
TODD SANDERS

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On 21 September 2001, the torso of a young black boy was found floating in the River Thames. Within a month the London Metropolitan Police reported that it may have been the result of an 'African ritual murder'. This theory, in varied forms, has underpinned media reporting on the Thames torso case to date.

Throughout the Thames torso investigation, the London Metropolitan Police ('The Met') have worked very closely with the media. They have issued numerous press releases, held television and radio press conferences and collaborated with Channel Four on a documentary, which follows inspectors on their investigation across South and West Africa, and London. The Met have also maintained a public website and featured the case on BBC Crimewatch. This paper considers how the police-media engagement surrounding the Thames torso investigation has led to the production and reproduction of particular images about 'Africa' and 'Africans'. These include the idea that Africa and Africans can be meaningfully discussed in the singular; that the things they do are morally perverse; and that these alleged perversities are, with globalisation, increasingly unravelling the moral fabric of British society. The fact that the Thames torso investigation has underscored rather than undermined a series of images of African Otherness has serious implications for how the police and media manage and communicate information to the general public. It also raises concerns about the role anthropologists play in the broader public sphere.

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The Torso in the Thames: a brief chronology

The discovery of a boy’s torso in the River Thames, clothed in orange shorts, was first reported in late September 2001. Speaking at a press conference at Catford Hill police station, Detective Superintendent Adrian Maybanks said a sharp-bladed instrument had been used to cut up the boy, who he described as black Afro-Caribbean, around five years old. The shorts on the torso had washing instructions in German (BBC 2001a). A few months later the Met would give the boy a name: Adam.

Within days, news reports began to appear positing a possible link between the Thames torso and a murder the previous month in Holland, where a white girl’s dismembered body was found in a lake (BBC 2001c). A police spokesman reported that: ‘Dutch officials are here in London, and at this stage they are working with detectives here to find out whether there is a link between the cases’ (BBC 2001d). The Thames torso case, with its possible connections to the Dutch case, was aired on BBC One’s Crimewatch. In spite of numerous calls from the public, no new leads were found (BBC 2001b).

By mid-October, the media were reporting a new – albeit tentative – theory: that these two cases were possibly linked and, furthermore, that both were the result of ‘ritual murder’ by ‘African witchdoctors’. Newspapers used a South African term, sangoma, to describe these ‘witchdoctors’ who they claimed use ‘body parts in their ointments and potions’ for witchcraft (BBC 2001e). Detective Inspector Will O’Reilly of the Met’s Serious Crime Group, the man heading the Thames torso investigation, explained that this theory was ‘flagged up to us by the pathologist who said that it may be a ritualistic killing’ (Bennetto 2001; ThisisLondon 2001). O’Reilly also told the press ‘It’s one of many lines of inquiry we are looking at, we are not ruling anything out’ (BBC 2001e).

In late January 2002 the police held a press conference. They made public, first, that a South African pathologist specialising in African ‘mutil’ killing was being flown to London to carry out a second post-mortem on the torso; and, second, that detectives had discovered seven half-burnt candles wrapped in a white sheet in the Thames (BBC 2002f; Vasagar 2002). The name Adekoye Jo Fola Adeoye was written on the candles and sheet, noted detectives, as they displayed the sheet for the press and world to see. O’Reilly said that ‘The circumstances of this murder are unique. If the murder is ritualistic, we believe it is the first in this country. We know with some certainty that the candles and the sheet form part of a ritualistic ceremony. We can’t say if they are connected [with the torso], but at the moment we are linking them’ (Vasagar 2002). Media reports suggest the police had linked the name on the sheet to West Africa in general, and the Yoruba in particular (Walsh
2002). They also suggest that detectives had abandoned the idea of a link between the Thames torso and the dismembered Dutch girl,² though the Met and Scotland Yard were now liaising with detectives in Germany and Belgium where three other ‘similar’ cases had been reported (Vasagar 2002).

A few days later, police held a conference at the National Police Training College in Bramshill, Hampshire, where detectives from across the UK – and an eager press – listened to the South African pathologist’s findings: ‘It is my opinion that the nature of the discovery of the body, features of the external examination including the nature of the wounds, clothing and mechanism of death are consistent with those of a ritual homicide as practised in Africa’ (BBC 2002; Guardian 2002; Peachey 2002).

