Forum of EthnoGeoPolitics

Main Article

Ritual violence in Liberia: 2. Studying ritual violence in history—Assessing (lack of) insights and knowledge

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Ritual violence in Liberia series—Abstract

Ritual violence—violence characterised and justified by rituals i.e. observable ceremonial and sequenced acts, often involving human sacrifice and the removal of organs to attain magical power—still is rife in many places and regions across the globe, including West Africa. This Ritual violence in Liberia series analyses lethal and non-lethal ritual violence in Liberia during its known history, but eventually focuses on the period from the Liberian Civil Wars of 1989-1997 and 1999-2003 to the time of brittle-and-violent 'peace' of today.

This series especially investigates the role of combatants in ritual violence during times of (major) internal war in Liberia. These combatants include child soldiers, their leaders and their victims—though forcibly recruited and indoctrinated child soldiers could be seen as victims as well. These may also include any other actors perpetrating such violence during times of (relative) peace in Liberia against any non-combatants and former combatants among families, larger kin groups and ethnicities—including former child soldiers. Generally, the series seeks to uncover the saliency, prevalence and nature of ritual violence in Liberia, and the causes and consequences of such violence for both perpetrators and victims (opposing sides may be both

perpetrators and victims vis-à-vis each other), for indigenous peoples, other citizens and foreign residents in the country. For this it makes use of the author's theory and empirical research on brutalisation *i.e. increasing violation of local and/or international norms of violence.*

Even though few systematic, comparative studies on ritual violence have been done to this day, a fair number of anecdotal reports and in-depth case studies on particular tribes, peoples and societies show that this phenomenon is widespread, endemic and ingrained in many parts of the world—including Liberia, as this series confirms.

Indeed, especially magic-ritual violence in both the private i.e. domestic and public i.e. political spheres is rife in Liberia to this day. There, perpetrators not just target individuals as perceived and actual (former) enemies in vendettas often originating from the civil wars—including Liberian migrants and asylum seekers living abroad or (in danger of) being deported back. They also frequently target peoples and entire communities at random, whereby they immediately attack victims or abduct them and torture, mutilate and murder them afterwards in rituals believed to bring magical, supernatural, otherworldly powers to the direct perpetrators and/or their benefactors who ordered these killings in the first place. Even Liberian migrants, deported asylum seekers and visitors could easily fall victim to this 'random' violence.

Introduction—Studying the history of ritual violence in Liberia and beyond

As already noted in introductory Part 1 of this Ritual Violence in Liberia series, ritual or 'ritualistic' [1] violence—i.e. "violence characterised or

justified by rituals based on religious, spiritual and other ideological beliefs (or quite opportunistic, self-gratifying motives masquerading with those beliefs)"—is "often ghastly brutal, perhaps even more so than many other forms of extreme violence" (Ten Dam 2023: 27). Furthermore, this first part of the series has presented my "analyses on adopted circumscriptions of ritual violence and its empirical variants vis-à-vis other concepts and theories of violence" (Ibid: 27)—and compared these to my own circumscriptions of ritual violence, other forms of (brutal) violence, violence per se and (inter)related phenomena ranging from rituals and types of magic to tribes, clans and other social (kinship) groups (Ibid: esp. 37-54).

Here, in the second part of this series, I provide an overview of the (lack of) historical research, insights and consequent knowledge on ritual violence in Liberia, West Africa and other parts of the world. The subsequent parts of the series will present my (preliminary) research findings on ritual violence in Liberia's present and (recent) past, with a final concluding part summarising the main findings; these will appear in future bi-annual issues a/o annual volumes of this journal. [2]

As already noted, ritual violence in both the public i.e. political and private i.e. domestic and social spheres appears to be widespread in West Africa, but also in many other parts of the African continent and the wider world (Ten Dam 2023: 27-29). This violence even appears to be part of 'ordinary violence' i.e. "violence experienced by ordinary people in their ordinary everyday lives" (Bouju, & De Bruijn 2014: 3; Janin & Marie 2003) in times of peace and war—for so far people can lead everyday lives during times of war.[3] Its prevalence as shown by much anecdotal evidence and numerous case studies begs the question

why ritual violence and brutality have not been studied much more extensively than actually has been the case to date. Thus for some reason it does not appear as a major topic in development studies, conflict studies and related fields. Particularly the lack of broad comparative studies on ritual violence makes it very difficult to detect the provenances, types, evolutions and current trends of such violence in Africa as a whole, let alone across the world as a whole. [4]

Ritual violence studied and unstudied

True, a significant if relatively small number of scholars from diverse disciples do reliably analyse (certain types of) ritual violence—or at least the counter-phenomenon of non-violent ritual healing, medicine, empowerment and conciliation (e.g. Traore 1965; Tshiteku 2008; Akello 2010; Jacobs 2010; Van der Niet 2010)—in their works (e.g. Gifford 2002 (1993); Ellis 1995, 2001a, 2002, 2007 (1999); Ellis & Ter Haar 2004; Richards 2005; Cimprič apud Bouju & De Bruijn 2014; Van der Kraaij 2015; Petrus 2008; Petrus et al 2018).

