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‘IS THIS LIVER HUMAN?’: CHILD SACRIFICE AND MORAL PANICS IN UGANDA

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Abstract

In 2010, the BBC broadcast a salacious story about child sacrifice in Uganda. A ‘witchdoctor’, who had become a Christian preacher, was the charismatic leading character, and claims were made that thousands of children were being sacrificed for purposes of witchcraft. The journalist won a major prize, and versions of his tale were heard and seen in Uganda on radio and television. Despite his account being substantially fictitious, it helped trigger a moral panic. A host of NGOs and activists became involved, and vigilante groups targeted alleged perpetrators. In 2021, as if existing legislation did not already make killing and mutilating people a crime, a Bill was approved by the Ugandan Parliament, making human sacrifice illegal. This occurred in the same month as a new Bill further criminalizing homosexuality. Legislation against human sacrifice and homosexuality has been presented as complementary by the Ugandan government and has been defended as responding to widespread concerns about child safety. The article discusses these developments, and comments on how promoting moral panic about child sacrifice is more likely to lead to the mistreatment of spuriously accused individuals than to improve accountability for heinous acts.

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IN 2021, THE UGANDAN PARLIAMENT PASSED A LAW CRIMINALIZING HUMAN SACRIFICE—a crime that, it might be expected, could be prosecuted through standard bodily violence legislation. The MP who promoted the new Bill was Bernard Atiku. He was especially concerned about the sacrifice of children, which he claimed had been rampant since the 1990s. That is certainly the impression given by news media. If ‘child sacrifice’ is typed into an internet search facility, examples in Uganda immediately pop up. It seems reasonable to ask how and why the situation emerged, and if there is something unusual about the country.

In this article, I draw on my own experiences. I lived in South Sudan from 1980 to 1984, visiting Uganda repeatedly. Then, from 1987 to 1991, I carried out ethnographic research in northern Uganda, and in the mid-1990s, I carried out further research in different parts of the country. In 2004, after a gap of almost ten years, I returned to my former research sites and I have visited Uganda for periods of weeks or months most years since to research topics ranging from witchcraft and the effects of the Lord’s Resistance Army insurgency to tropical disease control and criminal justice. Particularly, in the late 1980s and again more recently, I have worked in Honourable Bernard Atiku’s home region in the part of Uganda referred to as West Nile. In total, I have spent almost 30 months conducting ethnographic fieldwork in West Nile among Madi, Lugbara, and Alur populations. I have also spent around the same amount of time living among Acholi, Langi, and other Ugandan groups. During long periods, I lived in villages, hosted by local families. Still, I am a white British man, and that obviously will have affected my exchanges with people, including those I came to know very well.

I have written extensively on local healing, on violent groups associated with spirit possession, and on aspects of what in English is called ‘witchcraft’.¹ However, I do not recall anyone suggesting that sacrifice was a real

1. For example, Tim Allen, ‘Coming home: The international agencies and the returnees in West Nile’, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 1, 2 (1988), pp. 166–175; Tim Allen, ‘Understanding Alice: Uganda’s Holy Spirit Movement in context’, *Africa* 61 (1991), pp. 370–399; Tim Allen, ‘The Quest for Therapy in Moyo District’, in Holger Bernt Hansen and Michael Twaddle (eds), *Changing Uganda: The dilemmas of structural adjustment and revolutionary change* (James Curry, London, 1991), pp. 149–161; Tim Allen, ‘A flight from refuge: The return of refugees from Southern Sudan to Northern Uganda in the late 1980s’, in Tim Allen (ed), *In search of cool ground: War, flight and homecoming in north-east Africa* (James Currey, Oxford, 1996), pp. 220–261; Tim Allen, ‘The violence of healing’, *Sociologus* 47 (1997), pp. 101–128; Tim Allen, ‘Upheaval, affliction and health: A Ugandan case study’, in Henry Bernstein, Ben Crow, and Hazel Johnson (eds), *Rural livelihoods: Crises and responses* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992), pp. 217–248; Tim Allen, ‘AIDS and evidence: interrogating some Ugandan myths’, *Journal of Biosocial Science* 38 (2006), pp. 7–28; Tim Allen and Laura Storm, ‘Quests for therapy in northern Uganda: Healing at Laropi revisited’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6 (2012), pp. 22–46; Melissa Parker, Tim Allen, Georgia Pearson et al., ‘Border parasites: schistosomiasis control among Uganda’s fisherfolk’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6 (2012), pp. 98–123; Melissa Parker and Tim Allen, ‘De-politicizing parasites: reflections on attempts to control the

risk to children until around 2010. There were circumstances in which a child died, and someone was alleged to have caused the death, often by magical means, but the mutilation of the corpses of children for rituals was not something that the people I lived with had hitherto talked about, even during discussions on violence, rituals, and witchcraft. To the extent that there was awareness of stories about such practices, they were discussed in a similar way to things that might have been seen in a Nigerian soap opera aired on a television in a bar. A significant shift occurred when the issue was taken up by Church groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) following the BBC's broadcast of a disturbingly salacious account in 2010, triggering a remarkable moral panic.

Following Stanley Cohen's conception, I use the term 'moral panic' for a condition in which a person or group of persons become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.² Cohen argued that a moral panic narrative is constructed around deviant behaviour in which the clear villain is vilified as a 'folk devil'. Some details associated with perceived threats may be correct, but their seriousness is exaggerated. Cohen noted that moral panics are usually promoted by news media, with journalists competing to produce compelling and shocking stories. Moral panics are also likely to be used by political actors for their own interests, and law enforcers are expected to show they are protecting society by ridding it of 'folk devils' so things can return to normal. Cohen was a sociologist writing about the UK, and his 'folk devils' were supposedly antisocial young people in conflicting subcultures who often moved around on motorbikes in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In Cohen's model, a sense of social anxiety is aroused among the public through the symbolic representations of the threat. Cohen added that sometimes the object of the panic is something that has been in existence before but suddenly appears in the limelight. Gatekeepers of morality respond, with experts diagnosing the situation and proposing solutions, including new laws and specific policies. Over time, Cohen maintained, a moral panic can be largely forgotten; however, at other times, it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions, potentially producing changes in legal and social policy or even in the way society conceives of itself.³ Cohen's concept has subsequently been adopted by other researchers and applied to a wide range of things. These include child abuse, drug consumption,

control of neglected tropical diseases', *Medical Anthropology* 33 (2014), pp. 223–239. Tim Allen and Kyla Reid, 'Justice at the margins: Witches, poisoners, and social accountability in Northern Uganda', *Medical Anthropology* 34 (2015), pp. 106–123; Tim Allen, 'Vigilantes, witches and vampires: How moral populism shapes social accountability in northern Uganda', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (2015), pp. 360–386; Jackline Atingo, Tim Allen, and Anna Macdonald, 'Witnessing *Ongwen*: A betrayal of expectations?', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 22 (2024), pp. 785–802.

2. Stanley Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers* (MacGibbon and Kee, London, 1972).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

immigration, disease outbreaks, street crime, popular music, witch trials, McCarthyism, comics, and cheap books.⁴ The list of examples is endless, and some scholars have been critical of the term being used so widely.⁵ The main reason for using it in this context is to draw attention to the fact that misleading, exaggerated and peculiar stories in the media have been linked elsewhere to processes comparable to those that have occurred in Uganda.

Below, I start by discussing the BBC reporting of child sacrifice in Uganda and reviewing controversies about it. I then go on to discuss other accounts and assess evidence that human and child sacrifice are prevalent. In the following subsections, I place Ugandan anti-witchcraft activism and Christian campaigning against Satanism in historical perspective, and I draw attention to another moral panic occurring simultaneously and sometimes overlapping, relating to alleged abuses being perpetrated by homosexuals. Both panics led to new legislation, which has been presented as complementary in that new laws are aimed at protecting vulnerable children. I conclude by describing ways in which moral gatekeepers have been very active, and how efforts have also been made to institutionalize responses and frame the issues in ways that enhance forms of public authority. As moral panic theory would predict, societal changes occurring are related to the interests of those involved in campaigning and their broader social influence, rather than widespread alterations in the behaviour of purported social deviants. There is no evidence that a supposedly large number of child-sacrificers have suddenly been brought to justice or decided to mend their ways.

