TRULY EVIL EMPIRES

The Panic over Ritual Child Abuse in Australia

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SUMMARY

Allegations of “ritual abuse” were first made in North America in the 1970s and early 1980s. It was claimed that an extremely severe form of sexual and physical child abuse was being perpetrated by Satanists or the devotees of comparably unorthodox religions. Perpetrators were often supposed to be involved in other serious criminal activities. Allegations were subsequently made in Britain, Holland, Australia and New Zealand. The thesis examines the bitter debates that these claims provoked, including the dispute about whether ritual abuse “really happens”.

The thesis also contributes to the debate by providing some anthropological insights into why these strange and incredible claims were made and why they were accepted by certain therapists, officials, journalists and members of the public. It is argued that the panic over ritual abuse was a panic about what anthropologists know as “witchcraft” and the thesis makes this argument through an analysis of the events (mainly discursive events) of the panic. The thesis in particular takes up Jean La Fontaine’s argument about the similarities between accusations of ritual abuse and those made against “witches” in early modern Europe and in non-Western societies. The similarities between the kinds of people typically accused of perpetrating ritual abuse and those accused of practising witchcraft are considered, with a special emphasis on those cases where accusations were made by adult “survivors” and where alleged perpetrators were affluent and of relatively high social status. The thesis examines how supposed perpetrators of ritual abuse were denied the social support properly due to them and how accusations—and the persecution that followed—achieved certain political, professional and personal ends for survivors and their supporters.

The thesis also considers similarities between “crazed” witch hunting and the recent spread of the panic about ritual abuse throughout much of the English-speaking West. The peculiar panic about witch-like figures that occurred in Australia -- especially in NSW--is examined. The thesis shows how, at a time when Australians had become very sceptical about claims of ritual abuse, activists were able to incite and affect the latest of a succession of homophobic panics in Australia.
This is to certify that I, Timothy Lynch, have not submitted this work for a higher degree at any other university or institution. All my sources of information have been acknowledged in the bibliography, except for interviews, the proceedings of court cases, Royal Commission hearings, seminars and rallies that I myself attended and media broadcasts. These have been acknowledged within the text of the thesis.
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“Ritual abuse is the unbelievable that we all need to believe. Most survivors state that they were ritually abused for the purpose of indoctrination into a set of beliefs and practices. Most often survivors state that it was for satanic worship and satanic beliefs or practices . . .”


“Let there be no mistake. Reports are coming in from many countries of children being ritually abused in the most painful, degrading and evil way. It would be nice if it were not happening in Australia but it is . . .

We know some of the sect’s reasons. We believe this is a big organization based on evil—a truly Evil Empire. They work in secrecy and fear. They infiltrate. They are cunning, brilliant and evil . . . perhaps at the end of this seminar you will have and inkling of the power we face.”


“The discourse of disbelief uses a number of strategies in order to dismiss ritual abuse reports as features of a social scare or moral panic. These include the consistent coupling of ‘satanism’ and ritual abuse . . .”

INTRODUCTION

In March 2002, I attended the “Surviving Child Abuse” seminar organised by ASCA—the Advocates for the Survivors of Child Abuse. The seminar was held at the Newcastle Wests Rugby League Club in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales. Those attending had first to sign a form that made them temporary members of the club, then walk past banks of poker machines, garish chrome bars, a large indoor water feature, and into one of the function rooms. There a small podium had been installed, along with a trestle table piled with ASCA literature. The lights had been dimmed a little to make the projected graphs, diagrams and speakers’ summary points clearer. Much of one afternoon session of the seminar was conducted by a woman whose horrific story of Satanism and sexual abuse seemed profoundly out of place in these banal and familiar surroundings.

She told delegates that when she was seven, her uncle began selling her to abusive cults. During periodic childhood outings--and unbeknownst to the rest of her family--she was drugged, then delivered to various sites where she was horrendously abused during Satanic and other occult rituals. She was tortured and gang-raped. Her body was used as an altar on which animal sacrifices took place. Perpetrators made films and took photographs as they sexually abused her and a number of other girls. Many of her tormentors were “high-ranking” members of the community, and seemingly able to perpetrate their crimes with impunity.