Particularly studies on witchcraft in Africa and beyond have (once) been quite extensive and have shown some relatively recent if perhaps short-lived "signs of revival" (Ellis 2001a: 223 (quote); e.g. Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1995). Fortunately we can rely on these scholars and their works—and on a small number of investigative journalists and other insightful observers as well (e.g. Mchunu 2015; Mukpo 2017; Flomo 2021; Karpeh 2023)—especially if we ourselves wish to conduct a comparative analysis of ritual violence across countries, regions and continents in the future, as such broad analyses seems to be lacking.

Thus West Africa specialist Fred van der Kraaij is one of the few scholars studying ritual violence in a comprehensive manner (especially those with lethal intent or effect), as shown by extensive passages on this phenomenon in his major 2015 work *Liberia: From the Love of Liberty to Paradise Lost* based with updates on the Dutch original of 2013 (Kraaij 2013, 2015). [5] Van der Kraaij presents and comments on many more particular findings by himself and a number of journalists and observers at his *Liberia Past and Present* [6] and *Ritual Killing In Africa* websites since 2001 and 2018 respectively. [7]

Stephen Ellis, onetime Director of and (like Van der Kraaij) longtime senior researcher at the African Studies Centre in Leiden (which extensive library is a major wellspring of sources for this paper), is one of the few other scholars who has noted and studied ritual violence in Liberia and elsewhere; his insights, expertise and companionship are sorely missed since his untimely death in 2015 (Akinyele & Dietz 2019: esp. 1-3; Ter Haar apud Akinyele & Dietz 2019: 6-30). [8]

Even so, the reported instances of ritual attacks and killings in Liberia and elsewhere have been and continue to be so frequent, that one can deduce salient traits and trends from these, leading to both preliminary and definite findings. Indeed Ellis himself noted that during the Liberian civil wars so "many fighters consumed human blood or body-parts that it may be said to have been a standard part of the armoury of Liberian fighters" (Ellis 2001a: 223).

All in all however, the relative dearth of in-depth study and knowledge on ritual violence, both within and outside academia, remains worrying and challenging. First of all, the bulk of classical-historical accounts written

during the last phases of Colonisation and early stages of Decolonisation on ancient and recent history of West Africa and its peoples, cultures, regions and eventual 'modern' nation-states, have, however insightful in other respects, rarely mentioned, let alone studied in-depth, native customs and beliefs—least of all or not at all rituals expressing these customs and beliefs in violence (e.g. Panikkar 1963; Hargreaves 1969; Crowder 1970 (1968); Davidson, Buah & Ajayi 1972 (1965)).

Some classical-anthropological, classical-historical and philosophical-theological accounts have paid some or even focused attention to native customs and beliefs in West Africa and other parts of Africa—and Liberia in particular (e.g. Johnston 1906; Schwab 1947; Harley 1941a,b,c, 1950), including those on ritual(istic) violence involving witchcraft and animal and human sacrifices—or ritual measures to regulate, constrain or even prevent such violence from happening in the first place.

Think of the groundbreaking studies by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, a founding father of cultural and social anthropology, on for instance the religious customs and beliefs of the Azande and Nuer peoples in or beyond Anglo-Egyptian Sudan or present-day South Sudan and bordering countries of Central Africa (e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1958 (1937), 1962 (1956)). Arguably Evans-Pritchard had been "the first" to produce a detailed study on "private vengeance and the feud" (arguably a type of ritual violence) in Africa "among the Nuer, a pastoral people of the upper Nile region" (Gluckman 1963 (1956): 5).

Similarly, Axel-Ivar Berglund has been one of the few to produce equally detailed studies on the religious customs and beliefs of the Zulu people in South Africa—including extensive analyses on magical (healing) rites

and ritual killings—mainly 'ritual slaughter' of animals however, which in most societies is more generally accepted or condoned than slaughter of humans (Berglund 1967: 37-50; 1969: 101-116; 1976: esp. 214-245).

Or think of the insightful studies by Grace Gredys Harris on for instance the *βutasi* religion among the Taita people in southern Kenya, whereby *kutasa*, its "basic religious act" of squatting and spraying "mouthfuls of liquid" like sugar cane beer or water and then uttering blessings or exhortations to particularly cast out "anger and resentment from the performer's heart and to turn away the anger of the [natural or supernatural] agent(s) addressed" (Harris 1978: 25-26 (quotes)).

This anger-removal rite, so central to their indigenous religion, is a major reason why ritual violence among the Taita appears to be rare. This is perhaps also because of—or despite—the fact that most Taita are nowadays at least nominal Muslims and some of them at least nominal Christians.

