The anthropologists

A number of distinguished Africanist anthropologists, several of whom have worked in Uganda, have strongly criticized the Newsnight material, both in emails to each other, the reporter and Newsnight producer Peter Rippon, and in a blog set up by Adam Kuper on the web page of the London Review of Books (LRB). The latter also contains some of the earlier emails (or newer versions thereof), as well as copies of emails from Whewell and Rippon defending the programmes.

The issues raised by the anthropologists on the blog are numerous, but fall into several broad categories. The first is that the research was ‘poor’ and that a similar story from, for example, the UK would require much more careful investigation. Two anthropologists note that a similar story did manifest in the UK two decades ago in the form of accusations of Satanic abuse of children, but this was shown to be false in a report commissioned by the government and produced by anthropologist Jean La Fontaine (1994).

Secondly, anthropologists complain that too much reliance is placed on the main informant (the reformed witch doctor), whose claims are dismissed as incredible. Most of the bloggers also dismiss the belief, cited in the programme, that the skulls of children are buried in the foundations of new buildings to ensure their prosperity.

Third, and most significantly, the anthropologist bloggers criticize the lack of cultural understanding shown in the programme, and the failure to consult academic experts (including anthropologists) who have been working on matters such as witchcraft for decades. Virtually all of the anthropologists who commented maintained that the doings of so-called witches and witch doctors exist more in the realm of the imagination than reality: ‘the great majority of accusations of ritual murder – common as they are throughout the continent – are unfounded’ and ‘nor is confession any form of evidence’ (Argenti). Although most concede that sometimes ‘dreadful events’ do occur, it is also argued that they are rare. In a later email, for example, Allen states: ‘In my experience of working in Uganda they are more rare than brutal attacks on alleged witches – and these are certainly on the increase again. Two women in the home in which I lived were tortured to death and I encountered many other cases.’

More generally, it is asserted that these programmes are a prime example of how badly the BBC and other media handle stories from Africa, with a tendency to stress the bizarre and exotic, thereby reinforcing existing prejudices and stereotypes held by non-Africans, especially Westerners. At the same time, the kind of messages such programmes give out to an African (in this case Ugandan) audience is even more dangerous because it encourages mob justice; several bloggers note the rise in killings of alleged witches in various parts of the continent, including neighbouring Kenya.

The BBC replies

I’ll return to these ideas, which I’ve represented all too simplistically and briefly, but first summarize the replies of the reporter and the producer, which also appear on the LRB blog. They maintain that their story ‘is based on compelling evidence we present from victims of very serious crimes’, which ‘horrify Ugandans as much as they do us’. Their research found that such crimes take place all over Uganda and people are very concerned about them.
4. We catch glimpses of the logos of VSO, SCF, World Vision, Plan, for example.

5. Although some posts make reference to the radio programme in the Crossing Continents series (broadcast on both the World Service and Radio 4), no anthropologist contributing seems to have seen the half-hour Our World: Uganda's epidemic of child sacrifice programme shown on the BBC News channel, and there is no engagement with producers of programmes other than Newsnight.

6. See http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/01/12/adam-kuper/bizarre-rumours#.more=2900; note it is necessary to register (for free) to contribute to this blog.


9. ‘Bizarre rumours’ is the title of Kuper’s initial article on the LRB blog: see footnote 5.

10. The programme Our World: Uganda was screened several times on BBC World, and the radio documentary repeated several times on the BBC World Service, both available in Uganda. Information from personal email from Tim Whewell, 28/01/10.


12. Although I had followed the anthropological literature in the interim and had read extensively prior to my visit.

13. The LRA was notorious, among other things, for capturing of children and using them as child soldiers. See for example Allen 2006, Finnstrom 2008.

14. ActionAid is not involved in this issue.

15. Uganda, whose economy is heavily dependent on Western aid, was suffering badly at the time from the drop in international exchange rates.

