

When 'ghosts' struck

Written by by tracy gwambe & joan akello
Thursday, 14 April 2011 13:42

The Kitebi saga shows how poor handling of a common issue can turn nasty

Kitebi Day and Boarding Nursery and Primary School in Mutundwe in Rubaga Division of Kampala district, with its old but neat green classroom blocks, teachers blocks and battered fencing on a dusty road, has been in the news lately over alleged demonic attacks.

Months after reports of bizarre stories of demons attacking pupils, demanding human blood, money, alcohol and sex, the pupils in their neat green and white uniforms continue trudging to class and teachers can be heard howling instructions.



Kitebi is a typical UPE school that charges between Shs 41,000 for day scholars and Shs 200,000 for boarders. Such low fees are unusual and could be the reason some parents have kept their children in the school despite the scary happenings.

Some parents, especially of the day scholars, merely regard it as their fate to have the controversial school. Reports of bizarre incidents at the school are not new. A neighbor of the school, who also has four children at the school, says talk of ghosts has haunted the school since 2009. She says in the recent bout of attacks, she was called to the school after the alleged ghosts, commonly called mayembe, possessed her son. As usual, she took him to a Christian Pentecostal pastor who, she says, exorcised the demons.

She says when possessed, usually at night, her son first complains of headache and stomachache before starting to scream, jumping up and running out of the house. "He normally has too much power and is usually aggressive. He throws stones at every one and does not recognise anyone. This takes about one hour before he calms down. We have to tie him up on ropes."

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Dangerous rumours

Superstitious beliefs abound at the school and the neighbouring community. The school compound has a mango tree that nobody is allowed to go to. It is alleged that the mayembe (ghosts) live there. But as expected, some pupils are either inquisitive or love mangoes and inevitably go to the tree. As in the past, when the children suffer the attacks, they shout out names of teachers and other school officials. This time, most have focused on a teacher, Naome Wandera, a former lover of the headmaster, Godfrey Ssenfuma.

Conflicting claims alleged that Naome brought the mayembe, while others claim they were brought by the headmaster.

Some parents claim that the school, which belongs to the Church of Uganda as a founder body, has run into trouble because it has brought in Muslims and witchdoctors.

The school authorities who are professed Christians by day, and apparent believers in witchcraft by night, have publicly responded with prayer. When the current phase of attacks broke out in the Christian Lent period, the school ordered all pupils, except those in the nursery section to fast.

During the attacks, the school Chaplain was at the centre of the frenzy, praying for the pupils.

Lillian Namaganda who lives with her says they saw two headless snakes that spoke. The alleged snakes, reportedly said they want Naome to take them back where she got them.

A parent says the demons, speaking through the children, demand "cows with two legs" a common euphemism for human sacrifice. She says they want two girls and two boys sacrificed.

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Belief in exorcism is widespread. According press reports, one of the teachers; Wandera says the headmaster has already slaughtered a cow in a ritual at the school at night, sprinkled its blood all over the classrooms and compound, and offered libations to appease the spirits. Since the ghosts have continued to attack the school, it is feared that the next step will be human sacrifice.

That is the problem. Unless the government intervenes, human life will be lost in the school. Two pupils have so far died.

Kitebi is a government-aided school but ministry of Education officials have not provided the right leadership in the saga. The headmaster has not been at the school since the attacks started.

Sarah Namutebi, the deputy headmistress says it all started when an unidentified pupil started shivering and shouting at breakfast time. Soon other pupils became hysterical. The situation escalated when villagers entered the school. Some were looters. Others attacked the suspected teacher, Wandera. She was only rescued by police who rushed her to Kitebi Police Post. The mob followed her there, demanding to lynch her. Police moved her to Katwe Police Post.

Mass hysteria?

Medical practitioners, socio-psychologists and psychiatrists are dismissing the superstitious frenzy of prayer, libations, and other acts to allegedly exorcise demons, as cosmetic.

Paul Nyende, a social psychologist at Makerere University said the events at Kitebi are a case of mass hysteria. He said mass hysteria is a "sudden outbreak of strange behavior or thought pattern leading to physical illness which can involve so many, hundreds of people in a very short period of time. Mass hysteria is common in closed communities, such as schools, hospitals and factories, where information seems to rotate. The closeness causes change in the original message and what comes out is an ultimately provocative message. This may affect people suddenly.