As we will show for Liberia, most denominations and branches of the Abrahamic religions and their priests in Africa—as admitted by some theological thinkers (e.g. Hebga et al 1963, 1967; Hebga 1982, 1990, 1995)—exhibit remarkedly little will and success in countering ritual violence that emanate from native, animist beliefs—let alone countering ritual violence that emanate from their own beliefs, or from heterodox combinations of both. An odd mixture on their part of fascination, prejudice and cohabitation with animism appears to account for their lacklustre opposition to such violence. At any rate, ritual violence in one form or another seems to happen everywhere—even among the Taita in Kenya (e.g. Mnyamwezi 2017).

Nevertheless, most contemporary scholars and observers on Africa, specifically those studying the perceived origins and fallouts of the recent wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and other places in West Africa and beyond in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, have paid little attention to ritual violence as a major factor accounting for brutal war and brittle peace. Some did pay attention to ritual violence and were rather shocked and alarmed by it, but showed little understanding of it. Specifically those who adopted what Paul Richards termed the *new barbarism* thesis (Richards 1996, 2001, 2005) of brutal warfare by environmental, political and cultural 'anti-modernity' crises and degradations (e.g. Huntington 1993; Kaplan 1994)—which contained many of the same faulty presuppositions as the kindred *new predatory war* thesis (see Ten Dam 2023: 65-74)—misconceived the provenance, role and relevance of ritual violence in the conflicts they studied. [9]

At any rate, many others noticed but were at a loss to explain ritual violence in these 'new wars', describing and viewing it as wanton, baffling brutality by mostly young combatants wearing "bizarre accoutrements" (Ellis 1995: 165; Ellis 2007: 17) that seemed to defy analysis and understanding. Thus British correspondent Matthew Campbell described but was at loss to explain his "terrifying, bizarre experience" of travelling with NPFL fighters towards Liberia's capital Monrovia in July 1990 "kitted out for battle in women's wigs and dresses" and their few vehicles spray-painted with frightening texts like "Here comes dead body trouble" (Campbell 1990; from Ellis 2007: 17, 115).

Other foreign correspondents tried to explain these semi-traditionalist accoutrements and accompanying lootings, vandalisms and other brutalities during the later stages of the Liberian civil war as a sign of

'come-back-to-the-bush' *anti-modernity* (a variant of new barbarism), like Jeffrey Goldberg: "They destroy symbols of progress and prosperity—pumping stations, plantations—with glee, as if they're happy to destroy the country's future" (Goldberg 1995: 38; from Ellis 2007: 122). Yet generally these young fighters of the NPFL and other armed groups did not destroy or plunder goods to do away with modern industrialist and consumerist society, but rather to get their "just deserts" from a society that had so far neglected the poor like them—and to punish the elite from having failed to help them despite the promises of redistribution by those who educated them (Ellis 2007: 122-123; Richards 1996: esp.79-etc.; Bazenguissa-Ganaga 1999).

In such cases deprivations led to depredations, and grievances led to 'greedy' hoarding of riches by the destitute. These cases mainly show that pure greed tends to motivate rather the privileged few who already possess quite some riches but just gluttonously wish to get more and more of these. In contrast, the destitute first tend to amass goods by plunder if need be in order to satisfy their needs and grievances, avenge their frustrations and gain status through possessing these goods; they only tend to become truly avaricious i.e. solely or mainly motivated by self-enrichment once they are no longer destitute, 'got the taste' for enrichment and even become the new rich.

All in all, most Western observers did not or still do not realise that African combatants in Liberia and elsewhere tend to wear 'freakish' dresses and decorations like human bones not just to puzzle, intimidate and scare outsiders, bystanders and enemies alike, but to ritually express spiritual power and invincibility—just as traditional masks to this day express hidden spiritual connections and powers in especially

secret societies across Liberia (see Ellis 2007: 16-18). Later stages of Liberia's civil wars knew "less cases of male fighters dressing in women's clothes or other carnival costume" and more cases of fighters wearing dresses fashionable in America for reasons that need to be determined in further research; yet the "one thing the fighters always wore" during Liberia's First and Second Civil Wars were "objects for their spiritual protection" (Ibid: 122).

Even those studying mobilisations and indoctrinations of child soldiers and other combatants during these relatively recent conflicts in West Africa and beyond—or the attempted disarmaments, demobilisations, therapeutic treatments, reconciliations and reintegration of these former combatants into society afterwards—hardly deal with and thus barely grasp the customs, beliefs and rituals of these war veterans accounting for their past violence and present traumas and often violent behaviour (e.g. Renda 1999; Chelpi-den Hamer 2001; Peters 2006; Hoffman 2008;)—barring some notable exceptions at least to some degree (e.g. Richards 2001; 2005; Fithen & Richards apud Richards 2005; Utas apud Richards 2005; Van Gog 2008; Van der Niet 2010).

