



## Suspicious of Occult Medicine Murders in Context of Democratic Elections in Contemporary Côte d'Ivoire

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### Abstract

The article aims to contribute to contemporary discourses on so-called occult medicine practices and the associated human murders within the context of democratic elections in Côte d'Ivoire. The study is grounded in anthropological fieldwork conducted in Abidjan from 2018 to 2020. Additionally, information on occult medicine murders from local and international media has been gathered to further enrich the reflections. The study reveals that in the prevalent public discourse, politicians are accused of employing occult medicine to enhance their power and ensure their success by collaborating with ritual specialists. The paper argues that, in everyday discourse, occult medicine murders can be perceived as being ontologically motivated.

**Keywords:** Côte d'Ivoire, elections, occult medicine murders

### Introduction

In recent years, so-called occult medicine practices – and human murder associated with them – have become a serious issue in Côte d'Ivoire (cf. Koenig 2014; Fancello 2011; Aboa 2015; Deveaux, 2018; Duhem 2018; Ouattara & Wedel 2020; Newell 2021), as in several other African countries (cf. for instance Tanner 2010; Schühle 2013; Oduro-Frimpong 2014; Max-

Wirth 2016; Myhre 2017; Rannditsheni et al. 2018; Owusu 2022; Kohnert 2003). Occult medicine practices typically refer to esoteric or hidden healing and well-being methods that are often associated with mystical, spiritual, or supernatural elements. These practices may involve the use of rituals, spells, or unconventional remedies that go beyond conventional medical approaches (see Traore 1983; Bastien 1988; Memel-Fotê 1998; Yangni-Angatê 2004; Kedzierska & Jouvelet 2006; Ouattara and Wedel 2020).

In various cultures, there are beliefs and traditions surrounding occult medicine, which may include the use of herbs, amulets, incantations, animal, human blood or body parts, or other mystical elements. It's important to note that the term "occult" in this context doesn't necessarily imply negative or malevolent practices. Instead, it highlights the hidden or mysterious nature of these medicinal traditions (cf. Cissé 1985, 1994; Kélétiogui 1978; Hellweg 2004; Gnonsoa 2007; Ouattara 2008). The most common practices associated with the occult include divination, magic, and spiritualism (also known as spiritism). There are numerous and diverse religions that have occult theologies. Occult religions are typically founded on nature-based polytheistic ideologies; their members believe they can magically intervene in the universe through specific spells, ceremonies, or rituals (Perlmutter 2003, p. 2).

A central feature of the notion of occult medicine is that it links occult forces to political power and material wealth and, more generally, to vitality and prosperity. However, occult medicine is also occasionally used with lethal effect, perhaps increasingly so – as in the case of the medicine murders, the killing of human persons to harvest body parts for making and selling medicine (cf. Bernault & Tonda 2000; Tanner 2010; Fancello 2011; Schühle 2013; Masoga & Rugwiji 2018; Newell 2021).

Although occult medicine practices have since long experienced the influence of Islam and Christianity as well as the secular heritage of colonial and post-colonial regimes, they remain alive and active, not only in their traditional roles but also in addressing and resolving contemporary issues and problems, in rural and urban areas alike. As highlighted by Dirk Kohnert (1996), the belief in occult forces is still deeply rooted in many African societies, regardless of education, religion, and social class of the people concerned. According to many Africans, its incidence is ever-increasing due to social stress and strain caused (among others) by the process of modernization. Occult forces beliefs have increasingly been exploited for political purposes. They lend themselves to support any kind of political system, whether despotic or democratic. Strategic groups, notably the power elite, are prone to use it systematically in their struggle for command and control. Thereby, they are likely to add further social stress to an already

endangered precarious balance of power, which makes occult medicinal practices accusations flourish (Kohnert 1996, p. 1347).