Initiating the moral panic narrative

In January 2010, The BBC's flagship news programme, *Newsnight*, showed an extended film about child sacrifice in Uganda presented by journalist Tim Whewell.⁶ The broadcast begins with a man dressed up in a white gown who is a Christian activist in northern Uganda. This is Polino Angela. We are told that he is leading a crusade to torch shrines. He is attempting to end a practice that 'appears to be killing more and more children' and which is known to be 'widespread'. Whewell also tells us that it is 'widely believed'

4. For example: Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1978); Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral panics: The social construction of deviance* (Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, New Jersey, 1994); Philip Jenkins, *Intimate enemies: Moral panics in contemporary Great Britain: Social problems and social issues* (Aldine de Gruyter, New York, 1992); Kenneth Thompson, *Moral panics* (Routledge, London, 1998).

5. For example, David Garland, 'On the concept of moral panic', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 4 (2008), pp. 9–30; Ben Sixsmith, 'A moral panic about moral panics? We are in danger of making unhinged generalisations about unhinged generalisers', *The Critic*, 20 November 2023 <<https://thecritic.co.uk/a-moral-panic-about-moral-panics>> (22 August 2025).

6. Tim Whewell, 'Witch-doctors reveal extent of child sacrifice in Uganda', *BBC News, Uganda*, 7 January 2010 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8441813.stm>> (22 August 2025).

that bodies of dead children have been placed in the foundations of some buildings in Kampala, Uganda's capital city. Reference is made to police reports about 'two dozen' murders, but Whewell invites us not to take these numbers seriously, because people think there are lots more killings than are recorded. We are not told what is in the police reports, or if they relate directly to two children that relatives have informed Whewell were killed in child sacrifices. In addition, Whewell meets a boy who had been abducted by a frightening witchdoctor but was subsequently released, because the witchdoctor was only interested in killing perfect specimens and the boy was circumcised. We do eventually have an interview with a policeman, but he is not questioned about the evidence. Instead, he talks generally about the use of witchcraft by rich individuals, and about how traditional healers have responded to the demand. This is followed by a statement by Whewell that traditional healers advertise services on radio stations. At first, it seems we are to assume that these are the healers that the policeman means. But no. Whewell tells us that these healers, the ones that advertise, are 'innocent'. It is others who are really 'witchdoctors'.

After making the assertions above about children in the foundations of Kampala's buildings, Whewell takes us back to northern Uganda and the activities of Polino Angela, who claims to have killed 70 people, including his son. Through his Christian faith, he realized the error of his ways and has now become a witchdoctor converter. He is seen doing his work. After a chat with a witchdoctor, the new convert agrees to abandon his practices. These have involved gruesome rituals. His clients have been bringing him human blood and body parts required by his spirits about three times a week! Even Tim Whewell sounds a bit incredulous at this point. Off we then go to the converted witchdoctor's shrine—where, we are told, no outsider has been before. Here we see the grisly remains of what the spirits have been fed on. A liver is pulled out of a pot with a stick. Is it human? Whewell's informant thinks so. The liver looks fresh, as if it has just been removed. Where was the rest of the body? We do not find out. Did Whewell take a bit of the liver for an autopsy? It seems not. Angela explains that he has converted more than 2,400 of these witchdoctors, but there are 'many, many' more shrines (like the one we see being burned) existing in this part of Uganda. Returning to scenes in Kampala, we are told people believe in spirits and that some government ministers consult witchdoctors, with the implication that they may be involved in child sacrifices too. Finally, we go to the north again, to end the report, with the claim that the most effective way to campaign against child sacrifice in Uganda is being led by Angela, Whewell's Christian vigilante.

The absurdity of claims made without question in the *Newsnight* report was immediately recognized. For example, one website dedicated to the supernatural and 'why people believe in weird stuff' repeated the story but

added up the numbers mentioned and was sceptical that Angelo could have saved 8,400 children per year for 20 years.⁷ For others, the BBC broadcast was completely unacceptable. It was sandwiched between a report about the snow in England and a speech by US President Obama, and without any discussion in the studio. At best, it was an exotic diversion about strange black people.

To analysts with local knowledge of Uganda and other parts of Africa, the suggestion that there is widespread belief in spirits and witchcraft was not surprising. The literature on such matters is substantial, ranging from the classic texts of anthropologists writing in the colonial era to more recent accounts, such as those by Jean La Fontaine, Adam Ashforth, Peter Geschiere, and Heike Behrends, as well as historical studies of anti-witchcraft panics, often linked to anticolonial activism, by for example, Luise White, and African analysts who have written insightfully about the customs and practices of their own people, including the great Ugandan poet and essayist, Okot p'Bitek.⁸ Nevertheless, scholars immersed in these debates and aware of these insights castigated the BBC for presenting a salacious and misinformed account, imbued with racist tropes. They also noted that several scenes had been rather obviously acted out for the camera.

Among those who complained to the BBC most vociferously was La Fontaine, who noted the similarities between Whewell's account and allegations about Satanism in the UK and US in the 1980s and early 1990s.⁹ In 1993, she was commissioned by the British government to investigate claims of ritual child abuse in the UK. It had been reported in the media that 4,000 children were being sacrificed every year, but she found that there was no credible evidence that such practices occurred.¹⁰ Similar conclusions were arrived at in the US when the National Center on Child Abuse and

7. Deborah Hyde, 'Uganda's child sacrifices. Superstition, religion, and being human', January 2010 <<http://deborahhyde.com/ugandas-child-sacrifices>> (22 August 2025).

8. Jean La Fontaine, *Speak of the devil: Tales of satanic abuse in contemporary England* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998); Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, violence, and democracy in South Africa* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005); Peter Geschiere *The modernity of witchcraft* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1997); Heike Behrend, *Resurrecting cannibals: The Catholic Church, witch-hunts, and the production of pagans in Western Uganda* (James Currey, Suffolk, 2011); Luise White, *Speaking with vampires: Rumor and history in colonial Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000); Okot p'Bitek, *The religion of the Central Luo* (East Africa Publishing House Nairobi, 1971), republished in Tim Allen (ed) *Lavino's people: The Acholi of Uganda* (Lit/IAI, London and Berlin, 2019).

9. Others complaining directly to the BBC or online included Adam Kuper, Paul Richards, Sverker Finnström, Nicolas Argenti, Ben Knighton and myself. Also, Pat Caplan summarized and elaborated the criticisms in Pat Caplan, 'Child sacrifice in Uganda? The BBC, "witch doctors" and anthropologists', *Anthropology Today* 26, 2 (2010), pp. 4–7. Those complaining raised a variety of points, but all generally expressed scepticism about the details of Whewell's account, and most drew attention to misleading and misinformed claims made about spirituality and witchcraft, as well as the problematic way his story was presented, which was seen as promoting racist or neo-colonial stereotypes of Africans.

10. La Fontaine, *Speak of the devil*.

Neglect found that none of the 12,000 accusations of Satanic abuse recorded in a best-selling book could be substantiated.¹¹

La Fontaine, who had also worked extensively on witchcraft in Uganda and other parts of Africa, pointed out that the BBC story was just not believable. The way that witchcraft, and witch-cleansing, were explained revealed a level of ignorance that probably would not have been considered acceptable if the report had been about other parts of the world.¹² A man who boasted about murdering so many people would be attacked in rural Uganda if people thought it was true. He would certainly not be able to operate as a kind of vigilante preacher. Nor was it likely that a fresh human liver would last long in a pot left at a shrine where dogs and other scavengers would want to eat it. Moreover, for the BBC to implicitly promote vigilante action against alleged witches by a Christian fundamentalist preaching about hellfire and damnation was irresponsible. It encouraged mob justice. A few months before, for example, eleven elderly people had been burned to death as witches in western Kenya.¹³ La Fontaine also compared Whewell's tale about witchdoctors with the homosexual uproar in Uganda. An Anti-Homosexuality Bill had recently been debated in the Ugandan Parliament in response to a furore about homosexuals targeting schools and other allegations being promulgated by Christian campaigners, supported by US-based pastors.