16. In 2009, the Ugandan MP James Bahati put forward a bill to the Ugandan Parliament which raised an international outcry. There is a huge amount of material about this on the web – see for example http://www.guardian.co.uk/katrine/2009/nov/26/homosexuality-bill


Police figures suggest an increase in killings or mutilations apparently related to human sacrifice, although responsible agencies in child protection maintain that the police statistics are an underestimate.

The BBC reports are based on detailed conversations with the Ugandan section of the NGO ANPPCAN and one of its Western partners, VSO. ‘The evidence for our reports is powerful and compelling. It comes from the parents of murdered and mutilated children, backed by medical and police evidence [...] respected local child protection agencies [...] the police [...] and a government minister. To describe the evidence of such an array of individuals and agencies as “bizarre rumours” is surely disrespectful.’ Finally, they state that they have received very few complaints about the programmes and almost all have come from British-based anthropologists, while there has been no complaint from Uganda, and the Ugandans they have asked are pleased with the results because the programmes have drawn attention to a problem about which they are concerned and against which many are campaigning.

In short, then, in the correspondence between the anthropologists and the BBC, there is little meeting of minds. The journalist sees the issue of child sacrifice, as do many in Uganda, as one of human rights on which he is reporting, indeed witnessing, and in this regard, NGOs rather than academics are viewed as the ‘experts’ with local knowledge, although as became clear from my interviews with the ActionAid personnel quoted below, not all NGOs would necessarily take the same stance on this issue. The anthropologists for the most part take a much more sceptical view, noting that similar stories have long surfaced in various parts of the continent and further afield. They are also deeply concerned that such reports broadcast on the BBC contribute to violence.

Conversations about ‘child sacrifice’

I had spent a few weeks in Uganda in February 2009, first in my capacity as a trustee of the development charity ActionAid UK, and then at Makerere University. It was my first visit to the country for several decades and I was very struck by the fact that violence of all kinds came up frequently as a topic in conversations with people I met, as well as in the media. This preoccupation, which I had anticipated in terms of the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan army, also included attacks on women, and the so-called ‘witchcraft killings’ which were the subject of the BBC programmes.

One of the most interesting conversations I had was with a fellow-trustee and a member of staff of ActionAid Uganda, both northerners. The trustee, himself a sceptic as far as the power of witch doctors was concerned, noted that while many people make false claims in order to gain a reputation, it does appear that children are indeed being killed for their body parts. He maintained, however, that children in Uganda may disappear for a variety of reasons, citing the proliferation of ‘orphans’ being set up, often by Pentecostalist pastors in search of converts or to gain NGO funding, and to which parents are persuaded to send their children, often very far from home, ‘for free education’. He also remarked that the idea that the plethora of new buildings in Kampala contains human skulls in their foundations is widespread.

The ActionAid staff member noted that the Uganda Christian Council is working with witch doctors who claim to have reformed, but added that while some people had confessed to nefarious acts, others had said that the deeds of which they had boasted were actually lies told to enhance reputations. She also suggested that the practice of child sacrifice may have increased because of the severe effects of the recession in Uganda. Both of my interlocutors commented on the then parallel concern with killings of albinos in Tanzania and alleged witches in Kenya.

More recently, I consulted a Ugandan anthropologist, Agnes Kamya, based at Makerere University, about the alleged ‘child sacrifices’. She noted that what she termed ‘the hysteria’ was at its height about a year ago (just around the time of my visit), and that it had recently died down somewhat – ‘people are now talking more about the forthcoming national elections and the anti-homosexuality bill’. In her own enquiries, she had been told that such notions of child sacrifice for witchcraft purposes are unknown in Ugandan cultures, and some theorized that they have a great deal to do with the ubiquity of popular (and gory) Nigerian films and soap operas in which occult practices – including child sacrifice – often feature.

