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Cover Story 'Child Witches' Inclusion

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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This Halloween many American children will dress up as witches. And we'll hear their laughter and see their smiles as they joyfully go from door-to-door trick-or-treating.

But here and in some places across the globe, children would never pretend to be witches because the consequences are not only dire but they can also be deadly.

For example, Nine-year-old Nwanaokwo Edet of Nigeria was accused of being a witch by the family pastor. Nwanaokwo's father forced acid down his throat as an exorcism, burning away his face and eyes. Nwanaokwo died a month later.

And, eight-year-old Shilua Salifu of Ghana now lives with her grandmother after being accused of being a witch. Shilua's mother tried to saw off the top of her skull to let the demons fly away.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo nearly 50,000 children live on the streets of Kinshasa, the capital, because they were accused of witchcraft and rejected by their families. In Nigeria, the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network reports that nearly 25,000 children have been abandoned or persecuted on the belief they were witches or wizards.

Organizations like the United Nations Children's Fund, Africa Unite Against Child Abuse, and Save the Children have stepped in where they could to stop the witch-hunt. But the phenomenon of "witch children" is so widespread throughout Africa these organizations

have set up "witch camps" as shelters for children who cannot be safely placed with a relative like Shilua.

Throughout history, people described as witches have been tortured, persecuted, and even murdered. And it is usually society's most vulnerable who are targeted.

With the HIV/AIDS epidemic leaving many children orphaned, and poverty ensued from crop failure and decade-long wars, the excising of Africa's children from their familial communities with the charge of witchcraft becomes an acceptable way for poor families to abandon their children.

The rapid growth of Evangelical Christianity throughout Africa has exploited the problem. With these churches in competition for parishioners, some clerics establish their unique godly credentials by claiming to have special powers in recognizing and exorcising these "child witches" for, of course, exorbitant fees.

The role religion has played in witch hunts is not new and has always targeted children, the most defenseless, before targeting marginalized adults.

For example, residing a stone's throw from Salem, Massachusetts I am reminded of one of this nation's earliest examples of home-grown domestic terrorism - the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

This haunting history of the Puritan's execution of innocent women, and certain men, is a window into how their religious fanaticism, misogyny, and homophobia destroyed not only the moral fiber of their town, but how it also decimated its own Christian zeal all to become a "city on the hill."

Clerics' sanctioning of Exodus 22:18 "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," not only gave men biblical legitimacy to control women, but it also gave them a legal license to kill them.

Homosocial circles of women threatened the Puritan's paradigm of male dominance, giving rise to the charges of witchcraft, because of the theological belief that women ought not be in the company of each other without the presence of a man. And without the presence of a man, of course, women could not help but engage in sorcery, paganism, and lesbianism.

"Lesbianism was identified with witchcraft... she could not form a household of her own apart from church and family... Her relations with a man were apt to be moral to the point of martyrdom, but not romantic. Puritanism does not seem to have been any more personally fulfilling to women than the slavery that they had willingly submitted to in previous times," historian Ellwood Johnson points out.

While today new light is being shed on the Salem Witch Trials little is still known about the first woman accused of witchcraft that sparked the trials - Tituba, a black slave.

As the house slave of the Rev. Samuel Parris, minister of Salem Village, Parris' daughter and her cousin accused Tituba of witchcraft. Allegedly, while assisting Tituba in preparing a "witch cake," the girls experienced unexplained "fits" and "symptoms."

Forced to confess that she was a witch, Tituba was known throughout Salem to tell tales from her African folklore tradition that both frightened and fascinated children and adults alike, stories later seen as evidence of her personal witchcraft.

However, in later years, Tituba's confession gave many historians the belief that her

race and low status as a slave in the community were enough to accuse her of being a witch.

"Hell Houses" are today's contemporary form of witch hunting. Created in the late 1970's by fundamentalist pastor, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, "hell houses" are religious alternatives to traditional haunted houses. They are tours given by evangelical churches across the country design to scare people away from sin. And one of those sins is homosexuality.

In 2006 the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) put out a report titled "Homophobia at 'Hell House': Literally Demonizing Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth" explaining how hell houses specifically targets youth.

"Instead of spooking youth with ghosts and monsters, Hell House tour guides direct them through rooms where violent scenes of damnation for a variety of "sins" are performed, including scenes where a teenage lesbian is brought to hell after committing suicide and a gay man dying of AIDS is taunted by a demon who screams that the man will be separated from God forever in hell," the NGLTF stated.

A study published in the Journal of Psychology stated that a strong belief in Satan is directly related to intolerance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people.

Religious leaders who support Hell Houses believe that by scaring LGBTQ youth into "heterosexual" behavior they are saving their souls. However, the message that "homosexuals" are going to hell can have a deleterious impact on our youth. For example the NGLTF report tells the story of Bobby Griffith, a gay teen who wrote in his journal that he was afraid he was going to hell and committed suicide.

Witch-hunts have always created moral panic, mass hysteria, and public lynching of society's most vulnerable and marginalized.

This Halloween, as I think of the children in African and of LGBTQ children here at home, I am reminded of our present and past witch-hunts.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member, the Rev. Irene Monroe, is a religion columnist, theologian, and public speaker. A native of Brooklyn, Rev. Monroe is a graduate from Wellesley College and Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University, and served as a pastor at an African-American church before coming to Harvard Divinity School for her doctorate as a Ford Fellow. She was recently named to MSNBC's list of [10 Black Women You Should Know](#). Reverend Monroe is the author of [Let Your Light Shine Like a Rainbow Always: Meditations on Bible Prayers for Not-So-Everyday Moments](#) . As an African American feminist theologian, she speaks for a sector of society that is frequently invisible. Her website is irenemonroe.com. Click [here](#) to contact the Rev. Monroe.



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