The speaker also provided a detailed description of the process by which she had recovered memories of this abuse. For twenty years she had no conscious
recollected until she was in her mid-30s, when she began to suspect that her uncle had sexually molested her. In the years that followed, memories of abuse—and then memories of the terrible abuse perpetrated by the cultists—gradually emerged as she attended marriage guidance counselling, was treated by a clinical psychologist and another therapist, engaged in “journaling” exercises and, finally, as she participated in ASCA’s therapeutic activities. When the speaker concluded by reciting a poem in which she soberly celebrated her survival, many of those attending the seminar were moved to tears.

What this speaker was describing was “ritual abuse”, that is, very severe physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by members of Satanic or comparably unorthodox religious groups. Such abuse is supposed to form part of the groups’ rituals and/or is a way of indoctrinating and controlling group members. The term was originally coined in 1980 by the Canadian psychiatrist Lawrence Pazder to describe the activities allegedly perpetrated by Satanists in the 1960s. According to one of Pazder’s adult patients, Satanists had kept the five-year-old daughter of a coven member imprisoned for some months, during which she was ritually subjected to physical and sexual abuse as part of an attempt to facilitate a visit to Earth by Satan. It was claimed that the girl also witnessed the abuse and murder of other children (Smith and 1981 [1980]). Certain therapists and activists subsequently used the term to describe comparable abuse reported by adults and supposedly disclosed by young children. These therapists and activists argued that ritual abuse was being secretly perpetrated on a large scale, and that powerful members of society often belonged to perpetrating groups (e.g. Gould 1992: 207; Ryder 1991: 14ff.). Later, the term was taken up by sceptical scholars, activists and commentators (e.g. La Fontaine 1994: 30). They too used it to describe the horrendous abuse reported by “victims” and “survivors”, but they regarded claims of “ritual abuse” to have arisen because of the repetitive and suggestive questioning of young children by child protection activists, poorly conducted psychotherapy undertaken by troubled adults and the psychopathology of certain adult “survivors”.

The account given by the speaker at the Newcastle seminar was very similar to those given throughout the 1980s and 1990s by other Australians, North Americans and Britons who have claimed to be survivors of ritual abuse. Like them, the Newcastle survivor claimed to have been “assaulted by multiple perpetrators of both sexes, over an extended period of time. The physical abuse [was] so severe that it often involve[d] torture . . . The sexual abuse [was] typically sadistic, painful and humiliating. The psychological abuse relie[d] on terrorisation of the victim . . .” Her abuse was, furthermore, “perpetrated . . . in a highly systematic way” by means of Satanic ceremonies and symbolism (Gould 1992: 207).

Some survivors have reported being subjected to ritual abuse even more horrific than that described at the Newcastle seminar. They describe witnessing ritual and other murders, and being forced to torture, murder and cannibalise others. They claim that they had been deliberately impregnated, then had the pregnancy ceremonially terminated. They say that they were ritually daubed with blood and excreta (Gould 1992: 223, 379ff.; Ryder 1992: 12; Young 1992: 250-1). By 2002, however, it was rare for a survivor to publicly and explicitly declare that he/she had been subjected to ritual abuse—and ever rarer to claim that the abuse occurred during the religious ceremonies of a Satanic cult.

The Newcastle speaker’s experience of initially having no memories of abuse, and of recovering memories of specifically ritual abuse only after a sustained period of therapy, is also shared by other survivors. Since 1980, certain researchers and therapists have proposed that severe trauma—such as ritual abuse—can precipitate the repression of memory, dissociation or the creation of multiple personalities. Survivors are typically described as suffering from some form of memory disorder which has prevented them from spontaneously recalling their abuse. Theorists also claim that young children who have more recently been subjected to ritual abuse are so profoundly affected by the experience—and so intimidated by the perpetrators—that prolonged and suggestive interrogations are required to facilitate disclosure.
In the 1980s and 1990s, claims of ritual abuse resulted in numerous prosecutions--some of which led to those accused being imprisoned--as well as official investigations and judicial inquiries. In at least one American state, laws were reformed so that child abuse perpetrated during Satanic rituals would be especially severely punished (Lanning 1992: 139). Many scholarly and popular works about ritual abuse were published, and seminars were organized to educate police, child protection workers and others. The mass media provided extensive and sensational coverage of the issue. Some American surveys conducted in the late 1980s and mid-1990s suggest, furthermore, that a large proportion of the population believed that the claims of ritual abuse survivors were true and that what Spensley described as a "truly Evil Empire" of abusive Satanists was indeed active (Spensley 1992a; see also Victor 1998).