La Fontaine's criticisms were reiterated in a series of comments initiated by Adam Kuper in the *London Review of Books* (LRB).¹⁴ Kuper observed that: 'In the grand tradition of generations of British missionaries crusading against barbarism, Whewell follows the repentant Angela, in the garb of a Pentecostal prophet, as he traipses through the bush destroying ancestor shrines.... The BBC swallowed the dubious story whole.... endorsing all sorts of bizarre rumours.' Several scholars contributed to the discussion in the LRB that followed, including myself. Some of the anthropologists made their anger about the racist tropes evoked in the story explicit. Citing Michael Taussig, Sverker Finnström observed that: 'Whewell's story is nothing but an example of the "colonial mirror which reflects back onto the colonialists the barbarity of their own social relations, but as imputed to the savage or evil figures they wish to colonize."' Like La Fontaine, I was especially shocked by the way in which the BBC account effectively promoted vigilante violence.

11. Alan Yuhas, 'It's time to revisit the satanic panic', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2021 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/31/us/satanic-panic.html>> (22 August 2025).

12. These comments by Jean La Fontaine were made in an email exchange with Tim Whewell on 11 January 2010. The email was sent to me and several others by Whewell, together with a reply claiming his account was based on evidence.

13. Rob Crilly, 'Mob of villagers kill elderly "witches" in Kenya's sorcery belt', *The Irish Times*, 22 March 2008 <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/mob-of-villagers-kill-elderly-witches-in-kenya-s-sorcery-belt-1.1214383>> (22 August 2025).

14. Adam Kuper, 'Bizarre rumours: BBC missionaries', *LRB Blog*, 12 January 2010 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/january/bizarre-rumours>> (22 August 2025).

I had seen for myself how violent mob justice could be in Uganda when alleged witches were killed close to where I was living in the late 1980s.¹⁵

The response of Whewell to the barrage of criticism was to dismiss the perspectives of academics as being pitched to a different audience and insensitive to the suffering of those affected. Also published in the LRB, both he and his BBC producer asserted that their account was carefully researched and grounded in facts. However, that position was soon fundamentally undermined. After the BBC report was broadcast in Uganda, the murder claims were investigated, and Angela admitted that he had invented them. He said that he hoped the international publicity would lead to a flow of donations.¹⁶ The retraction by Angela was reported by the BBC in February 2010, but there was no subsequent retraction of Whewell's story, and the BBC Radio version won the 2010 Best Radio Documentary One World Media Award the following June.

An effect of the BBC's dissemination of child sacrifice claims in the UK was an effort to shift British government policy towards Uganda. Two formal parliamentary petitions were launched, demanding that the UK intervene.¹⁷ Neither was successful in eliciting much support, but independent petitions proved more effective. Change.org claimed to have 2,667 supporters, and its website asserted a 'confirmed victory' in November 2011, when a British MP heard about it and urged the Foreign Secretary to take up the case.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Jubilee Campaign, a lobbying NGO focused on children at risk and persecuted Christian families worldwide, organized a petition calling on President Museveni and the Speaker of the Ugandan Parliament to use their influence to introduce a new law to stop child sacrifice. By 2017, it had over 8,000 signatories from 111 countries.¹⁹ As will be discussed below, this lobbying had an impact in Uganda.

Evidence of child sacrifice

The *Newsnight* story was presented as an exposé, but there had been some previous accounts of child sacrifice in the Ugandan press, relating to specific

15. Allen, 'The violence of healing'.

16. BBC, 'Uganda witch doctor "lied to BBC" over child sacrifice', *BBC News Channel*, 25 February 2010 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/8536313.stm>> (22 August 2025).

17. UK Government and Parliament, 'Petitions: Suspend UK aid to Uganda until the Ugandan Government acts to prevent child sacrifice', 13 October 2012 <<https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/19070>>; I demand that our Government intervene to prevent Child Sacrificing in Uganda <<https://petition.parliament.uk/archived/petitions/19059>> (closed on 14 October 2012) (accessed 22 August 2025).

18. Change.org, 'Stop the child sacrifice in Uganda', started on 15 October 2011 <<https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-child-sacrificing-industry-in-uganda>> (22 August 2025).

19. Jubilee Campaign, *Petition*, 2017 <<https://www.jubileecampaign.co.uk/stories/petition>> (22 August 2025).

incidents in Kampala and the south of the country. Notably, in 2006, the government-owned *New Vision*, the independently owned *Monitor* and the more tabloid-orientated *Red Pepper* reported on the case of five-year-old Edrine Muguluma.²⁰ He was one of a dozen children kidnapped around Kampala. The others managed to escape, but Edrine's mutilated body was eventually found in a plastic bag under a tree. It is important to note that the story was generally presented in the media as uniquely awful, rather than a wider problem. However, an opinion piece in the *Monitor* at the time by Robby Muhumuza drew attention to three other reported cases occurring at the end of the 1990s, and as many as 15 incidents mentioned in past issues of the *New Vision*.²¹ According to the accounts Muhumuza reviewed, almost all revolved around witchcraft, but he noted that not all witchdoctors are the same, and not all traditional healers or herbalists are witchdoctors. Interestingly, he additionally highlighted the dangers of Christian cults, like that of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in Kanungu district. Like Polino Angela, its leader, Joseph Kibwetere was a Christian activist. He claimed to speak directly with Jesus Christ, and, in 2000, he initiated a mass killing of more than 700 people, including children.²²

Further stories about child sacrifice were published towards the end of the decade, notably in 2008, when there was evidence that two children were sacrificed in Masaka District.²³ Later that year, church leaders, including the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda, made a statement blaming child sacrifice on devil worship and proclaiming that the only proper sacrifice is the blood of Jesus.²⁴ In 2009, impoverished children in Kampala living on the streets were observed wearing toothpicks or twigs in their earlobes. They explained that this was to show that they were not 'pure' or 'whole' and so would not be appealing to those interested in kidnapping them for sacrifice.²⁵ It was also around this time that Ugandan child sacrifice stories began to appear in the international media, too. Four months before the *Newsnight* broadcast, and perhaps sparking Wherwell's interest in the child sacrifice

20. Joshua Kato, 'Five-year old boy sacrificed in Rubanga Division', *New Vision*, 3 August 2006 <<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1143512/-boy-sacrificed-rubanga-division>> (22 August 2025).

21. Robby Muhumuza, 'Child sacrifice is on the rise in Uganda', *Religious News Blog*, 16 August 2006 (reposted from *The Monitor*, 14 August 2006) <<https://www.religionnewsblog.com/15637/child-sacrifice-is-on-the-rise-in-uganda>> (22 August 2025).

22. Richard Vokes, *Ghosts of Kanungu: Fertility, secrecy and exchange in the Great Lakes of East Africa* (James Currey and Fountain Publishers, Woodbridge and Kampala, 2009).

23. *New Vision*, 'How to stop child sacrifice in your area', 5 November 2008 <<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1177596/stp-child-sacrifice>> (22 August 2025).

24. Vision Reporters, 'Religious leaders condemn child sacrifice and corruption', *New Vision*, 27 December 2008 <<https://www.newvision.co.ug/news/1174214/religious-leaders-condemn-child-sacrifice-corruption>> (22 August 2025).