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Nyende said the physical symptoms might need medical attention since hysteria causes many physical changes that can be treated, such as fainting, and loss of consciousness. The pupils may need rehydration and minor tranquilisers to calm their mental state.

“Psychologically, going to hospital is therapeutic, because upon discharge, you are fine, the doctors attend to you, talk to you and may even give tablets with no medicinal content,” he said.

He says although not unusual, hysteria in Uganda is often associated with demons. Such strange beliefs, tremendous fear, disorientation, incoherent speech, loss of energy, and fainting of victims are associated with anxiety over an underlying problem. In this case, wrangles among the school officials, especially the headmaster and his mistress.

“This personal issue should have been handled at home, not taken to the workplace,” Nyende says, “their accusations and counter accusations put their pupils in a vulnerable position, with no one to give them professional help.”

Nyende said every school has a ghost story. Stories like the school was built on a cemetery and alleged odd and weird happenings at particular places like latrines and trees. He said it takes rumours and how they are handled to trigger mass hysteria.

He said the authorities concerned failed to diffuse the tension and dispel these myths and rumours before they engulfed the entire community. He said in such cases, people tend to be shy and hide. In this case, the headmaster was away in hospital.

“There should be somebody to constantly talk to the children in the absence of the headmaster. They need external resource persons to talk to the children,” he said.

UPE trouble?

Joyce Nansamba, an industrial psychologist, also noted the strained relationships, lack of a

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communication channel, and bickering among administrators in the school. She says the children were influenced to taint to the image of the accused teachers because of personal interests.

"The husband–wife conflict is a sign of poor personal relationship and underlying strain which has affected the pupils," she said.

She said the hysteria might be a means for the pupils, teachers, and the community to complain about inadequate facilities and resources in the school. "UPE schools face financial constraints. These are pupils in transition to adolescence and have challenges such as hunger. Food is an issue in UPE schools, so they would want to eat food even during Lent".

She says, however, accusations involving supernatural powers are complex in nature and should not be brush off.

She explained that girls are usually more hysterical than their male counterparts.

"The boys at this stage are more interested in discovering themselves, not creating relationships with their mothers, teachers. Therefore, they are less affected.

"Girls are more emotionally uncontrolled and feel comfortable to display outbursts .They can cry even in public."

Nyende said religious leaders who prayed for the children created a bigger problem because it appeared to confirm that evil spirits exist. He said the emphasis of deliverance by the church signals that people are not safe and this alone can trigger mass hysteria.

"In the 16th century, Europe was haunted by witch-hunts and the general population moved to mob justice to kill all suspects and people who had encounters with the devil," he said.

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He said closing the school or dispersing the pupils solves the problem. "I do not think any pupil comprehends what is taught because they are under tension. They are still in fear of the unknown," he said.

"A child cannot continue displaying bizarre behavior at home. After a few days home, they will progress and get fine." He said even after recovery, the children need counseling to maintain the changes, and remove fear of demons and darkness.

Martin Baluku, a community psychologist said a comprehensive team should be formed with a psychologist to analyse psychological and behavioural aspects such as what happened before and what can be done to solve the problem, a medical professional, and somebody with a sociological background to investigate the social aspects. Religious leaders or knowledgeable persons should research on this case as well.

"Government should create a child friendly environment by using the professions available, not relying on only the matrons or senior teachers, who are not effectively trained in protecting children," he continued, "We can neither rely on security guards nor leave the work to organisations that protect children because they cannot operate in the schools every day and night."

He said he is not sure whether evil spirits attacked the pupils or it is mass hysteria.

Simon Muhamuza, Principal PRO of Kampala City Council which oversees the school told The Independent that the pupils affected were taken to hospital and were diagnosed with hysteria.

"Hysteria is a common thing. It is a medical condition. You are taken to hospital, treated, discharged, then go home and sleep," he said.

"The pupils are in school. The school is running. Leave the children alone," he said.

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He said officials from KCC and Rubaga Division have visited the school and made a report that was shared with the ministry of Education, the Permanent Secretary.

“The contents are however not for public consumption,” he said.

Nansamba, the psychologist said the officials should make the report public to diffuse tension and also help eradicate ignorance in the highly superstitious community.