Human Security and Spiritual Insecurity

Why the Fear of Evil Forces Needs to Be Taken Seriously

Adam Ashforth

In 1994, to much fanfare, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the concept of "human security," proclaiming that this idea, "though simple, is likely to revolutionize society in the twenty-first century." Human security, the UNDP noted in its Human Development Report, was a way of moving beyond the emphasis on the territorial security of national states and the insecurity arising from the threat of violence by other states. Previous thinking about security, the report suggested, neglected the "legitimate concerns of people who sought security in their daily lives." The revolutionary new concept of human security was to be "people-centered." The 1994 Report outlined seven basic components of human security: economic, health, food, environmental, personal, community, and political security.[1]

The concept of human security has emerged as a staple of international development policymaking and analysis, embodied in, among other things, the UN Millennium Development Goals.[2] Opening the study of security to encompass issues beyond the traditional domain of relations among states has allowed global actors to do important work on global poverty, health, and violence that would not have

Adam Ashforth teaches in the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies at the University of Michigan. He is the author of *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (2005), which was awarded the African Studies Association's Herskovits Prize.

happened otherwise. The discourse surrounding human security, however, all too often ignores real issues of security and insecurity, such as the sense of danger, doubt, and fear that ordinary people experience when they perceive their hardships as being caused by deliberate, malicious actions. This is particularly true when the agents of harm are said to be entities, such as demons, evil spirits, angry ancestors, witches, Satanic bloodsuckers, or one of a host of "evil forces," which most of humanity lives amidst and worries about, but which outside observers tend not to take seriously. This dimension of insecurity should be taken seriously.

The language of the UNDP's Human Development Report betrays a commonplace fallacy in approaches to understanding questions of security in everyday life: "For many of them ['ordinary people'] security symbolized protection from the threat of disease, hunger, unemployment, crime, social conflict, political repression, and environmental hazards."[3] Few would disagree these are all bad things. However, security is a relational concept. Proper analysis of conditions of security and insecurity requires broad examination of the power relations within which people live—or think they live. Discussing issues of security inevitably requires one to discuss agency and the need for protection against forces—not merely symbols—intent on causing harm. We should be careful, therefore, when speaking of the seven categories of human security, not to erase the actual understandings of ordinary people concerning the forces acting on their daily lives to cause harm, as we subsume them in our metaphors and symbols of security. For such an erasure would not only constitute a form of injustice in itself; it might also obscure much that is going on in the daily lives of real people and frustrate efforts to make those lives better and more secure, in every sense.

To put it briefly, the concept of human security currently in vogue will not suffice. The struggle to alleviate hardship and suffering would be better conceived of in terms of "wellbeing."[4] Instead of treating security as a metaphor, as is often the case in work on human security, one needs to take seriously what people say about the agents causing harm in their lives. A concern with wellbeing—of oneself and impoverished others—requires taking seriously people's relations with forces, agencies, and entities understood as capable of causing harm, including those forces which appear simply as figments of others' imaginations. This is what one can refer to as spiritual insecurity.[5]

The key to understanding this dimension of insecurity is to accurately identify the power relations from which emerge the feelings of danger, doubt, and fear about invisible forces in everyday life. It then grows increasingly possible to explore the connections between relations producing this sense of spiritual insecurity and the broader sets of relationships wherein one ordinarily identifies political, economic, or social processes.[6]

Spiritual insecurity is not merely an addition to the list of seven components of human security outlined in the 1994 Report, and is certainly not something that one could add to the list under the conventional rubric of religion. Religion, in all its aspects, is about more than mere relations of power and ques-

tions of security. Spiritual insecurity, on the other hand, is related to, but not reducible to, the fears, dangers, and doubts that arise from poverty, disease, hunger, and violence. Without an understanding of spiritual insecurity in particular contexts, the intentional forces interpreted as causing various problems for ordinary people in their daily lives remain mostly opaque to outside observers.

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Relations Producing Spiritual Insecurity. Insofar as spiritual insecurity is concerned, in Africa and elsewhere, four broad sets of relations require examination.

First, one should examine interpersonal relationships, including social entities such as families, communities, organizations, and institutions, that emerge from these relations. One can explore these relatively straightforward relationships using ordinary methods of sociological inquiry. However, since individuals can have access to occult powers, relations among them can take unexpected forms. The everyday sociology of occult violence is not that different, in terms of the attribution of motive and responsibility, from that of other forms of violence. The consequences are also similar, notably in the form of fear, suspicion, and distrust.