**Ritual Abuse and the Anthropology of Witchcraft**

This thesis is neither an exploration of the beliefs and structures of groups that perpetrate ritual abuse, nor an analysis of the meaning and purpose of the sexually abusive rituals reported by survivors. I will not be examining the implications for conventional conceptions of religion in the West of the existence of a ubiquitous--though secret--Satanic religion. I will, rather, be using some anthropological insights to examine why people in the contemporary West have come to hold these strange and incredible beliefs about their childhoods--and, in some cases, about what is going on when their children are being cared for by others--and why their claims were so readily accepted by therapists, officials, journalists and members of the public. I will thus be contributing to what the British sociologist Sara Scott disparages as the "discourse of disbelief" that has always accompanied claims of and theorising about ritual abuse (Scott 2001: 10, 35).
In particular, I will be taking up Jean La Fontaine’s argument about the similarities between the accusations of ritual abuse made recently in Britain and those made against “witches” in early modern Europe and in non-Western societies. La Fontaine also points to the similarities between the kinds of people typically accused of perpetrating such abuse and those accused of practising witchcraft, and the similarities between the panic about ritual abuse and the attempts by people in other societies and other historical periods to “find”, “hunt down” or “cleanse” their society of witches (La Fontaine 1998: 14ff.). La Fontaine developed this argument after officially examining cases in the late 1980s and early 1990s in which very poor Britons had been accused of abusing their own children. I will seek to develop her theory by examining the accusations made by adult survivors, by analysing the similarities between “crazed” witch hunting and the spread of the panic about ritual abuse throughout much of the English-speaking West, and by demonstrating how the affluent and high-status people commonly accused of ritual abuse are actually the kind of “outsiders” commonly accused of witchcraft. I will also examine the peculiar panic about witch-like figures that occurred in Australia—especially in New South Wales (NSW)—and show how, at a time when Australians had become very sceptical about claims of ritual abuse, activists were able to incite and affect the latest of a succession of homophobic panics in Australia. This was a panic about the activities of wealthy, powerful and well-organised homosexual “pedophiles”.

I must thus unavoidably confront the paradox inherent within anthropological studies of witchcraft: the identification of a category on the basis that it does not, indeed, cannot “really exist” by researchers supposedly sensitive to the beliefs of the people they study (Needham 1978: 27; see also Lewis 1966: 309). In the case of ritual abuse, furthermore, there are numerous theorists and activists who argue that it is inappropriate to critically examine the claims of survivors, either because this will further damage people who have suffered severe trauma or because the perceived need to undertake such a task—as well as the means by which the task is likely to be undertaken—is part of a “vastly elaborated intellectual tradition” that has long denied the nature and scale of sexual assault and denigrated its victims (Herman 1981: 9). At the end of her book, Sara Scott goes so far as to suggest that survivors of ritual abuse may have made some incredible claims because the “content and
presentation" of their accounts have been "shape[d]" by patriarchal "cultural frames" (Scott 2001: 194).