Thus while Luca Renda recognised that "internal conflicts often revolve around intangible issues such as: ethnic disputes, religion, language, group rights, discrimination or domination by a majority or a minority" (Renda 1999: 59), he did not refer to any aspects of ritual violence as factors which anybody seeking to end civil wars must deal with. This omission or 'blind spot' has been typical among those studying and practicing (attempts at) development, negotiated settlement, reconciliation and conflict resolution.

Challenges of studying ritual violence in-depth and across cases

Despite the reliable notion that ritual violence however circumscribed is widespread in many parts of the world—given a fair number of anecdotal reports and in-depth case studies on particular tribes, peoples and societies (see preceding section)—few if any systematic comparative studies have been made on this phenomenon in the present times or recent past, let alone the distant past. Even the more general "comparative empirical study of war .. was left mainly to military professionals, historians, or anthropologists with antiquarian interests" (Richards 2005: 1).

A small group of scholars and analysts have been or are doing their best to fill this huge gap in knowledge on this phenomenon in the broad sense given the perhaps unavoidable variety of definitions and thus delineations of it (e.g. Hadzizi 2011). Fred van der Kraaij is one of them regarding the close study of lethal ritual violence: "For over forty years I have studied the phenomenon of ritual killings in Africa and I've come to the conclusion that these practices are widespread across the continent. Ritual murders are also committed beyond the African continent, but that is not the focus of my research". [10]

But even Van der Kraaij cautions that his study of the phenomenon in Africa is not (yet) a systematic or otherwise advanced one. Thus on his website *Ritual Killing In Africa* he just presents "relevant material, often accompanied by my personal observations and/or analyses, which .. must be seen as reflections and certainly do not pretend to be definite conclusions". [11]

All in all, the dearth of especially comparative research and knowledge on ritual violence—and related phenomena in (once) traditional i.e. preindustrial societies—is clearly in part due to the overall disinterest in it across a wide range of scientific institutions and disciplines due to conservatism, biases, budgetary constraints and kindred reasons—with the partial exception of particularly anthropology and ethnography (see preceding section 'Ritual violence studied and unstudied'). The same disinterest has been rife among state and religious institutions as well. Thus the Catholic Church generally "had made no effort to understand the spiritual beliefs and needs of Africans" in Colonial and even Postcolonial times (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 53).

However, even those interested and engaged in studying the phenomenon of ritual violence, even in the more modest and easily focusable setting of single-case-studies, face two major interlocked challenges that concern studying other aspects of (originally) preindustrial societies as well: 1) the unwillingness to divulge to outsiders the workings of customs like those related to ritual violence that they consider to be sensitive, confidential or fully secret for religious, other cultural or practical reasons (omerta, self-interest, self-preservation, etc.); and 2) the lack of written or otherwise recorded codifications of such customs due to oral rather than scriptural traditions in these societies at least until well into the twentieth century.

These cultural characteristics—secretiveness and lack of written codification—are especially true for Africa, which arguably "remains the continent where the least gets written down", a given that is "to some extent compensated by the fact that ideas transmitted by word of mouth are more important in Africa than in most parts of the world, no doubt

because of its long oral tradition" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 19). Yet one can only understand and (comparatively) study oral traditions in Africa and elsewhere for so for far both locals and foreigners can audio-visually record these or write these down.

Thus far this has been done only sparingly and on a case-by-case basis over the last few decades and even centuries. Comparative and focused studies (with recordings) on animist, Christian and other religious beliefs and customs vis-à-vis social and cultural practices in Africa have been rarer still (e.g. Thomas et al 1969; Moorhouse 1973; Schoffeleers 1978; Bourdillon 1991; Olupona 1991; Gifford 1992, 1995; Haynes 1996; see Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 19-20 & notes 25, 26, 27, 31)—slightly less rare if counting the more doctrinal and other partisan observations and studies on native beliefs and customs from Christian and other non-native perspectives or vice versa as well (e.g. Harley 1941a,b,c, 1950; Junge 1950, 1952; La Roche 1957; Kuik 1970; Gehman 1993 (1989); Hebga 1982a,b, 1990, 1995).

Animist and other traditional religions in Africa may have revitalised in recent decades, but are seemingly dispersed, ever evolving, splintering and realigning within and across regions, without clearly demarcated doctrines and denominations. These religions are also generally neglected and ill understood—by outsiders at least (apart from the few specialists studying these in depth)—in part because these "lack written texts to compare with the Bible or the Qur'an" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 20).

As a result, these religions (seem to) lack clear, distinct or common theological and customary doctrines—including those on the do's and don'ts of ritual violence—that remain more or less uniformly fixed and enforced over time. Even more pronounced and minutely described ones lack written

sources, priestly authorities and thus uniform (coded) doctrines—such as the heterodox *winti* (spirit) religion with native American elements practised in the former Dutch colony Surinam and its diaspora in the Netherlands and elsewhere, based on native *vodun* (spirit) and other 'Voodoo(like)' [12] beliefs among enslaved members of the Akan, Fon and other peoples in West Africa brought to Surinam during the transatlantic slave trade (e.g. Wooding 1972; Stephen 1983, 1986; Kelly 2023).

