



# Sorcery at High Levels : In Liberia, Politics Is Spellbound

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MONROVIA, Liberia — Many people here were struck by two things when Defense Minister Gray D. Allison was arrested and charged in June with having made a human sacrifice to further his career.

They thought Allison was paying the price of plotting a coup against President Samuel K. Doe. And they thought he was almost certainly guilty.

The latter assumption had only a little to do with the public's deep loathing for Maj. Gen. Allison. It was more a reflection of one of the more bizarre features of politics in Africa: Liberian politicians are widely assumed by the public to seek their fortunes through witchcraft.

Tale of 'Heart Man'

The charge that Allison had ordered the death of a local police officer so that the man's blood and organs could be used by a sorcerer—a "heart man"—to increase Allison's power has dominated talk for months in this dank, mildewy capital.

Allison has been dismissed from the Cabinet, and on July 14 he went on trial before a court-martial. He denies the charge, which could result in his execution if he is convicted.

The case's mixture of politics and superstition is not novel.

"If you look at the history of Liberia," an American anthropologist who has studied traditional cultures here said recently, "you'll find that ritual practices are characteristic not only of the traditional animist culture but of the political elite."

The more exalted the politician, the stronger the rumors about human sacrifice. During the nine-year presidency of William Tolbert, who was killed after a coup headed by Doe in 1980, it was commonly rumored that human organs were stashed throughout the presidential mansion—this while Tolbert was head of the World Baptist Convention.

Rumor Widely Believed

"It's less important whether the rumors were true than that everyone believed they were true," the American said, asking to remain anonymous because he still travels to Liberia. "That tells you a lot about the strength of these beliefs."

When Tolbert, evidently intent on discouraging the so-called heart men, ordered nine people hanged after they were convicted of a human sacrifice in 1976, "many people believed it was just his way of getting legally sanctioned sacrificial victims for himself," the researcher said.

Now this notion is generally discounted.

It would be unfair to suggest that political witchcraft is so widespread that the nation's leaders have left a trail of dismembered corpses. But it is no exaggeration to say that even those who do not believe in ritual practice believe that their leaders believe in it.

"It's ingrained in the upper levels of our society," said Michael K. Francis, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Monrovia, Liberia's capital.

There is a feeling here that politically motivated sacrifices have been increasing and that, with a presidential election scheduled for 1991, they are likely to increase further. Scarcely a week passes that local newspapers do not emblazon across their front pages an account of some new outrage.

This routine aspect of ritual killings seems to have inured the public to what must be some of the most lurid newspaper prose in the world. The Liberian press rarely shrinks from the most graphic description of physical injuries or hesitates to use the goriest of pictures.

Increasingly, pastors have made ritual murder the subject of their Sunday sermons. "Liberia is sinking into paganism," a leading Monrovia minister said after Allison was charged.

Yet many despair of eradicating superstition from Liberia. "The churches have educated people, we have preached against it, and yet we still have it," Archbishop Francis said.

Guarding Against Coup

All this colors political discourse in this country, even among the Westernized. Doe's ouster of Allison from the Defense Ministry could be seen as a preemptive strike against an impending coup, but an educated and successful Monrovia businessman had this to say about it:

"He must have been afraid the general's magic would work."

Experts in traditional culture are hard-pressed to explain why these beliefs have persisted in this region despite a cultural onslaught by Christianity and Islam. And such beliefs are found not only in Liberia; the influence of several mystical groups, such as the secretive Poro Society, extends over the border into Sierra Leone.

Nor do Liberia's politicians have a monopoly on mysticism; the late president of neighboring Guinea, Sekou Toure, often claimed that he was impervious to his enemies' bullets.

But Liberia has long had particular difficulty melding the traditional cultures of its indigenous people with the Western customs introduced by the former slaves who settled the country early in the 19th Century.

It was not until 1973 that the national legislature outlawed all forms of trial by ordeal, such as forcing a suspected sorcerer to prove his innocence by drinking poison.

And not all Liberians are satisfied with what evidence-gathering methods are left. As a lawyer wrote last year in a scholarly look at ritual murder cases for the Liberia Law Review:

"Very seldom are perpetrators convicted, since the only evidence that can be adduced rests upon ordeal trials often performed by the witch doctor."

Instead of ruling their evidence inadmissible, he argued, courts should treat witch doctors like medical doctors, accountants or aircraft engineers "in providing expert testimony." He said their credibility should be judged by their skill and experience.

Allison, who was the second most powerful man in the Liberian government, is by far the most prominent politician to be charged with ritual murder. But over the last 10 years any number of county leaders, clergymen and legislators have been tried, and sometimes convicted, on similar charges.

Few Uncovered

It is an article of faith here that only a fraction of these murders are uncovered.

"Many cases are never prosecuted because the condition of the body makes it impossible to determine what took place," said Marcus Jones, the Montserrado County prosecutor who tried a renowned ritual case last year and will prosecute nine civilian co-defendants of Allison, including Allison's wife.

Most Liberians view ritual practices with puzzlement. Justice Minister Jenkins Scott, asked why he thought Allison believed that the murder of the police officer would be to his advantage, replied, "It baffles oneself to ask how did he get involved."

But that does not mean that they close their eyes to its existence. Prosecutor Jones, asked if his investigators themselves feared that Allison's magic might work against them, replied, "Well, they know that according to the Bible such spells are short-lived."