It should also be noted that the occult medicine complex is not limited to the African continent (see for example, Hanegraaff 2003; Wedel 2004; Bernardi Junqueira 2021); growing numbers of Africans – migrants, refugees, victims of sex-trafficking etc – today live and work outside Africa, in Europe, the Americas and Asia, bringing problems associated with these beliefs and practices – including threats of curses by feticheurs/marabouts and the fear of witchcraft – with them. Furthermore, experts in occult forces Islamic knowledge – commonly called ‘marabouts’ – travel between West Africa and Europe, the United States and Asia. They offer their knowledge to both a West African diaspora population and a local clientele that includes non-Muslim (cf. Kuczynski, 2002; Gemmeke 2009; Parish 2018). In an effort to negotiate their expert status publicly, occult medicine specialists, mediatize and advertise their services on the social media, in printed press and in radio and television shows – both in Africa and abroad.

The article aims to contribute to contemporary discourses on occult medicinal practices and the associated human murders within the context of democratic elections in Côte d’Ivoire. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Abidjan from 2018 - 2020. The primary sources of information about this broad and elusive, yet very public subject, are gossip and rumors (*radio tratoire*), conspiracy theories and urban legends, news reports in conventional media, television and, increasingly, internet and social media. Thus, I have gathered information on occult medicinal practices from both local and international media to deepen my reflections.

The article reveals that, during electoral seasons, these discourses gain significant traction in Côte d’Ivoire, attracting extensive media attention. Within this popular discourse, politicians are accused of utilizing occult medicine, facilitated by ritual specialists, to empower themselves and secure success in elections. Put briefly, my argument will be this: in daily discourse, these occult medicine practices are perceived as ontologically motivated.

### **Occult medicinal practices in Côte d’Ivoire**

The use of occult medicine is not limited to the treatment of illness or other physical ailments. It is used for any number of purposes; ambitious politicians use it to gain or stay in power, a businessman to accumulate wealth and status, the street peddler to earn a modest living, and the spurned lover to regain his/her partner’s affection (see Kélétigui 1978; Touré and Konaté 1990; Ouattara 2008).

In Côte d’Ivoire, as in most francophone countries, in popular discourse, occult medicine practices are often described as “doing a work” (*faire du travail*) or “doing medicine” (*faire du médicament*). People

frequently turn to occult medicine specialists who are deemed capable of interpreting and manipulating these invisible forces. They may seek specialist knowledge to determine whether the root cause of their misfortune is occult in nature, or because they seek magical protection and healing. In cases where occult medicine experts use their special powers to bring order to a chaotic world, they attract large audiences (cf. Touré and Konaté 1990; Bassett 2003; Gnonsoa 2007; Ouattara 2008; Ouattara and Touré 2020; Ouattara et Wedel 2020).

### **Occult medicine murders in Côte d'Ivoire: types and profile of perpetrators**

According to a Lecturer/Researcher at the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny in Côte d'Ivoire, the majority of occult medicine murder cases involve an intricate network of stakeholders organized across three levels: (a) 'occult medicine specialists,' including fetishists, marabouts, or self-appointed pastor-prophets, who play a role in instructing clients about the required body parts for occult medicine or even selling them; (b) clients who pay the killers to acquire the necessary body parts of the victims; and (c) the murderers—referring to those who are paid to carry out the actual killing of the victims and harvesting their organs (Interview in Abidjan, 2019).

The most frequent occult medicine murders in Côte d'Ivoire are murders linked to: (1) elections; (2) cybercrime or “grazing”; (3) social or economic promotion; (4) trafficking in human organs; and (5) sports competitions (see Touré and Konaté 1990; Ouattara 2008; Koenig 2014; Bazare et al. 2017; Fancello 2011; Newell 2021). One of the central factors in occult medicine murders is that the perpetrators often act under the guidance of someone who gives advice on how to proceed.

In Côte d'Ivoire, this person may be a “fetishist” (*féticheur*), *marabout*, or self-appointed pastor-prophet who has the trust of his clients. In Côte d'Ivoire, election periods and government reshuffles are favorable times for occult medicine specialists to coach politicians by offering them their services and medicines. Ritual sacrifices or medicine murders multiply on the eve of electoral deadlines (cf. Touré and Konaté 1990; Guibléhon 2011). Below, I present some contemporary discourses on occult medicinal practices – and the human murders associated with them, unfolding in the shadows of democratic elections in contemporary Côte d'Ivoire.