In comparison, other peoples and regions with long oral traditions, like the Albanians in the Balkans and the Chechens in the Caucasus, (seem to) possess much 'better' indoctrinated, circumscribed, described and thus analysed beliefs and customs to outsiders especially, simply because they adopted a Latin, Cyrillic or other foreign script and increased the literacy among them decades, perhaps even a full century, earlier than most peoples on the African continent. Yet even their religions and other cultural characteristics are little known, as their scripts and literacies arrived relatively late compared to those of other peoples on much of the Eurasian continent.

Thus one of the fundamental factors accounting for a "relative lack of knowledge about Albanians' immaterial culture, their beliefs, morals and customs" is simply the longstanding "absence of indigenous script" (Ten Dam 2011: 262 (quote); Ten Dam 2018: 33). Such (outside) knowledge about peoples in the Northern Caucasus was similarly limited for the same basic reason. Thus "the Chechens and Ingush adopted a script only under a Soviet literacy programme in the 1920s (initially in Latin; Cyrillic since 1938). Prior to that literacy drive, some Chechens—less than one percent—wrote in Arabic or Chechen in

Arabic script, in Persian, Turkic and Russian or Chechen in Cyrillic script" (Ten Dam 2011: 259).

Be that as it may, secretiveness and lack of written codification also appear to account for the relative neglect in studying and amassing knowledge on ritual violence in particular: overcoming these challenges may require costly and time-consuming efforts to gain the trust of local communities—efforts that may be beyond the budget and timeframe of many an academic, journalistic or other research-oriented institution.

Findings from multiple outside and inside researchers seeking to overcome said challenges (whether successful or not) have found that secretiveness towards them are due to many reasons. I myself have already found in earlier research that peoples like the Albanians and the Chechens are often "fearful to divulge any .. information and insights to outsiders" given their repeated sufferings from colonisation, repression, warfare, deportation and other devastations in the past and present; outsiders, even venerable researchers, may intentionally or unintentionally "betray them to incumbent, all-too-often hostile authorities—or otherwise betray, misinterpret and dishonour their trust by, for instance, writing disparaging accounts about their culture and traditions" (Ten Dam 2020: 253).

Africans are likewise reluctant to talk about their actual religious beliefs and practices—and particularly about (blood-)feuding, witch-hunting or other types of ritual violence—to outsiders. Members of mainly religiously oriented secret societies—of which there are many for centuries to the present day in Liberia alone—are actually forbidden to divulge such practices in their midst; typically what "happens during the

initiation ceremonies is secret and violations of the pledge of secrecy are punishable by death" (Kraaij 2015: 33-34). These societies not just tend to be highly secret to protect themselves and their practices from actual and perceived enemies: arguably, secrecy itself is central to their (religious) beliefs and rituals—as I will describe in the forthcoming section 'Secret societies and ritual brutalities' in forthcoming Part 3 of my Ritual Violence in Liberia series. According to some scholars, like founding sociologist Georg Simmel, "the secret offers .. a second world alongside the manifest world" (Simmel 1964: 330). If so, then "secrecy is a natural relative to the spirit world" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 75).

In paradoxical contrast, Africans do talk freely amongst themselves about such secret beliefs and practices—unless these concern the particulars of their own secret societies—through often speculative "oral communication and news-telling" dubbed *radio trottoir* (pavement radio) and to some degree even the local written and audiovisual media (Ibid: 28(quote)-33).[13] They believe—all too often confirmed by past experience—that any voluntary or allowed revelations and explanations to outsiders, be they long-term field researchers or short-term visitors, or even to researchers from their own communities, will meet with incomprehension, controversy disgust and even hostility by the latter.

For the same reason, many African leaders during and after Decolonisation hid their actual (violent) beliefs and practices to the outside world in order to avoid alarming foreign dignitaries, financiers and observers. Thus Zambia's longtime president Kenneth David Kaunda, undeniably a devout Christian, "struck most foreign visitors as reasonable, progressive and sincere", unaware of local rumours that he

had "a close personal relationship to two Indian mystics who had a key position in his entourage" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 70). [14]

While local secretiveness may be difficult to penetrate, many outsiders willfully ignore *radio-trottoir* rumours (sometimes actually verifiable and factual) recorded by local journalists and researchers or any other indications of local ritualism because of their own cultural and ideological predispositions. Thus according to Cameroonian anthropologist-theologian Meinrad Pierre Hebga (1928-2008), leftist revolutionaries and other progressives in the West were blind to the fact that many of the apparently like-minded African leaders they admired were (also) "in thrall to all sorts of traditionalists, marabouts, fetish-priests and diviners. Some of these leaders even practice ritual human sacrifices to retain their power" (Hebga 1990: 74; transl. Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 72 & note 7).