25. Emailed personal communication, Sara Weschler, 24 March 2025.

topic, the UK's *Guardian* published an article describing an incident in Bugiri District involving the mutilation of a child and referred to the trial of a businessman accused of sacrificing a boy to ensure the success of one of his investments. More vaguely, it additionally claimed that police had been informed about 300 cases of such murders and disappearances.²⁶

While manifestly aiming to disturb or shock readers, these articles, published before 2010, mostly focused on specific incidents. This changed after the BBC *Newsnight* report, which triggered a proliferation of sensational accounts in the international and national media, as well as a rapid expansion in activism by Christian groups and NGOs. In 2011, another BBC correspondent, Chris Rogers, took up the story and made further claims.²⁷ He reported that police had confirmed that there had been 38 victims of child sacrifice in the previous five years. However, charities claimed that there were 900 cases that had not been investigated because of corruption and a lack of resources. Rogers also described the work of Pastor Peter Sewakiryanga of Kyampisi Childcare Ministries church and the Jubilee Campaign. Sewakiryanga subsequently appeared in positive terms in other media accounts and, in 2018, the European Union (EU) Delegation in Uganda, together with the Heads of Missions for the EU and the Embassy of Norway, announced him as one of the winners of the EU Human Rights Defenders Award.²⁸ By that time, a plethora of agencies had taken up campaigning and fundraising. They included Plan, Save the Children, World Vision and the Norwegian Refugee Council. They all produced reports to solicit support and promoted the idea that child sacrifice was common. For example, in 2016, the Norwegian Refugee Council claimed that in Buikwe District at least one child was killed each week.²⁹

Activists and journalists were apparently convinced that the horrors of child sacrifice were pervasive, and it is certainly the case that after the BBC report, concerns about child sacrifice escalated. English language newspapers circulate quite widely in Ugandan cities, and each issue is likely to be read by several people. An estimate of how many people in Uganda read a newspaper in 2007 suggested that it might be around 150,000 out of a

26. Annie Kelly, 'Child sacrifice and ritual murders rise in Uganda as famine looms', *The Observer*, 6 September 2009 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/06/uganda-child-sacrifice-ritual-murder>> (22 August 2025).

27. Chris Rogers, 'Uncovering the business of child sacrifice in Uganda', *BBC News*, 11 October 2011 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-15267792>> (22 August 2025).

28. *Uganda Christian News*, 'A pastor on mission to stamp out child sacrifice in Uganda', 8 June 2018 <<https://www.ugchristiannews.com/a-pastor-on-mission-to-stamp-out-child-sacrifice-in-uganda/>> (22 August 2025).

29. Sofi Lundin, 'Uganda-Where dead children's bodies are big business', *Norwegian Refugee Council*, 17 November 2016 <<https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2016/where-dead-childrens-bodies-are-big-business/>> (22 August 2025).

national population of about 27 million at that time.³⁰ However, stories in newspapers were also reported on radio stations and communicated by other means. In 2015, a BBC World Service survey found that 87 percent of the Ugandan adult population had access to a working radio, 74 percent had a mobile phone in their household, and about a third of the population commonly watched TV.³¹ BBC World TV is often available in bars, and BBC World Service Radio is broadcast continuously and accessible nationwide. Whewell's story, and later BBC coverage, was therefore watched, heard, discussed, and re-reported, giving international credibility to accounts in the Ugandan media.

Yet, it would be fair to say that, despite all the interest and funding, robust research and assessment remained very limited. In 2010, Pat Caplan helpfully reviewed controversies about Whewell's sensationalist *Newsnight* contribution but did not carry out her own investigations.³² Journalists and activists were, to a large extent, feeding off each other with their alarming revelations and assessments, but more dispassionate inquiries were absent. There was only one survey purporting to present accurate data. It was carried out over two months in 2012 at 25 selected locations in nine Ugandan districts, under the auspices of Humane Africa, a charity that had previously worked in South Africa.³³ The Humane Africa survey involved researchers based at Makerere University in Kampala and activists working for a Christian ministry. Workshops were held to discuss child sacrifice, and there were some snowballing referrals. From the stories collected, the report estimated that one mutilation/sacrifice took place each week in each location visited. In addition, an SMS text was sent to Ugandan 'youth' who were part of a network developed by UNICEF. They were asked, 'Have you heard about child sacrifice in your community, yes or no?' Given the coverage in the Ugandan media, it is perhaps a little surprising that only 37% answered yes. A particularly interesting aspect of the report was that the narratives collected contradicted claims made by the BBC and others about Ugandan child sacrifice practices being linked to ceremonies or rituals. No evidence was found that such ceremonies occurred. Instead, those interviewed claimed that body parts, tissue or blood were removed while the child was alive and were worn, buried or consumed by an individual in the belief that they would

30. *New Vision*, 'Opinion', 4 August 2007 <<https://allafrica.com/stories/200708060734.html#:~:text=The%20circulation%20of%20the%20daily,27%2C000%2C000%20read%20the%20daily%20newspapers>> (22 August 2025).

31. BBC Media Action, *Uganda—Media Landscape Report February 2019* <https://www.communityengagementhub.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/09/Uganda-Media-Landscape-report_BBC-Media-Action_February-2019.pdf> (22 August 2025).

32. Caplan, 'Child sacrifice in Uganda?.'

33. Simon Fellows, 'Child sacrifice and the mutilation of children in Uganda', *Humane Africa*, 2013, <<https://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Child-Sacrifice-and-the-mutilation-of-children-in-Uganda.pdf>> (22 August 2025).

overcome illness, gain wealth, be protected, or obtain blessings from ancestors. Occasionally, it was noted, mob justice was exercised against alleged perpetrators, sometimes leading to their death.

Like other accounts, the Humane Africa report suggested that child sacrifice was connected with ‘witchdoctors’, who might, or might not, be ‘traditional healers’. The authors arbitrarily chose to define a witchdoctor as someone who uses human body parts and tissues in their medicine. However, one ‘traditional healer’ interviewed claimed to be using body parts himself, so the distinction was left unclear. Reference was briefly made to ‘anthropological background’, but specific reference was only made to four sources. Three of those dealt with ‘muthi’ medicine in South Africa, including an article by Adam Ashforth.³⁴ The wider literature on local healing and witchcraft in South Africa was not mentioned, let alone the substantial literature on Uganda. Analysis was also not helped by the unusual definition of ‘child sacrifice’ as ‘the harmful practice of removing a child’s body parts, blood or tissue while the child is alive.’ That may be horrific, but it seems to set aside body parts being removed after a murder. It is unlikely, for example, that Whewell’s supposed human liver in a pot was cut out of a living person. Also, the definition includes relatively benign things, such as hair, loose skin, nail clippings, spit, or placentas. Overall, it is hard to interpret the claims that the report makes about the scale of the deadly child sacrifice problem, other than that child sacrifice in a broader sense is something being talked about, and that there have been incidents reported.

The Ugandan coordinator of the Humane Africa report was Paul Bukuluki, and his subsequent publications have tended to elaborate on the points it made. In a piece called ‘Child Sacrifice: myth or reality?’ he cited the report as evidence that child sacrifice occurs, and noted that the Ugandan police are asked to investigate between 14 and 29 cases per year.³⁵ He also cited a 2009 report that claimed close to 3,000 children disappear from their homes annually in the country and suggested that many of those children might end up being sacrificed.³⁶ However, how the figure of 3,000 was established is unclear, and there are many other reasons why children may disappear. In a later article, child sacrifice is described by Bukuluki as a subculture, perpetrated by

34. Adam Ashforth, ‘Muthi, medicine and witchcraft: Regulating “African Science” in post-Apartheid South Africa?’, *Social Dynamics* 31 (2005), pp. 211–242.

35. Paul Bukuluki, ‘Child sacrifice: myth or reality?’, *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 41 (2014) <<https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/58231>> (22 August 2025).

36. The figure of 3,000 Ugandan children disappearing annually is linked to an organization called The African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Abuse and Neglect. The figure is repeated in various places. For example, it appears in the *Testimony of Obed Byamugisha before The United States Congress House Foreign Affairs Committee Sub-Committee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organisations*, 19 September 2023.

‘fraudulent’ witchdoctors.³⁷ Somewhat misleadingly, that piece repeated claims made in the Humane Africa survey while using the term child sacrifice in the normal way to refer to murders and mutilations. It also made more effort to draw on academic literature, but that is an odd aspect of the article and perhaps reflects a tendency for contemporary Ugandan analysts to be uncomfortable with scholarly discussion of witchcraft in their own country. Some of the most important publications are by researchers who were linked to Bukuliki’s university, including Okot p’Bitek,³⁸ but none of them are mentioned. Instead, there is a discussion of publications that do not address practices in Uganda. That includes Evans-Pritchard’s well-known work on Azande witchcraft in Sudan from the late 1920s, and it is not noted that Evans-Pritchard’s use of the word witchcraft for the Azande word *mangu* refers to something completely different from the activities the article associates with fraudulent witchdoctors.³⁹ One of the few sources cited on Uganda is none other than Tim Whewell’s discredited BBC account.