### **Suspicious of occult medicine murders in context of democratic elections**

In Côte d'Ivoire, anxieties about medicine murder typically occur during political upheavals, in view of the fact that occult medicine murders seem to increase in number during electoral periods in the country (cf. Aboa

2015; BBC 2015; The Japan Times 2015). On January 27, 2015, Ange Aboa reported in Reuters that "Many Ivorians suggested that the kidnappings were possibly connected to ritual killings orchestrated by corrupt businessmen and politicians. These individuals allegedly employ body parts in ceremonies believed to bestow supernatural powers." Additionally, one of Aboa's sources in Abidjan remarked, " These are mystical and occult practices [...]. This is about black magic, and they need these human sacrifices to get money and power.

According to many of my respondents, in Côte d'Ivoire, as in several African countries, the number of occult medicine murders tends to increase in election periods. In 2015, a year of the presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire, more than 24 children were kidnapped and killed across the country within a period of two months before the elections. Most of the bodies of the victims were mutilated, and several body parts missing. Ivorian authorities deployed around 1,500 police, soldiers, and gendarmes as part of an operation aimed at stopping these killings and identifying the culprits (cf. BBC 2015; Aboa 2015; Abidjan.net 2015; The Japan Times 2015).

There was also a wave of similar occult medicine murders on the sidelines of the 2006 and 2010 elections (BBC 2015). The Minister of the Interior at the time reported to the BBC news on 29 January 2015, 'We have these ritual crimes, and we know very well the type of criminal who commits them in other countries. They do it to get power and money.' On January 27, 2015, Reuters reported that:

At least 21 children have been kidnapped in Ivory Coast since December (2014) and most have been found dead with their bodies mutilated, authorities said, in a wave of ritual killings some residents fear may be linked to upcoming elections. [...]. Many said the kidnappings were likely linked to ritual killings by corrupt businessmen and politicians, who used body parts in ceremonies supposed to confer supernatural powers. [...]. Presidential and possibly legislative elections are scheduled to take place toward the end of the year in the world's largest cocoa producer and the economic motor of francophone West Africa. A spate of child abductions was recorded ahead of elections in 2010. The kidnappings have led to calls for action from the U.N. children's agency UNICEF, which urged authorities to do everything possible to quickly identify those responsible.

A school manager in Abidjan reported to the BBC news on 29 January 2015, "We have been more vigilant. We have taken the names of all accompanying children. And security has been reinforced at the entrance." A father in Abidjan expressed his fear to BBC News in the following terms: "I am really afraid because this could happen to us too. I have taken measures; I have talked to the maids and to those working in my house. I told them not to leave my son alone" (BBC news 2015).

In 2018, the year of municipal and regional elections, national and international media outlets reported that more than 40 children had disappeared in the country in less than two months. On April 4, 2018, the journalist Stéphanie Aglietti published an article in *Libération*, a French daily newspaper, titled 'Côte d'Ivoire: A Supposed Resurgence of Ritual Crimes Creates Psychosis'.

In July 2019, the corpses of 25 infants were discovered in sachets at the Gagnoa municipal cemetery in west-central Côte d'Ivoire. Local and international media suggest that the children might have been murdered by a network that deals with human blood and body parts for “magical” purposes, occult medicine murders in other words (see BBC 2019; RFI 2019; Paris Match 2019). According to one of my respondents, “some politicians ritually bury live animals [e.g. chickens, cows, dogs, goats, sheep] and even human beings as a symbolic way to bury their opponents and their chances of winning the elections, in order to have an advantage over them” (Interview in Abidjan, 2019). In 2018, during the campaign of the municipal and regional elections for example:

[...] in Korhogo, four gravediggers were sent to dig a grave. When they arrived at the cemetery, they saw two gravediggers digging a grave and walked over to them. The two gravediggers then started to run away. However, the four gravediggers were able to catch one of them. They found a five-year old girl alive, wrapped in a white fabric next to the grave that the two gravediggers were digging. They uncovered the child and took her as well as the gravedigger they caught to the police. The gravedigger told the police that they were sent by a *marabout* to bury the five-year old girl alive. The police informed the city prefect and decided to arrest the *marabout* in question. However, this case was closed without follow-up (Interview in Abidjan, 2019).