Arguably Hebga's own Catholic upbringing, education and priesthood may have instilled some (anti-animist) prejudices of his own. Still, his nuanced analyses of native customs which one should understand, tolerate and even accept for so far in line with the Scriptures—and calls, together with likeminded theological scholars like Richard J. Gehman, for an inclusive, responsive Christianity in Africa devoid of white-colonial, supremacist and racist misinterpretations and misapplications of it, were quite radical and progressive at the time (e.g. Hebga apud Hebga et al 1963, 1967; Gehman 1993 (1989); Boulaga et al 2007). [15]

One must keep in mind however that many locals, be they leading figures or ordinary citizens, do not uniformly approve or justify religious or secular practices of ritual violence either. Many or most of them are actually ashamed about and oppose such practices within their communities, like

abusing children accompanied with satanic or other rituals, removing organs for magic purposes, consulting or hunting witches, or feuding with perceived and actual enemies through other ritual(ised) means. Still, they are generally loath to talk to both domestic and foreign 'investigators' about these things so as to avoid judgment, derision or even repressive (state) intervention. They rather wish to deal with and combat these brutalities internally, often through the same (kinds of) beliefs, perceived or actual powers and rituals the perpetrator hold and apply, yet interpreted and applied quite differently than the latter do.

Thus healing white magicians mainly differ from harming black magicians in the ways they use essentially the same tool-kits (oaths, spells, potions, etcetera) for quite contrasting objectives and perceived or actual effects—and quite often apply these very same tool-kits against (those of) the latter. Outside investigators have been able to detect this dynamics between white and black magic to some degree, by their own direct observations (if often from a safe distance) or by rare witnesses (reluctantly) willing to divulge such secrets to them and others—with or without the aid or 'gentle persuasion' of police officers or other agents of the state.

Concluding observations

All in all, the mentioned and other written and audiovisual accounts by mainly foreigners about ritual customs and practices in Liberia and elsewhere have been few and far in between and often prejudicial from Christian and other Western perspectives to boot. These accounts and those by contemporary researchers are essentially anecdotal, just offering glimpses of apparent trends of ritual violence in the distant and recent

past and present in Liberia (as elsewhere). Van der Kraaij cautions that, even with his own research and that of close and trusted colleagues, "It will never be known how many victims died in the hands of ritual killers nor will it ever be known how many perpetrators got away with their hideous crimes. Many people continued to believe that human sacrifices were needed (justified?) to protect or further the interests of the tribal community—or for personal purposes: to enhance social prestige or to gain material wealth, even to gain access to public offices". [16]

Even more general insights on magical-ritual beliefs and practices among Liberians remain sketchy at best, particularly on who exactly believes and practices in what, where and when. Thus Ellis notes "a very considerable problem of securing adequate evidence. The best-documented population groups of modern Liberia are those living in the urban settlements which were founded by immigrants of American or other foreign origin" (Ellis 2001a: 225) who had brought their own beliefs and practices—and eventually mingled these to some hazy extents with native beliefs and practices (see esp. first sections in forthcoming Part 3 of the Ritual Violence in Liberia series). Ellis:

> The fact that few literate Liberians or foreign writers ventured inland before then [early twentieth century], and that their accounts of the interior were often coloured by a characteristically Victorian idea of African primitiveness and superstition, has meant that there is a relative paucity of ethnographic descriptions of some parts of the Liberian hinterland until quite recent times. When scholars, missionaries and administrators did take pains to inquire systematically about the practices, institutions and ideas of the hinterland peoples, it was at the very moment that existing

> ideas and practices were changing most rapidly in reaction to the extension of government authority over them (Ellis 2001a: 225).

Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence of magical-ritual beliefs and practices in general and magical-ritual violence in particular across Liberia's past and present turns out to be plenty if one adds these all up (or just a portion of these) and if one interpret these carefully, as I seek to accomplish in the subsequent articles of this series.

Even though "no one will ever know how many" people exactly have been ritually killed (or mistreated, wounded and maimed) in Liberia during any particular period of time, anecdotal evidence of such violence is plenty: actually ritual violence of all possible varieties—of all kinds of political and non-political and magical and non-magical shades and hues—continued in Liberia "during the dictatorship of Samuel Doe (1980-1990), the two civil wars (1989-1997 and 1999-2003) and the presidency of Charles Taylor (1997-2003); and even during the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first democratically elected female president" (Kraaij 2015: 41 (quotes))—and sadly to the present day.

