a witchcraft accusation uttered by a *mutumishi* looks like the former anti-witch specialists or like the treatments of a *mufumu* (traditional healer). Following Marc Augé, we can identify three equally important dimensions of this witchcraft idiom: technical, interpretive, and normative (Augé 1974). The technical aspect is the consulting of a *mutumishi*, whether he is a pastor, a prophet, or a religious “intercessor”. The *mutumishi* deploys a set of detection tools in order to provide the believer with a “spiritual diagnosis”. This latter is produced through visions, prophetic dreams, and prayers. The *mutumishi* then proposes to the believer a healing path (“*parcours de guérison*”) to fight the attack of the sorcerer, which consists in prayers, soul healings, confessions, and deliverance from witchcraft. The normative aspect of witchcraft discourse is identifiable in the account the *mutumishi* makes up during the soul healings and the deliverance of the victim from evil spirits (*bampepo*). In these accounts, whose patterns of narrative are very often similar, the “elementary event” that affected the believer’s life is interpreted through the symbolic reversal of the ordinary life. Through the witchcraft imagery, the *mutumishi* turns

social norms upside down. In doing so, food becomes poison; kitchen tools (like the pan to cook *bukari*) become the witch's weapons to harm; children turn into adults; children get married with their own offspring; daughters turn into *mami wata*; and human beings transform into animals. Through the reversal of social norms and roles, pastors and prophets aim to address and reaffirm the ethic and morality of Christian life. The moral questioning of one's behaviors takes us to the core of the third aspect of the witchcraft discourse, i.e. the interpretation. The mutumishi's interpretation is a moral discourse on illness, misfortune, and death. This explanation implies that the trigger of the suspicion or accusation of witchcraft is frequently a symptom affecting an individual. The pastor quickly moves these symptoms, discrete and localized manifestations, into the spiritual field. I would be tempted to say that "spiritual" here means not just the transcendent nature of the relation between believers and God, but it also refers to the immanence of the social relations. More precisely, "spiritual" refers to the invisible part concerning the power inherent in all social relations. In this sense, to relocate symptomatic manifestations into a "spiritual" domain also implies a social etiology involving the moral nature of one's behaviors and actions. It serves to address the legitimacy of the exercise of power and authority in social relations. Of course, pastors find this source of legitimacy in Christian theology and in the Bible, within which the role of children and women is subjugated to the father's authority.

In Lubumbashi, as I see it, most of the time witchcraft accusations arise from very specific events (a series of deaths, illnesses, and loss). Accordingly, to the twofold logic of interpretation I mentioned above, accusations pointing out symptoms also underlie conflicts at home within the family and among kinship, like that between different generations (grandparents / grandchildren) or between stepparents and children from a previous marriage. In these conflicts, children stand either in a weak position or at the edge of the family inclusion and exclusion. Take, for instance, the example of recomposed families and children whose parents are not officially married (e.g. the man has not paid the bride's price to his family-in-law). In these cases no formal status is guaranteed to the children, neither by the state nor by kinship norms. Thus, standing in a sort of social no man's land, children's behaviors are more likely to be questioned as misfortune burst out at home. There are specific sets of child behaviors which are more easily condemned. One is to "show overbearing pride" (*afficher l'orgueil*), which refers to an arrogant and disrespectful child; another behavior severely reprimanded is "to be hypocrite", which addresses, in the parents'

terms, a child who is not genuine and sincere in the relationships with his parents and relatives. Other misbehaviors are severely blamed, such as to run away from home, to lie, to be disrespectful, and to get drunk.