By February, the Met had ruled out the sheet and candles as evidence in their investigation. Working with officers from the New York Police Department, they had located and interviewed Adekoye Jo Fola Adoye in New York. His parents, who live in London, had apparently performed a ceremony with the items in question to celebrate the fact that he had survived the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center (BBC 2002a; Flanagan 2002).

In March 2002 the police began publicising the fact that they were conducting forensic tests on the torso. These included DNA, ‘bone mapping’ and other high-tech tests which aimed to determine the victim’s ancestry, place of origin and residence (BBC 2002i; BBC 2002b; Flanagan 2002).

In April 2002, O’Reilly and Scotland Yard’s Commander Andy Baker travelled to South Africa to ask Nelson Mandela to appeal to help identify the boy’s murderer. Mandela agreed, and made a ‘world-wide appeal’ at a press conference in Johannesburg (BBC 2002c). While in South Africa, detectives consulted with the South African police Occult Crimes Unit. Together with reporters, a television crew and local police, they visited a market where traditional medicines and animal parts were sold; and a ‘traditional healer’ named Credo Mutwa. Mutwa detailed for detectives and media how the Thames torso’s missing limbs were possibly used to magical ends, and provided gruesome details of ritual killings. Mutwa also suggested the killers would have been closely related to the victim, and that they were followers of ‘obeh’ – which he claimed was a West African form of witchcraft. The healer told detectives they should ‘look in West Africa, from Nigeria onwards for where these people are from’ (Flanagan 2002).

In May, in Britain, detectives began searching for a man suspected of murder 34 years ago. In 1969 the headless torso of a baby black girl

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² Dutch police discovered that the girl was killed by her parents.
was found hidden in the bushes in Epping Forest, Essex. However the main suspect – her father – fled the country before he was apprehended (BBC 2002k). O'Reilly told the press: 'We are looking at the 1969 case because of the ritualistic overtones. The father was down on his luck and apparently carried out the killing to change that' (Sawyer 2002; Bennetto 2002). Also in May, police from across Europe met at the Hague for a one-day conference. Commander Andy Baker reportedly said: 'We knew about a couple [ritual murders] already, it's pushing double figures across Europe now' (BBC 2002g; Allen 2002).

In June police and newspapers reported that the genetic tests on Adam pointed to a West African origin. Additionally, analysis of stomach contents and bone chemistry suggested that the boy could not have been raised in London. A story in The Observer suggested that the police had modified their previous theory, claiming that police now believed 'Adam was bought as a child slave in West Africa and smuggled to Britain solely to be killed' (Bright & Harris 2002).

The following month a Nigerian asylum-seeker was arrested in Glasgow and flown to London for questioning. This reportedly followed a routine visit by social workers, who reported seeing 'strange voodoo-like items' in her home. A more thorough search of her flat revealed 'several objects associated with curses, including whisky jars containing chicken feathers' (Thompson 2002). DNA tests on the woman, however, confirmed she was unrelated to the torso. She was released on bail, and has recently been deported to Nigeria after a failed asylum application (ThisisLondon 2002b; Davenport 2002; Sky-News 2002; Allen 2003).

In September, police pathologists identified a 'concoction' of minerals and other matter in the boy's lower intestine, which the media said 'police believe was fed to him as part of a ritual killing' (Davenport 2002; BBC 2002d). And in October, Scotland Yard sent a delegation to West Africa 'to collect samples and carry out research' (ThisisLondon 2002a). According to The Independent, a team from Scotland Yard travelled to Nigeria and took samples from soil, rocks and meat in a 10,000 square kilometre area (Allen 2003). A television crew also accompanied the police on at least part of the journey.