Anti-witchcraft activism and Christian campaigning

Like Whewell, Bukuluki deployed the term witchdoctor in a vague way. The fact that this English term is used to describe a diverse array of spirit mediums, healers, diviners, herbalists, rainmakers, elders responsible for ancestral shrines, and specialists in magical therapies is not considered significant. That is a characteristic shared with many other accounts. In general, the anti-child-sacrifice journalists and activists have suggested that all witchdoctors are wicked monsters who commit unspeakable acts themselves or demand them of their clients. Occasionally, problems with such homogenizing surfaces. Thus, Whewell confusingly told us that traditional healers who advertise on the radio were not witchdoctors, presumably to make the point that not all non-biomedical therapists should be targets for vigilantes. Although this begs the question of who decides which traditional healers are ‘innocent’. Surely it is not just the ones on the radio!

The valorizing of mob justice implied by the BBC *Newsnight* broadcast was especially unsettling for analysts familiar with the ways in which purportedly evil witches and witchdoctors have been, and still are, sometimes dealt

37. Paul Bukuluki, Simon Fellows, and Ronald Luwangula ‘Chapter 9. Dilemmas of child “sacrifice” and mutilation in Uganda’, in David Kaawa-Mafigiri and Eddy Joshua Walakira (eds), *Child Abuse and Neglect in Uganda* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), pp.179–197 <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321531082_Child_Abuse_and_Neglect_in_Uganda> (22 August 2025).

38. Okot p’Bitek, *The religion of the Central Luo*.

39. Edward E. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft oracles and magic among the Azande* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1937).

with. Witch hunts can often end up being very violent. The implications of Uganda's moral panic about child sacrifice for the targeting of so-called witches and witchdoctors are important to appreciate. As La Fontaine warned in 2010, it has helped drive a Christianized conception of alleged Satanic practices, which sets aside conventional evidence in favour of moral populism. Public authority is thereby reinforced for leaders who draw on religious discourses to promote scapegoating, prejudice and intolerance.⁴⁰

Under the British Protectorate, colonial officials were confronted with cases that they perceived as being grounded in superstition, and they were keen to stop them from occurring. This is apparent in the Witchcraft Ordinance of 1912 (amended in 1921), which aimed at preventing witchcraft accusations and the suppression of the activities of 'witch-doctors' and 'witch-finders'. In other words, according to the Witchcraft Ordinance, the activities of someone like Whewell's Polino Angela would have been punishable. In some parts of Uganda, including the northwest of the country where Atiku, the MP who championed the child sacrifice Bill in 2021, comes from, the 1912 Witchcraft Ordinance constrained the way that cases could be presented to the district courts, but efforts were made to circumvent the limitations. British officials were perplexed by the frequency of instances of 'poisoning', which is a possible translation of *inyinya*, a Madi and Lugbara term used to describe ways of harming others, usually with diverse kinds of magic, and most often occurring within a home.

During the years of British rule, several major anthropological studies focused on witchcraft. The pioneering work by Evans Pritchard was based on fieldwork across the border in Sudan but exerted a powerful influence on research conducted in Uganda, including that of his students.⁴¹ A point made repeatedly was that some of the ways in which Ugandans thought about and experienced misfortune and metaphysical threats involved accepting that spiritual forces were directly experienced, and that suffering often had causes associated with the effects of ghosts or malign qualities in neighbours.⁴² All Ugandan groups had specialists who sought to control these things, sometimes at shrines. These specialists had specific names in the various Ugandan languages, but the English term 'witchdoctor' was commonly used to refer to all of them. In general, a witchdoctor was someone who would help deal with things that might be called witchcraft, and it was also possible that they would use witchcraft themselves. Indeed, ritual elders might be expected to call on diseased ancestors to bring suffering to draw attention to what they viewed as immoral or antisocial behaviour. Anthro-

40. Allen, 'Vigilantes, witches and vampires'.

41. Evans Pritchard, *Witchcraft oracles and magic among the Azande*.

42. A good example is John Middleton, *Lugbara religion: Ritual and authority among an East African people* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1960).

pologists would not call that kind of activity witchcraft, but Christian activists wanting to stop pagan practices would.

As independence approached, pressure was applied to amend the Witchcraft Ordinance in a way that recognized the possibility of someone being a witch and using witchcraft for wicked ends. In 1957, the 1912 rules were replaced.⁴³ The new rules stated that: 'Any person who directly or indirectly threatens another with death by witchcraft or by any other supernatural means shall be guilty of an offence and on conviction shall be liable to imprisonment for life.' After independence, this wording was used almost verbatim in the 1965 Act. In effect, the 1965 Act provided a legal basis for witch-cleansing, although with various constraints. Almost immediately after it became law, a witch-cleansing movement was triggered in the area of Uganda where Whewell later filmed the activities of Angela. Those attacked included old women, teachers protesting about their salaries, and councillors opposed to political changes introduced by Milton Obote's government. People were forced to admit that they were witches by being made to drink urine, hold heated rocks, sit on barbed wire with naked buttocks, and being washed in peppered water.⁴⁴

At the time of the witch-hunts near Lira, where the people are Luo-speaking, another student of Evans-Pritchard was writing a doctoral thesis on the religion of Ugandan Luo-speaking groups. That was Okot p'Bitek. In his book on Luo religion, p'Bitek had much to say about different kinds of witches (*la-jok*) and the ways in which people deal with them, including killing them. However, he is careful to distinguish between forms of witchcraft, and between witches and ritual specialists, such as clan elders and *ajwaki* (spirit mediums/witchdoctors).⁴⁵ He argues that these specialists are integral to Acholi relations with the spirit world and religious beliefs. He is also very critical of efforts to Christianize Acholi customs and beliefs. Indeed, he famously valorized those traditions in his epic poetry.⁴⁶

Since the 1960s, there have been many other accounts of African witch-cleansing outbreaks in Uganda, often involving Christian activists,⁴⁷ including some written by me.⁴⁸ In the late 1980s, I was living in the

43. Ray Abrahams, 'A modern witch-hunt among the Lango of Uganda', *Cambridge Anthropology* 10 (1985), pp. 32–44.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Okot p'Bitek, *The Religion of the Central Luo*.

46. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (Heinemann, Oxford, 1984).

47. For example, Heike Behrend, *Resurrecting cannibals: The Catholic Church, witch-hunts and the production of pagans in Western Uganda* (James Currey, New York, 2011). There is also a substantial literature on campaigns against so called witchdoctors in many parts of Africa. A useful overview is Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders (eds), *Magical interpretations, material realities: Modernity, witchcraft and the occult in postcolonial Africa* (Routledge, London, 2001).

48. Allen, 'A flight from refuge'; Allen, 'The violence of healing'; Allen and Reid, 'Justice at the margins'.

northwest of the country. In 1988, a group of women in the village in which I was living were accused of *inyinya* and tortured. Some were killed, including women and children in the neighbouring compound to mine. The women who were said to be using *inyinya* were talked about as not behaving appropriately because they had moved to the homes of sexual partners without the proper arrangement of bride-wealth and other customs. Sometimes, *inyinya* was explicitly linked to HIV/AIDS, and health education campaigns about the disease, which were promoted by church activists, and appeared to justify exerting controls on behaviour, if necessary, by force. Church groups were also keen to link *inyinya* with Satanic acts, and the Arua Catholic Diocese newsletter wrote positively about the witch hunting, publishing names of some of those accused.⁴⁹ A frequent moment for making accusations was when a child became sick and died. It was sometimes said that the women accused were jealous of others having children, and that is why they caused babies to suffer and die. However, as was the case with the witch hunts described around Lira in 1967, child sacrifice was not mentioned.

When I returned to my former field research sites in 2004, I found that witch-hunting had become semi-formalized, and church-linked assaults on supposed Satanic practices had expanded to the point that ancestral shrines had largely disappeared.⁵⁰ Rather than referring cases to magistrate courts, where witchcraft cases were often viewed as being too restricted by the need for corroborated non-magical evidence, local councils sought to express the consensus of their constituents. The village-level councils introduced in 1986 were directly elected and required a capacity to act in the interests of their communities. In the 1990s, they introduced witchcraft 'elections', a procedure that has become quite common in other parts of Uganda and across the border in South Sudan.⁵¹ Those individuals with the most votes had their names publicized and their photos circulated. They were ostracized or chased away from their homes.