To conclude, the strength of a witchcraft accusation lies in its capacity to explain all the aspects of what I have called, along with Marc Augé, “the elementary forms of the event” (Augé 1984). More precisely, the power of the accusation resides in its capacity to keep together individual symptoms and social dimensions of the event. In this sense, witchcraft can be seen as a “circular way of thinking” (*une pensée circulaire*) (*ivi*) combining a symptomatic and an etiologic idiom (Reynolds Whyte 1998). I use the concept of “circularity” of witchcraft discourse differently than Peter Geschiere (1997). For Geschiere, the circularity of witchcraft is linked to the ambivalence of “acceptable and unacceptable uses of occult forces” (Geschiere 1997: 207). The *nganga* (traditional healer), says the author, “can offer protection against witches only because he or she is a super-witch” (*ivi*). In other words, the circularity of this discourse stands in the ambivalent meanings (neither completely positive nor negative) carried by “occult forces”. Moreover, the author draws from the categories of political anthropology to state that witchcraft (*djambe* or *evu* in his Cameroonian fieldwork) is inherently ambiguous because it serves to level inequalities as well as to address the accumulation of power and wealth (*ibidem*: 69). As I see it, the circularity of the witchcraft discourse has to be understood differently when addressed to children. In this case, the *mutumishi*’s circular explanation puts at work an interpretation that works according to a twofold logic: a causal logic *a priori* that points out the symptoms of a specific disease; and a causal logic *a posteriori* that gives an all-round explanation that brings together individual symptoms and social relations (Augé 1984). This is why a witchcraft accusation can quickly involve many family members in a series of accusations: in pointing out an individual symptom, pastors imply problems in relationships to people (e.g. husband/wife, husband/brother-in-law, step-parent/child) that, in turn, needs to address individual symptoms and so on.

Since people rarely solve these problems, the circularity of witchcraft accusations never ends. The circularity of the witchcraft accusation can be broken down as an agent of misfortune that has been found, sickness healed and a social order restored. Difficulties in getting the problems solved, especially those related to health, turn revivalist churches’ rituals into a sort of “perverted ritual” (Augé 1977). As I said above in this text, the witchcraft interpretation works through the symbolic reversal of ordinary life. Through the witchcraft imagery, the *mutumishi* turns the social norms upside down

in order to reaffirm those same norms. Nevertheless, while the “social drama” opened by the first accusation cannot be solved, the circle of accusations may perpetuate with a long series of accusations. In the case of children, the circularity of anti-witchcraft rituals comes to an end as the children run away from home. In the witchcraft interpretation, pastors understand the runaway as a self-accusation of being a witch.

Conclusion

In this text, I have proposed to exanimate the “child-witches” in the Congo as a multifaceted phenomenon composed of, at least, two main figures. From the one hand, I have showed the process of social exclusion of street children who are labelled as witches for their antisocial modes of living and violent behaviors. A process which is exacerbated by an institutional action, individualizing and marginalizing, that reproduces itself mechanisms of exclusion and social labelling interpreted locally by the idiom of witchcraft. On the other hand, children are accused at home and in Pentecostal Churches. Here witchcraft works as an interpretation of individual illness through a “logic of persecution” (Zémpleni 1975; Ortigues & Ortigues 1984). Children in marginal positions within kinship networks are more easily targeted as agents of misfortune.

This distinction is mainly valid theoretically, but in practice stigmatization and accusation, symbolic violence, structural violence and violence at home are constantly interconnected. The two cases I have presented in this text suggest two final considerations. First of all, the symbolic violence exerted in the public space upon street children shows the limits of a society unable to “contain its children” rather than its inability “contain witchcraft” (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998). In the Congo social structures, representations and ethics relating to children seem to no longer have the power and resources to give meaning to an overwhelming demographic category.

Secondly, the strategies set up for the social reintegration of children from the margins (both in the street or in family) is problematic. On the one hand, religious and humanitarian institutions support street children. These institutions create, often unwillingly, institutionalized images of childhood (such as the “street children”, the “child-soldier”, and the “child-witch”) labeling the marginalized children even more profoundly. Moreover, shelters and humanitarian programs do not set cultural rituals which would allow to control and discipline the meaning of children marginality which is, as we have seen, culturally sanctioned by the symbolic violence of witchcraft. On

the other hand, accusations of witchcraft at home, and more broadly, the circularity of the witchcraft discourse, generate a vicious circle, making a chain of individual events and a social explanation that reinforces itself through a feedback logic. Following Marc Augé, the difficulty in breaking down the circle created by the all-around witchcraft explanation makes the rituals performed in revivalist churches less a ritual of inversion than a ritual of perversion (Augé 1977). The ritual actions performed by a mitumishi transpose illness symptoms and misfortune onto a “spiritual” level. In proposing a spiritual and social etiology, pastors thus exacerbate social causes, producing irreversible consequences (runaway of the accused, worsening of the sufferer’s health conditions, and sometimes even death). Therefore, the solution of the social drama opened by a witchcraft accusation fails. It could succeed if a mediation would occur between the treatment of the bewitched and the restoring of the social order, a solution seldom achieved.

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Children accused of witchcraft in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): Between structural and symbolic violence

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