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Endnotes

1. The term 'ritualistic' may better describe the phenomenon studied than the term 'ritual'—in the conceptual and phenomenological sense. Yet a frequent use of the former term would decrease the article 's readability.
2. The distinct articles to appear in this Ritual violence in Liberia series in this journal may constitute more advanced, updated and improved versions of equivalent chapters in my *Ritual violence in Liberia – Ritualised brutalities in Liberia prior to, during and after the Civil Wars*—if this book were indeed to come out first. But more probably this book will appear only after the entire series has come out in full, whereby its book chapters will be the more advanced versions of the series' parts i.e. articles.
3. Jacky Bouju and Mirjam de Bruijn do not clearly specify whether ordinary violence i.e. "ordinary violence of ordinary people in ordinary situations" (Bouju & De Bruijn 2014: 1; from Janin & Marie 2003) concerns violence in the midst of war or other forms of armed conflict and political violence as well. Still, they appear to imply that it concerns any non-public violence in times of peace or absence of major conflict only (Ibid: 1-11). At any rate, I equate ordinary violence with any private violence in times of peace and war.
4. This lack of comparative knowledge has forced me to abandon the planned sections 'Ritual violence in Africa and the rest of the world—overall types and trends' and 'Ritual violence in West Africa—some particular types and trends' for this article. Simply too little is researched and known on such trends to make meaningful observations.
5. From here on we refer to 'Kraaij' in short for easier readability—yet one seeks in the Bibliography for 'Van der Kraaij' i.e. the author's full surname.
6. Van der Kraaij also had a blog called *Liberian Perspectives* (https://blog.liberiapastandpresent.org) since 2007 (see Kraaij 2015: xxvii, 163), but now this seems either defunct or integrated with his Liberia Past and Present website (www.liberiapastandpresent.org).

7. See www.liberiapastandpresent.org & www.ritualkillinginafrica.org. Van der Kraaij: "In 2018 it was decided to cease reporting on ritualistic killings [in Liberia] on this [former] site. Instead, new ritual murder cases have since been included in a general website on *Ritual Killing In Africa*. Interested readers are advised to consult the Liberia page of this site for recent developments" (https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsIVbis.htm). However Van der Kraaij neglects to date his particular papers and comments on both of these websites, which makes it impossible to refer to these as publications Harvard-style in the main text. So I refer to these publications in foot- or endnotes instead. The most significant of these are presented in the Bibliography as well.
8. Gerrie ter Haar, a close colleague, collaborator and wife of Ellis, noted that "Stephen and I liked to compare the type of bonding among college friends, with its elements of mutual obligation, reciprocal relations, and solidarity within the group, to the social bonds forged in African societies, such as initiation societies in West Africa or the Broederbond in South Africa" (Ter Haar apud Akinyele & Dietz 2019: 8).
9. Richards effectively conflated the new-barbarism and new-predatory-war theses into a broader new-war thesis acknowledging "poverty", "hatred" and other grievance-based motives leading to weakened or collapsed states (Richards 2005: 2)—even though he claimed to distinguish and criticise three kinds of new-war explanations: 'Malthus-with-guns' (violent competition over resources due to environmental degradation and consequent scarcity), 'new barbarism' (violent confrontation between communities due to reawakened cultural and ethnic identities and differences) and 'greed-not-grievance' (violent competition over both scarce and plentiful resources out of greed and narrow self-interest) (Ibid: 6-10). Yet most or nearly all deprivationists stressed that so-called 'new

wars' were just the same-old wars based on deprivations and consequent grievances under new guises and circumstances, with criminal and (other) greedy entrepreneurs playing subsidiary roles. In contrast, depredationists like Paul Collier and Martin van Creveld stressed the relevance of greed-based rather than (any) grievance-based motives accounting for the supposedly 'new' kind of armed conflict emerging after especially the end of the Cold War (see Ten Dam 2023: 65-74).

10. Fred van der Kraaij, 'Why publish this site on ritual killing in Africa?' *Ritual Killing in Africa – Human Rights, Rule of Law, and Superstition in Africa* [2018]; www.ritualkillinginafrica.org/why/. See note 7 on the need for referencing these and other website sources in foot- or endnotes rather than Harvard-style in the main text.
11. Van der Kraaij, 'Methodology' *Ritual Killing in Africa* [2018]; www.ritualkillinginafrica.org/caution/. See preceding note and note 7.
12. For now I prefer not to apply the pejorative term *voodoo* to denote such beliefs and practices in and beyond West Africa, even if one could rightly criticise some or many of these beliefs and practices in the moral sense. One should apply non-pejorative terms and concepts in scientific analysis as much as possible, before making any (moral, normative) judgments on the phenomena such terms refer at. That is one reason why I am considering to replace the term terrorism with another one like *anti-civilian violence* or *one-sided violence* for the phenomenon of any violence against (practically) defenceless people (see my definition of this phenomenon in Ten Dam 2023: 42-46). One consideration why I may continue to apply the term 'terrorism' for this phenomenon however, is to counter the persistent lack of lucid circumscriptions and overabundance of biased, partisan application of it. Maybe I will also decide to apply the term 'voodoo' in future research for the very same reason.