Simultaneously, ancestral shrines had been assaulted by Christian vigilantes. Some had been literally smashed to pieces.⁵² Again, there was no talk of child sacrifice. In fact, my first direct encounter with child sacrifice issues was after the BBC *Newsnight* report. I was a delegate at the International Criminal Court Review Conference near Kampala in 2010. I attended as a representative of northern Uganda and was lobbied by a group that had taken up the issue following the broadcast of

49. Allen, 'Upheaval, affliction and health'; Allen, 'AIDS and evidence'.

50. Tim Allen and Laura Storm, 'Quests for therapy in northern Uganda: Healing at Laropi revisited', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 6 (2012), pp. 22–46.

51. Elizabeth Storer, Ryan Joseph O'Byrne, and Kyla Reid, 'Poisoning at the periphery: Allocating responsibility across the Uganda/South Sudan borderlands', *Third World Thematics* 2 (2017), pp. 180–196.

52. Allen and Reid, 'Justice at the margins'.

Whewell's story. I was told of children disappearing and being sacrificed in the way Whewell described and was asked to support research on the topic. In a small way, I agreed to do so, but the cases investigated did not confirm child sacrifice had occurred. One case involved an Anglican bishop, who was campaigning in ways that were not dissimilar to Polino Angelo.⁵³

The trend was soon further exacerbated by another UK-based journalist. Annie Ikpa is a freelance television editor who previously worked on the sexually charged reality TV show *Love Island*. In 2014, she repeated the exaggerated claims in the BBC reports and started making YouTube videos, including one in which she speaks emotionally to the camera for fifteen minutes, much in the confessional style of *Love Island* participants.⁵⁴ She goes so far as to claim that it was she and her team that passed the 2021 legislation outlawing human sacrifice in Uganda.⁵⁵ That is an overblown assertion. Pastor Sewakiryanga, the Jubilee Campaign, and various NGOs and Christian organizations had been calling for a new law for quite a while.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the YouTube video mentioned above has well over a million views, and Ikpa's heart-wrenching monologue certainly helped keep Ugandan child sacrifice in the international news. The publicity also helped the Ugandan government to use the child sacrifice moral panic strategically.

Criminalizing child sacrifice and homosexuality

The new legislation on child sacrifice was passed by the Ugandan Parliament on 4 May 2021. Those involved in perpetrating the crime face long terms in prison or the death sentence. Bernard Atiku had switched from being in the opposition to joining the ruling party in 2020. That was perhaps one reason why President Museveni was willing to sign his somewhat strange Bill into law. Existing legislation ought to have been sufficient, even if a specific crime of child sacrifice was not defined in Ugandan law. Problems associated with child protection, it had long been noted, were mostly linked to a lack of personnel and infrastructure of staff to do their work, while the judiciary had a backlog of cases, and the Police had not implemented existing legislation.⁵⁷

53. Allen, 'Vigilantes, witches and vampires'.

54. Annie Ikpa, 'How I fought to ban child sacrifice in Uganda', *YouTube*, 8 August 2021 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQTNB4ROSII>> (22 August 2025).

55. Annie Ikpa, 'Let's end human sacrifice in Uganda', *JustGiving*, 27 July 2021 <<https://justgiving.com/fundraising/annieikpa>> (22 August 2025).

56. Jubilee Campaign, 'End Child Sacrifice', *Jubilee Campaign*, 2017 <<https://www.jubileecampaign.co.uk/stories/uganda>> (22 August 2025).

57. Philippa Bogere and Eddy Walakira, 'Child sacrifice in Uganda: Adequacy of existing legal provision', *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences* 41 (2014) <<https://www.ssoar>.

Drawing on the accounts in the media and NGO reports, Aiku had argued in parliament that human sacrifice, especially of children, had been rampant in Uganda since the 1990s. He faced little resistance to his claims, and MPs across the house were eager to demonstrate that they, too, thought that sacrificing children was something to condemn. For example, the Vice Chairperson of the Committee on Legal and Parliamentary Affairs unreservedly backed the Bill, noting that there was a grey area in legislation that related to the possession of human body parts, and the possession or sale of human body organs, while the Leader of the Opposition, Betty Aol Ocan, stated that the primary victims of human sacrifice are children. Ocan said that people should abandon 'primitive cultural beliefs' and seek knowledge from the Bible, and the Minister of State for Planning said: 'It is abhorring (*sic*) to hear that someone will sacrifice a child's life to construct a building so that it can generate a lot of wealth for them.'⁵⁸ No one suggested that child sacrifice was acceptable, or already adequately criminalized, so the new Bill passed smoothly, and President Museveni willingly signed it into law, much to the joy of anti-child-sacrifice activists.

An aspect of these developments that was barely disguised is that the parliamentary discussions, and President Museveni's apparent enthusiasm, coincided with a comparable discourse about homosexuality. Media accounts and linked activism had similar qualities. Claims included the much-repeated myth 'that queer people are preying on children and that they are carrying sacks of cash to schools.'⁵⁹ In the same month as the Prevention and Prohibition of Human Sacrifice Bill was passed by Parliament, a Sexual Offences Bill was also passed, enhancing measures to criminalize homosexuals. La Fontaine's remarks in response to the *Newsnight* broadcast had proved to be prescient. Homosexuality was similarly viewed as being targeted at children and now carries similar punishments. As one MP stated during the debate leading to the 2023 Homosexuality Act: 'Our creator God is happy [about] what is happening ... I support the bill to protect the future of our children.'⁶⁰

The Ugandan moral panic about homosexuality has run parallel with the moral panic about child sacrifice, starting around the same time. In March 2009, a 'Seminar on Exposing the Homosexual Agenda' was held in Kampala, attended by leading US evangelical pastors, including the co-author of a book

[info/ssoar/handle/document/58240](https://info.ssoar/handle/document/58240) > (22 August 2025).

58. [ugchristiannews.com](https://www.ugchristiannews.com), 'Parliament enacts law against human sacrifice', 5 May 2021 <https://www.ugchristiannews.com> 'church' News (22 August 2025).

59. Frank Mugisha, 'A season of terror for gays in Uganda', *The Monitor*, 12 March 2023, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/a-season-of-terror-for-gays-in-uganda-4155600> (22 August 2025).

60. Al Jazeera, 'Uganda's new anti-homosexuality law bans identification as LGBTQ.' *Al Jazeera news*, 22 March 2022 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/22/uganda-passes-tough-antigay-law-bans-identification-as-lgbtq>> (22 August 2025).

claiming that homosexuals were responsible for the Nazi Holocaust.⁶¹ The event was organized by Family Life International, which is a Ugandan organization with support from the US. It attracted a large audience, including politicians and members of the clergy. Discussions about homosexuality at the event soon found their way into Parliamentary debates. In October 2009, not long before the broadcast of the *Newsnight* story about child sacrifice, an Anti-Homosexuality Bill was introduced by an MP who was reportedly a member of the Fellowship, a group of 'born-again' Ugandan parliamentarians linked to a US evangelical movement sometimes known as the Family. Drawing on the criminalization of homosexuality in the colonial penal law of 1950, the Bill expanded the prohibition of practices to protect the traditional family, including the 'promotion' of homosexuality and the crime of 'aggravated homosexuality', which included situations in which the 'victim' was a minor. It eventually received Presidential assent in 2014, in a slightly watered-down form, but campaigning for more draconian legislation continued.