Jones keeps a well-thumbed Bible on his cluttered desk in the Temple of Justice. When the talk turns to bodies drained of blood or divested of organs, he opens the Bible to Psalm 16 and intones:

"Verse 4: 'Their drink offerings of blood will I not offer. . . .' It appears that some of these gentlemen have misconstrued the Bible."

Infamous County

According to Jones, ritual killing and other forms of spirit worship take place in all 13 of Liberia's counties. But there is no question that one venue has come to be identified in the public mind with the most horrendous savagery--Maryland County, in the southeast of the country.

The fact that Allison was born in Maryland County was enough to convince many people of his guilt.

"I believe the charges are true for two reasons," a prominent journalist said. "One is who he is. The other is where he comes from. He's a Marylander."

Maryland's isolation contributes to its image as a sort of Liberian Transylvania. With no coastal road to unite Liberia's remote regions, Maryland County, about 250 miles from the capital as the crow flies, can be reached by car only by way of a circuitous route that takes one more than twice that distance.

Natives of the district often speak of the sinister atmosphere of the place.

"When I was a little girl, my father owned a rice field near the side of the road," Rose Jackson, a Maryland-born secretary in a Monrovia office, told a visitor the other day. "I remember the men used to come around in big black cars to buy rice. My brother and I would always want to go look at those cars, but whenever they came my father would tell me, 'You go back into the field.'"

Maryland's image has been reinforced by two famous cases. One occurred more than 10 years ago, when nine county leaders, including a former county superintendent and a member of the Liberia House of Representatives, were tried and convicted for the ritual slaying of the well-known singer.

On President Tolbert's order, the defendants were hanged in the public square in Harper, the district's principal city. Feelings had run high against the defendants, and the hanging was a major event.

"The whole city turned out," a witness said.

"We thought that with the executions in 1979, these murders would come to an end," Archbishop Francis said.

But last year the bodies of two boys, ages 7 and 8, were found with their eyelids and other parts missing.

Eventually, six Maryland men were caught and tried for the crime, among them a local party leader and a former judge. The men were convicted and sentenced to death, but the sentences have been appealed to the Supreme Court.

Contributing to the county's baleful reputation is its generally hapless image.

This year Maryland was the site of the national celebration of President Doe's birthday, a rite that is alternated among the counties to give each a chance to show off its development projects and generally put on the dog.

The May 6 event was a fiasco of botched housing arrangements and inept programming. Later, county leaders went to Monrovia and publicly apologized to Doe.

Now, any untoward happening in the county gets the attention of a largely contemptuous nation. In early July, an account of the killing of a Harper man, apparently by his landlord, appeared on the front page of the News, a leading newspaper, under the headline "The 'Usual Thing' in Harper Again."

But not even last year's child murder case captured the nation's attention as has the Allison case.

The Allison case began last March, when the body of Patrolman J. Melvin Pyne was found in a Monrovia suburb. The decapitated corpse had been placed across railroad tracks with the head a few feet away in an attempt to disguise the murder as an accident. Pyne's heart, among other parts, had been removed.

Dismissed From Cabinet

There were no developments for several months, and then, in late June, Allison was dismissed from the Cabinet and jailed. On July 6, Justice Minister Scott made a public announcement of the charges and named Allison's nine alleged co-conspirators, including his wife, Watta. The nine co-defendants are to be tried in civil court.

Since then all that has become known has tended to reinforce the public impression of what inspired the crime. Pyne was said to be a heavy drinker, and people who are often defenseless, such as children and drunks, are often easy marks for the young prowlers who provide victims for the heart men.

Pyne, it developed, was of the Sarpo tribe, a fact that caused many people to nod sagely. The Sarpo are traditionally associated with the Krahn, which is President Doe's tribe. One would expect a heart man to order up the body of a near-tribesman to work his magic against Doe. In other words, some believe, Allison was plotting a coup.

That is an assumption that few here have any trouble with.

"If you're the second most powerful man in the country, what's the only thing you can still want?" a prominent businessman asked.

Another assumption involves the role of Allison's wife. A large, imperious woman who has been known to march into the Defense Ministry barking orders, she has been widely cast as the Lady Macbeth of the case.

She was born to a family more prominent than that of her husband, a former Signal Corps officer.

"She used to complain about how (the president) was much younger than Allison and should have been serving under him—that sort of thing," an Allison relative said.

The Allison case notwithstanding, many Liberians express chagrin at how their country has come to be known for its ritual slaughter.

"They have cases like this in Europe this very day," Prosecutor Jones remarked, in a characteristic complaint.

Yet Jones suggests that ritual slaughter is deeply ingrained in parts of the country. Jones and other officials have worked hard to bring the state's legal authority to bear against witch doctors, with mixed success. In prosecuting last year's Harper case, he tried repeatedly to elicit testimony about the nature of rituals in which the children's blood and body parts were used.

"All the defendant would say was that they were charms," he recalled. "The judge sustained objections to the testimony because it was not relevant."

But in the Allison case, for the first time, a witch doctor--one Sekou Sacho--is among the defendants. Jones considers this a real advance.

"Sorcerers will still exist," he said, "but if we prosecute successfully two or three or four of them, maybe they will tell their clients they can go back to sacrificing chickens or goats or cows instead of human beings."

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