In Côte d'Ivoire, one of the occult medicine murder cases that caught the attention of national and international media was the case of Bouba, a four-year old boy. He was kidnapped on February 24, 2018, in Abidjan and found two days later, slaughtered, drained of blood, and buried. The Ivorian police reported that it was a young jeweler, who had killed the four-year old boy on the advice of a *marabout*, to become wealthy (see Aglietti 2018; Deveaux 2018; Duhem 2018; Lauvergner 2018; Le Parisien 2018; Tounkara 2018). On January 27, 2018, the Radio France Internationale (RFI), reported that: “According to a police source, five members of an organized criminal group have been apprehended, and two have been referred to the prosecution. The *marabout* is still at large” (my translation).

In the face of these disappearances of children, which had increased since the beginning of 2018, President Alassane Ouattara promised a strong response: “I have given firm instructions that our defense and security forces

be deployed on the ground to protect all populations" (RFI 2018, my translation). Several media linked the case of Bouba to upcoming municipal, regional and senatorial elections scheduled for 2018 (see Aglietti 2018; Lauvergnier 2018). One of my respondents who works at the National human rights commission of Côte d'Ivoire (CNDH-CI) stated:

The high number of ritual murders and the disappearance of children reported in the media keep people in a state of stress, especially when it comes to the safety of their children who have to go to school every morning. Schools are taking new precautions in light of the recent kidnappings, including asking parents to pick their children up from inside the school, encouraging school bus drivers to drop children off closer to home, and telling unaccompanied children to walk home in small groups. There are fears that these ritual killings are linked to upcoming elections later this year. Legislative elections are more likely than presidential ones to result in this type of murder, since there are more seats to be filled and therefore more candidates (Interview in Abidjan, 2018).

A respondent summed up the problem:

It is always the same, as the election approaches, the ritual murders increase. It is a lucrative business for *marabouts* and other occult medicine specialists. During pre-election periods, they come to Côte d'Ivoire from the whole sub-region. Sometimes, they fly here in business class, to sell their services to politicians (Interview in Abidjan, 2020).

These accounts above illustrate well that for most people, these occult medicine murders are politically motivated. In most cases, it is believed that politicians are behind these occult medicine murders. In the course of the electoral season, a range of discourses has been spreading about electorally motivated occult medicine murders in Côte d'Ivoire.

## Discussion

The article emphasizes that understanding murders associated with occult medicine requires consideration within a broader framework encompassing socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, alongside ontological ideas related to supernatural forces. Throughout the electoral season in Côte d'Ivoire, various discourses emerge concerning occult medicine murders motivated by electoral considerations. The findings from the study indicate that: (1) In ongoing discussions, a consistent theme emerges, connecting medical practices to instances of harm to individuals in the lead-up to each election in Côte d'Ivoire (Lauvergnier 2018); (2) in popular discourse, politicians are often accused of harnessing occult medicine to strengthen their influence and ensure their ongoing success, often with the assistance of occult medicine specialists, (3) in many

instances, there is a prevailing belief that politicians are connected to occult medicine practices – and human murder associated with them, (4) the primary victims of ritual murders in Côte d'Ivoire are children.

Numerous scholars have emphasized a recurrent theme during electoral seasons in sub-Saharan Africa: the notion of an "invisible hand," occult power, or a secret society manipulating the dynamics of power (cf. Bernault & Tonda 2000; Sanders 2003; Newell 2007; Duhem 2018; Sarkisova-Kouamé & Kouamé 2019). Sarkisova - Kouamé Vlada & Caummaueth- Kouamé Reine (2019:14) highlights that:

In sub-Saharan Africa, presidential elections are only organized with the assistance of marabouts or *féticheur*. Moreover, as well as the allocation of ministerial portfolios or government reshuffle. Even coups are planned and carried out only after consultation with the "workers" of the invisible world (my translation).

The engagement of individuals in occult medicine practices is frequently rooted in their cultural or spiritual beliefs, as they seek healing and well-being through methods that may deviate from mainstream medical perspectives. This observation is consistent with findings from previous works (Kélétiogui 1978; Hellweg 2004; Ouattara 2008; Newell 2022), which have delved into the cultural and spiritual dimensions of such practices. These studies collectively highlight the diverse ways in which individuals draw upon occult medicine, influenced by their cultural backgrounds and spiritual orientations, as an alternative approach to address health and well-being concerns.