There are, however, very good reasons for me to state openly that this is a study of illusory "witch-like" crimes--and to justify this approach. Most obviously, an examination of horrendous, religiously-motivated abuse which is actually occurring in contemporary Australia is an entirely different study to an examination of claims which are not true but which precipitate widespread and serious alarm. Secondly, the question of whether or not reports of ritual abuse are true is not simply a theoretical issue. Those theorists and activists who express fear that critical researchers will further traumatise survivors, or who reject the idea that the truth of survivors' claims can validly be assessed, have very frequently been involved in campaigns for fundamental reforms to sexual assault laws. They also call for perpetrators to be rigorously pursued and may even actually make accusations of ritual abuse (e.g. Scott 2001: 189ff.). Thirdly, these theorists seriously--and, I believe, disingenuously--misrepresent the debates about ritual abuse. They suggest, for example, that Satanic conspiracy theories and bizarre stories of large, well-organised cults were propagated by sceptical researchers, a sensation-seeking mass media and even those accused of ritual abuse. To do this they cite some quite general theories made when allegations of ritual abuse were relatively recent--and some essentially speculative theories whose proponents took no subsequent part in the debate. Theorists disregard the fact that these sorts of claims had actually been made--beginning around 1980--by survivors, their therapists and supporters, and by the parents and supporters of supposed child-victims. They also fail to acknowledge that therapists and activists began to champion the idea that survivors of ritual abuse were actually reporting the activities of small, idiosyncratic religious groups or of perpetrators motivated solely by perverse sexual desires and predilections, after sceptics had discredited these earlier claims.
Structure of the Thesis

The first part of the thesis—"Theories, Debates and Definitions"—consists of a review of the literature about ritual abuse and an examination of the various, often conflicting, theories about it. Many of those who accept reports of ritual abuse regard sceptics as dupes—or even supporters—of the Evil Empire of perpetrators. Sceptics in turn describe a kind of Empire made up of ill, credulous and self-interested theorists and activists. I will argue that the bitterness of the debate is a consequence of the extreme seriousness of the issue as well as the diverse and unusually strong professional, philosophical, political and even personal commitments that theorists have invested in this controversial issue. These investments make the debate about ritual abuse complicated as well as bitter. Theorists approach the issue from very different viewpoints, for example, and some theorists have modified their views about ritual abuse and why reports of it should be accepted. Theorists may also endorse—or to refrain from criticising—those with whom they may not entirely agree.

I am especially concerned with exploring the question of what actually constitutes "ritual abuse". There are significant—and bitter—disagreements about how ritual abuse should be defined. I will challenge those theorists—such as Scott—who have recently claimed that those reporting "ritual abuse" simply mean a particular form of severe, but not totally exceptional, abuse. I will show why such "broad" definitions are inappropriate and argue that their proponents misconstrue claims of ritual abuse made in the past and the theories proposed to explain these claims. The most influential of the earlier theorists were convinced that ritual abuse was, by definition, an activity perpetrated by Satanists. Other theorists defined ritual abuse as an activity mostly perpetrated by Satanists, perpetrated by Satanists in concert with others, or perpetrated by other groups who were in various way "Satanic". I will also argue that the later accounts of "ritual abuse"—which theorists claim are quite similar to certain substantiated cases of abuse—are, in fact, significantly different from these cases.
In Part 2--"Screams That Must Be Heard"--I will justify my scepticism about claims of ritual abuse. Sexual and physical mistreatment of children which is severe and elaborate has occurred in Australia in the past--and unquestionably continues to occur. Such abuse is quite different to that reported in this country by ritual abuse survivors and their supporters. The abuse that survivors claim to have suffered or witnessed is--apart from any other differences--more severe and perpetrated on a significantly greater scale. Claims of ritual abuse have been scrutinised by Australian police, prosecutors, a royal commission, scholars and journalists. None of these investigators--some of whom acted at the request of survivors and their supporters--were able to uncover evidence of ritual abuse. Some investigators, however, were themselves subsequently accused of being perpetrators of ritual abuse or of being in league with Satanists in some other way.

Reports of ritual abuse by "child victims" and recollections of abuse by "adult survivors" typically follow periods of intensive and suggestive interrogation or therapy. The theories which motivate these methods of facilitating "disclosures" of ritual abuse or the "recovery" of memories of it are themselves based on very problematic and controversial theories. These were developed to explain why children who had allegedly been sexually abused failed to disclose the abuse or retracted any accusations, and why adults who had suffered severe and sustained abuse in childhood were not be able to spontaneously recall it. These theories were based on very problematic data and were mostly formulated by therapists and others who were already convinced that child sexual abuse--including abuse of the most severe kind--was very common. In practice, the methods used to interrogate children about ritual abuse were likely to precipitate "disclosures" by children who have not in fact been abused, while therapies used to uncover and treat past ritual abuse were likely to falsely convince adults that they had been ritually abused.