In November 2002, a sensationalistic story on the Thames torso hit the headlines: 'Human flesh on sale in London' (Barnett et al. 2002; BBC 2002e). The story appeared with two photos, side-by-side: one of a bare-chested boy from Benin, ceremonially sacrificing a goat; the other of a desiccated crocodile head seized by police in London. The story told how Thames torso detectives, together with environmental health officers, had raided a north London shop in search of illegal African bush meat. And possibly human flesh. The idea was that Adam was trafficked from West Africa to Britain for the sole purpose of ritual murder, and that his body parts were sold alongside 'bush meat' for
occult purposes. A police spokesman told the press: ‘There is an ongoing search for Adam’s head and limbs and there is evidence to suggest a link between those who are involved and the trade in illegal animal parts and meat products’ (BBC 2002e; Barnett et al. 2002). One story reported that Heathrow airport’s meat transport director, who took part in the raid, as saying: ‘The intelligence we are receiving suggests human flesh is coming into this country’ (Barnett et al. 2002).

In late January 2003, Torso in the Thames: Adam’s Story aired on Channel Four. This hour-long documentary, the product of many months’ media-police collaboration, chronicles the case as just described. It takes viewers from the Thames where the torso was found to various press conferences in Britain; to Mandela’s public appeal in Johannesburg; with British and local police to the South African ‘traditional healer’s’ home, and to an open-air market; to West Africa where a British detective is shown asking an African elder if there are any children missing from his village; and back to London, where the case continues. The documentary neatly encapsulates the broader message now being conveyed to the general public: the Thames torso is the tip of a massive and malevolent iceberg, pointing to a thriving underground transnational trade in African children and body parts for occult purposes.

Discussion

The time, energy and resources the Met and Scotland Yard have devoted to this case, the public statements they have made, and their repeated, expressed anxieties over the case suggest that they are committed to solving this crime. Yet en route, and contrary to their stated aims and objectives, the police and media have reproduced a much older and more unsettling story of African Otherness. We can usefully discuss such matters under the headings of homogenisation, identity and globalisation.

Homogenisation

One recurrent feature in the imagery surrounding the Thames torso investigation has been the reduction of difference to uniformity. For instance, media imagery surrounding the Thames torso case has consistently cast Africa, geographically speaking, as an undifferentiated entity. Black bodies come from black Africa, which is why ‘African ritual murder’ and ‘African witchcraft’ are purportedly meaningful categories in the first place. This is also why a black body can be linked to West Africa with a sheet and candles, and simultaneously to South Africa and
South African ‘muti’ killings with a pathologist’s report. Clearly, though, West Africa is not in South Africa. Nor is it nearby.

Such homogenising assumptions similarly underpin the idea that Nelson Mandela is or can be Africa’s spokesman. When in Johannesburg, for example, O’Reilly told the press: ‘Mr. Mandela is one of the most influential men in Africa and we hope people will listen to his appeal. It could well be that the boy’s parents do not know he is dead because news from Britain is unlikely to have reached them. Hopefully this will help’ (Nettleton 2002). While Mandela is an influential figure in Africa and elsewhere, the assumption that Africans will pay special attention to him because of this is questionable. Nor is it clear how, if Africans cannot receive news from abroad, they will see a televised broadcast by Nelson Mandela from Johannesburg. Furthermore, the suggestion that Africans do not, or are unlikely to receive news from outside Africa is simply untrue.

The images produced of ‘Africans’ and ‘their culture’ have also been homogenous. Take the following comments – illustrative of many others – made by O’Reilly when in Johannesburg: ‘We have come here not because we think Adam came from South Africa, but because this is where the experts are who can help us understand this culture and belief system’ (quoted in Flanagan 2002). Speaking of an African ‘culture’ and ‘belief system’ in the singular is more than mere semantics, and highlights a tendency that pervades media reports on this case. Such implied homogeneity suggests that all Africans share a single culture, and it thus matters little where, exactly, one gains an understanding of it: in South Africa, West Africa or elsewhere. The same can be said for monolithic media phrases like ‘African ritual murder’, ‘African voodoo’ or ‘African witchcraft’.

In short, the imagery produced in the Thames torso case has continually reduced multiples to singulars, treating vast geographic, cultural and social differences as though they simply do not matter. Similar reductive tendencies become evident when we consider the images surrounding identity.