According to several scholars, murders that involve the practice wherein parts of the victim's body are removed for making "medicine" to strengthen politically, professionally, or economically those who use it, the use of the term "ritual murder" is misleading. The killing of the victim is not in itself ritualized. In this sense, the use of the term "ritual murder" is incorrect (see Prinsloo and Du Plessis 1989; Kuper 2006; Minnaar 2003; La Fontaine 2011). This view supports that of Prinsloo and Du Plessis (1989) who argued for a distinction between "ritual murder," when a victim is sacrificed for the benefit of the whole community, and "medicine murder," where a victim's body parts are harvested to make magic potions that are used by individuals for selfish reasons (Prinsloo and Du Plessis, 1989, p. 617).

As highlighted by Adam Kuper (2006), we can qualify these ritual killings as medicine murders – people are killed so that their body parts can be used in magical concoctions that are supposed to guarantee strength, courage, and political success (Kuper 2006, p. 1). Jean La Fontaine (2011) also emphasized that the acquisition of body parts does not always require killing. Some unfortunate victims have been left alive after limbs have been



severed (La Fontaine 2011, p. 9). However, in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, we can speak of occult medicine murders because the victims are killed (see Fancello 2011; BBC 2015; Aglietti 2018).

Regarding the occult medicinal practices and associated human murders that resurface every time there's an upcoming election in Côte d'Ivoire, an Ivorian political leader reported to *Jeune Afrique*, a French-language pan-African weekly news magazine, on March 5, 2018, explaining, 'We live in a society where the belief persists that making human sacrifices can influence election results. The idea is that to stay in power, you have to sacrifice a human being' (Duhem 2018, my translation). According to Perlmutter (2003: 30): "The significant ideology behind sacrificial ritual is that blood consists of life force energy [...]. In specific occult worship, bloodletting or imbibing blood from a victim represents the assimilation of raw power". For a more in-depth exploration of the association between blood and life force energy, refer to additional sources (Jonckers 1976; Mellott 1984; Cissé 1985; Nabofa 1985; Wise 2006).

The study has brought to light a disturbing revelation that the primary victims of ritual murders in Côte d'Ivoire are children. This vulnerability is attributed to their physical inability to defend themselves against attacks. Moreover, a number of studies indicate that a deeply unsettling belief exists that certain occult medicines attain heightened potency and efficacy when crafted with ingredients derived from young victims. A prevailing perception among some 'occult medicine specialists' is that virgins embody qualities of cleanliness, purity, or even magical essence. There is a widespread belief that rituals or medicines stand a significantly higher chance of producing the desired effects if a virgin or items directly associated with a virgin are incorporated (see Perlmutter 2003; Ashforth 2005; Tanner 2010; Owusu 2022). As a result, individuals seeking wealth, protection, power, longevity, and other aspirations through spiritualists may receive instructions from occult medicine specialties to engage in acts such as sleeping with virgins or providing sexual fluids or body parts of virgins as integral components of the rituals necessary for fulfilling their requests (Owusu 2022, p. 25).

## **Conclusion**

The subsequent reflections were formulated to contribute to the Contemporary discourse on occult medicinal practices and their correlation with human murders in the context of democratic elections in Côte d'Ivoire. The study highlights the prevalence of discussions concerning politically motivated occult medicine murders during electoral seasons in the country. Contrary to expectations, the processes of modernization and democratization have not diminished occult convictions, as evidenced by

prior research. Within the intricate intersection of politics and occultism, the latter remains a significant force.

The perceptions of occult medicine and its practices in Côte d'Ivoire are dynamic and deeply ingrained in ontology. Practitioners often engage in these rituals guided by cultural or spiritual beliefs, seeking healing and well-being beyond conventional medical perspectives. Murders associated with occult medicine must be scrutinized within the broader framework of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors, interwoven with ontological notions of supernatural forces. Given that these occult medicinal practices are intricately linked to enduring beliefs in supernatural forces, a comprehensive understanding is imperative.

The persistence of occult convictions, even amidst modernization and democratization, underscores their enduring influence. These practices, deeply rooted in ontology, offer an alternative lens through which healing and well-being are sought. The connection between occult medicine and supernatural forces necessitates a holistic examination, considering socio-cultural, economic, and political contexts.

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