In Part 3--Witches and Witch Hunters--I will follow La Fontaine by comparing the panic about ritual abuse in the contemporary West to the "witch finding" activities described by anthropologists and historians. The "witches" of early modern Europe and numerous non-Western societies were accused of perpetrating acts "that violate the most taken-for-granted cultural axioms about the natural limits of human
behaviour" (La Fontaine 1994: 20). The witches of early modern Europe were also regarded as worshippers of Satan—and as working for the establishment of his earthly Empire (Cohn 1975: 99ff.; see also Brown 1970: 36). Perpetrators of ritual abuse are not only accused of engaging in murder and physical and sexual assault. They supposedly perpetrate other, typically "witch-like" activities: devil-worship, transforming themselves or others into travesties of properly-constituted human beings, and attempting to undermine the rightful operation of society.

In Britain, accusations of ritual abuse were made against very poor people who, like "witches", were considered "outside" the society in which they reside (Douglas 1970: xxv-xxvii; La Fontaine 1998: 14, 74). Those commonly accused of ritual abuse in Australia were not members of stigmatised groups. They were, however, people whom their accusers, their therapists and others perceived to be thoroughly and fundamentally evil. Their accusers—and the therapists and supporters of these accusers—considered them to be violent, sexually deviant, oppressive, misogynistic and somehow lacking in self-control. The supposed perpetrators of ritual abuse—like those accused of witchcraft in early modern Europe or in non-Western societies—could thus be denied the social support properly due to them. Accusations of ritual abuse—and the persecution that followed—also achieved certain political, professional and personal ends for survivors and their supporters.

I will also analyse the similarities between "crazed" witch-hunting in early modern Europe and other societies and the spread of the panic about ritual abuse throughout much of the contemporary, English-speaking West. Ideas about ritual abuse—and allegations that this activity was occurring—were affected by a variety of factors as they spread from the United States to other Western countries. Allegations were made in countries whose governmental, legal and law enforcement structures were very different from those in the US, for example, and it took some time for ideas about ritual abuse to become established in other countries.

Historical factors and cultural characteristics also significantly affected the way the panic about ritual abuse occurred in different Western countries. American ideas about ritual abuse were taken up, modified and used by Australians in a number of
local debates and conflicts. Those accused in Australia were generally non-
conformists or people who could be made vulnerable to the charge—a very
dangerous one in this country—of non-conformism by an accusation of ritual abuse.
Ritual abuse theorists and activists had relatively little success here in provoking
widespread concern about the activities of religious deviants. They subsequently
promoted ideas about ritual abuse that resonated with longstanding Australian
antipathies to and suspicions about certain groups. I will argue that it was in this
way that the panic about ritual abuse here evolved into a panic in the 1990s about
the existence of an Evil Empire of homosexual "pedophiles".

Neither Part 2 or Part 3 of the thesis will include data gathered first-hand from
survivors. Macquarie University’s Ethics Review Committee—acting on the advice of
a senior member of the Department of Psychology—imposed onerous restrictions on
the interviews I had planned to conduct with survivors, parents of child victims and
those who had been accused of perpetrating ritual abuse. The committee’s advisor,
an expert on the impact of trauma on individuals, informed me that he had been
involved in past cases of ritual abuse. He also gave every indication that he
believed that claims of ritual abuse are inherently truthful—or that they should be
treated as such. I was, however, able to use other methods to gain access to
accounts by Australian survivors—including those who subsequently retracted their
claims—as well as victims’ parents and the accused. These are contained in a
number of surveys, publications and legal documents. I also attended relevant
seminars and rallies, judicial inquiries and court cases.[1] My project has, however,
been inevitably—and quite directly—affected by an activist in the debate about ritual
abuse and an ally of those likely to criticise my failure to talk to and “take seriously”
the survivors of ritual abuse (Scott 2001: 1).
Note

[1] For a full discussion of this matter, see Chapter IV.