Identity

The Thames torso case raises several issues surrounding identity. Most apparent is the guiding trope – ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – that underpins the images produced. In different contexts, the ‘us’ shifts between ‘the Met’, ‘British’, ‘European’ and ‘white’, while the ‘them’ shifts between ‘African’, ‘black’ or ‘other’. In this imagery, the two halves of this opposition have not been cast as equals. ‘Africans’ and the things they do are routinely glossed as inferior. The things ‘Europeans’ or ‘British’ do, in contrast, are glossed as superior. One of the most obvious ways
such asymmetries manifest themselves is in the dogged dichotomy between reason and unreason as articulated through the lens of 'science' and 'superstition'.

Throughout the investigation, Africans and African Diaspora in Britain have been presented as people who hold weird, inexplicable and morally bankrupt beliefs. They are said to believe in 'voodoo', 'witchcraft', 'ritual murder', 'human sacrifice', 'superstition', 'selling human body parts', etc. In media reports, Dark Continent imagery abounds. Such matters are sometimes reported to the accompaniment of a flurry of adjectives and adverbs, all of them derogatory: 'primitive', 'gruesome', 'horrific', 'barbaric', 'sinister', etc. (ABC 2002; Bright & Harris 2002; Oliver 2002).

More commonly, however, news reports coldly and uncritically note such 'African oddities' – like the sale of human body parts – as if they were widespread and commonplace practices in Africa (BBC 2002h; Davenport 2002). Other reports, following an identical logic, detail in shopping-list fashion the supposed market value of human body parts (Independent 2002; ThisisLondon 2001). Still others provide radically decontextualised statements that, while ostensibly meant to inform, serve solely to make Africans, their beliefs and practices look foolish. Consider the following iconic statement:

Police suspect the killers may have been practising a rare variant of the 'muti' ritual. Muti killers tend to remove the genitals, breasts and extremities of their victims, as their screams release the 'magic' of the internal organs for the potions, but do not dismember their victims (Walsh 2002).

Such imagery of Savage and Superstitious Africans has continually been juxtaposed with its converse, the Civilised Science-Minded Europeans. This is how one journalist established this contrast:

A tour of a 'muti' medicine market in downtown Johannesburg provided the officers with an idea of the significance of traditional medicine and witchcraft in sub-Saharan African life.

Tables spilled over with decaying animal parts and jars of congealing fat. The men from the Met mingled with the regular 'muti' customers. Stall holders appeared evasive about the medicinal properties of their wares, insisting only that it was 'powerful' stuff, guaranteed to cure all ills.

The traders were clearly uneasy to see South African officers attached to the occult unit, who had accompanied their London colleagues, scrutinising the malodorous piles.

'You could probably get human body parts down here if you know what to ask for and how to ask for it', said Captain Lynne Evans from the Pretoria-based unit.

Meanwhile, scientists in the UK are using several groundbreaking techniques to pinpoint Adam's home country. They believe he comes
from west Africa, possibly Nigeria, Ghana or the Ivory Coast.

By analysing elements found in the body's bone structure – nitrogen, oxygen, sulphur content, for example – and pollen and parasite samples extracted from the gut, experts are confident of being able to identify the boy's home to within the nearest mile (Flanagan 2002).

While Africa and Africans are variously tarred as irrational, superstitious and morally corrupt, the Met has consistently portrayed itself and is portrayed in the media as methodical, rational investigators seeking to uncover the Truth through the application of science and technology. Here, too, adjectives and adverbs reign supreme, though this time in a markedly different tenor: met detectives are routinely said to be using 'groundbreaking' and 'extraordinary' forensic tests (Flanagan 2002; Nettleton 2002; BBC 2002i; Davenport 2002).

Media imagery surrounding the Thames torso case, in short, relies on a fundamental dichotomy between 'us' and 'them', and the two sides of this dichotomy stand in an asymmetrical relation. While 'we' represent the pedestrian, rational, scientific and morally righteous, 'they' represent the exotic, irrational, superstitious and morally indefensible. This particular imagining of self and other raises an inescapable corollary that comes with globalisation.

Globalisation

If one buys these images about self and other, then globalisation poses particular conceptual and practical problems. Key among them is that globalisation logically implies a meeting of worlds, which in this case implies that a corrupt and morally bankrupt 'them' threatens a sensible and moral 'us'. A savage and superstitious Africa threatens to undo the moral fibre of a righteous Europe through globalisation.