What seems clear from all of the above is that contemporaneous manifestations of the occult, at the level of both ideas and practices, are varied and must be related to present-day social, economic and political circumstances. As one Ugandan blogger put it: ‘we have to look at what is happening politically, socially and economically in contemporary Uganda. [...] some people are getting rich on a very large scale, most are from the political circles of the well connected political ruling family and NRM’.
The BBC programmes

When I first began receiving copies of the email correspondence about the BBC programmes, I read them with interest, but did not venture into the debate, since Uganda is not an area in which I have carried out research,19 and like most anthropologists, I am reluctant to comment on issues outside of ‘my’ area, although I did watch the Newsnight programme on the BBC website. However, as the debate continued, I decided to view or listen to the BBC programmes on this topic. It became clear that ‘the story’ only really begins to make sense if one does this, since each of the broadcasts uses a somewhat different range of material. The Our World programme, for example, has an interview with a Ugandan worker from the NGO FAPAD,20 which specializes in monitoring and following up cases of disappearances/children and reports of killings and mutilations in Lango district. She asserts that at the height of what she terms ‘the panic’ there was an average of two reports per day of child disappearances. But her explanation for this situation only appears in the radio broadcast, where she lays emphasis on the role of ‘Nollywood’ (Nigerian) ‘thrillers’ that portray such killings in graphic detail, one of which she shows to the reporter, who is horrified by its content.21

I share many of the criticisms made by my colleagues: I too was somewhat dismayed when I saw and listened to the programmes, as I frequently am by Western media reporting on Africa. Although the reporter in the Our World programme (probably the best of the three) concedes that ‘in this story it is hard to know where reality ends and myth begins’, the thrust of most of the messages exhibits precisely the degree of credulity so heavily criticized by the anthropologists who commented. I too found the main character who appears in all the programmes unconvincing (round figures always raise suspicions) and the sequence with the witch doctor being ‘reformed’ even more so. But other interviews (with the police commissioner, the NGO worker, the dentist/traditional healer, and especially with the victims of violence) were rather more convincing and I found myself in agreement with Paul Richards’ comment: ‘But I still have a nagging sense that some of these events may have been real […] I think it would be wise for us to at least entertain this possibility, and perhaps then to develop some theory about when fantasy passes into opportunity’. Perhaps, had the material been edited into an hour-long film instead of just 15 minutes for the Newsnight piece22 and half an hour for each of the others, the overall effect could have been rather different.

But I am not about to write yet another detailed criticism of these programmes, problematic as they are. Rather, I want to pursue the idea that both they and the criticisms of them by anthropologists raise two sets of crucial questions: the first is in regard to the interpretation of witchcraft and other forms of alleged ritual killings in contemporary Africa and the effects of their representation on lay audiences, both non-African and African. The second concerns media representations of Africa and public anthropology.

For most of the anthropologists who criticized the programme, a significant problem lies in the failure to distinguish between ideas about witchcraft and actual manifestations. Allen, for example, while conceding that ‘dreadful events’ do sometimes occur, suggests in his comments that these are rare and that ideas about ritual killing ‘are as likely to be as much about asserting certain ideas about moral probity as presenting facts’. Such a view is, of course, very much in the classic tradition of witchcraft studies in and of Africa. It is a powerful tool for understanding not only the occult in Africa, but also ‘witch-hunts’ elsewhere in the world (Caplan 2006).

Yet this is not the only view of occult phenomena, and some anthropologists working in Africa have accepted that there has indeed been an increase in recent years not only in allegations of witchcraft but also in its material manifestations, including killings and the removal of body parts, and have tied this to wider social and historical processes, including modernity and globalization (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Geschiere 1997, Niehaus et al. 2001, Sanders 2001), rather as did the Ugandan blogger quoted earlier. Haar and Ellis, in their response to an article by Ranger (2007), state: ‘Our point is to suggest that such practices do actually occur with some frequency in separate parts of Africa’ (2009: 409). The Comaroffs note that in South Africa there has been ‘an explosion of occult-related activity, much of it violent’ and that ‘magic has become as much an aspect of mundane survival strategies as it is indispensable to the ambitions of the powerful’ (op.cit.: 20; see also Niehaus et al. 2001). So perhaps Whewell’s suggestion in the BBC programmes that the explosion of discourse around child sacrifice is linked with ‘modernity’ is not so far off the mark, even though we might want a more nuanced discussion of this term and one which goes beyond the skyscrapers and advertising hoardings shown in the programmes.