The two panics have evolved simultaneously but largely separately, although the claims made by activists have echoed each other, and occasionally, there are implications of a connection between them. Both acts are presented as abhorrent to Ugandans, viewed as evils, and castigated by religious leaders and politicians in comparable terms. For example, the Ugandan Human Rights Commission (UHRC) has implied that an association exists in the legislation against them. In its responses to statements and questions from the UN Human Rights Committee in 2023, the UHRC explained that a 'widespread campaign to promote homosexuality amongst children in schools was discovered—its methods and content too difficult and graphic to explain.'⁶² As with the Bill on Child Sacrifice, it was claimed that the Government had responded to protect children and youth in the country, in line with its responsibilities, because cases of dreadful abuse were being discovered, whereas previously there was no problem with homosexuality. It is an approach with similarities elsewhere. For example, associating homosexuals, witches, illicit cults, and those seeking wealth through the horrific abuse of children has occurred in West Africa. Cameroon and Gabon have experienced comparable moral panics, with conspiracy theories about Freemasons being an important factor, rather than exaggerations about child sacrifices.⁶³

61. Rahul Rao, *Out of time: The queer politics of postcoloniality* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020).

62. United Nation Human Rights, 'In dialogue with Uganda, experts of the Human Rights Committee commend improvement of prison conditions, raise issues concerning the anti-homosexuality law and free elections', *United Nations*, 28 June 2023 <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/06/dialogue-uganda-experts-human-rights-committee-commend-improvement-prison-conditions#>> (22 August 2025).

63. Peter Geschiere, 'A "vortex of identities": Freemasonry, witchcraft, and postcolonial homophobia', *African Studies Review* 60 (2017), pp. 7–35; Shelagh Roxburgh, 'Homosexuality,

Since the campaign against homosexuality by Christian activists and parliamentarians started in earnest around 2010, President Museveni has deployed a strategy of communicating differently to different audiences. While indicating sympathy for criminalizing homosexuality, he kept procedures tied up in committees. He was aware that overtly anti-homosexual legislation would alienate Uganda's Western allies. His years of procrastination in assenting to the Bill's passage into law suggest that he was compelled to support it as a matter of political expediency. The lobbying by externally funded Christian activists was relentless, and salacious stories about homosexuals and lesbians were common in the Ugandan media. Moreover, most Ugandans, including leading politicians, viewed homosexuality with disdain.⁶⁴ Targeting homosexuality was therefore an expedient populist policy, even if the practical consequences Museveni had wanted to avoid occurred, with cuts in foreign aid and subsidized finance. His response has been to emphasize the African quality of the anti-homosexual legislation. When funding was suspended in 2023, he observed that it was 'unfortunate that the World Bank and other actors dare to want to coerce us into abandoning our faith, culture, principles and sovereignty, using money. They really underestimate all Africans.'⁶⁵ In this context, efforts to prevent homosexuality and child sacrifice ostensibly as a means of protecting children might be interpreted as a shrewd strategy for wrong-footing those supporting one but opposing the other, and both controversies helped deflect attention from other matters in ways Cohen and others using the moral panic concept have noted. In Uganda, those matters included militarized COVID-19 controls, constraints on political opposition, and a further drift towards more authoritarian governance as a means of extending presidential terms in office.⁶⁶

Resolving moral panics

In recent years, stories about child sacrifice and homosexual abuse have remained common in Uganda's media, but there have also been accounts of a few instances of criminal charges, trials, and some successful convictions

witchcraft, and power: The politics of resentment in Cameroon, *African Studies Review* 62 (2019), pp. 89–111.

64. Ronald Kakumba Makanga, 'Uganda a continental extreme in rejection of people in same-sex relationships', *Afrobarometer Dispatch*, no. 639, 11 May 2023 <<https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad639-uganda-a-continental-extreme-in-rejection-of-people-in-same-sex-relationships/>> (accessed 22 August 2025).

65. *Al Jazeera News*, 'Uganda defiant after World Bank halts funding over anti-LGBTQ law', 8 October 2023 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/10/uganda-defiant-after-world-bank-halts-funding-over-anti-lgbtq-law>> (22 August 2025).

66. Melissa Parker, Moses Baluku, Bono E. Ozunga, Bob Okello, Peter Kermundu, Grace Akello, Hayley MacGregor, Melissa Leach, and Tim Allen 'Epidemics and the military: Responding to COVID-19 in Uganda', *Social Science & Medicine* 314 (2022), pp. 1–9.

since the new Bills were passed. In August 2023, a 20-year-old man became the first Ugandan to be charged with ‘aggravated homosexuality’ for which he could be executed. Later that year, a man was convicted of the offence of child sacrifice in Jinja and sentenced to 52 years in prison.⁶⁷ In an interesting twist, another case involved a pastor of the Healing and Deliverance Church. The pastor and his wife were sentenced to life imprisonment, having been convicted of aggravated trafficking of children and for a specific incident of child sacrificial murder.⁶⁸ The case highlighted a growing concern, expressed in Uganda media outlets, that ‘born-again’ and Pentecostal pastors are now themselves resorting to witchcraft, allegedly involving child sacrifice, in their competition with each other for funding, congregations, and followers.⁶⁹

Nowadays, there is ostensible acceptance by government officials, religious leaders, and aid agencies that human sacrifice, and particularly child sacrifice, is a potential threat to the Ugandan population. There is also acceptance from most Ugandans I have spoken to that homosexuality is something to be avoided. Nevertheless, more than a decade after the sensational *Newsnight* report and the contemporary foregrounding of supposed illicit homosexual behaviours, and despite all the activism and pressure on the police to investigate allegations, confirmed cases of child sacrifice have not escalated substantially. The handful of cases that have recently been brought against alleged homosexuals are related to sexuality, not abuse of minors or other egregious acts.⁷⁰ The current number of child sacrifices is impossible to assess precisely. Definitions vary, and data from police reports are partial and inconsistent. A 2015 police statement mentions 87 allegations being registered over the previous eight years, although only a quarter had sufficient evidence to merit being put before the High Court.⁷¹ Since the moral panic started in 2010, there may have been half a dozen convictions, including those recent ones mentioned above. It is possible that the media’s association of child sacrifice

67. Michael Odeng, ‘Man jailed for 52 years over child sacrifice’, *New Vision*, 1 November 2023 <https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/news/man-jailed-52-years-over-child-sacrifice-NV_173953> (22 August 2025).

68. Charles Kakamwa, ‘Jinja pastor’s wife sentenced to life in prison for murder’, *New Vision*, 20 December 2023 <https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/news/jinja-pastors-wife-sentenced-to-life-in-priso-NV_173058> (22 August 2025).

69. *New African*, ‘Born-again pastors under scrutiny’, 23 March 2019 <<https://newafrican-magazine.com/20201/>> (22 August 2025); Alan Tacca, ‘Why some Ugandan pastors are turning to human sacrifice’, *The Monitor*, 19 December 2021 <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/columnists/allan-tacca/why-some-ugandan-pastors-are-turning-to-human-sacrifice-3657524#google_vignette> (22 August 2025); Ryan O’Byrne, ‘Occult economies, demonic gifts, and ontological alterity: An evangelical biography of evil and redemption in rural South Sudan’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 50 (2021), pp. 137–155.

70. For ‘aggravated homosexuality’ see *Reuters*, ‘Exclusive: First Ugandan charged with “aggravated homosexuality” punishable by death’, 28 August 2023 <<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/first-ugandan-charged-with-aggravated-homosexuality-punishable-by-death-2023-08-28/>> (22 August 2025).

71. World Vision International, ‘Community amber alert against child sacrifice’, May 2015 <<https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Co...>> (22 August 2025).

with wealth acquisition may encourage some individuals to attempt it. For any children to be sacrificed in Uganda is dreadful. Still, the number of child murders is probably comparable to other countries, and there are much more significant threats to child safety.

The BBC *Newsnight* story in 2010 initiated a tendency towards exaggerated assertions that have little connection with reality. It played a key role in promoting a moral panic, creating a space for religious and political leaders to promote their moral probity by appearing to be controlling a practice that largely did not exist. This has resulted in police investigations, draconian legal measures, and vigilante violence. Despite the pastor who acted as the key informant in the BBC account being exposed as a charlatan, the journalists involved maintained the accuracy of their reporting and took no responsibility for the consequences. The moral panic that ensued meant that vulnerable people were subjected to witch-hunts. Occasionally, children themselves can become folk devil targets of vigilantes. Amongst those killed as witches in the village where I was living in the late 1980s were adolescents, and adolescents continue to be accused sometimes, especially young women. It is something highlighted as a growing problem, and not only in Uganda.⁷²

Witch hunts have happened before, and both Christian activists and politicians have been involved. However, the imprimatur of an ostensibly authoritative media source, as well as the support of a plethora of civil society organizations has been something new. So was the ostensible acceptance that the child sacrifice problem needed to be addressed by the Parliament and the President. There is no robust evidence to support assertions that large numbers of children are being murdered or mutilated for body parts. They never have been, but the new Bill, combined with relatively low numbers of confirmed cases and a few successful convictions, has enhanced the public authority of those who claim to have controlled a child sacrifice epidemic.