Countless news reports and police statements surrounding the case allude to this imagined quandary. Take one example, reported on BBC News, which posited a link between the murdered Dutch girl and Adam. 'The way in which both bodies were cut up has raised the fear that a form of black magic performed in South Africa could have come to Europe' (BBC 2001e). Such imagery has not, of course, been single-handedly invented by the media, but has been co-produced in dialogue with Thames torso detectives.

In January 2002, Scotland Yard's Serious Crime Group Commander, Andy Baker, made the following comments to The Scotsman:

Our fear is it is the first of many. The rumours are it is opening up. I don't want to raise the fear factor but if it is a ritualistic Muti murder others will follow, according to South African authorities. With the
movement of people around the world and the spread of this culture it is bound to come here because we have a high African population. If the murder was ritualistic we believe this is the first in this country. Our inquiries abroad suggest there are many of these types of murders across the world (McDougall 2002).

O'Reilly has expressed similar sentiments to the press: ‘The ritual killing of children is an absolute reality. We do not want this to gain a foothold in this country. This is why, one year on, we are still working flat out to try and solve the case’ (Thompson 2002). The vice-chairman of the Metropolitan Police Independent Advisory Group similarly noted: ‘We are talking about either witchcraft, ju-ju or voodoo... In promoting cultural diversity we import the good and the bad. If this is a ritual killing then unfortunately – as bad as it may sound – we have imported those aspects of culture into mainland Britain’ (BBC 2002i).

The imagery surrounding the Thames torso case plainly voices popular anxieties about otherness, about globalisation, about immigration and multiculturalism, and about the grave possibility of having ’our’ life-world unravelled by ‘their’ cultural practices. Interestingly, while recent anthropologists have had much to say about how Africans sometimes use witchcraft idioms to discuss their anxieties about modernity, globalisation and creeping commodification (see Moore & Sanders 2001), here we somewhat unexpectedly find British police and media using ‘African witchcraft’ and ‘African ritual murder’ in similar ways. The barbarians, it appears, are once again knocking at the door, this time with a vengeance.

Conclusions

While some sociocultural anthropologists might raise objections to the foregoing analysis, they would, I believe, be in the minority. Some nonanthropologists will take exception on the grounds that there have been documented cases of what appears to be ’ritual killing’ in different parts of Africa. If this is true, so the reasoning goes, then the police may be onto something. And consequently this paper is a pointless, if not counterproductive exercise in semantics and deconstruction.

The point worth stressing however is that such practices in Africa are – like Satanic child abuse killings in Britain – extremely rare, even if

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3 I am well aware that an entire paper could be, and probably should be, written on these issues alone. I hope at a later date to explore how this case articulates with European identity politics, changing immigration policies and concerns, and how in Britain, in particular, it resonates with recent Met efforts to shake off public accusations of institutionalised racism following the McPherson Enquiry. For an interesting example from Holland that broaches some of these issues, see van Dijk 2001.
the popular imagination in both places suggests otherwise. In both cases, the savage imagery and moral panics far outstrip the number of actual killings, which are either negligible or absent (Sanders 2001; Gulbrandsen 2002; La Fontaine 1998). Thames torso detectives know this. O'Reilly even noted that, in 2000, only three such cases were reported across the whole of Africa (Guardian 2002). Yet the imagery produced through police-media engagements suggests something altogether more sinister: that 'ritual murder' or 'human sacrifice' is, in one journalist’s words, 'a crime common in sub-Saharan Africa' (Davenport 2002). And moreover, that such practices are so excessive that they are now spilling over from a morally corrupt Africa onto the innocent shores of Britain. Thus, even if this case does turn out to be 'ritual killing' – even if an 'African witchdoctor' waltzes into Scotland Yard tomorrow and says 'I did it!' – it matters little. The damage has already been done with the imagery generated, where old stories are refracted through new lenses, where Savage Africans and Civilised Europeans are locked into life-or-death struggles over science and superstition, good and evil, morality and immorality, us and them. Lest there be any doubt about how the general public reads such troublesome imagery, one need only consult Channel Four’s web discussion on their Thames torso documentary. In the telling words of one viewer: 'Thank goodness such evil atrocities as this have been brought to our attention. Investigation in our civilised society here may well help stamp out such barbarism elsewhere'.