13. Many of these "so-called 'secret societies' " (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 79)—a term "originally used by Europeans to designate initiation societies they found .. in many parts of West and central Africa" (Ibid: 209, note 29)— have trouble keeping their secrets despite their threatened sanctions on those divulging these, simply because of their large memberships: "many .. incorporate most adult members of a community, making the notion of secrecy rather problematic" (Ibid). The resulting *radio-trottoir* rumours, though often speculative, non-corroborated and (thus) unreliable, offer outside researchers with one of the few avenues to study these societies and their ritual violence.
14. Only after Kaunda finally lost his presidency in Zambia's 1991 elections did "further information about this side of his spiritual life emerge as his closest advisors began to speak more openly" about this closely guarded palace secret; "many experts on Southern African affairs would have been perplexed if they had had full information about it in earlier years, when Kaunda was generally seen as a Christian gentleman and a moderate socialist" (Ellis & Ter Haar 2004: 71).
15. However, even the most understanding analyses of 'other' beliefs and customs tend to be rather constrained and biased if conducted from a strictly doctrinal perspective based on one's own customs and beliefs. Jon Arendsen did praise Richard J. Gehman's approach of studying African traditional religions in-depth without assuming *a priori* that these are heathen, evil or Satanic. Yet his argument that German "deals with specific aspects of African Traditional Religion and then looks at the Scriptures to see if this activity is in line with Scriptures" and that this approach "has been needed for a long time" (Arendsen apud Gehman 1993: 8-9), actually shows the limits of studying phenomena from a doctrinal-theological or any other partisan perspective which effectively forestalls any truly scientific falsification or 'stress-testing' of one's own convictions, presuppositions and predispositions.

16. Van der Kraaij, 'Ritual Killings – Past and Present: From Cultural Phenomenon To Political Instrument, Part II The second half of the 20th century: 'heart man' murders – Introduction and Caution' *Liberia: Past and Present*, [2005]; https://archives.liberiapastandpresent.org/RitualKillingsSecondHalf20th.htm.

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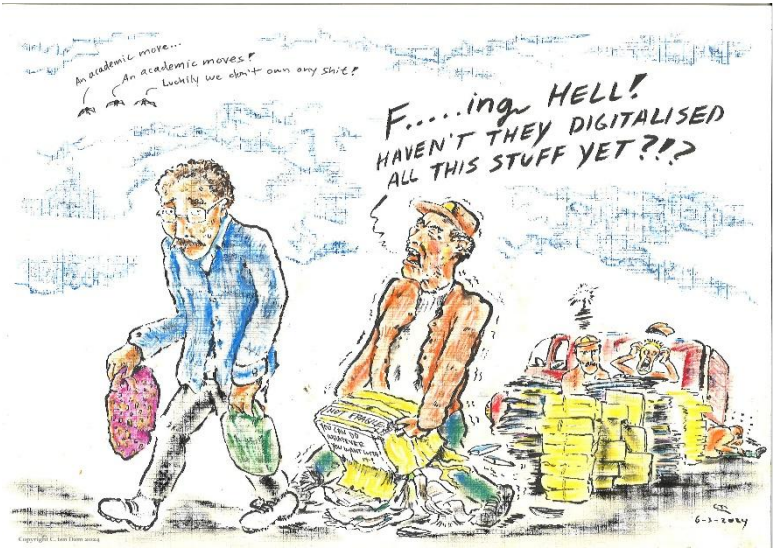

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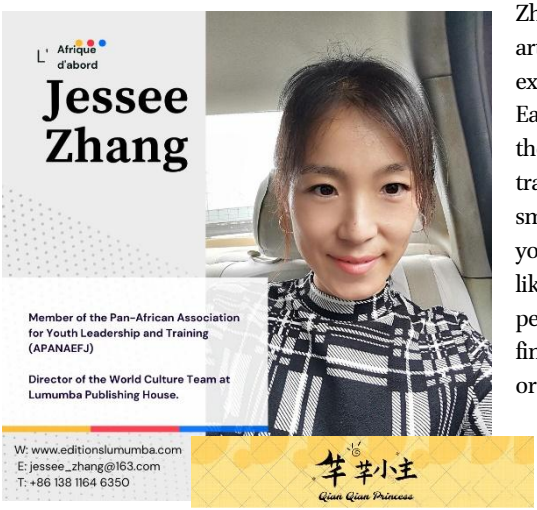
WCPT already has published multiple books in English on e.g. Eastern and Western countries and (their) cultures. If you are interested in writing one or more books on specific countries and cultures with royalty contracts for the World Culture project (worldculture.wordpress.com), you are welcome to contact Jessee Zhang at jessee_zhang@163.com (of course, she speaks English).



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Her own designed and crafted products bear this logo; 'Qian Qian' is the nick name of her daughter.

*: Zhang Shi in Chinese; she is also editor of (any) Chinese section(s) in this journal (see Editorial Board on page 2 of its more recent issues and volumes).