The term occult, deriving from the Latin term *occulere* (to conceal), describes powers deployed by humans, either individually or collectively, which are somehow concealed, invisible, or secret. The ability to deploy such forces may derive from innate capacities, secret knowledge of the powers and agencies inherent in substances (such as with sorcery), relations with invisible beings (such as with Satanism), or all of the above and more. As with other forms of power, there are legitimate and illegitimate uses of occult power, depending upon whether the cause is good or evil. Given that the powers being deployed are secret, the difference between healer and witch, herbalist and sorcerer, or Christian Pastor and Satanist is never fixed or unassailable. Despite the perennial efforts of those who openly profess access to occult power to demonstrate their legitimacy, it is not uncommon in places where awe of the occult prevails for healers to be killed as witches; priests to be slain as Satanists; the well-intentioned to be denounced as evil; or for aid agencies to be seen as acting in league with bloodsuckers.

Second, one should examine relations between people and substances, images, texts, and objects—in other words, the agencies inherent in materials deemed capable of causing harm. Vast quantities of purportedly medicinal substances, for example, generically dubbed "herbs," are ingested in Africa; enormous hopes and fears are predicated upon their efficacy. And for every ton of medicinal "herbs" concocted

in the pursuit of healing, another is presumed deployed in the enterprise of dealing death and misfortune by sorcery.[7]

Third, one should examine relations between people and invisible beings. Social scientists typically deal with these relations in terms of individual belief and collective ritual. A vast literature on religion in Africa traces the history of institutions and the lineaments of dogma to the spread of world religions and attempts to reconstruct analogous patterns in African traditional religion. A relational perspective, however, opens the field beyond the domains ordinarily treated under the rubric of religion. Relations, as they are experienced, between the spirits that inhabit the human body and those that inhabit the broader universe are mediated through individuals. For most who live with such spiritual awareness, however, the deepest realities of their material and social worlds are spiritual mysteries. By accepting the existence of relations between individuals and invisible beings, one may begin to appreciate the dimensions of these individuals' experiences and their implications for ordinary aspects of human social life.

Fourth, one should examine relations among agencies inherent in personhood. The simplest way to think of this phenomenon is in terms of a process of managing power relations among "internal agencies," which are often conceived of in English as the body, mind, soul, spirit, desire, and will. By treating psychological phenomena as a set of relations, it becomes possible to open one's inquiry to new avenues, without relying on a concept of belief.

Issues of security always involve both objective and subjective concerns. The world is full of objects, agents, and entities that cause damage. Human beings have evolved complex modes of recognizing, avoiding, managing, and mastering these dangers, usually by thinking of them as if originating from deliberate actions by conscious agents. Hurt, that is to say, is usually felt as harm.[8] The sense of danger or feeling of fear, however rationally assessed from objective dangers or instinctively experienced, is, of course, subjective. Despite the fact that we may doubt the objectivity of actual dangers invoked, spiritual insecurity is real.

In practice, discussions of security almost always involve efforts to distinguish objective dangers from subjective perceptions of threat. Efforts at managing dangers and seeking security, whether in everyday life or interstate relations, are predicated upon interpreting the nature of threats and risks. Efforts to understand or promote the conditions of human security in particular contexts, therefore, should not be predicated upon external presumptions about which entities in relations producing a sense of danger, doubt, and fear are real or objective, and which are mere individual ideations or shared beliefs. Consider the case of Satanic bloodsuckers in contemporary Malawi.

Making Sense of Satanic Bloodsucking. In December 2007 fieldworkers for a research project in the southern Malawi district of Balaka reported rumors of bloodsuckers sweeping through their area. The story was that the country's president had made a pact with foreigners—whites—

to supply Malawian blood for Satanic rituals, and was having intermediaries move among the villages pumping the blood from unsuspecting victims. Some said the president was using the proceeds for his political campaigns, while others said the money was going into the fertilizer subsidy program. Residents throughout the region organized vigilante groups to patrol their villages. They beat or hacked to death several suspects. Locals concluded that the police were in league with the bloodsuckers. Police and public health officials convened meetings to try to persuade people that the rumors were false. The national police spokesperson made a statement warning "members of the general public . . . to refrain from spreading false stories about blood suckers in their areas when they do not have evidence to support their claims."[9] After a couple of months, the rumors died down and the patrolling ceased. People concluded that there had been a false alarm. Bloodsuckers were still considered a real threat, but they had not been active in their area at that time. Similar stories have been heard in this part of Africa for the better part of a century.[10]