Such images, though novel in their specifics, hardly spring from thin air. They draw on a lengthy western history of demonised Others, and are refracted through specific contemporary constellations of power, namely, the police and media. This, in turn, raises the issue of responsibility and complicity. Can the police and media, singly or together, be held accountable for the outcome of their actions, however unintended? Should they be?

Since I have no privileged knowledge of the Met’s or media’s aims in this case, imputing motive can only be guesswork. For the Met, at least two possibilities present themselves. On the one hand, if their aim is to undermine in the popular imagination derogatory images of Africans, then plainly their communication strategy has failed. If, on the other hand, their aim is to convey an image of concerned and hardworking Met detectives, following any lead, however trivial, to bring the killer of a young black boy to justice, then their communication strategy has proved a resounding success, at least for some. One

4 http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/T/thinktv/comments/jan03_torso_comments.html
viewer's web comments on *Torso in the Thames: Adam's Story* speak volumes here: 'an inspiring account of dogged police work and forensic science...a damning indictment of the frequency of such crimes in African countries to make such efforts by our own police worthy of note'.\(^5\) The problem however is that whatever the case – whether the Met has not managed, mismanaged or over-managed the information released from their investigation – the outcome has been the reproduction of derogatory images of Africa and Africans. This point is one they might ponder very seriously.

Nor is the media entirely innocent. Here, too, it is impossible to know whether the production of Dark Continent imagery has been witting – aiming perhaps to sell newspapers with sensationalist headlines (see bibliography) – or unwitting, in which case journalists, the BBC and others appear simply to believe the derogatory supposed 'facts' they have been reporting about Africans. On 31 January 2003, for example, BBC Radio Four aired a piece on the Thames torso. The reporter noted that police believe the boy was 'kidnapped or given up by parents who saw it as an honour to have their child killed in ritual sacrifice known as “muti”'. Such statements are plainly absurd, and it should worry the BBC and others that such wild and inflammatory conjecture can today pass itself off as responsible journalism.

No doubt the Met and media, if pressed, would blame each other for the images produced. Both, I suspect, would claim they are only reporting 'the facts'. But neither can legitimately luxuriate in a radical postmodern position claiming the complete detachment of author from text. Both must consider their complicity in the production of such harmful images. They must also develop future communication strategies that undermine rather than underscore the very ideas of Otherness all involved ostensibly seek to eliminate.

Anthropologists are hardly innocent here either. We must ask: Have we, too, been complicit in the (re)production of such derogatory images? Where are the public anthropological voices attempting to disrupt and undermine such recognisable Othering discourses? What role should we, or can we play in these debates?

Given the nature of this case, the police have consulted many anthropologists and Africanists. A number continue to advise them today. For the record, I rang the Met in 2001 to see what assistance I might offer as an Africanist anthropologist who writes on 'witchcraft', and to express concerns over how the case was being pursued and represented to the public. We had, I believe, three conversations in all.

\(^5\) http://www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/T/thinktv/comments/jan03_torso_comments.html
The evidence they then offered that the Thames torso was 'African ritual murder' I found utterly unconvincing, and I politely told them so. They did not ring again. On discussing the case at the American Anthropological Association meeting in November 2002, I was surprised to discover that three of my Africanist colleagues – one from Europe, one from America and one from South Africa – had also been contacted by Scotland Yard. They, too, spun a similar line to mine. They, too, were not consulted further. It is difficult to know where in the equation alternative voices might reasonably be inserted, or how they might be heard.

The media have been no more receptive to anthropological disruptions. In early 2002, I sent brief commentaries on the Thames torso to The Times, The Guardian and The Independent. Not one was published. Perhaps they were badly written. Perhaps other stories were more pressing. The broader point though is that while we should question the role anthropologists play in the public arena, and our own possible complicity in the production of Othering images, the very real issue remains of how we navigate these broader power structures in order to communicate our anthropological commonplaces. The distressing and depressing Heart of Darkness imagery surrounding the Thames torso case stands, I believe, as testimony to the seriousness of the task at hand.

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Todd Sanders
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Cambridge