In his book about the UK, published fifty years ago, Cohen argued that moral panics pass through predictable stages with predictable actors. The nature of the panic is 'presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears,

72. Judith Verweijen, 'The disconcerting popularity of popular in/justice in the Fizi/Uvira region, Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo,' *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22, 3 (2015), pp. 335–59; Mark Tran, 'Witchcraft claims against children in Congo DRC reflect curse of poverty', *The Guardian*, 24 January 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jan/24/witchcraft-children-congo-drc-poverty>> (22 August 2025); Joan Nyanyuki, 'Witch-hunts and ritual child abuse are a stain on Africa. We must confront them', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/commentis-free/2022/jun/08/witch-hunts-ritual-child-abuse-albinism-africa>> (22 August 2025).

submerges or deteriorates....⁷³ Uganda's moral panic about child sacrifice has perhaps now entered the last phase.

Once investigated, few of the specific accusations levelled at individuals have proved to be credible, and while tales about child sacrifice continue to circulate, the real possibility of a child being abducted to be cut up for body parts is not a day-to-day worry in the parts of Uganda I know well. That includes places where the sensational *Newsnight* film was made. Nevertheless, the legacy of Angela's ludicrous claims and Whewell's report about him continues to have an influence and contribute to the repertoire of causes taken up by civil society groups, and political and religious leaders to enhance and entrench their status. This applies to public authority at all levels, including members of Parliament, as well as President Museveni, who is masterful at managing populist policies that can seem contradictory from afar. Stories about homosexuals recruiting children in schools and shocking tales about prevalent anal rape are perhaps even less based on verifiable evidence than those of child sacrifice, but those tales, too, help shape current national politics.

Cohen suggested that moral panics can potentially produce changes in the way society imagines itself. By this, Cohen means more than in the media. Toward the end of his book, he observed that magistrates, leader writers, and politicians react to stimuli in terms of positions, statuses, interests, ideologies, and values: 'Their responsiveness to rumours is not just related to the internal dynamics of the rumour process, but whether the rumours support their particular interests.'⁷⁴ He argues that stratified societies can be expected to generate moral panics, and new folk devils will be created.

A few years later, Cohen's ideas were taken up and elaborated in great detail by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.⁷⁵ The focus of their book was the emergence of mugging as a purportedly new crime in Britain during the early 1970s. Hall et al argued that it was a quintessential example of a moral panic serving to reinforce systems of social control. They argued that moral panics were not inevitable, but rather were produced and gained significance during times of perceived crisis. Although robbery and murders on the street had occurred in the past, the use of the term mugging by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper in 1972 was taken up in other media and by the police and politicians as a sudden and alarming threat. The Home Secretary, for example, spoke in the House of Commons about a 129 percent increase in muggings during the previous four years. This was in spite of the fact that mugging was not a legally defined crime, and statistics on assault with intent to rob bore little relation to such a claim.

73. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, p. 9.

74. *Ibid*, p. 191.

75. Hall et al., *Policing the crisis*.

Hall et al. argued that this development needs to be understood as a response to a crisis in the hegemony of the British state in the 1970s, associated with sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, the rise of student activism, and striking coal miners. The perceived social deviants who became the scapegoats that Cohen called folk devils were, Hall et al. maintained, black, working-class youths. Often, those convicted of mugging were Afro-Caribbean men, and sometimes there was no victim of a crime, just police evidence based on profiling. The labelling was linked to data which appeared to show a rise in crimes perpetrated by black people, which in turn justified stronger police measures. It stoked resentment among immigrant groups and racism in the broader population. It is an example that is particularly relevant with respect to child sacrifice in Uganda. Like child sacrifice in Uganda, mugging in Britain was presented as a suddenly prevalent crime that was a threat to decent citizens, requiring urgent political, social, and legal responses.

Interestingly, Jean La Fontaine is somewhat sceptical about using the moral panic term for the allegations of Satanism in England during the 1980s and 1990s that she investigated for her book *Speak of the Devil*.⁷⁶ She suggests that the phases of moral panics delineated by Cohen lack analytical rigour, although it is worth noting that her own analysis of Satanic abuse hysteria emphasizes social and economic insecurity. That is not so different from the explanation for the public obsession with mugging provided by Hall et al. Meanwhile, others have complained that the label of moral panic has become a lazy way to castigate political opponents or any conspiracy theory that gains a degree of traction—something that digital media has made a common occurrence. One commentator has recently referred to a moral panic about moral panics.⁷⁷

These are perhaps reasonable criticisms of the way Cohn's term has been overused. Arguably, the moral panic concept should be limited to a way of interpreting what has occurred in some circumstances and noting that comparable processes have occurred elsewhere. It is also the case that media landscapes have transformed since the 1970s, and changes are accelerating. Since the BBC's report on Ugandan child sacrifice in 2010, access to digital media has spread, and gatekeeping of news has been eroded. While the child sacrifice and homosexual moral panics were unfolding in Uganda, millions of people in the US accessed bizarre tales online about a paedophilia ring linked to members of the Democratic Party based in pizza restaurants. Hillary Clinton was accused of participating in ritual child murder, and a cabal of Satanic and cannibalistic child abusers was secretly being challenged by Donald Trump. Trump himself lent credence to such accounts, and their circulation probably influenced the result of the 2024 Presidential election. Conspiracy theories now affect news in such a way that fact, fiction, and

76. La Fontaine, *Speak of the devil*.

77. Sixsmith, 'A moral panic about moral panics?'.

fantasy are persistently blurred, and the measures described by Cohen and Hall for shaping, using, and containing news increasingly seem to be about a bygone era. That is not just with respect to the situation in the US. People in Uganda with access to the internet were also exposed to the weird allegations about demonic Democrats. Those I spoke to dismissed them as daft, but possibly they affected how rumours about prevalent child sacrifice in their own country were consumed by others.

Conclusion

This article began by asking if there is something unusual about Uganda? The answer is that it has arguably been more vulnerable than other places to the BBC's irresponsible, and arguably racist, journalism, due to the status of the BBC as a source of credible news, combined with the prevalence of people who can understand English and who can access multiple media, including radio, TV, and the internet. Also, it is a place in which those interpreting the spirit world and the supernatural have considerable status, and who compete for constituents and congregations. Pentecostalism is widespread, and anti-Satanic proclamations are norms in the language of governance and in established and independent churches. The country is prone to outbreaks of religiosity and metaphysically inspired acts, sometimes with violent qualities. However, Uganda is certainly not unusual in having moral panics or hysterical public debates linked to tales comprised of salacious nonsense.

In Uganda, as in other countries, influential actors were involved in ostensibly addressing a problem that was largely a fabrication. In doing so, they promoted their notions of morality, influenced understandings of spirituality, expanded their constituencies, and enhanced their leadership positions. Moral panic also helped divert attention from other issues, including the political tensions associated with President Museveni's grip on power. In some instances, people targeted as folk-devils have experienced extreme persecution. Among those involved in that persecution have been people who acted deliberately or because they believed their own rhetoric about Satanism and witchcraft. Others have perhaps been unwittingly caught up in matters they do not well understand. Nevertheless, it is troubling that international and national actors and analysts who should know better or should have made more effort to investigate what is happening have been complicit. That includes the BBC, which continues to promote Tim Whewell's account of Ugandan child sacrifice, even while recognizing that its main protagonist had made things up.⁷⁸

78. Whewell, 'Witch-doctors reveal extent of child sacrifice in Uganda'; BBC, 'Uganda witch doctor "lied to BBC" over child sacrifice'.