Human security, as presently construed, provides little guidance for observers seeking to understand and improve the circumstances of people who see their security threatened by Satanic bloodsuckers, or for white development workers in the same region whose good works are interpreted as aiding the cause of Satan. Two Christian aid workers running an orphanage were suspected of being Satanists, with their good deeds a cover for blood collecting. The Catholic diocese in the region found its missionary priests also under suspicion. A major U.S. research project had to cancel operations for fear of attacks upon its fieldworkers. One can briefly examine the case of the bloodsuckers in the light of the four sets of relations outlined above.

First, one needs to examine how relations among people, ordinarily construed, are shaped by the bloodsucker rumors. Clearly, the rumors speak to insecurities arising from social inequality, particularly those deriving from local Malawians' connections with the outside world and whites from overseas. It is virtually impossible to grow even modestly wealthy in Malawi, except through connections with the government, whites from overseas, or both. Foreign aid comprises some 40 percent of the national budget.[11] International NGOs are among the few sources of regular employment for the educated elite. But despite the dream of connecting with such organizations, 80 percent of the population survives by subsistence agriculture and few are educated beyond primary school. It is not hard to see why talk of bloodsuckers might seem plausible to villagers in this context.

Second, one needs to understand how people interpret and manage relations with powers inherent in substances, in this case the powers enabling bloodsuckers to instantaneously pump blood from their victims. Vigilantes believed that the vampires were using occult powers to achieve their evil ends. This conviction grew steadily over time, growing apace with their failure to apprehend any actual bloodsuckers. The presumption that bloodsuckers used occult means similar to witchcraft

also hindered efforts by public health officials to persuade people that blood pumping on the scale imagined was impossible.

Third, relations with and amongst spirit beings in this part of the world have undergone radical changes in recent years, driven by the rapid spread of Pentecostal proselytizing. About 8 percent of people in this region describe themselves as Pentecostal, but the figure belies the significance of this movement, particularly as word spreads of Pentecostal pastors claiming the ability to cure AIDS.[12] Pentecostal preachers, many of whom are white Americans, offer their flock a sense of direct access to the Holy Spirit, which promises to relieve problems of illness, poverty, and social dislocation in their congregants' lives. There is also much talk of alternate spiritual agencies and demons, organized in a hierarchy of evil power headed by Satan. Pentecostal healing rituals, for example, routinely involve the pastor "delivering" his congregants from the powers of demons. In this context, the concept of bloodsucking, which has existed in these parts for almost a century, takes on a new form. Whereas older versions of the rumor posited that whites were engaging African intermediaries to collect blood because whites could not survive in the tropics without it, the new versions frame the story in terms of whites needing African blood for purposes of Satanic initiation rituals.[13] These rituals open access to wealth and power both for the whites—including international aid workers—and their African intermediaries.

Fourth, blood serves a key role in the politics of personhood. The discussion of blood in these regions resonates with traditions of healing and health maintenance, offering rich resources for speculating on the powers inherent in the vital fluid. Lessons regarding the dangers of contact with blood, particularly through sex, along with the importance of managing hot and cool bodily states, have long been taught in the formal contexts of initiation schools and reinforced in the medium of everyday gossip.[14] In recent years, people in this part of the world have learned that blood is both the home of the virus causing AIDS and the source of resistance to the disease. Malawi has been hard hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, with a national prevalence hovering around 15 percent.[15] Three-quarters of the deaths in parts of Malawi are AIDS-related.[16] Both the advent of AIDS and information about HIV as an infectious agent present in blood have led to speculation about blood. When health authorities sought a local equivalent for translating the word "virus," they chose the Chichewa term for a small animal that is also used in witchcraft.[17]

As this brief example shows, making sense of matters such as bloodsucking, Satanism, witchcraft, sorcery, or a thousand other sources of danger in people's everyday lives, requires a framework for interpreting the dangers, doubts, and fears arising from relations with invisible forces. That is to say, it requires analysis of spiritual insecurity. Failure to understand the everyday threats posed by invisible forces can produce unforeseen and unintended consequences, adding to the perplexity of those who wonder why their well-intentioned efforts at development fail.