How then should we anthropologists advocate tackling an issue like allegations of ritual child killings in Uganda?

Media representations and public anthropology

Uganda is far from being the only African country to be cited in reports on problems relating to the occult, with Kenya, Angola, Nigeria, Tanzania, Gambia and the Congo all featuring in BBC reports on some aspect of witchcraft practices in the last year. Nor is the Ugandan child sacrifice issue the first media story with an African setting to
have aroused the ire of anthropologists. In recent years, they have complained, for example, about the reporting around the ‘torso in the Thames’ and the ‘child witches’ stories in the UK, with many of the same criticisms as were made of the child sacrifice programmes, namely that they focus on the bizarre and exotic, and give a very skewed portrait of Africa and Africans, as well as failing to distinguish between discourse and empirical reality.

Why have such complaints apparently fallen on deaf ears? How can we explain the lack of anthropological or other academic input into programmes like Newsnight, and why is it rare for anthropologists to be consulted by the media, especially in the English-speaking world? Such questions form part of a wider debate about the relative lack of a public anthropology in the UK which has often been aired in the pages of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY.

In his book Engaging anthropology (2005), Eriksen discusses this issue and suggests that we need to examine ourselves, our texts, and our focuses, since, as he notes, much anthropological work of the last few decades has not been noted for its accessibility to lay audiences. Anthropologists perhaps also tend to make journalists nervous. It is easy for an anthropologist, with years of research and knowledge of local languages and cultures, to trump a journalist, no matter how experienced and competent, who has spent only a few weeks in a country visit. Furthermore, relatively few anthropologists engage pro-actively with the media20 – most are over-stretched and ‘op-ed’ pieces do not count for Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) submissions. So what we write tends to be for other anthropologists. Maybe, too, we also need to consider why it is that we focus on the bizarre and exotic, and give a very skewed portrait of Africa and Africans, as well as failing to distinguish between discourse and empirical reality.

So suppose that the BBC had called up an anthropologist or two and asked for their advice before they started planning these programmes. The BBC would have been convinced that there was a story here to be pursued – after all it had been all over the Ugandan media for some time. The Ugandan government had set up a special police commission to deal with issues of child sacrifice and trafficking, there have been court cases and more are pending, although, like the reporter, we'd want to make use of local voices and take seriously people’s allegations that their children have disappeared, have been killed, or have had body parts removed,21 we’d also want to examine alternative explanations to that of child sacrifice. The local ones themselves appear to be far from homogeneous: some children are trafficked, others taken for their vital organs as part of some international trade in body parts, as well as children being sacrificed as part of occult practices.

We’d certainly want to contextualize all such reports in terms of current economic and social issues, which for Uganda include not only increasing and highly visible social inequality and poverty for many, but also the long-running war in the north and its aftermath, the rise of ethnic nationalism and ongoing conflict22 in some areas, drought in some parts of the country, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the extremely high fertility rate;23 all of these contribute to the very high number of vulnerable children in the country.

We might also want more questions asked about NGOs/INGOs and churches and their agendas, since they play a far more prominent role in the Ugandan welfare system than is the case in the West and are primarily dependent on foreign donors. So it is as well to look not only at what ‘the story’ tells us, but also at what is left out. But we’d also probably want to point out that these reports of occult practices are not only or entirely African phenomena, as many anthropologists have shown in their work elsewhere.

Postscript

The Newsnight programme ends with the BBC reporter asking whether Pollino Angela, the reformed witch doctor and pastor who figures so largely in all the programmes, had risked a lot by confessing so publicly to his crimes. It turned out that he had, for after the programmes were aired Pollino Angela was arrested by the police, in spite of the Minister for Ethics having told the reporter that old crimes should now be forgotten. On 8 February a report appeared in New Vision, one of Uganda’s leading dailies, under the heading ‘Police dismisses [sic] sacrifice claims’, quoting Binoga, the head of the Task Force (who had also been interviewed by the BBC): ‘The information Pollino gave to the BBC about his involvement in child sacrifice was a “pack of lies” which has tarnished the image of the country.’24 The story is far from over.

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