A Pragmatic Approach to Spiritual Insecurity. Security is a central preoccupation of the global development industry. Famine, disease, and climate change, among other things, are constantly referred to in the language of security, and not merely as potential problems that might require military action by states. Security, broadly conceived, has come to be thought of as an end in itself for the development process. But the way the concept is currently construed is inadequate for understanding the sense of danger, doubt, and fear that afflicts a great part of the world's population.

For reasons that remain obscure, humans seem to have evolved a sense—we might call it a conviction—that their security depends upon agencies and entities that are sometimes described as supernatural, extra-human, spiritual, or invisible. To paraphrase a former senior adviser to President George W. Bush, most people, in most places, do not appear to live in "reality-based communities."[18] Realists ignore this fact at their peril. Over the past couple of centuries, a small group of elites have cast suspicions upon these convictions, calling them mere products of the human mind or forms of belief, and thus irreducibly subjective. However, most people throughout human history have lived in ways that are premised upon a shared understanding of these entities and the forces they embody.[19]

Conventionally, these matters are discussed within the context of religion. Such a narrow framing of the issue, however, ties it too closely to the concepts of belief and faith. A better solution is to open the analysis of power relations, upon which human security ultimately depends, to include relations with other agencies and entities beyond that which is merely human. This is not as outlandish as it might sound.

Security is a relational concept. Whatever it is that one discusses when speaking of security and its absence, one is referring to a feature of relations—more specifically, power relations with entities intent on causing harm. Thus, proper analysis of conditions of security and insecurity requires broad examination of the power relations within which people live—or think they live. Where people see themselves as living in relations with invisible beings and powers, which is almost everywhere, failure to take account of these relations as part of everyday social relationships—rather than mere beliefs—will prevent a proper understanding of the questions of security relevant to that particular context.

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NOTES

1 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22-24.

2 For discussion of the history of this idea and some critiques, see S. Neil MacFarlane and Yuen Foong Khong, *Human Security and the United Nations: A Critical History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

3 United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994*, 22.

4 D. Kahneman, E. Diener, and N. Schwartz, eds., *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003); Ian Gough and Alister MacGregor, eds., *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

5 An early conceptualization of this issue grew out of a decades-long conversation with Charles Tilly. See Adam Ashforth, "Relational Sociology Run Off the Rails, or: How Chuck Tilly Helped me Understand Spiritual Insecurity in Soweto," (lecture, The Social Science Research Council, New York, 3-5 October 2008), Internet, http://www.ssrc.org/hirschman/content/2008/texts/Ashforth.pdf.

6 For an extended example of how one can do this, see Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

7 Brian Morris and Jerome Msonte, *Chewa Medical Botany: A Study of Herbalism in Southern Malawi* (London: International African Institute, 1995).

8 See Charles Tilly, *Credit and Blame* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

9 "Police Warn About Bloodsucker Rumours," *The Nation*, 11 January 2008.

10 For an account of similar rumors in the past, see Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

11 The Honourable Goodall E. Gondwe, "2008/09 Budget Highlights," (speech, New State House, Lilongwe, Malawi, 23 May 2008).

12 Jenny Trinitapoli, "Religious Teachings and Influences on the ABCs of HIV prevention in Malawi," *Social Science and Medicine* 69, no. 2 (2009): 204.

13 Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires*.

14 For a discussion of the women responsible for teaching girls about blood, sex, and health during their initiation period, see Deborah Kaspin, "A Chewa Cosmology of the Body," *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 3 (August 1996): 561-578.

15 Hans-Peter Kohler, Jere R. Behrman, and Susan Cotts Watkins, "Social Networks and HIV/AIDS Risk Perceptions." *Demography* 44, no. 1 (2007): 1-33.

16 Henry V. Doctor and Alex A. Weinreb, "Estimation of AIDS adult mortality by verbal autopsy in rural Malawi," *AIDS* 17, no. 7 (2003): 2509-2514.

17 Peter Probst, "'Mchape' '95, or, the Sudden Fame of Billy Goodson Chisupe: Healing, Social Memory and the Enigma of the Public Sphere in Post-Banda Malawi," *Journal of the International African Institute* 69, no. 1 (1999): 108-137.

18 Ron Suskind, "Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush," Internet, http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/17BUSH.html (date accessed: 28 January 2009).

19 For a powerful critique of this way of thinking about belief, see William Cantwell Smith, *Belief and History* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1977).